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THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN THE  
CITY OF MEMPHIS, 1860-1870

by

Nicholas Joseph Kovach

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Major: History

The University of Memphis

May 2012

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Ronald Joseph Kovach,  
my mother, Linda Marie Ireland,  
and my niece, Emily Elizabeth Hilkert.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Arwin Smallwood, for his guidance, patience, and support. Without him, this thesis could truly not have been written. I would also like to thank Dr. Aram Goudsouzian and Dr. Charles Crawford for their valuable insight and support. Finally, I would like to give a special thanks to Dr. Richard Rupp for the initial spark that inspired me to become a historian.

## **ABSTRACT**

Kovach, Nicholas Joseph. M.A. The University of Memphis. May 2012. The African American Experience in Memphis, 1860-1870. Major Professor: Dr. Smallwood.

This is a study of African Americans in Memphis, Tennessee. The primary focus is on the transition from slavery to freedom, 1860-1870, and how the changing social structure affected and was influenced by African American agency.

City, county, federal and state records were used. Specifically, the Memphis Public Library, University of Memphis Special Collections, and Shelby County Archives served as sources of information. Additionally, a comprehensive bibliography of secondary sources was examined and utilized.

Unique conditions existed in Memphis. Since its founding, extremely oppressive conditions existed for slaves and free people of color, which created a resonating struggle for the African American community. Control over African Americans came in many forms, including work, education, and other social factors. It has been concluded that too much black agency, rather than strictly race, caused the riots of 1866. After Reconstruction, African Americans were gradually forced into submission by the close of the century.

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## Introduction

The city of Memphis and the surrounding region has a young history, beginning with the city's foundation in the 1820's after the Indian removal. Slaves were separated from husbands, wives, and children from North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia when they were brought here. The rise of the cotton kingdom, from the beginning, traumatized African Americans. Black labor's sole purpose was to enrich and empower the white community at any cost. The study of labor is still a field not fully utilized by historians to understand African American agency. Not exploring this agency has forced African American history to be told through the eyes of others, which is detrimental to self awareness. "The quest to arrive at a true self-knowledge, in Du Boisian language, has been a long and arduous process that continues to unfold as we speak."<sup>1</sup> Labor history effectively tells the story of the African American struggle to gain control of futures and destinies lorded over since the introduction of Africans to the Americas and which still continues today. However, beginning with Du Bois in 1935, a narrative has emerged that reveals a tumultuous struggle that has not been in vain. Works began emerging that revealed an active resistance to slavery.<sup>2</sup> The Civil War and Reconstruction became a turning point in African American history where, en mass, African Americans began to gain ownership of personal destiny.

Historians have asked several questions to better understand the repercussions of Reconstruction and how those have affected the state of racial affairs in modern times in

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<sup>1</sup>Michael A. Gomez, "Of DuBois and Diaspora: The Challenge of African American Studies, *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 35, NO. 2, (Nov., 2004), p 182.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Knopf, 1956).

many parts of the South. Eric Foner provides a sweeping understanding of Reconstruction from multiple perspectives, demonstrating a comparison of Reconstruction in the United States to those of other slave-centered colonies such as Haiti and eastern Africa.<sup>3</sup> Steven Hahn presents a study of African American political traditions which emerged out of slavery and provides a brief overview of rural former slaves' political and social aspirations and tactics in comparison with their urban counterparts.<sup>4</sup> Joseph P. Reidy provides insight into the origins of paid labor in plantation life.<sup>5</sup> Yet these works spend little time investigating the unique conditions African Americans faced within the city of Memphis.

Labor history as a means to understand the African American experience in the United States began with *The Black Worker*, by Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris. The central thesis of *The Black Worker* lays responsibility on the unions and union members for discrimination against African American workers since emancipation. "The discrimination which the Negro suffers in industry is a heritage of his previous condition of servitude, kept alive and aggravated within the ranks of organized labor by the structure and politics of American trade unionism."<sup>6</sup> This seminal work paved the way for works such as Eric Arnesen's *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class and Politics, 1863-1923*. Arnesen frames his writing in a chronological narrative to

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<sup>3</sup>Eric Foner, *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983).

<sup>4</sup>Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, From Slavery to the Great Migration*. (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup>Joseph P. Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup>Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), xv.

effectively argue his contention that the relationships between black and white workers were complex: “Workers’ experiences were not determined by abstract categories of race and class but instead reflected their positions within both the class and racial hierarchies in urban southern society.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, he concludes, biracial labor unions, while not able to end racism, nonetheless created a bridge between blacks and whites and thus race cannot be seen as the sole reason for the decline in union power and control of the labor supply. His work is a shining example of the insight and different questions which are raised when combining African-American history and labor history. While these historians asked important questions about African American labor, they do not fully explain conditions in Memphis, a city completely dependent on the cotton industry and never fully industrialized before the twentieth century.

