

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: DYING FREE: AFRICAN AMERICANS, DEATH, AND
THE NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM, 1863-1877

Ashley N. Towle, Doctor of Philosophy, 2017

Dissertation directed by: Associate Professor Richard J. Bell

This dissertation explores the ways in which African Americans in the South used death to stake claims to citizenship and equality in the years following emancipation. The death and destruction the Civil War wrought did not end at Appomattox Courthouse. After the war, freedpeople in the South continued to die from disease, starvation, and exposure and former bondspeople became the targets of racial violence by white Southerners. By recasting emancipation as a struggle for power over life and death, “Dying Free” provides a new framework for examining the fraught power relations between former masters, ex-slaves, and the federal government in the postwar South. This dissertation asserts that African Americans used the murders of their loved ones and community members as opportunities to protest the injustices they faced as they tried to forge new lives in freedom. By harnessing the power of the dead in a variety of arenas, freedpeople strengthened their bonds with relatives and communities, denounced their unjust treatment at the hands of white Southerners, and demanded equality and the rights of citizenship from the federal government.

**DYING FREE: AFRICAN AMERICANS,
DEATH, AND THE NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM, 1863-1877**

by

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Introduction

A dilapidated farmhouse stood on the edge of a small Georgia town. As night fell upon fields trampled by horses and soldiers, a faint light glowed from a room inside the house where an old, emaciated woman awoke to find that she was free. In the maelstrom of civil war, the woman had taken sick as Union soldiers had passed through town. As other slaves fled to freedom behind Union lines, a younger woman named Tildy had remained at the house, faithfully nursing the older woman as she recovered. As the ill woman awoke, Tildy exclaimed “[w]e’s all free now, Aunty!” Days later, when Tildy’s patient had gathered her strength, the two ex-slaves set out together on a grueling trek to locate relatives who already had fled to liberty. The journey would prove too arduous for the old woman, however, and when she realized that she would not make it, she turned to Tildy and said, “I’s going where you can’t lead me no more. I’s tried to keep up, chile; but de old heart’s worn out. But glory to de blessed Lord and Saviour, I dies free! Tell every body dat ever asks for the ole woman that she died free.” The old woman then fantasized about her young companion’s promising future and prayed that Tildy would learn to read so that she could understand the Bible. After saying farewell, she once more whispered “I dies free!” and passed on.¹

Published in an African-American newspaper just months after the end of the Civil War, this fictional story offers important insights into the dramatic changes that the Civil War and emancipation brought to the lives of bondspeople. Across the South, four million enslaved Americans gained their freedom with the end of the war; all experienced

¹ *South Carolina Leader*, October 28, 1865.

feelings of jubilation, hope, apprehension, and fear at the prospect of a future unbound from the chains of slavery. The first actions many freed slaves took following emancipation were similar to those of these two freedwomen. Turning their backs on the sites of their enslavement, freedpeople set off down rural, rutted roads to test the limits of their freedom. Escaping the bounds of the plantation was often their first means to assert their new status, and mobility also brought the promise of reconnecting with kin that years of slavery and war had together torn asunder. As they put distance between themselves and their former masters, ex- slaves sought other opportunities previously denied to them, especially the opportunity to educate themselves and their children.²

But for all its promises and hopes, emancipation also brought danger and uncertainty. The inclusion of the old woman's death in the story was fitting, as the specter of death loomed large during the postwar era. Freedpeople who followed in these two women's footsteps would have encountered other people like them dying from disease, malnutrition, and exposure. They would have discovered the bodies of former slaves murdered by vengeful white Southerners; their corpses left to serve as a warning to any other freedpeople attempting to exercise their newly won rights. In the midst of these deaths freedpeople found meaning in this loss of life. For the elderly woman, dying free in pursuit of her own dreams was the most meaningful action of her life. Those three words—I dies free—captured the monumental changes wrought by the Civil War, as

² Yael A. Sternhell, *Routes of War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012); Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

freedpeople attempted to take control over their lives and deaths, a power which had once been in the hands of their masters.

The Civil War unleashed unparalleled carnage in the United States. By the end of the war, more than 700,000 Americans lay dead. As Drew Gilpin Faust has argued, this unprecedented destruction fundamentally changed the relationship that Americans had to death, and in the process transformed the society, culture, and politics of the nation.³ This dissertation contends, however, that the death and destruction of the Civil War did not end at Appomattox Courthouse. In the years following war and emancipation, freedpeople in the South continued to perish in vast numbers from disease, starvation, and exposure. Formerly enslaved people were also the frequent targets of racial violence across the South. White Southerners even colluded to organize massacres of African Americans. Their intent was to curtail black political action through death threats and violent intimidation. Indeed, historians have argued that the endemic mortal violence in the South was a primary reason why Reconstruction failed.⁴

³ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

⁴ For books that examine political violence during Reconstruction see, Charles Lane, *The Day Freedom Died: The Colfax Massacre, The Supreme Court, and the Betrayal of Reconstruction* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008); Donald G. Neiman, *Black Freedom/White Violence, 1865-1900* (New York: Garland, 1994); Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan in the Reconstruction-Era United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); George Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press 1984); Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Allen Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Gilles Vandal, *Rethinking Southern Violence: Homicides in Post-Civil War Louisiana, 1866-1884* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000). In these works, the central focus is upon the effect of violence on state and local politics. Rarely do historians place freedpeople at the center of this history and attempt to discern how they reacted to this violence. Kidada Williams's recent work attempts to remedy this by investigating the testimony of freedpeople before Freedmen's Bureau courts and congressional committees. Kidada Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

Few scholars, however, have paused to examine the ways in which African Americans attempted to craft a “new birth of freedom” by seizing upon the specter of death in the post-war South. “Dying Free” investigates how African Americans used death to make sense of emancipation. In 1880, Frederick Douglass reflected on the failure of Reconstruction, lamenting that “[t]hey did not deprive the old master class of the power of life and death, which was the soul of the relation of master and slave.”⁵ This dissertation builds upon Douglass’s central contention that slavery and emancipation were ultimately struggles for power over life and death even as it disputes Douglass’s claim that this power remained solely in the hands of white Southerners. Rather, “Dying Free” examines how freedpeople strove to wrest control over their lives and deaths from their former masters. It contends that *through* death, freedpeople found valuable opportunities to make sense of their new lives in freedom. Thus, while death was a destructive force, it could also be regenerative. Building upon Vincent Brown’s conception of ‘mortuary politics,’ I argue that freedpeople called on their dead—corpses, ancestors, and martyrs—to strengthen their bonds with relatives and communities, denounce their unjust treatment, and stake claims to citizenship and equality. While it is remarkable that freedpeople persevered despite the ubiquity of mortal threats to their lives, what is more significant is the ways in which former slaves persisted *because* of these deaths.

The “New Birth of Freedom”: Reviewing Black Reconstruction

⁵ Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. 4, *Reconstruction and After* (New York: International Publishers, 1955), 31-2.

Following emancipation, freedpeople looked optimistically toward the future, acting in deliberate ways to give tangible meaning to their new status as free people. Many former slaves such as Henry Bobbitt, who walked over sixty miles from a plantation in Warren County, North Carolina, to Raleigh, tested their new freedom by leaving the site of their enslavement, or in Bobbitt's words "ter find out if I wuz really free."⁶ They sought out cities and towns for the promising educational, civic, and religious opportunities they presented. The prospect of moving to wherever their limited funds could take them also offered the previously enslaved new options for securing work in different towns, counties, and states.

At the heart of freedom for ex-slaves was the opportunity to reconstitute families and communities that had been torn apart by slavery and war.⁷ In the months and years following emancipation, former slaves set out in search of loved ones. They posted newspaper advertisements seeking information on the location of kin and friends. They thronged Freedmen's Bureau offices imploring agents to grant them transportation so that they could be reunited with relatives. In these ways, freedpeople sought to take control of their families' fates, which had once been in the hands of their masters. Freedpeople aspired to remove their families from the oversight of their former owners and white employers by purchasing or renting land to work for themselves. Ex-slaves also implemented new labor strategies in an attempt to gain economic autonomy and provide

⁶ Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 310-16. For African Americans' initial actions testing their new freedom, see William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 3-200; Peter Kolchin, *First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama's Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972); Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 222-335.

⁷ Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*.

for all of their relatives under one roof.⁸ Additionally, families took on the extra burden of caring for extended kin when relatives passed away. Freedpeople fought tirelessly to maintain custody of these children, and bitter disputes arose between white employers and freedpeople when employers attempted to apprentice orphaned children who had extended kin willing to take care of them.⁹ These attempts at restoring and cultivating kinship networks were an essential part of freedom for former slaves, and they doggedly sought opportunities to gain control over their families and raise them as they saw fit.

One of the most important goals freedpeople hoped to obtain in the post-war years was education for themselves and their children. Ex-slaves exhibited an insatiable desire to learn to read and write. Reconstruction witnessed the growth of schools across the South. Some freedpeople moved to cities and towns with schools, while others made the presence of a schoolhouse on the plantation an “absolute condition” before signing labor

⁸ For works on family and labor, see Nancy Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003); Ira Berlin, Steven F. Miller, Leslie S. Rowland, “Afro-American Families in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” *Radical History Review*, no. 42 (Fall 1988): 89-121; Noralee Frankel, *Freedom’s Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Mississippi* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 383-431; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic, 1985), 43-76; Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slavery to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 102-42; Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

⁹ For works on apprenticeship after emancipation, see Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 139-42; Richard Paul Fuke, *Imperfect Equality: African Americans and the Confines of White Racial Attitudes in Post-Emancipation Maryland* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), 69-87; Mary Niall Mitchell, “‘Free Ourselves but Deprived of Our Children’: Freedchildren and Their Labor after the Civil War,” in *Children and Youth during the Civil War Era*, ed. James Marten (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 160-72; Karin L. Zipf, *Labor of Innocents: Forced Apprenticeship in North Carolina, 1715-1919* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 40-105.

contracts.¹⁰ Northern benevolent societies, the Freedmen's Bureau, and state governments funded these schools in the South, but the catalysts for their creation were often freedpeople clamoring for education. Freedpeople established societies to raise money to erect schoolhouses and pay teachers' salaries and they taxed themselves in order to fund public education. In all of these ways, freedpeople evinced a craving for learning that made it a key component in structuring freedpeople's communities.¹¹

Black institutional life also flourished after emancipation, as freedpeople created and joined African-American churches, fraternities, and mutual-aid societies. Pews and pulpits occupied by black worshippers, masonic temples crowded with African-American freemasons, and meeting houses packed with black mutual aid society members gave credence to former slaves' free status. With the demise of slavery, freedpeople were no longer relegated to clandestine meetings in woods and fields to escape their masters' oversight. Freedom enabled former bondpeople to create large, organized institutions that championed their own goals. Through these various establishments, African Americans created meaningful bonds with other black community members. These

¹⁰ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 96.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 96-102. The scholarship on freedpeople's efforts for education is voluminous. The foundational works on black education in the South are Ronald E. Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875* (Wesport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980); Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freedpeople: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Robert C. Morris, *Reading, 'Riting, and Reconstruction: The Education of Freedmen in the South, 1861-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Joe M. Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986); Christopher M. Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862-1875* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); William P. Vaughan, *Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865-1876* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1974); Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

organizations laid a foundation for black political action by providing a forum for freedpeople to espouse their wants and needs and to organize themselves.¹²

Among the aspirations freedpeople harbored were securing the right to vote and the extension of civil rights. These two goals served as benchmarks for marking African Americans' altered status from slave to citizen. In the immediate aftermath of emancipation, freedpeople and free people of color organized conventions to press the federal government for civil rights and the extension of the suffrage to black men. African Americans were primarily concerned with those civil rights that would allow black men to serve on juries and to give testimony in cases that involved both whites and blacks. With the passage of the Military Reconstruction Acts in 1867 freedmen in the South gained the right to vote in elections, opening a floodgate of African American political participation that built on previous grassroots community organization. The effect of all this political activity was extensive. In the twelve years after the Civil War, over 600 black men served as state legislators—a majority of whom were freed slaves—along with 16 black Congressional office holders, and 18 executive-level state office holders. Southern black people also elected and appointed hundreds of African Americans to county and municipal offices during and after Congressional Reconstruction. By electing officials that were sympathetic to freedpeople's objectives,

¹² John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860-1890* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002); Foner, *Reconstruction*, 77-123; Peter P. Hinks and Stephen David Kantrowitz, eds, *All Men Free and Brethren: Essays on the History of Prince Hall Freemasonry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

ex-slaves were able to affect change, or at least put direct pressure upon politicians to advocate on their behalf.¹³

The advances African Americans made during Reconstruction in their personal and public lives evinced the radical changes that both emancipation and war brought to American society, politics, and economics. Yet in all of these actions that offered hope of regeneration after four deadly years of war, the threat of death still lingered in freedpeople's homes, in their churches and schoolhouses, and in town squares where black men and women gathered.

Violence in the South ebbed and flowed in response to a host of political, social and economic factors. As a result of this prolific violence, the federal government passed significant legislation to try to safeguard freedpeople's rights over the course of Reconstruction. The massacres of African Americans in Memphis and New Orleans in May and July 1866, for example, called into question the efficacy of Andrew Johnson's lenient reconstruction plan, and provided additional fodder for Republicans to press for the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment. This amendment granted citizenship and all its attendant rights to African Americans. When Radical Republicans debated the need for additional legislation in the South, they cited the murders of African Americans as a central reason for the necessity of the Military Reconstruction Acts which divided the South into five military districts, granted African Americans the right to vote, and established new stipulations for southern states to return to the Union.¹⁴

¹³ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 346-64; Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 198), 74-110; Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 162-213.

¹⁴ Thaddeus Stevens, for example, railed against letting former Confederate states back into the Union without prohibiting men who had aided the Confederacy from voting. He noted, "I hear several

White Southerners were not deterred by this additional federal legislation. The months before the 1868 presidential election, for example, were particularly violent and bloody as Democrats sought to suppress black voting through organized intimidation and death threats. As violence in the South continued unabated in the 1870s and threatened the democratic process of elections, the federal government once again acted to curtail white on black violence and passed the Enforcement Act and Ku Klux Klan Act in 1870 and 1871. The Enforcement Act made it a federal crime to intimidate voters and prohibited state officials from discriminating against voters because of race. The Ku Klux Klan Act designated crimes committed by individuals that denied citizens their constitutional rights to be punishable by federal law. This act and the alacrity with which the federal government investigated and prosecuted cases hamstrung the Klan—but only for a time. Violence remained a constant threat to African Americans’ lives during the end of Reconstruction. Indeed, many Americans stopped supporting political Reconstruction endeavors in the South because of the cost of protecting the lives of freedpeople. As a result, deaths from disease, starvation, exposure, and murder remained a persistent facet of African-American life in the South.¹⁵

Mortuary Politics

gentlemen say that these men should be admitted as equal brethren. Let not these friends of secession sing to me their siren song of peace and good will until they can stop my ears to the screams and groans of the dying victims at Memphis.” *Congressional Globe*, 39th Congress, 1st Sess. 2544 (1866).

¹⁵ Allen Trelease, *White Terror*; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 260-63, 271-91, 454-59, 556; Gregory P. Downs, *After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015).

“Dying Free” casts new light upon this familiar outline of the experiences of freedpeople during Reconstruction by analyzing the era through the lens of death. Over the past decade several historians have demonstrated the usefulness of death for examining relations of power.¹⁶ This dissertation is especially influenced by Vincent Brown’s *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (2008), and his concept of “mortuary politics.” Brown investigates the way that death shaped the experiences of both whites and blacks, free and enslaved, in colonial Jamaica. He examines how people made cultural sense of death, how they used death politically, and to what effect. Brown focuses on Jamaica because of its high death rate during the long eighteenth century, arguing that as a result of the pervasiveness of death, both free and enslaved had to come to terms with its consequences. In doing so, Brown demonstrates that “death was as generative as it was destructive.”¹⁷ Through deathways and funerals, enslaved people established communities of belonging and affirmed social values. Slaves confirmed social bonds and ancestral legacies by attempting to pass on property to kin. At its conclusion, *The Reaper’s Garden* turns its attention to the

¹⁶ This dissertation draws on Thomas Laquer’s important contention that dead bodies matter. He argues that “the living need the dead far more than the dead need the living. [Corpses matter] because the dead make social worlds.” Thomas Laquer, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1. For exemplary books that use death as an analytical tool to examine shifting power relations, see Richard Bell, *We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Self-Government in the Newly United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012); Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017); David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); João José Reis, *Death Is a Festival: Funeral Rites and Rebellion in Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, trans. H. Sabrina Gledhill (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Erik R. Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 4.

relationship between the Atlantic World and death, analyzing how abolitionists used the mounting death toll of slaves, and images of the barbarity of slavery to denounce the immorality of the institution. In these ways, Brown documents the significance of death to the enslaved, but also demonstrates its importance in shaping anti-slavery dialogues in the Atlantic World.

Brown's work on Jamaica provides a useful framework for examining death and power in the Reconstruction South. Just as death was an inescapable and prevalent facet of life in Jamaica, so it was in the post-Civil War South. In addition to Brown, "Dying Free" builds on the work of Drew Gilpin Faust to argue for the importance of death to understanding the experience of freedpeople during the process of emancipation. In *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (2008), Faust demonstrates how the massive number of casualties in the Civil War transformed Americans' relationship with death and gave rise to a culture of death, as soldiers and civilians came to terms with the destruction of the war. Finally, Faust tracks how this culture of death became a part of the American landscape, as Americans erected cemeteries and monuments to the fallen. "Dying Free" builds on Faust's framework by addressing how the formerly enslaved experienced death during the Civil War and Reconstruction and the political uses to which black survivors put the dead.¹⁸

Recently, scholars of emancipation have started to examine the mortal destruction and suffering of the emancipation process and how freedpeople's struggles shaped political discourses on citizenship and civil rights. Scholars have begun to question the long-held dichotomy between slavery and freedom in the postwar South, and now

¹⁸ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*.

contend that the status of the formerly enslaved was tenuous and uncertain. In *Sick from Freedom: African American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (2012), for example, Jim Downs documents the travail faced by enslaved people in Union contraband camps during the war, as well as the multitude of deaths that resulted from malnutrition, exposure, and disease in the years following the demise of slavery. While emancipation was a monumental event, Downs argues that the suffering experienced by former slaves drastically undercut their ability to enjoy the fruits of freedom documented by the previous generation of revisionist historians.¹⁹ In his telling, a majority of former slaves were struggling simply to live. Relentlessly pessimistic, Downs thus has little to say about the opportunities for regeneration wrought by this onslaught of mortal suffering.²⁰

¹⁹ Beginning in the 1960s with the advent of social history and the Civil Rights Movement, historians began to look at Reconstruction with renewed vigor. Revisionist historians overturned the existing narrative of Reconstruction promoted by the Dunning School which had argued that Reconstruction was a disastrous failure in which blacks and northern white Republicans conspired together to usurp power in the South, and embarked on an illegitimate governance of the South that was characterized by the incompetence and ineptitude of black office holders and “carpetbagger corruption.” Revisionist studies agreed with the Dunning School that Reconstruction had been a failure, but they argued that its demise was the result of the federal government not protecting freedpeople’s rights. In short, the revisionists contended that Reconstruction did not go far enough. This new school of thought produced monographs placing freedpeople at the center of the Reconstruction experience. They demonstrated how Reconstruction presented freedpeople with new opportunities to form families, establish schools and churches, and labor under new contracts and relationships with employers. The Freedmen and Southern Society Project is especially significant in this historiographical turn, compiling documents from the National Archives that detail the transition from slavery to freedom. These records place the experience of the formerly enslaved at the heart of the Reconstruction process, chronicling their successes, failures, and the hardships they endured in forging new lives in freedom. The most comprehensive synthesis of the revisionists’ work is Eric Foner’s *Reconstruction*.

²⁰ Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Chandra Manning delves into the relationship that freedpeople forged with the federal government during the Civil War as they struggled toward emancipation. She documents similar suffering among African-American refugees in Union camps. Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016). For a synthesis of this new scholarship that seeks to reframe the legacy of the Civil War and emancipation, see Carol Emberton, “Unwriting the Freedom Narrative: A Review Essay,” *Journal of Southern History* 82 (May 2016), 377-94.

The most careful analyses of the relationship between death and culture in the postwar South are those conducted by scholars of the historical memory of the Civil War. William Blair and David Blight have each demonstrated how whites and blacks in the North and South employed the memory of the Civil War dead to serve political ends by erecting soldiers' cemeteries, celebrating Decoration Days, and presenting the fallen dead as heroic soldiers who died for righteous causes.²¹ Together, Blight and Blair's works reveal the ways in which reunification of the country increasingly meant ignoring slavery's role in precipitating the war, and the actions of African Americans in the Union army to secure freedom. Blight and Blair acknowledge that African-American leaders continued to point to black military service and sacrifice as a reason why blacks should gain full civil rights, despite the growing aversion of white leaders to acknowledging their role in the Civil War. These works provide a valuable foundation for additional historical inquiry into the ways in which freedpeople invoked the memory of black soldiers to advance their own claims to citizenship and equality. Yet, while Blight and Blair focus primarily on veterans' cemeteries as powerful sites of reunification of the country, the implications of the creation of national cemeteries in the South, black veterans' struggles for inclusion in these cemeteries, and African-Americans' establishment of civilian graveyards remain understudied.

"Dying Free" thus attempts to apply the insights of scholars of death in America to the larger historiography of Reconstruction. In doing so, it argues that in the midst of

²¹ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War and American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009); William Blair, *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1861-1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Other works have also examined the links between death, Civil War veterans, and historical memory. See Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Brian Matthew Jordan, *Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War* (New York: Norton, 2015).

the extreme suffering and violence freedpeople endured during Reconstruction, ex-slaves used death as an opportunity to create communities, solidify kinship networks, and protest against their unjust treatment. Some of the hardships freedpeople encountered were, of course, impossible to overcome. However, “Dying Free” argues that although death was a destructive facet of the Reconstruction experience, some freedpeople who survived the ordeal were able to make meaning out of the extraordinary loss of life.

The Bones

This dissertation is organized around five thematic chapters that focus upon different aspects of African-American life in freedom across the South. These chapters cover the same time period, roughly 1863-1877. The purpose of these chapters is to investigate the myriad ways in which death permeated African Americans’ social, political, and economic lives, and how black men and women used these mortal losses to advance their own agendas.

The first chapter examines the ways in which African-American soldiers took part in “the work of death” during the Civil War. Through an analysis of black soldiers’ and African-American laborers’ work in burial corps, it argues that African Americans were the primary labor force in creating national cemeteries. This labor provided opportunities for African Americans to demonstrate their dedication to the Union by serving as “caretakers” of the Union dead while erecting these cemeteries. The chapter contends that black men and women quickly appropriated these cemeteries as their own political spaces on Decoration Days to commemorate the emancipationist legacy of the Civil War.

Chapter two investigates the interplay of death, family, and economic independence in African-American communities. It asserts that deceased black soldiers

played a central role in securing a modicum of economic stability for their surviving kin. Through an analysis of African-American women's applications for widows' pensions, and their struggle for land ownership, this chapter claims that by such means African Americans affirmed kinship networks and built community bonds that provided vital economic support. In the process of applying for widows' pensions, African-American women crafted their own understanding of who was deserving of a federal pension—an understanding that was forged in their own experiences of enslavement and emancipation.

Chapter three focuses on how African Americans discussed the racial massacres and deaths that plagued the South during Reconstruction. Specifically, this chapter looks at African-American testimony given before congressional committees investigating massacres and Ku-Klux Klan violence in the South, as well as how the black press in the South and North reported on this violence. It demonstrates that freedpeople seized opportunities to testify in order to defy the death threats implicit in these violent acts. Through their testimony and reports, African Americans used the deaths they had witnessed to call attention to the dire situation of black people in the South and to stake claims as citizens to federal protection.

The fourth chapter examines African-American religion and spiritualism by analyzing how Reconstruction-era black people used Christianity, Conjure, Voodoo, and Spiritualism to assist them in navigating the perils of freedom. The main contention of this chapter is that affairs of the soul and the spirit world were central to African-American community building and political life. Black men and women relied on the spirits of the dead to mediate the issues they encountered in their daily lives and to

provide them with guidance and support as they strove to eradicate the racism and inequality they endured in freedom.

The final chapter chronicles the formation of private black civilian cemeteries in the post-war South. This chapter argues that African Americans deliberately erected these sites as spaces of political meaning and historical memory. The chapter closely analyzes the development of two black cemeteries in Wilmington, North Carolina, and Columbia, South Carolina, and how black men and women used these spaces of rest and remembrance for political purposes. Ultimately, this chapter contends that private civilian cemeteries were an integral facet of African-American political culture and served as sites for the political mobilization of African-American men and women.

Because African Americans interacted with death in such varied arenas, this dissertation draws from a wide array of sources. The voices of African Americans in the South are especially clear in published reports of congressional hearings on racial massacres and violence in the South. These reports record African-American men and women's words as they described the deaths they witnessed during these bloody conflagrations. In the columns of African-American newspapers in the South and the North, black editors frequently printed accounts of the murders of black men and women in the South, as well as information about funerals of local black leaders, and ceremonies in private black cemeteries. In the voluminous pension files kept by the Military Pension Bureau, African-American widows of black soldiers wrote letters to pension officers that explained why they were worthy and in need of a federal widow's pension. Afro-Creole spiritualists in New Orleans painstakingly recorded messages in multiple séance registers when they made contact with the spirits of their friends, family, and heroes. In addition,

decades after emancipation, freedpeople recounted their experiences as slaves to Works Progress Administration interviewers who documented their recollections about religion, folklore, healing, and death.

In a variety of other sources that do not privilege the voices of African Americans, glimpses of the ways in which black men and women harnessed the power of the dead are also evident. In the records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, better known as the Freedmen's Bureau, agents wrote reports and letters to their superiors about their interactions with freedpeople. They reported on their attempts to secure coffins and burials for deceased black refugees, their struggles to mediate violent disputes between white employers and black employees, and to provide protection for former slaves whose lives had been threatened by their old masters. In the records of the Quartermaster General, local burial corps agents and military officials documented the experiences of the black laborers who exhumed and reburied Union soldiers' bodies within national cemeteries. The registers of depositors for the Freedman's Savings Bank, the records of the Southern Claims Commission, and local deed books also yield information about the creation of African-American burial societies and black-owned and operated cemeteries. In their published memoirs, teachers, missionaries, and plantation owners recorded their observations as they watched black people shake off the yoke of slavery, confront the deaths of kith and kin, and strive to create their own autonomous communities.

This interplay between life and death, and slavery and freedom is at the heart of understanding the experience of emancipation and Reconstruction. In 1863 Frederick Douglass urged black men to enlist in the Union army and fight for their freedom by

proclaiming, “[b]etter even to die free, than to live as slaves.” Douglass’s exclamation echoed the spiritual sung by black people held in bondage in the South: “And before I’d be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave and go home to my God and be free.”²² With the tumult of the Civil War and emancipation, countless African Americans did die free. What did it mean for former slaves to die as free people and how did the survivors find meaning in their deaths? These are the questions this dissertation seeks to answer.

²² *Douglass’s Monthly*, March 21, 1863.

CHAPTER ONE

“To Repose with Their Comrades”: African Americans and the Creation of National Cemeteries

On a warm day in May of 1874, thousands of African Americans led by the Independent Order of Pole Bearers, a black fraternal organization, paraded through the streets of Memphis on their way to the Memphis National Cemetery. It was the sixth straight year that former bondspeople had marched to the cemetery as part of their Decoration Day festivities. Within the gates of the cemetery, former slaves decorated the graves of nearly 14,000 white and black Union soldiers who had fallen during the Civil War. Attendees stood amidst the final resting place of over 4,000 black soldiers, some of whom had been ruthlessly killed during the Fort Pillow Massacre a decade earlier. Lionizing the dead, African-American orators urged their listeners to honor the soldiers' sacrifices by demanding their full civil rights.¹

The ceremonies that took place at this Memphis ceremony were not unique. Across the South, African Americans regularly paraded to national cemeteries erected by the federal government following the end of the Civil War. Black men and women harnessed the power of cemeteries filled with the bodies of white and black war-dead in order to craft a meaningful, usable memory of the Civil War and to assert their continued dedication to achieving full civil and legal equality. Blacks chose national cemeteries in particular for their symbolic resonance. Not only did black Union soldiers lie beneath the

¹ Memphis National Cemetery officially opened on Decoration Day in May 1868. The *Memphis Daily Avalanche* reported that at the dedication of the cemetery, an estimated “four to five thousand persons were on the ground during the day. The colored element was greatly in the majority.” *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, May 31, 1868.

soil, but it was primarily freedpeople who had constructed these final resting places for all the Union dead. Indeed, many bodies of Union soldiers only came to rest in national cemeteries because of the useful information slaves and freedpeople had provided to burial corps members during and after the war. By keeping mental maps of remote graves, performing the exhausting labor of exhuming and reburying the bodies, and using those spaces to celebrate their freedom and remember those who fell to make them free, African Americans claimed these southern sites of rest and remembrance as their own political spaces to make meaning out of the Civil War and emancipation.

Exhuming

The South emerged from the Civil War as one vast, blighted graveyard. Unmarked graves littered fields pockmarked from innumerable battles and skirmishes that had wracked the South for four long and ruinous years. The work of interring the dead had begun during the war, but with the end of combat, the federal government could focus on the task of identifying and properly burying the dead. In July 1865, Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs issued a general order that all Union commanders submit a report recording every interment made during the war. When the quartermaster general's office finished compiling these records, Union commanders had only accounted for 101,737 burials, which comprised less than a third of the estimated Union deaths. These bleak numbers revealed that thousands of men remained undiscovered in makeshift, unmarked graves far from home. Throughout the North, civilians and politicians urged that the federal government account for these unidentified men, and give them a proper burial. With the mustering out of many white regiments at

the close of the war, this work was largely left to the United States Colored Troops who remained on duty across the South.²

The task of finding and interring the dead was a costly and time-consuming process. Black troops along with freedpeople hired for the unpleasant task of exhuming corpses for relocation to national cemeteries worked long hours, traveling long distances in search of bodies. An observer near the Chickamauga battlefield in Georgia, described the scene of a burial corps locating bodies slated for reburial in Chattanooga National Cemetery in Tennessee. “[A] hundred men were deployed in a line a yard apart, each examining half a yard of ground on both sides as they proceeded. Thus was swept a space five hundred yards in breadth. . . In this manner the whole battlefield was to be searched. When a grave was found, the entire line halted until the teams came up and the body was removed.”³ Scenes of the formerly enslaved and black Union troops traversing battlefields in search of the bones of fallen comrades were common across the war-wrecked South. Near Chattanooga, Captain W. A. Wainwright employed 100 recently discharged black soldiers to exhume all the bodies buried along a twenty-mile stretch of the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad and then re-bury them in Chattanooga National Cemetery.⁴ Elsewhere in Georgia, African Americans were the primary laborers who exhumed bodies and reinterred them in the Andersonville National Cemetery – a

² Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

³ J. T. Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of its Battle-Fields and Ruined Cities* (Hartford, Conn.: L. Stebbins, 1866), 266.

⁴ J. B. Van Horne, Report on National Cemetery at Chattanooga, May 14 1866, box 19, General Correspondence and Reports Relating to National and Post Cemeteries, entry [E] 576, Records of the Quartermaster General, Record Group [RG] 92, National Archives [NARA].

sequence of burials which Northerners followed with rapt attention due to the cemetery's notoriety as the site of a prison camp during the war.⁵



Fig. 1.1. African Americans at work disinterring the dead from the Cold Harbor battlefield in 1865. John Reekie, *A Burial Party on the Battle-Field of Cold Harbor*, April 1865, Library of Congress.

Exhuming and reintering the dead was part of African-American soldiers' duty, but through their actions black troops staked particular claims to the outcome of the Civil War. By their somber work to lay to rest the bodies of many thousands of white Union soldiers, African-American troops became proxy caretakers of the white Union war-dead,

⁵ E. B. Whitman to E. B. Carling, January 11, 1867, box 3, E576, RG 92, NARA. Likewise, at Stones River in Tennessee, 120 troops from the 111th USCT labored around Murfreesboro to disinter the dead and reinter them in the national cemetery there. William Earnshaw to Bt Major General J. L. Donaldson, April 25, 1866, box 69, E 576, RG 92, NARA.

assuming roles traditionally served by family members. Their labor evinced their enduring respect for and dedication to the emancipationist cause for which Union men had fallen. They also exhibited their capacity for intimate, humane care-giving in providing a proper burial for their fallen brothers in arms.⁶ According to Chaplain William Earnshaw, the first superintendent of Stones River National Cemetery, the work these soldiers accomplished was done “without any disposition to claim the praise of any.” In order to recover these dead from their distant graves, black troops had traveled seventy to eighty miles and found corpses “on the highest mountain peaks, on the mountain side, in dark ravines, and in the swamps of those victorious fields.”⁷ The work had often been repellent, requiring burial teams to unearth putrid remains during the height of summer.⁸ Nevertheless, Earnshaw reported, “[n]ever will I cease to remember how tenderly they performed this work amidst untold difficulties, how cheerfully they set out on long and tiresome journeys through rain and storm in search of the remains of their fellow comrades and the proud satisfaction expressed by them when they laid them to rest in our beautiful cemetery.”⁹

⁶ In June 1866, as Congress debated how to reconstruct the South, Pennsylvania Congressman, Thomas Williams, used the familial role slaves had assumed when they cared for Union soldiers to argue that African Americans should gain the right to vote. “They were our guides, our spies, our concealers, and our nurses. The fugitive from Libby or Florence or Andersonville found food and shelter in their cabins, and the darling of many a mother, the pride and hope of many a northern home, was affectionately tended by a second mother, who studied every want, tried to soothe every pain, and, when naught availed, wiped off the clammy death-sweat, and closed the glassy eye.” *Congressional Globe*, 39th Cong., 1st Sess. 3070 (1866).

⁷ William Earnshaw to Bt Major General J. L. Donaldson, April 25, 1866, box 69, E576 RG 92, NARA.

⁸ One burial corps near Stevenson, Alabama had to stop exhuming bodies after a family complained about the smell. Whitman reported that a “portion of the bodies, those buried at a more recent period, were so offensive, as to compel a family residing near, to remove from their residence.” The work was ordered to resume when it was cooler, perhaps in October. E. B. Whitman to J. L. Donaldson Aug 6, 1866, box 50, E 576, RG 92, NARA.

The stench of decomposing bodies, disease, and inclement weather were not the only dangers African-American burial corps members faced when carrying out their solemn orders. The land that burial corps combed were home to hostile white Southerners incensed by the sight of victorious black troops trampling through their fields while the Confederate dead remained neglected.¹⁰ In Fredericksburg, Virginia, a crowd of white citizens attacked a Union burial party awaiting a train at the railroad depot. In the melee eight men were injured.¹¹ In Tennessee, Captain W. A. Wainwright, the officer in charge of exhuming the dead for interment in Knoxville National Cemetery, could not find laborers to hire. Potential laborers had been scared off, he believed, by “threats made by the ‘reconstructed’ that persons giving my employees aid in disinterring the ‘hogbacks,’ meaning union soldiers, could no longer live in that country.”¹²

While recalcitrant white Southerners refused to provide information on Union graves to burial corps members, many Union commanders found their most valuable informants to be local freedpeople. As Captain E. B. Whitman explained, white residents in Mississippi showed no disposition “to render any assistance or to furnish any information. The freedmen as in time of actual war, seemed to be the only source of

⁹ For more on families as care-givers of the dead, see Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 6-14. William Earnshaw to Lorenzo Thomas, September 1, 1867, box 69, E576 RG 92, NARA.

¹⁰ The national cemetery system only included the burial of Union soldiers. The bodies of Confederate soldiers were left where federal burial parties found them. In response, Southerners—especially women—mobilized to form privately operated memorial associations to bury the Confederate dead. For more on Confederate memorial associations see Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 237-49; Caroline Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies’ Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

¹¹ The report does not say whether the men injured in the attack were white or black. “Another Display of Rebel Violence,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, September 29, 1866.

¹² W. A. Wainwright to [Meigs], January 25, 1867, box 38, E576 RG 92, NARA.

reliable information.”¹³ Later, he expanded on this point, noting that “most all the information gained was from negroes, who, as I was told by parties at Mt Sterling [Kentucky] pay more attention to such matters than the white people.”¹⁴ It was not just that blacks paid “more attention to such matters,” but rather that they made a conscious effort to remember where the dead were buried and the number of graves. Beyond the watchful eyes of their masters, slaves even protected and tended the graves of those who had fallen. During the war, black people buried Union soldiers when they had been left unburied by their killers, or before their fellow soldiers had time to care for them. As a slave, Moses Coleman saw the shooting of a Union soldier by Joseph Wheeler’s Confederate cavalry. He also buried the corpses of five Union soldiers who had been captured and shot while bringing up the rear of William Tecumseh Sherman’s army. Coleman held on to this information for years, and as a freeman, he pointed burial corps members to these six unmarked graves.¹⁵ Likewise, African Americans living on William Perdue’s farm near City Point, Virginia, risked their jobs and perhaps even their lives to provide information about the location of seven bodies buried under Perdue’s pea vines. In an act of vengeance, Perdue had removed all of the headboards and mounds from these graves to obscure their location. When asked by burial corps members about the graves,

¹³ E. B. Whitman to J. L. Donaldson, April 20, 1866, box 45, E576 RG 92, NARA.

¹⁴ [Whitman], *Journal of a Trip Through Parts of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia Made to Locate the Scattered Graves of Union Soldiers* [1866], p. 26, E685, RG 92, NARA.

¹⁵ [Whitman], *Journal of a Trip*, p. 169, E685, RG 92, NARA. Near Savannah, another black man informed Whitman that he had helped bury two soldiers from Kilpatrick’s cavalry. Information about graves of Union soldiers was also furnished by freedpeople near Savannah, including York Smith, who said he could point out graves of Union soldiers. Willis Grubbs took care of a sick soldier and buried him when he died near an African-American burial ground. He disclosed the location of the soldier’s grave to a burial corps. *Ibid.*, 186-8, 196, 202, 208-9, 245-246.

Perdue denied all knowledge of any burials on his property. Rather than see these seven graves damaged and lost to the next year's planting season, a freedwoman employed by Perdue divulged their locations to the burial party. In gratitude, the commander of the corps promised the freedpeople working on this farm that he would not tell their owner-turned-employer that they had helped him locate these Union graves.¹⁶

Beyond remembering the sites of lone graves, some freedpeople also tended the gravesites of fallen Union men long after interment. After the war, a freedman living just outside of Clarkesville, Tennessee, had taken on the monumental task of looking after the graves of 126 soldiers and six children of soldiers' on his land until a burial corps removed them in 1866.¹⁷ Such feats were not uncommon among freedpeople. Indeed, the efforts of that Tennessee man echo the similar, albeit better known, efforts of freedpeople in Charleston, South Carolina, to care for the graves of Union prisoners of war who had died in a Confederate prison camp created on the site of a former racecourse. In April 1865, former slaves erected a ten-foot tall, white-washed fence around that burial ground and set about organizing the graves into orderly rows. These freedpeople then erected an archway over the enclosure with a sign that read "Martyrs of the Race Course."¹⁸ This event, which became the impetus for the first Decoration Day, has received a great deal

¹⁶ Le Duc to James M. Moore, August 23, 1866, box 21, E576 RG 92, NARA. For another example of African Americans providing the location of Union graves, see Charles Fitchell to A. F. Rockwell, May 6, 1876, box 68, E576 RG 92, NARA. Fitchell reported that a black man named Jesse Washington saw a Union soldier get shot near Aquia Creek, Virginia, and pointed out the location of his grave.

¹⁷ [Whitman], *Journal of a Trip*, p. 248, E685, RG 92, NARA.

¹⁸ For more on the "Martyrs of the Race Course," see Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 65-70; Kathleen Ann Clark, *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), 31-38. The Quartermaster General removed the remains of Union soldiers buried at the racecourse to Beaufort National Cemetery.

of scholarly attention, but it was not an anomaly. Across the post-war South, freedpeople embarked on all manner of similar endeavors to preserve the remains and memories of fallen Union soldiers. In providing burials during wartime and remembering and caring for graves during peacetime, freedpeople demonstrated their vested interest in the outcome of the Civil War, their understanding of their own stake in that war, and their thankfulness for the sacrifices made by Union troops.

Interring

It was primarily African-American labor both inside and outside of the cemetery that made possible the erection of national cemeteries in the South. Black men worked on burial corps finding graves and exhuming bodies, and black teamsters loaded and unloaded wagons brimming with coffins containing the remains of the Union dead at dozens of national cemeteries where other black laborers worked to bury the bodies, and beautify the cemetery grounds. The national cemetery at Port Hudson, Louisiana, for instance, employed forty-eight black laborers, along with four black teamsters and a black mechanic. These men were employed in various tasks; twenty-five worked under an African-American overseer scouring the countryside for graves to exhume, removing approximately fifty bodies a day and covering an average distance of three miles. Black teamsters carted materials to and from the cemetery, as well as bodies. At the cemetery, three men built coffins, and twenty African Americans worked on the grounds digging graves, erecting headboards, planting trees and shrubs, making walkways, grading ditches, and mowing the grass.¹⁹

¹⁹ Inspection Report on Cemeteries at Port Hudson, Louisiana, May 1867, box 57, E576 RG 92, NARA.

The Port Hudson cemetery was a small-scale operation compared to larger cemeteries such as Chalmette National Cemetery in Louisiana, which employed 155 black laborers. A combined 341 African Americans labored on cemeteries at Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Marietta. By contrast, these three cemeteries only employed twenty-four white employees.²⁰ Indeed, the rest of the cemeteries erected in the South mirrored this pattern; if the federal government employed white laborers, they were few in number, and often held managerial positions as foremen. In eight cemeteries in the South with extant records of black and white laborers, the federal government employed 811 black laborers and only 108 white workers.²¹ Thus, it was predominantly black laborers employed by the federal government that constructed these cemeteries.

This work of preparing the Union dead for their final rest provided freedpeople with new opportunities to support their families while working outside of plantations and away from the supervision of former masters. But it could be exhausting, grueling, and stomach churning work. Black laborers at Arlington National Cemetery protested their

²⁰ Thosmas B. Van Horne to J. L. Donaldson, July 16, 1867, box 19, E576 RG 92, NARA; Inspection Report on Cemeteries at New Orleans, Louisiana, May 17, 1867, box 15, E576 RG 92, NARA.

