The Gentleman from Memphis: Robert R. Church Jr. and the Politics of the Early Civil Rights Movement

Darius Jamal Young

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THE GENTLEMAN FROM MEMPHIS: ROBERT R. CHURCH JR. AND THE POLITICS OF THE EARLY CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

by

Darius Jamal Young

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Abstract


This dissertation examines the life and career of Robert Church Jr. Church was the son of the first black millionaire in Memphis, Tennessee and a member of the southern black elite. As a child he inherited a life of privilege and could have easily rested on the fortune his father accumulated. Instead, Church decided to embark on a career as politician and activist. At the height of his career he would become the most recognizable black figure in the Republican Party.

"The Gentleman from Memphis" serves as a lens into the political activity of African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century. It focuses on the strategies that Church used to organize and empower black people through the vote. Church believed that voting served as the most pragmatic approach for African Americans to obtain full citizenship in this country. Through the organization he founded, the Lincoln League of America, Church demonstrated the political agency of African Americans on a national level. His political philosophy moves our understanding of black politics beyond formal political victories. Instead this dissertation argues that Church used the arena of politics to interject the plight of the black community into the national political discourse. By enfranchising thousands of black southerners and developing a substantial voting constituency, black voters could have their voices heard among the nation's most prominent policy-makers. Specifically, this dissertation focuses on the incremental victories achieved by black voters, and argues that the activism of Church and his colleagues served as the catalyst for the traditional civil rights movement.
I used Church's correspondences, newspapers, government records, and institutional records to construct a political biography that moves Church's significance beyond Memphis and argues that he should be remembered as one of the most influential black leaders of his era. His connection with prominent black and white leaders made him an asset to the Republican Party, as well as the leading black organizations. His advice was coveted by Presidents of the United States, the leaders of the NAACP, politicians, labor leaders, and scholars. During the first half of the twentieth century Church played a role in nearly every major black movement. This dissertation places Church into the historical narrative of black leadership during the pre-civil rights era and provides a more intimate understanding of black political strategies during the era.
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**Introduction**

The Gentleman from Memphis

In 1936, Jesse Owens served as one of the most popular black figures in America. That year he ran and leapt his way to four gold medals at the Summer Olympics held in Berlin, Germany. Much like Joe Louis the year prior, a black male athlete was used as an international symbol of American superiority. More importantly Owens’ dominance at the Olympics symbolized the good over the bad. American democracy had figuratively defeated Nazi Germany. For black America, however, the celebration of Owens meant something different. As Americans pretended to be the international standard of freedom, black people suffered from the oppressive confines of racism. Owens dominance of white athletes epitomized black hopes for conquering the racial struggles in the country. His victories transcended track and field and shaped the politics of the nation. Most black athletes avoided the arena of formal politics, but the Olympic champion accepted an opportunity to campaign for the Republican Presidential candidate, Alfred Landon. The Republican National Committee sponsored a speaking tour featuring Owens to capitalize on his fame. To accompany him on the Midwest swing of the tour was America’s leading black Republican for the past two decades, Robert R. Church Jr. Owens by himself could bring in the crowds by the thousands, but the RNC needed the legitimacy of Church to resonate with the voters.\(^1\)

Church rode in a “special car” with Owens throughout Ohio, stopping in Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati. From there, they toured the Midwestern cities of

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Cairo, Illinois; St. Louis, Missouri; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Chicago, Illinois. Black Republicans Roscoe Conkling Simmons and Perry Howard also joined them on the road. Owens gave speeches that praised America as the land of opportunity and told stories of his Olympic glory. However, he said very little about Alf Landon’s policies and sometimes appeared unprepared. Simmons and Howard spoke about the more substantive issues in connection with the presidential race. Remaining in the background, visible but silent, was Bob Church. As he had done throughout his political career, he chose to remain behind the scenes.2

The Owens tour is a clear reflection of Church’s approach to leadership. The RNC wanted its most influential black figure to accompany America’s most celebrated black athlete, and Church used the notoriety of more popular leaders to disseminate his messages to the masses. America’s black darling of the moment had a much more far-reaching effect on black voters than the old guard black Republicans, whose prestige was fading by the 1930s. Church did not have the charisma to energize voters alone. He was more of an intellectual power broker who preferred to work with a select group of leaders, black and white, to develop strategies that placed the plight of black Americans into the national political discourse. Church wanted to empower African Americans with the ballot so they could challenge national political leaders for their civil rights. By remaining in the background, Church earned the respect of the nation’s most prominent leaders. He negotiated directly with people who had the power to enact policies that could drastically improve the lives of African Americans. While Church may have failed to pass significant legislation that changed the place of black Americans, the “Negro question” could no longer be ignored. The incremental victories won by the black

2 Chicago Defender, October 17, 1936; Capital Plaindealer, October 18, 1936.
leaders of Church’s era impacted the collective consciousness of white Americans, building a foundation for the more formal political victories of the 1950s and 1960s.³

Church was at the center of nearly every major black political movement of the first half of the twentieth century; however, his name is often ignored by historians. Church should be remembered as one of the most influential black leaders of his era. Church, at the height of his popularity, possessed as much notoriety as any of his contemporaries. As a black political leader he had few rivals. Presidents, congressmen, labor organizers, NAACP officials, businessmen, tycoons, and intellectuals all corresponded with Church to receive guidance on how to address the race problem. Church was not just a local leader in Memphis. His leadership transcended his well-known relationship with white political boss Edward Hull Crump. Church and Crump forged an alliance that developed each other’s political machine. While this is a significant aspect of Church’s contributions, his influence carried beyond the Bluff City.⁴

Church was a complex person. He was a member of the black elite, a politician, an institution builder, and an activist. Church combined these characteristics to forge a career that would help change the American democratic process. In 1953, The Journal of Negro History commented that Church “was always alert and a watchman on the wall in


behalf of civil and human rights for Negroes.” No person before him had more success in ushering black people to the polls. Throughout his career he labored to protect the welfare of African Americans.5

His upbringing in an elite family prepared him to lead. Church’s parents nurtured his development by educating him in private, predominantly white institutions. Robert Church Sr. avoided all aspects of Jim Crow society while raising his children. He had the wealth to avoid segregation as much as possible. The children attended integrated schools, churches, and organizations. When traveling, Church Sr. reserved private coaches to spare young Bob the humiliation that most black people faced in the South. These child-rearing techniques helped to create a sense of entitlement in Church. As Church matured, he did not carry the same insecurities of confronting whites as the majority of African Americans. He did not believe that he had to adhere to the strict codes of racial etiquette. Church was also taught that he had a duty to uplift others. He could not rest on the laurels of his father. Instead, he developed a connection to the black masses and seized the opportunity to be one of their primary advocates. His lifestyle provided the training necessary to agitate influential whites in the name of securing true freedom for all African Americans. This became his lifelong mission.6

Church worked to obtain these rights through the realm of politics. He used the Republican Party as a tool for social change. Church has been unfairly categorized as


blind follower of the GOP. He saw politics as a way of challenging the status quo and forcing white Americans to live up to the promises of the Constitution. The constitutional framework of American society guarantees the fundamental concept of human equality and human rights. “It is within this conceptual milieu, inherited from the American Revolution, that the Negro has carried on his struggles for social, political and economic emancipation,” wrote Ralph Bunche.7 Church believed the most deliberate approach to obtaining these rights was by challenging the very people who had the authority to interpret, amend, and enforce the Constitution. His lifelong affiliation with the Republican Party demonstrates his pragmatism. Church recognized that African Americans did not have a true advocate from either faction, but he chose to embrace the romanticized myth of the “Party of Lincoln” to convince whites to live up to the ideals of the Party, and to inspire African Americans to remain loyal to the party that freed the slaves. Church recognized that black people needed a stage to voice their concerns, only then could they make their issues a national problem. For most of his career, the Republican Party seemed to be the natural political home for African Americans, since the Democratic Party was not a feasible option for blacks in the South.

Church’s role within the Party was always as more of an agitator than of a supporter. He fought tirelessly to get white Republicans to recognize the plight of African Americans and to serve as their political advocate. From his beginnings in the 1910s until his death in the 1950s, Church’s platform always focused on the inclusion of African Americans in mainstream society. He neither received payments from the Republican National Committee nor ever ran for office. Serving as a public official

would have limited his effectiveness as a leader. As a person who was professionally and financially independent from the GOP, he had the autonomy necessary to fight within the Party as vigorously as he did publicly. Church funded his own endeavors and paid his way to national conventions. He had the ability to mobilize more black voters to the polls than any other leader who preceded him. This made him an asset to the Party.

Church’s influence and wealth further enabled him to challenge white policymakers without fear of repercussions. Church’s political machine allowed him to negotiate basic concessions for the black community on a local level, while continuously challenging the racial consciousness of white Americans nationally. His relentless pursuit of equality helped bring about gradual change. Early on, he identified the political potential of the African American community, and he turned this innate political energy into a solid voting constituency. By enfranchising thousands of African Americans, Church helped hold their elected officials accountable. Church often warned Republicans of the consequences of ignoring their black constituency. During the FDR years, when blacks’ political loyalty started to shift, Church blamed the Republicans’ lack of concern, not black voters, for their defection from the Party. Church commented that he never intended for all African Americans to be Republicans, “but the majority of Negroes (to) become politically alive.”

Church developed the Lincoln League of Tennessee into a national organization. The Lincoln League of America served as essentially the black Republican National Convention throughout the 1920s. It was an opportunity to showcase the diversity of black leadership. It provided a platform for the likes of Roscoe Conkling Simmons,

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Perry Howard, Henry Lincoln Johnson, and Ben Davis to showcase their talents and ascend in the ranks of the GOP. It also allowed elite black leaders to connect with the masses, and it provided a forum for women to articulate their unique concerns. Church developed the Lincoln League into one of the most significant black organizations of its era.

Church also played a significant role in the expansion of the nation’s preeminent civil rights organization, the NAACP. As the first exclusively southern member of the executive board, Church helped establish sixty-eight branches in fourteen southern states. His house often served as a headquarters for James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, and Roy Wilkins to investigate lynchings in the Mississippi Delta region. Church would also establish connections and order local blacks in the area to do preliminary investigations prior to their visits. Through these two institutions, Church was at the forefront of the movement to secure political and social rights for all African Americans. Only by investigating the lives and careers of Church and his network of black leaders can we understand the totality of the accomplishments of the better-known African Americans.  

“It is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals,” wrote Martin Luther King Jr. in his 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” King’s frustrations in the 1960s suggest that there was no perfect approach to securing

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the civil and human rights for African Americans. He still battled many of the enemies that leaders fought against during Church’s era. Church made many mistakes as a leader. At times he contradicted his own beliefs in an effort to gain concessions for the black community. However, through it all he kept African Americans at the top of his agenda. Church’s success will not be measured in political victories or passed legislation. His contributions are nevertheless significant. Black activism was continuous throughout the twentieth century and each generation built on the progress of the past. In order to understand this process, we have to move the discussion beyond the race’s most recognizable figures and examine the complexities of these movements. The “top down” or “bottom up” approach to African American history still leaves out the contributions of leaders who served as middlemen between the working-class and the national celebrities. They served as the black community’s brokers for civil rights. Their knowledge, experience, and connections provided a counter to the racist image of black men and women, while simultaneously forcing the United States to address the “Negro Question.” The contributions of Robert Church Jr. provide a lens into the complexity of black leadership during his era.11

Chapter 1
Growing Up Church

Robert Church Sr. grew up knowing little about his mother. When he was a young child, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, she was sold to a slave owning family in Louisiana, where she remained until her death in 1851. Charles Beckwith Church, Robert’s father, rarely reminisced about their relationship. This caused some confusion in Robert's own self-identity. When asked once, "How much of a colored man are you?," he answered, "I don't know - very little...My father is a white man; my mother is as white as I am...My father owned my mother." Church also served as his father's slave even though Church admitted, "He does not openly recognize me." Adding to the mystery of the Church family origins was a letter that Robert Sr. received from a young man from Lynchburg, Virginia, who claimed he was the grandson of a wealthy tobacco planter who once owned his mother.¹

In the letter he first discussed the circumstances that brought Robert’s grandmother to the United States. He also shared the stories he learned of Robert’s mother, Emmeline. The retelling of this story continued for generations, as other members of the former slave owning family contacted the children and grandchildren of Robert Sr. and offered similar accounts of this original correspondence. The letters explained that Emmeline grew up the daughter of a Malay princess, named Lucy, who

was captured by rebel forces in the early nineteenth century on the island of San Domingo. The letters emphasized that Lucy was not African. She belonged to an aristocratic family that spoke French and wore fine jewelry. The insurgents overthrew the royal family and took the Malaysian beauty in their custody and offered her a choice of being beheaded or sold into slavery. She opted for the latter. From there she boarded a slave ship bound for the United States during the first decade of the nineteenth century.⁴

After several weeks at sea, Lucy arrived in Norfolk, Virginia. The tobacco merchant’s grandson explained that his grandfather would travel from Lynchburg, Virginia, to Norfolk with the intent to purchase “wild Africans.” He elaborated on his grandfather’s rationale by stating, “By distributing them among other slaves on the plantations, they would in course of time become civilized.”⁵ However, Lucy stood out amongst the other “uncivilized” Africans because she was a “bright red young girl with very long straight hair.” He continued, “She attracted a great deal of attention by her beauty and the jewelry she wore, and consequently brought a fancy price.”⁶ After an intense bidding war for the Malaysian princess, the tobacco planter placed her on one of his three Virginia plantations.

Although records officially recognized Lucy as an enslaved woman, the owner “never treated her as a slave” and Lucy had the “privilege” of working as a seamstress for the tobacco merchant’s family. The planter’s grandson emphasized that she “never did


⁴ Church and Church, *The Robert R. Churches*, 4.
any menial work in her life."5 Emmeline was born in Lynchburg, Virginia, although an exact date or her father is not provided by the sources available. She enjoyed the same privileges as her mother. Both the enslaved woman and the little girl remained on the plantation until the economic demand for tobacco declined in lieu of the expanding cotton industry. Eventually their master decided to sell the mother and daughter along with the rest of his slaves for fiscal reasons. A slave owner purchased Emmeline and moved with her to Holly Springs. According to numerous accounts, he assured Lucy that he would raise Emmeline as if she was his own daughter. A letter written to Mary Church Terrell by a descendant of the slaveholding family boasts, “he bought the very little girl, Emmeline, and gave her to my mother, who was then his baby girl. My mother’s name was Rosalie and she and the little girl, Emmeline, were brought up more as two sisters than as mistress and maid.”6 A planter from Natchez, Mississippi would later buy Lucy, and like many enslaved mothers and daughters, the two were split and never saw each other again.

In Holly Springs, Emmeline had a relationship with “Captain” Charles Beckwith Church, although the circumstances of their acquaintance are not clear. According to congressional testimony by Robert Sr., he admitted that Emmeline was one of his father’s slaves, but it is not clear if he was the slave owner who purchased her from Virginia. Captain Church and Emmeline could have had a consensual relationship, or she could have been sexually exploited, like countless other enslaved women; Robert Sr. never mentioned his father’s affection for Emmeline or their experiences together. Regardless,

5 Ibid.

Robert Sr. was born out of their union on June 18, 1839. Captain Church raised Robert after Emmeline’s master sold her to a white family in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she learned French and lived as a Creole woman until her death. Robert, like Emmeline before him, never saw his mother again.  

The saga of Lucy and Emmeline is probably more legend than fact. There is a lot of confusion as to whether or not the authors of the letters were anonymous members of a slave owning family, or members of the white side of Church’s family. However, this romantic remembrance of the Church family’s slave ancestry, and more importantly the Churches’ embrace of the tale, offers insight into the construction of a collective identity among the southern black elite. The tale suggests that a slave aristocracy existed even within the oppressive confines of the peculiar institution. The letters emphasized that Emmeline had no African blood, spoke French, lived in cabins away from other enslaved Africans, and worked as a seamstress. Her owners, moreover, never considered her a slave. Lucy and Emmeline held positions of distinction on their family’s plantations and ascended to the very top of the social hierarchy for enslaved laborers. The slave owning family that wrote these letters knew of the Churches’ success, and may have felt guilty for enslaving the ancestors of one of the nations’ most prominent African American

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families. The letters often commented on the Churches’ success and extended congratulatory gestures to the family. By reaching out to the Churches, they perhaps tried to separate themselves from the immorality of their forefathers. But that the Churches embraced their link to an enslaved aristocracy deserves further analysis.\(^8\)

In many instances, a direct link to the “peculiar institution” served as a justifiable reason to deny a person’s membership in the black elite, especially in the North. Although skin color, refinement, education, wealth, family pedigree, social organizations, and family prominence remained important qualifiers in both regions, the issue of recent slave ancestry separates the two. The northern black elite emphasized the ability to trace their family heritage to the relatively small quasi-free black societies in places such as New England, New York, and even Washington D.C. The social status of privileged blacks in the North depended on the number of generations removed from slavery as much as any other factors. The Churches and other southern black elite families did not have this option. Therefore, they embraced the idea of tying their family heritage to privileged slaves who did not typically work in the fields, but instead worked as house servants, domestics, or skilled slaves. They were also usually the offspring of slave owners who developed relationships with enslaved women, or the product of sexually abused black women on the plantation.\(^9\)


For generations the Church family embraced the myth of Emmeline’s high status. They also embraced the idea that she worked for progressive slave owners who did not overtly exploit their laborers. They used the tale, whether consciously or subconsciously, to legitimize their current position among the nations’ most prominent black families. Mary Church Terrell did challenge the concept of the good master/slave relationship in her autobiography, *A Colored Woman in a White World*. She stated, “the anguish of one slave mother from whom her baby was snatched away outweighs all the kindness and goodness which were occasionally shown a fortunate, favored slave.”

She acknowledged that the torture of separating family members outweighed the perceived kindness of a plantation owner. The remaining members of the family, however, found solace in the idea that their ancestors lived an exceptional life compared to the typical experience for African Americans on a tobacco plantation. This generational link to a slave aristocracy allowed a few wealthy southern blacks to solidify their status among the black elite.

The Church family history offers an intimate portrayal of the process by which southern black aristocratic families constructed and maintained their status for generations. Most of the scholarly discourse that exists on the black elite focuses on their “exclusivity and dominance of black institutions.” It implies that their quests to assume leadership positions were motivated only by their self interest. They did not genuinely crusade on behalf of the black majority. However, this interpretation needs reevaluation.

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The Church family took calculated measures not only to protect their status in society, but also to ensure the development of a class of leaders that could impact the African American community as a whole. Slavery, emancipation, and the rise of the Jim Crow South determined the strategies used by elite families such as the Churches. For instance, Robert Sr. and other upper-class parents wanted to spare their children from the humiliating experiences most African Americans suffered in the South. They understood that their children would have to exude confidence and be willing to confront whites in their adult years. By subjecting their children to demeaning exchanges with whites, they risked harming their children’s ability to resist white supremacy as adults. During the early civil rights struggles of the twentieth century, a class of nurtured leaders, including Robert Church Jr., shared a collective consciousness with all classes of black society. The criteria for the black elite continuously evolved, reflecting the ongoing changes in American society, especially in regards to race.\(^\text{12}\)

In the black elite’s initial appeals for social recognition, many of its members gradually realized that despite their ancestry, education, wealth, and any other accomplishments, their status would ultimately be determined by their race. This barrier became more apparent after Reconstruction, when former white abolitionists abandoned their quest to improve race relations and white supremacists violently “redeemed” the

South. In the remaining decades of the nineteenth century, black elites, especially in the South, devised new strategies that eschewed proving their equality to whites. Instead, they established a foundation for African Americans to succeed despite the direst of circumstances. To be included within the black elite, one needed to be a leader. They no longer solely appealed to whites for approval. Instead upper-class blacks sought the approval of the black community – a possibility only made by expressing genuine concern for their race. The rejection of the black elite by their white counterparts, the establishment of the Jim Crow South, and the violence of white southern terrorism on black society encouraged African Americans to develop a more substantial, congruent society. Families such as the Churches embodied the characteristics of the new southern black elite as evidenced by their family background, accumulation of wealth, educational training, faith, professions, associations with fraternal orders, marriages and political leadership. The success of Robert Church Jr. reflected the sacrifice of his parents, especially his father.\footnote{Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890 – 1940*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 46 – 51; Moore, *Leading the Race*, 3. See also Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998); Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Harold Rabinowitz, *Race Relation in the Urban South, 1865 – 1890* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951) for comprehensive studies focusing on the development of the Jim Crow South.}

Robert Church Sr. continued his mother’s legacy of serving as a “fortunate, favored slave” in his father’s riverboat company. He often spoke of his father with the typical affection of any father/son relationship. Charles did not treat his son as a slave. Captain Church instilled in young Robert to always defend himself and urged him to
“never be a coward.”

He continued, “If anybody strikes you, hit him back and I’ll stand by you.” Charles openly sided with the Union despite residing in the heart of the Confederacy. Although his father’s business suffered as a result of his loyalty, Robert learned the importance of possessing high integrity and honor, lessons he would later instill in his son.

On Captain Church’s ship, the *Victoria*, Robert Sr. became accustomed to hard work. He started as a dishwasher and eventually moved up to the position of steward, a title of distinction within the riverboat industry. In general, slave life on the riverboats mirrored many of the same characteristics of life on the plantation. This differed from the maritime experience of slaves at deep sea. Slaves who worked on the ocean tended to have more independence and mobility, while the black people who worked on riverboats were subjected to harsher working conditions, longer days, and were often the victims of violence. Rivers, like the Mississippi River where Robert worked, ran through the same areas that stripped black people of their humanity and subjected them to lives of uncompensated labor. Since there was very little geographical separation from plantation and riverboat slavery, the captains used many of the practices that slave masters used to control their laborers. Robert probably enjoyed more privileges than the typical laborer on the ship. He admittedly capitalized on his inherited status, as the master’s son, to escape the limitations of slavery. This created a clear distinction between Robert, a perceived elite slave, and the other laborers on the boats.

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During Robert’s years as a steward, he learned the value of earning and thrift, essential values to upper-class Americans. Robert never gained any formal education, but as Mary Church Terrell recalled, he taught himself how to read and acquired useful habits. For instance, Robert learned the benefit of buying supplies in bulk while making transactions for his father’s company. Mary stated, “My earliest recollection is of seeing barrels of flour, firkins of butter, and large tins or wooden buckets of lard. He would buy turkeys and chickens by the crate.” Robert’s responsibilities allowed him the opportunity to develop a sophisticated business acumen that surpassed many of his peers, regardless of race. He used these skills to solidify his position as one of the most successful African American businessmen of his era. Because of the opportunities afforded to Robert and his relationship to his father, he never considered himself a slave. At a Congressional hearing Church was asked, "Were you ever a slave?" "Yes," replied Church, "but my father always gave me everything I wanted." Charles never discouraged Robert from pursuing his dreams. With the money he earned while working for his father, Robert decided to embark on a new life in Memphis, Tennessee.

Inspired by his father’s advice to “never be a coward,” in 1862 Robert decided to move to Tennessee in the midst of the Civil War. Although Robert understood the repercussions of being black in the South, he never experienced the restrictions of being a slave. Mary Church Terrell described him as a man of “innate culture.”

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16 Terrell, A Colored Woman, 35.

17 U.S. Congress, Memphis Riots and Massacre (1866).


19 Terrell, A Colored Woman, 1-12.
confidence to excel in what was typically a dire situation for most African Americans in Tennessee. He moved to Memphis not with the intention of merely finding work, but with the notion of establishing himself as an entrepreneur.\textsuperscript{20}

Robert capitalized on Memphis’s expanding economy. In the wake of emancipation, African Americans and rural whites from the Mississippi Delta began to move to Memphis. Its unique geographic location influenced the city’s economic development and racial composition. Located on a Mississippi River bluff and on the borders of northern Mississippi and eastern Arkansas, Memphis emerged as a profitable distribution center for many goods. By the 1860s the city’s ethnic make-up included African Americans, Anglo-Americans, Germans, and the Irish. Although close in proximity to his hometown of Holly Springs, Mississippi, Memphis was vastly different from his experiences on his father’s riverboats.\textsuperscript{21}

During his initial years in Memphis, Robert bought several residential properties including a hotel, a restaurant, and a saloon, however; he did not accomplish this alone. In 1863 he married his first wife, Louisa Ayers, with whom he had two children, Thomas Ayers Church and Mary Church (the future women’s rights activist and pioneer, Mary Church Terrell). Louisa, a successful businesswoman, owned a profitable hair salon patronized by many well-to-do white women in the city. Her success preceded the fortune that Robert would later amass. In fact it was Louisa’s wealth that allowed the Churches to purchase their first fashionable home. Although reserved in manner, Mary


described her father as having “the most violent temper of any human being whom I have come in contact.”\textsuperscript{22} If angered, he could “completely lose himself,” and become consumed with rage. Church “often carried a pistol and would pull it at the slightest provocation on policemen, sheriffs, a snowball-throwing crowd, or anyone else who got in his way.”\textsuperscript{23} On one occasion Church fought two white men on Beale Street after being provoked and insulted. The newspaper reported that the two men were incarcerated with their “heads broken.”\textsuperscript{24} In February 1867 he was arrested and later discharged after shooting a white police officer and three months later he was arrested again for assaulting a black patron at his saloon. Robert’s volatile temperament waned in his later years, but certainly affected his relationship with Louisa. Based on the writings of Mary Church Terrell, their marriage has been described as “not peaceful” and the couple divorced four years later in 1867. Louisa kept custody of the children, and Robert acquired a portion of her assets, money he used as investment capital to expand his fortune.\textsuperscript{25}

The South represented a region in transition. New debates over politics, economics, freedmen, Reconstruction policies, and women’s rights forced southerners to react, whether positively or negatively, to the creation of a modern society that included new interactions between races, technologies, ideas, and styles. Rural southerners from the Mississippi Delta converged on Memphis to capitalize on the city’s trading industry.

\textsuperscript{22} Terrell, \textit{A Colored Woman}, 36.


\textsuperscript{24} Terrell, \textit{A Colored Woman}, 36.

Memphis also attracted educated African Americans, women activists, businessmen, and other professionals. This amalgamation of ethnicities, educational backgrounds, gender roles, and class disparities encouraged the development of “organizations devoted to self-advancement or reform, and put new pressures on race relations.” The post-emancipation population of Memphis forced all of the city’s residents to redefine ideas of authority. It encouraged underrepresented groups to challenge pre-existing stereotypes of what they ought to do and be, while southern whites worked diligently to protect the ideals and customs of the old South.

Emancipation and the subsequent rise of successful African Americans threatened the notion that black people were inherently inferior and forced whites, especially poor whites, to reassert their supremacy. At the end of the Civil War “white southerners created their modern sense of themselves as different, externally, from the rest of Americans and different internally, from African Americans, at the level of culture.” The New South that rejected northern influence and sought to obstruct black progress developed strategies to preserve their deep affinity for an imaginary Dixie that existed prior to their defeat by the Union Army. In many instances, the tactic used to maintain social order in Memphis was violence.

26 Ayers, _The Promise of the New South_, 56.


Robert Sr.’s success as a businessman prompted violent responses from disgruntled white southerners who sought to reestablish their supremacy in the South. Church’s success surpassed many of his white contemporaries within the city and region. His increased social position threatened the racial hierarchy of the South. White southerners worked to preserve their traditional southern culture. In 1866, for instance, a Memphis riot left forty-six black people and two whites dead. Although the riot was largely the result of increased racial tensions caused by local Memphians losing their jobs to rural migrants from the Mississippi Delta, the leaders of the mob identified Church as one of their prime targets. His close friends warned him that “he was one of the colored men to be shot.”

His wife begged him to stay home that day, but he ignored her pleas and continued to work in spite of the peril he knew he faced. During the riot, he was shot in the back of his head. In a congressional testimony on the Memphis riots, Church testified, "on Wednesday evening, about nine o'clock, a crowd came by me, when they got hold of a colored man and beat him unmercifully; they ordered me to shut up my house; they fired at me and struck me in the neck; another ball glanced past me, and another ball struck me; in all they shot twelve to fifteen shots at me." The shooters believed they killed Church and then, "broke into the saloon, drank all the whiskey, broke open the money drawers." In all they took two hundred ninety dollars and caused approximately seven hundred and fifty dollars worth of damage.

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Church explained that the people who shot him and looted his saloon were policemen. According to Mary, “He would undoubtedly have been shot to death if the rioters had not believed they had finished him when he fell to the ground.” He survived, but suffered from incredibly painful migraine headaches that were so intense at times that Robert threatened to claim his own life.

A year after the near fatal shooting, Church continued to build his wealth through various business ventures; however, it was not until the yellow fever epidemics of 1878 and 1879 that Church solidified his position as the wealthiest African American in Memphis and arguably the region. The epidemic spawned from an inefficient sewer system and unsanitary drinking water. The health crisis drastically altered the racial composition of the city and virtually transformed Memphis into a “new” and improved southern city. Many of the city’s wealthiest residents sought refuge and fled, leaving behind their homes, land, businesses, and other possessions, while the city’s poorer ethnic groups, such as the Irish and African Americans, remained in Memphis. Robert Church Sr., bought the first bond to restore the City Charter for $1000. This gesture endeared him to the white community. He then purchased numerous properties vacated by fleeing Memphians. His investments paid off during the early 1880s after the local health department rectified the city’s dysfunctional sewer system and built artesian wells for drinking water. Gradually, rural migrants and former Memphians returned to the Bluff City. At the turn of the twentieth century Church owned numerous residential properties.

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and saloons, Church Park, and Church Auditorium. In 1906 he founded the Solvent Savings Bank and Trust Company. By the early twentieth century Robert’s possessions totaled an estimated five hundred thousand dollars.  

In 1885, Robert married a twenty-nine year old musician and teacher, Anna Wright. Despite Robert’s individual success, he gained status by marrying into the “fashionable social circle” of the Wright family. Anna’s early life eclipsed the extraordinary upbringing of her husband’s. According to Roberta and Annette Church, Anna was born free in Memphis in 1856 and attended Lemoyne Normal and Commercial School (now Lemoyne-Owen College) where she was one of two members of its inaugural graduation class. She then studied at the Musical Institute at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and also attended the Oberlin Conservatory of Music at prestigious Oberlin College. Her marriage to Church not only represented a personal union between the two, but also reconfirmed their elite social status in the black community. Robert and Anna taught their children what they considered the “cornerstone of respectability...thrift, hard work, self-respect, and righteousness,” along with the responsibility they had to their race. Robert Sr. and Anna provided the example for young Robert Jr. and Annette to follow in their respective lives and careers.  

In his 1908 directory, The Bright Side of Memphis, Green Polonius Hamilton wrote that, “Great as Mr. Church is considered because of his enormous wealth, he is, in

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35 Gatewood, Aristocrats of Color, 71; Moore, Leading the Race, 33; Church and Church, The Robert R. Churches, 27 – 36.
the writer’s humble judgment, greater because of the high character of his children.” Hamilton continued, “no man could wish a greater monument to his memory than the exemplary character and worthy lives of his devoted children.” Family served as the core institution for the black elite to preserve their legacy. Parents expected their children to maintain their family’s prestige. Most important, the black elite family nurtured a class of African American leaders that secured equal rights for African Americans during the freedom struggles of the early 20th century. Parents such as Robert and Anna surrounded themselves with people who shared similar interests of improving race relations in America. Robert participated in local politics and was an influential member of Booker T. Washington’s National Negro Business League. In such households, activism became not a form of charity, but a normal experience. They preached racial solidarity and expected their children to continue their efforts to lead the race. This is the burden that Robert Church Jr. inherited when he came into the world on October 25, 1885, at his parents’ Lauderdale Street mansion.

Robert Sr. and Anna viewed education as an agent for social change. By providing their children with the best educational opportunities available to African Americans, they ensured the cultivation of a new leadership class. On Robert Jr.’s fourth birthday his older sister Mary Church Terrell wrote him a detailed letter and sent two books written in German. Mary, who went to school in Germany, explained, “Sister wants you to read these little German poems to her when you have a few more

36 Hamilton, The Bright Side of Memphis, 100.

37 National Negro Business League Membership, n.d., The Robert R. Church Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Mississippi Valley Collection, McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN; Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 5; Moore, Leading the Race, 33 – 35.
birthdays.” She continued, “Someday you must go to school and learn a great deal, so that you can speak lots of languages besides know other things. Sister will talk about that when we see each other.”\textsuperscript{38} She also sent him a silver piece of German money with the words “Gruss aus Berlin” (Greetings from Berlin) inscribed on the coin. Mary instructed Robert to wear it as much as possible so he would not lose it. Robert Jr. was learning to be a cultured, well-educated person.\textsuperscript{39}

Robert Sr. and Anna looked to the church to help instill a sense of righteousness and self-respect in their children. In addition to teaching their children the core values of Christianity, the church could also be viewed as a determinant of status and a place to nurture a class of future leaders. As a youth Robert Jr. attended the predominantly white congregation of Calvary Episcopalian Church in Memphis, where Bishop Charles Todd Quintard confirmed him at an early age.\textsuperscript{40}

The Episcopal Church boasted the largest membership of black aristocrats across the nation prior to the Civil War and maintained a substantial number after Emancipation. The Episcopal Church functioned not only as a place of worship, but also as a place for affluent African Americans to gather and network. By the turn of the twentieth century only 15,000 African Americans remained in the Episcopal Church, adding to “an image of exclusiveness.” George Freeman Bragg, one of the most respected black Episcopal clergyman, who “admitted the church still contained a small contingent of daniacal

\textsuperscript{38} Mary Church Terrell to Robert Church Jr., October 25, 1889, Church Family Papers, Box 2, Folder 1.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{40} Kelley, “Robert R. Church,” 7.
colored people who used the church to get as far as possible from the ordinary Negro.”

The Episcopal Church also served as the institution of choice for influential whites. Therefore many of the professional and political relationships that developed between powerful whites and African American leaders originated during service on Sundays. Booker T. Washington told a joke about an elderly black woman from Mississippi who wandered into an Episcopal church, “took a seat in the rear, and began to moan and clap her hands as the rector began his sermon.” Washington explained, “Her demonstration practically broke up the service, and one of the officers of the church went back to stop her. ‘What’s the matter with you aunty, are you sick? No, sir, I’se happy, I’se got religion. Yes, sir, I’se got religion.’” The officer then replied, Why don’t you know that this isn’t the place to get religion?” Black Episcopalians viewed themselves as an exclusive social class as much as a religious denomination. The Episcopal Church as an institution did little to improve race relations in America; however, children such as Robert learned at an early age to develop alliances with prominent leaders, regardless of race, who could assist in improving race relations in the black community.

Robert and Anna also understood that their children’s futures relied as much on their educational pedigree as on their family prominence. They emphasized the importance of pursuing careers that did not rely solely on the support of the white community. They encouraged their children to maintain a sense of self-sufficiency and avoid being controlled by whites. This independence was essential to developing a class

41 Gatewood, Aristocrats of Color, 276.

of leaders and activists who could voice their opinions on race relations without the threat of losing their jobs. Privileged African Americans thus selectively chose schools that reinforced their collective agenda of establishing a viable black leadership class.43

Robert Jr. initially attended the private kindergarten and elementary school of Julia B. Hooks. The Hookses represented one of Memphis’ most prominent African American families. Julia Britton Hooks was an accomplished musician, teacher, and principal. She and Anna played piano together and performed in classical music concerts during the 1880s. After she opened the Hooks Cottage School in 1892, it quickly became the school of choice for the city’s privileged black families. The Churches entrusted her with the task of molding a young Bob into a productive member of society. A look at his fifth grade notebook from Mrs. Hooks’s class revealed that Robert was a good student. When he was eleven, Mrs. Hooks gave him examinations about important black and white leaders. Hooks continued the work that began in the households of Memphis’s most respected families. Robert Jr. then continued his education at the best black Episcopal parochial schools in Memphis.44

The exclusive network of family, church, and school sheltered Robert from the degradation that most African Americans faced in the South. The Churches shielded their children from the personal humiliation of the Jim Crow laws and encouraged them to exude confidence and demand fair treatment from whomever they encountered. As a result children such as Robert developed a sense of entitlement. They challenged figures


44 Robert Church Jr.’s Fifth Grade Notebook, November 2, 1896, Church Family Papers, Box 2, Folder 2. Church, Walter, and Crawford, Nineteenth Century Memphis Families of Color, 20, 43 – 45.
of authority and viewed themselves as equals to whites. However, Robert also recognized that his experience was atypical. While a child, he noticed his father would reserve private Pullman accommodations when they rode the train. Robert understood that his father obtained these accommodations “not only for comfort but to avoid segregation.” He also observed, “It was possible to stop at hotels in the North and East, and that it was possible for all children to attend the same schools in the North and East, but in the South neither of these was possible.” The parents of the black elite skillfully developed a sense of social awareness in their children while protecting them, as much as possible, from humiliation by racist whites. As Robert matured, he became more aware of his surroundings and understood the importance of championing the causes most pertinent to the African American community.