With new directions in understanding Reconstruction and black labor, a different narrative has developed that demonstrates a conflict within the African American community in the New South, rather than a consensus, and a perception that African Americans as slaves and then as free workers were active actors and not beholden to history occurring around them without participating. Yet scant attention has been paid to Memphis, one of the first major cities to be occupied by Federal troops during the Civil War in the first state to be reinstated to the Union. African American oppression in the City of Memphis and in particular, African American agency, has been overshadowed or even ignored for too long and, consequently, a full understanding of the city, of the South, of the institution of slavery, and of current race relations in the South cannot be thoroughly understood.

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<sup>7</sup>Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class and Politics, 1863-1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xi.

In order to better understand African American history and thus American history, the events during Reconstruction in one of the Mississippi River's most important cities must be examined in further detail. Examining African American labor in Memphis is necessary to deepen the understanding of empowerment and agency and the reactions to this from white society. Understanding 'labor' as what service a worker can provide, namely their manpower, creates a deeper understanding of race relations through the struggle between workers and those who control the means of production (capitalists) to control the social order. This thesis will demonstrate the evolution of African American labor in the city of Memphis from 1860 to 1870, showing that economic empowerment and control of African American labor occurred in four parts which were reflected in pre-war conditions, during the Civil War (first as workers, then as soldiers), and then under Radical Reconstruction which was propelled by the riots of 1866. The final phase of African American labor evolution in Memphis would come full circle in the social order of the 'New South', which is arguably still in place today.

Chapter One will answer the question of what life was like in Memphis for the slaves on the surrounding plantations and the tiny number of free African Americans in the city at the dawn of the war. Understanding what jobs were held to earn a living, what those living conditions were like, who was free, how free people fit in the overall demographics of the city, and what restrictions African Americans faced before the war will help set the stage for conditions during and after Reconstruction. Further, where African Americans were migrating from during and after the war is important to help understand what impending problems and situations the city would encounter under Federal occupation and the dawn of the New South.

Chapter Two discusses the second phase of African American labor, which developed in two parts during the Civil War. As thousands of slave refugees fled from the surrounding plantations and into the city, Memphians and the Union Army were faced with a new set of challenges. The former slaves saw the Union Army as a means to finding their freedom and new ideas of labor and work. The Union Army initially put refugees to work as general laborers who fortified the city's defenses. African Americans saw this as a new form of empowerment. Eventually, the Army began recruiting black soldiers. African Americans were hopeful that they could not only fight for their freedom, but to also earn a living which would benefit their families and extended networks in the process.

Chapter Three focuses on the riot of 1866, the first major hurdle the city faced. This section examines the demographics of the city at the conclusion of the war and the intentions of the Freedman's Bureau in comparison to the intentions and goals of African Americans. This chapter also examines the new job opportunities and living conditions for African Americans under Federal occupation. The events that led to the riot in May and what happened during the riot demonstrate how Reconstructionists reacted to the violence and what this meant for the city's race relations.

Chapter Four examines the Freedman's Bureau reaction to the violent riots. Hiring trends and job opportunities changed for African Americans after labor contracts were created and enforced by the Bureau, as did business ownership opportunities. In this decade, African American workers and community leaders were beginning to organize themselves and take control of their right to work. With an increase in wealth and personal income, living conditions were also affected. African Americans in

Memphis after the riots realized the idea of freedom, if only briefly: freedom to choose which jobs they held, to improve financial situations, and freedom to watch their children receive a formal education rather than working at a young age.

At the end of Reconstruction, a pattern of oppression began that stifled African American leadership in the community that did not comply with the social order of white control over labor. Beginning shortly after the withdrawal of Union forces, independent African American economic gain was immediately reacted to with violence or forcing community leaders to flee the city. This marks the beginning of the New South. The consequences of these reactions are better understood by examining the new working conditions and jobs available for African Americans in the city and the living conditions that changed as a result.

Understanding the actions of African Americans as actors in this volatile and tumultuous time is crucial to understanding a turning point in African American history; where a once enslaved people began defining themselves and saw, if only for a brief moment, that empowerment is possible and control of their own destinies could actually be realized independently. Resistance to the social order became a never-ending battle. A better understanding of African Americans in Memphis during this era, who were the first generation to taste freedom, helps extend the conversation and understanding of how the nation as a whole adapted to an expanded work force which came to redefine freedom through control of labor and social conditions. Social history in the United States cannot be complete without understanding how labor history shaped the New South in Memphis.

This thesis is only the beginning of understanding a city that historians have paid little attention to in the larger discourse of Reconstruction, African American, and labor

history. African Americans had many other concepts of freedom, including political participation, increases in education, and establishing churches, all of which occurred in Memphis over time, but for the focus of this research paper, special attention will be paid to how freedom was found through labor. The intention of this paper is not only to answer particular questions regarding this field, but to also open the door for many more. Understanding the evolution of African American labor in the city of Memphis between these two decades provides a deeper insight into the conditions that set this city apart from other regions in the South during this time period.