²¹ Due to the inconsistency in reporting the number of laborers at a given time, it is difficult to make an estimate of the total number of African-American laborers in the entire national cemetery system. The number of black and white laborers listed above comes from the following numbers of laborers reported by cemetery superintendents. At Baton Rouge National Cemetery, there were fifty black laborers and four white foremen. Corinth National Cemetery employed 116 black laborers, with no white laborers. The labor force at Nashville National Cemetery was comprised of seventy-one black laborers employed under the direction of seven white foremen. Pittsburg Landing had fifty-eight black and three white laborers. Vicksburg, Mississippi, had the highest number of white laborers, employing seventy white men, but the cemetery also employed 170 black laborers. As noted, Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Marietta employed 341 black laborers and twenty-four white workers. Inspection on Cemeteries at Baton Rouge, Louisiana, May 27 1867, box 10; Inspection Report on Cemeteries at Corinth, Mississippi, August 5, 1867, box 22; Inspection Report on Cemeteries at Nashville, Tennessee, August 1867, box 50; Inspection Report on Cemeteries at Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee, August 8, 1867, box 57; Inspection Report on Cemeteries at Vicksburg, Mississippi, June 14, 1867, box 70; Thomas B. Van Horne to J. L. Donaldson, July 16, 1867, box 19, all in E576, RG 92, NARA.

long hours, claiming that “all that are officiating over us are disposed to tyranise. We are Laborers working in the U. S. Cemetery Irlington who have been ordered to work (10) hours and we believe it to be a violation of the Law and an injustice to the laboring man.” Besides the tiresome hours, the men noted that “som of us have familys in the city and cannot go home after quitting for it is too late in the evening and too early in the morning for to get over hear in time to go to work.”²² The long distances black laborers had to travel in order to do this solemn work could keep them away from their families for long periods of time. At Memphis, the burial corps leader had difficulty employing men following the Memphis Massacre in May 1866, as men “did not want to go that far out into the country,” perhaps fearing that they would be too far away from their families to be able to protect them.²³

Within the walls of these cities of the dead, hundreds of freedpeople found a way to scrape together a living through the work of death. With no set wages for workers, laborers received varying amounts of compensation based on the tasks they performed. At Baton Rouge National Cemetery, forty-four African-American laborers each received twenty dollars a month to inter the remains of soldiers, unearth and re-inter remains that had been buried in the cemetery during the war, grade the grounds, cut ditches, erect 2,600 feet of fence around the cemetery, and re-mound graves that had been washed away during storms.²⁴ But pay varied from cemetery to cemetery. The national

²² Laborers to John A. Rollans, May 7, 1869, box 7, E576 RG 92, NARA. I have not found a response to Rollans’ letter. It is not clear whether the Quartermaster General reduced the men’s hours.

²³ E. B. Whitman o J. L. Donaldson, June 28, 1866, box 57, E576 RG 92, NARA

²⁴ Inspection Report of C. W. Folsom, May 27, 1867, box 10, E576 RG 92, NARA.

cemeteries at Chattanooga and at Marietta, Georgia, employed fifteen black foremen at twenty-five dollars a month, while their white counterparts at Baton Rouge made forty dollars a month.²⁵ This discrepancy may have been racially-motivated – akin to the two-tier pay system that discriminated against black troops early in the war – but most likely stemmed from different policies of ration distribution.

Some cemeteries provided their laborers with rations and reduced their pay accordingly, while other cemeteries expected their laborers to support themselves with the money they earned, and adjusted their pay. For instance, at Pittsburg Landing on the Shiloh battlefield in Tennessee, fifty-eight black laborers, six black teamsters, and a black mechanic were all paid forty dollars per month, but were not given rations. According to the superintendent this was equivalent to getting paid twenty-five dollars with a ration.²⁶ This income was a marked change from their uncompensated labor as slaves, but these post-war wages barely provided subsistence living to the men tasked with doing the nation's most precious work. As another superintendent explained during a debate over this pay, "I consider \$30 [a month] low enough as compared with any place I have visited. I should not think it could bear to be any less than that. The men [here] get no rations."²⁷

The wages these black laborers received were meager, and barely covered their costs of living, but these men also faced the threat of not receiving their pay on time, or at

²⁵ Reports of Persons and Articles Hired, March 1867, box 19, E576 RG 92, NARA.

²⁶ Inspection Report on Cemeteries at Pittsburg Landing, Mississippi, August 8, 1867, box 57, E576 RG 92, NARA.

²⁷ Inspection Report on Cemeteries at Nashville, Tennessee, September 14, 1867, box 50, E576 RG 92, NARA.

all. Several cemetery superintendents reported to the quartermaster general's office that they owed laborers several months' worth of pay. The superintendent at Nashville noted that twenty-three men had not been paid for their work over the prior two months. These men had been away from the cemetery on scouting duty looking for unregistered graves, and by the time they came back funds had run out. The superintendent explained "[t]his, as usual works badly as the men have to buy everything they use, drawing no rations. Therefore if a man is discharged without pay he cannot pay his debts."²⁸ C. W. Folsom, the assistant quartermaster at Natchez, Mississippi, conveyed a similar issue to his superior, and requested that "immediate provision be made for the prompt payment of the hands, and kept up hereafter. I am not yet able to say where the fault of this non-payment, (which seems universal in the old mil'y Div'n of the Tennessee,) lies; but it should by all means be stopped... The "Burial Corps" and bankruptcy seem to be synonymous..."²⁹

African-American laborers at Vicksburg, Mississippi, who contracted to erect a gate at the entrance of the national cemetery there remained unpaid for their work long after the contractors employed by the federal government absconded from the city without paying their employees. These laborers subsequently petitioned the Secretary of the Treasury for assistance, asking "is there no remedy for us?" In a curt response, the quartermaster general stated that the "[d]epartment cannot settle claims of contractors' creditors. The laborers' remedy is against the parties who have employed them."³⁰ Thus,

²⁸ Inspection Report on Cemeteries at Nashville, Tennessee, September 14, 1867, box 50, E576 RG 92, NARA.

²⁹ Inspection Report on Cemeteries at Natchez, Mississippi, June 7 1867, box 51, E576 RG 92, NARA.

³⁰ Ralph McClennin, et al to Hon. Secretary of Treasury, October 30, 1879, box 19, E576 RG 92, NARA; S. Lindsey to Meigs, October 20, 1879, box 19, E576 RG 92, NARA.

while the national cemetery system provided freedpeople with a source of employment, the disorganized bureaucracy of the post-war army often meant that black laborers could not depend on receiving a paycheck on time.

Race also evidently factored into how some burial corps captains determined wages and their timely disbursement. William Crockett, an African-American burial corps member in Fredericksburg, originally signed on to work for thirty dollars a month with rations. Initially, the captain of the corps had assumed that his new employee was a white man, but when he learned he was black, he cut Crockett's pay in half, to fifteen dollars a month, asserting that the quartermaster had ordered that African Americans be paid only that amount.³¹

To protest their own unequal pay, black laborers at Chalmette, fearing reprisals from the cemetery's superintendent, enlisted the assistance of a white man named George Blodget to appeal to the Secretary of War on their behalf. Blodget's entreaty explained that while the men worked ten hours per day without complaint, they were paid just twenty dollars a month. White laborers at the same facility were paid forty dollars. "[T]he colored men do equally as much work, and at times the most repulsive, and hardest that is done," Blodget insisted. "Under the circumstances they most respectfully appeal to you if they are not entitled to the same remuneration for their labor as the white men—\$40 per month, being as little on which they can live and support their families.—They do the same amount of work, if not more..."³² In reply, Quartermaster General Montgomery

³¹ William E. Crockett to A. P. Ketchum, April 1867, filed as C-148 1867, RG 105 Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, NARA. [FSSP A-9718].

³² George Blodget to John A. Rawlins, July 5 1869, box 15, E576, RG 92, NARA.

Meigs ordered that “grades of pay should not depend on the color of the laborer, but on the amount and kind of labor performed by him. A colored laborer performing an equal amount of the same kind of work as a white laborer is entitled to an equal amount of pay.” Meigs then instructed “the pay of the colored laborers at Chalmette national cemetery to be equalized with that of the white laborers at the same cemetery, if the work is of the same grade.”³³ In providing labor that the federal government so desperately needed, African-American cemetery workers leveraged their position to sometimes successfully gain equal pay with white laborers in the free post-war marketplace.

Segregating

African-American burial corps members’ labor produced finely manicured cemetery grounds with rows of neatly organized graves, in which both black and white soldiers finally came to rest. In theory, the national cemetery system was racially neutral regarding burials; the only stipulation for inclusion in the cemetery was that the soldier had died fighting for the Union during the war. Thus, national cemeteries were spaces that demonstrated the revolutionary nature of the Civil War, as African-American soldiers came to rest within the same gates as white soldiers. By the time the army completed the reinterment program in 1871, approximately 30,000 black soldiers had been buried in national cemeteries. The inclusion of African-American soldiers in these new memorials to the Union war-dead was a point of pride for the African-American

³³ Ed Schower to Geo. G. Blodget, August 5, 1869, box 15, E576, RG 92, NARA.

community, but they often had to fight in order to ensure that black soldiers secured their proper place within these sacred grounds.³⁴

During the Civil War, burial parties made every effort to ensure that black and white soldiers were buried in segregated plots when time allowed. The exigencies of war, however, often meant that black and white soldiers had been buried together quickly where they had fallen. But when burial parties had more time to bury the dead, it appears that laborers attempted to segregate them. In 1864 in Alexandria, Virginia, African-American soldiers at the black L'Ouverture Hospital protested against the burial of their comrades in the freedmen's "contraband" cemetery, rather than in the cemetery recently established in the city for Union soldiers. Objecting to interment of their brothers in arms in a separate cemetery, 443 soldiers affixed their names to a letter arguing, "[w]e are not contrabands, but soldiers of the U.S. Army, we have cheerfully left the comforts of home, and entered into the field of conflict. . . and should share the same privileges and rights of burial in every way with our fellow soldiers, who only differ from us in color."³⁵ A

³⁴ For works on the experience of African-American soldiers in the Civil War, and the relationship between freedom and military service, see James McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (New York: Pantheon, 1965); Joseph T. Wilson, *The Black Phalanx* (New York: Arno, 1968); Ira Berlin, Joseph Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, eds. *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, ser. 2, *The Black Military Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: Free Press, 1990); Edwin S. Redkey, *A Grand Army of Black Men: Letters from African American Soldiers in the Union Army, 1861–1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); John David Smith, ed. *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Noah Andre Trudeau, *Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War, 1862–1865* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1998); Keith P. Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers during the Civil War* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2002); Eric Foner, *Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: Norton, 2010); Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Carole Emberton, "'Only Murder Makes Men': Reconsidering the Black Military Experience," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, no. 3 (September 2012): 369-93.

³⁵ Captain J.G.C. Lee to Major General Montgomery C. Meigs, December 28, 1864, box 2, E576, RG 92, NARA.

similar attempt at post-mortem segregation took place in Savannah. There, a burial corps buried a majority of the white Union soldiers in the city's whites-only cemetery, Laurel Grove, while they interred black soldiers in the local African-American burying ground which was nominally owned by the city.³⁶ Around Clarksville, Tennessee, E. B. Whitman found black soldiers frequently buried in established African-American cemeteries, as well as black soldiers buried in graveyards created for black refugees.³⁷ Likewise, in Mobile, Alabama, laborers laid to rest white Union troops in a whites-only plot adjoining the city cemetery, while black soldiers were mixed "pell mell" with refugees buried in a separate African-American section on the opposite side of the grounds.³⁸

³⁶ E. B. Carling to C. K. Smith, February 15, 1866, box 64, E576, RG 92, NARA. The officer suggested that the government simply pay for the plots the soldiers were buried in in the black cemetery, and leave them where they were.

³⁷ [Whitman], *Journal of a Trip*, p. 245-249, E685, RG 92, NARA.

³⁸ Lorenzo Thomas to Edwin M. Stanton, July 9, 1867, box 47, E576, RG 92, NARA.

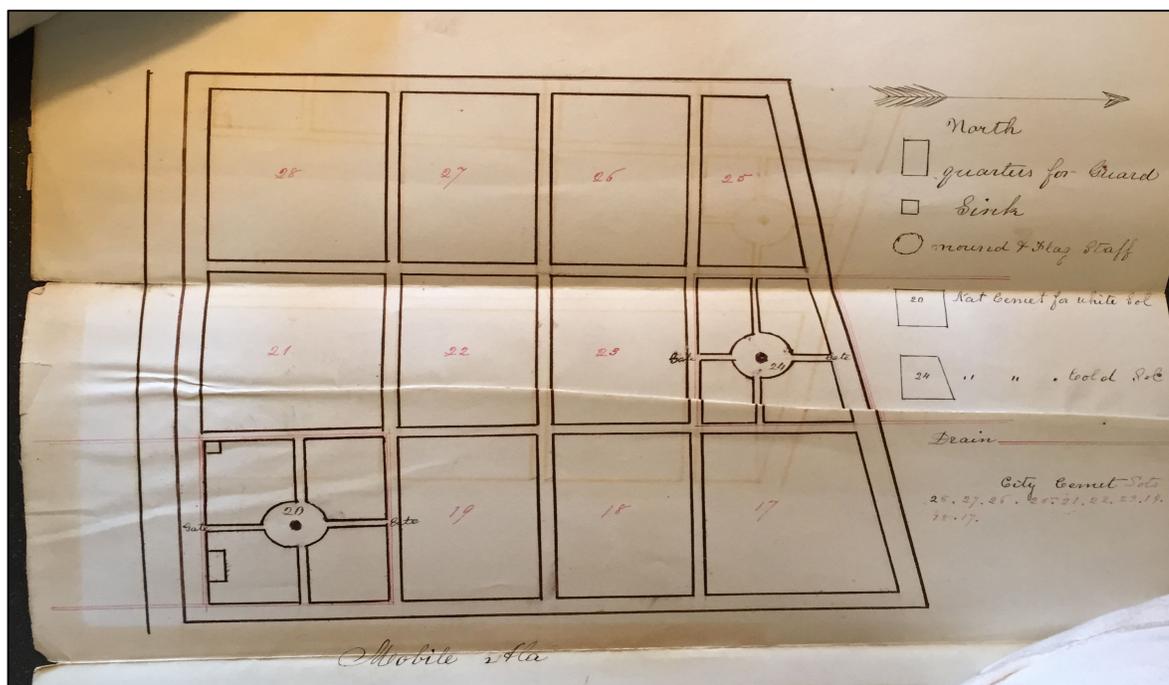


Fig. 1.2. Rough sketch of the layout of Mobile National Cemetery. The square marked “20” in the bottom left corner shows the national cemetery for white soldiers, and the square marked “24” in the center right of the map denotes the national cemetery for black soldiers. The squares separating the two cemeteries comprised a cemetery owned by the city of Mobile. Mobile, Ala, Undated Map, box 47, E576, RG 92 NARA.

These examples of post-mortem segregation appear to have occurred as a result of pre-war custom, but they took on new meaning in the postwar years. After the war, the practice became policy as the bodies that burial corps exhumed from unregistered graves and reburied in national cemeteries were consistently separated by race. In Fort Pillow, Tennessee, the site of a massacre in which Confederate soldiers under Nathan Bedford Forrest had brutally murdered surrendering white and USCT soldiers, federal burial parties tasked with installing the bodies in a temporary cemetery in 1866 reported that they had finished their work and that “the white men were buried on the east side of the cemetery and the colored on the west.”³⁹ When laborers later moved the bodies from Fort Pillow, this time to the national cemetery at Memphis, they joined a federal burial ground

³⁹ W. J. Colburn to M. C. Meigs, April 9, 1866, box 45, E576, RG 92, NARA.

that was already segregated by race. In 1867, the Memphis cemetery contained the graves of 4,034 unidentified African-American soldiers, each buried at the rear of the cemetery behind the graves of 9,415 white soldiers, sailors, and government employees. The same patterns recurred across the South.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ List of interments by state, July 1867, box 45, E576, RG 92, NARA; Map of the US National Cemetery near Memphis, July 1867, box 45, E576, RG 92, NARA. One unique characteristic of the Memphis cemetery, however, was the treatment of the dead from Fort Pillow. The superintendent of the cemetery directed that the dead from the Fort Pillow battlefield be buried in a separate section. In this small plot of 248 soldiers, white and black were laid to rest. Classified Statement of Interments, June 30, 1875, box 45, E576, RG 92, NARA. It is unclear if the bodies of white and black soldiers in the Fort Pillow section of the cemetery were mixed together, or still segregated even within the plot. Calvin Jackson, staff, Memphis National Cemetery, Department of Veterans' Affairs, email to author, June 16, 2015, notes that the current staff of the cemetery has no record of the Fort Pillow section of the cemetery, and it no longer exists on maps of the Civil War portion of the cemetery.

The logistics of ensuring that cemeteries remained segregated was complicated, especially as a result of the decomposition of the bodies. But from the records of the Quartermaster General's office, it appears that officials kept meticulous and separate records for white and black burials. Despite decomposition, burial corps members had other ways of determining if a corpse was white or black. In 1869, for instance, the superintendent at Port Hudson accidentally unearthed a body. He concluded "the remains from the indication of the hair attached to the cranium" were that of an African American. Thus, the superintendent had the body buried in the portion of the cemetery set aside for black soldiers. Monthly Report of the Condition of the National Cemetery at Port Hudson, November 1869, box 58, E576, RG 92, NARA. For other examples of the federal government interring African American soldiers in segregated plots, see Plan of Proposed Cemetery, New Berne, North Carolina, n.d., box 53, E576, RG 92, NARA; S. C. Forsyth to M. G. Meigs, May 19, 1868, box 51, E576, RG 92, NARA; plats in [Whitman] Journal of a Trip. Faust contends that the racial segregation of national cemeteries was not the product of military policy, but occurred as a result of custom. Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 317n.



Fig. 1.3. This map of Memphis National Cemetery shows the segregation of plots of African-American soldiers in the bottom right corner of the map. Map of Memphis National Cemetery, July 15, 1867, box 45, E576, RG 92, NARA.

The large numbers of unidentified African-American soldiers buried in national cemeteries also set them apart from their white comrades in arms. In national cemeteries in the South, approximately sixty-four percent of interred black soldiers remained unidentified, while the number of white soldiers whose identities could not be confirmed in these same cemeteries was about forty-eight percent.⁴¹ There were several reasons for this discrepancy. White regiments had higher literacy rates than black ones. When a soldier died, white soldiers were able to write the name of the soldier on a scrap of paper to be buried with the body, or on a makeshift headboard. Black soldiers were less likely

⁴¹ These numbers are not comprehensive, but are based on the data collected in 1871 by the federal government about the numbers of known and unknown white and black soldiers and civilians interred in national cemeteries. *Inspection Report of National Cemeteries, 1870-1871*, 99, Christensen Family Papers, Box 6, South Caroliniana Library. Faust places the number of unknown black soldiers at approximately two-thirds, and whites at nearly one-half for national cemeteries nationwide. Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 236.

to be able to do the same.⁴² For the same reason, African-American family members who might have been able to positively identify a lost loved one were less likely than white families to write to the War Department seeking information.⁴³ As a result, only occasionally did black family members travel to these battlefield-graveyards to identify their kin and thus ensure that they were not placed beneath an unknown headstone. In Natchez, Mississippi, for instance, Mary Williams identified the remains of her brother, Hendon Branch, who had served in the 5th United States Colored Artillery, after burial corps members disinterred his body from a grave on the banks of the Mississippi River. Small numbers of USCT veterans, friends, and family members traveled long distances in the hopes of finding their loved ones, though the outcome was usually bleak. At Natchez National Cemetery, Branch was one among only ninety-three black soldiers to be identified. In the same cemetery, 2,438 black soldiers came to rest beneath headboards marked “unknown.”⁴⁴

Forgetting

Distinguishing the bodies of African-American soldiers from those of black refugees who had seized their freedom by following the Union army posed a problem for

⁴² No definitive numbers on literacy of black soldiers exist. Historians have argued that black troops recruited in the South had lower rates of literacy due to laws prohibiting educating slaves than those recruited in the North. In the South, an estimated five to ten percent of the black population was partially literate in 1860. For more on black troops and literacy, see Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 83-4.

⁴³ For white civilians inquiring about the locations of their loved ones, see Requests for Information Relating to Missing Soldiers Received by James Moore, Quartermaster, 1865-1868, E582, RG 92, NARA.

⁴⁴ Original Field Sheets of Union Dead (Colored) Disinterred from April 15th to April 30th 1868, box 51, E576, RG 92, NARA; List of bodies (white and colored) reinterred in National Cemetery from Feb 1 1870 to May 31 1870, box 52, E576, RG 92, NARA; Original Field Sheet of Union Dead (Cold) Disinterred from June 15 1869 to June 30 1869, box 52, E576, RG 92, NARA.

cemetery officials. When it came to choosing a location for a national cemetery, officials tried to select sites near battlefields or urban hospitals where laborers would have the least number of bodies to move. Burial corps buried deceased black civilians en masse in “contraband” cemeteries near army hospitals. At the same time, however, laborers also buried Union soldiers who died in these local hospitals nearby. As a result, the locations of many early national cemeteries in the South contained the remains of white and black soldiers and freedpeople. At the refugee camp at Camp Nelson, Kentucky, for instance, burial corps members puzzled over what to do with the bodies of the children and the wives of black soldiers who were buried together in the same yard as their kin.⁴⁵ Across the nation, African-American politicians and newspaper editors, and federal officials debated the appropriate final resting place for freedpeople. The solutions officials decided upon at Arlington National Cemetery and Chalmette National Cemetery demonstrate the varied ways in which the cemetery landscape highlighted the martyrdom of some African Americans, while obscuring the losses suffered by thousands more.

The construction of Arlington National Cemetery is an especially illuminating example of this dilemma. In one of the oldest portions of the cemetery, Union soldiers had buried freedpeople and black and white soldiers side by side. According to Montgomery Meigs, the founder of Arlington National Cemetery, between 1863 and 1865, “great numbers of colored refugees from Virginia and other Southern States came to Washington.” The Quartermaster’s Department took charge of burying “many of them who died in hospital or in camp, or in employment of the Dep’t as teamsters or laborers &c.” Meigs had ordered the bodies to be “intermingled with the whites and not to be

⁴⁵ [Whitman], *Journal of a Trip*, p. 32-3, E685, RG 92, NARA.

distinguished from those of the other race.”⁴⁶ A month after Union troops made the first interments at Arlington, Meigs ordered white soldiers to be interred closer to Robert E. Lee’s mansion on the cemetery grounds, and the white soldiers that had been buried in the older portion of the yard to be reburied “to repose with their comrades” in the main cemetery. The black soldiers buried in the older part of the cemetery were not moved, but instead remained “where so large a number of their own race had been interred and thus this part of the ground was devoted to the colored people, soldiers, & refugees.”⁴⁷

In 1871, a group of African-American leaders in Washington, D.C., including Duke W. Anderson, Frederick G. Barbadoes, and William H. A. Wormley, protested the exclusion of these black soldiers from Arlington’s central grounds, and petitioned the Secretary of War to have them moved to the prime real estate close to Lee’s mansion.⁴⁸ Their protest began in the wake of an embarrassing scene at Arlington Cemetery on Decoration Day in 1871, when a procession of prominent African-American men, including Frederick Douglass, Barbadoes, Wormley, and Anderson, marched from the

⁴⁶ F. G. Barbadoes, D. W. Anderson, and W. H. Wormley to W. W. Belknap, August 2, 1871, box 8, E576, RG 92, NARA; Endorsement from M. C. Meigs, August 5, 1871 on F. G. Barbadoes, D. W. Anderson, and W. H. Wormley to W. W. Belknap, August 2, 1871, box 8, E576, RG 92, NARA.

⁴⁷ Endorsement from M. C. Meigs, August 5, 1871 on F. G. Barbadoes, D. W. Anderson, and W. H. Wormley to W. W. Belknap, August 2, 1871, box 8, E576, RG 92, NARA.

⁴⁸ Barbadoes was politically active throughout the country, serving as a delegate to the California Colored State Convention in 1865, and serving on the executive committee of the National Convention of the Colored Men of America in 1869. *Weekly Anglo-African*, December 17, 1859; *Proceedings of the National Convention of the Colored Men of America: Held in Washington, D.C. on January 13, 14, 15, and 16, 1869* (Washington, D. C., 1869). Duke Anderson was pastor of the First Baptist Church in the District of Columbia, and the first African-American justice of the peace for the district. He was also a trustee of Howard University, the Freedman’s Bank, and a commissioner of Washington Asylum. Masur, *An Example for All the Land*, 159-60. Wormley was a hotel keeper in the city. Entry of Wm. H. A. Wormley, May 12, 1873, no. 307, Registers of Signatures of Depositors in Branches of the Freedman’s Savings and Trust Company, 1865-1874, Records of the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, National Archives, Record Group 101, microcopy 816, reel 4. Both Barbadoes and Wormley would serve as honorary pallbearers at Frederick Douglass’s funeral in 1895, *New York Times*, February 26, 1895.

lavishly decorated graves in the cemetery's central area to the burial ground of black soldiers and freedpeople. There, they discovered that those graves had long been neglected. The *Washington Chronicle* reported that there was “no stand erected, no orator or speaker selected, not a single flag placed on high, not even a paper flag at the headboards of these loyal but ignored dead... Deep was the indignation and disappointment of the people.”⁴⁹ The group then improvised an “indignation meeting” and passed two resolutions vowing to petition to have the remains of these black soldiers removed to the main grounds. In the years since the end of the Civil War, the image of the black soldier had become a potent symbol among African-American politicians keen to advocate for the suffrage and for civil rights. This second-class treatment, buried and forgotten in the deepest recesses of the cemetery, did not evoke the powerful image of the heroic black soldier, made equal in death as a result of his sacrifice. Yet in their attempt to venerate African-American soldiers, these men also made a clear distinction between the mortal offerings made by soldiers and black refugees.

Meigs ultimately refused to grant the petitioners' request, but in explaining his rationale for doing so, he exhibited a more expansive understanding of the costs of emancipation than Douglass and his fellow petitioners. Meigs objected to the reburial of the black soldiers “in sentiment as well as in the expense.” He astutely noted that “all care for the dead is for the sake of the living, and if the colored people generally prefer to have their comrades, who fought for them, taken up again and scattered among the whites,—it can be done.” Connecting the struggle for liberty by freedpeople to that of black soldiers, Meigs reasoned that the burial of black troops among black refugees was a

⁴⁹ *Washington Chronicle* as quoted in *Semi-Weekly Louisianian*, June 15, 1871.

testament to their shared sacrifices in the war. Meigs reasoned, “[t]hese [black soldiers] are buried among their own people, the whole of the colored persons buried at Arlington, were victims of the strife which brought freedom to their race in this country.” By this logic, Meigs concluded, “I believe that hereafter it will be more grateful to their descendants to be able to visit and point to the collected graves of these persons, than to find them scattered through a large cemetery & intermingled with another race.”⁵⁰

Meigs’s vision of the purpose of this portion of the cemetery as a memorial to the collective struggle by black soldiers and refugees for freedom was certainly striking, but was ultimately at odds with black middle-class leaders’ attempt to craft a triumphalist narrative of emancipation centered on the black soldier.⁵¹

⁵⁰ F. G. Barbadoes, D. W. Anderson, and W. H. Wormley to W. W. Belknap, August 2, 1871, box 8, E576, RG 92, NARA; an official at Mobile National Cemetery gave a similar rationale to that of Meigs when discussing the removal of black troops from the black cemetery to the white cemetery adjoining it. Lorenzo Thomas noted that a “scheme has been suggested of turning over the colored cemetery to the Freedmen’s Bureau. I doubt the expediency of this, as that institution is supposed to be temporary, and has not funds enough, I should suppose to properly improve the grounds. If that transfer should be made, I should recommend that the colored soldiers where known, be removed to the white cemetery; but there are only 62 known; and of the unknown the location of the graves even is unknown. They cannot be discriminated from the other graves. The whole of the colored people buried there, were to some extent the wards of Government as they were placed in an exceptional position by the siege of Mobile, and the entrance of our troops. As the soldiers are mixed in with them, the best thing to be done is to make the whole ground as presentable as possible with moderate expense.” To do so, Thomas suggested erecting a “neat arch” over the gateway to the black cemetery “similar to that over the gateway of the white cemetery,” and building a picket fence to enclose the cemetery. See Lorenzo Thomas to Edwin M. Stanton, July 9, 1867, box 47, E576, RG 92, NARA.

⁵¹ The decision to keep a portion of Arlington National Cemetery segregated had lasting implications for the treatment of black soldiers’ graves there and elsewhere. Only a few years after its creation, officials at Arlington began to neglect the portion set-aside specifically for African Americans. For example, in 1873 Congress appropriated one million dollars for a headstone replacement program that would replace headboards nationwide with durable stone markers. The following year, grounds crews in Arlington began replacing the headboards with new stones, but the African-American section of the cemetery remained untouched. By 1877, an inspector of the cemetery, James Gall Jr., reported that the wooden headboards in that section of the cemetery were decaying so rapidly as to make them practically “useless.” While the graves of the 3,757 freedpeople interred at Arlington eventually received permanent headstones, they were thinner and less durable than those in the rest of the cemetery. Robert M. Poole, *On Hallowed Ground: The Story of Arlington National Cemetery* (New York: Walker and Company, 2009), 84-5; James Gall, Jr. to Meigs, October 5, 1877, box 7, E576, RG 92, NARA.

At Chalmette National Cemetery near New Orleans, officials took the opposite approach, and decided to remove the thousands of freedpeople interred on the cemetery grounds. During the war, freedpeople had flocked to New Orleans following its capture by Union forces in 1862. Laborers buried Union soldiers, black and white, who died in the city hospital, in Chalmette cemetery located six miles east of the city. In the same cemetery, Freedmen's Bureau agents laid to rest freedpeople who had perished in the city's refugee camp. By May 1867, 3,000 freedpeople lay buried in that cemetery.⁵² "This appears to me to be an impropriety, which has probably grown out of the unavoidable usages of a time of war," Assistant Quartermaster C. W. Folsom explained to the quartermaster general in 1867, "but which there seems no necessity for in time of peace." According to Folsom, "[t]here is an obvious impropriety in expensing the money of the nation, voted for this purpose in decorating a common graveyard for paupers and other citizens. There is no good reason why a male or female citizen who may die in a public charitable institution, (perhaps of a loathsome disease,) should be buried in ground intended and dedicated to Union Soldiers." Folsom then requested that the Freedmen's Bureau take over the task of burying freedpeople in a cemetery other than Chalmette, a request that the quartermaster general approved.⁵³

By 1868, as Chalmette was running out of space to bury soldiers exhumed from the surrounding area, the graves of freedpeople became a casualty of the burgeoning cemetery. In order to make room, the quartermaster general approved a large-scale

⁵² Report of Capt. C. Barnard, May 20, 1867, box 15, E576, RG 92, NARA.

⁵³ Inspection report from C. W. Folsom, May 23, 1867, box 15, E576, RG 92, NARA. Apparently, General Phil Sheridan, the commander in charge of the sub-district had ordered that freedpeople not be buried in the cemetery, but the Freedmen's Bureau had ignored the request. Chas. Barnard to C. G. Sawtelle, June 15, 1867, box 17, E576, RG 92, NARA.

project to disinter 5,000 freedpeople from the national cemetery and rebury them in a freedmen's cemetery adjoining it.⁵⁴ In 1871, the city of New Orleans assumed ownership of the freedmen's cemetery, but by 1873 federal officials reported that the freedmen's cemetery had fallen into a deplorable condition. "[T]he graves are now entirely neglected," reported an army official, "and the place turned into a pasture and stockyard."⁵⁵

The debate over the burial of freedpeople in the national cemetery and their removal to a separate freedpeople's cemetery presaged a larger development in Civil War remembrance. The inclusion of freedpeople in national cemeteries would have been an unwelcome reminder of the shortcomings of the Civil War and emancipation. Federal officials created national cemeteries to be places to honor Union victories, where Americans could gather to remember the valor and bravery of soldiers who had fought to preserve the Union and eradicate the scourge of slavery from the nation. Rows upon rows of graves of freedpeople mixed among them might have instead evidenced the failure of emancipation and post-war Reconstruction. In removing the graves of black refugees from the cemetery, the officials at Chalmette ensured that the grounds honored the Union soldiers who gave their lives for freedom, and obscured the sacrifices freedpeople made in their own pursuit for liberty.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Chas. Barnard to C. H. Tompkins, April 28, 1868, box 15, E576, RG 92, NARA.

⁵⁵ Annual Report of the Supt of Chalmette, La National Cemetery, July 1872, box 54, E576, RG 92, NARA.

⁵⁶ Jim Downs makes a similar argument about how white Americans in the nineteenth century discussed emancipation. According to Downs, emancipation was a catastrophic event for former slaves who suffered from disease—especially small pox—malnutrition, and exposure. Middle-class blacks and Northern whites did not give much attention to the suffering of former bondsmen, however, as it conflicted with the triumphalist narrative of the Civil War promulgated by white writers of the late nineteenth century.

Remembering

Despite the removal of freedpeople's graves from national cemeteries, African Americans in the South persisted in claiming these enclosures as their own political spaces. Following the first Decoration Day in Charleston in 1865, Americans across the country appropriated the holiday for their own uses. In the North, white and black Americans flocked to the graves of Union soldiers to lay wreaths and flowers on their headstones, and to listen to orators give speeches about the valor with which those men gave their lives. In the South, white Southerners gathered at cemeteries established by Ladies' Memorial Associations and paid homage to the Confederate soldiers who had fought for their own dearly-held cause. But the South also had other cemeteries—those established by the federal government for Union soldiers. Naturally, white Southerners spurned these sites, considering them to be a painful and vengeful reminder of their loss at the hands of Lincoln's army. These spaces thus became opportune places for freedpeople to gather and reflect on the legacy of the Civil War.⁵⁷

Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

⁵⁷ For one of the most definitive treatments of Decoration Day, see Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 64-97. While historians have examined Decoration Day ceremonies from the Confederate and Union perspective, little has been done to investigate how national cemeteries in the South factored into these ceremonies. Historians that focus on African-American public political culture and ceremonies have turned their attention to Emancipation Days and the Fourth of July. These studies often focus on African-American activities in the North, rather than the South. Kathleen Clark's book, *Defining Moments*, seeks to remedy this, but her work focuses primarily on Emancipation Day and the Fourth of July, and rarely discusses Decoration Day. Moreover, while there has been a tremendous outpouring of scholarship on how African Americans commemorated the Civil War, and remembered the sacrifice of black troops to that effort, this scholarship has also focused primarily on how blacks in the North commemorated this loss. Mitch Katchun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and the Meaning of African American Emancipation, 1808-1915* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); Kathleen Clark, *Defining Moments*.

In the years following the war, African Americans in the South appropriated Decoration Day as their own holiday; it was not uncommon to see thousands of African Americans thronging the streets and filing through the gates of national cemeteries. The activities leading up to the ceremonies took on a festive air with brass bands and fraternal organizations proudly parading through the streets to the cemetery, their music filling the air. Outside of the cemetery walls, black merchants and hucksters sold food, lemonade, and alcohol to attendees.⁵⁸ Black families picnicked and socialized with one another. Inside the gates, freedpeople paraded throughout the cemetery, strewing the graves with flowers and evergreens as bands played dirges. Attendees often traveled long distances, demonstrating their dedication to honoring the dead. In Fredericksburg, Virginia, over 1,000 black people annually inundated the cemetery. The crowd included local fraternal societies and civic organizations hailing from Washington, D.C. and Richmond. Similarly, black people traveled from across the state of Georgia to pay their respects at Andersonville. The level of organization in planning and disseminating information about these ceremonies to freedpeople across hundreds of miles evinced the importance of these occasions to African Americans' social and political lives.⁵⁹

African Americans in the South used Decoration Day ceremonies to celebrate their post-emancipation political, social, and economic advancements. At the Memphis National Cemetery, the Independent Pole Bearers' Association planned the entire day's events and led the procession to the cemetery. Other Decoration Day ceremonies had

⁵⁸ For especially detailed reports on the scenes of Decoration Days, see "Decoration Day," *Memphis Appeal*, May 31, 1874; Patrick Hart to Henry C. Hodges, May 31, 1871, box 60, E576, RG 92, NARA.

⁵⁹ Charles Fitchett to Henry C. Hodges, June 14, 1871., box 29, E576, RG 92, NARA.

similar leaders who organized parades to the cemetery that displayed the strides African Americans had made in education, politics, and social organizations. Members of fraternal organizations and civic groups proudly wore their uniforms as an expression of their leadership and civic engagement as they marched to the cemetery.⁶⁰ At one Decoration Day in Danville, Virginia, 300-400 black school children from freedpeople's schools in Virginia and North Carolina traveled to the cemetery to decorate the graves of soldiers with flowers. Afterwards, the children gathered in a circle and sang Sunday school songs. As the superintendent of the cemetery reported, "[t]he conduct and order of these little offsprings of former bondsmen was very good and impressive and deserves credit to themselves and their teachers."⁶¹ There, between rows of soldiers' graves, the children of freedpeople served as inspiration for the rest of the African-American community in attendance. They showcased the advances made by former slaves as they achieved one of their most coveted goals of freedom: education. By including children in these ceremonies black organizers also demonstrated their desire to promote a common and enduring understanding of the meaning of the Civil War and emancipation.

⁶⁰ The Pole Bearers were a "purely benevolent" organization, which African Americans organized in 1868. The Pole Bearers were a leading political group in the city, and a "kind of semi-military organization, having been permitted by the constituted authorities to bear arms." Green Polonius Hamilton, *The Bright Side of Memphis: a compendium of information concerning the colored people of Memphis, Tennessee, showing their achievements in business, industrial and professional life and including articles of general interest on the race* (Memphis, TN: Hamilton, 1908), 208-9. Kathleen Clark, *Defining Moments*. Clark makes a similar argument about Emancipation Day festivals and Fourth of July celebrations, arguing that the "uplift" principles these ceremonies exhibited were not necessarily on display for white audiences, but rather were important in attempting to inspire freedpeople. It should also be noted that these ceremonies also were a means of affirming social distinctions of class and gender. Mutual aid societies and fraternal organizations were largely the domain of free black males of the burgeoning urban black middle class, rather than freedpeople and women. Clark, *Defining Moments*, 7.

⁶¹ Morris Hein to Montgomery Meigs, May 30, 1873, box 26, E576, RG 92, NARA.

Decoration Days provided a lesson to younger generations about the importance of remembering those who had fallen in the great battle to secure their freedom.

By claiming national cemeteries as their own on Decoration Day, African Americans cultivated their own conception of the causes of the Civil War, an understanding that was increasingly at odds with white Northern and Southern remembrances. A letter from the pseudonymous “Aquila” to *The People’s Advocate*, an African-American newspaper in Alexandria, Virginia, complained that the African-American students at Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute were not allowed to attend the Decoration Day festivities organized by local blacks. The writer reported that African Americans from Norfolk and Portsmouth organized and attended the ceremonies at the Hampton National Cemetery and heard an oration by the “eloquent and scholarly” Bishop John M. Brown, a former slave and local politician from Southampton County.⁶² Aquila lamented that the African-American students were unable “to hear Mr. Brown’s masterly oration, which coming from a colored man would have given them fresh courage and inspiration as colored students.” Instead, the white principal of the school, Samuel C. Armstrong held a separate ceremony at the cemetery afterwards, with students, teachers, and the “Southern nobility” in attendance. According to Aquila, at the cemetery, Armstrong had “denounced the entire body of colored people who had decorated in the forenoon,” and several Southern men gave speeches that espoused the lost cause.⁶³ Aquila’s disappointment over Armstrong’s decision to forbid students to

⁶² Brown was elected by all 1,242 black voters in Southampton county to the 1867 Virginia Constitutional Convention. Sara B. Bearss, et al., eds., *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2001), 305–6.

⁶³ *The People’s Advocate*, July 7, 1876. For another example of school children taking part in Decoration Day ceremonies, see *Proceedings of the Freedmen’s Convention of Georgia Assembled at Augusta, January 10th, 1866*, (Augusta, Ga: Loyal Georgian, 1866), 12.

attend the ceremonies of Hampton's African-American community evidenced the importance that freedpeople placed on Decoration Day. For Aquila, Decoration Day was a critical occasion to remind former bondspeople and their children of slavery's central role in causing the Civil War and freedpeople and their descendants' vested interest in the legacy of the war.

African Americans used Decoration Days as an occasion to define the meaning of their freedom and to affirm their political goals. White observers of these ceremonies derided the "political" nature of black orators' speeches that discussed important issues to the black people in attendance. "Heretofore on decoration day instead of doing honor to my fallen comrades, [African Americans] have completely desecrated their last resting place," the white superintendent at Salisbury, North Carolina, complained. "Political speeches with one or two exceptions have been the order for decoration last year...for 1 3/4 hours W. F. Henderson spoke on politics. The result was cheering hollowing & trampling over the graves with no order to their proceedings."⁶⁴ While some white onlookers viewed these orations with disdain, African-American audiences regarded these same speeches as a source of inspiration and hope. In 1874, for example, African Americans were anxiously awaiting the passage of a new Civil Rights Bill that would guarantee them equal access to public accommodations and facilities, and the right to serve on juries. In Memphis, 5,000 blacks gathered in the cemetery to hear Ed Shaw, a leading local African-American politician, give a speech in which he implored blacks to have faith in eventually achieving equality. According to one spectator, Shaw stated that the "advancement of the negro had been more rapid than anticipated, and they should

⁶⁴ George W. Harbinson to W. R. Belknap, May 30, 1872, box 62, E576, RG 92, NARA.

rejoice in the belief that they would soon be full citizens...The last crowning glory to befall them was the passage of the civil rights bill. He knew it met with opposition from many white persons, but so did their liberty, their enfranchisement, and their public schools meet with opposition.”⁶⁵ Drawing on a shared understanding of the advances black people had made in the years following emancipation, Shaw urged his listeners to remain dedicated to the cause of equality and citizenship, just as they had for years before.