In the late nineteenth century, another Memphis existed outside the isolated, privileged world of the black elite. Memphis had a reputation of gambling, prostitution, bootlegging, violence, and other forms of criminal activity. The city would eventually be recognized as the murder capital of the nation, and white supremacists worked diligently to reclaim their city. During the 1890s Jim Crow laws became entrenched in the city’s culture. As an adolescent Church remembered riding the streetcars to and from school. In 1881, the Tennessee Legislature passed a Jim Crow law that required segregated seating on its public carriers. Church reminisced that the city “had colored policemen, squires, magistrates, a wharf-master, and at one time there were colored members of the...

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45 Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 8; Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 8; Moore, Leading the Race, 33 – 34.

Segregation dominated southern culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Southern whites attempted to hinder the success of African Americans by instituting fear into the black community as an attempt to ‘keep blacks in their place.’ They also made efforts to disenfranchise African Americans. During Robert’s childhood white supremacy transitioned from an unofficial way of life into a legalized institution enforced by the police, court system, visible signs, and vigilante violence. Yet Memphis maintained a strong clientele of African American doctors, lawyers, teachers, and business owners. The city of had not hosted a lynching since the 1860s. However, white Memphians became increasingly disgusted by the success of its black residents. Their disdain peaked in the spring of 1892. Robert was only seven years old when Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will (Henry) Stewart were lynched in one of the most infamous episodes of extra-legal violence in American history.48

In an area known as the “Curve” on the outskirts of Memphis, Thomas (Tommie) Moss owned the People’s Grocery Store. The Mosses were a respected family in the city and Tommie was a close friend of Mary Church Terrell. She recalled that Tommie would attend her parties as a child, and they remained in touch during their adult years. Tommie worked as a postal carrier and saved his money to open his grocery store. His business brought pride to the neighborhood as most of the black residents in the area began to patronize his store. This caused an intense competition with the white grocery store owner, William Barrett, “whose own grocery had enjoyed a virtual monopoly of clients


until the appearance of the black store.” Their rivalry culminated on March 2, 1892 when a black boy, Armour Harris, and a white boy, Cornelius Hurst, played marbles near the People’s Grocery and began to argue and fight.49

The childish skirmish escalated after Hurst’s father joined the scuffle and subsequently began beating Harris. Calvin McDowell, the grocery’s store manager, and Will (Henry) Stewart, the store’s clerk, came to the black boy’s defense. A melee ensued with the Curve’s black and white residents fighting one another. The Curve riot resulted in the arrests of the black grocers. While they were detained, a white mob stormed the jail and seized the three men from their cells. The mob of approximately seventy-five men wearing black masks loaded them onto a switch engine that ran behind the jail. They took the young men about a mile north of Memphis and the rest of the city slept, the mob shot them to death.50

The lynching of Tommie Moss, Will Stewart, and Calvin McDowell reflected the resentment of southern whites for successful African Americans. The murders impacted the Churches directly. The loss of Tommie Moss caused Mary to sink into a deep depression. She had left Memphis years ago to pursue her career but she was devastated at hearing the news of her childhood friend. The lynching caused her to question her Christian faith. She stated, “I could not see how a crime like that could be perpetuated in a Christian country, while thousands of Christians sinfully winked at it by making no protest loud enough to be heard nor exerting any earnest effort to redress this terrible


50 Duster, ed., Crusade for Justice, 48; Giddings, IDA, 177 – 178.
wrong.”

Memphis needed leaders willing to voice their displeasure with such heinous acts. These types of events raised the consciousness of young Robert as his parents and sister Mollie refined him into an upstanding young man who understood the plight of African Americans in the South. As he prepared for college Robert understood his responsibility to his race.

Higher education was probably the single most important qualifier for inclusion in the black elite. As Gatewood states, “Education was assumed to bestow the refinement and culture essential for entry into the highest stratum of black society.” The Churches, like most elite families, understood that a good education protected them in many cases from working for white employers. Like many children of upper class blacks, Robert chose to venture to the North to further his studies. In the fall of 1904 he enrolled at Morgan Park Military Academy in Morgan Park, Illinois. The Morgan Park Military Academy served as a preparatory school for the University of Chicago. The school costs the Churches nearly $800 per year for room, board, and books -- a fee Robert Sr. willingly paid as long as the academy prepared his son for the educational rigor of the nation’s finest institutions. Bob graduated from Morgan Park in 1905 and then followed in his older sister’s footsteps by attending Oberlin College in Ohio. Oberlin established its reputation by becoming the first college in the United States to admit African Americans and women. It played an active role during the abolitionist movement and offered an atmosphere “probably freer of prejudice than virtually any other

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51 Terrell, A Colored Woman, 141.

52 Hale, Making Whiteness, 208; Giddings, IDA, 182 – 183.
predominantly white institution in the country.”

Oberlin became a school of choice for the children of the black elite, as evidenced by the school’s legacy of producing influential black professionals and leaders. Robert remained at Oberlin for two years before completing his academic training at the Packard School of Business in New York. In New York, he interned for two years on Wall Street, learning the banking industry. Robert planned to then return to Memphis, applying his hands on experience from Wall Street to run his father’s Saving Solvent Bank. His educational experience in the North allowed him to observe firsthand the black experience in places such as Illinois, Ohio, and New York. He also developed long lasting relationships with up and coming black leaders such as James Weldon Johnson, and he became more interested in politics, which he believed would be the most viable instrument to bring about change in America.

During Robert’s internship in New York he learned of his father’s failing health. While apprenticing for the best bankers on Wall Street he also assumed various responsibilities at the Solvent Savings Bank and Trust Company. From 1907 to 1909 he served as the bank’s cashier and began to manage his father’s real estate holdings. In 1909 Robert was elected president of the bank. He applied the knowledge he gained in New York to the institution his father founded. Robert was poised to continue his father’s legacy as a successful entrepreneur. His educational pedigree and business training further validated his place among the black elite. He returned to Memphis with high expectations from his family and the city. As Hamilton predicted in *The Bright Side*


54 Robert Church Jr.’s Morgan Park Academy Tuition Receipt, January 14, 1904, Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 7; Morgan Park Alumni Directory, 1926, Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 7; Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 9 – 10; Church and Church, *The Robert R. Churches*, 63.
of Memphis, many believed, “In the natural course of time he will succeed his worthy sire as the wealthiest colored man in America.” Out of respect for his father Robert, decided to postpone any political aspirations. He emerged on the Memphis scene as “a veritable chip off the old block” and began to carve his own legacy in the Bluff City.  

Before returning to Memphis, Robert rekindled a friendship with a young lady he had known since childhood, Sara (Sallie) Parodi Johnson. The two presumably met during Robert’s many visits to Washington D.C. as a child. They reunited in New York, and Robert continued to write Sallie after he returned home. In a 1909 letter from Mary she thanked Robert for a great time in New York and sent “love and kisses” from herself, “Mama Lou” (Louisa Ayers Church), and “a certain young teacher.” Sallie belonged to a well-known African American family in Washington D.C. and attended the most famous black high school in the country, M Street High. She served as vice-president of her class. M Street would graduate some of the nation’s most prominent black leaders, such as Bob’s brother in-law Robert Terrell, Benjamin O. Davis, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Rayford Logan, and Charles Houston. It also boasted a talented faculty that included Sallie’s future sister in-law Mary, Anna Julia Cooper, Angelina Weld Grimke, and Carter G. Woodson. Many of Washington’s upper-class black families sent their children to be educated at M Street. After graduating in 1903 Sara enrolled at the exclusive Myrtilla Miner Normal School (now the University of the District of Columbia). The Miner Normal School initially designed its curriculum to train African-American women to be teachers and nurses. In 1882 it became the first black school in the country to offer courses in liberal arts. M Street High and the Miner Normal School were both instrumental in preparing students for leadership roles in the African American community.

55 Solvent Savings Bank and Trust Company End of Year Statement, December 31, 1910, Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 16; Church Auditorium Rent Contract, April 18, 1910, Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 34; Hamilton, The Bright Side of Memphis, 100; Church and Church, The Robert R. Churches, 65.

56 Mary Church Terrell to Robert Church Jr., September 27, 1909, Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 31.
American women to become teachers. It later expanded its mission to also training black men. Many of its graduates, including Sallie, received first priority to fill the District’s teaching vacancies as a result of her close affiliation with Mary Church Terrell.57

Sallie taught in Washington until she married Robert on July 26, 1911, at the 15th Street Presbyterian Church in Washington D.C. Their guest list included some of the most influential African Americans in the nation. Francis James Grimké, renowned activist and minister, married the couple. W.E.B Du Bois wrote Robert and Sallie after the extravaganza to congratulate them “on the commencement of their new life.” Their marriage represented the merging of two prominent families. Black elites viewed marriages as partnerships that “ensured status retention and reaffirmed friendships between elites.” The future looked bright for Robert and his wife as the two returned to Memphis anxious to embark on their new lives together. His only regret was that his parents did not attend the ceremony. Anna remained in Memphis to tend to her ill husband. As Bob began a new chapter in his life, his world shattered on August 29, 1912 when his father passed away. By that time Robert Sr. was reputed to be valued at more than $1,000,000. Robert left his fortune to Anna and their children. The death of Robert Sr. changed in Bob’s life, both personally and professionally. He began to focus more on his career as an activist and political leader.58

57 M Street Ten Year Graduation Anniversary to Sarah Parodi Johnson, June 12, 1913, Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 43; Moore, Leading the Race, 93.

58 Robert and Sarah’s Wedding Guest Book, July 26, 1911, Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 38; Wedding Certificate, July 26, 1911, Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 38; W.E.B Du Bois to Robert Church Jr., August 23, 1911, Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 44; Robert Church Sr. Obituary, August 1912, The Church Papers, Box 1, Folder 53; Moore, Leading the Race, 38; Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 11.
Chapter 2

Coming of Age

When Ida B. Wells-Barnett heard of Robert Church’s death, she sent Robert Jr. heartfelt condolences. Yet, she added, “I rejoice exceedingly that he has so worthy a son to take up the work and carry it on now on his own responsibility…. May you like Solomon be given wisdom with which to fulfill your trust to the honor of your race and your generation.”53 For his entire life Robert had walked in the shadow of a giant, and now he was thrust in the position of filling the void created by his father’s death. He received other letters that encouraged him to protect his family’s legacy in the city. Booker T. Washington challenged Robert Jr. to “continue to enrich our race through your efforts.”2 Washington and Wells understood that the race needed young leaders to carry on the torch that their generation ignited. Robert Jr. was a southern gentleman, educated at the finest schools, and the son of a wealthy businessman. He had been nurtured since childhood to succeed his father as the preeminent black leader in the city.3

As condolences continued to pour in, the Churches began to execute Robert Sr.’s last will and testament. He named Anna the sole executrix of his will and bequeathed

1 Ida B. Wells to Robert Church Jr., September 9, 1912, Roberta Church Collection, Box XI, Folder – Robert Church Jr. Correspondence, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis Tennessee.


unto her all of his personal properties except a watch, chain, and diamond stud that he left to his son. According to his will, Robert also left Anna at least twenty-five properties that he owned in Memphis. Although Anna officially served as the heir to his fortune, Robert Jr. managed the bulk of the family’s estate. Thomas and Mary, products of his first marriage to Louisa Ayers, shared an additional forty-five properties in Shelby County. There are no records of disputes between the five heirs to his fortune.

But his death revealed a skeleton in the family’s closet. Shortly after Robert’s death, a young woman from Vancouver, British Columbia, by the name of Laura Church Napier emerged from obscurity and challenged the will. In her statement to the court she claimed that Robert Sr. “always recognized her as his daughter.” Laura was born prior to the Civil War in New Orleans, Louisiana, making her Robert Sr.’s first child. It is likely that Robert had a serious relationship with a woman by the name of Margaret Pico in New Orleans during his time as a steward on his father’s steamboats that traveled the Mississippi River. According to the Chicago Defender, a staff correspondent in New Orleans found several records from long before the Civil War in a safety deposit vault. He claimed to find an aged marriage certificate. The records also indicated that he afforded her similar opportunities as his other four children. Laura attended private schools and eventually graduated from Fisk University in Nashville. The rest of her siblings knew of her. The Chicago Defender explained, “it is known by a great many that Mrs. Napier lived with the family in Memphis ever since Mrs. {Mr.} Church’s marriage to the present widow, formerly Miss Anna Wright of Memphis.”

There is no evidence that the children refuted any claims that she was their half sister, but they fought to

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4 Chicago Defender, October 26, 1912.
protect their father’s assets. Laura believed that she, too, should benefit from her father’s estate and subsequently contested the will in Shelby County’s Probate Court.\(^5\)

Robert Jr. acted on behalf of the family and hired the highly successful Memphis attorneys, S.M. Neely and Malcolm R. Patterson, to represent the family. Patterson was the ex-governor of Tennessee. The case continued for three years until the Tennessee Supreme Court upheld the decision that Church’s will could not be attacked and Laura Napier had no standing in court.\(^6\)

The Churches’ reaction may have been motivated primarily by financial gain, but it also revealed a larger concern with protecting the family’s image and legacy. This case illustrates the culture of dissemblance that defined the black elite. They needed to appear an ideal family. Questions surfaced about the honesty and integrity of Robert Sr. How many times was he married? Was he divorced? How many children did he have? Robert Sr. deserved to be remembered for his pioneering accomplishments, but he was no saint. He could be an unforgiving person with a volatile temper. At times he was unapproachable. Robert Jr. and his siblings went to great lengths to protect the sanctity of the Church family name, even if it meant romanticizing their past. In this defense of his father, Robert Jr. emerged as the family patriarch. He was determined to uphold the legacy of his namesake. The death of Robert Sr. marks a transitional period in Bob’s life as he attempted to expand his influence in the Bluff City.\(^7\)

\(^5\) Chicago Defender, October 26, 1912; December 21, 1912; February 15, 1913; Philadelphia Tribune, June 5, 1915; Baltimore Afro-American, June 5, 1915.

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Chicago Defender, February 15, 1913; Darlene Clark Hine uses the term “culture of dissemblance,” in respect to the lives of black women who were victims of rape, but the author finds similar arguments can be made in regards to the black elite. See Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape
Throughout the ordeal Church continued to serve as President of the Solvent Savings Bank, even though he worked primarily as a real estate operator. His inherit wealth and prestige allowed him the financial freedom to pursue politics. Since his return to Memphis, Church worked on securing the foundation for his political career. The political arena is where Bob exceeded the notoriety of his father. He served as a life-long member of the Republican Party, but his affiliation went beyond merely campaigning on behalf of its candidates. Instead, Church most wanted to demonstrate the political agency of African Americans within the Republican Party. In his eyes the Republican Party represented more than a political organization; it represented the neglect of Lincoln’s successors towards black society, as well as the most pragmatic approach to improving the lives of African Americans. Racism existed in both political parties and Robert believed that African Americans could not expect much, in terms of racial progress, from Democrats or lily-white Republicans. Therefore he pressured the Republican Party to remain true to what he perceived as the promise of Lincoln.8

Church’s transition from the business sector to the political arena was not seamless. After returning from New York, he apparently made some discerning comments about women's suffrage. It caught the attention of his sister. Mary scolded her younger brother about his sexist stance. She addressed her letter to, “My dear little Baby Brother,” highlighting the twenty year age difference between the two siblings. Mary stated that she would have confronted her brother earlier, but she hesitated out of fear he

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“may never write again.” Mary challenged Church to reconsider his stance and to “think about it seriously from every point of view.” She wrote that, “no colored man who believes in suffrage for colored men can consistently oppose it. Unless you believe all men who are born colored, should because of that accident of race be deprived of the right of citizenship, you can not insist that all human beings who are born girls should because of that accident of sex be denied rights which others enjoy simply because they happened to be born boys.”

Her stance on race and gender echoed the sentiments she expressed over a decade earlier in her address to the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). She was offended by the position he took, especially since she had dedicated her life to advocating for the rights of women.

Robert's stance reflects the patriarchal influence that existed in most families, which insinuated that black men were the race’s only qualified spokespersons. Within the black community intra-racial issues revolving around gender, class, and economics had always surfaced, and historically, black men such as Church had addressed the African American problem in the United States while silencing the voices of black women. Mary forced Robert to reconsider this strategy by proving the hypocrisy of his stance. Whether

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9 Mary Church Terrell to Robert Church Jr., January 29, 1910, Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 1.

willingly or regretfully, Church heeded his sister’s advice and began to rethink his position on women’s suffrage.\textsuperscript{11}

As Church matured as a leader he took a more sophisticated approach to politics. In 1912, torn between his duties as president of the bank and his desire to enter politics full-time, he decided to resign his position. He abandoned the institution that his father founded because it did not coincide with his vision of racial uplift. Robert Sr. envisioned that the Solvent Savings bank would promote thrift among the black masses, and he believed in the promise of economic uplift. He offered loans to black entrepreneurs who could not obtain funding from predominantly white banks, offering an alternative for the city’s black residents to invest their money without the threat of being swindled by the high interest rates offered by his white competitors. He hoped to educate the masses about fiscal responsibility and believed economic security would help sustain a strong, self-sufficient black community in Memphis. This in turn would empower black Memphians to challenge for the rights to which they were constitutionally entitled. The bank eventually became the center of the black business district on Beale Street. However, Church did not believe in his father’s mission.\textsuperscript{12}

At the time of Church’s resignation, the Solvent Savings Bank and Trust Company sold shares of stock at ten dollars. It had deposits of approximately $90,000 and over $10,000 in capital. The bank thrived for decades, having more than one million

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 186; Mary Church Terrell to Robert Church Jr., January 29, 1910, Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 1.
\end{itemize}
dollars deposited by 1920. Although Beale Street gained a reputation for being the Mecca for black capitalism in the Mid-South, Church understood that his and his colleagues’ successes did not represent the nearly 52,000 African Americans living in Memphis. The overwhelming majority of black Memphians remained poor and did not have money to invest in the bank. The average black person worked in unskilled positions and struggled to make ends meet. Most of them had little money to deposit in a bank or to pursue lucrative business ventures. Robert believed everyone regardless of class and wealth should participate and benefit from political representation. Although the average black resident did not benefit directly from the bank, Bob Jr. capitalized on his father’s legacy. Robert Sr.’s former business associate formed the “nucleus for the potent, political bloc” envisioned by the younger Church. This allowed Robert to redirect his energy from the private sector to advocating for political rights on behalf of all black Americans.

Church began his political crusade in his hometown, gradually increasing his presence on the national stage. He understood his affiliation with the black elite and upper class would not be enough to sway the political tide in the city. In order to participate in Memphis politics, Church had to build a relationship with the notorious Boss, Edward Hull Crump. The “Crump Machine” dominated the local political scene throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The supposedly progressive agenda of Crump often neglected the needs of the black community. As historian Lester Lamon


stated, “His progressivism was that of business efficiency and corporate regulation, not social justice.”\(^\text{15}\) Therefore, Church worked with prominent black Memphians Bert M. Roddy and Harry H. Pace, both high-ranking officials in the Solvent Savings bank and personal friends of his father, to form the Colored Citizens Association. The Colored Citizens Association (CCA) organized a successful voter’s registration drive in the black community, garnering the attention of Crump and his opponent. The CCA strategically negotiated a deal with Crump that would include the needs of the African Americans in the reforms he promised. They placed an emphasis on improving their neighborhoods, asking specifically for new parks and paved roads. At a CCA meeting, Pace pleaded to vote for Crump because “the other candidate promises everything and I fear he will do nothing; but this redheaded fellow frankly declines to promise some of the things we want, but convinced me that he will fulfill the promises that he did make.”\(^\text{16}\) Crump won the election and in 1913 opened Douglass Park. He also authorized other improvements in the black community.\(^\text{17}\)

This was the beginning of a thirty-year political relationship. Both Church and Crump were regarded as the “bosses” of their political factions. Church could deliver the black vote in West Tennessee and Crump ruled the local political scene in Memphis. In order for these two political giants to exist in the city they realized they would have to

\(^{15}\) Lamon, *Black Tennesseans*, 222.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 223; “Along the Color Line,” *Crisis Magazine*, 2 (August 1911): 139; *Crisis Magazine*, 3 (December 1911).

work with each other. African Americans could vote as long as they paid the poll tax required by the Tennessee Constitution. Crump understood that those voters could not be ignored and were vital to the success of his political machine. Church, for his part, knew it was highly unlikely for a Republican candidate to win a local election, especially since African Americans were still outnumbered in Shelby County. Instead he used his appeal in the black community to force Crump to consider some of the demands made by black Memphians. Church also understood that in order for African Americans to maintain their right to vote they needed to ally themselves with the city’s most powerful politician. He conveyed to his constituents that even though they voted for Democrats locally, their loyalty remained with the Republicans, and they could still vote for the G.O.P. in the national elections. The strategy Church employed allowed him to increase his influence in the state and organize a substantial political bloc that eventually overturned the Democratic stronghold in Memphis.18

This relationship with Crump during the 1911 mayoral campaign established Church as a master organizer and a respected leader among black Memphians. He could align the black vote with the candidate(s) who could deliver the most rewards for their communities.19 This set the stage for his political aspirations during the 1912 upcoming national elections.

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Church recognized the political agency that black Tennesseans possessed compared to other southern cities. Tennessee’s voting requirements did not resemble some of the other more extreme Jim Crow measures exhibited throughout the South. Besides the state imposed poll-tax requirement, there was no statewide white-primary rule, which made it difficult to prevent African Americans from voting. According to Paul Lewinson, “every vote counted” in Memphis.\(^\text{20}\) Church’s ability to secure this large voting bloc raised the awareness of factional leaders in both parties. Although Republicans coveted the black vote, the Party’s lily-white faction attempted to prohibit black membership. Robert met this challenge head on.\(^\text{21}\)

Most histories of Church inaccurately characterize him as a person who solely delivered black votes for Republican candidates. However, the true testament of Church’s life-long political crusade can be gleaned in his fight against lily-whites. He is often remembered as one of the Party’s most loyal black supporters, but Church was also one of the Party’s most vocal critics. The lily-white movement surfaced during Reconstruction as a response to assertions made by southern Democrats who considered their Republican counterparts “nigger lovers.” Therefore the lily-whites made a concerted effort “to take control of the Republican organizations in the South into their white hands.”\(^\text{22}\) The Democrats had already effectively built a reputation as the “white man’s” Party and Republicans set out to accomplish the same. White Republicans feared


that black men would dominate the Party in the South. The creation of the lily-white faction thus transcended politics; it embodied the culture of segregation in the South. According to Hanes Walton Jr., the construction of the lily-white faction was inevitable. The same “space” white supremacy created for the lily-white faction to exist also provided a “space” for Robert Church Jr. to develop his own political machine as a response to southern segregationists. Robert would later align himself with the interracial faction composed of black Republicans and sympathetic whites also known as the “black-and-tans.” This interracial coalition provided Church with the necessary leverage to integrate the Republican Party.23

In 1912 Church made his first of eight successful bids to represent the Tenth District of Memphis at the Republican National Convention. In response to his election, the lily-white Shelby County Republican organization tried to prevent him from attending the convention. This brought a local battle to the national stage. But Church led his Tennessee group of “black and tans” to the convention and demanded to be seated. He benefited from the “numerical superiority of blacks in the party in Shelby County,”24 and he supported President William Howard Taft’s reelection. Taft controlled the convention that year, and his faction rejected the bid of the lily-whites because they were considered


“Roosevelt men.” Church kept his seat at the convention and in turn worked hard to campaign for Taft. Although the Republicans were soundly defeated by Woodrow Wilson, making him the first Democrat to win office since Grover Cleveland in 1892, Church had experienced his baptism in national politics.

Church’s schedule became more hectic as a result of his growing notoriety; however, he still made time for family. On his twenty-eighth birthday his mother Anna wished him a life of “happiness and success” and told him to continue enriching the lives of the people he touched and continue to "comfort your family." In the spirit of her deceased husband she also wished that he grow and “be a stronger and better man each day.”

Anna Church frequently wrote her son to acknowledge his various accomplishments. He also remained very close to his sister Annette, but he longed for a family of his own. In 1915, Robert and Sallie welcomed their first and only child, Sarah Roberta Church. Known as Roberta, she was born in Washington D.C. at the home of Sallie’s mother. Roberta attended the best schools in Memphis and later graduated from the private Lemoyne High School. Roberta then received her bachelors and masters degrees from Northwestern University in sociology and psychology, respectively. She later followed in her father’s footsteps and became an important presence within the Republican Party. During the 1950s President Dwight Eisenhower made Roberta the highest-ranking African American female appointee in his administration.

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26 Anna Church to Robert Church Jr., October 26, 1913, Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 35.

After his daughter’s birth Church focused on developing a strategy that would increase the presence of African Americans within the Grand Old Party. He needed an agenda that stimulated the interest of black voters and convinced them to take a more substantial role in politics. Church needed to develop a plan to pay poll taxes for those who could not afford it. Church would use small venues, mainly the Church Auditorium, as meeting places to inform black voters about the political process. He wanted to create a more politically sophisticated black voting constituency in Memphis. Although this seemed to be a daunting task, Bob exuded confidence and invested a considerable amount of financial and intellectual capital into this movement. A journalist described Church as “conservative by nature. But when he is right, he is very persistent and cannot be frightened from his course.”

Independent wealthy, Church did not participate in politics for individual notoriety. In fact he often avoided the limelight and appointed other qualified leaders to represent various issues. Church emphasized developing an organization that displayed the collective strength of the black community, and granted everyone, regardless of class or gender, the opportunity to participate in the political process.

Robert turned to a group of qualified leaders who could influence the movement beyond the Bluff City. Most of the men he surrounded himself with were also accomplished members of the black elite in Memphis. Church met with prominent black Memphians Thomas Hayes, Wayman Wilkerson, Levi McCoy, Josiah Settle, Jr. and Bert Roddy and formed the Lincoln Republican Club. It later became known as the Lincoln Republican Club.


Republican League of Tennessee. These men had equal stature to Robert, and the majority of them had worked with his father. They offered insightful feedback and could challenge Bob’s decisions if necessary. He purposefully avoided leaders who he could dominate or easily influence. A local newspaper commented on the mistake of other black organizations that employed the opposite strategy. The article stated, “in the past, far too often, when a strong character in the Negro race has sought to launch an enterprise, he has surrounded himself with weaklings, perhaps thinking that he might shine the brighter as a brilliant star, if surrounded by far dimmer stars only.” The article continued, “The men launching the Lincoln Republican Club took pains to put several bright stars together.” These members of the black elite had the daunting task of developing an organization that would speak to, speak for, and speak with the black masses in West Tennessee.

Political scientist Melissa Harris-Lacewell argues that members of the black elite spoke to black people “to frame the solutions to the black dilemma.” They spoke for the black community “when they are under the gaze of white power structures that attempt to understand and predict, what the Negro wants from the appeals of leaders.” Furthermore, “they speak with black people in an intricate, reciprocal cultural reproduction of ideas.” The Lincoln League’s success depended on the cooperation of the entire community. Church and the other officers articulated the aims of the organization and explained how they planned to integrate the leadership within the Republican Party. Church established

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32 Ibid.
connections with influential whites and blacks throughout the country and planned to produce a platform that addressed the issues most pertinent to all African Americans. The Lincoln League embodied the collective strength of the black community and called on all of its citizens to be active agents in the organization by encouraging them to offer solutions to their common problems.  

The Lincoln League provides a model for understanding the structure of black leadership in the early twentieth century. Scholars have criticized the efforts of the black elite as disingenuous or labeled them opportunists. While some of these criticisms are warranted, the black working class held Church and his peers in esteem. The black community respected leaders who embodied the tradition of defiance that has historically fueled black freedom struggles. African Americans have traditionally rallied to support defiant individuals who refused to succumb to white supremacy. Therefore black Memphians supported Church not because of his wealth and family pedigree, but because he created an opportunity for all African Americans in the city to “retain a sense of selfhood in the face of constant subordination and dehumanization in the American system.”

On the evening of February 1, 1916, Church and over one thousand potential voters gathered at Church Park on Beale Street. A local black newspaper reported, “Remember the date for in all likelihood it is to become historic.” In a letter written to

33 Robert Church Jr.’s Lincoln League Speech, November 1916, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 24.

34 Lacewell, Barbershops, Bibles, and BET, 208; Kevin Gaines, Uplifting the Race, 45 – 46.

35 National Beacon Light, February 5, 1916.
his close friend Roscoe Conkling Simmons, Church described the evening as a “very bitter (cold) night” but the event was filled with enthusiasm. He asked Simmons, a newspaper editor and master orator, to produce a story that could be sent to the leading colored papers in town. In a pamphlet, presumably written by Simmons, the leaders outlined the goals of the organization. They proclaimed that the Lincoln League intended to teach African Americans the “higher art of politics.” Acknowledging the influence of Jim Crow the message stated, “Call it a move of segregation, if you will, but the cold fact remains: the colored voter must either vote as a unit or continue to be politically expunged as at present.” Church called for its members to follow the principles of the organization and not the men. This approach would preserve the organization regardless of its leaders. The Lincoln League also made it clear the only qualifications for membership were that a person must be a qualified voter and sign or endorse the constitution of the Lincoln Republican League. Church later declared that the Lincoln League “is distinctly founded for the good of the masses and not the classes of men.”

Church Park and Auditorium served as its headquarters. Members elected Bob as the president of the organization and Thomas Hayes, Wayman Wilkerson, Levy McCoy, Josiah Settle Jr. Secretary, and Bert M. Roddy as its officers. For the first time, blacks in

36 Robert Church Jr. to Roscoe Conkling Simmons, February 2, 1916, Papers of Roscoe Conkling Simmons, Box 2, Robert Church Jr. Correspondences Folder, Harvard University Archives, Pusey Library, Cambridge, MA.; Chicago Defender, February 12, 1916.

37 Lincoln League, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 25.

38 Lincoln League Meeting, November 1916, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 25.
Memphis had a viable organization to offer a serious threat to the lily-white Shelby County Republican Organization during the upcoming election.\textsuperscript{39}

The Lincoln League also functioned as an instrument for social and educational change. The organization provided an opportunity for black Memphians to congregate and discuss issues, such as lynching, women’s suffrage, and blacks in the military. Perhaps the League’s greatest contribution other than its political achievements was in education. Church helped to establish numerous voter academies throughout the county. He financed practically the entire venture. The academics taught the fundamentals of voting, but more important it taught the city’s black residents the fundamentals of reading. At the turn of the century a sizeable portion of the city’s black residents were illiterate. Although Tennessee had not instituted literacy tests as a voting requirement, Church and the other officers wanted to be certain that their members did not accidentally vote against the candidates supported by the Lincoln League. Church also speculated that Tennessee would join other southern states and enact literacy and property requirements at its fall state constitutional convention, effectively ending what many considered the most liberal franchise in the South. The burden of improving literacy in the black community fell largely on the women. Although they could not officially hold membership in the League, because at the time they did not qualify as “eligible voters,” they were essential to its success, as a result of their role primarily as teachers of these voting academies.\textsuperscript{40}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.; Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 28.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{40} Green, \textit{Battling the Plantation Mentality}, 35; Lincoln League Meeting, November 1916, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 25; \textit{Chicago Defender}, October 28, 1915; \textit{Commercial Appeal}, October 22, 1916; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 40; Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 19, 28.}
Women regularly attended the meetings, as suggested by photographs, and understood the aims of the organization. The teachers of the voting schools used various instructional methods and held class nightly at Church Auditorium. Church explained the teaching process in a letter he wrote to a masters student at Tennessee A&I. For literate voters, teachers used ballots in order to demonstrate the methods used at the ballot box. The instructors urged them to vote the straight Republican ticket and avoid simple mistakes. For illiterate voters, teachers taught them basic reading skills so they could vote for the Republican candidates. Others were taught to “single shot” and vote for the Republican candidate for Governor and ignore the other candidates. Church believed this to be the most effective method because black voters would often vote for more than one candidate for the same office and invalidate their ballots.\(^{41}\)

The local newspaper, the *Commercial Appeal*, became intrigued by the activity of the Lincoln League. It employed several black and white men to infiltrate the organization and report its findings. The newspaper reported on October 22, 1916, that Church and other officers funded the efforts of the organization, and received funds from the National Republican Headquarters. It also confirmed that the League’s presence extended beyond the Tenth District and influenced voters throughout West Tennessee. Finally, it correctly concluded that the League used women to serve as instructors for the voting academies and hinted that these women were “well paid.” Despite efforts to rally white Memphians to obstruct the success of the Lincoln League, Church continued the movement.\(^{42}\)


The Lincoln League worked diligently to register voters in the city. In the spring of 1916 the Lincoln League issued a letter signed by Church, Walter L. Cohen and Roscoe Conkling Simmons. It charged:

The defense of our people must come from us, and not from others. The time to step out is today and not tomorrow. The infamy of the political conspiracy which looks to the political slavery of our children we will meet as men and we will call to our aid those whom we have lifted by our ballots and see if the constitution is strong enough to hold up the common citizenship of this country.43

Thousands of black Memphians responded to this charge. The party received an additional boost after Bob was elected as a delegate at large for the upcoming Republican National Convention in June. He became the first black Tennessean since 1892 to hold this distinction. The Nashville Globe reported, “The Negroes of Tennessee ought to get squarely behind…. No one will deny the fact that the white Republican is trying with vehemence to rid himself of the black as a factor in conventions, while at the same time courting the Negroes assiduously along about election time. Mr. Church and his numerous followers are going to carry the war right up to the National Convention.”44

The lily-whites from Tennessee predictably challenged his nomination. Church urged Roscoe Simmons to have him issue a statement to prominent members of the national organization informing them that “in Shelby county alone there are more than 10,000 colored voters who could be controlled by the Republican organization if the men who could whip this vote in line were given some recognition.” He assured the politicians, “I have no personal or selfish motive that is prompting me to make this fight, but my friend

43 Lincoln League Letter, n.d., Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 23.
have insisted that since I have been doing some special work for the National leaders for the past year, that I can best make the fight. However, that is secondary, I only want to see the Tenth Congressional district represented by a colored delegate, since there is but one, instead of a white delegate." The national committee agreed. Despite opposition from lily-whites Bob attended the convention in June and returned to Memphis to prepare for the presidential and gubernatorial elections. That summer the national organization also named him a member of the Advisory Committee for Negroes to aid its national campaign committee. Church’s individual status within the Party of Lincoln continued to rise as he strengthened the movement in the Bluff City.

By October 1916 the Lincoln League successfully registered 10,612 African Americans, accounting for nearly one-third of the total 32,348 registered voters in Shelby County. The Lincoln League held a meeting on September 8 and adopted the platform for the Lincoln Republican League Ticket. This separate Republican ticket posed a direct challenge to the Shelby County Republicans. Wayman Wilkerson, the Lincoln League’s candidate for Congress, and “the arch lily-whitist” John W. Farley headlined the election. Church told Roscoe Simmons that he hoped their ticket “will run 3,000 votes ahead of this one.” Church most wanted to annihilate the lily-whites to prove that a Republican candidate would never win office in the city or state without reconsidering its segregationist position.