## Chapter I

### Pre-War Conditions in Memphis and the Surrounding Area

Memphis, Tennessee is located on the Mississippi River in between the Ohio River mouth and Natchez, Mississippi. The first inhabitants of the Memphis area were the Chickasaw Indians. The first Europeans to arrive in the area were the Spanish in 1541, led by explorer Hernando DeSoto. A hundred years later, French explorers Fathers Marquette and Joliet travelled down the river through Memphis. In 1739 the French built Fort Assumption. After the French and Indian War in 1763, England took control of the bluffs, although the area was still Chickasaw by treaty. The Indians, French, English, Spanish and the American colonists tentatively coexisted while trading and occasionally fighting until Tennessee became a U.S. territory in 1790, and then a state in 1796. Although this land legally belonged to the Chickasaw Indians, the new settlers would eventually take it over. In 1818 the Chickasaws surrendered their northern territory, including the land that would become the City of Memphis. General Andrew Jackson from the North and South Carolina border, General James Winchester from Maryland, and Judge John Overton of Virginia became the founders of Memphis. The city was surveyed and designed in 1819 and was mapped out in 1820 and incorporated in 1826. At the time Memphis was only four blocks wide and had a population of around fifty people. Marcus Winchester, the General's son, was made the first mayor.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For a general history of the city of Memphis, see: Gerald M Capers, Jr., *The Biography of a River Town* (Memphis, 1966), 78; J.P. Young, *Standard History of Memphis* (Knoxville, Tenn. 1912). While these works provide an understanding of the city's foundation, however, the history of slave and free people of color agency is not discussed.

Its prime location in the heart of cotton country made it one of the largest cotton-exporting cities in the South in less than thirty years. Planters from the Carolinas, Maryland and Georgia began settling the Mississippi River Valley soon after the territory opened. The City of Memphis was the hub of cotton trade before the Civil War and most of the major business and labor were related to this industry. Another major economic industry was slave trading. The influence of the capital gain from this commerce had a direct impact on African American labor in Memphis through shaping the demographic makeup, the restrictions and ordinances put in place, and the forced migration patterns before the war.

The first census taken in Memphis was in 1820 and indicated that there were no free African Americans residing in all of Shelby County at that time. Slave schedules were not recorded until 1850. However, in 1830 there were a total of eighty three free African Americans.<sup>2</sup> By 1840 that number had only increased by sixteen.<sup>3</sup> Between 1840 and 1850, the population swelled from 6,335 to 22,623.<sup>4</sup> There were five wards in Memphis in 1850. The total slave population in Shelby County that same year was reported at 14, 360. 2,362 of that demographic lived and toiled in the City of Memphis.<sup>5</sup> In 1850, the free black population in the city was reported at 125, which consisted of thirty black males, forty-three black females, twenty six male mulattoes and twenty six

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<sup>2</sup>1830 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Roll 181, Schedules of the Fifth Census of the United States, Memphis Public Library. See appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup>1840 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Roll 530, Schedules of the Sixth Census of the United States, Memphis Public Library.

<sup>4</sup>Gerald M Capers, Jr., *The Biography of a River Town* (Memphis, 1966), p. 78; J.P. Young, *Standard History of Memphis* (Knoxville, Tenn. 1912), 92.

<sup>5</sup>1850 Tennessee Slave Population Schedules, Roll 895, of the Seventh Census of the United States, Memphis Public Library. See appendix 2.

female mulattoes. Forty one freed people lived in the Fifth Ward, and the rest were almost evenly distributed throughout Wards one through four.<sup>6</sup> The free black population had only increased by sixty eight people since 1850. In 1860, Shelby County was home to 48,092 people; 30,950 were white, 17,146, or a full one third of the total population, was African American. Of the black population in the county, 16, 268 were slaves, and 687 were free people. The entire free black population in the city of Memphis totaled 193. There were a total of eight wards by 1860. The free population in Memphis consisted of forty three black men, forty three black women, thirty five mulatto men, and seventy two mulatto women.<sup>7</sup> The free people of color were not, however, integrated throughout the city nor did they have any agency in what jobs they could hold. Aside from a few servants who lived in the houses of white bosses in wards one through four and ward eight, most lived in the fifth, sixth and seventh wards.

Of the 193 free black Memphians, only thirty seven lived scattered throughout the first, second, third, fourth and eighth wards, while thirty six resided in the fifth, thirty three in the sixth, and ninety lived in the seventh.<sup>8</sup> The majority of jobs held by free blacks in Memphis before the war were unskilled general labor positions. These figures are remarkable in comparison to other cities in the Southeastern states. For example, in

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<sup>6</sup>1850 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Roll 895, Schedules of the Seventh Census of the United States, Memphis Public Library.; In 1850, the City of Memphis only had five Wards; see also chart in Appendix 3.

<sup>7</sup>1860 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Roll 1273, Schedules of the Eighth Census of the United States, Vol. 18 (1-407), Memphis Public Library; 1860 Tennessee Slave Schedules, Roll 1285, Rhea thru Sullivan Counties, Memphis Public Library; see also "Index to the 1830's, 1840, 1850, 1860 Censuses Indicating Free African Americans in Shelby County Tennessee", Transcribed by Arthur L. Webb, 1990, Memphis Public Library.; for a complete breakdown of free population statistics in the City of Memphis, see chart in Appendix 1.