As cemetery officials and civilians attempted to block African Americans’ access to these sites of remembrance, black people worked doggedly to ensure their continued admittance to these public spaces. In 1871 at the Fredericksburg National Cemetery, the superintendent refused to let 1,000 African Americans into the cemetery because of the “disorderly manner in which these parties generally behave.” After the superintendent denied the party admittance, a fist fight broke out between a few men in the crowd and white cemetery-goers. The superintendent and his supporters eventually pushed the group back to the railroad depot and sent them home. Following the scuffle, the superintendent wrote to the quartermaster general in the hope of banning all associations and large parties from entering the cemetery in the future, but Meigs responded that the “national cemeteries should always be open to all orderly visitors, whether single parties or processions. The only exclusions should be of those who are disorderly.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ W. Henry Taylor to M. C. Meigs, June 1, 1874, box 45, E576, RG 92, NARA. Ed Shaw was a free black from Kentucky who moved to Memphis just before the war. He owned a saloon in Memphis and was a central figure in local politics there. In 1873 he successfully ran for the post of wharf master, the highest paid local position in Memphis. Brian Daniel Page, “Local Matters: Race, Place, and Community Matters after the Civil War” (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2009), 180.

⁶⁶ Charles Fitchett to Henry C. Hodges, June 14, 1871., box 29, E576, RG 92, NARA., E576, RG 92, NARA; Elsa Barkley Brown, George Kimball, “Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond,” *Journal of Urban History* 21, no. 3 (March 1995): 308.

In other parts of the South local officeholders and cemetery officials embarked on similar attempts to ban black people from national cemeteries. “Men, women and children went scampering in a disgraceful manner all over the graves,” the superintendent of Richmond National Cemetery complained. He spent the day “driving out of the cemetery the boys with baskets of cakes and buckets of lemonade which they were huckstering through the cemetery in fact the affair was a desecration and not a decoration.”⁶⁷ In Salisbury, North Carolina, in 1876, the mayor of the town attempted to break the apparent monopoly that blacks had on organizing Decoration Day, by appealing to the cemetery superintendent to let the city plan the day’s events, rather than local black leaders.⁶⁸ Joseph Ballard, a former slave who had since become chairman of the Republican executive committee, a leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and organizer of the annual Decoration Day activities, visited the cemetery’s superintendent to protest the exclusion. Ballard feared that if the ceremonies were in the control of city authorities “they the colored people would be ruled out.” Ballard and his followers were at a disadvantage in their appeal, as the superintendent was of the opinion that “there should be no political complexion given to the ceremonies.”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, in

⁶⁷ Patrick Hart to Henry C. Hodges, May 31, 1871, box 60, E576, RG 92, NARA.

⁶⁸ For reports describing earlier Decoration Days at Salisbury, see Monthly Report of the Condition of the National Cemetery for May 1871, box 62, E576, RG 92; George W. Harbinson to E. D. Townsend, May 2, 1872, box 62, E576, RG 92; Wm. H. Richardson to Quartermaster General, June 1, 1874, box 62, E576, RG 92; Wm. H. Richardson to Quartermaster General, June 1, 1875, box 62, E576, RG 92, NARA.

⁶⁹ A. Mack to General, February 5, 1876, box 63, E576, RG 92, NARA.

the following years, Ballard and his followers continued to honor the memories of fallen Union soldiers within the walls of the national cemetery.⁷⁰

Conclusion

While the ballot box was off limits to many African Americans by the late nineteenth century, the gates of national cemeteries remained open. There, surrounded by Union graves, freedpeople laid flowers on the headstones of the white and black soldiers who had fallen, and in doing so, affirmed their dedication to defending their hard-won freedom. National cemeteries in the South festooned with evergreens and flowers symbolized the monumental changes the Civil War had wrought, and freedpeople's determination to ensure that their stake in that war was not forgotten. African-American participation in Decoration Days in the South was an act of political assertion, just as caring for the graves of soldiers during the war had been. Through their vigilance watching over the dead and their early and continuing labor to create fitting final resting places, African Americans in the South were integral to constructing national cemeteries. As black laborers dug each grave they simultaneously carved out a space to memorialize the Civil War and emancipation. In the course of doing so, the former bondspeople who died in the process of emancipation were relegated to the peripheries of those memorials—to overgrown fields with rotting headboards—while black Union soldiers

⁷⁰ W. H. Richardson to A. D. Schinck, May 31, 1878, box 63 E576, RG 92, NARA. Ballard was a leading figure in the Salisbury community. For more on his life in North Carolina, see James Walker Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; or, The Centennial of African Methodism* (New York: A.M.E. Zion Book Concern, 1895), 116, 400, 440; Katherine Petrucelli, ed., *Heritage of Rowan County, North Carolina*, vol. 1, (Salisbury, NC: Genealogical Society of Rowan County, 1991). For another example of freedpeople holding “political” speeches in national cemeteries on Decoration Day, see *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, June 7, 1878 in which P.B.S. Pinchback gave a speech at the Vicksburg National Cemetery glorifying the sacrifices made by black soldiers.

lay within the gates of these illustrious spaces, but in separate, remote sections—segregated in death as they had been in the military. National cemeteries, then, served as sites that demonstrated the remarkable advances African Americans made in the fight for freedom, but also the costly consequences of the process of emancipation.

The deaths of thousands of Union soldiers spurred the federal government to enact legislation not only to provide fitting burials for the dead, but also to assist the women and children left behind by the carnage of the war. With their deaths, the men who came to lie beneath the soil of national cemeteries catalyzed the growth of the Pension Bureau, a system to which African-American widows and children would demand equal benefits in the years following the Civil War. The power of the slain African-American soldier resonated beyond the walls of the national cemetery, then, as African-American widows deployed the memory of the black Union soldier to claim additional rights from the federal government.

CHAPTER TWO

“The Widows and Families of the Heroic Dead”: African-American Kinship and Domestic Economy in the Civil War Era South

In 1863, Adele Anderson, an enslaved woman on the plantation of Valmont Breaux in Louisiana, made the difficult and dangerous decision to flee in pursuit of the nearby Union army. Anderson left behind her husband, Henry, when she and her eight children fled, but he subsequently left the plantation as well. They were reunited shortly afterwards in Brashear City. After the family received papers from the federal government certifying their freedom, Henry Anderson enlisted with the 93rd United States Colored Infantry (USCI). As he marched off to war in 1863, Henry left behind Adele and their eight children, one of whom was less than a month old. Adele would spend the remainder of the war following the Union army and serving as a cook and nurse behind its lines. The ravages of war and the chaos of dislocation took their toll on the Anderson family, and by war's end, seven of the children had died from disease and Henry Anderson had been killed and buried in Chalmette National Cemetery. Within months of learning of her husband's death, Anderson sought the assistance of a United States Sanitary Commission (USSC) claims agent to help her secure the back pay and bounty owed to him at the time of his death. She also filed a claim for a widows' pension in hopes of receiving eight dollars a month. The money she eventually received from the federal government provided her with a modicum of support for herself and her surviving child as they embarked on new lives in freedom.¹

¹ Pension File of Henry Anderson, 101.917, 438.548, 93rd USCI, Case Files of Approved Pension Application, 1861-1934 Civil War and Later Pensions Filed; Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15 [RG]; National Archives and Records Administration [NARA], Washington, D.C.

The losses Anderson suffered during the war, and the hardships she endured in freedom were not unique. The destruction wrought by the Civil War upon the lives of enslaved people was catastrophic. Husbands, fathers, and sons joined the Union army to gain their liberty, only to be cut down by enemy bullets, or, more commonly, by disease. The women and children, like Anderson, who entered Union lines were equally vulnerable to death from disease, starvation, and exposure, as they languished in ill-supplied “contraband” or refugee camps and on federally operated farms.

As freedpeople attempted to forge new lives in freedom, centralize their families under one roof, and establish economically independent households, they drew on their deceased relatives and the federal government as mechanisms to support them in their quests for economic liberty. The bounties, arrears of pay, and pensions that these widows, mothers, and children received as a result of the deaths of their loved ones provided them with a valuable means of support beyond their own labor. While the ubiquity of death in the Civil War-era South threatened to rend African-American families asunder, it simultaneously provided opportunities to reconstitute families, and provide financially for the support of kith and kin.

Disease and Death in War

On a hot summer day in 1865, a freedwoman carrying the body of her dead child stumbled into Camp Nelson, a refugee camp established in Kentucky for fugitive slaves who had sought freedom and protection from the Union army during the war. Her husband had joined the army and had left this woman and her child in a hostile town to survive on their own. While the woman did not divulge the cause of the child’s death

when she entered the camp, most likely he or she had perished due to disease or starvation, as so many other freedpeople did. Local authorities had refused to bury the child, and so the grief-stricken mother had made the six-mile journey to Camp Nelson in order to find a place to lay her child to rest. A relief worker at the camp who witnessed the sight wrote to a federal official and explained the vulnerable position of freedwomen and their children in the South, especially those who had family serving in the Union army. He noted, “this was the child of a soldier, and that soldier away from his family, in the field fighting for that Government that did not or could not protect that body of his own child from insult.”² The death of this child was just one example of the thousands of deaths that came as a result of the process of emancipation.³

As the fate of the freedwoman and her child made clear, the Union army’s policy toward enslaved men and women who made it to federal lines might have granted them their freedom, but liberty came with its own host of problems. Beginning in July 1862, with the passage of the Second Confiscation Act, the army officially accepted fugitive slaves into federal camps in exchange for their labor. The act, however, only applied to

² Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie Rowland, eds. *The Black Military Experience*, series 2, vol. 1, of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 717-18. While Camp Nelson perhaps offered protection for freedpeople from hostile Southerners, it was not a safe haven. Freedpeople died in high numbers from disease, exposure, and malnutrition in the camp, due to a dearth in federal resources expended to provide for the freedpeople that congregated there. In an especially telling incident, a black soldier swore an affidavit that his wife and child were expelled from Camp Nelson due to overcrowding in the middle of December. His child, who was already sickly, died shortly after being removed from the camp from the cold. The soldier buried the body of his child before returning to service. Berlin, et al., *Black Military Experience*, 270.

³ Jim Downs’s work deals specifically with the suffering that African Americans faced during the process of emancipation as they contended with disease, starvation, and exposure. Jim Downs, *Sick From Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jim Downs, “The Other Side of Freedom: Destitution, Disease, and Dependency among Freedwomen and Their Children during and after the Civil War,” in *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War*, eds. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 78-103.

able-bodied men. The women and children who trailed behind the lines of Union soldiers only received rations, shelter, and medical care by virtue of their husbands' and fathers' labor for the Union army. The dependency of these women and children on their male heads of household, and by proxy, upon the federal government, only deepened when the federal government granted black men the opportunity to don the federal blue uniform and fight in 1863. Many of the able-bodied black men working in refugee camps enlisted in the army, leaving their wives and children in the care of federal officials. Ultimately, the federal government provided minimal care for freedwomen and children living in the camps and on federally-operated farms, leading many to suffer and even die.⁴

Because of this policy, the woman who staggered into Camp Nelson faced particular perils when she arrived. A Northern woman visiting the hospital at Camp Nelson recalled, "I found the poor people huddled together in rags and dirt. The wards were full of human wretchedness. I found poor women dying amidst filth and suffering for the simplest food, within twenty steps of the superintendent's office."⁵ The displacement of African Americans as they fled to freedom behind Union lines caused

⁴ Some military officials did attempt to provide rations and medical care for freedwomen and children, but the attempts were haphazard. In Alexandria, Virginia, for example, the federal government taxed black laborers and teamsters five dollars a month from their twenty-five dollar monthly salary in order to provide the "several hundred women and children...who are unable to find employment and also furnished medical care, support and attendance to the sick and helpless." Quartermaster General M. C. Meigs to Hon. Edwin M. Stanton, 4 Oct. 1862, and endorsements, vol. 20, p. 149-46, Press Copies of "Miscellaneous" Letters Sent Relating to Such Matters as the Assignment of Personnel, Property & Supplies, Transportation, & the Organization & Administration of the Quartermaster Dept., ser. 14, Central Records, RG 92 [Y-549] quoted in Berlin, et al., *Freedom*, 270-73.

⁵ Reporting on the suffering of refugees at Camp Nelson during the war, Thomas Butler, an officer of the USSC described the freedpeople there as "the most pitiable class of refugees. Nowhere in the whole range of my observation of misfortune and misery occasioned by the war, have I seen any cases which appealed so strongly to the sympathies of the benevolent as those congregated in the contraband camp at Camp Nelson." Dr. J. S. Newberry, *The U. S. Sanitary Commission in the Valley of the Mississippi During the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1866* (Cleveland, Ohio: Fairbanks, Benedict & Co., 1871), 527-28.

enormous difficulties, and the federal government struggled to provide the necessary funds and resources to support them. Smallpox was especially prevalent in refugee camps and federally-operated farms. Historian Jim Downs contends that the federal government was unresponsive to the smallpox epidemic, underprepared to treat the disease, and most likely exacerbated its spread by transporting freedpeople back and forth across the South to find them agricultural jobs.⁶ Smallpox was so rampant in some parts of the South that the freedpeople living on federally-operated farms in Port Royal took to calling the disease “the Government lump.”⁷ In Mississippi, a military official reported that a refugee camp at Young’s Point, near Vicksburg, “had been a vast charnel house—thousands of people, dying.”⁸ Even within federally-held territory, newly freed people faced a precarious future.

When husbands and fathers left for the battlefield, the women and children left behind struggled to survive in the refugee camps they had created near Union lines, and the farms on which the federal government placed them. Writing from their camp in Texas, members of the 1st US Colored Cavalry protested the poor treatment of their wives by federal officials in a Virginia contraband camp, where the regiment had been mustered

⁶ Downs, *Sick from Freedom*, 107-08.

⁷ Elizabeth Ware Pearson, ed., *Letters from Port Royal, 1862-1868* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 252. J. David Hacker contends that the death toll for civilians was much higher than historians previously estimated, although he states that inadequate evidence and data cannot provide specific numbers. J. David Hacker, “A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead,” *Civil War History*, 57 (December 2011), 307-48. On Hilton Head Island, in South Carolina, the disease tore through a camp, killing freedpeople by “tens and twenties.” Quoted in Downs, *Sick from Freedom*, 100. Children were particularly susceptible to contracting the disease. As one federal official in Louisiana noted, “with no physician near, where the colored children are poorly fed and clad, and much exposed, they sicken, die, and are buried without a record of their numbers.” “Report of the Board of Education for Freedmen, Department of the Gulf, for the Year 1864” Daniel A.P. Murray Pamphlet Collection, Library of Congress.

⁸ Quoted in Noralee Frankel, *Freedom’s Women*, 38.

into service. According to the soldiers, their wives “sends Letters stateing thir sufferage saying that they are without wood without wrashions without money and no one to perpect them.”⁹ A similar situation prevailed on Roanoke Island in North Carolina, where federal authorities stopped issuing rations to the families of black soldiers. Following this, missionaries on the island reported, “it is a daily occurrence to see scores of women and children crying for bread, whose husbands, Sons and fathers are in the army today.”¹⁰ While African-American men had enlisted in the army with the expectation that the federal government would provide rations and care for their families while they served, the starvation and disease endured by freedwomen and children signaled that they were not a priority of federal authorities. Moreover, the protests of blacks soldiers about the poverty their families faced demonstrated that their families’ survival depended on the funds these soldiers sent to them.

The money that black soldiers sent back to their families was a significant source of income, and helped these families to survive the impoverished conditions they faced in the refugee camps. As Private Hope Montgomery, an African-American soldier in the 63rd USCT, lay in bed in a smallpox hospital in Mississippi in the summer of 1864, he thought of his wife Safronia. The disease had ravaged his body and he feared he would

⁹ Berlin et al., *Black Military Experience*, 725-26. In Memphis, Tennessee, the wives of black soldiers remained close to their husbands’ regimental camp, living in “Temporary huts.” A commander of one of the black regiments stationed nearby complained that these women had “no visible means of support.” As a result, the men of the regiment felt obliged to steal clothing, rations, and tools such as axes, shovels, and picks in order to construct and maintain makeshift homes for their families. *Ibid.*, 719-20.

¹⁰ Soldiers in the 36th USCI voiced similar complaints, noting that “some soldiers are sick in Hospitals that have never been paid a cent and their familys are suffering and their children going crying without anything to eat.” Upon receiving word of the complaint the commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau, Oliver Otis Howard, ordered that the assistant commissioner of North Carolina continue to issue rations until further notice. *Ibid.*, 727-730.

soon die. How would Safronia get along without him there to provide for the family? During his service in the army, Montgomery had managed to save eighty dollars. He now entrusted the money to one of his comrades in the regiment who promised to send it on to his wife when Montgomery died.¹¹ By planning for his death, and attending to his family's needs in this way, Private Hope affirmed his role as a provider for his family and attempted to supply them with a degree of support and stability for the future.¹²

The death of African-American women's male kin during the war placed them in a tenuous position that necessitated that these women take immediate actions to secure financial assistance. Desperate for the much-needed money their fallen kin had provided them with while in the army, freedpeople came before USSC agents by the hundreds to seek assistance in getting the back pay, bounties, and widows' pension to which they were entitled from the federal government. In order to manage this onslaught of claims, the Commission created the Army and Navy Claims Agency to aid Union soldiers and their families in filing applications for pensions, back pay, and bounties. The deluge of relatives demanding this money reached such a volume that a USSC agent reported the

¹¹ *United States v. Alfred Bordoe*, see testimony of Alfred Bordoe, MM-3796, RG 153 Courts Martial Cases, NARA. Montgomery's wife's name is not mentioned in the courts martial case, but comes from a widow's pension application filed by Montgomery's second wife, Malinda. Malinda applied for a pension after her husband died in 1891. The bureau repeatedly denied her request for a pension on the grounds that her marriage was not valid to Hope because the divorce or death of Hope's first wife could not be verified. The bureau reversed its decision and granted her a pension in 1906. Pension File of Hope Montgomery, 527.919, 609.897, 63rd USCI, Case Files of Approved Pension Application, 1861-1934 Civil War and Later Pensions Filed; Department of Veterans Affairs, RG 15; NARA, Washington, D.C.

¹² Malachi Shears, a private in the 35th USCI also sent money back to his family. He mailed his mother \$50 to help support her while he served in the army. Pension file of Malachi Shears, 132.351, 35th USCI, RG 15 NARA. Dylan Penningroth uncovers how slaves passed on property and chattel they possessed in slavery to their kin and fictive kin. While Penningroth tracks post-war developments in black claims to property ownership, he does not give the same attention to *how* they passed property to their kin during this period. I contend that providing money for their families was another means of affirming kinship relations between soldiers and their families. See Penningroth, *Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 79-110, 131-86.

“whole time” of the agent at Camp Nelson “was engaged in the work of the Claim Agency.” By 1866, African-American refugees in Camp Nelson had filed at least 200 claims for bounties, arrears, and pensions with the government through the assistance of USSC agents.¹³

Across the South, African-American refugees who learned of the deaths of their loved ones sought out the local USSC agents who could help them file their claims with the federal government. Louisa Reed wrote to her local USSC agent and pleaded with him to help her get the money that was owed to her son, Henry Clay, who had died while serving in the 84th USCI. “I shold bee very glade to obtane the Balance Due to him,” Reed wrote, “for I am in need of it this time.”¹⁴ She explained that her husband had died ten years earlier, and that her son had since been her only source of support. While she had filed her application for back pay in June of 1865, she had been left without an income for nearly half a year when she wrote to the USSC agent in October 1865 to ask about the status of her claim. As her insistent language made clear, Reed and other soldiers’ family members had long depended on the money their relatives sent home to help them subsist.

¹³ Brandi Brimmer has demonstrated the importance of community networks to how African-American women navigated the federal pension system in North Carolina by looking at the African-American community in eastern North Carolina. Her work argues that the relationships between freedwomen and the local agents who represented their claims were integral to their success in staking their claims to federal support. Drawing on this scholarship, this chapter contends that the networks freedpeople formed while in refugee camps would have provided similar knowledge, as these women and other family members would have been in contact with the family members of soldiers serving in their deceased kin’s regiments, and they would have been in contact with United States Sanitary Commissioners who were frequently in the camps. Brandi Brimmer, “All Her Rights and Privileges: African-American Women and the Politics of Civil War Widows’ Pensions” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2006).

¹⁴ Louisia Reed to Mr C. W. Seaton, October 16, 1865, Box 266, United States Sanitary Commission Records Army and Navy Claims Agency, New York Public Library [USSC Claims].

The speed with which freedwomen moved to secure the back pay and bounties owed to their deceased relatives attested to the critical support that income provided to the dead's family members. Applying for a pension, back pay, or bounty was a complicated process that required a great deal of evidence from a variety of people. Applicants had to submit proof of military service of their husbands from a superior officer, medical forms attesting to the death of their husbands from military service, evidence of their marriage to the deceased, and two witnesses to corroborate the marriage. Just three months after the death of her husband on May 9, 1864, Julia Bradley brought her mother-in-law and a close friend of the family before Charles Seaton, a USSC claims agent in New Orleans, to confirm her legal widowhood so that she could obtain the back pay owed to him.¹⁵ The alacrity with which Bradley sought out the USSC agent was common among widowed freedwomen in the wartime South. On April 10, 1864, Betsey Deroh became a widow when her husband John, a soldier in the 93rd USCI, died of disease in Brashear City, Louisiana. By May 10, only a month after her husband's death, Deroh had sought out the services provided by the USSC to apply for a widow's pension.¹⁶ The swiftness with which these women gathered evidence and brought claims

¹⁵ For four years, Bradley employed the services of the USSC claims agency to assist her in receiving the back pay of her husband, but ultimately she ended up abandoning the claim for unknown reasons. Bradley merely sought the back pay and bounty owed to her deceased husband in 1864, but in 1867, the Second Auditor in charge of dispersing the funds asked for evidence of Bradley's continued widowhood—something that was required in order to receive a widow's pension, but that should not have been required to receive the pay of her husband. Apparently, Bradley was unresponsive to this request, and her claim was ultimately abandoned. Stephen Bradley, Box 215, USSC Claims.

¹⁶ Pension file of John Deroh, 93rd USCI, 527.69, RG 15 NARA. The case of Amanda Whitiker, a former slave in Nashville, Tennessee, who became a widow on August 30, 1865, when her husband James, a soldier in the 15th USCI, died in a hospital from disease, also demonstrates the promptness with which freedwomen applied for pensions. By October 10, less than two months after her husband's death, Amanda had gathered the resources to file an application for a widows' pension from the United States Pension Bureau. Pension file of James Whitiker, 15th USCI, 111979, RG 15, NARA. For scholarship on the Civil War veterans' pension system and dependents, see Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992);

before the federal government for pay in arrears, bounties, and pensions, demonstrated the importance of their husbands' income to their own support and livelihoods.

For those women who were successful in securing the pay and bounties owed to their deceased loved ones, the sums of money they obtained could be exceptionally useful in assisting them as they struggled to make ends meet in freedom. In June 1865, just four months after the death of her son, Cheerney Williams filed a claim for the pay in arrears owed to him. Moses Williams, her son, did not have a wife or children, and his father, who might otherwise have stood to inherit the money, had died ten years earlier. Cheerney, without any other means of support, had depended on her son to provide for her. While the Pension Bureau took more than two years to approve her application, Williams eventually received \$366 in back pay and bounty money in 1867.¹⁷ Other family members also benefited from the sums of money the military owed to their deceased kin. Ann Wallace became a widow at the age of seventeen when her husband William died while a soldier in the 76th USCI in Blakeley, Alabama. Apparently, the two had met during the war at the Union garrison at Port Hudson, Louisiana, and were married there by a chaplain in the regiment in 1864. Following her husband's passing, Wallace sought out the services of a claims agent. Two years after William Wallace's

Megan McClintock, "Binding up the Nation's Wounds: Nationalism, Civil War Pensions, and American Families, 1861-1890," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Rutgers University, 1994); Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in the Civil War Era Mississippi* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Elizabeth Ann Regosin, *Freedom's Promise: Ex-Slave Families and Citizenship in the Age of Emancipation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Moses Williams, Box 805, USSC Claims. For another case of a mother receiving back pay and a bounty from her son's service, see Felix Gilbro, Box 380, USSC Claims, in which his mother, Silvia de Crozelle received \$250.

death, Ann received \$134.03 in back pay and bounty money for her husband's service.¹⁸ Likewise, John Swan's widow, Love Ann obtained \$450 in bounty and two years of pay in arrears after filing a claim with the second auditor's office in charge of dispersing back pay and bounties.¹⁹

Female kin were not the only family members who approached claims agents seeking the pay owed to their deceased relatives. Fathers also attempted to acquire the money due to their sons. According to the guidelines stipulated by the second auditor's office, fathers were third in line behind widows and children to inherit their relative's dues. Pension policy assumed that the father of the deceased, as the head of the household, would use the money to provide support for the deceased's mother. Andrew Copeland filed affidavits and additional forms as requested by the second auditor's office while applying for the money due to his deceased son.²⁰ Charles Lillison, having lost two sons, John and Levi Black, to the war in Tennessee, also applied for back pay and bounty money for both of his deceased sons.²¹ Brothers and sisters, although even further down the list of heirs, likewise presented claims to USSC agents. Margaret and Betsy Bailey lost their brother, William, during the war, and filed for arrears of pay and bounty money with the USSC claims agent. Laura Guy inquired about receiving her deceased brother's

¹⁸ Wallace's Widow's Declaration for Arrears of Pay and Bounty states that she was a slave of a man in Baton Rouge, while her husband "she is informed," was the slave of a man in Plaquemine, Louisiana. Their marriage in Port Hudson by an army chaplain, along with Williams's lack of firsthand knowledge of who her husband's master was, suggests that the two met at the garrison at Port Hudson. William Wallace, Box 778, USSC Claims.

¹⁹ John Swan, Box 742, USSC Claims. For additional cases in which wives sought arrears of pay and bounties, see Henry Martin, Box 553; Nelson Millar, Box 567, both in USSC Claims.

²⁰ Andrew Copeland, Box 281, USSC Claims.

²¹ Levi Black, Box 204, USSC Claims; John Black, Box 204, USSC Claims. For an additional example of a father filing a claim, see Newton Black, Box 204, USSC Claims.

back pay and bounty fully thirteen years after his death, in the hopes that it could help her impoverished condition.²² Historians have amply documented the ways in which freed African Americans drew on the labor of their kin and their extended relatives to create independent economic households in freedom.²³ But as the applications of women and men like Cheerney Williams and Andrew Copeland demonstrate, deceased kin sometimes were also a viable source of support for the living. While wives, mothers, fathers, and siblings filing claims for arrears of pay and bounties were not unique to African-American soldiers' kin, the importance of that money to black families took on an exceptional significance. As these men, women, and children entered into freedom and confronted the threat of disease, starvation, and the daunting odds of achieving economic independence, the money their deceased relatives provided them with was an opportune and substantial source of empowerment.

Matters of Life, Death, and Land

The end of the war and the coming of emancipation marked a new start for freedpeople. As they looked towards a future free from the shackles of slavery, they cast their eyes on the prospect of land ownership. By securing their title to their own parcels of land, freedpeople hoped to become economically independent from their former

²² Pension File of William Guy, 117769, RG 15, NARA.

²³ Nancy Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861-1875* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2003); Frankel, *Freedom's Women*; Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage, 1976); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk*; Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

masters, construct homes to house themselves and their loved ones, and reap enough money to be able to provide for their families. All of these goals, however, were threatened by the specter of death, which loomed large in the post-emancipation South. The suffering and destitution faced by newly freed African Americans continued to devastate the population long after the end of the war in April 1865. In the span of only two weeks on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, for example, a teacher there reported the deaths of five African-American children from dropsy and tuberculosis in May 1867.²⁴ Yet, the culture of death wrought by the Civil War and emancipation meant that freedpeople found ways of harnessing the power of these losses even as they struggled to purchase land and support their families. As African Americans attempted to maintain the small economic foothold some had acquired in land ownership, dead Union soldiers and deceased kin became powerful tools in the hands of freedpeople as they staked their claim to land holdings, and demanded that the federal government assist them in their endeavors.

On James Island, South Carolina, freedpeople who settled on land in the Sherman reserve faced the ever-present threat of death from disease as they tried to secure landed independence. They had traveled from the interior of the state to the Sea Islands in the years following the war, intent on obtaining their own parcels of land held in the federally-operated Sherman reserve. Yet rampant disease on the island had wreaked havoc on these newcomers.²⁵ In 1866, one physician noted that there were at least one

²⁴ Eliza Ann Summers to My Dear Sister, May 8, 1867, folder 4; Eliza Ann Summers to My Dear Sister, May 22, 1867, folder 5, both in Eliza Ann Summers Papers, South Caroliniana Library.

²⁵ Jim Downs contends that the movement of freedpeople across vast distances as they tested the limits of their freedom and sought advantageous labor contracts in different areas contributed to the spread of disease in the post-emancipation South. Downs, *Sick from Freedom*, 4.

hundred new cases of smallpox on James Island during the month of January.²⁶ Rather than uproot themselves again and return to their homes in the upcountry of South Carolina, these freedpeople resolved to remain and refused to sign contracts with white landowners or labor for anyone but themselves. In a petition to the Freedmen's Bureau they also demanded that the government provide them with further medical care so that they could stay in their newly established homes on their own land. Their refusal to leave the property they considered to be rightfully theirs was a costly decision. In February 1866, a surgeon on James Island reported that three freedpeople, who had been unable to harvest enough crops to feed themselves, had died from starvation on the island.²⁷ Despite these setbacks, the James Island freedpeople believed that if the federal government gave them the proper aid, they could successfully cultivate the land and thrive.

In staking their claim to social citizenship from the federal government, the James Island freedpeople used the deaths of their loved ones, specifically women and children, who had perished on the island as evidence of why they were in dire need of additional federal assistance. In doing so, they sought to strengthen their relationship to the federal government. In May 1867, a group of freedpeople complained specifically about C. H. Brownley, a doctor employed by the Freedmen's Bureau to tend to the sick on the island. These petitioners alleged that Brownley evaded his duties and refused to provide medical assistance or medicine to them. The petitioners highlighted the dire consequences of

²⁶ Renee Hayden, Anthony E. Kaye, et al. eds. *Land and Labor, 1866-1867*, series 3, vol. 2, of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 240-41.

²⁷ Erastus N. Everson to Bvt. Major H. W. Smith, February 10, 1866, E-15 1866, Registered Letters Received, ser. 2922, SC Assistant Commissioner, RG 105, NARA.

Brownley's negligence to their families, noting that they had "called on this gentleman, when our wives and children have been lagging at the point of death and were promised he would come and we have repeated our entreaties upon him to come, but have never seen him, which we sincerely believe was the cause in many cases of the death of those which were near and dear to us."²⁸ The petitioners even signed their names with the word "motherless" affixed next to some of their signatures, perhaps in a last attempt to convey the consequences of federal neglect on the lives of freedpeople.

On nearby Edisto Island, freedpeople living on other parcels of land within the Sherman reserve evoked their ancestors in their struggle to secure their right to own land. For these men and women, land was a basic necessity to shake off the yolk of slavery and begin independent lives. During the war, freedpeople had worked forty-acre plots of land administered by the Freedmen's Bureau under the assumption that they would eventually be able to secure permanent title to the lands. In October 1865, however, President Andrew Johnson had ordered General Oliver Otis Howard, the commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, to notify these settlers that Johnson had pardoned their former masters who would soon return to assume ownership of the land.

To protest their impending removal, a committee of freedpeople on the island petitioned Howard and Johnson to reconsider this dispossession, and invoked the dead as a way to stake their claim to the land they now occupied. The petitioners pleaded with federal authorities to consider their condition if they did not have land of their own to work. Without the federal government's help, the people of Edisto Island warned, "we

²⁸ Hamilton Brown et al. to The Assistant Commissioner of Freedpeople, Refugees and Abandoned Lands, for the State of South Carolina, May? 1867, B-86 1867, Registered Letters Received, ser. 2922, SC Assistant Commissioner, RG 105, NARA.

are at the mercy of those who are combined to prevent us from getting enough to lay our Fathers bones upon.” By evoking their ancestors and the bones already buried beneath the Edisto soil, the petitioners sought to demonstrate their long lineage upon this land. The freedpeople’s appeal to Howard illuminated the centrality of land ownership and kin to freedpeople’s conception of freedom. In order to be truly free, the petitioners demanded enough land to house their families and ensure that they received a proper burial upon death. Without this modicum of freedom, the freedpeople insisted they were not truly free.

The petitioners emphasized this point further by reminding Howard that the men to whom Johnson now wanted to return the land to had been disloyal.

If the government Haveing concluded to befriend Its late enemies and to neglect to observe the principles of common faith between Its self and us Its allies In the war you said was over now takes away from them all right to the soil they stand upon save such as they can get by again working for *your* late and thier *all time enemies*—If the government does so we are left In a more unpleasant condition than our former.

While the Edisto Islanders claimed that they owned property in livestock and furniture, these acquisitions were nothing if they were left “landless and Homeless.” Noting that they had few options before them but to submit to their former owners or become homeless, the petitioners stated, “You will see this Is not the condition of really

freemen.”²⁹ In linking their loyalty during the war to their assertion that acquiring land to at least bury their relatives should be a fundamental right of freedom, the freedpeople presented a powerful, albeit unsuccessful, argument for why they should not be removed from the land and the homes they had worked so tirelessly to create.

On federally-held lands across the post-war South, freedpeople threatened with dispossession repeatedly drew on the symbolic power of dead Union soldiers to lay claim to the land. During the war, federal officials settled some fugitive slaves on William Taylor’s abandoned farm near Norfolk, Virginia. These former slaves cultivated the land and built homes to shelter their families. By 1866, there were approximately 700 freedpeople working the land on the Taylor farm, many of them the relatives of black Union soldiers. In the fall of 1866, Andrew Johnson pardoned William Taylor, an ex-Confederate, and so Taylor returned to resume ownership of the property. Nineteen black soldiers’ wives on the farm wrote to the *New York Tribune* to voice their discontent over Taylor’s pardon, reminding readers that when their husbands went off to war to risk their lives for the Union, they had done so on the assumption that the federal government would help support their families in their absence. “[M]any fell in the glorious conflict for ‘Union, Liberty and Equality,’ leaving their relatives and friends to be cared for by our beneficent Government,” the women proclaimed. “[M]any a bloody battle was fought that...the loved ones at home should have the benefit of her institutions and be protected from the hands of traitors at home...” According to these freedwomen, the mortal sacrifices made by black troops necessitated that the federal government provide for “the

²⁹ Ira Berlin, Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, "The Terrain of Freedom: The Struggle over the Meaning of Free Labor in the U.S. South," *History Workshop* no. 22 (1986): 127-28.

widows and families of the heroic dead,” who assumed responsibility for them when they left to fight the war.³⁰ By returning the property to William Taylor and dispossessing them of the land that they believed was rightfully theirs, the women contended that the federal government had reneged on this promise.

The symbolic use of dead African-American soldiers to lay claim to citizenship rights was a tactic employed by black leaders throughout Reconstruction, yet as these women’s letter makes clear, the image of the slain black Union soldier was deployed by more than just the black middle class. The freedwomen on the Taylor farm fashioned a political identity for themselves based on the deaths of their husbands in order to make claims on the federal government. The appeal by the black soldiers’ wives was significant for several reasons. It demonstrated the new demands that black veterans’ wives claimed on the state. As women, the writers of the letter insisted that the federal government provide for them while their husbands were away at war, and after their husbands had died in service to the country. In this way, the wives on the Taylor farm entered into a larger debate about the obligations the state had to its widows and citizens more generally. Yet their appeal was also shaped by their race and by their conceptions of what freedom entailed. The women on the Taylor farm used their status as soldiers’ widows, coupled with their unique position as freedpeople, to stake claims to that most sought-after goal of freedom: land ownership. Ultimately, these freedpeople were unsuccessful in their attempts to remain on the farm, and county agents drove them from the property

³⁰ Renee Hayden, Anthony E. Kaye, et al. eds. *Land and Labor, 1866-1867*, series 3, vol. 2, of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 319-20.

in the late 1860s.³¹ Nevertheless, the petition by these women clearly demonstrates the opportunities that death provided for African Americans in the postwar South to assert their ownership of rights previously denied to them.

African-American Widows in the Postwar South

As the wives of deceased black soldiers attempted to provide for the material wellbeing of their families, they crafted a novel identity for themselves as soldier's widows who were entitled to specific privileges from the federal government. In 1862, as the tally of the wounded and dead in the Union army soared, the federal government began to take steps to provide for wounded veterans and the dependent family members of deceased soldiers by creating a pension system. The creation and subsequent expansion of this federal pension system were products of the catastrophic loss of life during the Civil War. While the original act of Congress initiating the pension system did not extend benefits to African-American widows, the deaths of black troops in service to the Union eventually led Congress to expand the pension system so that it included black soldiers' kin. As African-American widows in the South applied for pensions in response to the deaths of their husbands, they took an active role in shaping and enlarging federal pension policy. As soldiers' widows, African-American women found a powerful identity through which they claimed new rights from the federal government, articulated their own visions of respectability, and in the process, affirmed the familial and community

³¹ Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 406.

bonds they had forged in slavery and freedom.³²

In February 1862, Congress passed the *Act of 14 July 1862*, establishing the “general law pension system,” which provided pensions for women, children and other dependent kin of soldiers who died while serving in the Union army. As other scholars have contended, the concept of the nuclear family and patriarchal marriage were central to this pension system and to how the Bureau dispersed benefits. In order for a relative to successfully present a claim to the Military Pension Bureau, they had to prove their status as a dependent of the deceased soldier. For women, legal marriage provided the most tangible measure of dependency, and entitled them to what Brimmer terms “an important body of rights and concrete economic resources.”³³ The centrality of legal marriage to obtaining a pension laid bare the white, middle-class ideas that structured this system. Enslaved people, as property of their owners, had not had access to the institutions that provided legal marriages. Thus, the marriages between formerly enslaved women and men who enlisted in the Union army were not recognized under the 1862 pension law. As a result, even as African-American soldiers joined the ranks of the army to fight and die for the preservation of the Union, there was no legal guarantee that the federal government would economically protect their families upon their death.

In July 1864, Congress revised the 1862 pension law in order to allow the widows of black troops access to pension benefits. The merciless murder of surrendering African-American soldiers at Fort Pillow in April 1864 and the subsequent public outrage over

³² Brandi Brimmer’s work is especially insightful on the ways in which African-American women in North Carolina refuted the white middle class notions of sexual and moral respectability that undergirded the pension system. Brandi Brimmer, “Black Women’s Politics, Narratives of Sexual Immorality, and Federal Policy in Mary Lee’s North Carolina Neighborhood,” *Journal of Southern History* 80, no. 4 (Nov. 2014): 827-858.

³³ Brimmer, “All Her Rights and Privileges,” 22.

that massacre provided the impetus for Congress to revise the pension law. The 1864 act opened up the pension system to formerly enslaved women who had been married while they were slaves, and who had made it into Union lines and thereby earned their freedom. With the end of the Civil War and the onslaught of pension applications from recently freed African-American widows who had remained slaves for the duration of the war, the federal government expanded the pension system once again. The *Act of 6 June 1866* recognized the altered status of newly freed African Americans by allowing black women freed by the Thirteenth Amendment to file for widows' pensions, regardless of their prewar status. In the passage of these three acts, Congress mirrored the ways in which African-American actions shaped the growth of the federal pension system. As black widows filed claims with the Bureau, often out of necessity to be able to provide for their families, their petitions redefined what the federal government considered to be "respectable" marriages, and thrust African-American widows into new, protracted, and often fraught relationships with federal bureaucracies.³⁴

As African-American women applied for these pensions, they struggled to establish their legal status as widows. During slavery, enslaved people and their owners had employed assorted customs to sanction marital relationships between slaves. From jumping the broom to ceremonies in their masters' homes, to weddings in front of slave quarters presided over by black itinerant preachers, the ways in which enslaved people sanctified their marriages varied. In general, however, they had one thing in common; they rarely produced papers documenting these weddings. As a result, when they sought

³⁴ For more on the ways in which the pension system expanded during and after the war, see Brimmer, "All Her Rights and Privileges," 23-5; McClintock, "Civil War Pensions and the Reconstruction of Union Families," 473-74.

widows' pensions, newly freed African Americans had to call upon their former owners, and those who labored alongside them in the fields and in the big house, to verify their marriages. Yet the war had caused massive displacements of African Americans who had been taken from plantations by their fleeing masters, or who had traveled with Union armies and been relocated to refugee camps, or who had ventured to cities following emancipation to seek out new opportunities. The deaths of their husbands and the process of applying for a pension necessitated that African-American women reconnect with those people who had been central to their lives while enslaved. Social capital became especially important to African-American widows, who in the absence of written documentation, relied on their communities to verify their relationships. As these women looked towards the future they simultaneously had to look to the past and draw on the relationships they had forged in slavery to support their new lives in freedom.

The case of Adele Anderson, the freedwoman from Louisiana whose story began this chapter, illustrates the opportunities and difficulties that death and the widows' pension system provided for African-American women. In 1900, the Bureau commenced a special examination into the pension claim of Adele Anderson. Beginning in 1864, Anderson claimed a widows' pension in response to the death of her husband, Henry Anderson, a soldier in the 93rd USCI. Before the war broke out, Adele had been enslaved on the plantation of Valmont Breaux in Lafayette Parish where, according to Adele, Breaux had forced her to marry Henry, another slave on the Breaux plantation."³⁵ While

³⁵ In describing the marriage ceremony she stated simply "[t]hey just made us come to the house and stand there together and said we were man and wife. Witnesses testified that the relationship that Adele and Henry had had was tempestuous and that they had separated several times. One witness even reported that Adele had once stabbed her husband in the chest with a pair of scissors, causing Henry to be bedridden for several months. Pension File of Henry Anderson, 101.917, 438.548, 93rd USCI, RG 15 NARA.

Adele had been married to Henry, she also took up with a slave named Harry Butler on the nearby plantation of Basil Crowe. In 1901, former slaves on the Crowe plantation testified before pension examiners that slaves had considered Adele to be romantically involved with Harry Butler.