46 Ibid.

47 Commercial Appeal, October 21, 1916; Melton, “Blacks in Memphis,” 40; Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 28; Lamon, Black Tennesseans, 56; Robert Church Jr. to Roscoe Conkling Simmons, August 26, 1916, Box 2, Simmons Papers, Robert Church Jr. Correspondences Folder.
The platform of the Lincoln League ticket articulated the issues most pertinent to the black community. It supported labor unions for the “mutual protection” of “working men and working women,” the abolition of Jim Crow government in the South, anti-lynching legislation, and equal rights for black soldiers in the military. The platform also emphasized the need to pass legislation to improve the inadequacy and inequity of education for African Americans, and to allow the “immediate extension of the vote to women.” Bob, who helped to draft the platform, learned from the conversations with his sister. It included the language: “The right to vote is a right inherent in every American citizen, and any abridgement thereof is a perversion of the organic law both in letter and spirit.” It continued:

The claim that the right to vote should not be withheld from those able to bear arms in defense of the country involves no stronger reason than the claim that universal suffrage ought to be extended to those who bear the children that make the soldiers of tomorrow, and to all women who so nobly bear the common burdens of the republic. We believe in both the equality of sexes and the equality of men. The members of the Lincoln League made it clear that “we favor the immediate extension of the vote to women.”

The platform also announced its candidates for office, most notable Wayman Wilkerson for Congress, Bert Roddy and H.M. Bomar for State Senators, and Thomas H. Hayes for Floterial Senator. The members of the Lincoln League adopted the platform without a dissenting vote. Church considered the meeting a great success. The Lincoln League carried the momentum into November as they prepared to confront their lily-white counterparts.

In Church’s final address, just a few days prior to the election, he once again stated that the objective of the Lincoln League was to promote the principles of the

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48 Lincoln League Platform, September 8, 1916, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 24.
Republican Party and protect the interest of African American voters in Tennessee. He explained his intentions of making the League an invaluable asset to the GOP in the state and the nation, and reminded them they had a reasonable chance to elect an African American to the United States Senate and Governor of Tennessee.

On the morning of the election, the *Commercial Appeal* countered Church’s plea with a display of racist “yellow” journalism. The article urged white Democrats to go to the poll and claimed that blacks and whites were attempting “to herd the ignorant Negro voters to the poll today” and split the white Democratic vote in the city. “There are 10,612 Negroes registered in Shelby County. There are just 21,636 white registered in Shelby County. Every black vote counts Presidential year. Suppose the white vote is split? Go to the polls today. Vote for Woodrow Wilson and the straight Democratic ticket and write the brand of shame across the hideous plot.” The *Commercial Appeal*, spread fear of a black political takeover. The newspaper already served as the unofficial organ of white supremacy in Memphis, with outlandish stories of black men as rapists and its daily stereotypical political cartoon, “Hambone’s Meditations.” White Democrats responded to the call and swept the elections that year.

Although the loss could be considered a political failure based on the overall outcome of the election, Church still viewed the election as an overwhelming success. He knew the unlikelihood of defeating the Democrats and Boss Crump’s political machine. Instead he intended for his movement to obstruct the growth of the lily-whites in Tennessee and the entire southern region. In this regard he succeeded as the Lincoln

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49 Robert Church Jr.’s Lincoln League Speech, November 1916, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 25.

League candidates outpolled the lily-white Republicans nearly four to one, leading Church to declare that the Lincoln League ticket represented the “Regular Republicans” in Tennessee. *Champion Magazine*, based out of Chicago, declared, “In our opinion it was the most significant phase of the recent election.” The article made clear that the Lincoln League did not work to promote any individual politician, or establish “Negro supremacy.” Instead it worked “to regain the lost rights of a growing race.” It concluded, “We congratulate the Colored people of Tennessee upon the success of their Lincoln League and their Robert Church.”

Other national newspapers applauded their efforts to challenge the party, who much like the Democrats, intended to keep African Americans politically powerless.

Church’s success in organizing the Lincoln League, combined with his ability to secure the black vote in Memphis, caught the attention of Republicans in Washington D.C. He had finally emerged from the shadow of his father and began to receive praise based on his own merit. In the subsequent years Church transitioned from a local leader to a national figure. During the various campaigns he built relationships with other prominent leaders, both white and black. They all coveted his expertise and attempted to align themselves with the rising star. Church had matured as a leader, and he hoped to empower all black Americans with his message of political uplift.

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51 *Champion Magazine* Article, January 7, 1917, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 25.
Chapter 3

The Roving Dictator of the Lincoln Belt

“Memphis presented a strange paradox,” wrote Gerald Gapers, “a city modern in physical aspect but rural in background, rural in prejudice, and rural in habit.”¹ By the World War I era the city boasted at least three colleges, a medical school, six hospitals, and three business colleges. Automobiles, paved streets, buildings, and city parks reflected the city’s urban landscape. Aesthetically, Memphis seemed to be in the midst of an urban renaissance. It also appeared to be a possible safe haven for rural blacks who wanted to escape the hostile environment of the Delta. It was the only place in the region that had a substantial black professional class, and as a result of the work of Church and others, black Memphians had a political voice in a southern city. Beale Street had transformed from a once posh exclusively white residential area into the “Main Street of Negro America.”² On Beale you could find everything from the offices of the leading black professionals in the city to banks, auditoriums, music clubs, saloons, gambling dens, and restaurants. Musicians, such as W.C. Handy, “Father of the Blues,” helped to introduce a new musical genre to America. Memphis emerged as an attractive alternative to the mundane country life. With a sprawling downtown, a prominent skyline, new


industries, a politically conscious black community, and a “progressive” mayor, Memphis in many ways epitomized the promise of a modern southern city.³

Despite the city’s physical improvement, however, its culture reflected the traditions and ideology of its rural neighbors. White Memphians remained resistant to social change. Many had migrated from the Delta and brought with them their own system of values and beliefs. Religion, in particular, had an enormous effect on the southern way of life. H.L. Mencken deemed Memphis “the Buckle of the Bible Belt,” in reference to the unique form of evangelical Protestantism that permeated the area. Their religion led some white Memphians to reject certain characteristics associated with urban life, viewing them as a threat to their southern traditions. They were consumed with their concepts of honor and “right to vengeance,” and considered it their sacred duty to protect their women and children from the moral and racial corruption of urban America. Black progress posed a threat to the racial hierarchy of the South. So aside from defending the sanctity of their women, they felt equally passionate about maintaining their political autonomy. As Amy Wood wrote, white southerners “conceptualized the threat of black enfranchisement and autonomy as, above all, a dire moral threat to white purity, literally a physical assault on white homes and white women.”⁴

By 1916, Church had successfully mobilized the black vote in Memphis and established himself as the preeminent black political leader in Tennessee. His political

³ Ibid; Paula Giddings, IDA: A Sword Among Lions (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 615; Capers, Biography of a River Town, 207; Goings and Smith, “Duty of the Hour,” 231; Biles, Memphis in the Great Depression, 88.

⁴ Wanda Rushing, Memphis and the Paradox of Place: Globalization in the American South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 44; Biles, Memphis in the Great Depression, 6; Amy L. Wood, Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890 – 1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 49.
victories challenged the fundamental beliefs of white supremacists. Therefore, in 1917, when a black woodchopper was lynched, Church witnessed the extent to which white Memphians would protect their racial hegemony in the area.

On Wednesday, May 2, 1917, a white sixteen-year old schoolgirl named Antoinette Rappel was brutally raped and murdered near the Wolf River Bridge on the outskirts of Memphis. Her decapitated corpse was found “lying on its back, with arms and limbs outstretched, and with clothing torn and disheveled.” That day the Memphis dailies suggested that a black man had attacked her and vigilante justice should be served. The News Scimitar reported, “that every indication tends to fasten the crime to a negro wood cutter, or more likely two of them.” The Commercial Appeal explained Rappel’s decapitated state by planting the idea that “a large number of Negroes worked as wood cutters in the area.” This image captured the imagination of white Memphians. The reports served as a rallying cry for white men to reassert their dominance. Most importantly, the Rappel murder provided an opportunity for white Memphians to reclaim their city not only from what they perceived as black sexual predators, but also from leaders like Church who threatened the tenets of southern culture.

Shelby County Sheriff Mike Tate led the investigation of the murder. The initial evidence suggested that a white male had committed the crime. Detectives Charles


6 News Scimitar, May 3, 1917.

7 Commercial Appeal, May 3, 1917.

8 Wood, Lynching and Spectacle, 7.
Brunner and John Boyle found Rappel’s bicycle standing against a tree with the contents inside her basket undisturbed, implying that she may have known her attacker. Also, her assailant left a white jacket and handkerchief at the scene of the crime, attire not typically associated with the poor woodcutters in the area. Dr. Lee A Stone commented, “It is practically a certainty…that this terrible crime has been committed by a white man.”

Instead of Tate following the leads of Detectives Brunner and Boyle, he chose to rely on the testimony of an African American deaf mute by the name of Dewitt Ford. Ford worked as a woodcutter near the scene of the murder and reenacted the attack through an elaborate performance that involved a series of physical gestures and grimaces. Ford, also known as “Dummy” by his employer, allegedly stood behind a tree and witnessed the murder. Subsequently, several suspects were brought in for questioning without any success. Finally, Tate turned to a thirty-something black woodcutter by the name of Ell Persons. He had previously interrogated and released Persons on two separate occasions. Frustrated with false leads and the increasing pressure from the white community to find Rappel’s killer, Tate, in an act of desperation, followed the advice of a New York criminologist and photographed the eye of the deceased girl. According to the French scientist Alphonse Bertillion, a person’s retina retained the image of his/her killer.

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Officer Paul Waggener photographed Rappel’s left eye because her right eye had decomposed. He claimed he could see the forehead and hair of Ell Persons.\textsuperscript{10}

On May 8, 1917, a grand jury indicted Ell Persons. He was immediately taken to Nashville for his own protection as he awaited trial. On May 21, as he traveled back to Memphis for a court date, a mob took Persons from two police office without any struggle. They immediately began to plan his murder. \textit{The Commercial Appeal} and \textit{News-Scimitar} advertised the location and time of the proposed lynching. \textit{The Commercial Appeal} ran the headline, “MOB CAPTURES SLAYER OF THE RAPPEL GIRL: Ell Persons to be Lynched Near Scene of Murder, May Resort to Burning.” An estimated 2,000 – 4000 men waited at the Wolf River Bridge on the night of his abduction. That number increased to around 6,000 men, women, and children the following morning. The atmosphere resembled a festival more than a public execution. People acted as police officers and directed traffic. Vendors had concession stands and sold drinks, peanuts, cotton candy, and ice cream to the anxious onlookers.\textsuperscript{11}

The proceedings began around 9:00 a.m. In the presence of thousands of spectators Persons confessed to the crime. A local pastor was summoned to allow Persons to pray in accordance with the lynching ritual. However, a spectator countered that Persons did not allow Rappel to pray before she died. The victim’s mother, Minnie Woods yelled, “Don’t shoot him, please….I want him to suffer 10,000 times more than did my little girl. Burn him, Burn him!” The mob respected her wishes and led Persons


to a pit filled with tree branches soaked in gasoline. The vigilantes then drenched Persons in gasoline, alcohol, and kerosene and proceeded to burn him alive.\textsuperscript{12}

With his body ablaze, the crowd sang “John Brown’s body” and “My Old Kentucky Home.” After the fire burned out and with his body smoldering from the ritualistic sacrifice, the crowd rushed his body to gather souvenirs from his charred corpse. They cut off his ears, nose, lips, and fingers. Finally someone decapitated Persons in the same manner as Rappel. His severed head was then thrown onto Beale Street, not far from the offices of Church and the city’s other leading black businessmen. The actions of the mob made it clear that they wanted to do more than terrorize the person suspected of the crime. They also wanted Church and his peers to understand the lengths whites would go to in order to protect the racial hierarchy of the Bluff City.\textsuperscript{13}

W. Fitzhugh Brundage describes mass lynch mobs as numbering between fifty and several thousand people, with the full support of their community for extralegal and illegal activities. Brundage states that mass mobs demonstrated the “highly ritualized choreography” of the chase, the selection of a sacrificial site, the sadistic torture and burning of the victim, and the collection of mementos from the victim’s body. This type of community-sanctioned violence reflected the culture of the South and symbolized the atmosphere in which Church operated.\textsuperscript{14}


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

It is also fair to criticize the city’s black leaders. The Ell Persons lynching not only exposes how white supremacists viewed African Americans, but also shows how African American viewed themselves. Class and group affiliation shared the activism in the city. Church and other members of the black elite did nothing to prevent the lynching of Ell Persons. In fact, as Kenneth Goings and Gerald Smith highlight, no “community” came to his defense, perhaps because Persons did not belong to any defined group. He was not a member of the black professional class or the larger working class in Memphis. Instead Persons “was an itinerant woodchopper, a migrant to the area who lived a relatively isolated existence in a woods outside of Memphis.” The city had a history of black activism, but for the most part these activists geared their efforts toward members of a specific group. The Persons lynching revealed a fundamental flaw in the black elite’s racial uplift strategy. As Goings and Smith state, the Talented Tenth in the city sought racial redress through legal and political action. Accommodationists were not willing to jeopardize their lives because it would do nothing to “foster harmonious race relations.” However, the actions of the mob suggest that despite Church’s distance from people like Persons, whites tended to view all African Americans, despite class, in a similar light.

By throwing Persons’ head onto Beale Street, the mob posed a direct challenge to black success. Church responded by becoming a more vocal critic of lynching. The lynching transformed black activism in the city, as Church and his allies attempted to align themselves with larger organizations and institutions that had the resources to expose these southern traditions on an international stage. Much like when his father was shot during the 1866 riots, Church became an unsuspecting victim of racial violence.

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Although he did not suffer any physical damage, it became clear that the white community perceived him as an enemy. Unlike his father, the younger Church was not as willing to accommodate to the demands of the white community. He was more expressive in his disapproval for these heinous crimes. He directly challenged the tenets of white supremacy.\(^{16}\)

Church developed a more organized approach to activism in the city. He was a much different leader than his father. People revered his father for the wealth and influence that he amassed, but he did little to improve the social conditions of the city. Church Sr. went to extreme lengths to endear himself to the white community. He not only bought the first bond to restore the city charter; he also once contributed one thousand dollars to provide entertainment for a reunion of the United Confederate Veterans. “I never gave a cent in my life so cheerfully or gladly as I gave that check to the veterans’ entertainment fund,” he once remarked. Perhaps out of necessity, Church Sr. chose to take an accommodationist approach in dealing with whites in the city to protect his family, businesses, and real estate investments. He also may have hoped for his children to be the leaders that he could not be. Church Jr. was a more vocal leader who would not cower under the pressure of white supremacy.\(^{17}\)

Within days of the lynching, Church met with his longtime friend since his days on Wall Street, James Weldon Johnson. On the day Johnson arrived, Church drove him to the lynching site. Johnson recalled, “A pile of ashes and pieces of charred wood still marked the spot.” After envisioning the scene Johnson stated, “I tried to balance the


\(^{17}\) Ibid.; *Commercial Appeal*, January 30, 1901.
sufferings of the miserable victim against the moral degradation of Memphis, and the
truth flashed over me that in large measure the race question involves the saving of black
America’s body and white America’s soul.”¹⁸ Church served as host and guide for the
next ten days as Johnson investigated the murder. Johnson interviewed Sheriff Tate,
black and white residents, and newspaper reporters. He published his findings in The
Crisis.¹⁹

Johnson found that Memphis’s black community wanted to enlist the help of the
National Association for Colored People (NAACP). Black Memphians were still excited
about what they accomplished the previous year with the Lincoln League. Lincoln
League member Bert Roddy had worked since 1914 to establish an NAACP branch in
Memphis after attending a meeting hosted by the organization’s board chairman, Joel
Spingarn, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Johnson met with Roddy and Church to discuss the
necessary steps for establishing a branch in Memphis. On June 11, 1917, prior to
Johnson’s departure, Church provided the names and membership dues of fifty-three
potential members, including himself, his wife Sallie, his mother Anna, and his sister
Annette. The Church women were the only women who signed the charter. Although
members only needed to submit one dollar to be considered active, over one-third of the
applicants donated the maximum five dollars. They impressed the national headquarters
with their commitment, and the NAACP granted a charter to Memphis on June 26. They

¹⁸ Johnson, Along this Way, 317 – 318.

¹⁹ Copy of the Crisis, May 22, 1917, The Robert R. Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder
28, Mississippi Valley Collection, McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.;
(Library of Congress Microfilm); NAACP, “The Lynching at Memphis,” 185 – 188; Patricia
Sullivan, Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement (New
secured a permanent charter the following year. Bert Roddy served as the branch’s first President, and Church served as the Chairman of the Executive Committee.\(^{20}\)

The Memphis branch played an integral role in expanding the NAACP’s presence in the South. However, not everyone was willing to remain in an area where over 5,000 people could witness a lynching and no one was arrested. The United States had recently entered World War I with the intention of making "the world safe for Democracy.” Black Memphians recognized the hypocrisy of President Woodrow Wilson’s crusade and looked for opportunities to protect themselves at home. The majority of black southerners continued to live in terror. Many black people thought the NAACP’s presence was only reactionary, and it would not prevent the type of violence that befell Ell Persons. *The New York Age* deemed Memphis “the most murderous city on earth.” In 1915 there were a reported 122 homicides in the city; New Orleans finished a distant second with eighty-three. Another statistic reveals that for every 100,000 residents of Memphis, 81.3 were killed; this, too, led the nation. The 227 Memphis police officers could not control the outlaw culture that existed in the city.\(^{21}\) This negligence prompted a response from the black community. The week of Person’s lynching, 1,500 – 2,000 African Americans flooded the bus station in Memphis with the hopes of purchasing a ticket to Chicago. On June 5, a military recruiter came to Memphis with the intention of getting black men to enlist in the military. He had scheduled his trip to Memphis prior to the lynching and expressed his disappointment with the turnout. He expected around


8,000 men between the ages 21-30 to enlist; however, only 3,000 showed. The Commercial Appeal noted that the few men who did enlist only did so to escape the racist atmosphere of the city. The recruiter believed that “German agents” had sabotaged his trip; however, it was more likely that African Americans were protesting the racial situation in Memphis.22

Church could not ignore the reactions of these black Memphians, and for the first time he spoke out against the lynching. Three thousand anxious black men and women packed themselves in Church Auditorium on June 29 to attend the first meeting of the Lincoln League since Persons’s death. In the weeks after the burning no organization publicly condemned the actions of the mob; no leader had come forward to provide advice or guidance, and no one delivered a speech to provide hope and courage to those who desperately needed direction. A newspaper captured the moment: “The pent-up feeling of the patriots and patriarchs, together with a thousand women, found expression in a burst of cheers when Robert R. Church Jr….took the gavel. What the people expected is exactly what they got.”23 Church reassured the crowd, “I would be untrue to you and myself as your elected leader if I should remain silent against shame and crime of lawlessness of any character, and I could not if I would hold my peace against either the lynching or burning of a human being.” He encouraged the members, “We must not lose hope, but keep our eyes open and press forward.” He concluded his speech by endorsing the work of the NAACP.24

22 The Commercial Appeal, June 6, 1917; Sweeney, “Trials of Shelby County,” 116-117.

23 Untitled Newspaper Article, no date, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 23.

24 Ibid.
The tragedy of 1917 proved that the Lincoln League and the NAACP were necessary for the race’s continued progress. Church never contemplated conceding to the threats made by white supremacists or abandoning his political crusade. He instead focused on the state elections of 1918. Church commented to a reporter that he would fight year after year “until the political chains are broken and colored men are treated as citizens.” Empowering African Americans politically remained his professional priority. Church, much like generations of African Americans before him, equated the right to vote with freedom. He said, “If the League did nothing more than teach colored men the dignity of the ballot and white men that all colored men cannot be purchased and a great number misled that is enough for the first time.” His faction continued their role as the “Regular Republican Party” of Tennessee and began organizing and campaigning.25

The Lincoln League remained a strong organization. Its new branches and growing membership raised the concerns of whites throughout the state who did not believe in the League’s sustainability. Several newspapers began to voice their concerns more regularly. They questioned the leadership of Church. They depicted him as a dictator and not a person who truly believed in the democratic process. The Nashville Banner, for instance, thought African Americans should take initiative and vote for the candidates who they sought fit without Church’s influence. An editorial in the Banner warned members of the Lincoln League that if African American voters continued to vote based on the “dictation of the League. . .they will invite a solid white opposition.”26 The editorial scolded the League members and reminded its leaders that their main goal


26 Ibid.; Nashville Banner, November 18, 1916.
should be to encourage its members to make individual judgment in voting and not to be herded to the polls like obedient cattle.

Church’s political strategies demanded that the members of the organization look to him and other leaders in the League for their political direction. Although the *Banner*’s argument is rooted in logic, it is not a fair assessment of Church or the League. White supremacist organizations had compromised the essence of democracy long before the League’s existence. In fact, it was the actions of the Shelby County Republicans that made the Lincoln League a necessary organization. The Lincoln League was formed as a reaction to the solid white opposition that existed in the South. White Democrats worked diligently to keep African Americans second-class citizens; lily-white Republicans were even more inclined than Democrats to refuse them any form of political representation. Therefore Church had to develop a program that strove toward achieving assimilationist ends through separatist means.  

The *New York Age* highlighted the shortcomings of the *Banner*; “the spectacle of a southern daily preaching against race solidarity in politics is a bit unusual not to say incongruous.” Church established the Lincoln League to involve African Americans in the democratic process, not to compromise its democratic principles. He told members of the League that he had no intention of assuming a revolutionary role or forming “a color line organization similar to the Ku Klux Klans.” He wanted the members of the League to ascribe to the same type of idealism as the Young Turks Movement and the Sons of Liberty during America’s prerevolutionary days. Church worked to strengthen the organization and make them a closer-knit group. The construction of black institutions

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such as political organizations, fraternal orders, schools, and colleges could produce “mainstream values...in a segregated environment.”

Church responded to the limits of the Jim Crow South the best way that he knew. However, his “racial uplift” strategies reveals a disconnect between the leaders and members of organizations such as the Lincoln League. Church told members of the League exactly who they should vote for in local, state, and national elections. He expected no one to deviate from this plan, and according to the evidence few did. Church’s demanding leadership style eventually earned him the nickname as “the roving dictator of the Lincoln Belt.” Church only consulted with leaders of equal or higher stature on political issues. It can be assumed that Church believed his family background, educational pedigree, and relationships with powerful politicians made him an inherently more qualified leader, and he did not feel inclined to involve people of lower social status in his decision-making.

Although Church embraced a more egalitarian vision of racial uplift, his form of leadership bordered on paternalism. Certain aspects of his racial uplift ideology were fundamentally contradictory. As Kevin Gaines states, “Elite African Americans were replicating even as they contested, the uniquely American racial fictions upon which liberal conceptions of social reality and equality were founded.” The efforts of Church were not disingenuous, but he believed that only members of his social status were capable of leading the race. Gaines writes, “Although uplift ideology was by no means


29 *Time*, February 18, 1929.
incompatible with social protest against racism, its orientation toward self-help implicitly faulted African Americans for their lowly status, echoing judgmental dominant characterizations of the Negro problem.”

Wilson Moses describes this as a form of “black bourgeois nationalism” that existed from the 1850s through the 1920s. Although members of the black elite viewed themselves as separate from working-class blacks, they too had to deal with the reality that they were also denied access to mainstream institutions based solely on their race. Therefore, leaders such as Church emphasized ideas of “group self-consciousness” and developed programs that attempted “to manipulate the hostile environment in which it was conceived.” Church and other “black bourgeoisie nationalist” leaders developed an “alternative structure, a functional tradition created for the purpose of publicizing black aspirations, giving them political force, and institutionalizing them in forms that might ultimately transform American civilization.”

Church’s programs did provide a real sense of optimism for African Americans in the state, and this further enraged his enemies. Church’s friend George W. Lee discussed tactics used by influential white politicians to have him drafted into the army and fight in World War I. White Republican leaders wanted to eliminate Church as a leader, destroy the League, and seize total control of the Republican Party in West Tennessee. Lee stated, “even though he had a wife, a daughter, a sister, and a mother who were all

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30 Ibid., 4.

dependent members of his household, he wrote across the top of the questionnaire, ‘I
claim no exemption.’” Whites viewed Church as a “dangerous radical” and wanted to
thwart his authority. Despite his enemies’ efforts, the military never called Church for
duty. He remained steadfast in his approach and sought to control the Republican Party in
the state. 32

The Lincoln League focused on the state elections of 1918. That year the
Republican state committee sat Church as a full member in the organization. His white
rival John Farley spoke out against Church’s seat: “he did not care for a seat to the
committee if Mr. Church had a seat there.” 33 J. Will Taylor, state committee chairman,
informed Farley that the political leaders of Tennessee agreed that “Mr. Church had the
only organization in the state, and that henceforward he was to be considered as the
leader of Shelby County and the Tenth district, where he controls more votes than all the
lilies combined.” 34 Church grew tired of Farley and the antics of “water-through
Republicans and suitcase Democrats,” and in July 1918 he announced his candidacy for
membership on the Republican State Executive Committee. Church represented the
Tenth district, comprised of Tipton, Hardeman, Fayette and Shelby Counties. He had
successfully mobilized the black vote in West Tennessee during the previous national
elections and knew that he could easily defeat any lily-white opposition. The last black
person to be elected to this seat was Josiah T. Settle, twenty-years prior. His friends,
influential black Memphians Thomas Hayes, Bert Roddy, and “Little Joe” Settle,

32 George W. Lee, *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began* (College Park: McGrath

33 *Chicago Defender*, January 26, 1918.

34 Ibid.
campaigned on Church’s behalf. The Chicago Defender made sure that everyone had a poll tax receipt that dated prior to July 1, 1918, to ensure they could register. Defender stated, “No contest has attracted so much attention in a while, for everybody who knows that Church is one man that they can’t steal from and get away with it.”

On July 19, Roscoe Conkling Simmons spoke to an estimated 5,000 citizens of both races at Church Auditorium. Simmons, regarded as one of the leading orators of his era, declared “the day of political emancipation of the South was at hand for the first time in years.” As expected, Church was elected as a member of the Republican State Committee and the State Republican Primary Board. He and the Lincoln League “snapped the political chains of the south.” The Democrats and Republicans withdrew their candidates the day before the election and Church won full membership to the State Executive Committee and the State Republican Primary Board. As the Defender reported, “the lily-whites were afraid to go to the mat with him.” Church told Simmons that the reason the Republicans withdrew their candidates was because “they did not want my strength to become a matter of public record, and they knew that if they held the Primary they couldn’t steal it, and they couldn’t get me to withdraw.”

The person who Church most wanted to share his success with, Sallie, could not be with him to celebrate. She suffered from an illness suspected to be cancer, and she was living with her mother in Washington D.C. He wrote her on their wedding day.

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35 Chicago Defender, July 14, 1918.

36 Chicago Defender, August 10, 1918.

37 Robert Church Jr. to Roscoe Conkling Simmons, August 3, 1918, Box 2, Robert Church Jr. Correspondences Folder, Harvard University Archives, Pusey Library, Cambridge, MA.
anniversary and congratulated her for “being able to put up with me for seven years.” He informed her of his election and sent her a copy of a letter written by Jim Europe, the world-renowned musician, with the hopes of lifting her spirits. Church enclosed some money and assured her the “baby (Roberta) is well and doing fine.” Annette served as the primary caretaker for Roberta while Sallie was away. With a heavy heart Church ended the letter like he always did, “Devotedly yours, Robert.”

Congratulatory letters from other family members and other prominent leaders flooded his office. In particular, Ida B. Wells recognized him for his “splendid victory.” She offered, “I know that you will do great things for your people. I am certainly proud of your father’s son, my only regret is that he could not have lived to enjoy your victory.” Despite Well's ongoing rivalry with Church’s sister, Mary, he always remained supportive of each. Apparently, Wells had also fallen on hard times and she reminded Church of the time his father loaned her $200 to return to Memphis after being stranded in California. In the same letter she asked Church if she could borrow $500. She pleaded, “If I had not given my life, and all I could earn to help this race of ours, I would not need to ask such a favor of any one.” In perhaps an effort to persuade Church, Wells added, “Having done so, and the race at large having benefitted by my work, I feel I have the right to ask such a favor of one of my old friends who is amply able to do this for me.”

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38 Robert Church Jr. to Sarah Church, July 26, 1918, Church Papers, Box 2.
39 Ida B. Wells to Robert Church Jr., August 30, 1918, The Roberta Church Collection, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee, Box 6, Robert Church Jr. Correspondences Folder.
He took his seat in September 1918. The crowd gave him an “ovation that strong men only give to a strong man.”\textsuperscript{40} Church’s victory was an important individual accomplishment, but it meant more for the race. The other members of the committee welcomed Church and congratulated him on his victory. His triumph provided an opportunity to discuss the issues that plagued Tennessee’s African American community with the Party’s elite politicians.

In addition to Church, the Lincoln League had elected nineteen of the twenty winners of various local elections, including Mayor Frank Monteverde and County Trustee Edward “Boss” Crump. Church wrote to Roscoe Simmons that “the Lincoln League did its duty well, and the members deserve a lot of credit.”\textsuperscript{41} He also instructed Simmons to publish an article in the \textit{Defender} because “I think it is one of the greatest victories we have ever won.” He continued, “get this done in the paper this week and the next time I see you I will buy you a package of peanuts.” Robert Abbott, owner of the \textit{Chicago Defender}, had recently hired Simmons as the newspaper’s public relations representative at $125 weekly. Simmons could command an audience with his writings and speeches, unlike Church, who was an average orator at best. A newspaper article described Simmons as an amazing genius who was “the ambassador of 12 million people, the wisest champion his Race ever had, and his country’s foremost orator.”\textsuperscript{42} Church consulted with Simmons more than any other person on political issues. \textit{The Defender}

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Chicago Defender}, September 28, 1918.

\textsuperscript{41} Robert Church Jr. to Roscoe Conkling Simmons, August 3, 1918, Simmons Papers.

had a national readership and Simmons often used his articles to promote the achievements of Church and the League.

Church had developed the Lincoln League into a political powerhouse and hoped to carry this momentum into the fall as he worked with the leaders of the Lincoln League to develop strategies for the state elections. The Lincoln League endorsed Republicans H.B. Lindsay for Governor, H.C. Evans for United States Senate, and George C. Taylor for State Railroad Commissioner. A circular generated by the League read, “nothing is more important in the present than breaking our political chain. Second in importance is to stand by with those who give a hand when it takes a man to give the hand…The results will be close and we can win if you do your part.”

Although nearly 1,000 of the League’s members in Shelby County voted for the Republican candidates, they still could not overcome the Democrats’ control over the rest of the state. Church continued to suffer political defeats at the hands of the Democrats, but he was winning the fight against the lily whites as more counties in West Tennessee began to align themselves with Church’s Republican candidates.

Church succeeded in educating and organizing black voters in West Tennessee, but the Party remained divided. The national committee saw the potential for securing a Republican following in the South based on the work of Church. Perhaps other black Republicans in the region could prove that they could mobilize black voters. Church demonstrated that he could raise funds for the Party, as well. Since he financed his own organizations, programs, and paid his way to conventions, he became a financial asset for the Party. In preparation for the national elections of 1918, the GOP changed its tactics and demanded more reform in the South. It also wanted a united Party. In 1918 the

43 Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 36; Chicago Defender, October 26, 1918.
Republican Party appointed Will H. Hays as its national chairman. The Republicans selected Hays because of his effectiveness as a conciliator and one of his main priorities was unifying the Party. Hays contacted Church and informed him that, “your name has been suggested to me…as one whom we can depend upon in Tennessee.” He asked Church to partner with other respected Republican leaders and prepare a document that informed him of the state’s most pressing issues. He hoped to benefit from Church’s “suggestion and advice at all times.” Hays’ appointment to the national committee marked the beginning of a long political relationship between him and Church, and helped to increase Church’s presence in the national organization.44

Church had aligned himself with the most powerful politicians of his era, as well as the era’s most successful civil rights organization, the NAACP. In order for Church to accomplish his goals of mass political mobilization among African Americans, he needed to extend his presence beyond Tennessee. His affiliation with the NAACP helped to grow the organization, as well as his political machine. Most southern states had stricter voting restrictions than Tennessee. With the presence of lily-white Republicans and the obstacle of disfranchisement, some southern black men became increasingly uninterested in politics, and were more likely to vote without partisan bias. Neither Party made sincere appeals to black voters. As Glenda Gilmore suggested, no one could blame black southerners if they held “a perfectly human tinge of malice toward the Republican at the polls.”45 Church’s presence within the Republican Party and the NAACP allowed him to

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44 Sherman, *The Republican Party and Black America*, 135; Will Hays to Robert Church Jr., June 3, 1918, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 35.

merge these separate institutions to appeal to the concerns of the black community. During the World War I era “southern African Americans began to look toward the NAACP as a way to express political opinions.” His affiliation with the NAACP also allowed Church the opportunity to expand his position beyond politics and develop a larger constituency.

Church also had to consider the political effects of the Great Migration. Although the war created opportunities for black “to taste industrial freedom” in the North, the exodus ironically “elevated the possibilities for those who stayed behind.” White southerners had grown accustomed to a dependent black labor force. That they realized the value of black labor provided the “Negro race the chance to register its first protest against its treatment in the South.” The conditions in the South allowed the NAACP the opportunity to “translate ideals into action.” Their service in the armed forces allowed African Americans to reassert claims to “full citizenship rights, while exposing how America’s racial caste system undermined the nation’s most fundamental values.” For the first time in its nearly decade of existence, the NAACP could truly become a national organization. Church would play a considerable role in their efforts.

Now Church was given the task of helping to establish more charters throughout the South. Newly appointed executive secretary John R. Shillady and NAACP president Moorefield Storey had devised plans for a drive that would increase membership in the organization by 50,000 members. They called upon Church to assist in the aims of the

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46 Ibid.

47 Sullivan, Lift Every Voice, 61.
national organization. Church invited James Weldon Johnson and Shillady to speak at a meeting that would be hosted by the Memphis branch. He told Johnson that he could secure at least “two or three thousand” people in attendance. The meeting was billed as “A BIG Monster Mass Meeting” to be held at Church’s Park. It aimed to educate Tennesseans on the objectives of the NAACP. Following the meeting, Church provided the names and addresses of several leading men in Chattanooga and Nashville who were eager to establish branches despite the constant threat of violence that paralyzed the region. Church impressed the national office with his ability to mobilize large crowds on short notice, and much like the Republican Party, the NAACP's leaders in New York knew he could be a financial asset for the national organization. The NAACP needed a respected black southerner who understood the culture of the South and could convince his peers to establish charters in their cities and towns. Following the meeting in Memphis, Church emerged as a key component in growing the organization and aiding them with their national anti-lynching campaign.

The NAACP’s anti-lynching campaign was inspired by the efforts of a Republican congressman from St. Louis by the name of Leonidas Dyer. In the aftermath of the Persons lynching and the 1917 East St. Louis riots, Dyer introduced an anti-lynching bill that promised to “guard citizens of the United States against lynching” based on compliance with the Fourteenth Amendment. This bill served as a motivating

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48 Robert Church Jr. to James Weldon Johnson, March 19, 1918, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 31.

49 Robert Church Jr. to James Weldon Johnson, October 24, 1918, Roberta Church Papers, Box 6, NAACP folder.

50 Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 75.
force for the NAACP’s thirty-year anti-lynching crusade. That same year the NAACP made an important hire by appointing Walter White to his new position as assistant field secretary. Within two weeks of White’s hiring, he traveled to Tennessee to investigate the lynching of Jim Mcllheron in Estill Springs, Tennessee. Although it is unlikely that White stayed with the Churches during his investigation, the Church home usually accommodated White during his travels to Memphis and the Delta region. After a visit to the Churches in December 1918, he wrote Anna to thank the family for its hospitality. White wrote, “I have never enjoyed so thoroughly a visit in all my experience as I did the all too few days spent there and I shall always remember them with the keenest pleasure.” Growing tired of his road travels, he jokingly concluded, “I suppose I’ll get my resting in Heaven, if I ever get there, although I am afraid the Crackers won’t let me.”