<sup>8</sup>1860 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Roll 1273, Schedules of the Eighth Census of the United States, Vol. 18 (1-407), Memphis Public Library; See Appendix 3.

Charleston in 1860 there were 1,247 free black males, seventy four percent of whom were skilled artisans.<sup>9</sup> The white citizens of Memphis were seemingly wary of any black population in the city, whether slave or free, and they made efforts to control their main source of labor and wealth, as evidenced by certain local laws that were put into effect.

Prior to the Civil War, very few African Americans in Memphis enjoyed economic freedom, or control over their own labor, and none, either slave or free, experienced any social freedom. In 1849, after the first free African Americans began arriving in Memphis, a peculiar city ordinance surfaced; “Ordinance to prevent the introduction of Negroes within the city of Memphis passed.”<sup>10</sup> Almost from its founding, Memphis had been one of the largest slave trading cities in the South, let alone the region. A law such as this indicates that while slavery as a commodity was acceptable in the city, slaves were still under control of their masters and the free black population was small enough to keep tight social restrictions over to prevent the free African American population from growing. Despite the relatively small population of free people of color in Memphis before the war, several restricting state and local laws limited freedom for African Americans who were not slaves. These laws were designed to restrict the independence of African Americans, whether slave or free.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Herbert G. Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of Time on the Cross*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 53-54.

<sup>10</sup>*Summary of City Council, Board of Health, etc. City of Memphis: Part I 1826-1855* (from here on referred to as *Summary*), Compiled by Municipal Reference Library Memphis, TN, Memphis Public Library, Shelby County Libraries, 109.

<sup>11</sup>See; Eugene D. Genovese “The Slave States of North America”, *Neither Slave nor Free: The Freedmen of African Descent in the Slave Societies of the New World*, David W. Cohen & Jack P. Greene, Eds., (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Free Press, 1972), 258-278.

The labor structure of antebellum Memphis called for total control over black labor and any possible influences that would disrupt the protocol. Therefore, free blacks were required to register themselves with county courts and pay registration fees.<sup>12</sup> This was a means of keeping track of the free people of color population in an attempt to prevent total independence. All African Americans, whether slave or free, were also required to carry a pass when in the city. If a free person was unable to produce these papers on demand or the papers were deemed questionable by the authority, they were detained until further proof or testimony of character could be produced. If no one would testify, then the free person was considered a runaway and arrested.<sup>13</sup> Yet there were also laws to prevent free blacks from interacting with slaves, which explains the potential influence law makers thought free people of color would have on the slave population. For example, in 1850 it was decreed by the Memphis City Council that it was unlawful for slaves to remain in corporate limits of the city after sunset or at all on the Sabbath in the houses of freedmen.<sup>14</sup> African Americans, whether slave or free, were only allowed to worship in white churches as any independent gatherings would strengthen social networks. Further, any large congregations of slaves were banned, which included worship. Any worship had to be done under the supervision of a white person.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 64; See also: Beverly G. Bond and Janann Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 28.

<sup>13</sup>Public Acts of Tennessee, 1831, Chapter 102, Sec. I.; An addendum to this Act, 1842 Chapter 191, Sec. V, stipulated that these passes were to be renewed in county court every three years. At the time of renewal, each person's character was assessed and if deemed objectionable, the papers could be denied renewal. If this was the case, the person had twenty days to leave the state or else be subject to the same penalties under Chapter 102, section I.

<sup>14</sup>*Summary*, 91.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 92.

Therefore, there were no black churches in the city at this time. The purpose of such a law, which prevented free people from interacting with slaves, seems intended to curtail the flow of information and knowledge between the free population and the slave population. Since this social order of white control over black labor was in an ever teetering balance, any threat to its stability was immediately recognized and ended.

In Tennessee courts, free blacks were beholden to the same status as slaves; they could testify against each other, but could not testify in court against a white person.<sup>16</sup> Any labor disputes between African Americans and white bosses therefore could not be taken to court unless the charges were against the black laborer. Free blacks were also beholden to a humiliating curfew; they were given fifteen minutes to reach home after nine pm.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the most alarming of these city ordinances, however, was the very vague law that simply read, “Vagrant Negroes to be punished.”<sup>18</sup> The danger of such a law is that ‘vagrancy’ is never defined, nor is ‘punished’ or who will do the punishing; in other words, this law was left open for wide interpretations.

Police reports show that from 1859 to 1860, arrests of African Americans began increasing shortly before the war. In 1859, 281 African Americans were arrested, 239 were slaves and forty two were free. 112 slaves were arrested in the city for not carrying papers. Thirty one free people of color were arrested for not carrying proper papers. Some men, like Fernando Armstrong and Brutus, were ordered to leave the state,

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<sup>16</sup>Public Acts of Tennessee, 1839 Chapter 41.

<sup>17</sup>*Summary*, 130.