After the death of her husband, Anderson relied on the testimony of former slaves on the plantation where she had been enslaved to assist her in validating her legal status as a widow. Despite the time that passed between emancipation and when the special examiner deposed the witnesses in 1901, the act of claiming a widows' pension compelled Anderson to maintain and utilize the relationships she had made in slavery in order to claim her pension. This is especially apparent in the testimony provided by Paul Breaux and Malcolm Morris, both former slaves on the Breaux plantation who testified that Henry and Adele were husband and wife, and claimed that Adele had given them both five dollars as a "gift" for testifying on her behalf.³⁶ While Anderson had moved away from the Breaux plantation to New Orleans after the war, in order to stake her claim to a pension she had to affirm connections with those who had toiled alongside her as slaves years before. In doing so, the death of Henry Anderson, and Adele Anderson's subsequent pension application linked formerly enslaved people together, reifying their relationships by constantly rearticulating them in their pension application testimony.

As women like Anderson came to terms with the deaths of their husbands and attempted to navigate the pension system, the application process provided a space for

³⁶ In another case, Elizabeth Dallas and Ann Wallace served as witnesses in each other's pension applications to validate their marriages. Their husbands served in the same regiment, and they likely met in the Union army camp. While the experience of the war and camp life created opportunities for community building and bonding, the pension application also provided an occasion to affirm those bonds and use them for economic gain. See Pension File of John Dallas, 76th USCI, 112.801, RG 15 NARA; William Wallace, Box 778, USSC Claims.

them to elucidate a different understanding of the relationships that slaves recognized as legitimate. Ultimately, these definitions contrasted with the Pension Bureau's method of defining marriage. Eliza Lewis, a slave on Crowe's plantation noted that she did not "know whether Harry ever had her [Adele] for a wife before freedom or not, but he must have had her, for he used to be all the time at Mr. Valmont Breaux's, but whether he had Adele before the war she does not know." Lewis also stated, however, that "Adele's husband by whom she had some children was Henry Anderson."³⁷ Lewis acknowledged that it was possible that Anderson had been the wife of both Harry Butler and Henry Anderson, but she was certain that Anderson had been Henry's wife and she did not suggest that Adele's involvement with Harry Butler delegitimized that marriage. As African-American widows such as Anderson came forward, the act of applying for pensions provided a space for freedwomen to articulate their own understandings of sexual respectability.

While the former slaves on the Breaux and Crowe plantations seemed ambivalent about the status of Adele's marriage to Henry, the Pension Bureau's judgment was much more certain. According to the Bureau, because Anderson had left her husband, Henry Anderson, and apparently was in a relationship with Butler at the time of Anderson's enlistment, she was not entitled to the pension she had been receiving for the past thirty-seven years.³⁸ In 1901, the Pension Bureau stripped her of her pension and the

³⁷ Pension File of Henry Anderson, 101.917, 438.548, 93rd USCI, RG 15 NARA.

³⁸ In 1881, the pension system enacted a new law that allowed for "special examination" of women on the pension rolls to ensure that they were not dependents of other men. New legislation in 1882 stipulated that a widow's pension would be terminated if she had a sexual relationship with a man, thus making the parameters of cohabitation, remarriage, and widowhood more clearly defined than they had previously been when African American women had helped define how the pension laws were interpreted. Together these laws turned special examination into a "repressive feature of the pension process" that judged black women's sexual morality. Brimmer, "All Her Rights and Privileges," 124-25.

Department of Justice even contemplated filing charges against her to recoup the \$4,305.87 the federal government had paid her during that time.³⁹ In 1908, Anderson protested against being struck from the pension rolls, and petitioned the commissioner of the Military Pension Bureau, Vespasian Warner, to have her pension reinstated.

The appeals process for being placed back on the pension rolls offered African-American widows another chance to articulate their own conceptions of entitlement. In her appeal to the Pension Bureau, Anderson based her petition for reinstatement on her status as a widow, but also drew on her own wartime labor for the Union as evidence of why she was deserving of a pension. Rather than focusing on her marriage to Henry Anderson and attempting to conform to white middle-class notions of what constituted a proper wife, Anderson this time emphasized her own actions during the war that had supported the Union war effort. She noted that she was “not trying to steal, I just want the money what is coming to me from my husband. I worked in the army I was a sick nerse and also a cook and they did not pay me for that and I don’t try to get that money so you all can see that I aint trying to steel.”⁴⁰ When her appeal went unanswered for two years, Anderson wrote to Warner again and made clear that she had sacrificed a great deal during the war to be left in such a deplorable condition in her old age. As she noted, she had long since come to depend on the pension as a form of support, and could use it even more now that she was aging.

I am broken down in both my knees from traveling during

³⁹ Ultimately, the Department of Justice decided not to press charges against Anderson, believing that it would be a waste of time and money, as “the ex-pensioner’s property is not sufficiently valuable to warrant the belief that any considerable amount could be recovered if a judgment was rendered in favor of the United States.” Pension File of Henry Anderson, 101.917, 438.548, 93rd USCI, RG 15 NARA.

⁴⁰ Pension File of Henry Anderson, 101.917, 438.548, 93rd USCI, RG 15 NARA.

the war with the army and also suffering with inside troubles now and then and also helpless...I think it is very hard to treat a poor helpless widow like that in the condition I am in suffering from illness. I wouldn't really like to die with that on my conscious to see that I labored in the army and also looseing my husband what was my support...I am not able to do any thing else but sit down for day after days as I above said that I labored in the army I was a cook and I cooked for the army as the war was going on and I am very old.

In closing, Anderson beseeched the commissioner to provide some support for her, reminding him of the loss of her husband, and asking him to “let me know so I can rest a little easy from my grief.”⁴¹ While Henry Anderson had died nearly forty-four years earlier, the nature of the pension system caused Adele Anderson to continue to have regular interactions with the federal government in order to maintain her eligibility. As a result, the death of Henry and the subsequent investigation into his marriage with Adele offered an occasion for Anderson to express her own understanding of what made her worthy of a pension, which was not necessarily based entirely on her widowed status. Anderson couched her claim for a pension in terms of her service to the army, rather than solely as a dependent.

As Adele Anderson's example makes plain, the deaths of black Union soldiers provided their widows with an opportunity to voice their own understandings of what

⁴¹ Pension File of Henry Anderson, 101.917, 438.548, 93rd USCI, RG 15 NARA.

constituted a valid claim to the pension system. Elizabeth Farr, a widow in Beaufort, South Carolina, applied for a widows' pension beginning in 1865 when her husband, a soldier in the 104th USCI died while in service. The Pension Bureau repeatedly denied Farr's claim, despite receiving multiple applications, on the grounds that her former mistress refused to acknowledge that she had ever owned Farr. In response to yet another denied application in 1897, Farr swore an affidavit stating that she was the legal widow of her late husband. Furthermore, she claimed "the gravest injustice has been done me in the rejection on the grounds that I was not his legal widow." Here, Farr drew on her actions during the war as evidence of her dedication to her husband, stating "I was with him [her husband] in camp while he was in service and I was daily at his bed side in hospital during his last illness until death." Having proved that she was the legal widow of her husband, Farr boldly asserted that the real reason the Bureau denied her application was because of her race. Farr argued "that my being of the negro race has prejudiced my case beginning with the special examiner who conducted the investigation and continuing through the Democratic and unfair administration under whom my claim was adjudicated."⁴² Farr reminded the Pension Bureau that beyond being a former slave, she was "an honorable claimant for widows pension..."⁴³ Farr drew on her status as a "widow of this great and powerful country" to claim that she was entitled to certain rights that had been denied to her merely because of her race. Rather than being simply her husband's widow, Farr proclaimed herself a widow of the country and therefore a worthy beneficiary of the attendant rights that status offered.

⁴² Pension File of Robert Farr, 104th USCI, 121.786, RG 15 NARA.

⁴³ Pension File of Robert Farr, 104th USCI, 121.786, RG 15 NARA.

For those black women who successfully applied for a pension, the eight dollars a month they received as a result of the deaths of their husbands was an important source of income in supporting themselves and their families. Some African-American widows used their pensions as a means of providing for their extended kin whom they considered their family. In doing so, they defied the white middle-class notions of women in the domestic sphere that had long shaped pension law. In New Berne, North Carolina, for instance, Clara Williams, received a pension following the death of her husband, Silas, a soldier in the 35th USCT. Williams did not have any children and so she used her pension to subsidize the income of the extended network of family members with whom she cohabitated, including “Cousin James” and “Grandmother Cotton.” According to the family’s agreement, the three of them pooled their earnings together to support one another. “We all throw in and buy things to eat,” Williams explained, “between us we live very well.” Using the pension provided by her husband’s death, Williams was thus able to support her extended family as they attempted to make ends meet. The vision Williams put forth was at odds with the pension examiner, however, who believed Williams to be a dependent within James’s household, rather than an equal contributor to the household economy. As a result, the Pension Bureau ultimately stripped her of her pension.⁴⁴ Despite this, Williams’s use of her pension illuminates the ways in which African-American widows spent the money they received from their husband’s deaths to cobble together independent lives and support themselves and their relatives.

Clara Williams’s use of her pension was not unique. The Civil War made widows out of thousands of African-American women in the South. In response, extended kin

⁴⁴ Brimmer, “All Her Right and Privileges,” 151-53.

became one of the most important sources of economic assistance available to African-American widows. In Adams County, Mississippi, for instance, a pension examiner reported that most of the people residing in the home of widower Charlotte Branch were her “friends” and “relatives.” Other widows drew on their kin in the immediate years following the war to provide them with economic support. Anne Patterson’s husband Henry died while serving with the 5th USCI. For three years after his death she lived with her sister and brother-in-law before she remarried.⁴⁵

Other widows, however, chose not to remarry or to disclose that they had remarried in order to maintain their widows’ pensions. When Elizabeth Dallas lost her husband in 1865 she immediately sought a widows’ pension. In 1869, she began living with another man, and she married him shortly thereafter. Yet, she did not reveal her second marriage to the Pension Bureau, and continued to collect her monthly pension. As Dallas tried to justify to a special examiner why she continued to accept this widows’ pension, she noted that her second husband did not provide for her as a head of household should. She claimed that her new spouse left her for months at a time, leaving her on her own with no idea of his whereabouts. To further substantiate her claim that she was still dependent on her pension to make ends meet, she stated that she paid her own rent, and could not rely on her husband to assist her.⁴⁶ Perhaps Dallas also believed that regardless of whether she remarried or not, she was still entitled to recompense from the government for the death of her husband, as Elizabeth Farr and Adele Anderson had

⁴⁵ Quoted in Frankel, *Freedom’s Women*, 149.

⁴⁶ Affidavit of Elizabeth Dallas, December 1, 1881, in Pension File of James Dallas, 112.801, 194.021, 76th USCI, RG 15, NARA.

implied in their own examinations. While the eight dollars a month that widows received from the federal government provided little solace for the loss of a loved one, it proved to be an important source of income for freedwomen in their attempts to achieve economic independence.

The importance of widows' pensions to freedwomen's economic stability became clearest when the Pension Bureau rescinded their pensions. Elizabeth Farr fought tenaciously for years to have her name returned to the pension rolls and the testimony of witnesses on her behalf demonstrates the importance of her pension to achieving a modicum of economic stability. Suffering from asthma and confined to her bed, Farr was not able to rely on her own labor to support herself. Instead, she depended on the charity of church members and friends who cared for her and gave her food and medicine.⁴⁷ Farr pled with the Bureau for assistance, claiming "I am in a destitute condition...suffering from the want of food and medicines and every other need of life and at this time my condition cannot be worse." As Farr continued, she noted that the only source of support she had was her son George, who had also been sickly and died three weeks before she wrote her petition. She blamed his death in part on the federal government's unwillingness to grant her a pension. "I could not provide for myself and had to allow my child to be taken to a paupers institute," Farr explained. Subsequently, George died there "when he was entitled to money from the government on account of his fathers service."⁴⁸ While Farr's experience represents an extreme example of what happened when the Pension Bureau denied a freedwoman a pension, her plight demonstrates the

⁴⁷ For additional testimony of Farr's prostrate condition, see Testimony of Fannie Blue, Isam Brewer, Charlotte Lawton, Pension File of Robert Farr, 104th USCI, 121.786, RG 15 NARA.

⁴⁸ Pension File of Robert Farr, 104th USCI, 121.786, RG 15 NARA.

importance of the widows' pension in assisting freedwomen in subsisting following emancipation. As they struggled to provide for themselves and their families as laundresses, cooks, and field laborers, freedwomen harnessed the power of their new status as soldier's widows to claim certain economic benefits that were a vital additional income and source of support.

Conclusion

Recent scholarship on the transition from slavery to freedom has focused on the ways in which the process of emancipation was non-linear and tumultuous.⁴⁹ The lived experience of freedpeople in refugee camps and federally-operated farms across the South is an especially poignant example of the mayhem unleashed by emancipation. While these slaves risked their lives when they ran away to Union lines in search of freedom, their struggle for survival did not end when they arrived in camp. Freedom did not promise African-American men and women safety or a livelihood. In disease-ridden camps and farms, freedwomen and children labored and languished in unhealthy conditions as they awaited the return of their husbands, fathers, and sons from the battlefield.

Fighting to assert their manhood and to end the institution of slavery, black soldiers' sacrifices for the Union had significant social and political implications for the struggle for African-American civil and political rights. Yet, these same actions also left freedwomen and children in a vulnerable situation without the male head of the family

⁴⁹ For a synthesis of this new scholarship that seeks to reframe the legacy of the Civil War and emancipation, see Carol Emberton, "Unwriting the Freedom Narrative: A Review Essay," *Journal of Southern History* 82 (May 2016), 377-94.

nearby to provide economic support and protection. Their perilous condition only increased with the deaths of their male relatives in the army. These losses also provided a small foothold for economic advancement for freedwomen and children when they applied for the bounties and back pay owed to their deceased kin. While the deaths of their husbands, fathers, and sons left their relatives despondent and grief-stricken, the struggle freedpeople endured to recoup the money owed to their kin demonstrated the ways in which the dead could assist the living as they strove to create economically independent households.

Just as the death of male kin assisted freedpeople economically as they took their first steps in freedom, so did it provide a powerful argument for why freedpeople such as those in the Sherman reserve and on Taylor farm should be entitled to remain on the land. In the process of reconstituting families under one roof and attempting to provide for the material well-being of their kith and kin, freedpeople called on their dead as they struggled to achieve land ownership. On the federally-owned farms and land that freedpeople had worked during the war, African-Americans perceived the opportunity for landownership and all of its attendant privileges: economic independence, a home for their family and friends, and self-determination. When threatened with dispossession of this land, freedpeople found the mortal sacrifices made by African-American men during the war to be salient justifications for their claim to the land.

While the federal government failed to assist freedpeople in their endeavors to secure possession of land, the Military Pension System offered African-American widows a small income to support them following the loss of their husbands. The deaths of the male heads of their families offered African-American women a new and useful

status in the South as widows. The money they received from federal pensions also propelled them toward closer, protracted relationships with the federal government in which they found opportunities to articulate their own definitions of freedom, family, and respectability; definitions that were often at odds with those stipulated in pension law. As they applied for and utilized their pensions, African-American widows drew on relationships they established in slavery and freedom, and demonstrated the centrality of deceased kith and kin to securing a degree of economic security.

The women seeking pensions and land who appeared before federal authorities were not alone in trying to forge a relationship with the federal government as a result of death. Throughout Reconstruction, African-American men and women presented their testimony before federal officials investigating the multiple racial massacres that wracked the South. By telling officials about the murders they witnessed and the personal losses they endured, African-American witnesses urged the federal government to protect them and their tenuous freedom.

CHAPTER THREE

“We Are Killed All the Day Long”: Testifying and Writing About Death

In 1872, the *New National Era*, an African-American newspaper in Washington, D.C., published a letter in which a black man in Mississippi fantasized about an apocalyptic reckoning between murdered African Americans and those who had been complicit in the bloodshed that had wracked the South since emancipation. “I would to God that the ghastly forms of those who have fallen prey to the murderous assaults of Ku-Kluxism might, in the stillness of the night and cover of darkness, rise from their unknown graves, approach the bedside of those who have thus endeavored to shield their assassins, and with their emaciated arms and bony fingers touch and awake them to behold the results of Ku-Klux Democracy.” While the man could not hope to conjure the ghosts of those who died to tell the story of their demise, he relied upon the next best thing—those who had witnessed their deaths—to speak for them:

We would like for some of those credulous-minded beings who doubt the existence of that hellborn-Klan to visit the court-room and listen to the tales of horror, bloodshed, and crime as recounted by those who still bear the marks of its cruel inflictions. There may be heard the widow in agonizing tones telling of the unrighteous act that robbed her of her husband. There may be heard the gray-haired man, as in feeble accent he depicts the horrid scenes enacted by those whose presence he recognizes. There may

be seen the young man with finger pointing in recognition of the wretch who deprived him of an arm. There may [be] seen the slender forms of the little ones as they shrink back and shudder at the sight of those whom they recognize as the ones who on that terrible night awoke them to behold the murdering of their father.

Evoking the image of innocent African Americans courageously coming forward to testify about the fatal losses they endured, the man called to mind a scene that had already been acted out several times over across the South.¹

Cynthia Townsend was one such witness. In June 1866, she sat before three United States congressmen in a room at the Gayoso House hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. The men asked her to recall what she had seen a month earlier during what came to be called the Memphis Riot—a bloody three-day massacre of newly emancipated slaves that had left at least forty-eight dead and another seventy or eighty wounded during the first three days of May 1866. Townsend captured the horror of the riot that tore through her neighborhood, stating, “[i]t was right before my door; I do not believe I could express what I saw.” Townsend was one of sixty-six African Americans who testified before the House select committee tasked with investigating the causes and consequences of the Memphis Riot. Her testimony, however, was similar to the testimony provided by African Americans throughout the South during the course of Reconstruction. For Townsend, the violence she witnessed during those three days was incomprehensible and

¹ *New National Era*, March 14, 1872.

nearly impossible to put into words, but she tried anyway. She testified to seeing black men and women shot down in the streets, naming both the murderers and the victims as she recounted the details of their deaths. As if in disbelief about the brutality Townsend described, the congressmen asked her to be sure to state only those acts of violence that she had seen with her own eyes. To this, Townsend retorted, “I am telling you the truth, and I know I have to give an account of it.”² Townsend’s poignant response to the congressman that she knew it was her duty to tell them what she had seen was representative of what motivated other black men and women to testify. As witnesses to the murderous violence that ravaged many southern black communities, African-American men and women who testified effectively spoke for the dead—telling the stories of their demise and demanding a reckoning for their deaths.

The man from Mississippi’s dream and the testimony Cynthia Townsend provided were part of a larger dialogue about death and loss that African Americans cultivated during Reconstruction. Following emancipation, white Southerners launched a campaign of night rides, whippings, rapes, beatings, and murders of freedpeople to subordinate African Americans. Through these violent acts of intimidation whites sought to demonstrate that they still had the power of life and death over African Americans in some circumstances, just as they had had in slavery.³ But some African Americans defied

² “Memphis Riots and Massacres,” House Report, 39th Congress, 1st Session, 1865-66, no. 101, 162. Hereafter cited as “Memphis Riots and Massacres.”

³ For books on violence during Reconstruction, see Carole Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the Americans South After the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Charles Lane, *The Day Freedom Died: The Colfax Massacre, The Supreme Court, and the Betrayal of Reconstruction* (New York: Holt, 2008); Donald G. Neiman, *Black Freedom/White Violence, 1865-1900* (New York: Garland, 1994); George Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press 1984); Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Allen Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan*

the death threats implicit in this white-on-black violence. In official spaces—such as Freedmen’s Bureau offices and congressional hearings—and in the columns of newspapers, African Americans described the deaths of loved ones and community members in order to seek justice, protection, and equality from state and federal authorities. By raising their voices and lifting their pens, black people used those deaths as a means of defying racial subordination and demanding the rights of citizenship.

Threats and Death

Acting upon their freedom was a perilous endeavor for newly freed bondspeople. Former masters and white Southerners aggressively lashed out at emancipated slaves who sought to act on their liberty. At the same time, African Americans faced fierce reprisals from white Southerners for reporting violence perpetrated against them and their family members to Freedmen’s Bureau agents, local authorities, or congressional committees. Freedpeople who managed to purchase land and a home, or establish a school or a church, frequently saw their hard work go up in flames. Other African Americans awoke in the middle of the night to white Southerners breaking into their homes and dragging them from their beds for insisting on being paid a decent wage, or for reporting contract violations by their employers to local Freedmen’s Bureau agents.

White Southerners organized themselves into paramilitary groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Knights of the White Camelia, the White League, and the Red Shirts, in order to curb African-American political activity through violent intimidation,

Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Gilles Vandal, *Rethinking Southern Violence: Homicides in Post-Civil War Louisiana, 1866-1884* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2000); Kidada Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

assassinations, and massacres. In several massacres across the South including the Memphis Riot (1866), the New Orleans Riot (1866), the Camilla Massacre (1868), the St. Landry's Parish Riot (1868), the Bossier Parish Riot (1868), the Meridian Riot (1871), the Colfax Massacre (1873), and the Hamburg Massacre (1876)—to name only a few—white Southerners planned concerted campaigns to re-establish white supremacy and to curtail African Americans from acting upon their rights. In the course of these bloody conflagrations, hundreds, if not thousands of African Americans lost their lives.⁴

Appearing before federal authorities, including testifying before congressional committees and swearing affidavits before Freedmen's Bureau agents and circuit courts, many freedpeople defied the death threats contained in white on black violence.⁵ Coming forward to testify was a dangerous endeavor, and as a result, the number of African Americans who provided testimony to federal officials was small compared to the number who chose to remain silent. Charles Scott, an African American from Louisiana captured the fear that many African Americans felt about testifying before federal

⁴ No accurate number exists for how many African Americans were murdered by whites in the South during Reconstruction. The number of dead is likely in the thousands. For the massacres listed above, the reported death toll is over 600. For the numbers of dead, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 262 (Memphis), 263 (New Orleans), 342 (Camilla), 342 (St. Landry), 428 (Meridian), 437 (Colfax), 571 (Hamburg); Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed, 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 168 (Bossier Parish). Across the South, Freedmen's Bureau agents kept ledgers of the murders of freedpeople in their districts, demonstrating the pervasiveness of violence. In the district of Alabama, the Assistant Commissioner reported fourteen murders in 1866. For an illustrative example, see, "Freedmen's Bureau List of Murders in the Dist. Of Alabama 1866," Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Alabama, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, M809 Roll 23, NARA.

⁵ It is unclear whether African Americans who testified before congressional committees were subpoenaed, or testified on their own volition. It was most likely that both courses of action led to African Americans standing before federal authorities. Regardless of how African Americans ended up testifying, the testimony they provided demonstrates their desire to have the deaths they witnessed documented. For more on the difficulties of determining how African Americans ended up before committees see Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 293 n. 79.

authorities. He claimed “[t]here are many to testify before this committee, but they are demoralized. They are speaking to me daily and daily, to know whether there will be any protection here or not.”⁶ In St. Landry Parish, Louisiana, an army lieutenant expressed frustration about being unable to gather information from African Americans about the massacre that occurred there in 1868. “I could not get a negro within hearing distance of me unless he was with a white man. The negroes were intimidated,” he reported.⁷ The ghastly actions of white Southerners that blacks witnessed, and the threat of violent reprisals by whites if they did testify, most likely prevented a majority of African Americans from appearing before authorities.⁸

Those who did come forward were keenly aware of the mortal risks of doing so. In 1875, William Riley, a freedman from New Orleans, described to a congressional committee the intimidation he suffered from white Democrats at the polls and voiced his apprehension at being murdered for speaking with them. Before giving any answers, Riley stated “Gentlemen, I am not going to state anything until I understand whether my life is safe or not. I have been threatened...No later than last evening.” Eventually, Riley realized that he needed to testify, regardless of his safety. “Well, I am willing [to testify],” he resignedly noted, “there aint but one time to die.”⁹ As Riley’s statement

⁶ “Coushatta Affair,” House Report, 44th Congress, 1st session, 1875-76, no. 816, 711.

⁷ “Testimony Taken by the Sub-Committee of Elections in Louisiana,” House Miscellaneous Documents, 41st Congress, 2nd session, no. 154, 1870, 476.

⁸ While fear and self-preservation were the foremost reasons why blacks did not speak about the deaths they witnessed, Kidada Williams has demonstrated freedpeople remained silent due to many different factors. Some chose to assert their agency by engaging in a ‘collective silence’ in which they sought to put the traumatic past behind them by not speaking of it again. Others simply could not put the terrible events they had witnessed into words. For more on violence, trauma, and testimony, see Kidada Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me*, 49; Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*.

⁹ “Condition of the South,” House Reports, 43rd Congress, 2nd Session, no. 261, 1875, 276, 304, hereafter cited as “Condition of the South.” Some survivors’ determination to speak about what they saw

made clear, the necessity of having their stories of loss told often trumped the fear that some blacks felt about white retribution.

Lucy Tibbs, a survivor of the Memphis Riot also defied death threats from her attackers in order to publicly recount her own story of violence and loss at the hands of white rioters. Tibbs testified that the son of one of the leaders of the Memphis Riot, John Pendergast, had threatened to kill her if she told anyone that she had seen him murder an African-American man. Nevertheless, one month after the riot in June of 1866, Tibbs sat before a congressional committee and divulged all of the horrors she had witnessed during those three terrible days. On the first day of the riot, Lucy Tibbs had been five months pregnant and home alone with her two young children when she witnessed the gruesome murders of four black men right outside of her house on South Street. She also testified that rioters had murdered her brother, a Union veteran. On that same night, Tibbs told the committee, a crowd of men broke into her home and the intruders watched as one of the men raped her. "I had just to give up to them," Tibbs recounted, "they said they

made them tempt fate and appear before multiple commissions and committees. In doing so, they demonstrated the importance they placed on having their accounts told. J. B. Jourdain, a prominent free man of color, testified to the threats he endured as a result of providing information to the military commission charged with investigating the causes of the New Orleans Riot, stating, "Many have advised me to leave the city. I have heard them say, 'Damn him, he gave testimony,' and I have been told my life is in danger because I did so." Jourdain, a well-connected man of African descent, perhaps felt more comfortable testifying as a result of his political contacts. He was a member of the Union League, which he later confessed that he had joined because, "I have to join some party that I may have some encouragement, or some of these fellows might go to murdering again, though they might not find it so easy again." Other men and women of lesser standing also appeared before military commissions and subsequently testified before congressional committees, including Martin Self who owned a shop selling watermelons. Rather than shy away from testifying, Self named both of the police officers that assaulted him during the New Orleans Riot, describing in detail which police officer shot each of the bullet holes in his body. "Report of the Select Committee on New Orleans Riots," House Reports, 39th Congress, 2nd session, no. 16, 1866, 207. Hereafter cited as "Select Committee on New Orleans Riots"; "New Orleans Riots," House Executive Documents, 39th Congress, 2nd session, no. 68, 1866, 288-89; "Select Committee on New Orleans Riots," 338.

would kill me if I did not.”¹⁰ Despite witnessing the brutal deaths of her neighbors, losing her own brother, and succumbing to rape in order to try to save her own life, Tibbs refused to remain silent. In doing so, her testimony evidenced the bloody depths of white Southerners’ hostility towards newly emancipated bondspeople. But perhaps more significantly, Tibbs’s defiance of Pendergast’s death threat, and her determination to have her entire experience recorded, revealed that she refused to accept such inhumane treatment in freedom. By coming forward, Tibbs claimed a crucial right of citizenship in insisting that she was entitled to the same protections from the federal government as white citizens.¹¹

Murderous Words

By telling federal authorities about the deaths they had witnessed, African-American witnesses attempted to explain the causes underlying the violence perpetrated by white Southerners. Importantly, the testimony black people provided challenged the reports inundating Democratic newspapers in the North and South that claimed that

¹⁰ Lucy Tibbs was just one of at least five African-American women who were raped by rioters during the Memphis Riot. For her testimony, see “Memphis Riots,” 160-62. Neighbors of Harriet Armour testified that she was “deranged” after her husband left her when he found out she had been raped by two rioters. Nevertheless, Armour testified to her experience, “I have not got well since my husband went away....They just told me I had to do it. They barred up the door, and I knew I could not help myself.” “Memphis Riots,” 176. For more on the political implications of the rape of freedwomen during the Memphis Riot, see Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 61-83.

¹¹ This argument builds on Hannah Rosen’s work, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*. Rosen contends that in the postwar South, the “gendered rhetoric of race was both reflected in and reproduced through the acts of cross-racial sexual violence.” While black men and women sought to capitalize on their new rights as citizens, Rosen argues that white Southerners used sexual violence to reinscribe antebellum gendered and racialized definitions of citizenship that were predicated on white masculinity. This dissertation takes a different approach by using death, rather than sexual violence, as a lens for examining shifting conceptions of race and gender in the South. Just as sexual violence was a site where white and black men and women grappled with ideas about citizenship, so too was death a site of struggle. Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 6.

“radicalism” and “insurrectionary negroes” were the real instigators of the violence raging in the South. Through their testimony, black witnesses insisted that white Southerners were the true culprits. They frequently quoted their attackers and the words they heard rioters say as they killed their victims. By repeating these murderous words, African-American witnesses attempted to craft their own narrative about the origins of the violence in the South and establish that the massacres that white Southerners had incited were an attempt to curtail freedpeople’s political, social, and economic mobility. In doing so, African-Americans established the deaths of their family and community members as sites of struggle over the meaning of freedom.

Freedpeople’s testimony before the committee investigating the Memphis Riot of 1866 accomplished this by highlighting the wrath that white Southerners had directed against black Union soldiers. Democratic newspapers such as the *Memphis Daily Argus* claimed “the whole blame of this most tragical and bloody riot lies, as usual, with the poor, ignorant, deluded blacks.”¹² However, the testimony provided by African-American witnesses refuted this, and focused on the ire the rioters had unleashed on black Union soldiers. Frank Williams testified that he “heard them [rioters] say they would kill every damned one who had blue clothes on.”¹³ In doing so, Williams not only graphically underscored the vengefulness of the rioting men, but also exposed the precarious condition of black soldiers stationed in the South. White Southerners had specifically targeted black soldiers, as they were symbols of the defeat of the Confederacy and the

¹² *Memphis Daily Argus*, May 2, 1866. For other examples of newspapers placing the blame for racial violence on blacks in the South, see “Memphis Riot,” *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, May 16, 1866; “The Memphis Riot,” *Macon Telegraph*, May 9, 1866.

¹³ “Memphis Riots and Massacres,” 179.

upending of racial and gendered hierarchies that had privileged white masculinity as a requisite for military service and citizenship.¹⁴ Allen Summers, another survivor of the Memphis Riot made this point clear as he described the man who tried to kill him as having yelled that “they ‘were going to kill the God damned nigger soldiers who were fighting here against their rights—the black sons of bitches.’”¹⁵ Summers inclusion of the rioter’s assertion that black soldiers were “fighting here against their rights,” emphasized that these men attacked African-American soldiers because they were antithetical to the white, male dominated social structure that had organized antebellum Southern society.

When African Americans quoted rioters’ words, they did so in ways that stressed that the genesis of violence against them did not “originate wholly among the negroes,” as newspapers alleged, but rather, stemmed from freedpeople attempting to assert their new status.¹⁶ John Marshall, who also witnessed the Memphis Riot, testified that he saw a white man drag his black neighbor out of his home and then “a white man shot him right in his mouth. The man fell, and when he was getting up another man walked up to him, kicked him over and shot him again. Said he, ‘God damn you, you will never be free again.’¹⁷ Similarly, Lucy Tibbs recalled a crowd that formed around a freedman. As they shot him repeatedly, one of the members of the group shouted “[d]amn you, that will

¹⁴ For works on the conflation of African American military service, masculinity, and citizenship, see Nancy Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861-1865* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 158-87; Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1997), 184-254; Carole Emberton, “‘Only Murder Makes Men’: Reconsidering the Black Military Experience,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, no. 3 (September 2012): 369-93; Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 45-49.

¹⁵ “Memphis Riots and Massacres,” 168.

¹⁶ *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, May 16, 1866.

¹⁷ “Memphis Riots and Massacres,” 180.

show you how to leave your old mistress and master.”¹⁸ Mary Jordan likewise testified that one of the New Orleans rioters sneered, “Don’t you wish you were back with your old masters again, for them to take care of you?”¹⁹ The vicious words these freedpeople repeated served as evidence that white Southerners refused to tolerate free African Americans in their midst and were all too willing to use deadly violence to subordinate them. Yet the testimony that these witnesses provided also represented a marked change in the social structure compared to the antebellum South, as free black men and women stepped forward to confront their attackers, and provide valuable evidence about why these massacres had occurred.²⁰

Freedpeople also testified to hearing rioters link the murders of freedpeople to African American’s attempts to secure political rights. Following the New Orleans Riot on July 30, 1866, James Thomas testified to seeing policemen hastily remove corpses from the street and throw them into a cart. “I heard them saying as they went along ‘We will give you a vote; vote now, if you want to.’”²¹ By including this macabre detail, Thomas connected the savage treatment that African-American bodies succumbed to in death to white Southerners’ agenda to curb black political activity. Peter Crocker, a survivor of the New Orleans riot, provided similar testimony when he appeared before a

¹⁸ “Memphis Riots and Massacres,” 161-62.

¹⁹ “Select Committee on New Orleans Riots,” 234-35.

²⁰ Members of the Congressional committee tasked with investigating the Memphis Riot noted the political importance of survivors’ testimony to determining Reconstruction policies. As Congressman John Broomall noted, “the great question now before the country is whether the people of the eleven States lately in rebellion are yet in a fit condition to be entrusted with a share in the government of the country. The *animus* and the spirit of the people enter into the inquiry. The details of this report and testimony go to that very spirit and that very *animus* of the leading people of the city of Memphis. *Congressional Globe* 39th Congress, 1st Sess., 4265 (1866).

²¹ “Select Committee on New Orleans Riots,” 111-12.

military commission, his body still riddled with bullets and stab wounds inflicted by policemen only fifteen days earlier. As Crocker explained his near-death experience, he made sure to include the words he heard rioters speak over his body. “While I was lying there some one said, ‘God damn them, I am going to kill every negro in New Orleans. God damn their making laws.’”²² In Thomas and Crocker’s testimony, both men made clear that the murders of freedpeople in New Orleans were a product of their attempts to secure the suffrage and gain a degree of political power.

In response to public outrage over the Memphis and New Orleans Massacres of 1866, Congress eventually overrode President Johnson’s vetoes in order to pass the Reconstruction Act of 1867. The Act attempted to provide additional protection for African Americans in the South by extending the right to vote to black men, and increasing the federal military presence in the South by dividing the region into five military districts. The testimony that African Americans provided about their experiences was instrumental in gaining federal intervention in the South and granting African Americans rights that would enable them to safeguard their freedom. Yet as the testimony of black men and women made clear, freedom meant more than the acquisition of political rights. African Americans demanded that the federal government protect their lives as they strove to labor independently, raise their families, gain an education, and pursue their own vision of freedom. Despite gaining the right to vote, black families and communities remained targets of white animosity as black people struggled for economic autonomy and endeavored to look after their loved ones and communities.

The extension of the franchise to black men presented former slaves and free men

²² “New Orleans Riots,” House Executive Documents, 39th Congress, 2nd session, no. 68, 1866, 288-89; “Select Committee on New Orleans Riots,” 242-43.

of color with unprecedented opportunities for political involvement, but it also brought with it increased violence against African Americans who dared to act on these rights. In 1875, J. J. Johnson, a black man from De Soto Parish, Louisiana, testified that he knew of “a great many being killed in De Soto Parish,” during the course of Reconstruction. He claimed that white men in the parish justified these killings because African-American men had started voting for Republicans. Sitting before a congressional committee, he repeated the threatening words white Democrats had directed at him, including that “they would ride in our blood up to our horses’ bridle-bits. I asked what for. They said, “you have either got to quit going into politics, or else we will hang you.”²³ In DeSoto Parish, as well as across the South, white men evidently gave African Americans an ultimatum—choose to vote or to live.

Other African Americans testified that they faced death threats from white paramilitary groups simply because they had become prosperous in freedom. In Clarke County, Georgia, Alfred Richardson, a thirty-four year old former slave, attracted the ire of the Ku Klux Klan after he made a comfortable life for himself and his family as a carpenter and grocery store owner. In 1871, Richardson appeared before a congressional committee investigating voter intimidation by the Klan. He recounted how Klansmen fired nearly twenty shots into his leg and hip. As he was recovering, a white man came to Richardson to warn him that his life was in danger if he stayed in the county any longer.

²³ “Condition of the South,” 352. Abram Colby, a former slave and representative to the Georgia state legislature provided similar testimony about a visit from the Klan. He claimed that the Klan visited his house in 1869 and savagely beat him in front of his mother, wife, and daughter in order to force him to end his political career. Despite his near-death experience, and the trauma his entire family endured in its aftermath, Colby refused to remain silent and testified to his experience in 1872. When asked how long it took for him to recover from the assault, Colby noted “I have never got over it yet. They broke something inside of me.” “Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States-Georgia,” (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 695-707.

Richardson testified that this man had warned him that “[t]here are some men about here that have something against you; and they intend to kill you or break you up. They say you are making too much money; that they do not allow any nigger to rise that way: that you can control all the colored votes; and they intend to break you up, and then they can rule the balance of the niggers when they get you off.” Richardson stated that following this warning, the Klan attacked him in his home once again, shooting him in the side and arm. After the ambush, Richardson noted that “I have heard talk of them; and they say they will have me, they don’t care where I go.”²⁴ Despite the threat of another visit from the Klan and possibly death, Richardson chose to sit in front of the committee and to denounce the men that sought to curb his attempts at possessing the fruits of freedom.

The testimony of African Americans such as Johnson and Richardson demonstrated the revolutionary nature of Reconstruction, as black people exercised new rights, and attained economic and political control over their lives and those of their families. By speaking before federal authorities about the deaths and death threats they had witnessed, African Americans defied their attackers’ intended subjugation. In their testimony, African-Americans sought to define the meaning of their freedom by elucidating the ways in which white Southerners used death threats to deny them access to the economic, political, and social opportunities freedom was supposed to afford.

Searching for the Dead

Perhaps one of the greatest injustices freedpeople voiced in their testimony was the inability to care for the bodies of their murdered friends and loved ones. African-

²⁴ “Condition of the South,” 2-3.

American witnesses took pains to discuss the savage treatment of the bodies of African-American victims of post-war racial massacres. Evoking images of mounds of bodies, hidden corpses, and relatives buried in hastily dug pits, the testimony of witnesses sought to show the prejudice blacks endured even in death. By bringing to light these grisly details, they demonstrated the extent of white Southerners' wrath towards freedpeople. There were a few who were lucky enough to recover their loved ones' bodies, but more often than not, it seems that freedpeople were left only with questions and with anguish about the final resting place of their neighbors and family members.

African-American witnesses made sure to inform federal officials that the simple act of retrieving the body of a loved one was a perilous deed that required a concerted effort by relatives and community members. After the Memphis Riot, testifiers noted that the bodies of their neighbors lay where they fell for days before families and neighbors were able to safely collect them. Maria Marshall watched from her house as rioters murdered her neighbor, Shadrach Garrett. The next day she went to look at Garret's body, which still lay just out front of his home. "He laid just at his room door," Marshall recalled, while Garret's wife and children sat trapped in the room staring at their husband and father's lifeless body, unable to move it without help. As the mob subsided the following day, two or three families in the neighborhood crept out of their homes and helped Garret's wife take the body away for burial.²⁵ In 1873 in Colfax, Louisiana,

²⁵ "Memphis Riots and Massacres," 179. In another instance, Ginnie Menard testified that the mother of Adaline Miller enlisted the help of several people to remove the body of her daughter from in front of a grocery store where she had been shot. "Memphis Riots and Massacres," 258. Sarah Long was initially unsuccessful at getting anyone to help her bury her husband after his murder during the Memphis Riot, because community members, according to Long, "were scared to death, and so he remained where he was shot till next day, when he was buried." "Memphis Riots and Massacres," 222. In New Orleans, two black women testified to seeing a man shot to death in front of their home during the 1866 massacre. Fortunately, the sister of the man was able to locate his body and braved the hazardous streets in order to remove his corpse during the riot. Both women, however, remained trapped in their home, too afraid to go

following one of the deadliest massacres of the Reconstruction era which left over 150 freedpeople dead, the bodies of the victims remained unburied for days after the slaughter. It was not until a deputy marshal arrived in the town that those freedpeople who survived could begin the mournful task of burying the bodies. The deputy marshal enlisted the help of local African Americans who, under federal protection, formed a burial party to inter the bodies of fifty-nine freedpeople in a mass grave.²⁶ The image of black men and women interring their dead made national news in *Harper's Weekly*. Through African Americans' actions and testimony, they revealed how white Southerners used the unburied corpses of their victims to exhibit their continued power over black lives and deaths.



Fig. 3.1. "The Louisiana Murders," *Harper's Weekly*, May 10, 1873

outside to assist this woman in securing the body of her brother. "New Orleans Riots," House Executive Documents, 39th Congress, 2nd session, no. 68, 1866, 221.

²⁶ "Conditions of the South," 413.

They were the lucky ones. Witnesses to these massacres frequently described how after surviving the traumatic violence many other survivors searched in vain for the bodies of their loved ones. As J. B. Jourdain noted following the New Orleans Riot, “the police carried them away and buried them without their friends knowing. I know some who were killed, and their families could have given them a good burying, but they could not be found, and they have never been found since.”²⁷ In a workhouse in New Orleans, a surgeon found the remains of twenty-two unidentified African Americans, and “not a solitary person was found on the spot to identify the bodies.”²⁸ Undoubtedly, this was a distressing experience for the relatives of the dead who could not know for certain the fate of their relations and friends. By hiding the bodies of their victims, white Southerners used the corpses as another means of asserting their authority and power over living freedpeople.

Freedpeople’s testimony depicted this torment of not knowing the final resting place of their loved ones’ remains. Lavinia Godell recalled how she risked her life trying to retrieve the body of her husband, which she had been forced to leave in the street outside of her home in order to save her own life. Godell had learned that her husband’s corpse had been carted away to the city jail, and so she ventured through the city to claim his remains. But when she arrived, the jailer refused to return the body to her despite her pleas, to which Godell raged, “after you have killed him you ought to give me the body.” As she sat before the select committee a month after the death of her husband, she remained distraught: “I cannot tell you where he is...I do not know where he is any more

²⁷ “Select Committee on New Orleans Riot,” 206.