For his efforts in attempting to establish branches in the region and his efforts to pass anti-lynching legislation, Johnson informed Church that he planned to nominate him to serve as a member of the NAACP’s Board of Directors. Johnson, a native southerner, felt the South should have some representation on the Board. In January 1919 the NAACP announced in The Bulletin that Church had become the first exclusively southern member of the organization’s Board of Directors. Church had helped to establish sixty-eight branches in fourteen southern states. He became the representative of 9,841 members in a region that two years prior had virtually no presence. Church had personally grown the membership in the Memphis branch to over 1,000 members. His success in the region established a trustworthy and capable liaison with the national

51 Walter White to Anna Church, December 12, 1918, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 31.

52 Copy of the NAACP Branch Bulletin, January 1919, Roberta Church Paper, Box 6, NAACP Folder.
office. Church used his contacts in the region to provide news and information during preliminary investigations, and he also used his influence to grow the NAACP in Tennessee and its surrounding states.53

In the following years, the Church family home often served as a headquarters for lynching investigations in Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas. Church would dispatch informants and reporters to areas to gather information about lynchings, riots, and other discriminatory practices to share the findings with the national office, preparing White or Johnson for their personal investigations. The NAACP’s executive committee was always suspicious of infiltration and would instruct Church to monitor the behavior of persons affiliated with the organizations, such as branch leaders, attorneys, and investigators. They also did not want the correspondence between Church and the national office to be intercepted and their work sabotaged. Therefore, a select few members communicated in a secret code while they discussed the details of certain lynchings. NAACP press official Herbert Seligmann created the system to gather news from the South. He urged Church to use the following code:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>EQUIVALENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purchased Memphis (or other city)</td>
<td>Man lynched at Memphis (or other city)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George purchased Memphis or other city</td>
<td>Woman lynched at Memphis or other city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500 ( or other number)</td>
<td>By mob of 1500 or other number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash</td>
<td>Charge of rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortgage</td>
<td>Charge of attack on woman or other offense against woman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clear Charged with other offense

Sale Memphis (or other city) 100 (or other number of dollars) Race riot Memphis (or other city) in which 100 (or other number) Negroes injured

Credit Memphis (or other city) Your representative in Memphis (or other city)

Wire funds Recommend immediate Investigation

Forward shipment Memphis (or other city) Advise by wire of developments at Memphis (or other city) and send clippings

Fred Ku Klux Klan

Price raised Memphis (or other city) Trouble threatened Memphis (or other city)

George Hill H.J. Seligman

Alfred Means J.R. Shillady

Harold Phelps J.W. Johnson

Joseph Wild Walter White54

Church kept the national organization abreast of lynchings, riots, police brutality, white attitudes in the community, and the names of other southern black leaders who wanted to establish NAACP branches. Outside the offices in New York, Church emerged as one of the organization’s most valuable members.

Two separate entities, the Republican Party and the NAACP, coveted Church for his ability to mobilize African Americans in support of their efforts. Both white and black national leaders wanted to use Church’s attributes to their advantage. The elections of 1916 and 1918, combined with the Ell Persons tragedy, catapulted Church into the

54 Church, The Robert R. Churches, 69-70.
upper echelon of black leaders. The Persons lynching in particular forced Church to reassess his leadership style and recognize that political activism moved beyond participation at the polls. A political structure already existed within black communities in Memphis and other southern cities. African Americans, regardless of class, had built churches, public and private schools, newspapers, fraternal orders, women’s auxiliaries, and political organizations. In order for Church to be successful he needed to recognize that “these institutions composed a formidable and intermeshed infrastructure of social and political engagement.” By tapping into these institutions Church used the existing community to combat lily-whitism, disfranchisement, lynching, and other issues pertinent to the black community.55

By serving on the NAACP’s executive board, Church progressed from an exclusively political leader to a more complete civil rights activist. It provided an opportunity for blacks who had become disillusioned with the political process with another avenue to express their political opinions. Black people believed that the NAACP worked for them as “sort of a secret agent among southern African Americans.”56 The NAACP became another tool that Church could use to reach a black electorate that would otherwise not be interested in joining a solely political organization. Yet under the auspices of the NAACP, Church could still push his political agenda. He married the social uplift message of the NAACP with traditional politics to create a strategy that made him one of the most influential black leaders for the next decade.


Chapter 4

Minority Report

The little town of Elaine, Arkansas embodied the racial tensions of the nation in 1919. The rural community located in Phillips County, in the heart of the Arkansas Delta, was a quiet farm community that reflected the characteristics of a typical town found in the Jim Crow South. Large-scale cotton plantations created the appearance of a white sea that stretched as far and wide as the eye could capture. Local governments used race to determine a person's citizenship, which created a class of disfranchised laborers who remained dependant on whites for survival. Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers, who worked the cotton plantations, found themselves in a position where they had little power in their negotiations with white planters. In most instances, black farmers had to accept whatever their white employers would offer. As second-class citizens, African Americans had few recourses for to combat injustices, which allowed for their employers to further infringe on their civil liberties. Employers dictated nearly every aspect of African American life. In places like Elaine black people found little distinction between their current state and the institution of slavery.¹

The rural South presented limited opportunities for African Americans, but America's involvement in World War I provided new options. The soldiers who fought in the Great War not only left behind their homes and families, but also their jobs. Suddenly black southerners did not have to be relegated to the farms and many sought work in the local factories. The Great Migration allowed southern blacks to imagine a better society for their families and escape the hostile racial climate in the South. By

1919, black people found better jobs, housing, and education opportunities in the North. Thousands left their rural communities with hopes of reaching their perceived promised land. These changes, combined with the return of politically aware black soldiers, posed a serious threat to their white employers. Racial tensions reached an all-time high, and with black people moving into new areas, the "negro problem" was no longer relegated to the region.²

Elaine, Arkansas provided the site for one of the many racially inspired violent episodes that occurred during the infamous Red Summer of 1919. The Elaine Riot demonstrated that black people would no longer passively accept white racism. The riot also showcased white solidarity and the overwhelming odds African Americans faced in the South. The uprising was not just a physical altercation between the two races; it proved that blacks had to fight the institution of racism that had developed to defend the white community. In a race war black people could not possibly defeat whites, because they would be outnumbered and outgunned. Adam Fairclough writes that, “Whites controlled the police, the courts, and the prisons,” and “Whites could also draw upon the might of the federal government.”³

On September 30, approximately 150 - 200 black sharecroppers cramped into the tiny Hoop Spur Church in Phillips County. Frustrated with the mistreatment of their employers, the county's black workers organized to form the Progressive Farmers and

² Ibid., 150 - 178.

Household Union of America (PFHUA). The PFHUA agreed to not pick or sell cotton until its members received fair market value from their landlords. At the time the market value of cotton in Arkansas was forty-five cents a pound, but white planters would only pay black farmers twenty-four cents. Men, women, and children attended the meeting that night to discuss the hiring of a prominent white attorney from Little Rock to represent them. White farmers found out that the black sharecroppers were holding a meeting in the church. Around eleven o'clock, several cars filled with armed white men pulled in front of the church and opened fire, killing a few members. The attendees responded in an act of self defense and fired shots back at their attackers. In the end a white railroad agent had been killed and a deputy was wounded.  

The horrified white community thought black sharecroppers had launched a full-fledged insurrection with intentions to kill the white landowners in the area. Arkansas Governor Charles Brough requested and received 600 federal troops to quell the suspected attacks from the black community. Following orders, the military began arresting suspected black unionists and admittedly killed black people “for refusing to halt when so ordered or for resisting arrest.” White vigilantes, also indiscriminately shot and killed an unknown number of black people within a two-hundred-mile radius. Estimates of black fatalities ranged from 200 to 300 during the weeklong riot. In its aftermath, a Phillips County grand jury indicted 122 African Americans and charged seventy-three with murder. Twelve of those men received death sentences. The military

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made hundreds of other arrests while they tortured and beat black suspects being held in jail.\textsuperscript{6}

The NAACP and Walter White immediately began to investigate the incident. Elaine was located approximately ninety miles southwest of Memphis. Prior to leaving for Elaine, White contacted Church to gain more knowledge about what had occurred. Church contacted people in the area to do preliminary investigations to help prepare him for the visit. When White arrived, he posed as a white reporter for a Chicago newspaper and interviewed the governor, local white officials, and the jailed defendants to construct a story that contradicted the claims made by the mainstream media and the state. His report, along with later ones by Ida B. Wells, gained national attention. The NAACP and the local Citizens’ Defense Fund Commission raised approximately $10,000 for the defense of the twelve men sentenced to death.\textsuperscript{7}

The NAACP’s Board of Directors named Colonel G. W. Murphy, a prominent white attorney from Little Rock, the lead lawyer for the case. The NAACP strategically chose Murphy for the case because of his race and influence in the area. They rejected an offer from Thomas J. Price, a black lawyer from Little Rock and a member of the NAACP, to serve as the legal representation for the case. Price and another black lawyer from the area, Scipio A. Jones, had conducted their own investigations and were trying to build a case to save the lives of the twelve death row inmates. Price told Walter White that he and Jones planned to “lay the foundation to carry the cases to the United States


Supreme Court if need be.”

He asked the NAACP to help them raise approximately $10,000 for their efforts.

White and other members of the national branch considered the proposal. However, they knew a black lawyer stood little to no chance of overturning the decision of the twelve men in the racist atmosphere of Phillips County, especially if they were affiliated with the NAACP. Initially, the NAACP diverted any attention away from the organization until they had gathered all the evidence they could to stop the executions. It did not want to prompt a response from the white community and ruin its hard work. Although the NAACP hired Murphy, it did not necessarily trust him. James Weldon Johnson wrote Church to inform him that they had hired Colonel Murphy and agreed to “pay him $3000 for his services,” but they wanted “action and results.” He told Church that the national staff held a meeting and decided to ask him “to undertake the task of keeping a check on Colonel Murphy as best you can.” Johnson continued, “We do not wish to write or communicate with Colonel Murphy in any way which would cause him to think that we did not have the fullest confidence in him. Nevertheless, we feel that we ought to be in direct touch with him through one of our directors.” Johnson instructed Church to send a confidential letter that told him, “what you know and what you can find out about Colonel Murphy’s standing as a man in the state and as a lawyer, and as to his attitude toward colored people?”

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9 Ibid.; James W. Johnson to Robert Church Jr., December 2, 1919, Church Papers, Box 3, FF 31.
Johnson trusted that Church could find out more about Murphy without jeopardizing the case. He made it clear that he did not want any publicity about the Elaine violence “until we are out of the woods.” Johnson assured Church that “If we save these men we will flood the country with publicity on what we have done, but publicity now will not help us and will only hurt them.” He then asked Church to inform Thomas Price of the NAACP’s strategy and to help secure witnesses for the case. He told Church that the national members of the NAACP “felt that you were exactly the man to diplomatically handle this situation as well as to keep your finger on Colonel Murphy’s pulse.”

Church then helped to organize the investigation on the local level. With a small network of people, he worked on the case, risking their positions and businesses, homes, families, and lives. They faced a constant threat of danger. One person who fled the scene on the day of the riot wrote Church and the other members of the NAACP to explain his experiences. He urged them, “Please get up at once for my help because if they get me, they will kill me.” The mob had found literature with the names of men who supported the union. Though they lived as far as 100 miles away, they were being terrorized by local whites and sentenced to prison. Violence paralyzed the area. Just the thought of being associated with the case was enough to get a person killed. Despite the

10 Ibid.

11 Unnamed Phillips County, Arkansas Detective to the N.A.A.C.P., November 26, 1919, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 31.
violent atmosphere, Church supported the NAACP and served as middleman during the initial investigations.\footnote{12 James W. Johnson to Robert Church Jr., October 20, 1921, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 31; Rodgers, “The Elaine Race Riots of 1919,” 150.}

Church remained active in the Elaine matter and contributed to the NAACP’s legal defense fund. The NAACP was actually involved in two separate cases. One case, \textit{Ware v. State}, listed the name of Ed Ware and five other men. Another case had Frank Moore and five more defendants. The Arkansas Supreme Court overturned \textit{Ware v. State}, citing that the "jury had failed to state the degree of murder the men were found guilty of committing." The other case reached the U.S. Supreme Court and was overturned in 1923. They argued that "the trial had been dominated by a mob spirit." Church did not contribute much to the actual trials, but he continued to correspond with James Weldon Johnson until the last of the twelve men would eventually be released in 1925.

Church and his correspondence with Johnson and White demonstrate the importance of local leaders in the national struggle. The NAACP could not have been successful without people such as Church, who had knowledge of the area, connections with local leaders, and enough influence to mobilize African Americans into action despite the difficult odds. The NAACP needed Church’s expertise in organizing black people to prepare for White’s visit, as well as to develop a strategy that would work in the racist atmosphere of Philips County. Constantly fearful of espionage and infiltrators, the NAACP depended on Church for his advice on who they should align themselves with in order to make their efforts a success. After the “red summer” of 1919, Church, who still
served as its director of southern branches, would continue to play a role in the investigations of several local cases that the NAACP pursued in the years to come.\footnote{NAACP 1917 – 1968 correspondences, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 31.}

As the decade came to a close, Church found a nation in transition. The “Great War” served as the catalyst for the political, economic, and social movements that defined the 1920s. In its aftermath, some disillusioned whites dropped out of society and looked to the authors of the “Lost Generation” to articulate their frustrations. Increasing labor tensions prompted the working class to strike for fair wages and basic labor rights, while unrelenting employers sometimes countered these labor demonstrations with bloody force. In 1919, the U.S. Congress passed the Eighteenth Amendment to prohibit the sale and consumption of alcohol to promote ideas of morality and sobriety, while urbanites and youth rebelled by creating a sub-culture free of inhibition and sexual mores. These are only a few of the movements that helped to create America’s modern society.\footnote{Giddings, \textit{IDA}, 615; Lynn Dumenil, \textit{Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s} (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 8-9.}

As mainstream America constructed the image of “roaring twenties” to describe this decade of protest and individualism, African Americans still faced a common foe, white supremacy. Riots and lynchings suppressed any aspirations that African Americans would ultimately become full participants in American society. African Americans, however, did not accept these circumstances as they did during prior generations. African Americans born from the post-Reconstruction era had come of age. Their black leaders had never been enslaved, and they possessed a sense of entitlement that their parents had never developed. They had attended school, worked in professional occupations, and developed a collective consciousness of activism. Black people had
grown impatient with government-sanctioned racism and began to demand their equal rights. Their activism became evident in the art and literature of the Harlem Renaissance, while Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association embodied the nationalistic spirit of many black people during the 1920s. Together these ideological strands help pave the way for the emergence of a "New Negro" mentality. In order for leaders such as Church to remain relevant, they too had to embrace the more militant spirit of the black masses and harness this new energy.\(^\text{15}\)

During the spring of 1919 W.E.B. Du Bois stated, “We stand again to look America squarely in the face and call a spade a spade.” In his essay “Returning Soldiers,” DuBois applauded the commitment of black soldiers abroad, but criticized the racism African Americans faced on the home front. Du Bois charged, “But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land…We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting.” Du Bois’s comments about the black freedom struggle proved prophetic; they described the orgy of violence that occurred during those summer months.\(^\text{16}\)

A militant white opposition determined to keep blacks in their place countered any perceived gains made by African Americans during the Great War. Black soldiers fought to protect democracy abroad while maintaining hope that their country would realize its own hypocrisy and embody the true ideals of a free nation. As these black veterans returned home, they witnessed a renewed commitment by white southerners to


reeestablish their dominance. Benjamin Mays, then a young college student, noticed, “In many a local community Negro soldiers were told, ‘Take off those uniforms and act like a nigger should.’” Extra-legal violence resurged. Tuskegee Institute recorded seventy-six lynchings in 1919 compared to thirty-seven in 1917, which had the lowest reported total since the institute began gathering statistics in 1882. Twenty of the victims that year were black veterans. Even more suffered beatings, many while still in uniform, and were forced to leave their homes. A newspaper article stated, “Negro soldiers returning from the war inflamed their people with stories of race equality in Europe, especially the lack of discrimination in social intercourse.” Soldiers came home to defend themselves just as they did abroad. In Chicago, Illinois, and two years later in Tulsa, Oklahoma, black soldiers armed themselves and led the charge in defending their communities from their white neighbors, many of whom paid for their actions with their lives. In 1919, over four hundred blacks and whites were killed in the various racial insurrections. The new negro mentality infuriated southern whites who worked once again to redefine their culture through violent means.\(^{17}\)

That year, thirty-eight race related riots erupted across the nation. The working class, comprised of both blacks and whites, organized and staged labor protests to improve their economic conditions in the wake of the Great War; African Americans witnessed President Wilson negotiate the articles for the League of Nations abroad while

vigilante terror loomed over their communities. Blacks and working class whites in general became more militant in their quest for protection and economic security at home. Yet the federal government launched a malicious campaign of anticommunism, and xenophobia to keep protesters from challenging the authority of the government and industrialists. America’s attention was diverted from the bloody conflicts of the “Red Summer” and replaced with the anti-Bolshevik campaign of the “Red Scare.” The racial implications behind many of the riots that summer were now masked with “antiradical and nativist hysteria.” As Kenneth Janken explains, “whites perceived African Americans’ attempts to improve their life circumstances as unpatriotic efforts to bring down the social order.” The ever-present threat of lynching and mob violence posed a far greater threat to American society than the perceived dangers of Bolshevism. If Church and other leaders spoke out against these ills, they now risked being labeled as communists or un-American.\footnote{Giddings, \textit{IDA}, 593; Kenneth Janken, \textit{Walter White: Mr. NAACP} (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 43.}

That summer African Americans responded to the violent antics of whites with violence of their own. They realized that they could not rely on government intervention; they had to protect their families, homes, and businesses themselves. Ida B. Wells commented, “The Negro cannot understand why it was a brave thing to kill the Germans and not equally brave to kill white Huns in his own country, who take his life, destroy his home, and insult his manhood every step of the way in free America.”\footnote{Gidding, \textit{IDA}, 592.} As the working class protected itself in the streets, Church and the NAACP worked to expose the
hypocrisy of America and allow the international community to witness the plight of African Americans, especially in the South.\textsuperscript{20}

Church publicly supported the “war for democracy” not only as a symbol of patriotism, but also to force the American government to recognize African Americans’ inalienable rights as American citizens. In 1918, black Memphians proved their loyalty to America by contributing $174,823 for Thrift Stamps used to finance the war. That fall Church, Bert Roddy, Thomas Hayes, Thomas O. Fuller, James W. Lane, and other prominent blacks from West Tennessee pledged to double their quota of $75,000 for the United War Work campaign. Despite these displays of loyalty by black Tennesseans, the United States government refused to protect its African American citizens at home. Black leaders merely wanted America to practice what it preached. Instead, the violence that ensued throughout the state of Tennessee and beyond made a mockery of their efforts.\textsuperscript{21}

“The brutality of white violence and the blatancy of economic and legal coercion shocked black leaders who had rallied support for the war and infuriated many younger Negroes,” wrote Lester Lamon.\textsuperscript{22} A “New Negro” emerged as a result of America’s betrayal to its own citizens. The black community grew tired and would no longer idly stand by and watch their homes, property, and lives be destroyed by racist whites. Claude McKay in his poem “If We Must Die” articulated the mindset of many African


\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Commercial Appeal}, October 24, 1918; Lester Lamon, \textit{Black Tennesseans 1900 – 1930} (The University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 233.

\textsuperscript{22} Lamon, \textit{Black Tennesseans}, 235.
Americans; he wrote, “Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack, Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back.”23 Black leaders who had previously shunned any form of violent retaliation from the black community now began to consider armed self-defense. W.E.B. Du Bois in his defense of armed resistance, wrote in the Crisis:

For three centuries we have suffered and cowered. No race ever gave Passive Resistance and Submission to Evil longer, more piteous trial. Today we raise the terrible weapon of Self-Defense. When the murder comes he shall not longer strike us in the back. When the armed lynchers gather, we too must gather armed. When the mob moves, we propose to meet it with bricks and clubs and guns.24

Church told NAACP officials in 1919 that “antagonism between the races” was growing in West Tennessee, and he warned Memphis mayor Frank Monteverde that although black Memphians would not instigate any exchanges with the white community, they would be prepared to “defend themselves” if attacked.25

Southern blacks and whites had opposing views on how race would be defined in the post-war South. Both sides became more radical in their approach. Although Church was well connected with powerful whites, his loyalty remained with the black community. African Americans looked to Church to use his influence with the NAACP and the Republican Party to express their frustrations and distrust for the federal government. The NAACP looked to Church to assist with the ongoing investigations throughout the Delta region and bring justice to the black victims of the Red Summer. The Republican Partly looked to Church to convince the black community to trust in the same government that had abandoned them in their time of need. The summer of 1919 exposed the contradictions of the “war for democracy,” and now Church had to convince


a disillusioned African American voting base to once again believe in the democratic process as he began developing political strategies for the upcoming 1920 national elections.\textsuperscript{26}

The Republican Party could no longer take African Americans for granted, and Church needed to highlight the issues in the black community. As blacks fled the South they also found new political opportunities in the North. As a member of the NAACP Board of Directors he constantly corresponded with other executive members, and he became directly familiar with countless cases of racial injustice. As a consequence of his position he was constantly updated on issues pertaining to African Americans regarding education, violence, police brutality, and discrimination. He also learned more about the increasing African American discontent with both political parties. Although Church still believed politics was the most pragmatic approach to bring about equality in America, he certainly was not naïve about the problems that existed within his Party. In preparation for the 1920 elections Church challenged the leadership of the GOP to keep its promises or lose the support of African Americans forever. Church capitalized on the information he received as the director of the NAACP’s southern branches, attempting to merge the activism of the NAACP with the platform of the Republican Party.\textsuperscript{27}


During its national convention in Atlanta, the NAACP challenged both political parties to address the “negro question.” As both Republicans and Democrats prepared for their respective national conventions, the NAACP called upon them to embrace the principles of justice and democracy for all American citizens. Specifically the NAACP asked the parties to support African Americans’ right to vote, the federal suppression of lynching, national aid for education, and legislation that prohibited segregation in their political platforms. Church emphasized these points in his correspondences with Republican National Chairman Will Hays just months prior to the NAACP meeting. Together Church and Hays worked on a platform that addressed the concerns of African Americans. It also allowed for Church to make Hays aware that African Americans were losing faith in the Republican Party. He continuously warned Hays that if the GOP did not start to follow through on their promises, then the black community would begin to exercise other political options.28

Younger African American voters who did not embrace the idealized image of Lincoln’s Party had begun to distance themselves from the GOP and consider other alternatives, such as the Socialist Party. In August 1919 Church commented that the “I.W.W.’s are awake and the Socialists are not asleep,” warning of the possible exodus of black voters from the Republican Party.29 The summer of 1919 demonstrated that the conditions of black people had not improved, and even those who left the South to seek refuge and jobs in the North still experienced discrimination. More than civil rights,

28 NAACP Letter to both political parties, June 2, 1919, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 31; Robert Church Jr.’s correspondences with Republican National Chairman Will Hays, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 35.

29 Robert Church Jr. to Will Hays, August 25, 1919, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 35.
black voters heading into the 1920 election wanted help from anyone who was willing to
go into their communities and provide protection from ruthless white southerners who
were desperate to redefine white supremacy. More African Americans felt they could no
longer remain loyal to the Republicans without considering alternative factions. Church
warned Hays, “It is claimed the black man can not expect social and political equality
from either one of the old parties, and it is therefore pointed out that the Negro must look
to some other source for his political salvation.” Church had always been as critical of
the party as he was supportive. He recognized that his position extended beyond
selecting Republican leadership, and that the GOP must also be used as a vehicle to
improve the status of black people. To Hays he explained, “There is no question
confronting the Republican leaders half as important as the question affecting the
relationship of the Republican Party to its colored adherents.” Black voters he insisted
were, “still the most valuable asset that the party can claim.” He charged that present
Republicans lacked the perceived integrity of its predecessors and “have either forgotten
or are forgetting the loyalty of the colored Republicans.”

Church warned Hays that Republicans needed to meet face to face with black
voters, especially the younger generation, to address the “sting of disregard that marks
leading Republicans everywhere.” In order to repair the damage Republicans caused,
Church thought the national organization should speak to the issues plaguing the black
community in the leading “colored” and Republican newspapers throughout the country

30 Robert Church Jr. to Will Hays, August 17, 1919, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 35.

31 Ibid., August 25, 1919, Box 3, Folder 35.

32 Ibid.
every week. He suggested that Hays hire Roscoe Conkling Simmons, to give three to four speeches a week, making sure that he be introduced as a Republican. Finally Church suggested that Hays be the first Republican leader to speak out against disfranchisement and lynching at his next public meeting. Throughout their correspondences that summer, Church assured Hays that he could still mobilize the black vote for the Republican Party, but he also promised him that they would hold him and the entire Party accountable if they won the presidential election.33

Church continued to correspond regularly with Hays heading into the fall. Church stressed the importance of having a “colored man” present at all sessions during the upcoming national convention. He urged Hays to follow his advice if he wanted to maintain African American support. The situation of black America prompted Church to “ring the warning bell,” outlining the course of action that should be taken to maintain black support.34 Simultaneously, Republicans also needed to focus on strengthening their presence in the South. White southerners did not disfranchise black people based solely on race; they also disfranchised African Americans because they voted Republican. As indicated by Church’s relationship with Boss Crump, if black people supported the Democratic ticket, white southerners would be more likely to repeal laws that stripped African Americans of their political voice. Politics and race placed African Americans in a powerless position in the South, and Republicans needed to be mindful of the sacrifices African Americans made in support of their Party. Church’s mission exceeded securing basic voting rights. Instead he attempted to use the Republican Party to improve the

33 Ibid.; Robert Church Jr. to Will Hays, August 17, 1919, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 31.

34 Robert Church Jr. to Will Hays, October 29, 1919, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 35.
social and economic status of southern blacks. He envisioned that he could eventually transform the Republican Party from a political faction to an instrument used to obtain civil rights.  

Church relied on a small network of dedicated leaders in the South to aid his political mission. He recommended to Hays other respected black Republicans who could mobilize black voters. Church welcomed 1920 by working with Hays to develop the Committee on Policies and Platform. Hays wanted the committee to represent “all groups in interest and party thought.” He emphasized that Church should suggest “the most representative men and women who are outstanding figures in the different lines of activity, so as to bring the character and ability to the committee which will be of real value.” Church considered Hays’s request and recommended his friends Roscoe Conkling Simmons, James Weldon Johnson, Boston lawyer William H. Lewis, and Georgia Republican Henry Lincoln Johnson for the committee. All of these men had strong followings and could effectively usher voters to the polls in November. Church also advised Hays to ignore the requests made by the successors of Booker T. Washington in the Tuskegee machine, Emmett Scott and Robert R. Moton. Both leaders had been affiliated with Wilson’s administration, and Scott would eventually be appointed special advisor of black affairs. Despite their status Church did not believe they


36 Will Hays to Church, December 19, 1919, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 35.

37 Ibid.
could be trusted, and black people would not rally behind individuals who held prominent positions in Woodrow Wilson’s racist administration.³⁸  

Church continued to advise Hays that black voters had grown impatient with the GOP and that mere political rhetoric would no longer secure their votes. Republicans needed to take action and produce. Church made high ranking members of the Republican Party aware of the black community’s grievances. Although he could not force the presidential aspirants to recognize these issues on their individual platforms, he made them aware of the consequences if they ignored blacks’ concerns. Black people were willing to align themselves with any person, party, or organization that could bring them refuge. Church helped place the concerns of his community into the national political discourse. If he exposed racial injustices, no political candidate could justifiably act as if these problems did not exist. By educating the nation of the black plight, Church put white politicians in a position where they could either help the black community or be exposed as insensitive racists. Church spread the word publicly through newspapers and privately in his correspondence. Church surely knew that not everyone would fall in line and adhere to these demands. However, this blatant disregard of the country’s black citizens, combined with the increasing political sophistication of African Americans, served as the backdrop to the era’s struggle for black freedom.³⁹  

Hays continued to court both black and white southerners on behalf of the Republican Party, but more black voters still needed an arena where they could speak openly and freely with their leader. Church used the Lincoln League to develop a strong

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³⁸ Will Hays to Church, January 1, 1920, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 35.

³⁹ National Republican politics, 1918 – 1929, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 33; Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America, 135 – 144; Walton, Black Republicans, 121 -122.
Republicans also attempted to court white southerners, but Church knew that black voters held the unique position of deciding the state and nation-wide elections. He and Roscoe Conkling Simmons attempted to increase the League’s presence beyond Tennessee and develop it into a national organization. Black leaders in other states contacted Church to establish branches in their hometowns. For instance, Church traveled to Denver, Colorado, to meet with local leaders to set up a branch that would soon boast over one thousand members. Ostracized by local lily-white factions and much of the national GOP, the Lincoln League grew from an alternative local organization into essentially the Republican National Committee for African Americans during the 1920 election season.40

Church’s organization also benefitted from a new group of voters in 1920. Although Church would never be mistaken for a women’s rights activist, he learned from his early run-ins with his half-sister Mary and advocated the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Tennessee served as the deciding thirty-sixth state to ratify the amendment. As historian Paula Giddings noted, “Church, cognizant of the potential of the female franchise, encouraged the participation of women in the Lincoln League.”41 His friend Ida B. Wells had ended her exile from Memphis, returning to the Bluff City that year to discuss the role of black women in the upcoming election. Meanwhile, Mary crusaded for the passage of what came to be known as the Susan B. Anthony Amendment. She made Church’s previous stance on women’s suffrage seem foolish, forcing him to recognize his own hypocrisy. According to their papers Terrell and Church did not

40 Clarence Kelly, “Robert Church Jr.,” 40; Commercial Appeal, January 4, 1920.
41 Paula Giddings, IDA, 615.
correspond with each other often, but he definitely respected his sister and her efforts. He had matured as a leader, and he recognized that black women had a different story that could not be championed solely by men. As Terrell eloquently stated, her story “is a story of a colored woman living in a white world. It cannot possibly be like a story written by a white woman. A white woman has only one handicap to overcome—that of sex. I have two—both sex and race. I belong to the only group in this country which has two such huge obstacles to surmount. Colored men have only one—that of race.”\(^{42}\) The women in the Lincoln League were no longer relegated to positions as teachers and organizers. They now actively participated in all phases of the organization. As Church prepared for the League's convention he listed several women as delegates, including Ida B. Wells. The Church women - Anna, Annette, and Sallie - had all registered to vote and followed the political contests with keen interest and observation.\(^{43}\) The Lincoln League now had national appeal and emerged as a more representative organization for all African Americans. Church carried this momentum into the election season.\(^{44}\)

Church, Roscoe Conkling Simmons, and Henry Lincoln Johnson grew the Lincoln League into a national movement. It became Church’s chief instrument for restoring the black franchise and fighting Jim Crow. The scope of the organization, the


\(^{43}\) Sara Johnson Church, Voter Registration, 1920 – 1921, Church Papers, Box 3, FF 36; Annette Church to Robert Church Jr., June 6, 1920, Church Papers, Box 2, General Correspondences Folder.

membership of some of the country’s most influential black leaders, and Church’s media connections helped to excite a disillusioned voting constituency. The newly formed Lincoln League of America went on the road. It held its first national convention in New Orleans, Louisiana. In anticipation of the Lincoln League’s arrival, the *New Orleans Item* proclaimed, “Negroes from Lincoln League to Assist Race: Appeal for Ballot, Curbs on Lynching, Federal Aid for Education.”\(^{45}\)

The article announced the League’s officers. Church rarely sought public approval or personal recognition, and true to his personality he declined to serve as the League’s president. Yet Church always viewed the League as his very own political machine, and regardless of any official positions within the organization, its members considered Church the “boss”.

In preparation for the New Orleans meeting, Roscoe Conkling Simmons served as President, Henry Lincoln Johnson as Secretary, and Walter L. Cohen as Treasurer. Church served as Chairman of the Executive Committee and Director. Henry Lincoln Johnson, Perry Howard of Jackson, Mississippi, and W.H. Lewis of Boston composed the legal department. At the convention each state elected a vice-president who would lead the League’s efforts in their state. As a tribute, members of the Lincoln League paid homage to Louisiana’s eighty-two year old Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback, the first African American to become governor during Reconstruction, by naming him honorary president of the convention.\(^{46}\)

During the meeting leaders of the Lincoln League first attempted to demonstrate their patriotism by calling for Americans to stand against all foes, foreign and domestic, in the wake of the “Great War.” They voiced their concerns for the treatment of

\(^{45}\) *New Orleans Item*, June 18, 1919, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 25.

\(^{46}\) Ibid.
returning African American soldiers and pleaded with the government to honor them in the same manner as their white counterparts. They proposed resolutions to address protection at the polls for “all Americans” including black men and women. Members agreed that “The American negro has no desire to control the government of states even where he is most populous…But the negro does ask for a part in the government he is taxed to maintain.” Other topics included improving literacy among African Americans, calling for blacks to remain in the South, and urging white southerners to provide equal pay and opportunities for African Americans so that they would not seek these opportunities elsewhere. The Lincoln League’s platform also denounced lynching and pleaded for more African Americans throughout the nation to join them in their efforts. The central office would remain in Memphis, where Church could oversee and maintain his daily duties. In New Orleans, Church and his team announced to the nation that the Lincoln League would be a force to be reckoned with during the elections.

The Lincoln League’s platform looked more like the goals of a civil rights organization than a strictly political organization. The speakers touched on every major issue concerning the black community at that time. Although the Lincoln League did not possess the same prestige as the NAACP, its influence should not be overlooked. Much like the NAACP, the Lincoln League was comprised of the leading black politicians, members of the black elite, professionals, and other influential people. However, the Lincoln League was founded, organized, and run exclusively by African Americans, and it still garnered the attention of the nation’s political elite. African Americans throughout

47 New Orleans Times Picayune, June 18, 1919.

48 Ibid., P.B.S. Pinchback to Robert Church Jr., June 19, 1919, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 24.
the nation could take pride in this display of black solidarity and influence. As one newspaper commented, “It is the Race’s own organization.”

The Lincoln League provided an opportunity for black leaders to meet directly with the masses. With branches in over thirty states, Church and other leaders could develop platforms that would address the universal concerns of the black community. Each vice-president had the responsibility of articulating the specific issues that black people faced in their state. Simmons and other members of the media affiliated with the Lincoln League publicized these problems to the nation. Church also brought these concerns to the international stage. He believed that by exposing the South’s racist indiscretions to larger urban areas, the nation, and ultimately the world, it would bring shame to the country and hopefully lead to changes. The very existence of the Lincoln League proves that blacks accepted racism as a fundamental flaw in American democracy, but found ways to still participate in the political process.

The Lincoln League captivated black America. The constant flow of applications swamped the League’s headquarters. Church had originally scheduled the national convention to take place in Chicago, Illinois, in September, but the overwhelming response forced the postponement of the convention until February. Other local political organizations began to change their name to align themselves with the Lincoln League. After careful consideration Church decided to have the convention February 11 - 13,


1920, around Lincoln’s birthday, as “a fitting celebration to the memory of the great emancipator.” As one reporter stated “All Chicago is on tiptoe for this, the most important Race convention since the Civil war.”

In the weeks heading into the meeting Church released the convention platform. Speakers would address the following subjects:

1. Political parties and Colored Americans
2. The government and the colored American soldier.
3. Do we favor cutting down the representation of the disfranchising states: If so, when? If not, why not?
4. The American Federation of Labor and the colored worker.
5. Can the colored railroad worker hold what he has when the railroads are returned to private ownership? If not then what about that fact?
6. How can we best get the news to the American people that the Jim Crow car is eating away the heart of the American nation?
7. Is lynching to be standard of law and order in the United States? If not, who will stop it; how and when?

The leaders of the League attempted to address the issues that resonated most with the majority of African Americans. This convention was an opportunity not only to inspire and rally the support of black voters, but also to put white Republicans on notice. Although much of black America was still recovering from the brutality of the Red Summer, the Lincoln League proved that black people still wanted to display their patriotism, as well as loyalty to a party that had historically turned their backs on them.