<sup>18</sup>*Summary*, 92.

presumably for not being native Tennesseans, or for not renewing the papers on time.<sup>19</sup> In 1860, 350 African Americans were arrested, sixty eight of whom were free. One hundred thirty four slaves were arrested for not having passes in the city. Of the freemen, fifty were arrested for not carrying proper papers; like Tam Bradshaw, a forty two year old from the seventh ward, or Elsey Southall, an eighty two year old from the sixth ward. The remaining eighteen were arrested for charges ranging from not paying taxes to driving a dray too fast.<sup>20</sup> Such systemic repression is a testimony to the control that was used by a minority population in Tennessee, slaveholders, as a method of dominating the means of workers they could not control in the plantation fields. The system in place throughout Memphis was oppressive and still paternalistic even to those who had gained their freedom from plantation work.<sup>21</sup> However, at the very least, free people of color still had control over the right to work for wages.

Before the war, most free African Americans were limited to few jobs. Women typically worked as domestic servants or washerwomen, while men mostly worked as general laborers or craftsmen, if work was available. While the jobs available were limited, some were able to make decent livings and live independently in their own homes. Elsey Southall, an eighty-two year old washerwoman from Georgia, lived with

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<sup>19</sup>Memphis Police Blotter Station Book 1858-1860, Memphis Tennessee, Shelby County Archives.

<sup>20</sup>Memphis Police Blotter Station Book 1858-1860, Memphis Tennessee, Shelby County Archives.

<sup>21</sup>For detailed accounts of plantation life in the cotton kingdom, see: Susan Eva O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest: Mississippi, 1770-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968).

laborer John Walker and fellow washerwoman Massah Walker and her two daughters, Milley and Frances.<sup>22</sup>

Though the job variety was limited, the pay could lead to a decent living, especially considering the alternative of slavery. Mary Bradshaw and her mother Mariah were able to buy a \$5,000 home and raise Mary's four sons by taking in laundry. Calvin Going, a drayman,<sup>23</sup> and his wife Flora, a washerwoman, were able to save \$400 while raising their daughter Catherine.<sup>24</sup> Living conditions were not always intergenerational or communal. Mat Branch lived alone and worked as a drayman after moving from North Carolina; he had a modest savings of \$150. Tam Bradshaw, a forty two year-old from France, raised his eight year old daughter Rebecca alone and managed to hold a savings of \$1,000 while working as a drayman in the Seventh Ward.<sup>25</sup> Memphis was unique from other Southern cities as there was a resistance to any black population within the city, whether slave or free. The irony is that it was one of the largest slave trading cities in the South and West Tennessee held captive the majority of the slaves in the state. Therefore, the examples above stand as a great testament to the free population in the city of Memphis before the war who managed to take control of their labor and economic freedom despite the strict, oppressive social order that was in place that denied them true and total freedom.

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<sup>22</sup>1860 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Roll 1273, Vol. 18 (1-407), Memphis Public Library.

<sup>23</sup>A drayman is a person who drove a low, strong cart without fixed sides, used to haul goods or carry heavy loads.

<sup>24</sup>1860 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Roll 1273, Vol. 18 (1-407), Memphis Public Library.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.; Tam Bradshaw might be an example of the lingering French and Indian influences in the area over fifty years after they lost control of the territory.

The social balance between a hostile white population and an ambitious free black population seemed to hold as long as the social hierarchy was maintained. In other words, the free black population was allowed to remain free and economically independent as long as they accepted the dominance and social control of the white population. The jobs that were held at this time seem to be approved of by the white community, draymen and washerwomen, were necessary jobs, but were unappealing for most whites.<sup>26</sup> However, some men were able to find skilled work, like Henry Foster, a barber, who raised his newborn son Richard with his wife Mary in Memphis' sixth ward.<sup>27</sup> Harriet Holland, from Mississippi, worked as a dressmaker in the third ward and lived alone. Mr. Chubb made a good living as a blacksmith in the second ward and managed a savings of \$1,600.<sup>28</sup> Most of the jobs in Memphis were tied in one way or another to the cotton industry, either directly or through supporting the cotton trading community, but there was another large industry that Memphis had control of in the mid-South region.

In addition to cotton distribution, another major source of revenue in the city of Memphis was slave trading. Memphis was the largest slave trading city in the mid-South and one of the largest in the South. Some of the largest traders in Memphis were Mr. Nathan Bedford Forrest of the Forrest Negro Mart on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and Adams, and the Bolton, Dickens & Company on Union Ave. Understanding Forrest's role in slave

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<sup>26</sup>It is important to note that many Irish immigrants held similarly unskilled positions, but most white women did not list any job on the census records from 1820-1860. While there were occasionally a few exceptions, most free African American women had to work and were very often living independently of men, something very rarely seen among white women.

<sup>27</sup>1860 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Roll 1273, Vol. 18 (1-407), Memphis Public Library.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

trading and other slave trader's beliefs in the inferiority of African Americans demonstrates that the profession was not merely explained as an economic matter. However, examining the business ventures of the slave traders also provides a sense of where African Americans were coming from and provides a sense of the forced migrations before the war that led to the later migratory patterns afterwards.