²⁸ “Select Committee on New Orleans Riot,” 12.

than you do.”²⁹ By testifying about their inability to retrieve the bodies of their family and community members, African-American witnesses demonstrated that white rioters’ attempts to conceal the bodies of their victims was a deliberate effort to demoralize and intimidate them from speaking out against the murders they had witnessed. Godell’s deeply personal and harrowing testimony about the violence and loss she had endured made the murderous racism in the South difficult to ignore.

Accounting

By testifying, freedpeople and free people of color endeavored to seek justice for themselves and their slain loved ones, and to ensure that the murders and violence they witnessed did not continue. To do so, African-Americans insisted on giving a public accounting of the murders and attempted murders they had seen. While in most cases the perpetrators of these crimes were never arrested or brought to trial, by testifying in front of federal authorities, African Americans asserted themselves in new ways and called on federal officials to extend to them protection as citizens of the United States.

²⁹ “Memphis Riots and Massacres,” 77-78. Jane Sneed gave similar testimony about being unable to bury the body of her daughter, Rachel Hatcher. The city coroner buried the bodies of eleven freedpeople following the Memphis Riot, including the body of Hatcher. Sneed was not made aware of this however, and she testified before the select committee that “I have found it since where she was buried, and seen her name on the headboard.” When asked who secured the headboard, she stated, “I do not know; I only know where she was buried by seeing her name” Steven V. Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot That Shook the Nation One Year After the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), 164. “Memphis Riots and Massacres,” 98-100. In 1868, in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana, following a massacre that left forty to fifty African Americans dead, armed whites patrolled the parish, continuing to demonstrate their authority over black lives. Despite the threat to their lives, freedpeople eventually managed to pass information to Captain E. A. Hooker, sent to investigate the riot, that “if he would ride out a few miles from town in a certain wood and would look into a ravine, he would find the bodies of eighteen freedmen and one white man partially covered there.” Hooker and a Freedmen’s Bureau agent proceeded to the point indicated and saw the bodies. The agent reported that “the hands were sticking up through the dirt and that he counted some sixteen or eighteen bodies lying in the ravine.” The freedmen informed him that similar mass graves could be found throughout the parish. “Report on Louisiana Contested Elections,” House Miscellaneous Documents, 41st Congress, 2nd Session, No. 154, December 6, 1869-July 15, 1870, 476-7.

Through their testimony, male and female survivors sought to speak for the dead. Presenting his own bullet riddled body before a military commission just fifteen days after he narrowly escaped death, Peter Crocker, a survivor of the New Orleans Riot, was an obvious representative of the violence perpetrated against African Americans. Sitting before the commission, Crocker gave a detailed account of his near-death experience, and described how police had inflicted each bullet and stab wound on his body. He also recounted a callous conversation a group of men had had over his body as he lay helpless in the street. “God damn him I think he’s not dead yet,” a man remarked. “God damn it, he is dead; don’t you see all his brains are out?” replied another. Crocker recalled that as the cart carrying the dead had rumbled towards where he lay, a few men wrenched a dirk out of his side and “flung” him into the cart on top of another man. The cart made its way down the street and the police “brought in more men and flung them in on top, and carried us down to the workhouse.” When Crocker arrived at the workhouse, he was covered in the cart by a heap of bodies. He struggled to pull his heels up on the side of the cart so the inmates unloading the dead would see that he was still alive.³⁰ Through his miraculous testimony of survival, Peter Crocker narrated the experience of those African Americans who did not live to have their stories told.

Other witnesses presented their own deeply personal stories of the deaths of their family members in the hope calling attention to the dire situation freedpeople faced in the South. Mary Campbell, a freedwoman from Madison County, Alabama, swore an affidavit before a circuit court in 1869 less than two weeks after six or seven men

³⁰ New Orleans Riots,” House Executive Documents, 39th Congress, 2nd session, no. 68, 1866, 242-43.

disguised in masks and black gowns had murdered her husband. Campbell had been asleep next to her husband when she was startled awake by the sound of a pistol shot. In graphic detail, Campbell recalled the horrors she had witnessed that night. “I saw that my husband had been shot in the left side,” Campbell stated, “I saw the blood running out of his side; it ran on my clothes; he cried out, “Oh Lord!” Campbell watched in abject terror as the men who had gathered around her bed shot her husband in the side of the head again and ordered him out of the room. “He went out with them, and leaned up against the fence and I saw and heard some three or four of them shoot at him.” When the men eventually left, Campbell rushed to the side of her husband. “I helped to carry my husband into the house, and found that he had been shot some six times; he died in about an hour after he was shot.”³¹ At the end of her testimony Campbell made sure to note that she was seven months pregnant at the time of her husband’s death. By doing so, she called attention to her vulnerable position in freedom and highlighted the destruction that white violence wrought not only on individual black bodies, but also on African-American families.

The testimony black women provided about the murders of their husbands threatened the federal government’s agenda to rebuild the postwar South on the principles of free labor. As the federal government attempted to create stability in the South and establish a free labor system, officials relied on the institution of marriage to create a foundation to organize newly freed slaves into household economic units. African Americans seized the opportunity to get married and to have their unions officially

³¹ “Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States-Alabama,” (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 149-50.

recognized by local authorities—something that their enslaved status had previously denied them. The violent disruption of families that African-American women’s testimony documented threatened the efforts of freedpeople and federal officials in the South, however, as white Southerners murdered the heads of these newly-sanctioned households, killing men who were supposed to serve as the protectors and providers of African-American women and children.³²

African-American women’s testimony about their murdered husbands demonstrated that the violence directed toward freedpeople uprooted families and destroyed the foundations of African-American advancements in freedom. Following the Memphis Riot, several women came forward and gave detailed accounts of the deaths of their husbands. Sarah Long, a former slave, began her testimony by saying “I saw them kill my husband.” She recounted in detail the moment her husband died. “When my husband fell he scuffled about a little, and looked as if he tried to get back into the house; then they told him that if he did not make haste and die, they would shoot him again. Then one of them kicked him, and another shot him again when he was down; they shot him through the head every time, as far as I could see. He never spoke after he fell.”³³ As she tried to make sense of her husband’s murder during the Memphis Riot, Harriet

³² Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion*, 7; Mary Farmer Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen’s Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

³³ “Memphis Riots and Massacres,” 222. Lavinia Godell provided similar heart wrenching testimony about witnessing the death of her own husband, Jackson. Godell testified that she had come across her husband lying in the street. “He was lying and only groaning,” Godell noted when she reached him, “I sat with his head in my hands.” Eventually some men running by advised her she had better take cover or else she would be killed. Godell recalled her anguish “I didn’t know what to do. . . . I could not do anything,” but eventually she made the difficult decision to leave her husband’s body in the street in order to save her own life. “Memphis Riots and Massacres,” 77-78.

Williams spoke for many of the women who lost spouses in massacres in the South. “He had done nothing, and had not been from home since he came from his work,” she told the committee a day after his murder. “They had no cause whatever to murder him as they did.”³⁴ These women’s act of testifying before federal authorities was also an act of political assertion. By presenting themselves before federal authorities and sharing their personal losses, these women demonstrated that their freedom and that of their families was in jeopardy from these murderous attacks.

Other witnesses also sought to highlight the innocence of those who were murdered during massacres. In doing so, they discredited the narrative espoused by white Southerners that insurrectionary African-Americans were the instigators of these riots. The heart-breaking testimony that Jane Sneed provided about the murder of her young daughter, Rachel Hatcher, revealed that some of the victims of white Southerners’ violence were harmless girls and boys. Sneed testified that during the Memphis Riot Hatcher risked her own life to help a neighbor save items from his burning house. Sneed recalled that when she arrived at her neighbor’s house to help her daughter, she “walked upon the body of Rachel; she was dead and blood running out of her mouth. I turned and ran down to my house the back way; it scared me more than I had ever been in my life.” Sneed attempted to move her daughter’s body, but soon gave up, as she feared that her own life was in danger. As the houses in the neighborhood blazed, Hatcher’s clothes caught on fire and her body burned as it lay in the yard. Sneed told the commission that a surgeon from a USCT regiment told her he had seen Hatcher’s body and informed her “it was the awfulest sight he ever saw.” Sneed’s testimony evidently resonated with the

³⁴ “Memphis Riots and Massacres,” 350.

commission, who called Hatcher's murder "one of the most cruel and bloody acts by the mob" in their final published report on the riot.³⁵

When African-American witnesses testified about the innocence of such victims of these massacres, they sought to demonstrate the struggles that former slaves faced in forging new identities in freedom. As freedpeople testified about the Memphis Riot, they remarked on the innocence and virtue of victims such as Hatcher. African-American witnesses noted her youth and her inspiring progress in school. Hatcher's mother testified that "there was no reason for the men to be giving her [Rachel] trouble, I was tending to my own business. I was sending my daughter Rachel to school." Hannah George, who witnessed Hatcher's murder commented on her youth and intelligence, stating, "she was about 16 or 17 years old. She went to school, and was a right smart girl; she was the head of the class." Likewise, the brother of a black school-teacher murdered by the Klan in Georgia, explained to federal officials that his brother had been murdered because he was "too big a man...he can write and read and put it down himself."³⁶ By highlighting the upstanding character of the victims who were murdered as they sought to better their lives, African Americans' testimony illuminated the struggles black people faced in defining the meaning of their freedom. Moreover, through their testimony, these men and women underscored not only the mortal destruction that the massacre had wrought, but

³⁵ "Memphis Riot and Massacre," 98-100. Cynthia Townsend provided similar testimony about the innocence of the victims of the Memphis Riot, as she noted that "There were little children coming out of the houses, and they fired at them. I saw four or five come out at one time. Little children, old people, and women seemed to be all coming out together, and they just fired right at them." "Memphis Riots and Massacres," 162, 15.

³⁶ Cynthia Townsend noted that "this girl Rachael who was shot and burned was a nice, smart girl; I could not tell you how old she was; she was quite a young woman." "Memphis Riots and Massacres," 162. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 428.

the residual damage it caused to African-American communities.

As African-American witnesses appeared before federal authorities, they spoke for other community members who were too afraid to tell their stories on their own. J. J. Johnson, a prominent black Republican in DeSoto Parish, Louisiana, began keeping a list of the black men that local African Americans had told him had been murdered in the parish since 1868. In 1875, when he testified before a congressional committee, he spoke for all of the men and women who had entrusted him with this vital information, when he produced the list of 126 names. As if in disbelief that there were so many deaths in one parish, the committee members took the list from Johnson and began asking him about the circumstances of the murders of each of the persons named. Johnson was able to recall the approximate dates, locations, and circumstances of the deaths of each person about whom the committee asked him. When asked why he kept this list in the first place, Johnson voiced the reason why so many other African Americans chose to speak up, “I thought it was my place to get it up so I could keep in remembrance what was done in De Soto Parish.”³⁷ African Americans such as Johnson who testified thus served an important role in their communities by conveying to lawmakers the scale of death blacks endured in the South.

Other African Americans who testified also reported remarkably precise numbers, locations, and dates of where they saw dead bodies. Testifying before the Memphis Riot congressional committee, Andrew Minter said that he “counted eight colored men shot within three hundred yards of one another...every one was killed. I went right by them. They all had soldiers clothes on. This was on Tuesday night.” Minter stated that on the

³⁷ “Condition of the South,” 352-61.

following day he saw a white man shoot a black soldier, noting that “[h]e shot him so dead he did not kick. He lay there until the next day, until near 12 o’clock. Then they shot two or three soldiers in the lot where I was. They broke and run out. The white men run after them, and would shoot them and beat them in the head.”³⁸ By providing specific details, numbers, and measurements, black witnesses such as Minter sought to make their testimony unassailable under the scrutiny of federal officials.

Freedpeople also frequently named the perpetrators of the murders and their victims in an attempt to seek justice for the violent acts that white Southerners had committed. Lucy Tibbs began her testimony by listing the numbers of black men she had seen killed, noting that she had witnessed two men shot and killed on the first day of the riot. She made sure to tell the committee that she knew one of the men very well—a sergeant at the nearby fort. Tibbs then provided the precise locations of the corpses, stating that the two men she had seen killed were lying about 175 feet apart from one another. She also named the murderers. “The first was killed by John Pendergast...he keeps a grocery right there by my house,” Tibbs reported, “I was looking right at him when he shot the man...I saw him put his pistol right to his head.” By providing specific details, such as names, distances, and her avowal that she saw this murder with her own eyes, Tibbs endeavored to make her testimony impregnable. Tibbs continued her methodical mapping of the carnage she had witnessed, noting that “[t]here were four laid about two hundred yards from my house two days and nights...They killed a colored soldier just above my house on Wednesday morning about 9 o’clock.” The commission investigating the riot used Tibbs’s testimony in their final report, and noted that they were

³⁸ “Memphis Riots and Massacres,” 172.

“strongly impressed with the truth and fairness of her testimony.”³⁹ As federal authorities attempted to tabulate the loss of life from racial violence, African Americans performed their own deadly arithmetic of adding up the numbers of bodies they saw. African-American testimony then, provided deeply personal stories of fear and loss, but also staggering numbers of the dead.

The scale of death that African-American men and women witnessed over the course of Reconstruction was overwhelming. Even as more witnesses came forward to testify about the horrors they had observed, the death toll continued to climb. While the mortal violence white Southerners inflicted on freedpeople was evidently intended to intimidate African Americans and force them into subordination, by coming before federal authorities, black men and women refused to be cowed. In doing so, they collectively provided evidence of the ruthlessness of white Southerners and the tenuous position of recently freed slaves in a hostile country. Moreover, they sought to bring to light the murders of members of their families and communities that would have gone without notice were it not for their testimony.

Publishing

When African Americans testified before federal authorities they entered into a larger national conversation about the mortal costs of Reconstruction. Newspaper columns across the country were already brimming with reports of the violence wracking

³⁹ “Memphis Riots and Massacres,” 160-61. Tony Cherry, a discharged soldier from the 3rd United States Colored Heavy Artillery, testified that he saw five of his comrades killed during the Memphis Riot, and provided the names of those he knew, including “William Withers, George Black, George Cobb, Ike Richardson; the name of the other,” he lamented, “I do not remember.” “Memphis Riots and Massacres,” 182, 15.

the war-torn South. Images of lifeless black bodies displayed before smoldering ruins of schoolhouses, churches, homes, and orphanages repeatedly appeared in the pages of *Harper's Weekly* throughout Reconstruction.⁴⁰ Newspapers reported on the grisly murders and riots that inundated the South, publishing death tolls alongside titillating reports of ghastly murders.⁴¹ Democratic and Republican newspapers used these deaths to point fingers at their rivals' Reconstruction policies and to blame them for the catastrophic loss of life. The violence and death that national newspapers reported on demonstrated that the battles of the Civil War were far from over and that the South had not entirely surrendered to federal Reconstruction.⁴² Drawing on the testimony of African-American witnesses, the black press in both the South and the North marshaled the corpses of murdered blacks to encourage inter-sectional unity among African Americans in its endeavor to eradicate racism nationwide. In doing so, they commenced creating an historical memory of the violent history of Reconstruction, which they used to demand equality and protection as American citizens.

⁴⁰ For examples, see "Scenes in Memphis, Tennessee During the Riot—Shooting Down Negroes on the Morning of May 2, 1866," *Harper's Weekly*, May 26, 1866; "Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction and How It Works," *Harper's Weekly*, September 1, 1866; "Amphitheatrum Johnsonianum—Massacre of the Innocents at New Orleans, July 30, 1866," *Harper's Weekly*, March 30, 1867; "This is a White Man's Government," *Harper's Weekly*, September 5, 1868; "Patience on a Monument," *Harper's Weekly*, October 10, 1868.

⁴¹ Abolitionist newspapers and periodicals were especially graphic in the violence they reported. For instance, the *American Missionary* reported on crimes against African Americans in the South with vivid details such as the following report of the murders of African American women by white men: "One woman was found with her throat cut from ear to ear, and her little child less than a year old, eating the clotted blood from the wound. Another woman, in a delicate condition, was beat to death, and the child beat out of her." *American Missionary*, February 1867, 36.

⁴² As Carole Emberton has argued, however, in national newspapers, the conversation in newspapers often focused on how to reform wayward white Southerners and bring them back into the fold of the law, rather than asking how the federal government could best protect vulnerable freedpeople from the wrath of vengeful Southerners. While newspapers published in the North used depictions of dead freedpeople as a call to action to reform the South, the African-American press in both the North and the South used these deaths to serve different ends. Carole Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*, 40-1.

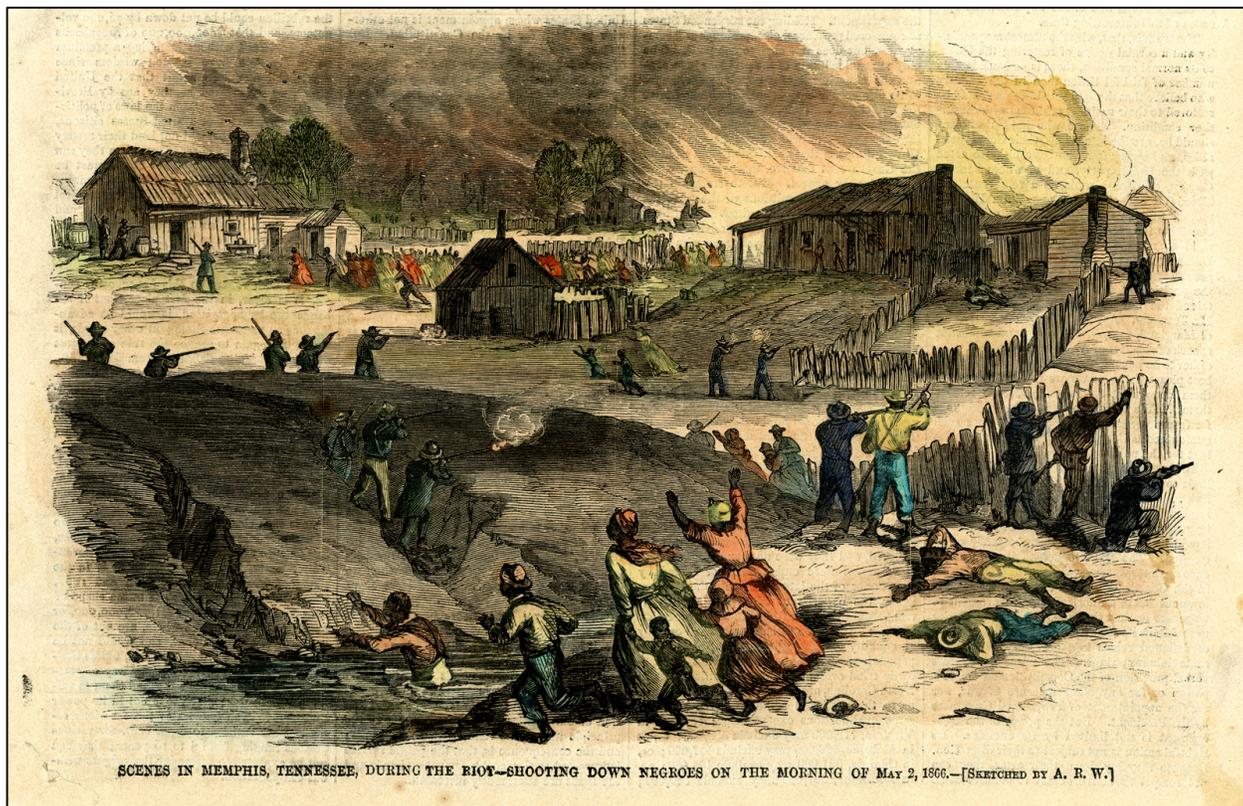


Fig. 3.2. An example of the kind of violent scenes *Harper's Weekly* published when reporting on Reconstruction violence. "Scenes in Memphis, Tennessee During the Riot," *Harper's Weekly*, 26 May 1866.

Even before reports of the Memphis Riot shocked the nation still reeling from the bloodshed of the Civil War, African-American newspapers had been reporting on the deaths of freedpeople across the South. In February 1866, the *South Carolina Leader* appealed to the federal government for protection of African Americans as it reported on the wanton murder of black people. "Colored men have been murdered in our streets at night, and robbed upon the public square in broad daylight," the *Leader* decried. The *Leader* noted that these outrages usually went unpunished in local courts and that freedpeople could not find justice in the South. "Reconstruction is desirable," the *Leader* continued, "but it is desirable only in accordance with the spirit of the age and the

enlarged ideas of personal freedom.”⁴³ Writing before the passage of the 1867 Reconstruction Act, which would enable African Americans to vote in the South, the *Leader* made clear that freedom and safety were not the same. Pointing to the murders of blacks in the South as evidence, the *Leader* argued that in order to safe-guard their hard-won freedom, black people must have equal protection of the laws, and black men must have the right to vote. The federal government eventually granted these rights through the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Despite these gains, the incessant racial violence in the South continued to curtail freedpeople’s ability to act on these rights.

In 1868, the *Christian Recorder*, an African-American newspaper in Philadelphia, forecasted that the massacres that continued to ravage the South would eventually rouse the nation to action. In the wake of the Memphis Riot, the New Orleans Riot, and the Camilla Massacre in Georgia, the *Recorder* lambasted the Republican Party for its inaction towards protecting African Americans in the South. “A few more Camilla’s and massacres in New Orleans,” the *Recorder* predicted, “will serve the faintest heart, among the leaders of the party to a stern sense of duty.”⁴⁴ By drawing on the memory of the bloody massacre at New Orleans, and adding the Camilla Riot to the ever-growing list of outrages, the *Recorder* anticipated that eventually the numbers of dead African Americans would be too much for the Republican Party to ignore. Just as black witnesses hoped that they could spur the federal government to provide additional protection for freedpeople by marshaling the corpses of the dead in their testimony, the *Recorder* predicted that the death toll from the inevitable murders that would happen in the future,

⁴³ *South Carolina Leader*, February 24, 1866.

⁴⁴ *Christian Recorder*, November 14, 1868.

would eventually compel the federal government to act on behalf of black Southerners.

In response to the incessant violence in the South, between 1870 and 1871 Congress had enacted sweeping legislation with the passage of the Enforcement Acts and the Ku Klux Klan Act. Combined, these acts provided additional federal protection for African Americans who attempted to exercise their rights under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and deemed violence committed to impinge on civil and political rights to be a federal crime, rather than an offense punishable by the states. In 1870 Congress also established the Department of Justice to help facilitate execution of the acts. The Department of Justice issued reports on crime and paramilitary groups in the South. These reports eventually led Congress to establish the Joint Select Committee in 1871 which investigated the “Condition of Affairs of the Late Insurrectionary States,” by taking testimony of both black and white Southerners.⁴⁵

Despite this host of legislation and investigations, in January 1873, just two years after the acts’ passage, the *Weekly Louisianian* reported that Democratic newspapers in the South declared “satisfaction that so many inoffensive and unresisting colored men have been sacrificed.” In its reporting, the *Louisianian* mirrored the ways in which African-American deponents crafted a narrative of blameless black victims struck down by vengeful white Southerners in their testimony. The *Louisianian* implored the federal government to take additional measures to safe-guard black Southerners by insisting “people of America, having emancipated and enfranchised us, we now ask you to protect us in the rights that you have conferred upon us, by making us your fellow

⁴⁵ Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me*, 34.

citizens”⁴⁶ The *Louisianian* made clear that despite the enhanced power of the federal government, these murdering bands of white Southerners continued to deny African Americans the rights and liberties they were entitled to as citizens of the United States.

By highlighting the innocence of African-American victims and the peaceful response of survivors, the black editors crafted a counter-narrative to that which was propagated by the Democratic press about the causes of racial massacres in the South. In doing so, the black press, like the African Americans who provided evidence to federal authorities, turned the victims of massacres and those who stoically endured the loss of loved ones and friends, into martyrs for the cause of civil and political rights. In 1874, for example, the editor of the *Louisianian* emphasized the guiltlessness of murdered African-American men and women, and the peaceful reaction of blacks in the aftermath of the bloodshed. “We have been wronged, outraged, and massacred by the whites, without cause or provocation, until the air is heavy with our sighs, and the waters of Louisiana are reddened with our blood; but as citizens, we cannot retaliate, and as Christians we bear our afflictions as becomes our faith,” the *Louisianian* noted.⁴⁷ The martyrdom of black victims of racial violence reported in the columns of black newspapers became a powerful icon for African-American leaders to draw on in staking additional claims for

⁴⁶ *Weekly Louisianian*, January 11, 1873. The *New National Era* published similar editorials that highlighted the vast number of dead and their innocence. The pseudonymous “Touissant,” for example, bemoaned that despite the Enforcement and Klan Acts, violence continued to inundate the South. “Instance the cold-blooded massacres all over the South. Bands of assassins roaming over the country shooting, hanging, whipping, maiming, and the State and Federal authorities standing by, if not powerless, at least unwilling to interpose, for fear of offending those whom they otherwise would conciliate,” Touissant thundered. *New National Era*, November 20, 1873.

⁴⁷ *Weekly Louisianian*, October 4, 1874. In 1874, the *Weekly Louisianian* also printed an illuminating speech given in Baton Rouge by Theophilus T. Allain, a black Louisiana congressman, characterized African Americans as “patient, forgiving and long suffering” in the face of bloodshed. *Weekly Louisianian*, June 27, 1874.

protection of their new rights.

Drawing on the history of death and violence that blacks had endured in slavery and freedom, African-American newspapers protested their unjust treatment at the hands of white Southerners. In May 1873, William H. Croghan, a free man of color in South Carolina, wrote to the *New National Era* in Washington, D.C and harnessed the powerful memory of the violence of slavery and emancipation as he called on the federal government to offer protection to its African-American citizens.⁴⁸ “He began by reminding readers of the Colfax Massacre and its consequences on black families, stating “by the hands of the *gallant* sons of the sunny South, an hundred human beings were shot down without mercy, and unspeakable anguish and affliction sent to the hearts and homes of many more.” After recounting the myriad instances of violence inflicted on African Americans from slavery to Reconstruction, he demanded that the federal government act to ensure the safety of black Southerners. “Ought not the Government, then, to take some steps for the safety of him whom it hath made a citizen? Surely, if law is not yet supreme in these United States, it is full time that it should be, so that the American citizen, whether in Maine or Texas, might be able to feel as safe under that law...”⁴⁹ Through the dead, the black press thus staked claims to rights for the living.

Underscoring the martyrdom of African Americans was just one tactic that the black press employed in seeking protection and rights from the federal government. In

⁴⁸ William H. Croghan was teacher at Clalflin University in Organgeburg, South Carolina and would eventually go on to teach at Clark University, before becoming the university’s first African American president. Croghan was born in St. Martin’s island in the West Indies in 1841, but eventually came to America to study at Pierce Academy in Massachusetts. W. H. Croghan, *Talks for the Times* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Jennings and Pye, 1896), vii-xxiii.

⁴⁹ *New National Era*, May 15, 1873.

the process of reporting on the massacres ravaging the South and presenting the victims as evidence of the unfulfilled promises of freedom and citizenship, the African-American press developed a new terminology of protest by repeating the names of specific massacres. In doing so, the black press in the North and the South evoked images of the countless numbers of dead. In the early years of Reconstruction, editors used the Memphis and New Orleans Riots to capture the danger, violence, and death threats blacks regularly faced if they attempted to act on their freedom. The *Christian Recorder*, for instance, used the Memphis and New Orleans Riots as touchstones to reference what was happening during the bloody election months of 1868. “The recent outrages in Camilla, Georgia, belong to the Memphis and New Orleans class of riots,” the *Recorder* proclaimed, “being simply an expression of the old rebel and pro-slavery malignity, encouraged by the forbearance of the North and by the open sympathies of the Democratic party.”⁵⁰ The *Recorder*’s linkage of malicious ex-Confederate and slaveholder animosity with the inaction of the North presaged a development in how the African-American press used the deaths of blacks in the South. The black press began to claim that the cause of the notorious slaughters in the South was not solely caused by white Southerners’ enmity, but by national animosity toward African Americans.

The African-American press used the dead to demonstrate that racial rancor was endemic to the nation, not just the South. In 1873, the *Recorder* listed the bloodiest massacres of black people during the past decade in order to demonstrate the sustained violence to which African Americans were subjected. “How numerous are these Negro massacres! Their name is legion Fort Pillow, New Orleans, Memphis, New York, the

⁵⁰ *Christian Recorder*, October 3, 1868.

Mississippi River, *idiom*, and lastly up to *this* date—Colfax. But we know not what of blood and murder a day may bring forth. How truly we may say,--*we are killed all the day long.*” In order to make this point, the *Recorder* did not need to once more drag the bodies of all of the dead before its readers, the names of those massacres loomed large enough.

By referencing slaughters in both the North and the South, the *Recorder* linked the plight of African Americans across the country through their shared experience of death and loss. The article expressed outrage over these deaths, and drew on the long history of death that African Americans had already endured. “[E]very year since liberty came, it has required scores and hundreds, to satisfy the demand upon us for victims to be offered up to a god, infinitely more bloody and relentless than the Roman Saturn, or the Hebrew Moloch, the god, American prejudice.” According to the *Recorder*, as long as prejudice against African Americans remained, the lives of black people, and the fate of the nation were in peril. “We say not, let these Negro massacres cease; but, rather, let American prejudice cease. As long as it lives, both we and the nation are in danger. With its death, will begin the era of good will and a true prosperity.”⁵¹ The *Recorder*’s warning that the nation was in danger as long as racial prejudice remained, called into question the legacy of the Civil War. After the nation had successfully survived the bloody crucible of civil war, the threat to the future of the Union was supposed to have passed. By listing the postwar massacres committed against African Americans, the *Recorder* reminded readers that peace had yet to be secured.

⁵¹ *Christian Recorder*, May 1, 1873.

This shared collective memory of racial violence and death that the black press repeatedly wrote about provided a basis for appeals to inter-sectional racial unity. In September 1874, the *Louisianian* published a speech delivered by P. B. S. Pinchback, a free man of color and the former lieutenant-governor of Louisiana, before an audience in Cincinnati, Ohio. In it, Pinchback made a similar appeal to African Americans across the country to aid the plight of black Southerners. He cautioned his listeners that the “actual condition of affairs in many portions of the South is more appalling than even the heart-sickening reports of riot and cold-blooded murders daily furnished by the Associated [Press] telegrams indicate.” He demanded that the government intervene “in behalf of peace and order, and the protection of the citizen in his political right.” To convince the government to protect African Americans, he described scenes of black men and women grieving over the victims of massacres. Pinchback begged black people to “lay aside their individual and petty differences and consider the common affliction of the race. If the colored people in the South can be killed or ostracized with impunity, then you are not safe here in the North... There must be no North and no South.”⁵² By evoking the image of dead African Americans, a scene that had been described innumerable times in the African-American press and in African-Americans’ testimony, Pinchback attempted to galvanize northern and southern black leaders to demand that the federal government protect black people from further violence and murder.

As Reconstruction lurched onward, the black press continued to deploy the bodies of the dead in its columns as evidence of the unfulfilled promises of Reconstruction. In 1874, the *Weekly Louisianian* echoed Pinchback’s message, remarking on the

⁵² *Weekly Louisianian*, September 12, 1874.

indifference of the Republican party and the dire consequences of hatred and bigotry across the country. Whenever African Americans dared to assert their claims to equality as citizens, “midnight murders by marked assassins or noonday massacres by White League desperadoes” followed. The paper warned that Republicans should not be surprised that in the South African Americans feared that their freedom was “illusory, their citizenship an abstraction and that they [had] only escaped the Juggernaut of American slavery to be crushed between the upper and nether millstones of American freedom—Northern prejudice and Southern hate.”⁵³ The *Louisianian* aptly summed up the perils that African Americans in the South faced as they attempted to capitalize on the opportunities freedom offered. As white Southerners murdered black men and women who sought to exercise their new rights, African-American editors maintained that the inaction of the Republican Party made them complicit in the bloodshed by not doing more to protect southern black people. The corpses that the black press marshaled to support this claim served as evidence of not only Southerners’ recalcitrance to Reconstruction, but of Northerners’ waning support for protecting African Americans’ rights and lives.

Conclusion

The threat of being crushed between the “millstones of American freedom” seemed ominously close for African Americans following the election of President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1877. After his election, Hayes ordered all remaining federal troops in the South back to their barracks, and in doing so signaled an end to the federal

⁵³ *Weekly Louisianian*, January 5, 1875.

government's commitment to reconstructing the South and protecting black lives. Yet, African-American activists continued to use the victims of the racial atrocities during Reconstruction as potent political symbols to insist on federal protection for black Americans.

Throughout Reconstruction, white Southerners had threatened the lives of African Americans in an attempt to subordinate them and return to the antebellum status quo. Yet in this altered world, many freedpeople refused to be intimidated. As a result, death became a site of struggle where African Americans fought to define the limits and meaning of their freedom. This contest over how they lived and how they died was played out before federal authorities in congressional hearings and testimony, and in the pages of African-American newspapers. By refusing to remain silent about the murders and violence they had witnessed, some African Americans attempted to speak for their slain loved ones and demanded justice for the loss of life white Southerners had inflicted. Through appeals to the federal government in their testimony and in the press, black men and women elucidated their own definition of freedom, which went beyond the extension of the suffrage. In their testimony and writing, African Americans insisted that the federal government not only had an obligation to protect African Americans' political rights, but also to assist them in safeguarding their families, their livelihoods, and their communities. Through the discourse of death that African Americans crafted in their testimony and the press, black men and women developed a form of politics and protest that was rooted in their often-times fatal struggle for autonomy over their own lives and those of their family.

The living were not the only ones who shaped this discourse of death, however, as the deceased themselves did not remain entirely silent. The souls of the dead and the victims of racial massacres often lingered among the living and offered wisdom to those who were willing to listen. In the Reconstruction South, visitors from the spirit world frequently informed how living African Americans interpreted and struggled to maintain their freedom.

CHAPTER FOUR

“The Invisible Army”: African-American Religious Life and Death

“Dem days wuz wors’n de war,” Millie Bates recalled in 1936 as she spoke about the violence of Reconstruction in South Carolina. According to Bates, the wanton mortal destruction of black lives following the war made the South a haunted place. “Atter all dat killin’ and burnin’ you know you wuz bliged to see things wid all dem spirits in distress a gwine all over de land...when a man gits killed befo he is done what de good Lawd intended fer him to do, he comes back here and tries to find who done him wrong.”¹ Bates’s belief that the souls of murdered black men and women remained among the living to seek vengeance for their untimely demise offered her a small consolation. Her characterization of the South as a place haunted by black souls taken too soon was a common world-view shared by people of African descent who believed in the “living dead”—ancestors and spirits who continued to interact with the living. In the Reconstruction South, the spirits of these dead offered solace, hope, and guidance as freedpeople and free black people sought to capitalize on the economic, political, and social opportunities freedom engendered.

People of African descent called on the souls of the dead to make sense of the chaotic and revolutionary changes war and emancipation heralded. Through the practice of Conjure and Voodoo, freedpeople attempted to harness the power of spirits in order to seize control of their own fates. They traded folklore about the different ways to predict

¹ George Rawick, ed., *South Carolina Narratives*, vol. 2 of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), 47.

and stave off death. Others communed directly with those in the spirit world during sacred rituals and séances, and sought answers to the difficult questions that faced the living.

The souls of the living were also of foremost importance to freedpeople. With freedom, African Americans zealously sought to provide for their own spiritual welfare to condition their spirit for departure into the afterlife. For Christian African Americans, the act of preparing for the afterlife was a community endeavor. In their houses of worship where they prayed together, repented their sins, and attempted to purify their souls in preparation for eternal life, black church-goers forged one of the enduring pillars of the black community. The pulpits of black churches bred nascent African-American political leaders who preached about the sacred duty of cultivating spiritual well-being, as well as secular issues of justice, equal rights, and citizenship. In the African-American Church, concerns about death and Heaven intermingled with matters of racial equality.

Thus, religion—both established Christian Protestantism, as well as non-institutionalized religions such as Spiritualism, Voodoo, and Conjure—provided tools for navigating the perils and unknowns of a society upended by emancipation. While the spiritual fulfillment and guidance that belief in the afterlife and the world of spirits offered African Americans during Reconstruction was not new, the ends to which they put spiritual matters, and the demands they made on their spiritual beliefs evolved. The nexus of religion and death offered a mechanism for racial advancement through community building and political organization, while simultaneously providing a set of ideological beliefs that imparted solace and wisdom on how to protest racial inequality.

The Church

Christian beliefs about death had provided men and women with a source of comfort while enslaved. Slaves looked to death as a form of deliverance and retribution. Death and everlasting life in Heaven promised black men and women an eternity free from slavery and a reunion with loved ones separated from them by slave sales and mortality.² The deaths of masters also offered slaves a degree of consolation, as they believed the deceased would receive just judgment for the sins they had committed as slave owners. One former slave explained that witnessing his master kill a crying baby was one reason why he believed in a Hell. He explained, “I don’t believe a just God is going to take no such man as that into His kingdom.”³ John Anderson, an escaped slave, summarized how he envisioned the afterlife by noting “[s]ome folk say slaveholders may be good Christians, but I can’t and won’t believe it, nor do I think that a slaveholder can get to heaven...but though I wish to get there myself, I don’t want to have anything more to do with slaveholders either here or in heaven.”⁴ Through their beliefs in the afterlife, slaves developed a method of resistance to their inhumane treatment that promised justice after death.

² Many documented slave songs attest to the freedom that slaves believed was waiting for them in Heaven. For examples, see “Wake Up, Jacob,” “My Father How Long?” “These are All My Father’s Children,” in William Francis Allen, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: A. Simpson, 1867), 65, 93, 101. Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 62.

³ Fisk University, *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-Slaves*, Clifton H. Johnson, ed., (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), 215.

⁴ John Anderson, *The Story of the Life of John Anderson, The Fugitive Slave* (London: W. Tweedie, 1863), 129. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 291-93.

In freedom, these beliefs continued to provide a framework for former slaves to understand the radical changes the Civil War caused. For many slaves, the Civil War's cataclysmic scale of death served as evidence of the sin of slavery and God's desire to deliver them into freedom. After having helplessly watched her master savagely beat her daughter, Aunt Aggy, a slave on a Virginia plantation, envisioned an apocalyptic day of reckoning akin to a bloody war. "That's a day a-comin'!...I hear de rumblin' ob de chariots! I see de flashin' ob de guns! White folks' blood is a-runnin' on de ground like a river, an' de dead's heaped up dat high!...Oh Lor'! gib me de pleasure ob livin' till dat day, when I shall see white folk shot down like de wolves when dey come hungry out o' de woods!"⁵ For Aunt Aggy and other slaves, their faith in a just afterlife provided them with a wellspring of comfort to cope with the horrors of slavery, and also informed how they initially conceived of their emancipation.

In freedom, freedpeople eagerly seized control over their spiritual lives. Emancipation unleashed a flurry of African-American institution building and at the center of this activity stood the black church. The expansion of African-American churches during Reconstruction occurred primarily within the Baptist Church, which, according to Eric Foner, "formed the largest black organization ever created in this country."⁶ While enslaved, men and women's religious instruction frequently had been

⁵ Mary Livermore, *My Story of the War* (Hartford, Conn.: A. D. Worthington and Company, 1889), 260-61. For historical discussions of how slaves perceived emancipation as a religious experience, see Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 55-80; Matthew Harper, "Emancipation and African American Millennialism," in *Apocalypse and the Millennium in the American Civil War Era*, eds. Ben Wright and Zachary W. Dresser (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 154-174.

⁶ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 92.

under the strict direction of masters and white ministers. If a master had allowed enslaved men and women to attend church, they faced reminders of their subordinate status each time they sat in segregated pews or listened to sermons that proclaimed that God had ordained slavery. After emancipation, black people deserted these segregated churches, and combined their money and resources to construct their own houses of worship.⁷

At the heart of the growth of African-American churches was a concern for the spiritual welfare of individuals, family members, and communities. One former slave explained his participation in the Baptist Church by noting, “I’s tryin’ to live so when de good Lawd calls I’ll be ready to answer wid a clean soul.” Jim Gillard, an ex-slave in Alabama voiced a similar reason for being part of the church when he noted “I b’longs to de church, ‘ca’se if a man dies outter de Ark he is not saved, an’ I wants to be saved.”⁸ Simply put, it was the act of former slaves and free people of color preparing their souls for death that prompted the momentous growth of the African-American church after the Civil War.

In front of their congregations, black ministers did their part to prepare their congregants for death by preaching about the centrality of death to spiritual immortality. Joseph Baysmore, a former slave and the minister of the first black Baptist church in Weldon, North Carolina, proclaimed to his followers that Jesus’s “love and mercy is deeper than the depth of death, and his arms are extended and he saith believe in me and

⁷ Armstead L. Robinson, “Plans Dat Comes From God: Institution Building and the Emergence of Black Leadership in Reconstruction Memphis,” in *Toward a New South? Studies in Post-Civil War Southern Communities*, eds. Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 73; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 202-84.

⁸ George Rawick, ed., *Alabama Narratives*, vol. 6 of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Company), 66, 156.

you shall be saved; although ye are fallen I will catch your soul before it falls through Mercy's last depth.”⁹ Baysmore’s message was illustrative of sermons given across the South by black preachers that linked death and eternal life together. Likewise, Lucius Henry Holsey, a former slave and bishop in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church informed his listeners that “Death is simply a removal from one sphere of being to another, a shuffling off of a coarser and earthly coil, and a flight from a lower to a higher, purer and sublimer altitude in another sphere. It is the heavenly mentality abdicating an earthly throne, and reascending to its high place to be in perfect unison with kindred spirits.”¹⁰ The messages espoused by black ministers such as Baysmore and Holsey built upon slaves’ earlier religious understandings that death promised freedom and eternal salvation in Heaven and a reunion with “kindred spirits.”