Church invited Will Hays to speak at the convention. He wanted the Party’s spokesman to meet face to face with African Americans to ensure black voters that the GOP had not forgotten the true meaning of democracy, and that its leaders would advocate on behalf of the race. This gesture empowered black voters, because now they

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51 Chicago Defender, June 28, 1919; Church and Church, The Robert R. Churches, 105; Clarence Kelly, “Robert Church Jr.,” 40.

had a person who spoke directly to them, who made promises to improve race relations in America. Church put the GOP’s high-ranking officials in a position where they could either address the race problem in America or risk African Americans leaving the Party altogether.53

On February 11 black delegates from across the nation packed the South Park Methodist Episcopal Church in Chicago. The interior was decorated with American flags, and an oil painting of Abraham Lincoln overlooked the proceedings. The men wore dark suits while the women were draped in their best dresses and elaborate hats. Over 400 delegates, representing every state of the Union, emphatically answered the roll call. Perry Howard of Mississippi called the convention to order and the great orator Roscoe Conkling Simmons delivered a “never-to-be-forgotten key-note address.”54 In his resounding voice he described black people as the saviors of American liberty and quoted Lincoln, “They will probably in some trying time to come keep the jewel of liberty in the family of freedom.”55 Simmons gave an inspirational address that resonated with all present at this historic gathering. From there he introduced Republican Chairman Will Hays, one of the few white politicians present at the event. Hays recognized the magnitude of the gathering and reaffirmed that the political future of the Republican Party depended on the support of African Americans. He told the cheering crowd that, “Lynching is a crime against judgment and justice, reason and righteousness an assault on our most sacred institution and is an affront to the accumulated wisdom of past ages. It is


54 Chicago Defender, February 14, 1920.

a condemnation of Christianity and merits the exoneration of every high minded citizen.” His speech was warmly received.\textsuperscript{56}

Church and Oscar De Priest from Illinois escorted the successful black businessman from Arkansas, Scott Bond, to the platform, where he offered his comments on the status of the race. Every speaker who took to the podium rallied the members to “make America safe for Americans – safe against disfranchisement, against prejudicial labor organizations, against Jim Crow cars, against mob violence and lynching.”\textsuperscript{57}

Members called attention to the Constitution and encouraged its members to see that its provisions were strictly enforced. Several prominent women were in attendance, including Ida B. Wells, who also addressed the convention. The \textit{Chicago Defender} deemed the meeting a “Decided Success” and said of Church that “the race has no finer, none more devoted, no wiser character.”\textsuperscript{58}

Church had proved that black voters were not “dumb driven cattle” that blindly followed the Party’s white leaders. The Lincoln League had emerged as a full-fledged race organization. It exceeded its perceived mission of empowering black people through the ballot, becoming an avenue for all African Americans, regardless of class, to voice their concerns to the nation’s leading black figures. As the \textit{Chicago Defender} stated, “Our word is no longer to the lilies or the “big leaders” of the party. That day when we looked to them is gone, forever gone.” The article continued, “Our word, and the word of

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Chicago Defender}, February 28, 1920.


\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Chicago Defender}, February 21, 1920.
the Race, North and South, is sent not to white men but to The Lincoln League of America.”

Even though Hays had delivered a speech at the convention and attempted to endear himself to black voters, he faced criticism from the black media for remaining silent on several causes, including the efforts of lily-whites to drive African Americans out of the party. Lily-whites argued that if black people were removed from the Party, Republicans could increase their membership in the South. Republicans controlled the 66th Congress and had not passed any substantial legislation that would protect African Americans in the South, most notably the Leonidas C. Dyer anti-lynching bill.

Many of the Republican presidential candidates neither addressed the grievances of the black community nor pursued the white southern vote. Warren G. Harding emerged as the most dedicated presidential aspirant to court the Southerners. He also became the first Republican candidate to campaign in the South in person when he visited Texas. However, he remained mute on the black community’s demands heading into the Republican National Convention.

Black Republicans competed for recognition against the lily-white faction for seats at the national convention in Chicago. Church had earned the attention of the GOP’s leading national figures, but the fight continued on the local level. In February, Church and 400 black voters gathered at the Shelby County Republican Convention Hall where thirty white Republicans met them. Church wanted to demonstrate that the

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59 Chicago Defender, June 5, 1920.

60 Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America, 133.

61 Ibid.; 135.
Lincoln League represented the regular Republican ticket and should have been recognized accordingly. In response the white faction hurriedly ran to lock the doors and called the police. After the police arrived, “the Negroes scattered up and down the halls,” until Josiah Settle rallied his delegates and announced that they would hold their own convention in the cramped, “tunnel-like hall of the courthouse basement.” Church capitalized on the moment and apparently “climbed upon a box at the entrance to the Convention Hall, and elected his own delegates to the Tennessee State Republican Convention.”62 From there his group proceeded to appoint committees and resolutions. According to an interview of Church’s “lieutenant” and political successor, George W. Lee, he proclaimed “that if they broke faith with Bob Church and the hopes of the race, the black soldiers who slept in Argonne Forest and the Vosges Mountains would certainly rise up and haunt them.”63 At the impromptu convention Church’s faction selected delegates to do battle with the lily-whites at the state convention.64

Church chartered a “Pullman” for his delegation, which would both navigate around the Jim Crow laws on the train and avoid any acts of sabotage that would prevent them from attending the meeting in Chattanooga. Church wanted “colored republicans (to) be more than just members of the Party organization.” He demanded that they be recognized as leaders. In April, prior to the official meeting, Church and other members of the State Executive Committee met at the Patton Hotel. He pleaded with the


Committee that the delegates selected at the Shelby County Courthouse be seated at the state convention. After listening to Church’s appeals an unsympathetic Republican State Committee denied Church’s request to have black Memphians seated as the regular Republicans from the city, proving again that Republicans would accept black patronage, but not their leadership. In response Church threatened to have the Lincoln League vote for the Democrats in the local and state elections if he and his delegates were not seated. The committee did not budge. Church, along with two hundred other dejected African American delegates from Tennessee, planned a walkout if the committee seated the rival factions.65

The next day Church led the black delegates into a tension-filled convention room. As they took their seats, no one knew what to expect from the rival factions. The state committee, as expected, seated the two white factions from Memphis, and excluded Church’s delegation from any representation. Instead of following through with the proposed walkout, an outraged Church used his political influence. Church sent Will Hays a telegram explaining the committee’s segregationist stance, and Hays responded by reprimanding the state leaders and telling them to comply with Church's demands. The following day the state committee reversed its decision in a vote of 333 to 224, seating the African American delegates and allowing them to represent one-third of the votes entitled to Shelby County. Church won the temporary victory, but a larger battle lay ahead at the national convention.66

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66 Lee, *Beale Street*, 258; The Republican Nominating petition, May 29, 1922, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 50.
His sister Annette wrote that the family was elated with his victory over the lily-whites, and that she prayed for him to win not because “you were my brother and because you were a colored man but because you were unquestionably right.” Annette had eagerly followed the political contests and “read with interest each decision.” She also asked him to express her congratulations to Walter Cohen and Henry Lincoln Johnson, as well as her apologies to Perry Howard and several other African Americans who lost their seats. She ended her letter by telling Church that their mother was extremely proud of him for winning, but more importantly for how he conducted himself during the heated exchanges. Although this was the first election in which she could vote, her letter expressed the wisdom of someone who may have been as politically savvy as her brother. Politics had become the new family business.67

A seat at the state convention did not guarantee Church’s position at the national meeting. Church entered battle with his lily-white rival attorney John W. Farley. Farley argued that Church and other black Republicans hurt the Party: “the mass of Negroes by nature cared nothing about voting and preferred to let Anglo-Saxons run the government; only the mulattoes such as Robert R. Church, who had some of the white man’s invigorating blood, sought to participate in politics.” Farley then invoked the segregationist image of Lincoln to counter his image as the “great emancipator,” and quoted him by stating “I will say, then that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social or political equality of the white and black races.”68

67 Annette Church to Robert Church Jr., June 6, 1920, Church Papers, Box 2, General Correspondences Folder.

68 Tucker, Lieutenant Lee, 74.
The National Committee ignored Farley’s plea and placed Church as a temporary delegate. However, Mrs. Eddie M. McCall Priest and four other women delegates led the white Memphians’ efforts to appeal the credentials committee’s ruling. She argued that Church had been involved in illegal activities in the city. She claimed Church ran a gambling establishment and owned the largest black-owned dive in the county. Mrs. Priest threatened that if Church remained seated, then she and other white Memphians would abandon the Party altogether. Although the allegations were untrue, Church did not want to engage in long public battle with Mrs. Priest. He was not as concerned about besmirching his public persona as he was concerned about the consequences of insulting a white woman in the racist atmosphere of West Tennessee. This case stood as another example of how the culture of white supremacy crippled black manhood, preventing Church from reacting to her allegations. Church fully understood the consequences of confronting the women delegates. As he told his friend James Weldon Johnson, he was “too wise” to engage in a fight with Mrs. Priest but he wished he could “burn the two men up, who where hiding behind their skirts.”

The credentials committee voted to have him unseated with a vote of 23-18, and Church did not challenge the decision. Church, did, however seek vindication at the convention after the Chairman called on him to deliver the minority report. A composed Church deliberately addressed the convention and stated, “Mr. Chairman, I have a minority report in my hand and I know that I am entitled to a seat in the convention as a delegate from the tenth Congressional District of Tennessee, but I am not going to be the one man to bring in a minority report before this convention, So I have decided to

69 Robert Church Jr. to James Weldon Johnson, June 22, 1920, Box C-388, Papers of the NAACP, Part 11, Series B, Harding thru YWCA MR, Reel 18.
withdraw it and I am going to carry my fight back to Memphis, Tennessee, and settle it there.”

Church and his delegates then exited the committee. An electrified crowd received Church’s short speech with cheers. Reminiscing, George Washington Lee called Church “a trained diplomat who was wise enough to sacrifice the glory of the moment for the commanding place in the future.”

Church further endeared himself to the most powerful members of the Republican Party. Will Hays appointed Church as the director of the Republican Negro campaign and provided him with an office in New York. Charles Cottrill, Henry Lincoln Johnson, T. Coleman Dupont and Jack Henley assisted Church in this new endeavor as they prepared for the presidential elections.

Warren Harding emerged as the Republican candidate for President. Hays advised Harding to make a “strong statement in favor of justice for Negroes in his acceptance speech.” As Hays worked with Harding to develop a speech, he corresponded with Church and made him aware that he “really want(ed) to make a great deal out of this speech to colored voters,” and he needed to give it some serious thought. On July 22, Harding stated, “the Federal government should stamp out lynching and remove that stain from the fair name of America.” Harding like most candidates denounced the practice of extra-legal violence. However, he moved beyond

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70 Lee, Beale Street, 258 – 259.


72 Tucker, Lieutenant Lee, 75.

73 Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America, 137.

74 Will Hays to Robert Church Jr., July 3, 1920, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 35.
the platform of the Party and said that he believed that “Negro citizens of America should be guaranteed the enjoyment of all their rights, that they have earned their full measure of citizenship bestowed, that their sacrifices in blood on the battlefields of the republic have entitled them to all of freedom and opportunity, all of sympathy and aid that the American spirit of fairness and justice demands.” Some African Americans believed they heard echoes of Lincoln in his speech, while more radical blacks such as A. Philip Randolph believed it was another Republican ploy to capture black support.75

Regardless, Church assured Hays that the Lincoln League would secure the black vote for Harding. Church wanted Harding to be aware that the Lincoln League was represented in every region of the country, and it “is prepared to go on with the work, thus saving you and Mr. Harding the time and thought necessary to perfect an organization from the ground up.” Church and James C. Napier campaigned on his behalf throughout the state. Napier, the leading black public figure in Nashville, convinced Hays that he could mobilize the black population in his section of the state, and Church was the black political boss from West Tennessee. Hays and Harding agreed that Tennessee was the one southern state that the GOP could win if they rejected lily-whitism. In addition to the GOP attempting to court the southern vote, this campaign served also as the first major effort to register black women to vote. Church’s sister Mary directed the eastern division of the Colored Women’s Bureau on behalf of Harding.76

75 Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America, 137.

76 Robert Church Jr. to Will Hays, June 16, 1920, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 35; Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America, 138.
Throughout the campaign Harding and Hays remained in contact with several black leaders including Church, James Weldon Johnson, William Monroe Trotter, Henry Lincoln Johnson, and Perry Howard. Although each urged him to take a strong stance on black issues, Harding tried to appease white segregationists. He thought black people should be protected by the law and given equal rights. However, Harding admitted that he did not believe “white people and black people should be forced to associate together.” He was careful not to upset white segregationists with his comments, given the widespread white anxiety that he would be too close of an ally to black people. In his campaign literature, Democratic candidate James Cox responded to Harding’s relationships with black leaders by warning northern and southern whites of a “negro” takeover.

Harding did not waver in his alliances with black politicians. Church continued to solicit support for his campaign. The national headquarters sent Church to Maryland and Kentucky to campaign on the Party's behalf. Church and members of the Lincoln League directed voter registration drives, encouraged blacks to pay their poll taxes, and urged people to turn out at the polls in November. As he did four years prior, Church provided a list of candidates he wanted his followers to support in the state and national elections, headlined by Harding for President and Alfred Taylor for Governor of Tennessee. Tennessee still held a unique position as compared to other southern states, because blacks could vote in larger numbers. Therefore they represented a real threat in both political contests. The Nashville Globe ran the headline “The World Is Watching The

77 Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America, 140.

78 Ibid.
Action of the Colored Voters of Tennessee.” In the weeks heading into the election Church called a meeting at Church’s Park and Auditorium on Beale Street. An estimated 15,000 people packed the auditorium as they listened to Roscoe Simmons deliver a passionate keynote address. According to Roberta and Annette Church, so many people arrived at the gathering that Simmons had to make an additional speech on the steps of the auditorium for those who could not get inside.

Heading into the final days of the campaign, Hays wrote Church and thanked him for his service. “Before we break up housekeeping, I just want you to get this word of appreciation to you. It has been a great fight. We are going to win, and the winning is no accident. I just wanted you to know that the Committee appreciate the efforts put forth by you in the coming victory.” On November 6, 1920, 170,000 black Republicans turned out to vote at the polls throughout the state. Although Church still had to adhere to the local machine politics of Boss Crump, he and his own political machine carried Alf Taylor to victory, electing the state’s second Republican governor by a margin of over 25,000 votes. He also endorsed J. Will Taylor, who was elected to Congress. Tennessee was the only southern state that Harding carried. To demonstrate the attention Church gained with these victories, the Western World Reporter celebrated Church under the headline, “Who Swung Old Tennessee Back Into The Columns of The G.O.P. – How the

79 Nashville Globe, October 29, 1920; Church and Church, The Robert R. Churches, 124.

80 Ibid., 125.

81 Will Hays to Robert Church Jr., October 30, 1920, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 35; Kelly, “Robert Church Jr.,” 60.
Trick Was Turned,” and the *Wilmington Advocate* stated, “To no one man is there so much credit due for the result in Tennessee as to Robert Church.”

Church did not single-handedly deliver the vote to Harding, who received 60 percent of the popular vote and won in a landslide. However, through his efforts, he helped to further empower African Americans politically. Beyond mobilizing the black community to the polls, he helped to create a more sophisticated political awareness among African Americans. The Lincoln League provided an institution where black people could communicate directly with the nation’s leading Republicans and campaign for full inclusion into American society. Ironically, the efforts of lily-whites to exclude black people from political participation also created an opportunity for Church’s organization to thrive. During the height of Jim Crow, individuals such as Church identified with what historian Darlene Clark Hine describes as “the Achilles heel of white Supremacy.” “Segregation provided blacks the chance, indeed, the imperative, to develop a range of distinct institutions that they controlled.” While Hine describes the creation of parallel professional institutions for black nurses, doctors, and lawyers to maintain themselves, Church essentially created a political parallel institution where African Americans could privately “buttress battered dignity, nurture positive self-images, sharpen skills, and demonstrate expertise” in a political setting. This safe haven for black politics helped to create a form of collective activism that could bring

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82 Western World Reporter, November 12, 1920, Church Papers, Box 4, Folder 2; Wilmington Advocate, November 12, 1920; Church and Church, *The Robert R. Churches*, 126.


84 Ibid.
incremental change. The Lincoln League helped to move African Americans from feeling politically estranged to developing a sense of entitlement in America.

Black voters demonstrated in the 1920 elections that they possessed political agency, and as they became more politically savvy their support could no longer be taken for granted. Church placed the concerns of African Americans into the national political discourse. His organization allowed black people, who otherwise may not have known how to express these concerns in a formal political setting, to identify with a larger national movement. Church and other leaders during the twenties worked to develop a collective political identity that would provide the support necessary for the activist struggles that would come in the following decades. Church taught African Americans that the success of participating in politics could not be measured by victories alone. Bringing the issues to the forefront of American political debate also had value, nurturing the next generation of activists.85

After Harding’s inauguration Will Hays contacted the President to inform him of Church’s work. He stated, “Without in any way discounting the splendid work done by a great many colored men, the fact is that for many months before election the one outstanding man among all the colored people, in the quality of unselfish and efficient work done, was Mr. Robert R. Church.” In the letter he explained that Church was “very wealthy,” and “goes about largely at his own expense on our political errands, never taking any salary, and he is a very exceptional individual.”86 Harding rewarded Church by making him the patronage dispenser for African Americans who coveted federal

85 Church and Church, The Robert R. Churches, 120 – 126.

86 Will Hays to Warren G. Harding, April 21, 1921, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 33.
positions. Church had ascended through the ranks of the GOP. He approved many of the federal positions awarded to African Americans during the Harding Administration. Although this appeared to be a rewarding experience, it also proved to be taxing, since many patronage seekers looked for Church’s seal of approval. For the next year Church would listen to various pleas made for federal positions by African Americans throughout the country. Church had arrived as a national leader, as he looked to use his influence in the Party to hire people who could advance the issues of black community. With the Republicans back in the White House, the future looked promising for black America.  

87 Kelly, “Robert Church Jr.,” 63.
Chapter 5

Man of Destiny

After being on the road for the better part of a year establishing himself as a national political powerhouse, Church returned to the familiar sounds of Beale Street blaring out the blues on his way to the office. As he drove his “Type 61” Cadillac down Beale, he witnessed the entire spectrum of the black community.¹ The offices of the black elite shared the same street with the city’s underworld. Church’s protégé, George W. Lee, described Beale Street as, “A main street of Negro America where its pulse beat highest, where richly red, dark brown women, hang-jawed country rubes mixed with spruce urban Negroes in an atmosphere pungent with barbecued pig, alive with the music of those who sit around in the cafes trying to ease their souls with readymade song.”²

Beale Street was the Harlem of the South. These were the people and the city that he fought for. In return black Memphians embraced him. Other members of the black elite failed to achieve this feat. Black Memphians proudly followed Church in the national news headlines, and envisioned him as one of their own. During the 1920s the only other black Memphian who could rival Church’s recognition as a hometown hero was “The Father of the Blues,” W.C. Handy. Although in separate worlds, these two men created

¹ L.M. Naughton to Robert Church Jr., June 20, 1923, The Robert R. Church Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 40, Mississippi Valley Collection, McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN. Naughton was the General Manager for the Cadillac Motor Car Company and he had written Church a letter to thank him for his purchase.

an image of the Bluff City as a progressive black metropolis in the Mid-South. They made the nation aware of Memphis and all it had to offer.\textsuperscript{3}

Professionally Church had reached a new high, but he suffered privately. His wife had been sick during the entire Harding campaign. In January 1922 Sallie, Annette, and Roberta moved to Washington D.C. to stay at the apartments Church owned on Q Street, where her mother cared for Sallie. An emotional Church wrote Sallie that month to inform her that her illness would require surgery. He tried to ease any fears by reassuring her of the improvements in medicine, and he comforted her by telling her she should only be in the hospital for a couple of weeks. Church urged her to have the surgery as soon as possible. He offered her the option of going to any hospital she preferred, whether it was the Mayo Clinic, St. Luke’s in Chicago, or Johns Hopkins in Baltimore.\textsuperscript{4} That spring Sallie had the operation at Johns Hopkins, but never fully recovered. Church had been with her during those months and “never left her bedside.”

The \textit{Chicago Defender} claimed he “deserted business and politics” to be with his wife during her illness. Sadly, Sallie passed away on July 3rd. “Mrs. Church Dies in Washington, Capital Mourns,” proclaimed the \textit{Chicago Defender}, remembering Sallie as “one of the most beautiful girls Washington could ever boast.” Church, grief stricken, had lost the woman he had known since “he was a boy in knee breeches and she just a little girl holding her mother’s hand.”\textsuperscript{5} It is hard to measure how he coped with the death of Sallie, but it is worth noting that Church, who was only thirty-seven at the time

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\item[4] Robert Church Jr. to Sallie Church, January 25, 1922, Church Papers, Box 2, Folder 14.

\item[5] \textit{Chicago Defender}, July 8, 1922.
\end{footnotes}
of her passing, would never marry again. Annette took on the responsibility of rearing Roberta as Church continued with his career in politics.\(^6\)

Church, heartbroken from losing his wife, consumed himself in work. President Warren Harding took the advice of Will Hays and consulted Church on African American appointments during his administration. As a federal patronage dispenser for the black community, Church helped secure appointments for Perry Howard as special assistant attorney general, Charles W. Anders as collector of internal revenue for the wealthiest district in New York, and James A. Cobb, who was confirmed as judge of the Municipal Court of the District of Columbia. Church wrote letters of recommendation for these individuals, as well as other black leaders who sought federal appointments from the Harding and Coolidge administrations.\(^7\)

Church also recommended whites for political offices. For example, he encouraged Harding’s administration to select J. Will Taylor for the post of National Committeeman from Tennessee in 1921. Church also had the nomination of Charles B. Quinn, a lily-white candidate for Memphis Postmaster, rescinded and replaced with Solomon Seches, whose tenure as Postmaster lasted from 1922 to 1926. This

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\(^6\) Robert Church Jr. to Sara “Sallie” Church, January 25, 1922, Box 4, Folder 14; Church and Church, *The Robert R. Churches*, 64.

\(^7\) *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 19, 1926; Paul Lewison, *Race, Class, an Party: A History of Negro Suffrage and White Politics in the South* (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1963) 139; Will Hays to President Warren G. Harding, April 27, 1921, The Robert R. Church Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 35, Mississippi Valley Collection, McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN; Applications for post office appointments, Church Papers, Box 5, Folder 1 and Box 5, Folder 20.
appointment benefitted the black community, because Seches hired local blacks to serve as mail carriers and workers for the post office.\(^8\)

Church’s position within the Republican Party garnered him national recognition, but it also proved taxing. On a daily basis Church received letters from African American patronage seekers who sought his endorsement. In this position Church could still remain behind the scenes, but it was not intellectually or politically satisfying. The ingenuity he displayed as an organizer and strategist during the 1920 campaign was limited by his new role. However, the role did allow Church the opportunity to reward the individuals who helped build the Lincoln League into a national organization. Many of the patronage recipients came from a middle-class to elite background, and they had established themselves as leaders in their respective states. Despite their individual successes they also coveted more prestigious positions within the government. While placing black people in high-ranking federal positions served as part of the Lincoln League platform during the 1920 campaign, Church recognized that this only helped a small percentage of African Americans. The typical black southerner still felt the brunt of white supremacy. Church thus refused to be pacified by his new position or token appointments. Because he had direct access to the White House, he kept the pressure on the nation’s highest-ranking officials to protect African American citizenship.\(^9\)

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Church advanced the positions of the black community without appearing militant or radical. His correspondences reflect the intellectual debates he had with white politicians on the direction the Party should take in reference to the black community; however, he made sure to not offend whites. This approach gave him credibility among white Republicans, forcing them to at least grapple with some of the matters he raised. During the 1920s few African Americans could rival Church’s influence as a leader. He continued to work with Republican Party and advance the mission of the NAACP. However, most scholarship that exists on black politics in this decade has overemphasized the contributions of people like James Weldon Johnson and Walter White without thoroughly examining the contributions of lesser-known leaders like Church. His name, like those of Johnson, White, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and others, was becoming synonymous with the black political struggles during the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁰

By 1920, African Americans made up nearly forty percent of the population in Memphis. Their support locally for the “progressive” Democrat, Edward Hull Crump, helped keep his political machine relevant. Crump had suffered several political defeats at the close of the 1910s, and by the turn of the new decade the political situation in Memphis seemed to be getting more complicated with the rise of a new political faction.

The two political bosses began to work closer together to maintain their stronghold over the local political scene. Crump and Church needed each other, because at times either leader could be the dominant political figure in the city. In the 1920s Crump was forced to follow Church's lead as they faced a common foe in rise of the Ku Klux Klan.\textsuperscript{11}

Memphis still had a reputation for being a vigilante town, and in 1921 the Ku Klux Klan had reestablished its presence in the city. In November, the Memphis chapter, also called a “klavern,” marched in the Armistice Day Parade behind a banner that read “One Hundred Per Cent American.”\textsuperscript{12} The Klan made several other public appearances and started to grow its local klavern, much to the dismay of the \textit{Commercial Appeal}. Unlike in 1917, when the \textit{Commercial Appeal} essentially advertised the lynching of Ell Person, this time the most recognized organ in the Mid-South denounced the Klan and became its most outspoken critic. The \textit{Commercial Appeal} had once earned a reputation for being one of the most racist newspapers in the country, but in 1922 editor Charles P.J. Mooney took the position of speaking out against the Invisible Empire. In addition, Mooney’s editorial cartoonist, Jim Alley, depicted Klansmen being “ordered to unmask, revealing an ugly, distorted face.” The caption read, “No Wonder he puts a sack over that mug.”\textsuperscript{13} \textit{The Commercial Appeal} continued its attack throughout 1923.


\textsuperscript{13} Jackson, \textit{The Ku Klux Klan and the City}, 46 - 47; Melton, "Blacks in Memhis,” 97; Philip Dray, \textit{At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America} (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 233-234.
The newspaper's denouncing of the Ku Klux Klan did not necessarily suggest that it had turned over a new leaf. The Mooney editorials probably had more to do with him being a Catholic than the Appeal having some sort of racial epiphany. In addition to Mooney's fundamental religious differences with the Klan, the Commercial Appeal wanted to prevent the possibility of the city erupting in violence. As Mooney noted on April 21, 1923, “Ordinarily the white people and the negro get along very well. It’s only when an “emperor” or a labor agent or something similar butts in that trouble ensues.”

For their coverage of the Klan the Commercial Appeal was awarded the 1923 Pulitzer Prize.  

Despite its journalistic victory the Commercial Appeal could not cripple the Invisible Empire. In fact the Klan’s presence in the city continued to grow. By 1923 the Memphis Klan boasted a membership of approximately 10,000 people. The majority of its membership consisted of “low paid white-collar workers and semi-skilled laborers from white lower middle-class neighborhoods.” The Klan had its strongest presence in South Memphis between McElmore Avenue and South Parkway East; west of the Fairground to Barksdale Street, and the Binghampton neighborhood in Northeast Memphis. As Gloria Brown Melton has noted, each of these communities bordered black neighborhoods. These were the same black communities Church had mobilized to the polls in 1920. While a strong anti-Catholic sentiment that helped increase the popularity of the KKK, it is not a coincidence that the Klan’s popularity peaked after Black Memphians played such an integral role in the previous elections. They brought the state its first Republican governor and won the state for the Republicans in the national

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14 Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan and the City*, 47; Commercial Appeal, April 23, 1923.

15 Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 97.
election. The Klan’s power bases suggested the possibility of intimidating these black neighborhoods from voting in future elections, limiting the effectiveness of black leaders such as Church. Other white supremacists took more extreme measures to diminish the influence of Church at the polls, threatening to kill him for his political endeavors. For instance, Church received a noosed-rope through the mail in 1921. Just as southern redeemers redefined white supremacy in the wake of Reconstruction through violence and intimidation, white Memphians resorted to similar tactics with the hope of disfranchising Church’s political faction. This “new and improved” KKK did not rely on mere public demonstrations or squabbles with the media. Based on its popularity in the city, the Invisible Empire entered local politics.

By 1923 the KKK had infiltrated the Memphis political scene, and rumors surfaced that they had formed an alliance with Mayor Rowlett Paine. Speculation swirled around the possibility that Paine had endorsed the candidacy Clifford Davis for city judge. Davis served as Paine’s personal secretary and was a known Klansmen who had spoken at several Klan gatherings. Paine had been courted by the Klan before, but he rejected their invitation to join the organization. In order to avoid any further speculation that Paine supported the Ku Klux Klan, he fired Davis from his position and denounced the Klan’s activities. Davis responded by accusing Paine of “yielding to his big friends” and joined the Klan ticket for the upcoming municipal elections.

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16 Letter sent with noosed rope, Church Papers, Box 4, Folder 18.
17 Jackson, The Ku Klux Klan and the City, 50-51; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis, 97-98.
18 Ibid.
The Klan established itself as a viable political faction within the city. Heading into the November elections two new parties surfaced. One was the Klan ticket headed by mayoral candidate W. Joe Wood, and another was the “anti-Klan” ticket led by former city judge Lewis T. Fitzhugh. Both Wood and Fitzhugh ran against the incumbent Rowlett Paine. The three-way race divided the city. Each candidate coveted the endorsement of the two political bosses, Church and Crump. Even the KKK extended an invitation to black voters by asking them to unite as native-born Protestants, a request that the black community rejected. Crump had opposed both the Klan and the Paine tickets. He intended to put his own candidate, Charles W. Thompson, into the race, but he later withdrew. Together, Church and Crump had enough political capital to secure the election for whoever they supported. Fitzhugh believed Crump would support his campaign, although Crump, as late as October 31, publicly stated, “I have had nothing whatever to do with either the Fitzhugh or the Paine Tickets.”

Church did not wait to take his cue from Crump. His faction supported the incumbent, Rowlett Paine. Bert Roddy, Thomas Hayes, and George Washington Lee released a statement stating, “The colored voters of Memphis are supporting the Paine administration ticket straight.” Paine promised improvements in the black neighborhoods, including streetlights, paved streets, a black policeman and fireman, and the completion of a new black high school. Those leaders declared, “We believe that they will give us a square deal.” Black Memphians took a pragmatic approach to local politics. Whites still outnumbered African Americans in the city. Therefore the chance

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19 Dowdy, Mr. Crump Don't Like It, 39.
20 Commercial Appeal, November 2, 1923.
of electing an African American to public office was virtually impossible. The threat of violence and disfranchisement paralyzed the black community. The presence of a black elected official could alone incite a violent response. In order to maintain the ability to vote on the state and national levels the way they sought fit, black Memphians had to make deals with candidates that could provide their communities with basic concessions. The support of the black community shifted the momentum toward Paine, even though he would never be considered an ally of the black community; in fact a report once described him as “a typical southern Negrophobist.” However, he did not represent the Klan, and that made him the best option for African Americans during the election. After rumors surfaced that members of Fitzhugh’s ticket had links to the Klan, it sealed the black community’s support for the incumbent.

After months of remaining silent Crump decided to publicly support Paine two days prior to the election. Crump warned that Fitzhugh and Paine would split the white vote in the city, clearing the way for a Klan victory. Realizing that Fitzhugh had little chance of winning, he endorsed his political rival. Paine emerged victorious; polling approximately 12,000 votes to the Klan’s 7,000. Fitzhugh received only 3,000 votes. While Crump’s endorsement helped Paine run away with the election, the support of African Americans kept him in office. According to G. Wayne Dowdy, “it is easy to conclude that African American voters, rather than the county machine, played the


22 Dowdy, Mayor Crump Don't Like It, 38-40; Jackson, The Ku Klux Klan and the City, 50-54; Lamon, Black Tennesseans, 43-44.
decisive role in Paine’s reelection.” Despite this victory one Klan candidate, Clifford Davis, succeeded in his bid for municipal judge.\(^23\)

During this entire ordeal Church remained mostly silent. He could have been confident enough in his lieutenants and the political maturity of black Memphians that he did not feel like it was necessary to comment on the contests. Church and the Lincoln League not only mobilized black voters to the polls in support of Paine, but also they educated them on the political process during the previous elections. Therefore they did not always have to look to Church or Crump for direction. They understood the stakes of this mayoral race and responded accordingly. However, Church's silence may best illustrate the contradictions in his political message. As a national leader he had to be conscious of constituents and understand that they watched his every move. It would not have boded well for Church to publicly campaign for a person who had earned the reputation as a white supremacist. Instead, he chose to let his local lieutenants convey the message so that he could maintain his credibility with black voters outside of Memphis. He could not expect black voters beyond Memphis to understand his pragmatic approach to local politics, so in an effort to avoid this controversy, Church chose to stay out of the headlines. \(^24\)

Church and Crump coexisted as the two political bosses in the city. Church's approach to the state and national elections contrasted with his curiously quiet demeanor during local elections. Although there is no evidence that Church worked directly with Crump, his silence against Democratic candidates suggests that he and Crump developed


\(^24\) Lamon, Black Tennesseans, 43-44.
an alliance. Church did not openly campaign for or against Crump’s candidates. He acknowledged that Crump controlled local politics, just as Crump did not interfere with Church’s state and national agenda. As Tennessee historian Lester Lamon stated, “each respected the political power and domain of the other…Crump-controlled local government, on the one hand, rarely engaged in race-baiting and harassment of black political activities, while on the other hand, Church-influenced federal officials seldom interfered with Crump.”25

Church balanced his position as a local and national leader. Memphis did not have much racial violence, but the southern phenomenon of lynching galvanized national politics during Harding’s first year in office. The Republicans dominated the national elections, and black leaders had every right to be optimistic that they would remain true to their campaign promises and make lynching a federal offense. After Harding’s inauguration he declared, “Congress ought to wipe the stain of barbaric lynching from the banners of a free and orderly representative democracy.”26 The anti-lynching bill that Leonidas Dyer introduced in 1918 gained new life as a result of the hard work of James Weldon Johnson and the NAACP. His bill would hold negligent officials as well as actors in the lynching accountable; it would also force counties where the lynching occurred to pay $10,000 to the victim’s family.

25 Ibid., 45; Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 100; Roberta Church to Lester Lamon, November 4, 1975, The Roberta Church Collection, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee. Lester Lamon prepared his manuscript for Black Tennesseans he sent advanced copies of Chapter 2 and 3 to Roberta Church, and she disputed the validity of Church entering into any "understanding, agreement, arrangement, or cooperation," with Crump. This did not deter Lamon, as he documented his claims about their alliance.

26 Sullivan, Lift Every Voice, 105.
The NAACP worked tirelessly to pass the Dyer Bill. Church maintained his relationship with the NAACP and still served as an executive officer. Associate Field Secretary William Pickens wrote Church, explaining that he would be diplomatic to contact “colored politicians who may have influence with the new administration.” Pickens believed it would be an effective strategy for black political leaders to support the NAACP and stand as a united front against white supremacy. He told Church, “If the colored politicians and the colored social workers could speak with one voice and to one purpose, they would be very apt to get what they asked for.”

Consequently, the platform of the Lincoln League was often very similar to the NAACP’s platform. Although they viewed themselves as separate entities, Church’s affiliation with both organizations suggests their overall often collaboration. Yet the two organizations did not always appeal to the same people. The NAACP remained relatively non-partisan, and the Lincoln League did not have any white members. By supporting each other behind the scenes, the two organizations appealed to a larger audience without compromise. Their network of influential African American and white leaders increased, and together they would served as a more comprehensive representation of black America. Church agreed to make the Dyer Bill a priority on his personal agenda, as well as on the Lincoln League’s platform.

The Republicans controlled the actions on Capitol Hill, but remained passive on anti-lynching legislation. Although African Americans turned out to vote in record numbers and helped place many congressmen in office, they still considered anti-lynching a nonessential issue. Two Lincoln League officers, Perry Howard and Henry Lincoln Johnson, proposed a compromise that called for “federal intervention only when

27 William Pickens to Robert Church, January 12, 1921, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 31.
prisoners already in custody were taken from an officer or from a jail to be lynched.” This infuriated the NAACP because they believed that “officials and mobs could easily fabricate conditions to circumvent such stipulations.” The NAACP successfully defeated the Howard-Johnson amendment and continued to pressure politicians to pass this legislation. After numerous delays and accusations from Democrats that Republicans only supported the bill as a political ploy to woo the black vote, the House voted to pass the bill on January 26, 1922, with a vote of 231 to 119. For the NAACP their work had just begun, as it still had to fight for its passage in the Senate. In June, the Senate Judiciary Committee endorsed the Dyer bill 8 to 6 after a long contested battle. The bill now needed to get to the floor of the Senate, but senators often overlooked the measure to concentrate on items such as labor disputes, veterans’ benefits, and taxes.

The NAACP issued a petition that numerous governors, mayors, college presidents and faculty, editors, lawyers, and others signed in an effort to urge the Senate to pass the legislation. When the bill finally made it to the Senate floor, southern senators organized a filibuster that prevented the passing of the legislation. Republicans did not mount much of an effort to counter the filibuster and eventually voted to abandon the Dyer Bill.