Between 1830 and 1860, roughly 575,000 slaves were shipped from states such as Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina known as the 'Upper South' to the 'Lower South' states of Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas. Slaves were brought from Virginia, Missouri, and Kentucky by boat, and from Georgia, East Tennessee, the Carolinas, Alabama and Mississippi by rail.<sup>29</sup> Some slaves were force-marched from these states into the mid-South as it was economically sound and hardly cost a dime in transportation expenses. Traditional narratives mythologize the humanity of Forrest as a slave trader, but reality simply does not support this.<sup>30</sup> Understanding that Forrest was a typical slave trader of his time who became one of the richest in the region allows an understanding that he used brutal tactics in a brutal profession.<sup>31</sup> Further, it also provides an understanding of Forrest's motivations when he became a General for the Confederate Army to carry out its egregious orders in an attempt to preserve this racially

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<sup>29</sup>Gutman, *Slavery* 103; Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 250.

<sup>30</sup>See John W. Green, *Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest*, (1944), John Allen Wyeth, *That Devil Forrest: The Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest*, (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1959).

<sup>31</sup>See Bancroft, *Slave Trading*, chapter XII; Jack Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), Chapter 5.

oppressive and paternal slave system, and it also explains his motivations for his role in forming the Ku Klux Klan who also acted in the name of preserving the old order.<sup>32</sup>

The control of labor and the economic rewards was made possible by enslaving the laborers themselves. By enslaving or completely controlling the laborers, planters were able to maximize profits by dramatically reducing overhead expenses such as salaries. While the black slaves produced great wealth for slave owners, Memphis slave-traders profited from this great need for manpower. Memphis had by far the largest slave trade of the cities in the central South.<sup>33</sup> Although little public record remains in Memphis of Forrest's business activity, a general understanding of his influence and its impact on African American labor can still be found in the surrounding material. In the late 1850's, slaves were worth anywhere from \$950 to \$1,800 a person depending on gender, age, and health. Slave traders averaged a \$300 profit on each person that was sold.<sup>34</sup> Byrd Hill was the largest independent slave-trader in Memphis before Forrest arrived from Mississippi and took Forrest under his wing to teach him the trade. In a few short years, Forrest opened his own company and surpassed Byrd as the largest trader. It is important to note that while the slave trading business was extremely lucrative for traders, there was still a reluctance of the citizens to have too large a slave population within the city limits, as indicated by the city ordinance mentioned earlier.

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<sup>32</sup>For a detailed history of the KKK, see: David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The First Century of The Ku Klux Klan* (Duke University Press, 2003); William Loren Katz, *The Invisible Empire: The Ku Klux Klan Impact on History* (Washington DC: Ethrac Publications Inc, 1986).

<sup>33</sup>Bancroft, *Slave Trading*, 250.

<sup>34</sup>Bolton, Dickens & Company Record of Slaves, 1856-1858 Including Elis, William D, ALS to Z. B. Oaks, dated October 6, 1875, Memphis Public Library.

Forrest and his business partners often employed brutal punishments.<sup>35</sup>

Whippings and forced marches to plantations throughout the region were the most common abuses attributed to all slave traders. However, Forrest biographer Jack Hurst contends, “as horrible as whippings were, they seem to have been considered by both blacks and whites to be of less importance than the separation of families.”<sup>36</sup> Families were being torn apart for profit and spread unwillingly throughout the South. Forrest, like any other slave trader, dealt with his slaves in a brutal manner and often divided families to cater to the varying needs of his clients. In 1933 Mary Herndon of Williams Avenue recalled her experience of being bought and sold by Forrest. Mary was born in ‘Indian territory’ where she had been kidnapped and brought to Cameron, Missouri. There, a local sheriff bought her and she was shipped to Memphis on a steamboat, with 100 other slaves, to Mr. Forrest. He then sold her to Louis Fortner who lived near Mason, Tennessee.<sup>37</sup>

In another incident, Byrd Hill, Forrest’s former business partner, posted an advertisement in the *Memphis Daily Appeal* offering a \$25 reward for the return of a slave named Andrew Jackson, a barber who was likely trying to get back to his mother in Louisville, Kentucky, as he had escaped to there once before.<sup>38</sup> The same paper reported in 1858 of an estimated twelve to fifteen hundred slaves brought to Memphis in the past month who had been sold by planters back east. “They will continue to come until

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<sup>35</sup>Hurst, *Nathan*, Chapter 5.

<sup>36</sup>Hurst, *Nathan* 39.

<sup>37</sup>J.H. Curtis, “Negro Woman, Slave Sold by Forrest, Recalls Days of Old,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 28, 1933.

<sup>38</sup>*Commercial Appeal*, November 18, 1949.

Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas shall each boast a population equal to any of the States from which they have removed.”<sup>39</sup> With such lucrative numbers, it is estimated that Forrest made over \$50,000 a year of profit in the slave trade.<sup>40</sup> In Memphis, only a few African American workers were able to escape the horrors of slavery, if not the brutal and humiliating repression of their white neighbors.