In order to fully control their spiritual welfare and gain admittance into Heaven, African Americans believed education was essential. Oppressive state laws had forbid slaves from learning how to read or write. Once free, former bondspeople eagerly sought opportunities to gain literacy.¹¹ A woman who managed to escape to Union-occupied

⁹ Joseph Baysmore, *A Historical Sketch of the First Colored Baptist Church in Weldon, N.C., With the Life and Labor of Elder Joseph Baysmore, with Four Collected Sermons* (Weldon, N.C.: Harrell’s Printing House, 1887), 1-2; Joseph Baysmore, *Falling from Grace, Baptism, and Predestination; Sermons by Elder Joseph Baysmore, of Weldon, N.C. to which is Added his Lecture on Humanity* (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards, Broughton & Co., 1878), 4.

¹⁰ Lucius Henry Holsey, *Autobiography, Sermons, Addresses, and Essays of Bishop L. H. Holsey, D.D.* (Atlanta: Franklin Printing and Publishing Company, 1898), 35. Conversion narratives of former slaves are rife with imagery of spiritual death and eternal salvation as well. For instance, one ex- slave said “When God struck me dead...I was in my house alone, and I declare unto you, when his power struck me I died.” Another former slave recalled, “when I killed dead I saw the devil and the fires of hell.” A freedman recalled giving up and believing he was going to die and surrendered to God. He had visions, and “like I bird I flew away into a world of light with thousands of other images like myself...I knew that I had left my earthly body behind, but where I ever came back to it or not, I do not know.” Fisk University, *God Struck Me Dead*, 59, 73, 92.

¹¹ William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 144-45.

Port Royal, South Carolina, from her master's plantation in Georgia during the war exemplified the ways in which religion, education, and the death were intimately linked. The woman stumbled into town nearly dead, her feet swollen and bleeding, her frame emaciated and frail from the great distance she had traveled to freedom. As she collapsed on the porch of a missionary teacher, she proclaimed, "Thank God I'se foun' freedom at last!...I t'ink, missis, I mus' give up 'fore I git here, but dem people tell me de schoolmissis would help me. An' now I is here, O bressed Massa, I is ready to die ef I kin only larn one t'ing to take wid me w'en I go to de Big Massa."¹² The woman's meager dying wish to be able to learn a solitary thing to prepare her to meet her maker before she passed away was significant. As one of her first actions as a free woman, and possibly her only act, her desire to learn underscored the centrality of education to her spiritual needs and her conception of freedom.

The importance freedpeople placed upon education as an important step in gaining access to Heaven meant that black churches doubled as schoolhouses where men and women learned to read and interpret the Bible. Together, young and old gathered to learn to read and write during Sunday School. Educated black ministers and their wives served as teachers for church members. As one of the first organized black institutions, churches also helped with the logistics of education. Church members raised funds to pay for books, rental fees for schoolrooms, and teachers' salaries.¹³ The organizational

¹² Elizabeth Hyde Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contrabands* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 140-41.

¹³ Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 146-51. It should be noted that while former slaves preferred to have black men and women as their teachers, Northern white missionaries from the American Missionary Association, American Baptist Home Mission Society, Methodist Freedmen's Aid Society, and the American Freedmen's Union Commission were all instrumental in establishing schools and educating freedpeople.

structure of the church provided newly freed African Americans with an essential foundation for acquiring the fundamental skills for political and social development.

As the primary caretakers of their congregations' spiritual security in life and death, African-American ministers were trusted leaders within their communities. As such, black churches produced the first black political leaders of the Reconstruction era and served as seedbeds for political organization and action. Within black churches across the South, African Americans organized Republican rallies and held Union League meetings. As one black minister noted, "A man in this State cannot do his whole duty without as a minister except he looks out for the political interests of his people." Whether they had political ambitions or not, ministers' literacy and education frequently thrust them into leadership roles—something that was lacking among most freedpeople in the early years of Reconstruction. As a result, by the end of Reconstruction over 100 black ministers from the North and the South would serve as state and national legislators.¹⁴

While the black church flourished during Reconstruction with Baptist and Methodist churches growing at unprecedented numbers, some African Americans subscribed to other spiritual beliefs to understand their purpose in life. The Northern missionaries and teachers that came to the South during the war intent on inculcating Christian beliefs in freedpeople frequently attempted to do so by attacking common black methods of worship such as singing, dancing, and shouting. Missionaries and teachers also sought to root out African inherited practices such as Conjure, which they considered to be backward and evil. Understandably, many freedpeople refused to be persuaded by

¹⁴ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 93.

the religious messages white missionaries espoused. For some African Americans, the answers to the pressing questions that emancipation raised, such as economic self-sufficiency, land ownership, and political rights, could not be found within the walls of Protestant churches, and so they sought solutions in the spells of conjurers, the prophecies of oracles, and the communications of the dead at séances.¹⁵

Conjure, Oracles, and Voodoo

Besides evangelical Protestantism, Conjure was the second most pervasive religious force in the lives of African Americans. With the end of slavery, African Americans gained the autonomy to practice their religious beliefs as they saw fit and to publicly embrace portions of their faith that they had hidden while enslaved. White observers fretted over the resulting outpouring of African-American spiritualism in the postwar South. A slaveowner in South Carolina, for instance, lamented that many former slaves whose masters had given their religious instruction “more than ordinary attention” lapsed into “Feticism and *Voodooism*” once free.¹⁶ Southern newspapers reported on the

¹⁵ This chapter seeks to build on recent scholarship that urges scholars to think more expansively on what African-American religion encompasses. It contends that while the Black church has dominated the historiography of African American religion, especially during Reconstruction, there were other noninstitutionalized spiritual beliefs that were just as meaningful and useful to African Americans in mediating their daily lives. In discussing “religion” throughout this chapter, I build on Yvonne Chireau’s work, who notes, “[r]eligion, then, not only pertains to the formal creeds, doctrines, and the theologies of a church-based faith tradition, but includes beliefs that are embedded in the ordinary experiences and the deeply held attitudes, values, and activities of members of a group or community.” Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 4, 125.

¹⁶ Quoted in Charles Joyner, *Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 144.

spread of “crude superstitions” among freed slaves who “[f]ree from the check which was once held over them...have unlimited control over their baser passions, and now and then it bursts out and proves that the worship of their barbaric fathers still runs in the blood of the Americanized negro.”¹⁷

The widespread belief of African Americans in Conjure, however, did not preclude them from believing in Christianity. As Albert Raboteau has explained, African Americans could practice both Christianity and Conjure without believing them to be antithetical to one another. White observers reported that black ministers frequently melded African spiritual beliefs and Christian teachings in their sermons. As one white onlooker noted, “[m]ost of their preachers in this region are nearly as ignorant and superstitious as their flocks, and as the church represents all their ideas of public meeting, and their whole social system turns upon it, they talk freely at their religious gatherings of ‘tricking’ and ‘conjuring’ and tell marvelous tales of the power of those endowed with supernatural gifts.”¹⁸ The syncretic beliefs freedpeople held in Christianity and Conjure provided answers to questions for which one religion alone was simply inadequate. As Raboteau has argued, Conjure “answered purposes which Christianity did not and Christianity answered purposes which conjure did not.”¹⁹

¹⁷ *Nashville Daily American and Union*, November 16, 1866

¹⁸ Quoted in *Black Magic*, 128.

¹⁹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 288. A case from Marion, Mississippi, demonstrates the ways in which Christian religion and Conjure could work hand in hand with one another. A black teacher by the name of Clay, who was a “great light among his race as a teacher among the young in the ‘rudiments,’ and of the old in the knowledge of their social and political rights,” became chronically ill while teaching. He was convinced that the man with whom he had been boarding, Frank Clinton, had conjured him and made him sick. Clay sought the treatment of another conjurer in the town to remove Clinton’s spell. Upon hearing of Clay’s illness, the black community in Marion held a trial before the church and charged Clinton with conjuring Clay. The church found him guilty of the charge and expelled him from the church and from the town. *Clearfield Republican*, December 8, 1868. For further discussion on the syncretism of Christianity and Conjure, see Chireau, *Black Magic*, 11-13, 25-28

Conjure was based on the premise that supernatural forces in the form of spirits had a direct effect on human lives. Conjurers harnessed the power of these spirits when they cast spells that ranged from destroying one's enemies, curing illness, obtaining a love interest, protecting property, finding lost items, and growing crops. Cultivated in the experience of slavery, Conjure had offered slaves a powerful tool of resistance against their enslavement and a means of mediating the oppressive relationship between master and slave.²⁰ In freedom, former bondspeople used Conjure and its associated spirits to facilitate their daily pursuits.

On the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, where Gullah culture and religious beliefs were prevalent among freed slaves, former bondspeople contacted the spirits of their ancestors as they tried to maintain control over their land. Gullah religious beliefs were a *mélange* of Protestantism and African-based practices, including the Christian belief in salvation, and the African beliefs of Conjure and the omnipresence of the living dead.²¹ In January 1866, as federal officers attempted to restore plantation lands to former owners, the freedpeople on the Sea Islands adamantly protested their removal from those lands that they believed to be justly theirs. Erastus Everson, a Freedmen's Bureau agent sent to remove the freedpeople from the islands in January 1866, reported to his superior officer that the people living there used "threatening language" and "have general the idea that the Islands are theirs, and those who are not so sanguine in this, are firm in their declarations, that no one shall prevent them from

²⁰ A great deal of the scholarship on African-American religion and Conjure has been preoccupied with the extent to which African spiritual beliefs "survived" in African-American religious practices. This chapter does not propose to weigh-in on this debate, but rather, asks how former slave used the disparate spiritual beliefs they inherited from their ancestors in navigating freedom. For more on the "survival" of African religious practices in America, see Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 3-92.

²¹ Chireau, *Black Magic*, 67.

occupying and cultivating them, as they see fit.” At the center of this protest to remain on the property were leaders that Everson referred to as “oracles.” “There are men among them,” Everson reported, “who are ‘oracles,’ and as *they* go, so go the whole without stopping to consider.”²² As freedpeople struggled to secure a foothold in land ownership, they put their faith in those who were able to commune with the dead to direct them in their future endeavors.

It was not just men, however, who held leadership roles within the Sea Islands communities as seers. Five months after his previous report about the condition of the Sea Islands, Everson informed his superior officer about an altercation he had with freedpeople on Sea Cloud Plantation. This time, a female oracle was at the center of the controversy. Local freedwomen “derided” Everson after he informed them that they must sign contracts with the owner of the plantation or vacate the land. A mother and a daughter threatened that “they would burn down the house before they would move away.” Everson singled out four women, one of which he referred to as “Mary Ann (the oracle)” for leading the protest.²³ Elsewhere in the South, freedwomen also used their powers to communicate with the dead and in doing so acquired social status within their communities. Maum Katie, for example, was revered by freedpeople on Saint Helena Island, where, according to a white missionary and teacher, she was “a great ‘spiritual

²² Everson reported that when “the former residents of the Islands are spoken of in any manner, and say openly, that none of them, will be permitted to live upon the Islands. They [freedpeople] are not willing to be reasoned with on this subject.” Renee Hayden, Anthony E. Kaye, et al. eds. *Land and Labor, 1866-1867*, series 3, vol. 2, of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 240-41.

²³ Erastus W. Everson to Bvt. Lt. Col. H. W. Smith, May 30, 1866, E-48 1866, South Carolina Assistant Commissioner Registered Letters Received, entry 2922, RG 105 Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, NARA.

mother,' a fortune-teller, or rather prophetess, and a woman of tremendous influence over her spiritual children."²⁴ The Gullah believed that the spirits of their ancestors continued to inhabit the earth, and exerted influence over the living. For these men and women, listening to their ancestors provided them with a source of knowledge and guidance for facing the travails of Reconstruction.²⁵

In the post-emancipation South, where former slaves frequently succumbed to disease, Conjure also provided freedpeople with a source of control and understanding of their own health and that of their family members. Celestia Avery, a former slave in west-central Georgia, repeatedly used Conjure to heal her family and come to terms with the mortal losses she endured after emancipation. In one instance, Avery's cousin's wife had become chronically ill after emancipation. A conjurer came to the couple's home and claimed that the woman had been poisoned by a spell. He promised he would cure her if her husband gave him fifty dollars. According to Avery, the family was shocked to learn

²⁴ Laura M. Towne, *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne, 1862-1884* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1912), 144-45. Other African-American women garnered leadership roles within their communities through their spiritual practices as well. In Nashville, Tennessee, the *Daily Union* reported that the practice of "voodoo" (used as a catch all term for African-American spiritual practices) was widespread among blacks in the South. Specifically, the *Daily Union*, mentioned that there was an African-American woman who claimed that she could see everyone's thoughts and knew their futures. Her abilities had gained her a following and leadership role among African Americans who formed the group called The Angel Band. She was known as the "God Mother" to her followers. *Daily Union and American*, November 16, 1866. For other women, being an oracle or "sorceress" provided a small income. Erastus Everson reported that a freedwoman had given a sorceress two dollars in order to ascertain who had stolen some money from her. Everson asked a superior officer if nothing could be done to prevent sorceresses "from plying their nefarious profession beyond the limits of the city." Erastus W. Everson to Bvt. Lt. Col. H. W. Smith, April 12, 1866, E-42 1866, South Carolina Assistant Commissioner Registered Letters Received, entry 2922, RG 105, NARA. Near Atlanta, Georgia, a freedwoman procured the services of a woman who practiced voodoo in order to get a remedy for the chronic illness from which she was suffering. She believed the illness was the result of a conjuring spell. The practitioner charged her \$3 and gave her a broth to remove the spell. *Star of Pascahoula*, November 13, 1875.

²⁵ For a recent account of how Gullah people, especially women, continue to speak to the dead and seek guidance, see LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory among Gullah/Geechee Women* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013).

that the conjurer had been making her cousin's wife ill by casting nefarious spells, and subsequently tried to make money off of her illness by curing her. By placing the blame for the woman's sickness on the conjurer, the Avery family gained power over their relative's illness and found an effective cure by admonishing the conjurer and preventing him from continuing his spells.²⁶ Through Conjure the Averys and other freedpeople found a way to stave off the ever-present threat of death by drawing on the influence of the spirit world to intervene on their behalf.

Celestia Avery also used her beliefs in Conjure to come to terms with the deeply personal losses she endured during Reconstruction. Decades after the death of two of her children, Avery explained to a Works Progress Administration interviewer the deadly omens she had observed before her children had perished. Avery explained that on the day that one of her fourteen children died, she had first witnessed a dog sliding on its stomach outside of her home, which, according to her, was "a true sign of death." This harbinger proved to be true. That night, Avery recalled, "my baby died and it wuzn't sick at all that day. That's the truth and a sho sign of death."²⁷ Avery blamed herself for the death of one of her other children, who she said died after Avery had cleaned the springs of her bed with a broom, rather than with a brush or a rag. Failing to follow this traditional advice, Avery warned, "sho as you do you see or experience death around you....Sho nuff the same night I lost another child that wuz eight years old."²⁸ The belief

²⁶ George Rawick, ed., *Georgia Narratives*, vol. 12 of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Company), 30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 28-9. The WPA ex-slave interviews are rife with folklore related to death. One former slave, for instance, informed an interviewer "If you have done somebody a terrible wrong, then I believe that person when they die, will appear to you on account of that." He also noted that his mother said that she "see haunts pass her with no heads." Other former slaves gave specific signs to tell when death would

in a supernatural power mediating the world and choosing who lived and died, rather than supposing that happenstance or luck was the cause of her children's deaths, gave order to Avery's life and helped her make sense of death. Moreover, this belief in supernatural powers gave freedpeople like Avery a degree of influence over their destinies. If they followed certain rules and adhered to the wisdom passed down from their ancestors, then they could successfully navigate any perils that arose.

The practice of Voodoo also offered African Americans a means of resolving the difficulties that developed in freedom. White newspapers frequently reported on the practice of "voodoo" by African Americans throughout the South, but they generally used the term as a catchall phrase for a variety of African-inspired spiritual beliefs, including Conjure. Voodoo, however, had a specific connection to southern Louisiana. As Kodi Alphonse Roberts has explained, "Voodoo is a collection of religious and magical practices employed in and around New Orleans. A group of saints, most of whom are recognizable from Roman Catholic and Christian lore, were employed by practitioners along with a group of magical formulas and mystical texts, in order to secure social and economic benefits in the material world via supernatural powers."²⁹ For African-American practitioners in New Orleans, the rituals and spiritual beliefs

come. Alice Bradley noted that "[d]at's one sign dat neber fails, when a dog howls dat certain way somebody is sho' going' to be daid." The screeching of an owl, according to Berry Clay, meant that "death will invariably follow its visit." Marshal Butler also believed that the screeching of an owl meant death, and attributed the death of his uncle to the occurrence. "I do believe the screeching of an owl is a sign of death. I found it to be true. I had an Uncle named Haywood. He stayed at my house and was sick for a month but wasn't so bad off. One night uncle had a relapse and dat same night a screech owl come along and sat on de top of de house and he—I mean the owl—"whoood" three times and next morning uncle got "worsen" and at eleven o'clock he died." "I does believe in signs...If cow lows at house at night death will be 'round de house in short time." Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, 69, 119, 165, 192.

²⁹ Kodi Alphonse Roberts, "The Promise of Power: The Racial, Gender, and Economic Politics of Voodoo in New Orleans, 1881-1940" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2012), 11.

associated with Voodoo provided a source of empowerment for the disenfranchised. Just as adherents to Conjure believed in its healing powers, so too did Voodoo's practitioners rely on charms, spells, and amulets known as *gris gris*, to protect them.³⁰ In order to cure her father's illness, for example, an African-American woman threw her father's pillow into the Mississippi River in order to drown a fetish that she suspected had caused her father to take sick.³¹ In 1870, a freedman brought a case of assault and battery to court after realizing he had been hexed when he discovered two live lizards in his pillow.³² In the midst of death and disease, the spirits of the dead that Voodoo practitioners called on in their intricate rituals granted them power to shape their world and protect themselves and their families.

Through Voodoo practices, African Americans in New Orleans also built a strong, tight-knit community that provided a source of support. A white newspaper correspondent reported that in one ceremony conducted by Marie Laveau, a group of men and women gathered in a room around a cauldron held over a fire. The attendees formed a ring and threw chickens, toads, snakes, roots and other various objects into the pot while singing and dancing and casting charms on the kettle. Following the ceremony, the

³⁰ Jude Thomas May contends that following the Union occupation of New Orleans in 1862, the practice of Voodoo became more widespread in the city, or at least it became more visible to whites. With the upsurge in disease, May argues that black people in the city turned to supernatural explanations and cures for ill-health. While May posits that the increase in Voodoo "provided a 'psychological satisfaction' for those who could not control their own physical lives and who were unable to understand their changed status," Voodoo as with all African American spiritual beliefs was a way for black men and women to understand their new status as free people and to find resolutions for the myriad problems they faced in light of their freedom. Jude Thomas May, "The Medical Care of Blacks in Louisiana during Occupation and Reconstruction, 1862-186: Its Social and Political Background" (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1971), 177.

³¹ *New Orleans Picayune*, July 31, 1886.

³² *New Orleans Times*, June 23, 1870.

men and women entered another room where they enjoyed a large dinner and wine together, after which the “gathering merged from a *voudou* into a simple negro ball.” While the correspondent was not sure of the purpose of the ritual, he surmised “it is probable that some believer either desired to avert calamity from himself, or inflict an injury on an enemy.”³³ Although the intended outcome of the gathering was not apparent, the ceremony was significant for what it represented. Through their shared beliefs in the power of the dead to assist the living, the men and women who joined together and ringed the cauldron formed a communal bond to support one of their members in taking control of their daily life.

Spiritualism

While some men and women of African descent interacted with the dead through charms and rituals, others sought to communicate directly with the spirit world through mediums. Spiritualism had emerged in the United States in upstate New York in the 1850s, but it gained popularity during the Civil War as Americans attempted to make sense of the mounting death toll caused by the Civil War. Antebellum spiritualist practitioners were frequently involved in other northern reform movements of the mid-nineteenth century, such as abolition, women’s rights, and temperance, and spirit messages frequently addressed these issues. Through mediums, Spiritualists received communications from spirits who directed them on how to create a more perfect society on earth. In postwar America, where so many lives had been lost in order to secure the

³³ *Alexandria Gazette*, October 28, 1868.

future of the Union, the dead weighed-in on what they had sacrificed their lives to protect.³⁴

After the Civil War, it seemed as though everyone—both the living and the dead—was focused on how to rebuild the war-torn country to create a stronger, less fallible Union. In the pages of northern spiritualist newspapers, deceased slaves and black soldiers considered the contentious topics of Reconstruction, including racial equality, black suffrage, and President Andrew Johnson’s impeachment. In 1865, Charles Brown, a black soldier who died fighting for his freedom during the war, lambasted Johnson’s conservative Reconstruction policies by noting “I fought for my own liberty and the liberty of my race, and for the Union and the Constitution revised, remodeled,—not as it was.”³⁵ In 1866, William, a slave who died after his master forced him to serve as a servant in the Confederate Army, contended that race should not determine whether a man had the right to vote. “Intelligence,” William instructed, “should stand superior to ignorance; it matters not whether it be under a black skin or a white one.”³⁶

Not surprisingly, Spiritualists had a difficult time making inroads in the South.³⁷

The progressive messages espoused by the deceased about abolition and equality made

³⁴ Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); For more on how spiritualism attracted Americans during the Civil War, see Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 180-87.

³⁵ *Banner of Light*, November 24, 1866.

³⁶ *Banner of Light*, May 12, 1866. Historians of spiritualism have noted that in many white spiritualist publications in the North, the spirits of slaves rarely mentioned the issues of racial brutality and violence that undergirded slavery in the South. A lot of their messages bordered on “minstrel mode,” with slaves waxing nostalgic for their old home on the plantation, but still celebrating their freedom in the spirit world. Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 168-69.

³⁷ Spiritualists speakers in the antebellum South faced threats and violence. In South Carolina and Tennessee, white Southerners threatened to lynch Emma Hardinge Britten, a leading light of the Spiritualist

white Southerners recoil from Spiritualism. Nevertheless, white visitors to the South reported that there were indications that some Southerners, especially free blacks and slaves, did subscribe to spiritualist beliefs. Most likely, these observers had witnessed conjuring rituals. In the old slave quarters of plantations, and in refugee camps, white onlookers reported that some men and women of African descent turned to séances and spirit messages in search of guidance. The Boston-based *Banner of Light*, for instance, stated that in a refugee camp near Memphis some of the black refugees were mediums who could predict the future.³⁸ During a tour through the South, Emma Hardinge, a leading medium from the North, recounted that there were “many excellent mediums” among the enslaved people on Colonel MacCrae’s plantation in Louisiana. She recalled the story of one man, in particular, who would enter trances in which he would communicate with MacCrae’s deceased son. Hardinge noted that the slave was originally from North Carolina, suggesting that perhaps spiritualist practices and mediums among slaves were more widespread throughout the South than simply in Louisiana and

movement. The Alabama state legislature even passed a statute prohibiting the practice of spiritualism. Any one caught breaking the law would have to pay a \$500 fine. Caryn Cosseé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 197.

³⁸ A Wisconsin soldier stationed at a contraband camp near Memphis reported that some of the refugees were mediums. He recalled a spiritual conversation he had with an older black man who had spoken with the Lord about the coming of the war. The soldier also spoke to another freed slave who said that he saw a black soldier and was sure that he would die soon, which he later did. *Banner of Light*, August 20, 1864. The *Banner* also reported on a black private in the 55th Massachusetts named Nicholas Said who had been born in Africa, but was enslaved in America. He had initially been raised as a Muslim, but converted to spiritualism later in life. *Banner of Light*, September 21, 1867. For more on Said, see his autobiography, Nicholas Said, *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said, a Native of Bournou, Eastern Soudan, Central Africa* (Memphis: Shotwell & Co., 1873). In Washington, D.C., spiritualism also gained a small foothold among African Americans. The *Banner of Light* reported that at their summer meetings nearly half of the attendees were blacks who were curious about spiritualism. *Banner of Light*, August 4, 1866, August 25, 1866.

Tennessee, two states that spiritualists considered to be hotbeds of African-American spiritualism.³⁹

The southern capitol of spiritualism, however, was New Orleans. In the parlors of elite Afro-Creole men's homes, free men of color and white spiritualists encircled tables and listened to the messages of the deceased. Historians have characterized Afro-Creoles in Louisiana as free people of African descent, who were educated, wealthy Francophones, who identified with French culture. Before the war, Afro-Creoles enjoyed a privileged status in New Orleans society, occupying a position between that of free whites and enslaved blacks. This liminal status enabled them to cultivate a vibrant spiritualist enclave. Throughout the city, white and black Creoles interacted with one another when they "attended plays, cockfights, and circuses together, albeit on a segregated basis."⁴⁰ But they also intermingled at séance tables. J. B. Valmour, a black Creole and blacksmith, for instance, was a leading medium in the Crescent City, and was known as a powerful healer and leader of interracial séances.⁴¹

Beginning in 1857, a spiritualist circle emerged in New Orleans under the guidance of Afro-Creole mediums Valmour, Louise, François Dubuclet, and Henri Louis Rey.⁴² Rey became the leader of the *Cercle Harmonique*, one of the most prolific

³⁹ Emma Hardinge Britten, *The Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten* (London: John Heywood, 1900), 145-47. Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 181; Cox, *Body and Soul*, 167-9.

⁴⁰ Michael A. Ross, *The Great New Orleans Kidnapping Case: Race, Law, and Justice in the Reconstruction Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 28.

⁴¹ White authorities did not turn a blind-eye to these meetings. In 1858, for example, police dismissed a séance meeting at Valmour's home under the suspicion that they were practicing Voodoo. Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism*, 213, 187.

⁴² Emily Suzanne Clark, "A Luminous Brotherhood: Afro-Creole Spiritualism in Nineteenth Century New Orleans" (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2014), 64.

Southern spiritualist circles of the Civil War era. Like many participants in the circle, Rey came from a wealthy influential black Creole family.⁴³ After the death of his father, he converted to Spiritualism, and began hosting séances in his home in the Faubourg Tremé. On Mondays and Fridays, approximately seven members gathered around Rey's table to commune with the spirit world. The attendees were some of the most prominent Afro-Creoles in New Orleans, including poets, writers, activists, and educators.⁴⁴ Séance participants would watch as the mediums communed with the spirits and then painstakingly recorded their messages in séance registers.⁴⁵ The souls that communicated with Rey's circle offered advice and guidance for perfecting the living world. Their communications centered on humanitarianism, equality, universal brotherhood, and political republicanism, which spiritualists and spirits collectively referred to as "The Idea."⁴⁶ While The Idea was already instituted in the spirit world, the ultimate goal of

⁴³ Henri Louis Rey became disenchanted with the Catholic Church after his father's death. His mother, under the guidance of a priest squandered the family's money on a lavish funeral for her husband. Rey considered this Anti-Catholic sentiment was common among Spiritualists across the country, who believed that the hierarchical nature of the Church was incongruous with the Idea. New Orleans Afro-Creole spiritualists also recorded anti-Catholic messages from their spirit guides, some of which were leveled directly against the local archdiocese that had supported the Confederacy during the war. Clark, "A Luminous Brotherhood," 115.

⁴⁴ Séance attendees included Rey's brother, Octave Rey; his wife and two sisters; Nelson Debrosses, a gifted healer; and Charles Veque and Francois Estéve who were "community activists." The group also included officials and instructors from the Couvent school, with which Rey's father had been involved. The Couvent school had been established in 1848 as a free school for orphans of color in the city. Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism*, 123-26, 216-17; Clark, "A Luminous Brotherhood," 65.

⁴⁵ Most of the messages the circle received were recorded in French, leading many historians to surmise that the spiritualist circle was composed primarily of Afro-Creoles. There are a few messages recorded in English, however, but these were from American spirits such as John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, and Daniel Webster. Occasionally, however, these English-speaking spirits' messages were recorded in French.

⁴⁶ For more on "The Idea" and how it structured Afro-Creole Spiritualism, see Clark, "A Luminous Brotherhood."

Spiritualism and communing with the dead was to establish the principles of The Idea on earth.

For Afro-Creoles living in New Orleans, Spiritualism provided an outlet to voice the frustrations they bore about racial inequality. The idea that death enabled men and women to leave their raced body on earth and ascend to a spiritual world free of racial distinctions resonated with Afro-Creoles.⁴⁷ The concept of racial egalitarianism in the afterlife offered black spiritualists the opportunity to envision a more just and equal society on earth. One spirit guide, for instance, harangued inequality by noting “By what rights, Oh men, do you dominate your brother? By what rights do you chain him?...Each man in his sphere wants to dominate and yet he admits that God has created us all equal.”⁴⁸ The egalitarian philosophy these spirits championed became especially important following emancipation, as the three-tiered racial society of New Orleans collapsed into a black and white binary. Emancipation effectively destroyed the elevated status Afro-Creoles had enjoyed prior to the war. In Louisiana, as in the rest of the country, the status of “enslaved” and “free” no longer dictated one’s rank in society. Instead, race became the ultimate qualifier for social, political, and economic rights. Rey, his fellow Afro-Creole spiritualists, and the spirits they communicated with believed

⁴⁷ As free men of African descent, men like Rey existed in an in-between status of enslaved and free. While state laws allowed free blacks certain rights denied to slaves such as the right to be educated, own property, enter into contracts, and testify in court, specific laws also circumscribed their rights and legally enshrined white supremacy. Over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, Louisiana passed several laws that restricted the rights of free blacks. Afro-Creoles could not vote or sit on juries. They could be arrested for insulting a white person or presuming to be equal to a white person. As sectional tensions escalated before the Civil War, the legislature passed additional laws that mandated that all free persons of color carry papers that attested to their free status. Moreover, any person of color could face hard labor if they were caught writing or publishing any words that might incite a slave uprising. Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism*, 74-79, 136.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism*, 220.

Reconstruction to be an unprecedented opportunity to advance the principles of The Idea on earth, and linked their struggle to that of the freed slaves as they attempted to secure full civil rights and racial equality.

More than any other messages, the frequent communications of John Brown, the zealous abolitionist, demonstrated the altered social status of Afro-Creoles in New Orleans and their linked fate with freedpeople. Rey received and recorded several messages from Brown throughout Reconstruction that urged his listeners to sympathize with the plight of the formerly enslaved. By recording these messages, Rey encouraged the elite Afro-Creoles in his midst to identify with freedpeople as the two groups attempted to navigate New Orleans' new racially bifurcated society. Through Brown's spirit, Rey chronicled the sufferings that African Americans had endured under slavery. "Human beings were being put to the level of brutes; black brothers were attached to the plow, as beasts of burden; the mud was forcibly tilled by them, in order to make it yield a produce benefiting their executioners who, far from paying them any gratitude for their fruitful labor, were riveting still more their chains." By such means, Brown's spirit celebrated emancipation as evidence of the advance of progress, and prophesized the impending success of free blacks who would harness their collective power to topple white supremacy. "The Free Black will crush thee under his heel; and Liberty will make shine, on its banner, these words in letters of fire: Equality for all!...The Republic is marching on, with gigantic steps towards the Union of the Races. You may stifle your hatred; for it shall not have the force to stop the progress of the citizen you once compelled to bend under your lashes."⁴⁹ By recording Brown's messages that spoke

⁴⁹ René Grandjean Collection, University of New Orleans, Earl K. Long Library Special Collections; 85-66, February 8, 1872. Message from John Brown.

defiantly and directly to white Southerners, the mediums within the *Cercle Harmonique* were able to voice their own hopes for Reconstruction and elucidate their own understanding of their new position within Southern society.

As Afro-Creole spiritualists attempted to implement the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity in their society, they also turned to the founders of the country to provide them with assurances for the future. Some of America's greatest statesmen communed with the *Cercle Harmonique*, including the slave-holding father of America, George Washington. On the Fourth of July in 1872, the spirit of Washington promised that racial equality would eventually come to fruition when he announced "the black page has given way for the one of Emancipation... The black hand has saved the Republic; the white hand will shake the black one. Long live Fraternity! Liberty will not be a vain word; Fraternity will come; and Equality will appear accompanied by Justice!"⁵⁰ One of the architects of the Compromise of 1850, Henry Clay offered a similarly optimistic prediction about the equality of all men during a séance in 1870, as he noted "no one can prevent the elevation of the Black, and his ascension to the greatest honorary posts in the county." Clay believed that this must come to pass because the black man had "welded together the different parts of the Union with his blood which has been spilt in profusion. His moral support to the Republic makes his weight in the scale."⁵¹ The spirit of Abraham Lincoln echoed Washington and Clay when he predicted in 1874 that "there will be triumph for the martyrs, and there will be shame for the oppressors" who had attempted to "crush out the germ of civil rights for the dark skinned children." Lincoln

⁵⁰ Grandjean collection, 85-66, July 4, 1871. Message from George Washington.

⁵¹ Grandjean collection, 85-66, July 16, 1870. Message from Henry Clay.

promised the *Cercle Harmonique* that “[y]ou cannot delay the triumph of justice. There will be for the down trodden their rights proclaimed and upheld in spite of all!”⁵² The communication of such martyrs and statesmen with the *Cercle Harmonique* provided the group with renewed zeal to continue to advocate for equal rights for Afro-Creoles and freedpeople.

While the prophecies of the spirits included the lofty ideals of equality, justice, and freedom, Lincoln’s demand for civil rights for blacks also evidenced that the spirits were concerned with the practical measures needed to implement these principles. Some visitors from the other side, for instance, spoke about the necessity of universal public education. In these ways, the spirits that spoke through Rey and his circle echoed the demands made by freedpeople who longed to be able to learn how to read and write. The spirit of William Meadows, an African-American Republican and delegate to the 1868 Louisiana state constitutional convention who was murdered by white men that same year, made this point clear when he assured the circle that “[y]ou can put off the hour, but cannot stop it. Mixed schools will come, the sooner the better for you.” Eugene Sue, a French novelist, spoke from the spirit world and made this demand especially clear when he stated, “[t]he most important question is that of free and gratuitous schools for all, this not applying only to primary schools...”⁵³

The emphasis that the spirits placed on education assured séance attendees during an increasingly ominous time. By 1871 when Sue spoke, Democrats had resumed control of state governments in Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina, and Republicans in

⁵² Grandjean collection, 85-66, September 4, 1874. Message from Lincoln.

⁵³ Grandjean collection, 85-67, June 10, 1867. Message from Eugene Sue.

Georgia were on the brink of losing control of the state legislature. Republican state governments had been instrumental in passing legislation guaranteeing free state-funded education, and in the case of Louisiana, integrated public schools. The return of state governments to Democratic control threatened this agenda, as state legislatures passed amendments prohibiting integrated public education.⁵⁴ Beyond the threat Democrats posed to achieving public education, the Spiritualists also had reason to fear the bloody reprisals of white Southerners against those working to advance the cause of liberty and equal rights.

In the wake of bloody massacres in Louisiana beginning in 1866, people of African descent worried that the tide of Reconstruction was turning in favor of white Southern Democrats. The spirits that visited Rey's séances thereafter offered consolation by reminding the *Cercle Harmonique* that martyrdom was central to advancing the realization of The Idea. The victims of the 1866 New Orleans massacre frequently visited Rey's séance table and provided insight into the ways in which their deaths had advanced the goal of equality. Victor Lacroix, an Afro-Creole leader who perished in the New Orleans Massacre assured the circle that his death and those of the other "innocents" had not been without purpose. "Your blood...that of the martyrs has not been shed in vain. Because of the tragedy Congress had responded to the atrocity."⁵⁵ John Henderson,

⁵⁴ Henri Louis Rey was an outspoken proponent of education, and came from a family dedicated to education. Between 1868 and 1869, as the Chairman on the Committee on Education in the Louisiana legislature, Rey spearheaded a movement to integrate Louisiana's public schools in accordance with the state's new constitution. Integration of schools had been delayed by Governor Henry Clay Warmoth and district school boards' reluctance to integrate schools. In 1870, with the passage of a legislative act, the old school district boards were dissolved, and integrated public schools became a reality. Melissa Daggett, "Henry Louis Rey, Spiritualism, and Creoles of Color in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans" (Master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 2009), 40.

⁵⁵ Grandjean collection, 85-31, February 21, 1869, quoted in Emily Suzanne Clark, "A Luminous Brotherhood," 245.

another victim of the massacre who had been “killed as a mad dog by a furious mob” came forward to proclaim “the 30th of July has been satisfied by our blood as the day of Independence of the Black men of Louisiana!” Henderson provided séance-goers with motivation to continue their struggle for equality and civil rights and told his listeners that those who had died to secure these rights had formed an “invisible army,” that “will help you and will carry the Day, and Victory will be inscribed upon your Banner, oh! Friends!”⁵⁶ Through their communications, the martyrs of the New Orleans Massacre reminded the circle that death did not mean the end of fighting for The Idea. In the spirit world, the dead continued the struggle for the principles of racial equality for which they had sacrificed their lives.

In the midst of repeated reports of the political assassinations and midnight murders of black Republicans across the South, the martyrs that visited the *Cercle Harmonique* urged the circle to hold fast to their belief in The Idea. William R. Meadows, a freedman and leading black Republican politician who was murdered by unknown white men in Claiborne Parish, Louisiana, contacted Rey’s spiritual circle two years after his death in 1870. He assured the circle that despite the political assassinations of Republican leaders “progress cannot be stopped.” He spoke to the white men who refused to accept black political rights:

You murdered me! For principles I died, for principles my
spirit will be among those battling for intellectual and
political advancement. You may use the weapon, the
revolver, you may seek to stop us in killing us like mad

⁵⁶ Grandjean collection, 85-34, November 18, 1871. Message from John Henderson.

dogs, we will rise again men, children of the same
 Father...as the invisible army of true Republicanism we
 shall succeed and victory will crown our efforts to safe
 guard your interests and render justice to all.⁵⁷

Recording and reading the messages of martyrs like Meadows provided members of the *Cercle Harmonique* with a mechanism to give voice to their own anger, frustration, and fear about the trajectory of Reconstruction. By hearing from their murdered contemporaries about their continued struggle for racial equality in the afterlife, the members of the circle ultimately could feel at ease that the losses they continued to endure were not in vain.

The dead men who communicated with Rey were especially useful in providing solace following the many outbreaks of violence in New Orleans that threatened to topple the state Republican government. In 1874 during the Battle of Liberty Place, the Crescent City White League, a white paramilitary group, unsuccessfully staged a coup intent on overthrowing the Republican government. The bloodshed of the battle was ominous. One spirit voiced the trepidation many séance-goers likely felt as he noted that “[t]he blood shed yesterday, demonstrates how much hatred there is in the heart of those men who seek to enthrall their brothers!” Yet Rey and his comrades found comfort in the prescience of the dead. “But, in truth, and with the firmness of conviction of those who

⁵⁷ Grandjean collection, 85-32, November 9, 1870. Message from W. R. Meadows. Many other spirits also brought similar messages of the usefulness of martyrs’ blood to the progression of the Idea. On March 25, 1869, for example, Laménais, a priest who left the Catholic church in the early 19th century, noted that martyrdom only advanced the cause of progress. He pointed to the deaths of Jesus and Abraham Lincoln as “two facts which prove that the blood of the martyrs do not arrest the march of Progress; that, on the contrary, the true and beautiful principle always triumphs, and the blood thus shed is the beneficial dew which feeds, which fructifies.” Grandjean collection, 85-66, March 25, 1869.

see far ahead and are assured of the realization, I tell you that you will see the civil rights of each one proclaimed, and they will be maintained! Fear nothing,” the spirit encouraged.⁵⁸ In these many moments of turmoil, where the hopes of Rey and his followers seemed to be in peril, the spirit guides offered consolation and motivation to not lose faith.

In 1877, as the end of political Reconstruction in Louisiana loomed, the martyrs of Reconstruction continued to provide assurances of the eventual achievement of The Idea. A.P. Dostie, a victim of the 1866 New Orleans Massacre and a frequent communicant with the circle, returned to the séance table to inform Rey that while Democrats might not receive justice on earth, the spirit world was waiting to deliver their reckoning. On the eleventh anniversary of the July 30 massacre, Dostie’s spirit appeared to remind his listeners that in the afterlife he was still “battling” all those who were “against human rights!” and warned that all “will be called to account for your wrong deeds.”⁵⁹ Yet this message also marked a change in the tone of the communications of the spirits. Dostie no longer urged Rey to be patient as The Idea advanced or to hope for civil rights on earth. Instead, the *Cercle Harmonique* would have to be content in knowing that those intent on reestablishing white supremacy eventually would atone for their misdeeds in the spirit world.

⁵⁸ Grandjean collection, 85-67, September 15, 1874. Message from V. de Paul. Another spirit also offered a source of comfort following the battle by noting that “Sumner, Lincoln and other workers who, being more enlightened and advanced here, devote themselves to the work of liberating the Great Republic from its shameful stain... Forward, by Right and Truth, oh, my children! We are watching over you! Have confidence in us.” Grandjean collection, 85-67, September 20, 1874. Message from Paul Lacroix.

⁵⁹ Grandjean collection. 85-63, July 30, 1877. Message from A. Dostie.

The apparent resignation of the *Cercle Harmonique* to the failure of The Idea to come to fruition in the living world became evident after 1876 as attendance at Rey's meetings diminished. Some members had passed away and continued to visit the circle from the afterlife, but for those former members who were still living, the séance registers leave few clues as to why members stopped coming to the circle. Most likely they became disenchanted with Spiritualism and its unfulfilled promises of equality, fraternity, and liberty for all. The beginning of Reconstruction had appeared to Afro-Creoles as the opportune moment to eradicate racial inequality. By 1877, the year that Democrats seized control of the Louisiana state government, the prospects for enacting further legislation to advance The Idea seemed bleak. When political Reconstruction ended in Louisiana, so too did Rey's recorded spirit communications. On November 24, 1877, Rey transcribed a final message in his register from "Friend!" who pledged to continue to provide support and guidance to Rey in the coming years: "Ah! Today, how your heart is full of hope, confidence, and assurance of ultimate success. Remember that we are with you, always."⁶⁰ This message from Rey's "friend" promising eternal support and guidance for his cause is a message that applied to many African-American endeavors to seek racial equality and justice in the years following emancipation. As Southern states fell into the hands of Jim Crow regimes, African Americans clung to their spiritual beliefs as a means of providing support and solace for the deaths inflicted by white Southerners in their campaign to reinstitute white supremacy.