African Americans had yet another reason to distrust the GOP and withdraw their support for the Party. Their frustrations continued to mount, because they knew that if

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29 Ibid., 70-71; Sullivan, Lift Every Voice, 109; Johnson, Along this Way, 365-371.

Republicans had brought the bill to a vote, it would have passed. Instead Republicans emerged as cowards and liars in the eyes of the black community. “I think disgust was the dominant emotion. What I had for a week been sensing would happen – the betrayal of the bill by Republican leaders – had happened,” reflected James Weldon Johnson. Although the bill failed, the NAACP and other leaders effectively raised the nation’s awareness of lynchings. Ultimately, the activism of African Americans during this anti-lynching crusade helped to curb its practice during the 1930s and 1940s.

In the aftermath of the Dyer Bill letdown, black voters began to reassess their loyalty to the GOP. African Americans did not have a strong advocate within the Harding and Coolidge administrations. Black people did not represent the same voting bloc as they did in the 1920 election. The Great Migration was moving black people from their rural communities to metropolitan areas in the South, as well as to the North. In these areas the Democrats developed strategies to appeal to black migrants. Church once again found himself in the position of convincing African Americans that even though the GOP had repeatedly failed the black community, it represented the best political option in 1924.

In August 1923 Warren G. Harding died, and Calvin Coolidge succeeded him as president. That same month the Lincoln League of America announced its annual meeting would be held in Chicago from August 30 to September 1 to announce their support for Coolidge. Church also issued a national call to hold a convention in 1924 to address the “grave political and economic conditions that oppress the people; take action on very important matters affecting our status in political conventions and inquire into a

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31 Ibid.

32 Zangrando, *The NAACP and its Crusade Against Lynching*, 75-76.
very serious situation now agitating the public mind.” That “very serious situation” referred to the controversy surrounding the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital. The government had attempted to prevent African Americans from serving on its staff.33 After years of black veterans receiving poor medical attention in inferior private institutions, the Treasury Department decided to build a hospital in Tuskegee, Alabama, for black veterans. It also presented an opportunity for the thousands of trained black physicians and nurses to practice, as well as run the day-to-day operations of the hospital. Church supported this cause, once again demonstrating that he was more than a political advocate; he was also a social activist.34

The federal government initially promised that the hospital would be staffed exclusively by African Americans. However, the Veterans Bureau, the agency that supervised the hospital, issued a letter stating that all key positions would be filled by whites. This news upset the black community, which became further enraged after finding out that white nurses, who according to an Alabama law could not touch black patients, would be assisted by black maids. Whites would receive professional compensation, while the black maids would be paid as menials. Tuskegee University president Robert Moton emerged as the most vocal critic of the plan. The Lincoln League's Henry Lincoln Johnson and Perry Howard joined Moton in their dissatisfaction with the plan; however, the two sides publicly squabbled over who should lead the hospital. Howard and Johnson may have joined the fight for self-serving reasons, as they saw an opportunity to gain more prestige and wealth. Although the two sides disagreed


with the leadership question, both eventually challenged the Veterans Bureau to not just integrate the hospital, but to hire a full black staff. Prior to Harding's death he agreed and asserted that it “will afford the colored race an opportunity to show its capacity for service and prove exceedingly helpful in that direction, provided the success hoped for is recorded.”

Booker T. Washington’s former foe, the NAACP, had a solid working relationship with Moton, and it too, joined the effort. Church weighed in with his comments. He made Tuskegee a priority at the League’s annual meeting. The Lincoln League issued a statement to President Coolidge, “to put Colored personnel at the government hospital at Tuskegee, Ala. Good morals, simple justice and every propriety dictate such a course.” The League ended its statement: “Every reason foreign to an insane asylum appeals to President Coolidge to stand by the judgment of his illustrious predecessor.”

This battle played out in the national media, prompting responses from white supremacist groups, such as the KKK, that promised violence if any black staff entered the building. The threats became so severe that Moton left town for his own protection. He feared that white supremacists would destroy his campus. However, black Tuskegeeans did not budge from their stance, and as a result of their efforts, combined with the national presence of Moton, the NAACP, the Lincoln League, the all-black National Medical Association, and the black press, the white community acquiesced.

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36 Chicago Defender, September 8, 1923.
The black doctor by the name of Dr. Joseph H. Ward received the appointment to lead the all-black facility.37

Coolidge enlisted the help of Henry Lincoln Johnson and Church to assemble the staff. Johnson had left Georgia to take a vacation to the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. While relaxing, he received a call from the president asking him to meet at the White House before he returned home. During their conversation Coolidge asked Johnson about Church. He then informed him that Church “went to Memphis much depressed,” as a result of his lack of support in regards to the “colored question.” From there Coolidge told Johnson, “that my plan was to have that hospital at Tuskegee run and controlled by colored men.” He told “Link,” as he was known, that he was upset his vision had been ignored and he had “taken the matter up and I have men now in the Veterans’ Bureau,” who would see his plan through. Coolidge then asked Johnson to collaborate with Church to prepare “a full and complete list of colored physicians, surgeons, nurses – indeed a complete personnel composed of colored people for that hospital at Tuskegee.”38 Coolidge specified that he did not want the people from one region, but he instead wanted for them to consider all sections of the country. Johnson asked Church to send him the names of all the “doctors, nurses and other person that you have in mind” to fill the vacancies. He also asked him to consider the salary of the “Superintendent,” and suggested that he start at $5,000 a year. The President of the

37 Clarence L. Kelly, “Robert R. Church, A Negro Tennessean, In Republican State and National Politics from 1912 – 1932” (Master's thesis, Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University, 1954), 70. Kelly regularly corresponded with Robert Church Jr., Roberta Church, and George W. Lee as he prepared his thesis.

38 Henry Lincoln Johnson to Robert Church Jr., Church Papers, April 13, 1923, Box 4, Folder 7.
United States personally went south to seek out the assistance of Church and Johnson to carry his vision into fruition. The Tuskegee situation proved that black people could effectively organize and fight their own battles. The Lincoln League met a few weeks after Ward’s appointment. The Savannah Tribune covered the meeting. The article discussed the reaction of black Tuskegeeans and the League's stance on the Tuskegee ordeal. It commented, “The difficult thing for him [the white southerner] to comprehend is that the Negro has at last learned to marshal forces and fight too.” The Tuskegee Hospital situation embodies the complex scope of the early civil rights movement; all aspects of the black community need to be accounted for in this struggle. Local black Tuskegeeans did not cower to threats of white supremacists; national civil rights organizations such as the NAACP garnered national attention; the political connections of the Church and the Lincoln League made the possibility of having a black staff a reality.

African Americans could mobilize in larger numbers than ever before. Church capitalized on this spirit of activism as he and other members of the Lincoln League encouraged more people to organize and fight for equality. At the annual meeting members challenged “soldiers of the war to take steps immediately to form an organization of their own, since the organization controlled by their fellow soldiers deny them privilege of assembly.” Church and his fellow committee members then pledged

39 Ibid.

40 Sherman, Black Republicans, 158-163; Savannah Tribune, September 13, 1923; Chicago Defender, September 8, 1923; Daniel, "Black Power in 1920s," 383; Henry Lincoln Johnson to Robert Church Jr., April 13, 1923, Church Papers, Box 4, Folder 7.

41 Chicago Defender, September 8, 1923.
their moral, financial, and political assistance to assist the soldiers in developing their own organization. Black soldiers began writing the League’s officials asking for advice and assistance after reading the article in the Chicago Defender. Also during the meeting the League's issued a preliminary platform that called for black public officials from every state, an end to mob violence, and advances in education. The League concluded by charging that, “The Lincoln League of America represents a people as ancient as the first story of our country. It speaks no fiery words of hate and brag, but gives expression to the millions knocking at the door of equality in their own land and determined not to take no for an answer.” Members made it known once again that they intended to do more than usher black people to the polls. Instead they viewed themselves as a civil rights organization that had the power to give black people the political agency necessary to improve race relations in their respective communities.

In August, Henry Lincoln Johnson, Perry Howard, and Walter Cohen held a private meeting with the accidental president at the White House. The two sides presumably discussed the political and economic conditions of African Americans, as well as federal appointments for black Republican leaders, including themselves. They did not speak publicly about their visit, but they did say that the president was most cordial. Coolidge wanted nothing more than to secure his own nomination for the upcoming election, and he needed to be particularly mindful about alienating the black vote. Coolidge met with the Lincoln League members as a somewhat symbolic gesture, because he desperately needed to establish a rapport with the black community. Prior to

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42 George Grier Jr. to Robert Abbot, September 7, 1923, Papers of Roscoe Conkling Simmons, Box 2, Lincoln League Folder, Harvard University Archives, Pusey Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

43 Chicago Defender, September 8, 1923.
his presidential campaign virtually no one knew his true feelings on the race question. As a vice-presidential candidate in 1920 he remained silent on the subject. Therefore members of the Lincoln League, as well as the NAACP, seized an opportunity to educate Coolidge on the major issues in the black community and attempt to gain his support. Coolidge’s campaign team would rely on leaders such as James Weldon Johnson and Church to create a black agenda much like his predecessor.

By 1924, Church had become a more well-rounded leader. A news-clipping entitled, “R.R. Church, A Leader,” stated that “The Hon. R.R. Church, beyond question, has met the full requirements of the race and has proved himself a leader true and tried and safe to follow. He is the most commanding figure today, standing in the forefront of Negro Leaders.” The article continued, “The stand which R.R. Church has taken on the side for right, the effort he has made, all give him a seat beside Douglas(s) and Langston, Lincoln and Roosevelt, making him a star of the first magnitude to be loved and by unborn generations of the race whose case he so ably represented and for whose rights he so valiantly fought.” He had garnered the respect of not only activists and politicians, but also academics. The father of African American history, Carter G. Woodson, recruited Church to the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. The “Association,” as it became affectionately known, elected Church to the Executive Council, and he accepted. Woodson told Church, “The aim of the Association is to connect with it men of consequence, who have an interest in the uplift of the race that the work may be popularized in all of its ramifications through this country and abroad.”

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44Newsllipping, No Title, No Date, Church Papers, Box 4, Folder 19.

45 Carter G. Woodson to Robert Church Jr., November 1, 1921, Church Papers, Box 4, Folder 19.
He continued, “The Association believes that you are one of the men to take the lead in this work.” Church’s star shone brightest during the 1920s. Black and white leaders alike coveted his advice and endorsements.46

The Lincoln League planned for the conference to take place in Chicago on February 12 - 13, 1924, in honor of Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. Church, Perry Howard, Roscoe Conkling Simmons, Walter Cohen, and Henry Lincoln Johnson each contributed $100 to cover the initial expenses. They worked to organize the event, and at the beginning of the new year they began mailing out invitations to its members. They also contacted branch organizers who represented forty states, urging them to send delegates to represent the various congressional districts in their respective states. By 1924 the Lincoln League held the distinction of being considered the “foremost political organization in the United States” for African Americans. News of the meeting spread from coast to coast. *The California Eagle* proclaimed that this meeting would be the “greatest political gathering in the history of the race.”47

On Tuesday February 12 the Lincoln League of America opened its second quadrennial national meeting at the Bethel A.M.E. Church auditorium in Chicago. A “glittering array of brilliant men and women” packed the auditorium. The session began with the entire crowd joining in the singing of “America,” followed by a prayer by Bethel

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46 Carter G. Woodson to Robert Church Jr., March 17, 1922, Church Papers, Box 4, Folder 19.

47 J.B. Bass (editor of the *California Eagle*) to Robert Church Jr., January 19, 1924, Roscoe Conkling Simmons Papers, Box 2, Robert Church Jr. Correspondences Folder; Roscoe Conkling Simmons to Perry Howard, December 23, 1923, and Henry Lincoln Johnson December 24, 1923, Roscoe Conkling Simmons Papers, Box 2, Robert Church Jr. Correspondences 1920-1939 Folder.
A.M.E.’s pastor Rev. C.H. Tanner. Roscoe Simmons captivated the audience with his “Address to the Country,” where he reiterated the principles of the organization. He told the crowd that the League represented “the equality of all men of all bloods and races, and the joint ownership of the United States by those who have defended it; by those who discovered and developed its resources.” He also challenged his listeners to hold the “Belief in the future of the American Negro as an American; determination to remain under the flag made sacred by our blood and fight it out; pride in our achievements that answer to all who revile us.”

Simmons had electrified the crowd. He later gave another speech that “was often interrupted by the thunderous applause.” Simmons asserted, “all that we are, we owe to the American White man; all that he is, he owes to us; the only difference is that he has collected his toll, but tonight I am here to present our claims.”

Church led the nominations committee and announced the appointment of Perry Howard to assistant attorney general of the United States -- an appointment Howard received based on Church’s recommendation.

Illinois Senator Medill McCormick and Republican National Chairman John T. Adams served as the only white men to speak at the event. Adams honored Lincoln’s legacy and promised to meet with members of the Lincoln League to discuss matters pertaining to the race. McCormick told the crowd that the 14th and 15th Amendments had been “grossly violated” by the United States, and he believed

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48 Roscoe Conkling Simmons, Address to the Country, Roscoe Conkling Simmons Papers, Box 2, Lincoln League Folder; Norfolk Journal and Guide, February 23, 1924.

49 Chicago Defender, February 16, 1924.

that “If we endanger the rights of one American citizen, we endanger the rights of all American citizens.” Their speeches endeared them to the crowd, but black people needed more than lip service, they wanted action. The conference attempted to address the following issues: “Migration and its Political Influence,” “Our Political Status,” and “Congressional Legislation.” For two days members debated and constructed a black agenda that would be submitted to the GOP’s national leaders.

Lincoln League officials presented a platform that addressed topics such as “Political Allegiance,” where they reaffirmed their allegiance to the Republican Party. They called for its members to “train and educate a race – thirteen million strong – in the spirit of the American government” and to strive “to vindicate the sword of Gar and the pen of Lincoln.” The League then asked its members to join the fight in making the “Free Ballot,” as “free in Alabama as in Massachusetts.” They discussed the issue of migration by recognizing that “Thousands of American Negroes are changing their habitation.” They acknowledged that some leaders thought it was unwise to leave the South, but the League made its position clear: “It is the belief of the Lincoln League that it is always in order for people to flee oppression and make it to the places where children can be free and their women enjoy the protection of decent society,” and that one cannot expect an entire race to “always bear oppression.” Officials stated that the South’s refusal to allow African Americans to participate in a government where they paid taxes gave them the incentive to find other opportunities elsewhere. On the issue of “Sex Equality,” the Lincoln League assured its women delegates that they believed “in the

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51 Chicago Defender, February 2, 1924.

52 Ibid., February 9, 16, 23, 1924; John T. Adams to Roscoe Conkling Simmons, January 21, 1924, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 25.

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political equality of the sexes.” Roscoe Simmons acknowledged that, “Those who make a home ought to be quick to make a Government. Those who give birth to men should be expected to give birth to ideas upon which Government of men must rest.” The principles and declarations of the League concluded by invoking the presence of Lincoln again by challenging the nation to secure for African Americans all which “Lincoln died to secure.”

After members developed a platform to present to the GOP, the conference concluded with a ball held at the local armory. The list of expected guests read like a “who’s who” list of black leaders. It brought a social climax to the political meeting. Among the people expected at the ball were Church’s half-sister Mary Church Terrell, Emmett Scott, James Weldon Johnston, James Cobb, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Nannie Burroughs, and A. Philip Randolph. Many of its attendees not only represented black leadership, but also the black gentry. The attendees adhered to the tenets of genteel performance as discussed in the etiquette literature that circulated in books and newspapers during the twenties. The men wore tuxedos and women wore formal gowns. The guests made their entrance in a “grand march” to signal their arrival. The ball allowed its attendees to socialize, mingle, and network with the nation’s elite black leaders. The ball capped off another successful conference.

While the Lincoln League had Chicago abuzz, another race conference met in the Windy City. Black Chicagoans hosted the ball that weekend to accommodate not only the Lincoln League members, but also the “All-Race Conference.” Howard University


professor Kelly Miller organized what he called the “Sanhedrin,” named after the Jewish council and tribunal. “The Sanhedrin: All Race Conference,” met on February 12, the same day as the Lincoln League, at the Wendell Phillips High School auditorium.55 A mild controversy loomed over the two mega-conferences. Some people speculated that Miller attempted to sabotage Church’s meeting, and the leaders of the Lincoln League felt disrespected. Others wanted to know who set the dates for the conference and why would they choose the same day to meet. The constitution of the Lincoln League stipulated that they would meet on Lincoln’s birthday for their national meeting. On the other hand, Miller had changed the date of his conference “three times, and only selected Chicago and Lincoln’s birthday after the conference of the Lincoln League set the time and place of its meeting.”56 League officials attempted to clear up any rumors that they opposed the Sanhedrin. According to the Baltimore Afro-American, “The officers declare that the Lincoln League is constructive, not destructive, and that it wishes all organizations well.” The truth of the matter is that Miller struggled to get supporters for his conference, and may have moved it to Chicago to attract the people who had already planned to attend the Lincoln League meeting.

Regardless, Miller had organized the Sanhedrin in reaction to the friction and rivalries that existed among black leaders, and he saw his conference as an opportunity to bring all race organizations under the same umbrella. He ultimately hoped that the conference would “arouse a sense of unity and race consciousness among Negroes.” He “emphasized that the conference must be by and for black men in America, must avoid

55 Chicago Defender, February 2, 1924.

56 Baltimore Afro-American, February 1, 1924.
politics and superficial grievances." He made it clear that he did not want women present at the conference. Over fifty organizations sent approximately 500 delegates to the meeting, including James Weldon Johnson of the NAACP, Dr. Channing Tobias of the Colored man’s branch of the YMCA, and Mordecai Johnson, who later became president of Howard University. The all-male conference met to discuss “all phases of life pertaining to the ‘Negro in America.’” The League tried to downplay any friction with the Sanhedrin. However, tension did exist between the groups’ two leaders.58

Church seemed less than enthused with Miller’s conference. In fact, Miller contacted Church the year prior and asked him to attend. Miller wrote, “We beg to request the use of your name as a member of the enlarged committee of the All-Race Conference. It is not only your name that is solicited but your active interest and cooperation.”59 He wanted the conference to be void of any political factions, because politics stood as a fundamentally divisive issue. Church disagreed with this approach; he believed that the problems that the black community faced were inherently political. The government had created laws that either prevented African Americans from receiving first-class citizenship, or it refused to pass laws that would either protect or uplift the black community. Church also felt that Miller’s conference fell short of its advertised goals. He rejected his offer by stating, “From all indications your movement is factional and fall short of your published proposals to eliminate factionalism among your various groups and make one united pull, and I would not care to lose time in a vain effort.”

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58 *Chicago Defender*, February 16, 1924.

59 Kelly Miller to Robert Church Jr., July 17, 1923, Church Papers, Box 4, Folder 6.
Church clarified his statement by explaining that he thought it was “vain because we cannot hope to pull our groups together with any kind of an initial committee that is unquestionably factional.” Church also did not fully trust Miller, a Democrat, and may have believed that he had ulterior motives.

Miller’s political affiliation is more than likely what deterred Church from joining the organization. Church also enjoyed being in control. He held membership in numerous organizations, and almost always served as an adviser or leader within the group. He believed that he had nothing to contribute to the Sanhedrin other than allowing them the privilege of using his name as an endorsement. By omitting politics, the “Sanhedrin” would simply serve as an academic outlet for intellectuals to discuss the plight of African Americans, but no real action would be taken to uplift the community. Others joined Church in his criticism of Miller’s Conference. Du Bois viewed the Sanhedrin as “an interesting social occasion” which had nothing worthwhile to say on such “vital questions as housing, intermarriage, union labor and the Klan.” Ultimately Miller’s movement failed as a result of the issues that he had hoped to defeat, such as jealousy, rivalries, and poor planning.

Church did not usually associate with black Democrats, but his confrontation with Miller speaks to a larger dilemma that he faced heading into the upcoming election. Black people wanted to know which side had their best political interest. As a result of Republican letdowns it became increasingly hard for Church to justify why black people should remain loyal to the GOP. Harding had done little for the black community, and

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60 Robert Church Jr. to Kelly Miller, July 25, 1923, Church Papers, Box 4, Folder 6.

Coolidge seemed to be even less concerned. Southern Democrats never hid their racist agenda, however. As more black people migrated to the North they witnessed an unfamiliar Democratic party that distinguished themselves from their southern brethren. Northern Democrats, too, avoided any promises to address the race problem. However, many black migrants had never voted, and now they could vote without any violence or intimidation. African Americans had such a small stake in American society that they would be willing to flock to the dominant political parties in their region to improve their immediate circumstances. The transition of African Americans from voting Republican to voting Democratic was a gradual process, not immediate. Black people moved to the Democratic Party after decades of broken promises by Republicans. No one Democratic candidate convinced black people to switch their affiliations. Years of Republicans constantly reneging on their promises pushed black people out of the GOP just as much as Democrats pulled them into their Party.62

The four years after the 1920 election exposed the true character of the Republican Party. Republicans could have used their control of the executive and legislative branches to tackle issues such as lynching, but they opted to neglect the demands of their African American constituency. Black votes wanted more than token federal appointments for the black elite; instead they wanted protection from the violence and intimidation they encountered on a daily basis. The aftermath of the 1920 election best displayed the dysfunctional relationship between blacks and the GOP during the decade. African Americans had become a more formidable political force than during the

McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft administrations. Republicans could no longer hide behind the claim that the Democrats controlled Washington as they did during the Wilson years, and make false promises that “things would be different” if they had control. African Americans had enough political capital to hold them accountable. For these formerly disfranchised Americans, the 1920 election epitomized their political optimism. It was the most inclusive election in the nation's history. Church ushered blacks to vote in record numbers, and women voted for the first time. Both races and sexes made their presence known during the election and helped to secure the Presidency, House, and Senate for the Republicans. Instead of capitalizing on this new political energy the Harding/Coolidge administration looked to pacify southern whites and appeal to lily-white Republicans. This administration, probably more than any other Republican administration of the twentieth-century, began the two-decade exodus of African Americans from the Party.63

As the Republicans prepared for the 1924 election, they had to try and rebuild their damaged relationship with African Americans. They faced new obstacles. The voting bloc in the South had changed as a result of the Great Migration. Black people lived in new areas, and had new social, economic, and political options. Black voters could also justify why they did not want to continue their support for the GOP. However, the unfortunate reality for African Americans during the 1924 election was that the Democrats, especially in the South, did not serve as a better alternative. They, too, did not

appeal for the support of the black community, and in fact still attempted to prohibit black people from voting at the polls. Black voters found themselves in a political purgatory void of any true advocate.  

So why vote? Church answered this in the same manner as he did before; because it was their right. By remaining active in national politics, black people could still raise the issues and expose the racist attitudes of white Americans. It allowed them to grow their movement, to become more organized, more aware, and more active in the fight against white supremacy. The constant rejection of both parties led to the more militant activism displayed a generation later. Therefore, their actions remain an important step in African Americans’ overall struggle for equality. They were not naïve, nor did they support the GOP in vain. By calling the bluff of both parties, African Americans raised the collective consciousness of the nation and exposed its exclusionary practices.

Church presented the Lincoln League's platform to Republican leaders. In addition to preparing for the national conference, Church had been asked to head Coolidge’s commission to study the economic and labor conditions in the Virgin Islands. Secretary of Labor James J. Davis appointed Church to lead a group of six other black leaders to assess the living conditions, unemployment rate, immigration issues, and farming conditions of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John. The stay would be for approximately six weeks, in which they hoped he would present information that would aid the United States in its efforts to establish new industries on the islands. Church respectfully declined his invitation and focused on the campaign. He needed to remain

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64 Gilmore, "False Friends and Avowed Enemies," 219-238
state-side to concentrate on the national political scene and another battle with the lily-white Shelby County Republicans at the state and national conventions.65

Prior to the meeting of Republicans representing the Tenth District of Shelby County Church, devised a strategy to have his delegation seated at the Knoxville convention. He needed to get some of his men on the county and district committees. Harry True, a leader of the lily-white faction, controlled one of the committees that Church attempted to desegregate. At a state committee meeting Church managed to successfully submit a resolution that allowed for the inclusion of African American men on all local committees. This gave him the leverage necessary to infiltrate True’s faction.66

He selected Wayman Wilkerson and George W. Lee to accomplish this task. According to Lee, they “employed all the instruments of flattery, lying, and head-scratching to make the lily-whites believe that they were against Church and bitterly opposed his leadership.”67 True believed their performances and immediately accepted them on the committees. Wilkerson then made an agreement with the representatives of the lily-white faction that African Americans in the district would receive “certain privileges” if they agreed to hold separate conventions and did not aspire to be delegates to the national convention. This agreement violated the principles of the Republican Party. Wilkerson’s next move was to get the lily-whites to document their agreement so they could present indisputable evidence at the national meeting. Wilkerson employed

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65 Baltimore Afro-American, January 11, 1924; George W. Lee, Beale St., 262.

66 Lee, Beale St., 262.

67 Ibid.
“all of the clownish antics” to coax the lily-whites to put their proposal in writing and sign the document. After he accomplished this, Wilkerson broke off the agreement by blaming George Lee for compromising their plan. However, the truth of the matter is that Wilkerson and Lee manipulated True and the lily-whites. Church now had the evidence he needed to carry to the state meeting.\(^{68}\)

Church, meanwhile, convinced his friend, congressman J. Will Taylor, to have African Americans on other committees. Taylor owed him the political favor after having him selected as the National Committeeman from the state in 1921. Their alliance produced a strong “black and tan” movement in the state. The phrase “black and tan” grew out of southern newspapers that applied the term to the interracial regular state organizations that were formed after lily-whites denounced their affiliation. The Church and Taylor coalition infuriated the lily-whites. After they realized the full scope of Church’s strategy, they aimed for revenge.\(^{69}\)

At an April meeting just prior to the state convention, Church and his faction arrived early and sat in the front seats of a Shelby County courthouse. When the lily-whites entered the assembly, they immediately confronted Church’s faction, and ordered them give up their seat and sit in the back. The group refused their demands and remained sitting. This prompted a lily-white leader named Ed Kinney to pick up a chair and hurl it at the black and tans. From there the entire courthouse erupted, and a melee ensued. A Sheriff was knocked to the floor with a chair as he attempted to break up the melee.

\(^{68}\) Ibid.

two groups. Several men left the courthouse bloodied during the scuffle and one black person was hospitalized.

Black people would not be subjected to the same intimidation tactics used by whites in the past. The *Pittsburgh Courier* covered the story and included in their sub-headline that, “Race Men Declare They Won’t Quit.” After order was restored the black and tans and the lily-whites decided to have separate conventions. Church would again represent the Tenth District as a delegate to the state convention.  

Church discussed the segregationist tactics the lily-whites were using at the state convention with J. Will Taylor. According to Lieutenant Lee, the state committeemen “were so incensed over the actions of the lily whites that they voted to give the Church and Taylor faction two-thirds of the Representation from Shelby (County).” Church also defeated attempts made by the lily-white leader, Jim Farley, to have him unseated as a delegate. Farley argued that his unseating at the national convention in 1920 signaled the lack of respect national leaders held for Church. The Credentials Committee ignored their request and Church’s faction remained intact. Church was then chosen as a delegate-at-large to the national convention. Church’s dominance of the state convention could be attributed to “his standing with the National Party leaders, including the President and some of his closest advisers.”

On June 25, Church and his fellow delegates took their seats at the National Republican Convention in Cleveland, Ohio. Melvin Chisum of the *Norfolk Journal and*

70 *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 3, 1924.


72 Kelly, "Robert R. Church," 74.
Guide reflected on the historical significance of the moment when he wrote, “It will be impossible for the historian of the future who essays to write the history of the Republican party to leave out the Colored Republicans and the duties which they have waged in the effort to destroy that political parasite of the southland known as the lily-white.” For the first time John Farley or no other lily-white challenged Church’s position. Church, however, did play the role of mediator between the contest for National Committeeman from Mississippi. Perry Howard faced strong opposition from his fellow Mississippian Eugene Booze. Church helped to construct a compromise that would seat Booze’s wife, Mary, as the National Committeewoman from Mississippi, and Howard as the National Committeeman. Other than that, Church maintained a low-key persona at the meeting. A sub-headline read, “Silent Bob Church.” Church said little at the meeting. He just “looked and read a lot.” He watched as his cohorts Howard, Simmons, and Johnson took a leadership role at the convention and received the accolades.

The Republicans produced a platform that showed more concern for African American voters “since the one adopted in 1908.” Historian Richard B. Sherman observed that, “For the first time it explicitly urged Congress to enact an anti-lynching law.” The platform also recommended that a commission be created to investigate the social and economic conditions of African Americans, and the “promotion of mutual

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73 Norfolk Journal and Guide, June 28, 1924.


75 Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America, 205.
understanding and confidence.” The Republicans attempted to balance their position among black voters and white southerners. It did not want to take strong commitments that could anger either side and jeopardize their support.

Although the Republicans included African Americans on their agenda, Church still had to fight in order to gain black recognition within the Party. Coolidge’s running mate, Charles Dawes, had scheduled a speech in Memphis that summer at a Republican meeting being held in the municipal auditorium. Tennessee Republican leaders agreed to allow African Americans to attend the meeting, but they would have to enter through a “separate door and to occupy an assigned section of the hall, apart from the whites.” Church heard of the plans and voiced his objection. He then called Massachusetts Senator William M. Butler, who had recently replaced John Adams as the Republican National Committeeman, to make him aware of the plans and ask him to cancel the meeting. Butler agreed and called off the meeting. Church had again used his connections with the Party’s elite to foil the plans of lily-whites.76

Battles between the lily-whites and Church carried on throughout the summer. Farley continued his crusade to block black people from participating at the polls, and Church kept appealing to the nation’s leaders to step in and stop the lily-whites’ antics. Church, in a letter to J. Will Taylor, said that Farley “is one of the bitterest men alive against Colored people.”77 Church had ascended to a high position socially, politically, and economically, and he could have conceded defeat to Farley and been secure in his

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76 Kelly, “Robert R. Church,” 76; Chicago Defender, October 4, 1924.

77 Chicago Defender, October 4, 1924.
own success. However, he continued to battle to secure the principles of equality and protect the constitutional rights for all African Americans.

Yet as the campaign moved on, it seemed that Church did not fully believe in Coolidge and his promises. He campaigned for Coolidge, but not with the same vigor as he did for Harding during the 1920 campaign. Coolidge appeared to be giving a contradictory message to his followers. He valued African American support, but he also wanted to continue recruiting white southerners to the Republicans Party. For instance, in August, Coolidge told a crowd in New York that, “Our Constitution guarantees equal right to all our citizens, without discrimination on account of race or color.”78 At the same time he refused to speak out against the Ku Klux Klan. A Democratic newspaper commented, “he seemed to imagine that without denouncing the Klan he can avoid loss of votes by saying nice things about the classes that are victims of the Klan’s hostility.”79 This further damaged the reputation of the GOP with African Americans especially after Democratic Presidential candidate John Davis and Progressive candidate Robert LaFollette condemned the invisible empire in separate speeches. Coolidge’s silence on this issue led African Americans to consider other options, and he never fully gained their trust.80

The NAACP refused to support any of the candidates publicly, but its most well-known member, W.E.B. DuBois, finally endorsed LaFollette for President. More leaders began to challenge Church’s position by encouraging black people to develop

78 *New York Times*, August 12, 1924.


“independent voting habits,” void of political affiliations. Coolidge nevertheless won a landslide victory. On the surface the GOP had decidedly won another presidential election, but they also suffered some disappointments. Their votes had decreased in all of the southern states from the previous presidential election, except Texas. Church also failed to secure Tennessee for the Republicans, as it returned to a “blue” state. Overall the campaign has been described as dull, and black people remained largely unenthused about their choices in 1924.81

The myth of Lincoln was no longer enough to energize the black vote. African Americans did not support Coolidge as they had in previous elections. To them he merely represented the best of the choices available. Church and the old guard black Republicans seemed to lose a little faith in the Party as well. However, he continued to support the GOP. Church’s allegiance to the GOP spoke more to his desire to force Republicans to live up to the ideals of Lincoln, rather than being associated with the GOP out of sheer loyalty. As Simon Topping wrote, “Church was much too experienced a politician to view the GOP nostalgically.” Church’s pleas within the Party reflected “not only the extremely limited options for southern African Americans, but also the disenchantment of a loyal party member exasperated at what the GOP had become.”82

Church played a role in nearly every mainstream issue that affected the black community during the 1920s. He balanced his positions as a local and national political leader, and he ventured into being a spokesperson for anti-lynching legislation and an advocate for an all-black staff at Tuskegee. During the 1920s Church was at the height of his popularity and influence. His appeal transcended politics. Black Memphians of all

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81 Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America, 213.
82 Topping, Lincoln's Lost Legacy, 205.
class identified with him. He held leading positions in the NAACP, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and the National Negro Business League. He also led the Lincoln League of America into essentially the “black Republican National Committee.” Behind the scenes Church worked diligently and allowed many of the stars associated with the black freedom struggles of the decade to receive the glory. Church had very little to gain personally from media exposure, and he must have taken pride in watching others create a legacy for themselves, much like the one he inherited. He already possessed name recognition, wealth, and power. Church did not want much attention, and he never accepted payment for his services. He only lent his time to causes he viewed as worthwhile, and would advance the entire black community. During the twenties very few people eclipsed the influence of Church, and he epitomized the true essence of a leader during the early civil rights movement.
Chapter 6
Church Must Go

For all the success, Church enjoyed he still could not eclipse the popularity of his half-sister Mary Church Terrell. Mary, “unquestionably the best known, the brainiest, and most influential colored woman in America,” brought more distinction to the already praised family name. During the twentieth century the two Churches had both become prominent members of the NAACP and the GOP. Mary served as president of the Women’s Republican League of Washington and attended the National Republican Convention in 1920. As astute a politician as her brother, she attended his Lincoln League meeting in Chicago to show her support. Herbert Hoover appointed her as the "director of work among the colored women of the East," during his 1932 campaign."¹ Mary joined her brother in the belief that the Republican party presented the best opportunity for African Americans to gain first-class citizenship in America. Like other Churches, Mary remained a life-long Republican years after African Americans defected from the party. Even though Mary was over twenty years Church’s senior, their careers paralleled each other’s. However, the two rarely collaborated on any projects and did not converse often. Perhaps due to the age disparity or the fact that they were raised in different households, the two were not close. They occasionally bickered and even had a brief custody battle over their nephew after their brother, Thomas Church, died in 1937.²


Despite their disputes, it is clear that the two had mutual admiration for each other’s work, and both took pride in maintaining the Church legacy. They could always count on each other in times of need. After Robert Sr. died, Church continued to correspond with Mary’s mother, Louisa or “Mama Lou,” as Church and Annette called her. He continued to send "Mama Lou" money as his father often did. Church and Terrell would sometimes write to exchange congratulatory gestures and acknowledge each other for their various accomplishments. Regardless of their seemingly distant relationship, the two could count on each other in times of need, as when tragedy struck Terrell’s family in the winter of 1925.3

Mary’s husband, Robert Terrell, died due to complications from a stroke just before Christmas in 1925. Church immediately sent his sister a telegram to offer his condolences and followed later with a phone call. “It is difficult to describe the effect it had upon me,” Mary told her brother to describe how she felt once she received his call. It “stiffened my backbone, revived my spirits, and made me feel that you were concerned about me…I can never forget your voice over that telephone as long as I live. I can hear it now.” Church did not attend Judge Terrell’s funeral, because he wanted to be home with Roberta for Christmas. Mary assured him that she understood and did not want to affect her holiday. In a state of mourning, Mary confided in Church throughout the letter. Her husband, who was already paralyzed due to the stroke, had been ill for a while, but she admitted that still “his death was a shock.” Church was considered the patriarch of the family even though their brother Thomas was much older. Thomas chose to live his life

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3 Louisa Ayers Martell (formerly Church) to Robert Church Jr., no date available, The Robert R. Church Family Papers, Box 2, Folder 13, Mississippi Valley Collection, McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN; Green Polonius Hamilton, The Bright Side of Memphis (Memphis, 1908), 99-101.
mostly as a white man and only contacted Church for money. Thomas, a lawyer in New York, later married a white woman and had a son, Thomas Jr. Mary thanked him for being there for her in her time of need.4

Like Church did when his wife died three years earlier, Terrell immersed herself in race work after Robert Terrell's death. Although the 1920s brought new leaders into the fold, both Church and Terrell remained relevant. Mary continued to serve as a lecturer on women and civil rights issues. She played a leading role in Hoover's 1932 re-election campaign. In 1946, at eight-three years old, she fought a three year battle to be accepted as a member in the all-white American Association of University Women. As late as 1950 she walked with a cane in a picket line to protest the segregated restaurants in Washington D.C.5

Church still served as patronage dispenser and believed he should name his brother-in-law’s replacement. He recommended his friend, Howard University constitutional law professor, James A. Cobb, to replace Robert Terrell as municipal judge in Washington D.C. The White House obliged and nominated Cobb for the position. This move agitated segregationists in the Senate. During confirmation hearings, Mississippi Senator Pat Harrison opposed the Cobb nomination. Cobb served as an attorney for the NAACP’s legal branch. Harrison contended that attorneys for “radical organizations” should not hold judicial positions. In turn, numerous black leaders such as Perry Howard, Emmett Scott, and William Lewis used their connections with influential white politicians to block the efforts of Harrison. Church appealed to Republican

4 Mary Church Terrell to Robert Church Jr., January 14, 1926, Church papers, Box 3, Folder 8; Thomas Church to Robert Church, April 22, 1912, and September 16, 1912, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 8; Jones-Branch, “Mary Church Terrell,” 74.