However, there was no escaping the fear of disease epidemics. Throughout the South, another horror was spreading. Disease outbreaks had long terrorized cities along the Mississippi River since its settlement by white people.<sup>41</sup> Memphis was no exception. Disease outbreaks had haunted the City of Memphis since its charter in the 1820’s. Aside from the horrors of losing family members, white slave owners were constantly worried and lived in fear over outbreaks because the death of their slaves would result in the death of their work force, which could lead to financial ruin. In 1850 a city council resolution stated “all cases of smallpox be removed, where practicable, to hospital by the city Marshall.”<sup>42</sup> The first recorded outbreak of yellow fever in Memphis occurred in 1828 and resulted in 53 deaths in 150 cases, which is a thirty-five percent death rate. In the 1830’s Cholera claimed over 200 victims. In the 1840’s, smallpox, dysentery, and cholera had claimed the lives of almost 450 people in 1,600 cases, or twenty eight percent of the affected population, a significant amount of whom were slaves. Then in 1855 alone a yellow fever outbreak killed 550 in 2500 cases, or at a

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<sup>39</sup>*Memphis Daily Appeal*, January 10, 1858; see also: Bancroft, *Slave Trading*, 23.

<sup>40</sup>Bancroft, *Slave Trading*, 263.

<sup>41</sup>For information on yellow fever in New Orleans see John Duffy, *Sword of Pestilence: The New Orleans Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1853* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966).

<sup>42</sup>*Summary*, 84.

twenty two percent death rate.<sup>43</sup> The increase of cases depleted the workforce whether the victims died or not. To keep the workforce healthy was also costly and burdensome to the plantation owners.

Although the percentages of death rates slowly declined, the numbers of affected people clearly increased when the population did. As the population grew and the workforce grew, more plantation workers were prone to death and illness, which limited work production. However, it appeared to many that blacks were more immune to the diseases that the white population, which might be explained before the war by the absence of large numbers in the city and the restrictions which prevented free blacks in Memphis with encountering slaves who may have ventured into the city limits. Limited numbers and interactions within the community might have led to a limited spreading of the disease amongst African Americans.

These percentages of deaths during each outbreak indicate that Memphians were well aware of the horrors that disease brought to their city and consequently the local government was constantly attempting to control conditions and modernize the city to prevent further epidemics. Serious outbreaks might lead to a depletion of the slave labor, which might lead to economic losses, rather than prosperity. Almost from its founding, the city of Memphis was in a constant state of tension. As the young town began to blossom and thrive, the free black population was kept under strict control and prevented from growing in order for the white plantation owners to keep control over the engine of their prosperity, the work force. Free African Americans were allowed to be free only if they were willing to follow the paternalistic structure. Exorbitant amounts of wealth

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<sup>43</sup>John M. Keating, *History of Memphis, I* (Syracus 1899), 677. These estimates are only approximate.

were at the fingertips of the white community as long as the social order kept the black population in total control. However, yet another, more serious threat to the old slave order was looming for the city of Memphis and the rest of the South, the Union Army.

## Chapter II

### The Transformation of Black Labor in Memphis, The War Years (1861-1865)

The City of Memphis was a major regional, national, and international cotton-trading center prior to the outbreak of war. Memphis was one of the major hubs of the cotton kingdom along the Mississippi River. It served as a focal point for cotton and molasses, until all trade and commerce had been virtually halted under Union occupation beginning in June of 1862. While many still smuggled cotton to other Confederate cities, declining prices left most local businessmen in Memphis bankrupt by 1865.<sup>1</sup> Many businesses were at risk of failing and work was difficult to come by legitimately. For the first time on a large scale, however, African Americans were able to experience freedom, which was rooted in an opportunity to participate in contract negotiations, discover new job opportunities, and becoming economic contributors. This second part of African American labor evolution was demonstrated by many in three phases, first as refugee workers, then as soldiers, and finally by working for the Freedman's Bureau.

During the Union invasion of the mid-South, slaves sought freedom behind Union lines, beginning with the U.S. occupation of Memphis on June 6, 1862. Thousands of slaves escaped from the nearby plantations in Fayette and Tipton counties in Tennessee and Tunica and DeSoto counties in Mississippi. They began flooding into the city. The refugees mostly concentrated around Fort Pickering and on President's

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<sup>1</sup>Johnathan H. Parks, "A Confederate Trade Center Under Federal Occupation: Memphis, 1862-1865." *Journal of Southern History* 3 (Aug. 1941). Parks provides a good understanding of commerce in Memphis during the Civil War.

Island. Fort Pickering was located in South Memphis in present day DeSoto Park. President's Island is a peninsula west of present day Riverside Park, south of the Fort Pickering site. Two reasons may explain why south Memphis in particular became home. First, free people of color lived here before the war. Most of the land was marshy and bad for growing or building, which allowed for affordable housing. Second, as more and more African Americans joined the Union Army, their families stayed nearby, dependant on the soldiers' wages for survival. However, while living conditions were dismal by many white standards with such a large population descending on the city so quickly, life was considerably better being free in the city than it was as a slave on the plantations. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Cowden stated: "In the largest house which is probably 18 x 35 feet and two stories high and containing four of five rooms there are seven families of soldiers of this regiment."<sup>2</sup> Despite the less than attractive living conditions, African Americans saw the Union Army as an opportunity to improve their financial condition. Many former slaves began walking the city streets and engaging in commerce freely, which caused furious resentment in many white citizens as evidenced by the riots which occurred so soon after the end of the war.