⁶⁰ Emily Suzanne Clarke and Melissa Daggett point to the more than coincidental ending of political Reconstruction in Louisiana and Rey's recorded séances as possible proof that Rey also lost faith in spiritualism. Clark, "A Luminous Brotherhood," 268; Daggett, "Henry Louis Rey," 59.

Conclusion

In freedom, African Americans zealously crafted meaningful spiritual lives for themselves and their families. The religious practices that emerged in church pews and around séance tables and cauldrons evinced African-Americans' new status as free people. An investigation into the preoccupation of African Americans with the afterlife in the South during Reconstruction reveals the centrality of death to African-American religious life, and community and political formation. As black men and women struggled to come to terms with their altered status in the South, death and the dead offered answers to some of the most pressing questions they faced.

Through Christianity, Conjure, Voodoo, and Spiritualism, African Americans employed a host of religious practices that spoke directly to their daily needs and aspirations. From offering cures for illness, to providing support for land ownership, and addressing broader concerns over racial equality, civil rights, and religious autonomy, African-American spiritual beliefs and their varied concerns about death and the dead provided black men and women with mechanisms for shaping their own lives and their communities. In establishing new black churches to tend to their spiritual wellbeing, African Americans erected one of the central pillars of the black community. From communing with the spirits in their Conjure and Voodoo ceremonies, black men and women gained valuable remedies to the small and large issues they encountered in their daily lives. Finally, direct communication with the spirits of the dead during séances offered Afro-Creoles in New Orleans guidance and assurance as they plotted a path to achieving racial equality on earth during the optimistic years of Reconstruction.

The dead made frequent visits among the living during Reconstruction, but black men and women also ventured into the spaces of the dead. While religious autonomy was one of the foremost ways in which black men and women asserted their freedom, providing fitting final resting places for their loved ones and leaders through the establishment of African-American cemeteries was equally important. Just as religious practices provided opportunities for African Americans to commune with the spirits and gain insights into the route forward in freedom, so too did African-American cemeteries. In these cities of the dead, black men and women memorialized their deceased loved ones and communally mourned and protested the deaths of family and friends at the hands of white Southerners.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Let’s Go to Buryin’”: African-American Civilian Funerals and Cemeteries in the Reconstruction South

A crowd of over 500 angry African Americans stood along the streets of Barnwell, South Carolina, on a winter day in 1889. Black women yelled with rage, waving their arms wildly and shouting “that God should burn Barnwell to the ground.” The men and women who gathered in the street had come to this town to show their solidarity with the victims of the most recent racial massacre in the state; a massacre in which white South Carolinians had lynched eight African-American men accused of murdering a landlord and the son of a plantation owner. The angry shouts rising from the crowd filled the air as a procession bearing the coffins of two of the lynched black men, Ripley Johnson and Mitchell Adams, made its way through town to the African-American cemetery for burial.¹ This funeral served as an opportunity to mobilize African-American civilians to protest against racial inequality and injustice. In the wake of unspeakable violence, in which African Americans saw firsthand the lengths to which white Southerners were willing to go to enforce white supremacy, burial of the martyred dead provided an outlet for the indelible grief, rage, and fear felt by black people living in the Jim Crow South. The use of funerals and burials as occasions for communal mourning and of protest was not a new development, of course, but rather methods that African Americans had forged out of necessity during slavery, and that had taken on a new significance in response to the ubiquity of death in the postwar South.

¹ Terence Finnegan, *A Deed So Accursed: Lynching in Mississippi and South Carolina, 1881-1940* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 68-9.

During slavery, death and burial had had political ramifications. Through burials, slaves from adjoining plantations had forged community networks, which later became the foundation for political action in freedom. In both slavery and freedom, burials served as a means of combatting the subordinate status of enslaved and freedpeople. While enslaved, burials had been a source of solace and hope for African Americans that freedom would eventually arrive, even if it could only be achieved through death. In freedom, spaces of death—funerals and cemeteries—became sites of political mobilization, memorialization, and protest.

Affirming these bonds in slavery and freedom had significant political implications. During the war, slaves had relied on their closest relationships and networks of kith and kin to provide news of the progress of the war, and to perhaps plan their own escape.² In freedom, these bonds forged in slavery were especially important in providing the building blocks for political action as formerly enslaved men and women took their first steps into freedom.³ For African Americans who had been free before the war, the Reconstruction era provided increased opportunities for the growth and development of

² Susan Eva O'Donovan, "Mapping Freedom's Terrain: The Political and Productive Landscapes of Wilmington, North Carolina," in *After Slavery: Race, Labor, and Citizenship in the Reconstruction South*, ed. Bruce Baker and Brian Kelly (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 190; Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 166-70, 172-73; Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 56-61.

³ O'Donovan, "Mapping Freedom's Terrain," 191. O'Donovan argues that the deep rooted communities that Wilmington, North Carolina's blacks established before the war gave them a powerful tool in freedom that could "serve them as both shield and sword in a long-fought struggle over freedom's meanings." *Ibid.*, 181. Hahn also argues for the centrality of kinship to the first political steps freedpeople took, noting that "African Americans built their new political communities—as they had done under slavery—from many of the basic materials of everyday life: from the ties and obligations of kinship..." enslaved people's attempts to have their marriages legally recognized and to have their families housed under one roof and provide for them, may be, according to Hahn, "regarded as among the first political acts that simultaneously rejected the legacy of enslavement and celebrated the vitals of freedom." Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet*, 166-70.

black institutions and meeting places, including cemeteries. Funerals and cemeteries enabled free people of color and freedpeople to provide for their deceased loved ones in more fitting and comprehensive ways than had been possible during slavery. The growth of African-American civilian cemeteries organized and run by blacks signaled a shift in power relations in the South. In a society in the midst of a racial revolution, African Americans harnessed the power of death and mortuary politics in order to seize control of their own lives and burials. Black-owned and operated cemeteries became powerful places of security, community building, political organization, and memorialization.

Dying Enslaved

In dense woods and in slave burial grounds on their masters' land, in hushed, secretive tones, and with loud songs and beating drums, enslaved people gathered from scattered plantations to usher their friends and family into the next world. The ways in which slaves were able to bury their dead varied greatly depending on their master and the plantation on which they were enslaved. In general, slave burials were hastily done with rudimentary supplies. "Dem coffins sho'wuz mournful lookin' things," one enslaved man recalled, "made out of pine boa'ds an' painted wid lampblack; dey wuz blacks de night."⁴ The evening after the death, following a full day of labor, some of the field-hands would go to the plantation burial ground and dig a grave. Once they finished, slaves loaded the body onto an oxcart and carried it to the graveyard for burial. It would sometimes be months before slaves were able to hold proper funeral services over the

⁴ George Rawick, ed., *Georgia Narratives*, vol. 12 of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Company), 110-11.

body. As one slave explained, this was to ensure that enslaved people from adjoining plantations could attend. “Dey waited ‘bout two months sometimes before dey preached de fun’ral sermon,” former slave William Cofer recalled. He clarified that the “reason dey had slave funerals so long after de burial wuz to have ‘em on Sunday or some other time when de crops had been laid by so de other slaves could be on hand.”⁵ The importance of funerals to bondspeople was evidenced in their commitment to attending them despite these additional hardships. After putting in a day of grueling labor, slaves would travel at night to a nearby plantation, or give up Sundays—the one day on which they were not beholden to their masters’ tasks—in order to attend the funerals of their friends and family.

⁵ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, 207.



Fig. 5.1. A black preacher presides over the funeral of a slave in the plantation burial ground as the master and mistress watch from a distance. *Plantation Burial*, John Antrobus, 1860. Courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection.

On some plantations, masters wielded their power by denying their slaves the opportunity to hold ceremonies over the dead. For many slaves the inability to tend to their loved ones, and the simple ways in which masters disposed of deceased bondspeople served as a final bitter marker of the injustice and domination their owners subjected them to during their enslavement.⁶ Rachel Adams, a former slave from Georgia, recalled years later, “I didn’t know nothin’ ‘bout what a funeral was dem days.

⁶ In examining the monetary value of slaves in life and death, Daina Ramey Berry notes that slaves continued to have economic and political value in death, or what she calls “ghost value,” which often meant that slaves did not receive a proper burial. Slaveholders frequently sold the corpses of deceased slaves to medical schools as part of the lucrative cadaver trade. To assert their power, local authorities refused to return the bodies of executed slaves to their families for burial and sold the body parts of the deceased as “curiosities.” Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 91-128, 149-93.

If a Nigger died dis mornin', dey sho' didn't waste no time a-puttin' him right on down in de ground dat [...] day. Dem coffins never had no shape to 'em; dey was jus' squar-[...] pine boxes. Now warn't dat turrible?" Other former slaves also indignantly remarked on the careless treatment of the dead, including a former slave in Texas who noted, "dey didn't have no funerals for de slaves, but jes' bury dem like a cow or a hoss jes' dig a hole and roll 'em in it and cover 'em up."⁷ Another slave lamented that "there wasn't no time for mourning" on the plantation when a fellow slave died.⁸ Despite these restrictions, slaves frequently held secret funerals and ceremonies to honor the deceased. These gatherings provided an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of life.⁹

The burial plots in which enslaved men and women found their final resting places served as sacred, autonomous spaces for living bondspeople to remember and commune with their ancestors. Julia Bunch, a former bondswoman, stated that "[u]s had a

⁷ Celestia Avery noted that when someone died "he was buried the same day...if he died before dinner the funeral and burial usually took place immediately after dinner." Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, 5, 26. For another example of former slaves discussing the lack of ceremony for funerals of the enslaved, see Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, 45 in which Georgia Baker stated "I never went to no baptizin's nor no funerals neither den. Funeral weren't de style. When a nigger died den days, dey jus' put his body in a box and buried it."

⁸ Henry Bibb, an escaped slave from Kentucky and abolitionist also commented on the treatment of enslaved corpses, describing the lack of respect they were given: "less care was taken of their [the slaves'] bodies than if they were dumb beasts." Quoted in David Roediger, "And Die in Dixie: Funerals, Death, and Heaven in the Slave Community, 1700-1865," *Massachusetts Review* 22, no. 1 (Spring, 1981), 166-67.

⁹ Vincent Brown has argued that slave funerals and burials in the Atlantic World provided a space for enslaved people to "publicly contemplate what it meant to be alive and enslaved. The death rite thus enabled them to express and enact their social values, to articulate their visions of what it was that bound them together, made individuals among them unique, and separated this group of people from others." Slave funerals symbolized that slaves, "who have been pronounced socially dead, that is, utterly alienated and with no social ties recognized as legitimate or binding, have often made a social world out of death itself." For enslaved men and women living in the antebellum South, funerals were a means of demonstrating "collective forms of belonging," of making and affirming ties between family members and extended kin. Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (December 2009), 1232-33, 1236.

big cemetery on our place and de white folks allus let deir niggers come to de funerals. De white folks had deir own separate buryin' ground..."¹⁰ Slave cemeteries were often in tucked away, uncleared parcels of land that were unfit for planting. One observer noted that in the Carolina Low Country, slave cemeteries were "ragged patches of live-oak and palmetto and brier tangle which throughout the Islands are a sign of graves within, – graves scattered without symmetry, and often without headstones or head-boards, or sticks ..."¹¹ Slaves considered these burial grounds to be their own, and they attempted to maintain them as best as they could, given their sparse resources. While slave cemeteries appeared untended, the shards of pottery and makeshift gravestones enslaved people placed on the graves of the deceased evidenced their desire to memorialize their dead. These slave cemeteries, then, served as important sites of community-consciousness in which enslaved people created tangible memorials to the past, affirmed their relationships through attendance at funerals, and established spaces of remembrance for their ancestors.

The connection enslaved people felt to these burial grounds persisted in freedom. While freedpeople frequently left the sites of their enslavement in search of economic and social opportunities in cities and towns, it was a common sight to see African-American funeral processions winding their way from towns and cities back to plantations where freedpeople laid the bones of their friends and family to rest. A rice

¹⁰ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, 158. Likewise, Susan Castle recalled that her former master "had lots of slaves to die, and dey was buried in de colored folks cemetery what was on de river back of de Lucas place." Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, 180. Alek Bostwick stated, "Yes Ma'am de white folks had deir cemetery, an' day had one for de slaves. Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, 110-1. Roediger, "And Die in Dixie," 171.

¹¹ Elsie Worthington Clews Parsons, ed. *Folk-Lore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina* (New York: American Folklore Society), 1923.

planter in South Carolina remarked on this phenomenon, stating “[e]very year more hands leave the plantations and flock to the town, and every year more funerals wend their slow way from the town to the country; for though they all want to live in town, none is so poor but his ashes must be taken “home;” that is, to the old plantation where his parents and grandparents lived and died and lie waiting the final summons.” Despite the prohibitive costs of transporting the body back to the country, community members contributed money to “bring the wanderer home.”¹² The burial grounds on the sites of their enslavement served as powerful spaces of remembrance and links to the past. As ex-slaves sought to construct families and communities following emancipation, they continued to draw on their ancestors, and the relationships they forged in slavery to guide them in these new endeavors. While slave sales and death could sever families indefinitely, African Americans’ persistence in burying their dead in family plots evidenced that slavery and all of its horrors had failed to destroy their families and communities.

Dying Free

While freedom expanded African Americans’ opportunities to bury their dead as they saw fit and to provide new spaces for the burial of their relatives and friends, it did not entirely mitigate the hardships of preparing and conducting their funerals. The massive upheavals of the Civil War meant that a lot of formerly enslaved non-combatants

¹² Elizabeth Waties Allston Pringle, *A Woman Rice Planter* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1914), 59-62. Pringle emphasized the paternalism that undergirded the allowance, noting, “even the most careless and indifferent of the former owners respect the feeling and consent to have those who have been working elsewhere for years, and who perhaps left them in the lurch on some trying occasion, laid to rest in the vine-covered graveyard on the old plantation. Pringle also describes her own experience of allowing her former slaves to be buried in the slave graveyard on her plantation.

who died within Union lines did not have their kin nearby.¹³ The federal government oversaw the burial of freed slaves who had died in refugee camps after achieving their liberty. Often, federal officials conducted these burials with no remark or ceremony besides signing a piece of paper ordering the burial of the body in the “freedmen’s cemetery” near the hospital or camp. In Chattanooga, Tennessee, military officials reported in 1865 that freedpeople were, “dying by scores—that sometimes thirty per day die & are carried out by wagon loads, without coffins, and thrown promiscuously like brutes, into a trench.” In Helena, Arkansas, one observer reported that soldiers placed the bodies of freedpeople in carts along with dead mules and horses for burial in the same pit.¹⁴ The exigencies of war and a lack of federal funds to provide adequate burials often meant that freedpeople who died within Union lines received hastier burials than those they had attended on the plantations of their enslavement.

For other refugees, the tumult of war caused them to be permanently separated from their departed kin and their final resting place. In a refugee camp in Cairo, Illinois, a freedwoman gave voice to the despair that many freepeople must have felt at being unable to provide a fitting burial for their loved ones. As Union officers rounded up freedpeople in Cairo to move to camps further down the Mississippi River on Islands Number Ten and Number Sixty, one freedwoman refused to abandon the body of her eight-year-old son who had died just hours before the steamers were scheduled to leave. Federal officials demanded that she get onboard the boat and leave her child, but as she

¹³ Quoted in Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 26-28.

¹⁴ Downs, *Sick from Freedom*, 27.

explained to Laura Haviland, an aid worker, “missus, I can’t go an’ leave my dead baby for de wharf-rats to eat...I don’t want to leave my child on dis bare groun.” For this freedwoman, the thought of her son’s body lying alone to be eaten by rats in the mud was unbearable. She had already lost her husband and three other children to slave sales, and now she was forced to part with her last remaining child before providing him with a proper burial. After Haviland promised her that she would obtain a coffin and bury the child immediately, the woman reluctantly parted with her son’s body and boarded the steamer on the next phase in her journey in freedom.¹⁵

Despite the material shortages and displacement some formerly enslaved people endured, freedom did present many freedpeople with new control over the way they mourned the deaths of their loved ones, including a host of novel opportunities to properly bury their dead and commemorate them accordingly. During the war, while Union troops occupied the South Carolina Sea Islands, liberated slaves took advantage of their newly acquired free status to hold funerals when it was most convenient for their community, rather than when their master allowed. In the late afternoon on a warm June day in 1863, as “the sun was just throwing its last departing rays across the broad landscape,” Merritt Morse, a white Union soldier, observed a funeral procession in which African-American men and women sang a mournful dirge as they followed solemnly behind a coffin carrying the shrouded body of a child. This procession of at least 100

¹⁵ The material shortages the army encountered in burying soldiers and black refugees was equally apparent in the difficulties Haviland faced in keeping her promise to the freedwoman. When Haviland asked a Union officer for a coffin to bury the child, the officer callously responded “[w]hat is the difference if that child shouldn’t be buried this afternoon or whether wharf-rats eat it or not.” As the man explained, soldiers were “buried in a ditch with no other coffin or winding sheet than the soldier’s dress. For the time being we bury hundreds just in that way...we cannot make coffins for them, but we roll them up in whatever they have.” Laura Haviland, *A Woman’s Life-Work: Labors and Experiences* (Cincinnati: Walden and Stowe, 1882), 246-48.

entered the graveyard situated in a wood near the beach, where over 1,000 other black people were said to be buried. The party halted before the already dug grave and lowered the coffin into the earth. Morse, who had been invited by the mourners to give a prayer over the body, noted that the “water, the setting sun, the lengthened, dire shadows of the trees and vines. Those hundred or more dark, mournful figures clustered round the little open grave made a picture that must impress one even deft of imagination.”¹⁶

At first glance, the funeral appeared to be similar to one that would have occurred during slavery; the freedpeople used the same graveyard they had used while enslaved; they held the funeral towards the end of the work day, and white men participated in and observed the ceremony. Yet, freedom had upended the dynamics of the funeral. An old freedman remarked to Morse on how different this child’s funeral was. When enslaved, men and women had had to prepare the dead at the orders of their master, dig the grave, and then bury the body during the night after completing their other workday tasks. The old man told Morse how inconvenient the work of preparing for a burial had been during slavery, noting that “he had often come for this work at dark had to go into the wood to find pitch wood to see to work by and then sometimes it would rain and put it out and they would be obliged to blunder ‘round in the dark and tumble the corpse in anyway they could and after this have to grind by hand their corn for supper and to cook for the next day or go without eating until the next night.”¹⁷ With freedom, African Americans now had the option to bury their dead on their own terms and provide for burial as they

¹⁶ Merritt Morse to My dear sweet wife, June 14, 1863, Darien Brahms private collection, Portland, Maine.

¹⁷ Ibid.

saw fit.

The inclusion of Merritt Morse in the funeral also demonstrated a shift in how freedpeople celebrated the lives of the deceased. While enslaved, African Americans had to tolerate their masters' or local officials' participation and oversight in their funeral proceedings.¹⁸ But in freedom, former slaves could choose whom they included in their ceremonies. In the months immediately following emancipation, former slaves frequently invited white Unionists who were soldiers, chaplains, and teachers to offer prayers and readings alongside black ministers during funerals. The white men and women they chose to include served as symbols of former slaves' newly acquired freedom. Eliza Anne Summers, a white teacher from Connecticut, and one of her white female colleagues participated in at least two funerals for their students while they were teachers at a freedpeople's school in the South Carolina Sea Islands. During the funerals, the two teachers read chapters from the Bible before the procession made its way to the graveyard to bury the children.¹⁹ African Americans invited white teachers, soldiers, and chaplains into their most somber moments as they buried their dead to serve as visible reminders that the deceased had died free.²⁰

¹⁸ Local town officials such as police attended urban slaves' funerals in order to ensure that slaves did not use funerals for nefarious reasons such as organizing slave rebellions or making plans to run away to freedom. For examples of police at black funerals, see Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; With Remarks on their Economy* (New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856), 405-06.

¹⁹ Eliza Ann Summers to My Dear Sister, May 8, 1867, folder 4; Eliza Ann Summers to My Dear Sister, May 22, 1867, folder 5, both in Eliza Ann Summers Papers, South Caroliniana Library. In Port Royal, South Carolina, freedpeople asked Elizabeth Hyde Botume, a teacher with the New England Freedmen's Aid Society, to preach the funeral sermon for their children on two separate occasions. Elizabeth Hyde Botume, *First Days amongst the Contrabands* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 102-07.

²⁰ While the inclusion of Morse and Summers evinced a change in the dynamics of African American funerals in the South, as the *types* of white people who participated in these funerals changed, the apparent oversight and participation of whites in black funerals remained a constant. It is difficult to come to any hard and fast conclusions about the intentions of including northerners in these funerals. Did these former slaves invite the teachers and soldiers as a sign of gratitude, or, as Jacqueline Jones offers, "perhaps

Formerly enslaved black civilians used what limited resources they had to construct their own final resting places. Jasper Battle, a former slave in Georgia, stated that once his former master died, he and his family had moved to Hancock County in central Georgia and taken up farming. As Battle recalled with pride, “Us got together and raised money to buy ground enough for a churchyard and a graveyard for colored folks. Dat graveyard filled up so fast dat dey had to buy more land several times.”²¹ To Battle, the creation of the graveyard and the church were evidently momentous accomplishments. Apparently, the graveyard was of great significance to the rest of this African-American community in the county as well, as the churchyard continued to grow. In a time when African Americans were testing the limits of their freedom by leaving the sites of their enslavement and venturing to new towns and cities, the graveyard served as an anchor, providing a sense of belonging to people who chose to bury their family and friends there. The graveyard allowed former slaves to bury their dead in a communal location of their own choosing, away from their former plantations, and among fellow worshippers and friends. The funerals held at these cemeteries continued to be of critical importance to free African Americans, who made long, onerous trips in order to attend the ceremonies of the departed. A former slave-owner from South Carolina, for example, commented that following emancipation freedpeople would “walk ten miles after a hard day’s work to go to a funeral.”²²

not enough time had passed since slavery for formerly enslaved people to take on new attitudes and behaviors towards whites.” For more on the complexities of interactions between northern reformers and newly freed slaves, see Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 148-49.

²¹ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, 68.

²² “Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States-South Carolina,” (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 174.

Other African Americans used their freedom in order to tend to already established city-owned cemeteries where African Americans had been buried. In New Orleans, freedpeople attempted to care for the city-operated “freedpeoples cemetery” where their relatives and friends had been buried during the war. Federal officials had established the “freedpeoples cemetery” in New Orleans during the Civil War as a burial ground for former slaves who absconded to Union lines and subsequently died under the care of the federal government. Freedpeople used the little money they had to erect markers and headstones over the graves of their deceased loved ones. As one official observed “great pains seem to have been taken in laying the place out, and a number of graves are marked by marbled headstones erected by friends or relatives, a number of whom are in this neighborhood.”²³ In 1871, the city assumed ownership of the cemetery from the federal government. Under the management of the city, the grounds received no attention from local officials and it fell into a deplorable condition.²⁴ In response to this inattention, black New Orleanians demanded that federal officials make some effort to care for the cemetery. A correspondent for the *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, an African-American newspaper, lamented “tis a shame to our civilization that this burial place for the dead should be so neglected, and sir, the murmuring of the citizens in this section especially our colored citizens against the authorities who willfully neglect the burial place of many of their friends and relatives will show itself in a manner not be

²³ J. O. Shelby to Quartermaster General, May 27, 1876, box 15, General Correspondence and Reports Relating to National and Post Cemeteries, entry [E] 576, Records of the Quartermaster General, Record Group [RG] 92, National Archives [NARA].

²⁴ Annual Report of the Supt of Chalmette, La National Cemetery, July 1872, box 54, E576, RG 92, NARA.

slighted.”²⁵ While they lacked the money to care for the cemetery themselves, African Americans in New Orleans threatened to use their voting power to improve the grounds.²⁶

Despite these protestations, by 1876, the New Orleans freedmen’s cemetery was all but forgotten by city officials, though not by local freedpeople. The loved ones of those buried in the cemetery lacked the money to maintain the grounds and headboards, but they preserved the memory of those interred there for future generations. An army official who visited the cemetery in search of any Union soldiers mistakenly buried there noted the deplorable condition of the cemetery. As he inspected the thousands of graves marked by weathered boards with faded, illegible writing indicating who lay buried beneath, the official encountered local African Americans eager to share what they knew of the burials.²⁷ Black men and women assisted the official in his work, and informed him that the graves belonged to black men, women, and children who had been refugees during the war, along with the dead from the city hospital.²⁸ Lacking the resources to maintain the cemetery themselves, these local freedpeople did what they could to make sure that those buried in the graveyard were not forgotten.

²⁵ *Semi-Weekly Louisianian* June 22, 1871.

²⁶ The federal official in charge of Chalmette National Cemetery, which adjoined the freedpeoples cemetery rationalized that “to take in this land now and put it in condition to favorably compare with the adjoining Cemetery could, it is feared, be only done at a greater expense than the present appropriation will warrant.” Endorsement on M. Meigs to W. B. Hughes, June 6, 1873, box 15, E576, RG 92. In 1876 Louisiana State Agricultural and Mechanical College purchased the land where the freedpeoples cemetery was located. Soon thereafter, the college requested that “[s]ome provision should be made to remove the remains within the walls of the cemetery, which can no doubt be done at a small expense to the government.” H. Bonzano to Alonzo Taft, April 21, 1876, box 15, E576, RG 92, NARA. For another example of officials refusing to provide funds to maintain African-American cemeteries, see Franklin Talbird to A. Christensen, April 1, 1874; Meigs to J. C. C. Lee, May 15, [18]74, both in box 12, Entry 579 RG 92.

²⁷ J. O. Shelby to Quartermaster General, May 27, 1876, box 15, E576, RG 92, NARA.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

To ensure that they and their families received a proper burial, many African Americans formed burial and mutual aid societies in which they pooled their resources together. Burial societies were not a new development with emancipation. Before the war, urban free black people had established such societies in which they paid a certain amount of money to the organization in exchange for a proper burial for themselves and their family members in cemeteries operated by or affiliated with the society. In freedom, many formerly enslaved people used their small incomes to join such societies and ensure that they received a good burial. Burial societies and mutual aid societies were part of a larger social security net that African Americans developed to aid one another in times of sickness, poverty, and death. As such, these societies served as the precursors to black insurance companies which developed in the late nineteenth century. For many, these societies provided members with not only a source of economic support, but also a sense of belonging and community. The most popular national societies, which also functioned as fraternal orders, were the Prince Hall Masons, the National Order of Odd Fellows, and the Knights of Pythias. But there were also local societies. In Charlotte County, Virginia, freedpeople flocked to join one such society named the True Reformers, which promised each of its members a “grand funeral.” Other societies, such as the Young Female Benevolent Association in New Orleans, provided members with fifty dollars in burial expenses in exchange for an admission fee of \$2.50 to \$5.00 and monthly dues of \$0.25 to \$0.50. Many of these burial societies also stipulated that the members of the society must attend the burial of deceased members or face expulsion from the group. The act of preparing for death and ensuring that their families would be provided for, knit African-American communities together and contributed to the development of African-American

institutional life.²⁹

African Americans' participation in burial societies was part of a larger civic duty to their communities. Local black politicians were frequently at the forefront of forming and participating in these societies. William Kennedy, a local Republican politician and Union League member in Henrico County, Virginia, for example, established the Sons of Jacob burial society in the late 1870s to assist members with funeral expenses. As their constitution made clear, The Sons of Jacob's primary aim was to "attend to on another in time of sickness and distress and to see each other decently buried after death." Of course, burial societies were frequently only accessible to wealthier African Americans, but the leaders of such organizations considered their work to contribute to the uplift of the entire race. As the New Orleans *Black Republican* noted in 1865, "It is indispensable that the people of color indicate ability to seize upon all the avenues that are open to any people. We must have our own whatever of intellectual activity, of collective organization in churches, asylums, or secular organizations, that makes up society and reveal[s] the capacity of government in a people."³⁰

As this brief sketch of African-American civilian burials during war and peace suggests, burial societies, funerals, and cemeteries were important spaces of community building and memorialization for freedpeople. Pooling their meager resources, newly

²⁹ Reminiscences, 1855-1885, Marie Gordon Pryor Rice Papers, Virginia Historical Society. John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 167-69. For more on black burial societies, see Daniel Levine, "A Single Standard of Civilization: Black Private Social Welfare Institutions in the South, 1880s-1920s," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 52-77; Peter P. Hinks, and Stephen David Kantrowitz, eds., *All Men Free and Brethren: Essays on the History of Prince Hall Freemasonry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

³⁰ Sons of Jacob Constitution, Section 4, William Kennedy Papers, Virginia Historical Society. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 169.

freed African Americans strove to establish fitting resting places for their loved ones and in doing so, marked their new status as free people.

Case Study: Pine Forest Cemetery

In Wilmington, North Carolina, city officials organized Pine Forest Cemetery as an African-American burial ground before the Civil War. Although nominally owned by the city, it was Wilmington's free blacks who operated the cemetery and oversaw the grounds under the aegis of the Pine Forest Cemetery Association of Wilmington, an organization they had established prior to the war. Owen Burney, a free man of color who would be elected an alderman of Wilmington in 1870, claimed that the cemetery "belonged to the colored people," while George W. Betts, a free man of color was, according to his own account, "in charge generally," of the cemetery during the Civil War.³¹ In 1870, the Association officially assumed ownership of the cemetery when it successfully petitioned the city for the deed to the graveyard.³²

The men who comprised the Pine Forest Cemetery trustees were some of the leading black men of Wilmington including aldermen Owen Burney, Duncan Holmes,

³¹ Claim of Pine Forest Cemetery Association, Wilmington, North Carolina, Claim no. 1280, Case Files, Southern Claims Commission, Records of the Third Auditor, Disallowed Case Files, Records of the U.S. General Accounting Office, RG 217, NARA.

³² During a Southern Claims Commission hearing Owen Burney proudly recalled how the Pine Forest Cemetery Association came to own the land, "the cemetery was of course not incorporated until after the war, the title was in the name of the city for the use of the colored people, I am one of the corporators. We have now a deed from the city." In 1869, George W. Prince, a black legislator, had successfully petitioned the North Carolina House of Representatives to incorporate the Pine Forest Cemetery Association of Wilmington. Claim of Pine Forest Cemetery Association, Wilmington, North Carolina, Claim no. 1280, Case Files, Southern Claims Commission, Disallowed Case Files, RG 217, NARA. The Board of Alderman that granted the Association's request for ownership of the cemetery included four African Americans. David Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom: Abraham Galloway and the Slaves' Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 204.

and Anthony Howe, and William Cutlar, a trustee of the First African Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, one of the first all black congregations in Wilmington.³³

Managing the cemetery was just one civic duty among many upon which the caretakers of Pine Forest Cemetery embarked. These men were also members of the Giblem Lodge, an African American masonic lodge in Wilmington. The lodge was at the heart of black Wilmingtonians' political culture, hosting political meetings, Emancipation Day celebrations, and Decoration Day parades, and its headquarters served as a polling place during elections.³⁴ The service and civic engagement of the men on the Pine Forest Cemetery Association demonstrated the importance of the cemetery to black political culture and the community. As politicians and religious leaders, the involvement of men such as Burney, Cutlar, and Holmes in the upkeep of the cemetery evinced the ways in which death and politics coalesced in the post-emancipation South.

An important site of community building and organization before the war, Pine Forest Cemetery continued to serve as a collective space for African Americans in freedom, as they fashioned it into a political meeting place. On September 26, 1866, nearly 200 freedpeople, mostly women and boys, convened in Pine Forest Cemetery to raise funds to send three African American delegates to the Freedmen's Convention in Raleigh, North Carolina. Organizers of the meeting could have selected the Front Street Methodist Church or city hall for their rally, as they did for meetings the previous week,

³³ Claim of Pine Forest Cemetery Association, Wilmington, North Carolina, Claim no. 1280, Case Files, Southern Claims Commission, Disallowed Case Files, RG 217, NARA.

³⁴ The Giblem Lodge was founded in 1869. *Weekly North Carolina Standard*, March 10, 1869; *Wilmington Journal*, July 10, 1874.

but instead they chose the cemetery.³⁵ In Pine Forest, among the graves of their enslaved ancestors, free black men, women, and children mingled, listening to the political speeches of John Sampson, John Nixon, and William Smith, the delegates selected to attend the convention. Speaking before the crowd, Nixon proclaimed that “they were on the road to the promised land, but were yet in the wilderness.” He promised the attendees that he would go to the convention and “do the best he could for his hearers who had sent him.” For Nixon, the fundamental issue at hand for African Americans was equal rights, with the suffrage as a central component to equality. As Nixon spoke, he told the crowd that he was only “asking to be acknowledged a free and independent citizen of the United States,” and to have “equal rights and coequal rights.” According to one newspaper, Nixon proclaimed that “[H]e wanted all rights, chief of which was the right to vote like a white man.”³⁶ Sampson then gave a speech, and asked the attendees at the rally to raise \$80 for the delegates’ travel expenses.

Holding the meeting in the cemetery was a poignant reminder of how far African Americans had come down the “road to the promised land.” Surrounded by the graves of their enslaved ancestors who had spoken in whispers at night about freedom, 200 free African Americans now met in the open, freely speaking about issues of racial and political equality and suffrage. Moreover, their meeting at the cemetery made the rally an inclusive affair. Black political mobilization in the early days following emancipation

³⁵ Thanayi Jackson, “‘Devoted to the Interests of His Race’: Black Officeholders and the Political Culture of Freedom in Wilmington, North Carolina, 1865-1877” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2016), 88-90.

³⁶ *Wilmington Herald*, September 27, 1865. For other examples of African American appropriating cemeteries for political meetings see *Charleston Daily News*, October 19, 1868, in which African Americans gathered in the parish cemetery in Christ Church Parish, South Carolina to hear political speeches by white and black Republicans.

involved the participation of not only black men, but of women, and even children. In order to send the delegates to the State Freedman's Convention, black politicians required the mobilization and money of the entire black community.³⁷ The cemetery was an apt place for the delegates to hold their fundraiser, as it was an outdoor, public spot in which many black Wilmingtonians had a stake. Cemeteries such as Pine Forest thus served as public political sites in which African Americans cultivated an inclusive definition of citizenship that allowed for the participation of men and women in the political process. As Hannah Rosen has argued, "[t]o attend a political speech, join a Republican club, debate election strategy at a meeting, or participate in casting ballots was to be a citizen. To do those things collectively was to empower entire communities and realize a vision for an inclusive public sphere."³⁸ By entering Pine Forest Cemetery, listening to speeches by black politicians, and giving what little money they had to support these men, African-American men, women, and children exercised their rights of citizenship.

The inclusive political culture that African Americans promoted in spaces of death was especially evident just five years after the 1865 meeting, when black Wilmingtonians met once again in Pine Forest Cemetery to mourn the loss of one of their fiercest allies, Abraham Galloway. Galloway had served as part of the delegation of black leaders who met with Abraham Lincoln in May 1864 to press for African-American suffrage. He had also helped to organize state and local chapters of the National Equal

³⁷ Jackson, "Devoted to the Interests of His Race," 92-4.

³⁸ On African American women's presence in the public sphere and an enlarged vision of citizenship see Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 115; Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1994), 107-146.

Rights League. Through his political leadership during the Civil War, Galloway had earned the respect and trust of Wilmington's black community, and they voted him into the state senate in 1868. When Galloway unexpectedly passed away from jaundice in 1870, African Americans across the nation took stock of what they had lost.³⁹ The *Christian Recorder* lamented his death, calling him "old, brave, defiant, and patriotic." The *Recorder* noted too that his death was mourned by "a host of friends who have learned to look upon him as their guiding star, particularly since the initiation of Reconstruction."⁴⁰

During Galloway's funeral in Wilmington in September, African Americans came out in droves to honor his memory and accomplishments. According to the *Recorder*, Galloway's funeral was the largest held in the state, with 6,000 people in attendance. Ex-slaves came on foot, by train, and by boat, just to catch a glimpse of Galloway's coffin. The procession from St. Paul's Episcopal Church to the Pine Forest Cemetery where Galloway was laid to rest stretched for nearly half a mile through the streets of Wilmington, where flags flew at half-mast. Black masons, firefighters, political and fraternal orders all were in attendance as well.⁴¹ The funeral thus served as a symbol of political strength, and as an opportunity for African American men and women to affirm their dedication to Galloway's legacy of political activism and authority. Galloway's burial in Pine Forest Cemetery also confirmed the importance of the cemetery to black

³⁹ For the most complete biography of Galloway, see David Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom*.

⁴⁰ *Christian Recorder*, September 14, 1870.

⁴¹ Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom*, 217-218.

Wilmingtonians as not only a final resting place, but as a space for community building, political organization, and memorialization.

Pine Forest Cemetery remained a foundational space and safe harbor for Wilmington's black community when whites resorted to exile and murder to drive black officeholders from power in the late nineteenth century. During the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot, white conservatives massacred at least seven, and perhaps as many as three hundred African Americans. Amidst the terror, black women and children fled to the swamps on the outskirts of town and sought refuge in Pine Forest Cemetery from the murdering bands of white men who roamed the streets. In the aftermath of the violence, at least two of the victims of the massacre assumed their final resting place in the same cemetery where thirty-two years earlier black people had first gathered to organize for equal rights.⁴²

Case Study: Randolph Cemetery

Across the South, African Americans erected civilian cemeteries not only to create sites of remembrance of their loved ones and friends, but also to memorialize the advancements African Americans made in freedom. In Columbia, South Carolina, African-American leaders gathered their resources to establish a cemetery in honor of Benjamin F. Randolph, a prominent African-American state senator from Orangeburg, South Carolina. Randolph was born to a free black family in Kentucky in 1820. During the Civil War, he served as an army chaplain with the 26th USCT in South Carolina. At

⁴² Reverend J. Allen Kirk, *A Statement of Facts Concerning the Bloody Riot in Wilmington, N.C. Of Interest to Every Citizen of the United States* (Wilmington?, N.C., 1898), 12. LaRae Umfleet, *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report* (Wilmington: Office of Archives and History North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2006) 173, 176.

war's end, he remained in the Palmetto State, taking up the post of assistant superintendent of education in the Freedmen's Bureau. He was an active member of the Union League, attended the Colored People's Convention in Charleston in 1865, and was a delegate to the State Constitutional Convention in 1868 where he was instrumental in drafting an article to the constitution authorizing free public education in the state. Following the Convention, Randolph's constituents elected him to the South Carolina Senate. The *Christian Advocate* noted, "in these official positions he was doing good service for his race and the cause of human rights."⁴³ As an advocate for the education of former slaves, a religious leader, and a state senator, Randolph embodied all of the promises and possibilities Reconstruction offered African Americans.

For all these reasons Benjamin Randolph was a controversial figure among white South Carolinians. On October 16, 1868, while on a speaking tour in support of the national Republican ticket, three men shot and killed Randolph as he stood on a train platform at Hodge's Station in Abbeville County, South Carolina.⁴⁴ His murder sparked outrage across the state. In Charleston, the *Daily Courier* reported that the news of Randolph's death "created a profound sensation among the colored people in this city yesterday. Crowds of freedmen assembled in knots and groups in the streets, and the

⁴³ *Christian Advocate*, quoted in *Harper's Weekly*, November 21, 1868.

⁴⁴ Although he was assassinated in broad daylight, the authorities never managed to identify or arrest the assassins. Years after the murder, William K. Talbert confessed to murdering Randolph and identified John Wesley, and Joshua Logan as his accomplices. All three men were from South Carolina, and members of the Democratic Party. *Testimony taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States-South Carolina*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872), 1258.

corners of Broad and Meeting-streets were the scenes of anxious discussion throughout the entire day.”⁴⁵

Debates over what should be done with Randolph’s corpse demonstrated the power the martyred senator held over African Americans. As preparations were made for the burial of Randolph’s body, leading Republicans feared that bringing Randolph’s corpse to Charleston was too dangerous, agreeing that “such a step in the present state of feeling among the blacks would be unadvisable, and accordingly telegraphed Governor Scott to retain and bury the corpse in Columbia.” In vacillating as to where Randolph’s body should be buried, Republicans demonstrated the political and social power that Randolph’s corpse symbolized for African Americans. The freedpeople congregating in the streets of Charleston worriedly discussing the murder of Randolph understood his death to be a product of both the possibilities and violent constraints of freedom.⁴⁶

The slain state senator’s funeral offered black South Carolinians an occasion to mourn the loss of one of their leaders, while simultaneously hardening their resolve to continue Randolph’s fight for equal rights. On the afternoon of October 18, a large crowd of African Americans gathered at the African Methodist Episcopal Church on the corner of Taylor and Sumter Streets in Columbia. Inside the crowded church three of Randolph’s friends delivered eulogies about their fallen comrade. Following the service,

⁴⁵ *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 20, 1868. Likewise, the *Charleston Daily News* reported that “the murder of this Republican leader created quite an excitement yesterday among the colored people, many of whom collected at the street corners and discussed the event in all its bearings.” *Charleston Daily News*, October 20, 1868. Randolph’s assassination also made national news. See *New York Tribune*, October 19, 1868; *Christian Recorder*, October 31, 1868; *Harper’s Weekly*, November 21, 1868.

⁴⁶ *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 20, 1868. The *Charleston Daily News* also reported on the change of burial plans, stating “it was at first supposed that the body would be brought to this city, and preparations were made for a reception; but the more moderate advised against any display that would tend to increase the excitement.” *Charleston Daily News*, October 20, 1868.

the funeral attendees poured into the street and marched to Elmwood Cemetery.⁴⁷ Their procession snaked through the neat rows of graves marking the burials of white Columbians, before halting in the black portion of the grounds to bury Randolph's body. Just as Galloway's funeral had offered black men and women an opportunity to honor one of their champions, Randolph's service also provided a space for both men and women to assert themselves politically by honoring their fallen senator.

Immediately following Randolph's funeral, African-American newspapers, politicians, and lay people began to cultivate an image of Randolph as a martyr to the causes of liberty, justice, and equality. The *Recorder* noted that Randolph's death had a purpose. "B.F. Randolph has made his last and only remaining sacrifice. Perhaps it was necessary that this bright star should be stricken out, to show how black is the night in which the slave oligarchs of the South would doom the negro. But let them know that our night is past, that our day is at hand; and as well may they attempt to chain the chariot of the glorious sun."⁴⁸ In the South Carolina senate, senators delivered remembrances of Randolph and highlighted his devotion to justice and equality. Senator Wright noted that "while he by the hand of the assassin has fallen, we rejoice that the cause for which he died still lives; and will live as long as time shall last. It is a noble thought to cherish, that when martyrs die, their cause lives." Wright concluded by affirming that Randolph's work would continue, "[h]e is dead, yet he lives, and the influence he has entered will be felt by generations yet born, and they will revere his name."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *Daily Phoenix*, October 20, 1868. The identities of the men who provided eulogies at Randolph's funeral are not known.