5 Jones-Branch, “Mary Church Terrell,” 75.
National Committee chairman William Butler and later met with President Coolidge to urge the appointment. Cobb had supported Church in his many political endeavors and served as a prominent member of the Lincoln League. Church wanted to repay Cobb for his loyalty. After a stubborn fight the Senate voted nearly 2 to 1 against Harrison’s reconsideration, confirming the nomination of James Cobb in June 1926.6

With the Cobb saga behind him, Church followed his usual pattern of concentrating on local politics in between national elections. In 1927, Mayor Rowlett Paine prepared for re-election. This time, however, he could not count on black Memphians to support him as they had in 1923. He had reneged on the majority of his campaign promises to the black community and did not make any attempts to court them for this election. Paine did not hire any black firemen and policemen, and he still refused African Americans general admission at Overton Park. The black community's contempt for Paine intensified after he built an incinerator near the new Booker T. Washington High School.7 It also bordered the all-black LaRose Grammar School and the Lewis Amusement Park, one of the few parks that black could attend in the city. Church's protégé George Washington Lee later recalled that Paine had effectively turned “a fine residential and school section into a dumping ground for the city’s filth.”8 Paine had no remorse for his actions against the black community. He officially turned his back on the very same constituency that elected him in 1923 when he urged white Memphians to exercise their right of suffrage. Several black leaders voiced their concerns about his

6 *Baltimore Afro American*, June 19, 1926.
failure to follow through on his pre-election promises, and they raised money for a legal
defense fund to secure a permanent injunction to prevent the development of the
incinerator. This action infuriated Paine. At an election rally he said, “The unusual
activities of the Negroes along political lines, now prevailing in this city; the admittedly
large number of illegal Negro registrations, the organization of this Negro political club,
its publicly announced demands, constitute a challenge to every white man and woman in
the city of Memphis to become qualified voters.”9 With that statement he called into
question the integrity of Church and his fellow leaders. An enraged black community
demanded that Paine apologize. He refused.

Black Memphians lost their battle in the courts to prevent the construction of the
incinerator, but as Lee observed, “its leaders proved that the Beale Street colored people
had pride and self-respect and the courage to fight for them.”10 African Americans in
Memphis had already demonstrated that they could organize and rally behind their
leaders. However, the issues surrounding the election of 1927 revealed a new activist
spirit among the city’s black residents. They finally had enough. As Lee stated, “the
sleeping Negro citizen was finally aroused and lashed into action.”11

Church, Wayman Wilkerson, Dr. J.B. Martin, Merah Steven Stuart, Dr. Joseph
Edison Walker, Thomas Hayes, Mrs. Laura Jackson, Mrs. Annie Brown, George
Washington Lee, and other prominent black Memphians formed a black political

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9 *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 17, 1927.

10 Lee, *Beale Street*, 244.

11 Ibid.
organization known as the West Tennessee Civic and Political League (WTCPL). Church, “seething with indignation,” called a mass meeting in June at the Beale Avenue Baptist Church to organize a plan of action. The WTCPL “sought to establish a plan of defense upon which all minds could meet in united action in order that the burdens of people, their common problems, might be met and overcome.” It presented a welcome alternative to the partisan politics of the Lincoln League, especially with black voters growing concerns with the GOP. Although Church remained important to the NAACP's national office, the Memphis charter became somewhat irrelevant during the 1920s and functioned mostly as an underground institution. The repressive racial atmosphere in Memphis never allowed the NAACP to flourish. The WTCPL filled a necessary void and provided an outlet for black Memphians to articulate the problems they faced in the city. Their concerns included unlighted and unpaved roads in the black neighborhoods, underpaid black teachers, inefficient medical care, and lack of playgrounds for children. Lee pointed out that of the $3,000,000 that Paine had spent improving the city, less than $500,000 went to the black communities. With this new organization Church wanted to harness the new activist energy being displayed by African Americans in the city to improve their overall conditions. In 1927 Paine became its primary target.

“Bob Church on the Warpath,” proclaimed the Pittsburgh Courier. The article discussed the perception of Memphis as a racially progressive, cosmopolitan city, but made it clear that as it is “bordered by Missouri, Arkansas, and Mississippi,” it reflected

12 Lamon, Black Tennesseans, 46.

13 Lee, Beale Street, 244-247; Lamon, Black Tennesseans, 46; Laurie Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 36; Michael K. Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 49; Pittsburgh Courier, September 17, 1921.
“all of the colorphobia of its neighbors.” The article highlighted the two extremes that created such great social contrasts in the Bluff City: “The gateway to the cotton belt, the center of many railroads, the headquarters of hundreds of important business concerns, the city, for all of its modernity in buildings and business enterprise, is culturally barbarous – a savage in Plus Fours – a Tenth Century barbarian in a Rolls Royce.” To combat the racial disparities that existed, Church and Lee started a vigorous campaign to register 25,000 voters for the upcoming election.14

The WTCPL unanimously supported Watkins Overton for mayor. Church called on his friend Roscoe Conkling Simmons to speak at a voter registration rally planned for August. During “Citizenship Week,” Simmons and other speakers motivated the crowd to turn out in record numbers. He challenged them to follow Church’s lead and to examine his record. “He knocked on the door of authority and what happened? You got a U.S. district attorney. He knocked again and got you a U.S. Commissioner and only recently knocked and you got a postmaster.” The crowd left the meeting inspired. The WTCPL increased black voter registration from 3,500 to nearly 11,000.15

Lee took the lead in making sure the registered voters paid their poll taxes before the deadline. He launched a campaign to appoint a chairman to each voting ward, a captain to each street, and a representative to each block. Lee, a master salesman from his

14 The Pittsburgh Courier, September 24, 1927.

days of in the insurance business, gave inspirational talks that linked paying their taxes to their duty of upholding the race.\textsuperscript{16}

The WTCPL organized African Americans prior to either faction fully disclosing its ticket. Publicly a nonpartisan organization, the WTCPL concealed its support for Overton until a few weeks prior to the election. Crump had already endorsed Overton and his ticket mate Clifford Davis - the same Davis that had run on the Klan ticket in 1923. The Crump/Overton camp recognized the success of the WTCPL’s voting registration campaign and wanted to ensure its support. Crump also knew that the black community was upset with Paine and wanted to court them in support of the Overton ticket. By not fully disclosing a choice, Church was able to broker a deal with Crump. Church met privately with Overton’s campaign manager Fran Rice and negotiated a deal to secure a black policemen, black firemen, higher teacher salaries for black teachers, and admittance to Overton Park in exchange for the black community's vote for Overton. Rice promised he would follow through on their requests.\textsuperscript{17}

Crump announced that “99.1 per cent” of African Americans would vote for Overton after Church’s meeting with Rice. After Paine found out about their alliance, he resorted to his usual racist scare tactics. Paine called the Church and Crump alliance “the greatest menace to white supremacy in the city since reconstruction days.”\textsuperscript{18} Paine had taken out a full page advertisement and asked the question, “Shall Crump and Church

\textsuperscript{16} Tucker, \textit{Lieutenant Lee}, 93.

\textsuperscript{17} G. Wayne Dowdy, \textit{Mayor Crump Don't Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 45; Lee, \textit{Beale Street}, 245; Tucker, \textit{Lieutenant Lee}, 94.

\textsuperscript{18} Dowdy, \textit{Mayor Crump Don't Like It}, 50.
rule through Overton?"19 He also had an enlarged picture of Church hanging at his campaign headquarters with a caption under it that read, “Will Southern white men and women allow this Negro man to name the next mayor of Memphis?”20 As a final act of desperation he put up “pictures of Church in a car pulled by Watkins Overton and pushed by Ed Crump,” to motivate whites to turn out and vote.21

Overton succumbed to the pressure of possibly losing the white vote due to Paine's behavior and broke his promises to the WTCPL. Crump contacted Lee and told him, “You let it leak out.” He continued, “I'll have to deny it now. Policemen will have to wait...All I can promise you is a chance to destroy your worst enemy.”22 Overton’s camp then released the following statement, “We do not favor anything which may create race friction, therefore are opposed to negro police, negro firemen, and general admission to the white parks.”23 However, he did promise “to provide more parks and hospitals for blacks.”

Overton essentially promised the city's white residents that he would maintain white supremacy and segregation during his tenure. This put Church and his black constituents in the compromising position of either pulling out of the election altogether and voting for no one, or taking these basic concessions as a minor victory for the black community. Overton’s half-hearted promise was a testament to how little political agency the black community actually possessed. African Americans had far to go in order

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19 New York Amsterdam, November 16, 1927.

20 Ibid.

21 Lee, Beale Street, 247.

22 Tucker, Lieutenant Lee, 95-96.

23 Commercial Appeal, September 9 and 10, 1927; Biles, Memphis, 27.
to have full inclusion in Memphis society. They could not be totally ignored, but the
election still ultimately depended on the white voters. The WTCPL’s support of Clifford
Davis demonstrated the few options available for African Americans. It also showed
their absolute disdain for Mayor Paine. Church’s faction reluctantly compromised its
beliefs and opted to accomplish its main goal of ousting Paine from office. For now
Church’s faction had to be content with gradual progress, trusting that they were making
strides that would pay dividends in the near future. Still Church and the WTCPL had
much to be proud of. In one summer, the black community more than tripled its
registration. As a community they became even more unified and organized under the
WTCPL.

Despite its success, the WTCPL did not have the universal support of the black
community. Black minister Reverend Sutton Griggs declared that the WTCPL was
“laying the foundation for a race riot.” Griggs, who enjoyed the support of white
businessmen, took pride in that “southern blacks monopolized sun jobs,” and he feared
that the WTCPL would make whites begin competing with blacks for those positions.
The city had not experienced a lynching in over a decade, and blacks still had the unique
opportunity to vote. Griggs insinuated that African Americans should be grateful for
their opportunities and not anger the white community. Lee publicly confronted Griggs,
arguing that the WTCPL should also examine the unprovoked murders of African
Americans by whites. Lee charged Griggs with being an Uncle Tom and continued to
challenge his accommodationist approach to racial uplift. Church and Lee were fully aware
of the risks involved with being a black leader in the South. Violence was always a

24 Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 36.
possibility, but both men believed African Americans should press on in spite of the threats.  

This danger became even more apparent in November, just days before the election. Approximately one thousand black men and women assembled at a local school to learn about the voting procedures for the upcoming election. As they met, a group of white men, “alleged to be unknown to the police, placed a bomb under the school building and set it off while the meeting was in progress.” Though it caused a considerable amount of hysteria, no one was hurt. A few minutes after the blast at the school, another bomb exploded at the New Prospect Baptist Church located on Beale, tearing a large hole in the floor of the church. White terrorists had declared war on the black franchise. The *Commercial Appeal* made light of the explosions by suggesting that someone had attempted to play a prank on African Americans by shooting “skyrockets” and firecrackers into the buildings. The city’s black leadership declared the acts cowardly and assured them they would not be deterred at the polls. No one was arrested. The local sheriff said the bombs were harmless and may or may not have had any political implications.  

Lee headed the new class of black leaders in the city and was the face of the campaign. Church, after being vocal at the beginning of the WTCPL campaign, remained in the background for the majority of the election. His silence prompted speculation that Church did not support the WTCPL any longer and that he disagreed with the city’s new leaders. A local black newspaper dispelled the rumors by explaining.

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25 Ibid., 36-37; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 63-64.

26 *New York Amsterdam*, November 16, 1927.
“when the voters followed Lieutenant George W. Lee, they also followed Church, for whom Lee spoke.”

Despite Griggs's criticism, and the obstructionist tactics of the white community, the black community still turned out at the polls. Watkins Overton won the mayoral race by nearly 13,000 votes. Approximately eighty percent of African Americans voted for Overton over the incumbent. Newspapers across the country credited Church, Lee, and black Memphians with the victory. The *New York Amsterdam* ran the headline, “Memphis Negroes Elect Mayor,” and the *Chicago Defender* stated, “Bob Church names Overton as Mayor of Memphis, Tennessee.” The *Defender* celebrated that “The election was a tribute to the superb machine-like organization of Robert R. Church…There was not a hitch in any part of the combination and despite the propaganda used by Paine supporters in the closing moments, Church’s entire ticket went over big.”

One of the most controversial elections in Memphis history was over. "It was a bitter campaign but a great victory,” Church commented. He succeeded in removing Paine, the “typical southern Negrophobist,” from office. Now the pressure turned to Overton to remain loyal to African Americans. While black newspapers celebrated the victory, they still remained realistic about the outcome. The *Pittsburgh Courier* wrote, “Through the effort of Church and the league, some eleven thousand Negroes were registered and a godly number of these voted Thursday. Whether or not the mayor-elect

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28 *Chicago Defender*, November 19, 1927.

29 *New York Amsterdam*, November 16, 1927.
will carry out his promise as to dealing fairly and honestly with the Negro citizens is problematical but the citizens, white and colored, have given him the chance."30

African Americans influenced local elections throughout the nation. “The recent elections in various parts of the nation show that the Negro communities in the cities are increasingly recognizing their political power and voting with greater intelligence,” wrote the Pittsburgh Courier.31 The article discussed the impact of black voters in various local elections in places such as New York City; Arlington, Virginia; Cleveland, Ohio; Detroit, Michigan; Louisville, Kentucky; and of course Memphis, Tennessee. After decades of work, Church was witnessing an increase in the black community's political consciousness. A new generation of voters who had never experienced slavery, Reconstruction, or the violent redemption era not only took to the polls, but also represented the future leaders of the African American struggle. This group had a new sense of entitlement. They did not have the same admiration of Lincoln or believe it was necessary to remain loyal to a constructed image of him serving as a figurative “Moses” for black people.

Church's loyalty always remained with black people first and the Republican Party second. He wanted to transition the black community's "infrapolitics" into a formal, collective energy that challenged discrimination and secured full citizenship for all African Americans.32 The informal forms of resistance that always existed in the black community were as important as any other aspect of black activism in America;

30 Pittsburgh Courier, November 19, 1927.

31 Pittsburgh Courier, November 26, 1927.

however, black people could only go as far as the laws of the land would permit. Their concerns needed to reach the halls of Washington D.C. before any substantive change took place. By enfranchising African Americans and other marginalized groups, they could redefine the democratic process in America and challenge for gradual reform. They needed to move democratic decision making from the relatively small white elite and incorporate the political opinions that reflected the spectrum of the American adult population. Throughout Church's reign as political boss of the black community African Americans used their ballot as a form of protest rather than an endorsement for candidates. Black politics has always been fundamentally different from white politics by the nature of the two groups experience in this country. The black community's politics always centered on issues of inclusion in American society, as opposed to expressing their opinions on the typical mainstream political issues. For instance the Lincoln League's platforms concentrated on issues affecting race relations as opposed to taking a political stance on the national economy, foreign relations, or the military. African Americans were willing to affiliate with any political party that was willing to address the race question. They used pragmatism and political expediency to negotiate better circumstances for their community. Therefore by the late 1920s black people began considering their political options. Church and his strategy of enfranchising African Americans had a direct correlation with black people becoming more politically mature and beginning to vote for its self-interest. Heading into the national campaigns of 1928, the Courier observed that African Americans “are seeing the necessity of ignoring political parties and the empty appeals and voting for the organization that definitely offers something more than kind words.”

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33 Pittsburgh Courier, November 26, 1927; Manning Marable, The Great Wells of
African Americans were optimistic about the 1928 national elections. Church engaged in his usual battle with the lily-whites, in particular John Farley. But black Republican leaders prepared to lead their constituencies to battle in various national campaigns, an onslaught of charges and rumors attacked their credibility. Perry Howard, Walter Cohen of Louisiana, Ben Davis of Georgia, and Church were the subjects of federal investigation for exchanging government positions for cash.34

That spring, Church’s name was mentioned in connection with the failure of the Fraternal Solvent Savings Bank. The bank that Church’s father founded had merged with the Fraternal Bank to become the fourth largest black-owned bank in the country. The bank, once dubbed the “Million Dollar Bank for Negroes,” collapsed due to corruption and mismanagement of deposits. Bank president Alfred F. Ward, vice-president Thomas Hayes, and six other bank executives served prison terms. When the bank closed, it had over $500,000 in shortages. The 28,000 depositors only received 9.4 cents on the dollar after the liquidation of the bank’s assets. In all, over fifty black-owned businesses and corporations sustained losses. Newspapers mentioned Church's name in connection with the bank's failure, besmirching his reputation. The government’s investigation of bank records revealed a note for $4000 made by Church in 1925. Although he had paid the note at its maturity, the local media attempted, erroneously, to link Church with fraud. Church did not seem too worried about the ordeal. “I have never had any questionable transaction with any bank, and everybody knows that I was not connected in any way with the defunct Fraternal Solvent Bank;" his statement made clear. "If I had a note there

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34 Chicago Defender, July 21, 1928.
in 1925, it was certainly paid when due as records of the will show.” Church never was considered a real suspect in the corrupt dealings of the bank executives. However, this minor allegation foreshadowed the turmoil that he faced later that spring.

One month after clearing his name in the bank fiasco, Church became the subject of a much more severe allegation. His problems began after he had Solomon Seches fired from his job as Memphis postmaster in June 1926. Church appointed Seches to this position in 1922, but after two reported "incidents" that occurred in 1923 and 1925, their relationship became strained. According to Seches, in 1923 Church attempted to lease the federal government a tract of land near Beale Street to erect a service station for government trucks for $18,000. Two other bidders offered tracts of land for more than half of Church’s asking price. The government chose the lower bidder. In 1925, Church’s uncle James Wright applied for retirement from the post office, but his permission to retire was delayed. Seches alleged that Church blamed him for the delay and forced his removal from office.  

Church raised more suspicions after he filled the vacancy by hiring G. Tom Taylor on an interim basis. Taylor expected to have his “acting” title removed and become the official postmaster for Memphis. However, he was fired due to his poor performance. Another Memphian by the name of Georg H. Poole, a lawyer, contacted Church about obtaining the appointment, but Church did not grant him the opportunity. Instead the position went to Harry S. New. This appointment enraged Taylor and Poole. They blamed Church and congressmen J. Will Taylor for overlooking them for the position. G. Tom Taylor and Poole accused Church of demanding compensation for the

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35 Baltimore Afro-American, March 31, 1928.  
36 Ibid.
position. Taylor stated that, “he lost his job because he refused to give Church $1000 of his salary." Poole alleged that he did not get the job because he would not agree to give Church $2,800 or agree to hire black clerks and carriers. Church characterized their statements as “malicious and false,” and he “welcomed a thorough and searching investigation by the Department and had requested it.”37 He went on to make a vague statement that everyone in Tennessee knew why Taylor lost his position, and that Poole was not considered because he could not pass the examination.

Harry New defended Church and called Taylor “an ingrate.” New stated, “J Will and Church did more for G. Tom than any two ever did for any man seeking a postmastership.”38 He told newspapers that he had known Church for years and believed in his integrity. He also made it a point to specify that he had never solicited an appointment from Church in exchange for cash. He believed the charges would be proven untrue. Finally Church named Edward V. Sheeley, a pharmacist, to the permanent position.39

Although Taylor and Poole took their claims to the media, it did not prompt a formal investigation. When Sheeley commented, “I am deeply obligated to J. Will Taylor and R.R. Church, to whom I owe my appointment,” it raised the suspicions of the Commercial Appeal.40 Farley and the local lily-whites subsequently attacked Church. They indicated that Sheeley was not qualified for the position and he must have paid

37Ibid.

38 Pittsburgh Courier, April 7, 1928.

39 Undated Newsclipping, Church Papers, Box 5, Folder 10.

40 Commercial Appeal, March 29, 1928.
Church. Farley rallied to remove Church from the Party’s leadership under the slogans, “Get Church at all cost,” and “Church must go.”

The fight lasted until the next year when a Senate Sub-committee investigated the issue. One of the sub-committee members, Senator J. Thomas Heflin of Alabama, read a poem that mocked Church:

Offices up a ‘simmon tree,
Bob Church on de ground.
Bob Church said to de’ pointing power,
Shake dem ’pointments down.41

The sub-committee cleared Church of any wrong doing and approved Sheely’s appointment as postmaster by an eight to seven vote.42

The sub-committee did not prove that Church accepted money. However, the notion that he may have accepted bribes is not that far fetched. The selling of federal positions by patronage dispensers had just become illegal, in 1926, when Congress passed legislation to prohibit the trafficking of public offices.43 Evidence proved that Perry Howard, for instance, took money prior to 1926. After the congressional legislation passed, he made it a point to have his appointees sign a waiver that stipulated he did not receive any cash for this office. Moreover, black leaders were not the only patronage dispensers who accepted money. What is compelling is that Church, Howard,

41 U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Post Office and Post Roads, Hearings Before a Subcommittee on Post Offices and Post Roads, 70th Congress., 2nd Session., pp. 47, 120 - 123.


43 Congressional Record, 69th Congress, Session 1, 5346-5348, 8459-8461 (March 10, 1926 and April 29, 1926).
Cohen, and Davis -- some of the most influential black GOP leaders of their era -- all faced charges that year. The timing of these corruption investigations does not appear to be coincidental. Heading into the national election of 1928, white Republicans made a concentrated effort to oust black leaders from their party.44

Especially telling is the manner in which the Republicans voted in the subcommittee meeting. When Sheeley's appointment passed, seven Democrats and “maverick” Republican leader Robert LaFollette voted yes. The other seven Republican congressmen voted no. The Commercial Appeal noticed this peculiarity: “It is an unusual situation for northern Republican senators to oppose confirmation on the ground that the appointment was obtained through the influence of a negro patronage dispenser while southern Democrat senators apparently approve a political alignment by which a negro political handles federal patronage for a Democratic machine.”45

The patronage investigation led to further attacks on Church's character. The local lily-whites, who referred to themselves as the “Hoover Club,” contested that Sheeley paid for his position and continued to challenge Church’s integrity. Poole became one of the Hoover Club’s most vocal leaders. In a district meeting that Church did not attend, Jim Quinn was elected as delegate to the National Convention. The lily-whites were confident that they would be seated at the state and national conventions since they did not seemingly have any African American opposition. However, Church


45 Commercial Appeal, February 27, 1928.
and J. Will Taylor organized a secret meeting around the same time as the lily-whites, electing delegates from their black-and-tan faction to the GOP meetings.\(^46\)

Church, in an effort to avoid the customary confrontation with the lily-whites, chose not to attend the conference in Nashville. The lily-whites assumed that Church had succumbed to the negative press he faced that year and conceded his usual seats at the national convention. The arrival of Church and his delegates at the national meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, thus infuriated the lily-whites. The black-and-tan faction once again challenged to be recognized as the regular Republicans from Shelby County. Church argued that the Republican Party would forever lose the black vote in Tennessee if they did not seat his delegates at the convention. Quinn countered by highlighting Church's battle with federal investigators. He then questioned Church’s loyalty to the Republican Party by raising suspicions as to why would the Democrats on the committee voted in favor of Church. The Republican credentials committee was unmoved by the lily-white’s antics and ruled in favor of the black-and-tans.\(^47\)

After the national meeting Church had to face another local critic. Clarence Saunders, the former founder and owner of the “Piggly Wiggly” and the current owner of the “Clarence Saunders Sole Owner of My Name Store” chain, took out a two-page advertisement in the local newspaper to appeal to white manhood in the city. He challenged white Memphians to stand up against the “Bob Church/Crump Gang,” and “smash” its power. Saunders clamed, “I am a friend of the Negro – I always been,” but

\(^46\) Clarence L. Kelly, "Robert R. Church, A Negro Tennessean, in Republican State and National Politics from 1912-1932," (Master's thesis, Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University, 1954), 84.

he later referred to black Memphians as Church’s “ignorant pawns.” Leaders in the city who previously remained silent seized the opportunity to try and rid Church’s influence with the GOP.48

Church won another battle with the lily-whites, but it was clear that Republican leaders did not value the black Republicans the same way they had in previous elections. Several factors led to the GOP divorcing themselves from black politicians. Black voters no longer voted blindly for Republican candidates and became more vocal in their criticisms of the GOP, which angered the Republicans who expected African Americans to remain docile and unyielding in their support for the "Party of Lincoln." In addition, the Republicans wanted to increase their presence in the South. This gain obviously could not be done with African Americans alone since they were outnumbered by white voters. However, the lily-whites refused to align themselves politically with their black colleagues.49

The Republican candidate for president, Herbert Hoover, made a concerted effort to force African Americans out of the GOP and court the lily-white vote. Hoover and his campaign mangers assassinated the myth of Lincoln. Hoover disassociated himself from African Americans and gained a southern following after a political miscalculation by the Democrats. The Democratic presidential nominee, New York Governor Alfred Smith, was a liberal Catholic who exposed the religious bigotry of many southern Protestants. One scholar wrote that southerners hated Smith so much that he "could not have won

48 Philadelphia Tribune, August 2, 1928, Pittsburgh Courier, August 11, 1928.

their support even if he had advocated the re-enslavement of Negroes.”

Hoover challenged the “Solid South” and realigned the Party, only appointing whites to manage his campaign, prompting many black leaders to abandon their support.

In the past, Church had contributed his time, intelligence, name recognition, and money to support national campaigns. He did virtually nothing to promote Hoover as a candidate. The Lincoln League did not meet. Due to many of its leaders being the subject of federal investigations, it had all but disbanded. The NAACP’s leadership openly criticized both parties. Walter White refused to head Smith’s “Negro” division, and W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in the *Crisis*, “It does not matter a tinker’s damn which of these gentlemen succeed. With minor exceptions, they stand for exactly the same thing: oligarchy in the South, color caste in national office holding, and recognition of the rules of organized wealth.” African Americans recognized that they did not have a true advocate in the race -- all the more evident after Hoover hired Colonel Horace Mann, a former Klan member and lily-white leader, as his southern campaign manager. The GOP made no apologies for courting white southern segregationist.

Hoover had little interaction with African Americans and never quite understood their plight. He grew up in Iowa, lived in Oregon with his uncle, and went to college at Stanford University. He “reinforced the values of rural, Protestant, white America.”

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52 W.E.B. Du Bois, "POSTSCRIPT," *Crisis* XXXV (November 1928), 381.

Hoover believed that people could achieve success based on personal merit, and the United States provided equal opportunities for everyone. He also believed that nonwhites were intellectually inferior, once describing African Americans and Asians as the “lower races.”

African Americans defected from the Republican Party in larger numbers than ever before. Respected black leaders voiced their disillusionment with the GOP and urged blacks to vote for the Democrats. Approximately twenty black newspapers including the *Chicago Defender*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, and *Norfolk Journal and Guide* all endorsed Smith. Hoover's campaign shown some concern, because it still expected black people to turn out for Hoover at the polls even though he blatantly disregarded them in his southern strategies. He asked some of the traditional black Republicans, as well as some new faces, to serve on the GOP’s Colored Voters Division. However, Church and many other black leaders declined Hoover’s invitation.

In a letter Church wrote to Hubert Work, Republican National Committee Chairman, he explained his decision not to serve as an executive committee member of the Colored Voters Division: “I am not insensible of the honor...however, I cannot bring myself to endorse either the personnel of this committee or the method by which it was chosen, I am forced to decline the appointment and withdraw from membership thereupon.”

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56 Robert Church Jr. to Hubert Work, August 15, 1928, Church Papers, Box 5, Folder 7.
leaders from states where African Americans did not fully engage in politics. Church stated, “Intimate knowledge of conditions among Colored Americans, of their present state of mind, of their growing self-respect, of the feelings of Colored Republicans who create our majorities in the free states, together with my own experiences in laboring for our party, lead to the conclusion that neither important colored leaders nor the rank and file will follow men who have no votes of their own, whether because they hail from states in which colored citizens are denied the ballot or from neutral territory where disfranchisement is universal.” He concluded the letter by telling Work that he was still devoted to the party and a Hoover supporter; however, Church's actions suggested something different.57

Church was upset in particular that John R. Hawkins, a black former college president and banker, headed the committee. The Hoover camp had not consulted him prior to the hiring. Church contested that Hawkins, from Washington D.C., could not hold the Republicans accountable, because he could vote only once every four years. Church knew that his comments would have a major impact once they reached the press. He caused a media firestorm after he sent his letter to the major black newspapers. One newspaper declared, “Democrats will draw comfort from the Church letter, although Mr. Church will not bolt the party. It is another sign of the independent spirit so evident in this presidential election.”58 The Pittsburgh Courier ran the headline, “Leaders Look

57 Unnamed News clippings, No Dates, Church Papers, Box 5, Folder 7; Houston Sentinel, August 31, 1928, Church Papers, Box 5, Folder 23.

58 Unnamed News clippings, No Dates, Church Papers, Box 5, Folder 7.
Askance at Church’s Stand.” Church’s stance surprised most members of the GOP. The Courier speculated that Church was more hurt by being looked over by the Hoover administration than any discontent he had with these new leaders.

Church responded to his critics the following week. He was informed that Emmett Scott wrote the article and attacked his character. Church was not shocked that Scott would write an anonymous article, stating that it was a typical article by the “industrious but elusive author.” Church declared, “For thirty years his brick-bats have been hurled from behind the coat-tails of protectors.” He reiterated his reasons for declining the appointment, citing that he refused to follow “apologists...Even at the request of Hoover...” Church would not be a figurehead leader and he disagreed vehemently with Hoover's company.

Church’s public statements and his absence from the Hoover’s campaign speak volumes about his feelings toward the presidential candidate. Even Time Magazine did a story on the Church/Hoover saga. The magazine speculated that Church “may require fresh and stronger reassurances that the bleaching of the GOP South” was not motivated by race before he endorsed the candidate.

Church did not trust Hoover and still had not publicly endorsed him heading into Election Day.

In the last days of the campaign, Church finally issued a statement that half-heartedly endorsed Hoover. Church took out a full-page ad in the Chicago Defender entitled, “Why I Am for Hoover.” This letter to his “Fellow Citizens” summarized his reasons for endorsing Hoover:

59 Pittsburgh Courier, September 1, 1928.

60 Unnamed News clippings, No Dates, Church Papers, Box 5, Folder 7.

61 Time Magazine, February 18, 1929.

62 Biles, Memphis, 98.
approach to politics and his frustrations with the GOP. The letter focused more on the racism that existed within the party than on the endorsement for Hoover. Church highlighted the aspirations he had for Republicans, as well as his disappointments. He explains, “Long have I waged war in your name and for our children. I have fought my engagement where unkind men challenge your citizenship. I have stood where man’s inhumanity to man has created an empire of bigotry and I have known deadly and unrelenting fire. I have fled from no battle.” Church continued, “To such of our countrymen, whether wolves dressed in the clothing of sheep as wear them under the banner of the free party or the brigade of boisterous and malodorous braggarts as we see them in array in the slave party…I am content to know, with you, that the reaper gathers only what is sown.”

Church did not immediately reveal his choice in the “Why I Am For Hoover,” letter. He instead allowed readers to understand his reasoning process prior to making the selection. “I write in plain language, not to establish the wisdom of a choice, but to reason it through, since reason alone can hold me up in a day so heavy in disappointments. I wish my thoughts be yours,” Church explained. He discussed his personal dilemma of staying with a party that had tolerated segregation, supported lily-whitism, and refused to put black Republicans in office. He reflected, “I must be plain and dodge no issue. As I thought of them I felt as you feel, saying with you, Why should I continue to stand?” Church acknowledged the problems of the GOP, but based on the record of the Democrats, he could not consider the alternative. The Democratic Party was currently engaged in a battle with the Supreme Court to prohibit black people from

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joining its faction. He then listed the Democrats' record of supporting disfranchisement, unequal education, Jim Crow cars, peonage, attempts to get the word “nigger” in the dictionary, and lynching as reasons why he could not switch affiliations and join their party.

As Church concluded he admitted that, “I am not satisfied with some of Mr. Hoover’s company, but clearly do I see in Mr. Smith’s company the entire array of gentlemen I know who would deny me life, liberty, pursuit of happiness and a chair car for our women to ride in.” He appeared torn in his decision and reflected his own stubbornness as a leader. Within the GOP, Church had always been as much of an agitator as he was a supporter. Although the GOP continued to let him down, Church found “it hard to embrace my enemy, remembering that ‘Greeks often bear gifts.’”

He promised to stand “with the Spirit of Liberty against the Spirit of Slavery.” He rationalized, “I may not be able to right wrongs, but, under God, I can protest them. The Republican party offers us little. THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY OFFERS US NOTHING… Herbert Hoover is the better man of the two.” Although, Smith had a significant black turnout, especially in northern cities, the majority of black voters still shared a fundamental difference with the Democratic Party and could not bolt from the GOP.

Hoover won a landslide victory over Smith. He succeeded in breaking the “solid South” by claiming Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia in the

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64 Ibid.
election. His appeals to white southerners proved to be an effective strategy, and he had no incentive to repair any damage done between the GOP and African Americans. He did not make any promises to African Americans in his inaugural speech or extend any olive branches to their leaders.\textsuperscript{66} Hoover’s administration, more that of any other president of the twentieth century, avoided race issues, and it did not make any concessions for African Americans.

After the inauguration Church made one last appeal to Hoover and encouraged him to live up to the ideals of the "Party of Lincoln." “Hoover will surprise U.S.,” and be “one of the great national leaders.”\textsuperscript{67} He reassured segregationists that African Americans did not want to take over the government, but they did expect to be treated equal. The success of Oscar De Priest, who became the first African American to return to Congress in over twenty years, instilled a sense of optimism in Church. He wanted to give Hoover an opportunity to do right by African Americans. On the contrary, he made his displeasures for one of Hoover’s primary advisers, Horace Mann, clear and recommended that he be removed from office. Church charged Mann, not Hoover, with trying to exterminate black voters from the party.\textsuperscript{68}

About a week after Church announced that “he would devote his life to squelching Col. Horace A. Mann and his attempt to make the Republican party lily-white in the South,” Horace Mann resigned from his position as the southern manager. Newspapers credited Church’s stance for causing the resignation. Mann also

\textsuperscript{66} Sherman, \textit{The Republican Party and Black America}, 233.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Chicago Defender}, March 9, 1928.

\textsuperscript{68} Unnamed News Clipping, No Date, Church Papers, Box 5, Folder 23; Topping, \textit{Lincoln's Lost Legacy}, 16.
relinquished his duties as the patronage dispenser in the South. Unfortunately, for African Americans this was not the sign of a friendlier Hoover Administration. Throughout Hoover’s first year in office he did not send one African American’s name to the Senate for confirmation. In fact he did not appoint a single black person to a meaningful position until March 1930, when he reappointed James Cobb as the municipal judge in Washington D.C.  

Church quietly observed Hoover during his first year in office. As the President continued to pass over African Americans for political offices, Church's resentment grew. Hubert Works’ personal assistant sent a letter to Hoover on behalf of the Republican National Committee during the spring of 1929 pleading with him to reach out to Church. The letter stated that Church worked behind the scenes with the chairman to prevent the defection of black voters from the party. For his role Work’s assistant commented, “no one was more active or gave me more intelligent assistance than Robert R. Church of Memphis, Tennessee.” He told Hoover that Church devoted time and effort to their cause and he “did some of the most intelligent work” on the campaign. Church was also sent a copy of the letter, but Hoover remained unmoved.  

Church was not the only one to notice Hoover's overt lack of respect for the black community. Walter White wrote in the Crisis, “Any Negro who hereafter regards him as a friend of his race or as having even reasonable human respect for it, must have proof which is not in the possession of The Crisis.” He later referred to Hoover as “The Man in

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69 Commercial Appeal, March 10, 1929; Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America, 234.

70 Hubert Works' Assistant to Robert R. Church Jr., May 3, 1929, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 6.
the Lily White House." Church would join his colleagues in their criticisms of the president.  

Church discussed the sentiments of the black community in a letter to the President in November 1929. “Where their hopes had been fondest their sorrow is keenest now and where they had been led to expect the bread of encouragement they have received the stones of contempt,” Church wrote. He informed the president that the black community's disappointment was "universal," and they could not believe a Republican would embrace the practice of disfranchisement and attack their citizenship. Even the administrations of Grover Cleveland, a northern Democrat, and Woodrow Wilson, a southern Democrat, appointed African Americans to federal positions. Church scolded Hoover for excluding “twelve million citizens solely because they do not resemble others in face and feature.”  

Church, although independently wealthy and famous, shared in the collective experience of being black in America. In his correspondence with Hoover he paid homage to his ancestors for their sacrifices to the country. Church also made it clear that he did not want any personal recognition, but he instead wanted African Americans a whole to be treated as citizens. He called the President's attention to the sacrifices of black soldiers and explained that their motivation to fight in wars was not only to protect democracy abroad, but to make a better way for African Americans at home. Church believed the 50,000 dollar memorial being built to honor dead African American soldiers was an empty gesture made by the government to pacify its leaders. Church stated, “The

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72 Robert Church to Herbert Hoover, November 6, 1929, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 6.
dead are safe and their memory is as secure as the story of our nation, but the living are
with us to contend for recognition as citizens. Such recognition as they contend for will
do more to vindicate the sacrifice and honor the valor of our brave dead than all the
monuments loving hands could erect in a country of Congressional indulgence.” Church
concluded his letter by explaining that he did not want the black community’s silence to
be mistaken for consent. Church predicted that black people would not vote for the GOP
in the next election; Democrats who sought “a shelter from the religious storms of the
hour, will leave the Republican party a wreck upon the shores of the political ocean.”

Church’s scathing letter did not motivate Hoover to change his approach to the
race question. Hoover commended the efforts of the lily-whites in Texas, Alabama, and
Florida for appealing to its white citizens and embracing independent Democrats. He
insinuated that southern African Americans associated with the former black-and-tan
parties were no longer welcome in the GOP. Hoover believed the lily-whites would be
the catalyst for the creation of the New South. Hoover totally eliminated the ideal of
the “Party of Lincoln” for most black voters during his tenure.

Hoover appointed virtually no African Americans to meaningful offices. He
voted down a proposal to provide equal spending for African Americans. He refused to
give in to the NAACP’s request to investigate lynching, peonage, disfranchisement, and
discrimination in public accommodations. Perhaps most controversially, he nominated
John J. Parker for the Supreme Court. Parker ran for governor of North Carolina in 1920

73 Ibid.
74 Kenneth Goings, "The NAACP Comes of Age,": The Defeat of Judge John J. Parker
75 Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America, 237-238.
and described the “participation of the Negro in politics” as “a source of evil and danger to both races.”

His support of Parker and the ongoing Great Depression pushed more African Americans out of the GOP and into the seemingly more racially accepting Democratic Party.

By 1931 Church's contempt for the president reached an all-time high. Upon hearing that Church was in Washington D.C., Hoover invited him to the White House to “suggest a tactful reconciliation” with his administration. Hoover wanted to arrange a conference with Church that would “suit his conveniences.” Church simply replied he was “too busy.” One newspaper sarcastically wrote that this should be added to Mr. Ripley’s “Believe it or Not…A Negro refused to see president Hoover.” Church, whom the writer described as “the most powerful single force, in the negro political and financial circles, in the world,” reportedly “lambasted the lily-white leanings of the president,” and told an interviewer after he declined the president’s invitation that “Gentleman, I am here on private business, which is taking up so much of my time I shall not be able to avail myself of your offer.”

Despite Church’s ongoing saga with the president, he still supported him locally during the 1932 campaign, though he restricted his activism to Shelby County. Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party dominated the elections for the next two decades, and along the way they reaped the benefits of the mass exodus of African Americans.

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77 Mid-South Liberator, June 13, 1931, Church Papers, Box 6, Folder 12.
from the "Party of Lincoln." Church, who remained a life-long Republican, ironically found solace in that he helped African Americans find their political voice.\textsuperscript{78}

Church's influence as a leader had peaked in the 1920s. Although he did not win many formal political victories, he still made a very important contribution to the overall black freedom struggle. Church raised the collective consciousness of the nation to the plight of African Americans to the point where their voice could no longer be ignored. The Great Migration forced the majority of African Americans into urban areas and they identified with the dominant political parties in these areas, including the Democrats. By the 1930s, the Democrats were more willing to address the race question. Even after African Americans switched their political affiliation to the Democrats, he never blamed them. He instead blamed the Republicans for forcing African Americans out of the GOP. While he believed that politics presented the best stage to debate the problems in the black community, he also recognized its limitations. Church did not expect whites to automatically see the error of their ways and elect African Americans to offices, but he knew someone had to be an advocate for social change. He embraced that challenge. Church used the national platform of the Republican Party to address nearly every important black movement during the first half of the twentieth century. Grassroots movements that began in the streets of black communities now had a voice in the halls of Washington D.C., and Church was a catalyst for this transition. He chose politics as his vehicle for change, just as others used education, economics, labor, and the legal system

\textsuperscript{78} Biles, "Robert R. Church," 362-382.
as their mode to bring about equality. It is their collective efforts and incremental victories that led to the revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s.⁷⁹

Church’s ability to use the Republican Party as a civil rights tool changed American politics. His stubbornness explained his loyalty to the GOP. He could never get past the history of the Democratic Party. “Above the platform at Kansas City (the Republican National Convention) hung a great picture of Lincoln, but at Houston (the Democratic National Convention)... hung a painting of Robert E. Lee,”⁸⁰ said Church. For Church’s generation, the Democrats remained the party that enslaved their parents. In their eyes, the Republicans represented the party of freedom. It was also the party that enabled their fathers to vote. However, as voters became further removed from slavery, they could grapple better with more traditional political issues, because they did not have the same emotional attachment. They did not have to fight against the violent threats of southern segregationists to the same extent that Church and his constituents did. When black people began to leave the South and settle in northern cities, they found out that they had political options.

James Weldon Johnson described how the Republican Party did not have the nerve to get rid of the black vote. Nor did the Democrats want their support. “The Negro is literally the bête noire of both parties,” he wrote.⁸¹ Church, too, recognized this

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⁷⁹ Biles, "Robert R. Church," 362-382; Topping, Lincoln’s Lost Legacy, 1-28; Gilmore, False Friends and Avowed Enemies, 219-238.

⁸⁰ Robert Church to Herbert Hoover, November 6, 1929, Church Papers, Box 3, Folder 6; Weiss, Farewell to the Party of Lincoln, 12-33; Gilmore, False Friends and Avowed Enemies, 219-238.

position, but did not believe black people should just accept being disliked by both
parties and remain silent. He used politics to challenge the hypocrisy of the Constitution,
teaching African Americans that if they wanted to bring about fundamental change, it had
to be done through the vote. Church described his political philosophy to a graduate
student at Ohio State University in 1935. "Thus far the negroes political influence has
been small,” but that it was important to keep “an active Negro constituency in the
Republican Party…to arouse the masses of colored Americans to a consciousness of the
potency of the ballot, and use it most effectively.” Church understood why black voters
turned to the Democrats and explained that he never intended for “all Negroes to be
Republicans, but that the majority of negroes become politically alive.” Both black
Democrats and black Republicans wanted the same thing, equality. Whichever party
could grant them more equal standing in America was who African Americans would
align with. Whether it was the Republicans in the South, the Democrats in the North, or
Communists in Alabama, African Americans defined these parties on their own terms.
Black politics centered on being included in American society. The platforms for black
Republicans and Democrats called for the federal government to protect their civil rights
in America. Therefore, when African Americans defected from the GOP, Church
recognized they still shared the same vision for racial uplift. He admitted that he believed
the “Negro is fundamentally Republican, both out of tradition and circumstances,” and
that black Democrats are “merely back-sliding Republicans beguiled by ephemeral
promises, or moved by a childish recalcitrance.” In regards to some black voters
rebelliously joining the Democrats, Church concluded that he “has no objection to the
Negro voter applying the rules of expediency in the matter of casting his ballot.” His main objective always remained moving the race forward.  

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Epilogue

The Memphis Blues

"LET' ER BURN," was the caption that read under the disturbing image of the Church family home afire. In the Commercial Appeal, the eighteen-room, nineteenth century mansion, where Church was born, stood in a veil of black smoke. The second caption in the newspaper showed the Memphis Fire Department extinguishing the fire, leaving behind the image of the house's charred remains. However, the firefighters had not rushed to the scene to save the house that stood as a monument of black success for nearly a century. Instead, they played the role of arsonists. The Fire Department wanted to test a new fog nozzle being introduced at the National Fire Instructors' Conference. The Church family home was deemed expendable, because it was "in a slum clearance area." Over “1,400 visiting fire prevention experts and several thousand spectators,” watched as flames leapt fifteen to twenty feet in the air.1 Firemen then surrounded the house and "snuffed it out in a matter of seconds." The roughly two-inch nozzle created a fog-like blanket of steam vapor to quickly smother the flames. The Fire Department used about 9,000 gallons, instead of the nearly 75,000 gallons necessary to extinguish a fire of that magnitude. For the firefighters, the fog nozzle technique was deemed a success. While the black community watched as water trickled from the ruins.2

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1 Pittsburgh Courier, May 3, 1952; Commercial Appeal, February 27, 1953.
Boss Crump authorized the burning of the Church residence as an attempt to erase the family’s legacy from the city. He hated Church for all that he accomplished and he did not want any reminders of his black contemporary. Church served as a delegate from Tennessee at eight consecutive Republican national conventions from 1912 to 1940. His mentee, George Washington Lee, estimated that Church was responsible for the federal appointments of more African Americans than any other “colored American” in history with the possible exception of Booker T. Washington. In Memphis, very few African Americans exceeded his popularity. “Thousands of them never seen him in person,” wrote Walter Adkins. "An equal number have never had an occasion for personal contact. Many have dealt with him only to become more deeply impressed, and depart to increase with their comment his mythical importance." The black community appreciated his consistency as a leader. He did not present himself as an expert on all issues in the black community, but he supported those who seemed genuine in the pursuit for equality. Church’s political perspective centered on the idea of moving the race forward and he put all of his energies into this cause. Even though he made mistakes along the way, his intentions cannot be questioned. Church’s devotion to negotiating better opportunities for African Americans won the admiration of his supporters and enraged his enemies.3

The 1930s and 1940s presented new challenges for Church. He faced personal, economic, and professional hardships throughout the decade. The Lincoln League disbanded, and Church never campaigned for the GOP as vigorously as he did in the 1920s. His relationship with Boss Crump became strained during the Democrats’ twenty

year reign in Washington D.C. Yet through it all, Church remained resilient. He did not allow his personal setbacks or the ongoing migration of African Americans to the Democratic Party to discourage on his outlook on the political scene. In fact, he viewed the current political trend with an “appreciative eye.” Although he remained an admired leader, his relevance began to fade, as witnessed in his diminished role as a federal patronage dispenser. Church strategically used his position to place individuals, white or black, in positions that would benefit the black community. For example, during the 1920s nearly eighty percent of Memphis's mail carriers were black, thanks to Church’s ability to select postmasters in the area. By the 1930s, whites regained the majority. His diminished role in the city prompted more unwarranted attacks on his character than he had ever experienced. Local whites had forgotten about previous relationships they had established, as they too worked to undermine him as a leader.4

Church had his fair share of racist encounters throughout his career, but they usually revolved around politics. He had avoided much of the typical day-to-day racism that the majority of black people faced, dating back to his childhood, when his father went to extreme lengths to protect him from any form of Jim Crow. An incident that demonstrates Church’s waning influence in Memphis occurred in July 1933. Two white motorcycle policemen pulled Church over for driving recklessly down Mississippi Avenue in Memphis. Church took exception with the two officers and expressed his discontent. The policemen then told Church that “he thought he was hard boiled,” or superior to them, and arrested him. Church was later released on his own recognizance and a hearing was scheduled for later that week. In court, the Assistant City Attorney,

Julius Alperin, asked for the case to be dismissed due to the officers’ mismanagement of the situation. Commissioner Clifford Davis, who Church had previously campaigned for to become city judge, stated based on an investigation that Church had not been driving recklessly. The policemen admitted that they did recognize Church and refused to repeat the statements they made to him during the arrest after they learned of his identity. The court threw the case out, and the officers were said to have made a “boneheaded play.” Regardless of the police officer's intentions, his arrest would prove to be a sign of more bad times to come in his hometown.\(^5\)

Whites seized the opportunity to curb Church’s power locally during the FDR years. John McCall, who lost as the Republican candidate for governor in 1932, issued a statement that he intended to “rid the people of Tennessee and the Republican party of the iniquitous influence of Bob Church, and to take from his hand the power to again betray the Republican Party as he has done so many times in the past.”\(^6\) He threatened to not run again in the Republican primary for governor if Church won recognition at the upcoming state convention. At the state convention in Chattanooga, white Republicans “nailed Bob Church to the Cross,” continuing their attacks on him.\(^7\) Local whites felt more comfortable in their criticisms of the former “roving dictator of the Lincoln belt.” Although Church maintained relationships with the elite white leaders of the GOP, it meant little on locally since the Democrats held the power in Washington D.C. In previous Republican administrations Church could use his connections with national

\(^5\) *Kansas City Plain Dealer*, July 14, 1933, and July 28, 1933; Biographical Information on Robert Church Jr., Church Papers, Box 6, Folder 45.

\(^6\) *Kansas City Plain Dealer*, May 18, 1934.

\(^7\) Ibid., May 25, 1934.
policy-makers to secure basic concessions for his fellow black and white colleagues. He could help Republicans that were somewhat sympathetic to the causes of the Democrats. Church no longer had this ability during the FDR years and became useless to the white Democrats who had tolerated him during his most influential years. Church managed to fight off the lily-whites and maintain control of the Shelby County Republicans throughout the decade; however, his position had little impact on the city.\(^8\)

His adverse relationship with the white community could be an expected consequence of his diminished role as a national leader. However, his refusal to leave the GOP influenced his relationship with the black community and most notably the NAACP. Walter White had just been named the executive secretary of the NAACP in 1931. White’s contribution to the early civil rights movement cannot be understated, but his abrasive personality caused conflict within the organization. W.E.B. Du Bois served as his most vocal critic despite, ironically, recruiting White to the organization. Du Bois expressed his dislike for him soon after White joined its staff in 1918. When Johnson stepped down from his position as Field Secretary, Du Bois courted Roy Wilkins, then the editor of the *Kansas City Call*, to replace Johnson as the head of the NAACP. Despite Dubois’s effort, the NAACP Board of Directors named White to the position. Almost immediately after his hiring, the two ego driven leaders argued about the direction of the *Crisis*. Du Bois began writing about achieving self-sufficiency through segregation, and White was a full supporter of integration. This conflict led Du Bois to suggest that White’s views on integration reflected his own self-hatred and publicly

criticized his relationship with the Roosevelts. Members of the NAACP’s executive board then censored Du Bois and created a rule that forbade paid NAACP officers from writing critical articles about the organization. Du Bois could not have his voice silenced and resigned from the NAACP in 1934. Dubois, who had his share of personality flaws, would not be alone in his rivalry with White.⁹

Church had a good relationship with White that dated back to when White stayed at Church’s home to investigate the Ell Persons lynching. The two corresponded regularly and collaborated on several NAACP projects, but Church disliked how White inherited his position. Church believed that NAACP executives mistreated his friend, James Weldon Johnson, and forced him to resign. At the time Church still held a position on the board of directors. In reaction to Johnson leaving the organization, Church sent a letter of resignation to White to take effect at the expiration of his term. He wrote White in January 1932, two days prior to the annual meeting, to express his reasons for leaving the position. “I was the first member elected to the Board from the South, and I was elected at a time, when the Association was not popular in this section. I accepted the place only because I thought my going on the Board might give courage to other Southern men and women to join the Association,” explained Church. “The Association is now a fixture, and I do not see any other helpful thing I can do by remaining a member

of the Board.” Church ended his tenure as an executive member but remained active with
the organization.  

One week later Church reached out to Roscoe Simmons. He told Simmons that
he had been a proud member of the Board, but “frankly I just got tired of being tied up
with some of the people connected with it.” Church asked Simmons to write a story
about his resignation in the newspaper to avoid any rumors as to why he quit: “The truth
is I am out and I want the people to know it.” Three weeks later the Defender made his
resignation public. Simmons mentioned that Church did not leave as a result of the
recent NAACP support of FDR, but he did comment on the dismissal of Johnson. By
getting his story out first, Church thought he had avoided any controversies. However,
White took exception with a comment that Church made about Johnson and published a
rebuttal the following week. Usually when Church went to the papers, he did not have to
worry about his detractors challenging him, especially in the Chicago Defender.
However, it was a new day and White had ascended to the top of black leadership by the
1930s. He wanted to protect the reputation of the NAACP.  

Under the headline, “Mr. White Objects,” the head of the NAACP asked that the
newspaper issue a correction in regards to Church’s reasoning for leaving the
organization. He prefaced his statement by saying he wanted to address the article from
two weeks ago because it did an “injustice to my friend, Robert R. Church of Memphis,
and, by implication, does harm to James Weldon Johnson and to the NAACP.” He stated

10 Robert Church Jr. to Walter White, November 18, 1931 and January 2, 1932, Papers of
Roscoe Conkling Simmons, Box 2, Lincoln League Folder, Harvard University Archives, Pusey
Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

11 Robert Church Jr. to Roscoe Conkling Simmons, January 9, 1932, Roscoe Conkling
Simmons Papers, Box 2, Robert Church Jr. Correspondences Folder; Chicago Defender, January
30, 1932.
that Church’s resignation had nothing to do with the controversial John J. Parker confirmation case or his connection with the white senators that voted for Parker. White explained that Church had not been able to attend the board meetings in a number of years. He then notified the public that the board recommended that his place be filled by newspaper editor William Allen White. “The association’s activities in no way entered into Mr. Church’s decision so far as we know.”

Church countered with a letter addressed “Mr. Walter White, etc.” Church told White that he found his article in the Defender interesting in view of the facts. “Maybe I ought to appreciate the spirit of it, but I am confused by its discrepancies,” wrote Church. White’s commentary suggested that the NAACP’s executive members had already made the decision to remove Church from the board of directors and named his replacement prior to his resignation. The letters he received from the organization officials, including NAACP Treasurer Mary White Ovington, expressed their gratitude for his service. Church believed that White wanted to skew the facts to protect the image of the NAACP. The perception that one of the primary persons who built the NAACP into the preeminent civil rights organization had been ousted could be damaging to the organization’s public image.

Church felt betrayed by White and other members of the NAACP. He told Simmons, “no one has ever intimated to me that my name had been question.” Church questioned the validity of White’s story. He believed that White was only reacting to Church’s initial comments in the Defender. White then wrote Church again and declared,

12 Chicago Defender, February 13, 1932.

13 Mary White Ovington to Robert Church Jr., January 15, 1932, Roscoe Conkling Simmons Papers, Box 2, Robert Church Jr. Correspondences Folder; Robert Church Jr. to Walter White, Undated, Roscoe Conkling Simmons Papers, Robert Church Jr. Correspondences Folder.
“Perhaps our letter to the *Chicago Defender* was not clear.” White explained once more that he wanted to clear up the implication that Church resigned from the NAACP due to personal grievances. Church shared the letter with Simmons and stated that Walter White's intentions were perfectly clear, “he wanted to convey one idea…that William White was elected before I resigned.” He then warned that if White went to the *Defender* again, then he would publish all of the letters that White wrote him expressing his regrets for Church’s resignation. James Weldon Johnson told Church in Nashville that he did not know anything about him being replaced, but he thought that White “wanted to get some more publicity on the Parker case.” Regardless of White’s intentions, Church made it a point in his letters to highlight his accomplishments within the organization. In many ways Church's letters reflect a leader in transition. He seemed to struggle with the idea that the NAACP executives did not do more to convince him to stay. So he became somewhat defensive and grew consumed with protecting his legacy. Church’s fallout with White stood as a turning point in his career.14

However, the White controversy would pale in comparison to his dispute with Boss Crump. For years Bob Church supplied the “brown screws in the Crump Machine.” Church played a vital role in the Crump Machine not only because of his influence among black Memphians, but also due to his connections with national Republicans. As a patronage dispenser, Church had the power to appoint local Republicans who had sensitivity towards the Democrats. “A hostile federal judge o[r] district attorney could

14 Robert Church Jr. to Walter White, February 6, 1932, Roscoe Conkling Simmons Papers, Box 2, Robert Church Jr. Correspondences Folder; Walter White to Robert Church Jr., February 17, 1932, Roscoe Conkling Simmons Papers, Box 2, Robert Church Jr Correspondences; Robert Church Jr. to Roscoe Conkling Simmons, February 21, 1932, Roscoe Conkling Simmons Papers, Box 2, Robert Church Jr. Correspondences Folder; *Chicago Defender*, February 13, 1932.
make life very unpleasant for the Democratic organization, but as long as a friendly Church supervised these selections, the Crump machine could operate with immunity,” wrote Roger Biles. With FDR in office, the Crump machine reached its maturity and was no longer reliant on the black vote. Crump had no desire to maintain a relationship with the other boss in the city. Crump’s candidates won numerous landslide victories throughout the decade, and it did not make sense to court African American support.

The political situation, combined with the economic pressures of the Great Depression, changed race relations in Memphis. Whites used race violence as a tool to intimidate blacks from pursuing the scant number of jobs available. Police brutality and cases of “negro-baiting” increased dramatically. Prior to the 1930s Crump did not tolerate these type of actions in his city. Once the black vote meant nothing to Crump, it shaped the entire black community. Black Memphians had to eventually appeal to Attorney General Frank Murphy after the police attempted to kill a black union organizer by the name of Tom Watkins. They complained that their basic civil rights and liberties had been violated, “aided and abetted by the city administration and the police force.” Robert Church organized a silent protest and urged black people not to vote in the 1938 gubernatorial election in reaction to the increased violent acts against the black community. His protest further strained an already fragile relationship.16

The two political bosses reverted back to their fundamental adversarial positions. “Edward H. Crump brought to Memphis many of the paternalistic racial attitudes

15 Roger Biles, Memphis in the Great Depression (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 103 - 104.

common to the southern white planter class,” wrote Biles. Crump embodied the feelings of southern segregationists, but he also took the responsibility of granting black people certain amenities. Crump seemed to look at Church as ungrateful for all that he had done for the black community. He felt as responsible for Church’s success as anyone else. When Church organized the informal protest against his candidates, Crump felt betrayed. He then launched a campaign to ruin Church. He found numerous code violations on Church’s real estate holdings. As soon as Church made repairs, Crump would find other issues for him to fix. Roberta Church reminisced, “it was one constant thing after another, so that you always had to be spending money for repairs.”

Crump’s political machine had finally matured in the 1930s. Crump, now in complete political control, took an apparent jab at leaders like Church in the city after a local black newspaper approached him about an advertisement. He commented, “I wouldn’t put an ad in that paper – you have a bunch of niggers teaching social equality, stirring up social hatred. I am not going to stand for it. I’ve dealt with niggers all my life and I know how to treat them.”

For years Crump provided tax exemptions for Church’s real estate holdings in exchange for the black vote. Most of Church’s properties had been technically delinquent since 1915. Now a disgruntled Crump decided to collect the back taxes on the properties.

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17 Roberta Church, interview by Charles Crawford, transcript, 10 July 1972, Number 2, pp. 2-3, Mississippi Valley Collection, McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

18 James C. Dickerson to Robert Church Jr., October 30, 1940, Edward Meeman Papers, Box 6, Folder E.H. Crump (Misc.), Mississippi Valley Collection, McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN (quoted from Biles), “Robert Church,” 371); Biles, ”Robert Church Jr.,” 378.

19 Commercial Appeal, February 11, 1940.
The changes that occurred throughout the 1930s affected Church beyond politics. Although the Democratic Party crippled Church politically, it ironically allowed him to be more radical in his leadership style. As he became increasingly irrelevant, Church did not concern himself with upsetting the powerful politicians in Washington D.C. He could voice his opinion with little consequences. Church had “nothing to lose.” He recognized that it did not make sense to maintain the façade of a political alliance with Crump, so he officially severed his ties with the Bluff City’s political boss. Besides leading the protest against Walter Chandler in 1938, Church openly campaigned for Wendell Willkie, the Republican presidential candidate in 1940, to the displeasure of Crump. Crump hated Willkie after the candidate made comments about how he did not want Crump or other political bosses associated with his campaign. Church did not waver in his support for Willkie, even after the city chancery court threatened to confiscate his properties. Church ignored the warning and refused to accept loans from to settle his debt. While Church was out of town the city seized eleven of his properties and sold them at a tax auction.20

Church’s stance and refusal to accept loans ultimately led to him, Roberta, and Annette relocating to Chicago. Crump’s machine had finally rid the city of his black political equivalent. Church continued to challenge Crump from a distance through his lieutenant George W. Lee, but Lee never had the impact that Church had on local politics. Losing his properties in the auction, combined with the effects of the Great Depression, caused the family some financial instability. The Churches still owned properties in Memphis, Chicago, and Washington D.C. Though Crump certainly held the upper-hand

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20 Wendell Willkie to Robert Church Jr., Church Papers, Box 6, Folder 55; *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, February 10, 1940; *Commercial Appeal*, February 11, 1940.
in local politics, he did not remove Church from the city until the second decade of Democratic dominance. Church, for his part, could have acquiesced to Crump’s demands and maintained the *modus vivendi* he enjoyed when he did not have to pay his taxes. However, he opted to challenge Crump. The black community’s native son had finally chosen to bid Memphis adieu and to shape local politics from afar.\(^1\)

Church spent the last decade of his life reminding Republicans that black people had left the GOP due to its own shortcomings, but he lacked the fervor of the 1920s. However, his last considerable effort as a leader can be gleaned in his support of the socialist labor leader, A. Philip Randolph. Randolph was one of Church’s closest friends. Publicly the two could not appear more different, but privately they shared the same vision of securing equal rights for black people. Their correspondence provides a lens into the complexity of Church’s leadership style. Despite Church’s elite status he remained sympathetic to the causes of the black masses. He shared a collective identity with all African Americans. Privately, he expressed his anger with whites more vehemently. Church befriended Randolph because he believed in his mission. He never tried to convert him to a Republican and accepted his more radical political identity. Randolph communicated directly with, and on behalf of, the working-class, while Church used his membership in the black elite to negotiate with the country’s most prominent black and white political leaders. Their goal remained the same, however, and they

\(^{1}\) Biles, "Robert Church Jr.", 379; Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee*, 126.
would use each other to create a more representative approach to leadership from behind the scenes.  

After Church defeated the lily-whites in 1928, Randolph wrote, “Through matchless courage and inflexible determination you have practically routed the “crackers” who were your enemies in Memphis…Your work there is truly an expression of the New Negro spirit, and I am sure that all Negroes with pride of race are fully appreciative of this work.”

Randolph watched his friend battle countless times against local lily-whites and later Edward Crump. He, too, engaged in a public rift with the Memphis boss. In November 1943, he was supposed to deliver an address for the Memphis chapter of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car porters and Crump forbade him from speaking in his city. The Boss told the newspapers that no outsiders would be permitted to speak in Memphis. Randolph then declared that Crump acted like a dictator. “The statement by E.H. Crump reads like a page from Hitler’s Mein Kampf,” said Randolph. He would later say that Crump was a fascist and he “out Hitler’s, Hitler.” The nearly yearlong saga was just a taste of what Church endured every day in the Bluff City. Randolph, who did not have to be concerned about feeling the wrath of Crump, took the opportunity to confront him in a manner that Church could not. As Randolph engaged in

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23 A. Philip Randolph to Robert Church Jr., August 6, 1928, Church Papers, Box 9, Folder 4.
a war of words with Crump, he solicited his friend’s help to start a new movement to protect African American workers.24

Randolph wrote Church to inform him of his plans to make Executive Order 8802, or the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), into a permanent legislation. The FEPC prevented discriminatory practices in employment during World War II. In November 1943, he asked Church to be a member of the National Council for a Permanent FEPC (PFEPC). Randolph wanted to ensure that African Americans would maintain the basic right of equal opportunity employment after the war ended and beyond. The following year Randolph officially founded the organization and began his crusade. Church fought relentlessly alongside Randolph for nearly a decade to secure the passing of the legislation. In 1946, Randolph asked Church to set up conferences with Republican congressmen, most notably Robert Taft, to urge support for the legislation. He wanted Church to also get the support of congressmen who would be willing to “break filibusters and committee logjams.”25 The PFEPC also named Church as a member of the Board of Directors in December 1946 to help formulate plans for the upcoming Congressional session. Congress stalled on introducing the bill, but in 1948 Harry Truman announced that he supported the legislation in an attempt to secure the black vote. After years of hard work the bill's chances seemed promising, but in February 1949 a Senate filibuster prevented the passing of the legislation.26

24 Chicago Defender, November 13, 1943 and November 27, 1943; Laurie Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 73-75.

25 Pfeffer, A. Philip Randolph, 100.

26 A Philip Randolph to Robert Church Jr., November 18, 1943, Church Papers, Box 6, Folder 53; A. Philip Randolph to Robert Church Jr., December 3 1946, Box 9, Folder 4; Alan
Despite the letdown, Church followed Randolph’s lead and continued to advocate on behalf of the black working-class. Church, who reached out to U.S. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., who wrote back that, “it has set back the cause of civil rights at least two years, if not more.”\(^\text{27}\) Unfortunately, the majority of Democrats and Republicans did not find the measure necessary. The NAACP and Roy Wilkins, who had been ardent supporters of the bill since the beginning, no longer found it a priority heading into the 1950s. A frustrated Randolph wrote Church that he wished he “had about a half dozen people as sincerely committed to the fight for civil rights and FEPC as you are, we would get somewhere.” He continued, “Negroes especially have go to raise some hell in this country in order to get their rights.”\(^\text{28}\)

Church challenged Republicans to include the PFEPC on their national platform. Church wrote a member of the Republican National Committee and stated that the “Republican Party promised FEPC in its platforms of 1944-1948. There is no other issue, Anti-Lynch, Anti-Poll Tax, or Anti anything else, at the present time, that the Colored Electorate, are as interested in, as they are in FEPC. To them, it is the greatest issue since Slavery.”\(^\text{29}\)

Heading into the 1952 election, Church endorsed Republican candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower for president, because he believed Eisenhower to be more favorable towards

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\(^{27}\) Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. to Robert Church Jr., March 19, 1949, Church Papers, Box 9, Folder 4.

\(^{28}\) A. Philip Randolph to Robert Church Jr., April 12, 1949, Church Papers, Box 9, Folder 4.

\(^{29}\) Robert Church Jr. to C. Mason Owlett, April 1, 1949, Church Papers, Box 9, Folder 4.
Church embarked on a mission to return the White House to the GOP. In order to accomplish this task, he returned to the city that he left over a decade ago. Church had visited Memphis numerous times since Crump forced him out of the city, but this time he looked to reestablish himself as a local leader. He became angry with Lieutenant George Lee for “selling out the race” by supporting the more conservative wing of the party. He had returned to Memphis “seeking to reclaim his power in the local party.”

Church stayed at the Lumpkin Hotel on the corner of Third and Vance. On April 17, 1952, he sent Congressman B. Carroll Reece a telegram to express his displeasure that Reece endorsed the more conservative candidate, Robert Taft, for president. He told Reece that there was “absolutely no sentiment here among colored Republicans for Senator Taft.” Church explained his position and ended his letter by stating, “I have the satisfaction of knowing that I have told you.”

He seemed like he was making peace with himself. To the end, Church fought with the GOP’s highest ranking members. Later that afternoon, Church called Thornton Matthew, “the Mayor of Beale Street,” from his hotel room and suddenly began to gasp for air. Matthew heard Church struggling on the other end of the phone and called the hotel office. Frank Scott, a black undertaker, arrived at the hotel and found Church alive but leaning back in a chair. Church, true to his stubborn self, refused to let Scott call a doctor. He collapsed. An ambulance carried Church to John Gaston Hospital where he was pronounced dead. Church, perhaps fittingly, died in the city where he had spent practically his entire life.

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31 Robert Church Jr. to B. Carroll Reece, April 17, 1952, Church Papers, Box 10, Folder 1.
“Robert R. Church and Memphis were synonymous,” proclaimed the *Pittsburgh Courier*.  

Roberta and Annette left Chicago for Memphis. On April 20, 1952, the family held the funeral service at T.H. Hayes & Sons Funeral Home. Reverend St. Julian A. Simpkins, Jr. of the Emmanuel Episcopal Church presided over the funeral. Approximately 600 people paid their last respects to the political leader. His old friend and colleague Henry Lincoln Johnson read telegrams sent by dozens of people expressing their condolences to the family. After the funeral concluded, Church’s body was taken to the Elmwood Cemetery and interned in the family mausoleum.

The “Gentleman From Memphis” had moved from a local leader into the pantheon of black leadership during the first half of the twentieth century. He inherited a life of privilege and could have easily chosen to avoid the problems most African Americans faced. However, he shared in the collective struggle to obtain equality for all Americans. Church’s talent made him a national figure. Still, Church chose to remain in the background and let others receive the glory. His career suggests that scholars should look beyond the usual names associated with the black freedom struggle and investigate the local leaders who helped shape their visions and bring it to fruition. Ultimately, his work helped to lay the groundwork for the civil rights movement. Church taught African Americans the power of the ballot. In order to progress, they had to bring their problems

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32 *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 3, 1952; *Kansas City Plain Dealer*, April 18, 1952; *Commercial Appeal*, April 18, 1952. Information on Robert Church Jr.’s death can be found in the Roberta Church Collection, Box 6, Robert Church Jr. Obituary Items, Memphis Room of the Memphis Public Library, Memphis, TN.

33 Various News clippings, Church Papers, Box 10, Folder 9; Robert Church Jr.’s Funeral Program, Church Papers, Box 10, Folder 5; *Chicago Defender*, April 26, 1952.
onto the political scene. His activism went beyond winning elections for select individuals; he looked to change the fundamental structure of American society through political agitation. Church died doing his life’s work. Historians should remember his contributions to the African American struggle.

Despite all of Church’s accomplishments, his legacy was nearly erased from Memphis. In 1940, the city changed the name of Church Park and Auditorium to the “Beale Avenue Park and Auditorium,” an obvious way to divorce the city from its most prominent black family. The city of Memphis would destroy not only his home, but his office on Beale St., as well as the Solvent Savings Banks. His daughter, Roberta, would dedicate much of her life to resurrecting her family’s name and legacy. She also followed her father’s footsteps in the realm of politics. She, along with notable Memphian Ronald Walters and historian Charles Crawford, played an important role in obtaining historical markers to commemorate these sites and honor the Church’s legacy in the city. The family name has also been restored at the park on Beale. Robert Church Reed Church Jr. was a giant among black leaders. “He was at all times a party man,” summed up Roy Wilkins, yet “He never was a slave to party policies. He did not follow blindly. From the beginning to the end he was a critic when criticism was indicated, and a strategist who did not hesitate to press his points upon the powers in the party.” Through a long series of battles against Jim Crow, tenuous alliances with Boss Crump and the Republican Party, and leadership of the black community in Memphis, "he paid his way and spoke his piece.”

34 Roy Wilkins, The California Eagle, April 24, 1952.
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