⁴⁸ *Christian Recorder*, October 31, 1868.

⁴⁹ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina, Being the Regular Session of 1868* (Columbia, SC: John W. Denny, 1868), 12-4. At a meeting held on October 21, 1868 by

The creation of Randolph Cemetery was spurred not only by Randolph's violent death, but also by the murders of subsequent African-American politicians in South Carolina. Two years after Randolph's death, white Democrats murdered six black Republicans and one white Republican in what came to be called the Laurens Riot.⁵⁰ Among the victims of the Laurens Riot was Wade Perrin, an African-American state representative from Laurens County. Following his death, his body lay in state at the statehouse. A funeral took place in the chamber of the House of Representatives, and then according to the *Charleston Daily News*, his "remains were buried in the cemetery where Randolph lies."⁵¹ Perrin and Randolph's graves served as palpable reminders of the costly consequences of fighting for freedom, equality, and justice. Because it now served as the final resting place of two assassinated African-American elected officials,

South Carolina's Republican party to discuss the murder of Randolph and other Republican politicians in the state, Alonzo J. Ransier, a state representative from Charleston offered a statement with similar sentiments about martyrdom. "Mr. Randolph has suffered martyrdom in a cause in which, and for which thousands have been slain, in the early struggles against the mother country, and in the civil convulsions of the last eight years." *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 22, 1868. The *Charleston Advocate*, the newspaper Randolph helped to start, also published a poem entitled, "Randolph," further elevating his status to martyrdom. The poem began by immediately proclaiming that Randolph's name had joined others who had sacrificed their lives for the cause of freedom, "Slain---the martyr'd dead Have welcomed thy undaunted soul Thy name will evermore be read On Freedom's blood-illumin'd scroll." The writer concluded the poem with a warning to those who struck down the senator, "Thy martyr blood that stains your soil May yet rouse Vengeance from its lair. Still's is the voice that waked your fears, The heart ye hated throbs no more; But while we steep his grave in tears, *His cause is dearer than before.*" *Charleston Advocate*, October 24, 1868.

⁵⁰ On January 9, 1869, in the South Carolina House of Representatives, Thaddeus K. Sasportas, a representative from Orangeburg County, the same county Randolph represented, introduced a bill entitled, "A Bill to provide for the erection of a monument to the memory of the late Hon. B F Randolph, Senator from Orangeburg." The bill was the first attempt to create a lasting monument to the mortal sacrifice made by Randolph. The bill was referred to the Committee on Ways and Means, but apparently it progressed no further. It would be two more years before the state erected a fitting monument to Randolph. Presumably, the bill died in committee as there are no references to the bill again in the *Journal of the House of Representatives. Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina, 1865-69* (Columbia, SC: J. W. Denny, 1869), 164.

⁵¹ *Charleston Daily News*, January 31, 1871.

Elmwood Cemetery became a nascent memorial ground for those slain in the pursuit of these goals.

Spurred by the burials of both Perrin and Randolph in Elmwood Cemetery, the state senate moved to create a memorial to those slain in the struggle for equal rights and justice. On February 21, 1871, the senate introduced “A Bill to provide for the erection of a monument to the memories of Hon. B. F. Randolph and Hon. Wade Perrin.”⁵² One week later, in a public showing of civic pride and strength, Chief Marshal Colonel William B. Nash and the Committee of Arrangements led the ceremony procession to lay the cornerstone of the monument, which included a time capsule over Randolph’s grave.⁵³ Beginning at the state house, white and black state legislators, Governor Robert K. Scott, black militia companies (including the Randolph Riflemen), a brass band, African-American masonic lodge members, benevolent and civic societies, and citizens marched through the streets of Columbia to Elmwood Cemetery.⁵⁴ One participant estimated that there were nearly 2,000 people in attendance, with “every Compny of the City and 2 from Charleston wose hear. Music of all discrpton wose hear.” The onlooker

⁵² *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina, Being the Regular Session of 1870-'71*, (Columbia, SC: Republican Printing Company, 1871), 115, 144, 178, 186, 333, 372, 470. The exact location of the memorial is not stipulated in the bill. Four days later, the Special Committee on the Randolph Monument, headed by Alonzo J. Ransier, the Lieutenant-Governor of South Carolina and a free man of color from Charleston, invited the House of Representatives to take part in the dedication of the monument. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina, 1870-71*, 527.

⁵³ Kreilick Conservation, LLC, *Historic Randolph Cemetery (1872), Columbia, SC: Phase I Report* (Oreland, PA: Kreilick Conservation, 2010), 117-19. The time capsule contained buttons and a small shield with the initials of C. D. Lowndes 1870 inscribed on one side. It is unclear where the buttons came from. C. D. Lowndes probably refers to Caesar Duncan Lowndes, a black Union veteran, a doorkeeper at the state legislature, a proprietor of a local hall, and a commissioner for elections for Richland County. He would later be promoted to Major in the South Carolina National Guard. The relationship between Lowndes and Randolph is not known. *Daily Phoenix*, July 17, 1867; *Daily Phoenix*, October 31, 1872; *Journal of the Senate of the State of South Carolina, Regular Session Commencing Tuesday, November 28, 1876* (Columbia, SC: Republican Printing Company, 1876), 404.

⁵⁴ *Charleston Daily News*, March 1, 1871.

also remarked on the variety of classes of people who took part in the dedication, from the wealthy to the poor, noting that “Sum in uniforme and Sum in Citoson Clothren Sum in Shurt Sleave and Sum barfuted but all wose a muven a long.”⁵⁵ While the implementation of the Randolph monument was led by Columbia’s elite blacks, the public cornerstone ceremony provided an opportunity for wealthy and poor African-American men, women, and children to participate in honoring the memory of the slain. In doing so, the ceremony enabled lower-class black men and women to politically assert themselves. Their presence demonstrated their grief over Randolph’s death and their hardened resolve to fight for the lofty ideals for which he had died. Together, the participants took stock of the advances they had made in freedom despite the deadly costs.

At the same time that preparations for the Randolph monument were underway, some of Columbia’s prominent African-American citizens created their own organization to purchase a portion of the land inside Elmwood Cemetery to be set aside for African-American burials, with the objective of establishing a private African-American cemetery in honor of Randolph. In July 1871, nineteen black men, including three men who had served on the committee to erect the monument to Randolph, formed the Randolph Cemetery Association. The men who composed this association were members of Columbia’s elite African-American community. They were politicians, including William Nash, a state senator, and Alonzo Ransier, the lieutenant-governor of South Carolina. There were barbers, carpenters, grocers, school commissioners, farmers, an attorney, a

⁵⁵ Mother & Father to My Dear Daughter, March 10, 1871, Elsie Booker Collection, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. The author of the letter is not known.

trial justice, and a minister.⁵⁶ Such an array of professions demonstrated that the project drew from a large swath of the black community, but it also evinced that this was largely a middle-class endeavor. In January 1872, these men purchased three acres of land to the west of Elmwood Cemetery for \$900 from the Elmwood Cemetery Association; acres where African Americans had been buried since at least 1864, including the location of Benjamin Randolph's grave.⁵⁷ Through their efforts, these nineteen men established the black burial ground within Elmwood as an autonomous African-American cemetery. They renamed it Randolph Cemetery.

By creating Randolph Cemetery, African Americans in South Carolina established an official site to memorialize the men who fought for the ideals of equality before the law, and for the rights of citizenship. It was fitting that the cemetery was named after Benjamin Randolph, a black man who had become emblematic of the struggles, losses, and promises of Reconstruction. To his black contemporaries, Randolph represented the possibilities that Reconstruction offered to African Americans if given the opportunity to labor for themselves and gain an education. Moreover, his untimely death enshrined him in the pantheon of martyrs as someone who strove for equality and citizenship and was struck down during the fight. Randolph's murder and the creation of a cemetery in his memory stood as symbolic reminders of the sacrifices of many others during an era when black and white Republican politicians and freedpeople feared for their lives when acting on their beliefs in racial equality and justice.

⁵⁶ Richland County, SC Register of Deeds, Deed Book G, 22; Randolph Cemetery: Mapping and Documentation of an Historic African-American Site, 15.

⁵⁷ Richland County, SC Register of Deeds, Deed Book G, Elmwood Cemetery Company to Randolph Cemetery Association (January 8, 1872), 242-43.

The monument that was finally laid over his grave in Randolph Cemetery, perhaps in 1874, served as a memorial not only to the mortal losses black people suffered during Reconstruction, but also to the significant progress that occurred.⁵⁸ The stone from the state house served as a reminder of the political advances African Americans had made in their short time in office, yet the words inscribed on the monument attested to the harrowing sacrifices made to achieve that success. The monument read:

IN MEMORIAM
 B. F. RANDOLPH
 LATE STATE SENATOR
 FOR ORANGEBURG COUNTY
 AND CHAIRMAN REPUBLICAN
 STATE CENTRAL COMMITTEE
 WHO DIED AT HODGES STATION
 ABBEVILLE COUNTY
 AT THE HANDS OF ASSASSINS
 ON FRIDAY OCT. 16
 A.D. 1868

The decision to include how Randolph died “at the hands of assassins” ensured that the memory of the bloodshed during Reconstruction was etched in stone and not forgotten in the African-American community. This inclusion also served as a rebuke to white Southerners that black people would remember this unsolved murder of one of their own.

⁵⁸ *Daily Phoenix*, March 3, 1874.

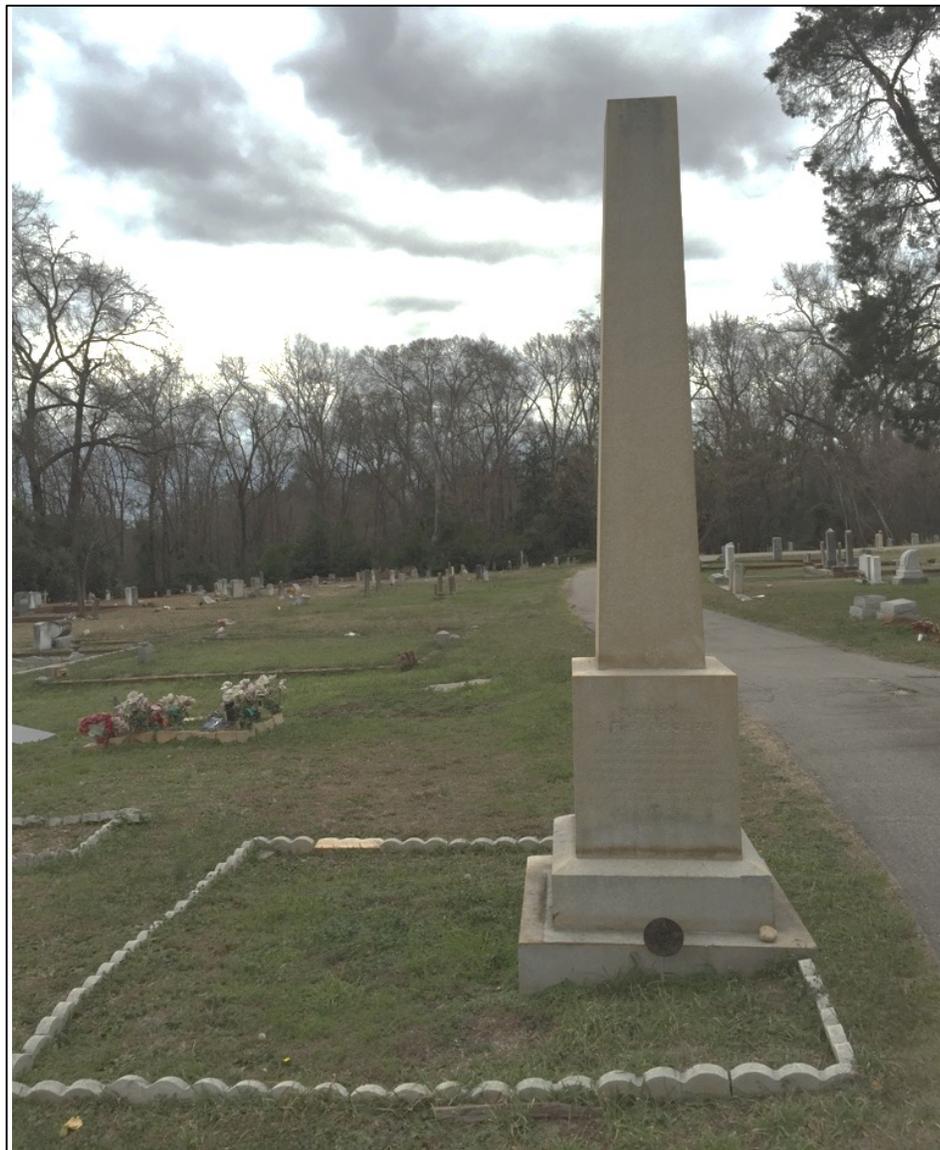


Fig. 5.2. The Benjamin Randolph monument erected over his grave in Randolph Cemetery, Columbia, South Carolina. Photo: Ashley Towle.

In the years to come, prominent African Americans from across the state would be laid to rest in Randolph Cemetery, making the graveyard a memorial to the achievements of African Americans in freedom, and a focal point for South Carolina's African-American community. Extant records suggest that the cemetery charged nearly \$30 for a plot in the cemetery, which meant that it was not a place that most of Columbia's working-class blacks could easily afford to be buried. Despite the high cost

for a plot, many skilled artisans were laid to rest in the cemetery, as well as female domestic servants and washerwomen. The cemetery also served as the burial place for South Carolina's elite African-American families, including several politicians.⁵⁹ Over the course of its storied history, Randolph Cemetery would become the final resting place for at least nine Reconstruction-era state legislators.⁶⁰ The cemetery was a prestigious final resting place. Prince Rivers, one of the premier postwar African-American politicians in South Carolina, for example, stipulated in his will that his body was to be buried in Randolph Cemetery. In 1887, following his death in Aiken County, South Carolina, a delegation of Odd Fellows transported his body to Columbia and buried him in Randolph Cemetery in "obedience to his request."⁶¹ The co-mingled bodies of African American men and women from different walks of life buried in their family plots within the gates of Randolph Cemetery served as a physical reminder of the advances made by

⁵⁹ Unfortunately, records of burials in Randolph Cemetery have not been found. All information about burials comes from extant tombstones, most of which are from 1890-1940. For a study of the people known to be buried in Randolph Cemetery, see Michael Trinkley and Debi Hacker, *A Small Sample of Burials at Randolph Cemetery: What Their Stories Tell Us About the Cemetery and African American Life in Columbia* (Columbia, SC: Chicora Foundation, Inc., 2007), 8, 41-62; New South Associates, *Randolph Cemetery: Mapping and Documentation of a Historic African-American Site* (Columbia, SC: New South Associates Technical Report, 2007), 15.

⁶⁰ African American legislators buried in Randolph Cemetery include Henry Cardozo, William F. Myers, William B. Nash, Robert J. Palmer, Benjamin F. Randolph, William M. Simmons, Samuel B. Thomson, Charles M. Wilder, and Lucius Wimbush.

⁶¹ Rivers, a former slave from Beaufort, South Carolina, joined the first regiment of African American soldiers raised by the Union during the Civil War. At the end of the war, Rivers had been promoted to the rank of sergeant of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers. During Reconstruction, he served as a delegate to the 1868 South Carolina Constitutional Convention, was elected to the House of Representatives, and also served as a trial judge. *Aiken Review*, April 13, 1887. Pension File of Prince Rivers, 363.134, 423.234, 33 USCI, Case Files of Approved Pension Applications, 1861-1934 Civil War and Later Pensions Filed; Department of Veterans Affairs, RG 15; NARA. While there are no cemetery records that state that Rivers is buried in Randolph Cemetery, nor is there a grave marker for him, both the *Aiken Review*, and Rivers's widow's pension file state that he is buried in Randolph Cemetery. There is evidence that there are several unmarked graves in Randolph Cemetery, therefore it is likely that Rivers's gravestone has been lost to time, like many others.

black people who had taken control of their own lives and dictated their own path in freedom.

In the years following Reconstruction, Randolph Cemetery remained an important site for African Americans to collectively protest against the racially oppressive institution of Jim Crow. In an annual event known as the “Randolph Celebration,” black people from across the state joined in Columbia to celebrate the memory of B. F. Randolph and the accomplishments made by African Americans in the state since emancipation. The celebration held in August 1891 was the largest memorial yet. The First Regiment of the National Guard from Charleston, along with the Capital City Guards, and the Carolina Rifles—all African-American militia companies—marched through downtown Columbia in a parade that ended in Randolph Cemetery, where they held “memorial exercises.”⁶² The city’s African-American masonic orders were also in attendance. Newspapers reported that the governor of South Carolina, Benjamin Tillman, was there during the celebration to “review the troops.” Just fifteen years earlier, Tillman had been an unapologetic participant in the Hamburg Massacre and the Ellenton Riot. During those massacres, the Red Shirts, a white paramilitary group in which Tillman was a captain, ruthlessly murdered African-American militia, black civilians, and one African-American state senator. The Hamburg and Ellenton riots signaled the end of Republican rule in the state, and made Tillman a prominent member of the Democratic Party. By marching to the black-owned and operated cemetery to memorialize an assassinated-African American politician, black South Carolinians protested Democrat’s

⁶² *State*, August 7, 1891. It is unclear when the Randolph celebrations began. The *State* reported on the 1891 celebration as an “enlargement” of the “annual event” leading me to conclude that there had at least been one, if not two Randolph celebrations in previous years. The Randolph Riflemen had been in operation since at least 1871. *Daily Republican*, February 24, 1871.

violent takeover of the state. Their ownership of Randolph Cemetery provided a space to remember and venerate Randolph and black political participation despite the increasingly confining strictures of Jim Crow.

Funerals at Randolph Cemetery also continued to be an important site of political organization and inspiration as race relations in the South reached a nadir in South Carolina in the 1890s. In 1893, Wade Haynes, a fifteen-year-old African American was executed by the state and buried in Randolph Cemetery. Haynes had been convicted of the 1891 murder of Florence Hornsby, a white eighteen-year-old girl whom Haynes had found stabbed to death near her home in Richland County. As the only suspect in the case, officials arrested Haynes and tried him for the murder. Although the evidence was entirely circumstantial and Haynes was most likely innocent of the crime, he was convicted of murder, and sentenced to be hanged. On May 5, 1893 the fifteen-year-old Haynes was executed by the state of South Carolina.⁶³

Outraged African-American civilians, clergy, and politicians used the execution of Haynes as an opportunity to highlight the discriminatory and racist treatment of blacks before the law. According to the *State*, the “funeral of Haynes proved to be the largest mass meeting of the colored people of Columbia ever held in this city. The funeral was set for three o’clock but long before that hour the negroes of all classes and conditions and sexes had begun to pour into the church building.” During the funeral proceedings, ministers from all of the black churches in the city conducted simultaneous services for

⁶³ Before the execution, a newspaper reported that blacks in South Carolina had taken a keen interest in the execution, and that “negroes the number of a thousand or more were massed around the jail enclosure long before the time appointed for the execution and they peeped through the cracks and viewed the scene of the coming execution from the adjoining house-tops, many of which were covered with human beings. *The State*, May 6, 1893.

Haynes, and used the occasion to rail against racial discrimination. Reverend Robert Eber Hart, the minister of Sydney Park Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in Columbia stood before the throng of mourners gathered in his church and spoke indignantly about the execution. "Here lies a dead man, who died in innocence," Hart thundered. He explained that the cause of the senseless death of the young man was his race. "Wade Haynes belongs to a race that is unfortunate in this respect," Hart explained. "He was thought to be guilty before he was tried because he was a poor colored man." Despite this disheartening conclusion, Hart implored his listeners not to lose hope, and offered a comforting prayer for the future. "There is a day in the near future when we can get a fair trial and mercy too...The white people will have to take this government in charge and give us justice." Following Hart's emphatic plea for an end to racial discrimination, the mourners left the church and proceeded to Randolph Cemetery. Although Haynes had been a farm laborer, and likely unable to afford a plot in the middle-class Randolph Cemetery, he was nevertheless buried there, "where a plot had been presented for the purpose."⁶⁴

Conclusion

The reaction of African Americans to the assassinations of black politicians, Haynes's state-ordered execution, and extra-legal violence exhibited the consistencies and striking differences of black life and death in slavery and freedom. While enslaved, African Americans had used funerals and burials as solemn events to affirm their bonds of kinship and community. Through these practices bondspeople had resisted their

⁶⁴ *The State*, May 6, 1893.

enslavement, and celebrated the journey of their departed loved ones into a world free of slavery. Emancipation provided free African Americans with new opportunities to build on the foundational relationships they had cultivated in slavery through funerals and burials. Through the erection of separate black civilian cemeteries, African Americans created sacred autonomous spaces for political organization, community building, and memorialization of the advances they had made since emancipation.

Yet the stakes of black funerals and the tools of protest available to African Americans had changed markedly as a result of the revolutionary changes wrought by Reconstruction. Haynes's funeral, and the funeral of the lynched men in Barnwell, South Carolina, demonstrated the continuity of using death as a means of protest. But what the funeral attendees were protesting was much different. In a very public way, African Americans now protested the legal discrimination they faced before state governments. The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, changed the dynamics of African American protest—as exhibited by the massive demonstration against Haynes's execution and the outpouring of support at his funeral. No longer were African Americans quietly mourning the loss of their enslaved kith and kin in private. Rather, they used deaths and funerals as opportunities to publicly denounce their unjust treatment, demand equality before the law, and pray for an end to racial discrimination.

Conclusion

“In the Cold Valley and Shadow of the South Land”

In March 1865, black Charlestonians announced and celebrated their freedom with a funeral. Nearly 4,000 black men and women marched through the streets followed by a hearse bearing a coffin labeled “slavery” with inscriptions emblazoned on the sides such as “death of slavery” and “Sumter dug his grave on the 13th of April, 1861.”¹ It was fitting that these formerly enslaved men and women used symbols of death to proclaim their new status as free people. After all, it had taken the lives of over 700,000 Americans to finally abolish the peculiar institution. But just because slavery was dead and “wrapped in its winding sheet and laid in the grave,” as the *Memphis Daily Appeal* acknowledged in 1872, did not mean that the spirit of slavery had been completely exorcised from the nation. Indeed, during Reconstruction African Americans presided over countless funerals—many for their murdered loved ones and community members.

In the years following the Civil War, African Americans looked optimistically toward their lives as freed people and relished the task of expanding American democracy. Abolition unshackled four million African Americans from the fetters of slavery, but it also untethered the racial codification of free and enslaved status that had been the bedrock of Southern labor and society. Using death threats and wanton murder, white Southerners attempted to circumscribe African Americans’ agency and coerce them back into a servile position. In these ways, white Southerners sought to reestablish white

¹ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 66-7.

supremacy and demonstrate that they still had the power over African Americans' lives and deaths, just as they had during slavery.

As this dissertation makes clear, however, African Americans used these rampant murders, mortal threats to their lives, and deaths from disease, starvation, and exposure to advance their own social, economic, and political goals. The loss of a loved one or a community member was a tremendous blow to those who survived. The grief and despair that freedpeople endured after the death of a husband, mother, son, or daughter from a microbe, a bullet, or a lynch mob left family members reeling from the loss. Collectively, however, African Americans used these deaths to successfully reconstitute their families and bolster their communities, to protest their unjust treatment at the hands of white Southerners, and to forge a relationship with the federal government in order to grant them political and civil rights that gave teeth to their free status. These actions took place in a variety of arenas: within the walls of national and private civilian cemeteries, in applications for widows' pensions, in the pulpits of black churches, around séance tables, on the witness stand at Congressional hearings, and in the columns of African-American newspapers. The damage death wrought in the lives of African Americans during Reconstruction cannot be overstated, but as long as an untimely death remained a prevalent threat to black lives, black men and women had a powerful, albeit grievous, tool at their disposal to strive for justice and racial equality.²

² Chandra Manning has explained that “[c]oming to grips with the Civil War, emancipation, and citizenship demands that we not step to one detached side or hold ourselves bemusedly above labels like triumph and tragedy, but rather that we live right in the unbearable tension between them.” This dissertation has attempted to burrow into that agonizing and fraught relationship between triumph and tragedy by exploring the interaction between the living and the dead. Scholars of emancipation and violence have noted the dangers of writing about the history of violence and suffering that was inherent to slavery and its demise. There are two major pitfalls that this dissertation has tried to sidestep. I have attempted not to whitewash the past or draw a teleological line between emancipation and the civil rights movement. Manning considers this the “all is well that ends well” approach in which historians minimize

The end of political Reconstruction in 1877, in which white Democrats wrested control of state and local governments from white and black Republicans across the South, constrained African Americans' political opportunities. The rise of the Jim Crow South came in fits and starts across the former Confederacy, but ultimately led to a consolidation of white supremacy characterized by lynching, legal segregation, and disfranchisement by the end of the nineteenth century.³ In 1889, Frederick Douglass took stock of this racial climate in America and lamented the obstacles that remained in the nation's path to racial parity. "The trouble is," Douglass cautioned, "that the colored people have still to contend against a fierce and formidable foe, the ghost of a by-gone, dead and buried institution." Death and death threats (those ghosts of slavery that Douglass warned about) were issues that African Americans reckoned with daily as white Southerners drew on the familiar strategy of violence and murder to reestablish white supremacy. Yet in this altered world, black men and women fought back with the tools and methods of protest that they had honed during slavery and emancipation as they attempted to bury the peculiar institution and its attendant racism once and for all.⁴

the suffering of those in the past to show that ultimately their pain was not in vain. The other pitfall is to focus solely on the violence and cruelty African Americans endured. In this case, suffering becomes a gratuitous spectacle that belies the centrality of death and suffering to the process of emancipation. Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2016), 279-88.

³ Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); William Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003); Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Kidada Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

⁴ Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, eds. Philip Foner and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1992), 729.

Over a year after the official end of Reconstruction, a group of African-American men in Louisiana implored African Americans across the country to demand that the federal government protect their citizenship rights. They did so by evoking the image of lynched African-American men. On December 28, 1878, the Young Men's Progressive Association, a black political organization in Louisiana, published an appeal to the "People of the United States." In their petition, Association members built on the discourse of death that African Americans had fostered before federal authorities and in the African-American press during Reconstruction, and demanded that the federal government ensure that the protections of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments apply to black people. Since the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments in 1868 and 1870, respectively, the Association remarked, "a reign of terror has been inaugurated which has bedewed the soil of our state with the blood of its people, rendered happy homes desolate. Wives have been made widows, children orphans, and the existence of our party threatened with destruction." With the return of local and state governments to Democratic control, the Association continued, "[w]hole parishes were run over and victims of "Local Self-Government" were left by scores hanging to trees."

By invoking the image of countless black men lynched after attempting to exercise their citizenship rights, the members of the Association sought to rouse their readers to action. Repeating an appeal that had reverberated in African-American newspapers throughout Reconstruction, they beseeched African Americans across the country "to set aside their personal differences in this solemn hour of our existence, and turn over a clean leaf in salutation of the dawn of a new era, which pleads for harmony,

unity, and cordiality.”⁵ The optimistic new era that the Young Men’s Association envisioned did not arrive. By the end of the nineteenth century, white Democrats had embarked on a deadly lynching campaign intent on restoring white supremacy and barring African-American men from the polls once and for all.

National cemeteries and Decoration Days offered black people living under Jim Crow an ever more precious opportunity to harness the power of the historical memory of the Civil War for political and personal purposes. On Decoration Day in 1888, eleven years after the political end of Reconstruction, the superintendent of Wilmington National Cemetery observed that Decoration Day still brought forth a “general outpouring of the colored people.”⁶ As the toxic racism of the Jim Crow South made political action more dangerous for African Americans, black men and women continued to quietly tend to the Union dead, just as they had during the war, as a means of affirming their dedication to the emancipationist legacy of the conflict. The *Washington Bee* reported in 1883 that throughout the South there was “no notice taken” of the graves of Federal soldiers, except “by the loyal and union loving colored people...If they did not do this the ‘unknown’ and nearly all the union dead that lie in the cold valley and shadow of the South land, would be untouched, unnoticed...Go witness on decoration day how they will plant on each

⁵ *Weekly Louisianian*, December 28, 1878. This appeal to end lynching and the language the Young Men’s Association used became a common refrain in African-American newspapers during Jim Crow. The black press became an important medium for African Americans to report lynchings across the country, vent their frustrations, and mobilize African Americans to defend themselves. For more on the role of the black press in the anti-lynching campaign, see Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me*, 101-44.

⁶ Newspaper clipping, May 31, 1888, box 72, E576, RG 92, NARA. In 1881 in New Orleans, black veterans drew on their service and sacrifice during the Civil War in order to protest their exclusion from planning the ceremonies to be held at Chalmette National Cemetery by white Union veterans. As a sergeant from the 73rd USCT asked “[di]d not the colored soldiers in the United States army fight bleed and die as bravely as their white brethren? Of course they did. Why then should this unjust discrimination be made between the white and colored surviving ex-soldiers?” *Weekly Louisianian*, May 14, 1881.

grave down there in the south their little token of affection and kind memory of the gallant dead.”⁷ As segregation and discriminatory legislation circumscribed the political opportunities available to black people, African Americans drew inspiration from national cemeteries to spur them forward.

In other towns and cities across the post-Reconstruction South, African Americans frequently turned to civilian cemeteries and funeral services as occasions to protest their subordinate status and hostile treatment at the hands of white Southerners. Following the lynching of three African American grocers in Memphis, Tennessee, in March 1892, black Memphians gathered at the Avery Chapel to pay their last respects to Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and William Stewart. Despite the horrific violence that black Memphians had witnessed just days earlier, African Americans came out in droves on the day of the funeral to support the families of the murdered men and to mourn their passing. According to the *New York Times*, the funeral “was attended by a great crowd of negroes, many of whom quit work for the day in order to be present.” The three coffins sat in front of the altar, and many in the crowd were “profoundly moved by the sight...many exclamations of grief and mutters of a sterner import broke from the hundreds who pressed forward to take a last look at the faces of the corpses...” Following the service, Moss, McDowell, and Stewart were buried in Mount Zion Cemetery, an African-American cemetery established by the Sons of Zion in 1876.⁸

The reports of lynched African Americans that inundated black newspapers offered a mechanism for black men and women to collectively mourn and protest the

⁷ *Washington Bee*, April 14, 1883.

⁸ *New York Times*, March 11, 1892

racial atrocities committed in the former Confederacy. Following the interment of Moss, McDowell, and Stewart, for example, black people across the nation participated in a national day of fasting and prayer to honor the victims. This mass protest against the murders also provided the impetus for Ida B. Wells to launch her anti-lynching crusade in her newspaper, *Freedom of Speech and Headlight*, in Memphis. Through the funeral service and the national outcry against the murders, the campaign to end lynching gained valuable momentum.⁹

Some African Americans gathered at funerals to denounce the violent ends to which their community members had succumbed. In Alexandria, Virginia, a white lynch mob murdered Joseph McCoy in 1897. Giving voice to the frustration many other African Americans must have felt after hearing of the murders of their loved ones, McCoy's aunt adamantly refused to bury the body of her nephew, stating "As the people killed him they will have to bury him."¹⁰ By refusing to spend the money to bury McCoy, and placing the onus on the city, McCoy's relatives and friends made a calculated decision to protest the circumstances of his death. While they refused to bury his body, McCoy's family and friends did arrange the funeral services at which they publicly condemned lynching. Reverend William Gains, a black Methodist in Alexandria, presided over the funeral. In his eulogy, Gains condemned the crime for which McCoy had been accused, while also denouncing his violent death at the hands of the lynch mob. "Those who brought about his death are inexcusable," Gains thundered, "...we cannot

⁹ *New York Times*, March 11, 1892; Linda McMurry, *Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 135.

¹⁰ *Alexandria Gazette*, April 24, 1897.

indorse mob violence and lynch law. Nor do we believe that the best citizens of this city approve of such.”¹¹ In his funeral sermon, Gains spoke out against lynching and urged the leaders of Alexandria to do the same. Indeed, clergy members such as Gaines galvanized the campaign to end lynching, and continued to be a source of political and spiritual guidance, just as they had during Reconstruction.

The omnipresent threat of death at the hands of white Southerners after Reconstruction spurred some African-American clergy to promote a colonization mission to Africa. Colonization proponents used the deaths of black men and women to garner support for a new movement, rather than attempt to advocate for additional protections in the United States. In 1877, during one of the first efforts for post-Reconstruction emigration, clergy led by South Carolina AME missionary Richard H. Cain advocated for emigration to Africa. Cain aptly summed up the frustration black people felt while fighting to survive under Jim Crow when he wrote in the *Missionary Record*, “the Colored people of the South are tired of the constant struggle for life and liberty with such result as the ‘Miss[iss]ippi Plan.”¹² Henry McNeal Turner, a bishop of the AME Church from Georgia, became one of the most outspoken advocates for emigration to Africa, believing that racial equality in “this bloody, lynching nation,” could never be achieved. He presented murder rates of African Americans in the South since enfranchisement to make his point. “A statesman of high repute, puts the murders and outrages perpetrated upon our people in the South alone, since 1867, at two hundred

¹¹ *Washington Post*, April 25, 1897.

¹² Quoted in William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 197.

thousand. Many of us think that the acclimating headaches of Africa, though sometimes possibly fatal, are not to be compared with such an orgy of blood and death.”¹³ For Turner and the hundreds of African Americans who traveled to Africa, the threat of disease offered a more promising future than remaining in murderous Dixie.

The debate over emigration polarized black leaders. Other black activists such as Frederick Douglass and upper-class black organizers in the North counseled against emigration, and instead advocated for migration to other parts of the United States. While emigration never gained a massive following, many clergy in the South voiced support for separatism and relocation as the antidote for the incessant threats against black people’s lives.¹⁴

For the majority of African Americans who remained in the Jim Crow South, businesses centered on death offered a source of economic and political empowerment. In the late-nineteenth century, Booker T. Washington opined that the major obstacle to black economic independence was “that we [African Americans] are always preparing to die. You meet a white man early Monday morning and ask him what he is preparing to do, and he will tell you that he is preparing to start business. You ask a colored man at the

¹³ Henry McNeal Turner. *Respect Black: The Writings and Speeches of Henry McNeal Turner*, ed. Edwin S. Redkey (New York: Arno Press, 1971), 52.

¹⁴ Steven Hahn argues that the calls black leaders such as David Walker, Martin Delany, and others had made for racial solidarity and repatriation during the nineteenth century coalesced into the international movement of Garveyism in the early 1900s. Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 470-74. Indeed, Marcus Garvey also pointed to lynch victims as evidence of the major obstacles African Americans faced in living in the United States. “As far as Negroes are concerned, in America we have the problem of lynching, peonage and disfranchisement...Do they lynch Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans or Japanese? No. And Why? Because these people are represented by great governments, mighty nations and empires, strongly organized. Yes, and ever ready to shed the last drop of blood and spend the last penny in the national treasury to protect the honor and integrity of a citizen outraged anywhere.” For more on the role of the clergy in fostering black nationalism see Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 191-224.

same time, and he will tell you that he is preparing to die.”¹⁵ While the threat of an untimely death was ominous and ever-present, some African Americans used it to their own economic advantage. The late-nineteenth century witnessed the rise of the professional black funeral home industry, in which black undertakers provided their fellow African-American community members with proper funerary rites and burials.

The growth of the black undertaker as a profession was a product of a larger development in which segregation became embedded in the southern economy. Booker T. Washington urged black business-owners to focus their energies on securing African-American customers. The most striking example of this movement was Washington’s creation of the National Negro Business League (NNBL). As a result of this trend, black undertakers became the sole final caregivers of African-American bodies. The rise of the professional black undertaker consolidated the various mortuary institutions and professions black men and women had nurtured during Reconstruction—burial societies, grave diggers, and black civilian cemeteries—into one occupation. One undertaker in Little Rock, Arkansas, proudly reported to the NNBL that “every funeral [I handle] that turns out in Little Rock, everything needed in the line, from a buggy up, is owned by the Negro that drives it or by the undertaker that conducts it.”¹⁶ Black undertakers such as G. W. Franklin, a former blacksmith from Chattanooga, Tennessee, for example, reported that when he began his business he had to make his own hearse and hire a horse, but by

¹⁵ Victoria Earle Matthews, ed. *Black-Belt Diamonds: Gems from the Speeches, Addresses, and Talks to Students of Booker T. Washington Principal of Tuskegee Institute* (New York: Fortune and Scott, 1898), 41

¹⁶ Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 41-5.

1908 he had acquired four hearses, eighteen horses, twelve hacks, and two cemeteries where he plied his trade.¹⁷ In the late-nineteenth century, African Americans found a way to make a living through the work of death despite discriminatory legislation and prejudice that constrained their other economic opportunities.

As pillars of their communities, black undertakers also became political leaders at the forefront of protests against racial segregation. In 1891, Alcee Labat and Myrthil J. Piron, prominent Afro-Creole undertakers in New Orleans, joined sixteen other Afro-Creole leaders in forming the Citizens Committee. Labat also served as a board member of the black newspaper, the *Crusader*, the primary communication for the Committee. The Committee organized to protest the Separate Car Act, a piece of Jim Crow legislation that stipulated that white and black passengers must sit in separate cars. The committee tested the constitutionality of the Separate Car Act by having Homer Plessy, a light-skinned man of African descent, intentionally violate the law by sitting in a car designated for white passengers. The case eventually made its way to the Supreme Court and ended in the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that ruled in favor of “separate but equal” accommodations and deemed segregation to be constitutional. In response to Labat’s significant leadership in organizing this resistance to the legal codification of racial segregation, white New Orleanians burned his funeral home business in an act of vengeance against him and the community his business served.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Baltimore Sun*, August 21, 1908.

¹⁸ Other black undertakers in the South spearheaded similar protests against segregation. In 1905 in Nashville, Tennessee, Preston Taylor, a former slave, Union veteran, pastor, and undertaker, organized a protest against an act that mandated separate street cars for white and black passengers. Black people in Nashville protested the legislation by organizing a streetcar boycott. Taylor’s successful undertaking business made him a prominent member of Nashville’s black community and he used his sizeable wealth social capital to start the Union Transportation Company, a black-owned and operated street car business.

The role of twentieth-century African-American undertakers as civil rights activists evinced the centrality of death to African-American political activism and the civil rights movement. Black funeral directors frequently cared for the bodies of lynch victims and, when possible, worked in conjunction with the press to gain national attention for the racism African Americans faced nationwide. The most illustrative example of this is the 1955 case of Emmett Till. In August 1955, fourteen year-old Emmett Till, was ruthlessly murdered after he allegedly whistled at a white woman in Money, Mississippi. Authorities found his brutalized body washed up on the banks of the Tallahatchie River days later. Tallahatchie County sheriff, Harold C. Strider, immediately ordered a black funeral home director to bury Till's body, likely to prevent additional media attention. But Till's mother in Chicago, Mamie Till Bradley, demanded that authorities return her son's body.

In Chicago, Till Bradley asked A. A. Rayner, a prominent black funeral home director, to prepare an open casket funeral for Till. At the funeral, Till Bradley allowed *Jet* magazine and the *Chicago Defender*, both African-American publications, to photograph her son's mangled corpse and publish the photos. She recalled, "I knew that if they walked by the casket, if people opened the pages of *Jet* magazine and the *Chicago Defender*, if other people could see it with their *own* eyes, then together we might find a way to express what we had seen." Some 50,000 people visited Rayner's funeral home and passed by Till's casket. Thousands more viewed his remains in the pages of *Jet* and the *Chicago Defender*. The graphic images were visible representations of the hatred

By 1906, however, the Union Transportation company buckled under financial duress from exorbitant taxes, fees, and expenditures. Smith, *To Serve the Living*, 58-64.

many white Southerners harbored towards black people, and became key to galvanizing the modern civil rights movement.¹⁹

Till Bradley's determination to have her son's body viewed so that "the world could see what they did to my boy," mirrored similar actions of African-American women years earlier during Reconstruction who stood before congressional committees and recalled in graphic detail the family members they lost at the hands of white mobs. Likewise, Till Bradley's use of the press was reminiscent of the ways in which African-American newspapers during Reconstruction strove to describe the murders committed by white people in the South, and the effects those mortal losses had on the family members that survived. In deciding to have an open casket, Till Bradley drew on tactics that African-Americans had forged in the crucible of slavery, honed during Reconstruction, and continued to deploy in the twentieth-century South.

The development of African-American mortuary politics and the ways in which black people responded to murders and lynchings of their community members should not be viewed as a triumphalist narrative in which African Americans endured and persevered against all odds. Instead, these actions reflected the violent nature of racism in the United States and illuminated the ways in which marginalized people succeeding in creating spaces to protest their inequality within a brutally racist society. While enslaved, men and women had sought comfort among their relatives and community members as they buried their dead and celebrated their passage into an afterlife free from slavery. With the Civil War and emancipation, thousands of African Americans died in pursuit of

¹⁹ For an overview of the Emmett Till case and the role of black funeral directors in garnering national attention for Till's murder, see Smith, *To Serve the Living*, 124-30.

freedom as refugees from slavery or as Union soldiers. Yet these deaths took on new political meanings as black people capitalized on their new free status. For all of the promises emancipation engendered, it also had its perils. In the face of unremitting death threats and murders, African Americans relied on the mortuary politics they had fostered while enslaved to take control of their lives and those of their loved ones. The murders and attempted murders of African Americans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were flashpoints that laid bare the inequality and racism that undergirded Southern society. In these moments, African Americans acted in politically conscious and public ways by testifying, protesting, and writing about their losses. They also communally mourned these deaths by gathering to pray in black churches and by attending funerals in African-American cemeteries. By using their mortuary practices to insist on the value of black lives—and the significance of black deaths—African Americans cultivated a method of protest against racism and inequality that remains politically salient and continues to shape the struggle for racial justice.

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