African Americans were coming from as far as North and South Carolina for a variety of reasons, yet behind all of them was the opportunity to escape the horrors of slavery.<sup>3</sup> Initially, General Sherman ordered the police force to treat African Americans

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<sup>2</sup>Lt. Col. Robert Cowden to Bvt. Brig. Gen. W.W. Morgan, Memphis, TN 17 Aug. 1865, letters Received, Box 39, 59<sup>th</sup> USCI, Regimental Books and Papers USCT, Colored Troops Division, RG. 94, NARA [G-215 FSSP] as cited in Hardwick, "Your Old Father", 113. Lt Col. Cowden was put in charge of the newly formed 59<sup>th</sup> Colored Infantry Regiment which was largely recruited from the influx of runaway slaves within the city.

<sup>3</sup>1870 Tennessee Census, Shelby County, Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, Roll 1562-1563, Memphis Public Library. For information on slave migration patterns, see: Beverly G. Bond and Janann Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 56.

in the city as freedmen, afforded all liberties.<sup>4</sup> This policy conflicted with local fugitive laws that were no longer legal for the Memphis police force to carry out. Memphians had historically placed severe restrictions on African Americans, both free and slave, limiting their mobility within the city and thus limiting chances for interaction.<sup>5</sup> Yet with the migration of thousands of former slaves from the surrounding rural plantations, these restrictions became nearly impossible to enforce.

General William Tecumseh Sherman assumed control of the Union army in Memphis in July of 1862 and saw the roughly 15,000 refugees as a welcomed opportunity for labor. He immediately began construction of defense structures around Memphis with the use of African American refugee manpower. Thus began black labor in Memphis on a grand scale not under the yoke of slavery. Fort Pickering was erected by September 1862 with the help of runaway slaves. In exchange, the workers were clothed, fed, and protected. The first phase of this part of African American labor evolution continued when, on August 18, 1862, General Sherman's orders stated: Each military company was allowed a maximum of five Negroes for jobs as cooks and teamsters. A total of 65 Negroes could be carried on the muster rolls of each unit, though these laborers could not bear arms nor wear the official uniform of the army.<sup>6</sup> Finally, loyal masters could claim their slaves and their wages upon proof of ownership.

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<sup>4</sup>Kevin R. Hardwick, "Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dad and Damned": Black Soldiers and the Memphis Race Riot of 1866, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 27 No.1 (Autumn, 1993), 111. Bond and Sherman, *Memphis*, 54.

<sup>5</sup>See Chapter One.

<sup>6</sup>Lt. Col. Robert Cowden to Bvt. Brig. Gen. W.W. Morgan, Memphis, TN 17 Aug. 1865, letters Received, Box 39, 59<sup>th</sup> USCI, Regimental Books and Papers USCT, Colored Troops Division, RG. 94, NARA [G-215 FSSP] as cited in Hardwick, "Your Old Father", 113.

Utilizing the refugees to work as general laborers allowed more white troops to be used in combat and also took manpower away from the Confederate forces.

Slaves who did not volunteer their services to the Union cause were impressed into the labor battalions by the thousands to build forts, to dig entrenchments, to provide fuel for the trains, and to maintain important roads and railroads in Tennessee. These black men and women (cooks, nurses, and laundresses) were paid a minimum of ten dollars per month, clothing and daily rations by the Union Army.<sup>7</sup>

The goal of the Union Army was not empowerment of a newly freed people, but an exploitation of labor. However, this was also the first opportunity that African Americans had to gain control over their labor which was now earning them a wage. Yet to hold the recently captured territory, it became clear to President Lincoln and the Union Army that a larger military force was needed.<sup>8</sup>

In 1862 the US government officially called for black soldiers. This marked the second opportunity when African Americans on a grand scale took control of their own freedom and finally earned a wage in the process. By 1865, in Memphis alone 7,694 African American men from the contraband camps volunteered and were ready to fight their former oppressors.<sup>9</sup> This accounted for one third of the entire African American soldier population of Tennessee, which totaled 20,133. Slavery was still not banned in

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<sup>7</sup>Bobby L. Lovett, "The Negro's Civil War in Tennessee, 1861-1865", *The Journal of Negro History* Vol. 61 No. 1 (January 1976), 38.

<sup>8</sup>See Ira Berlin, *Slaves No More: Three Essays on the Emancipation and the Civil War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup>National Archives, "The Negro in the Military Service of the United States, 1639-1886" Volume 6 1865-1867, Call No. 858 Role 4, Memphis Public Library.

Tennessee by the Emancipation Proclamation and the Army appointed General George L. Stearns Commissioner for the Organization of Colored troops in Tennessee. He established recruitment centers in every major city from Memphis to Nashville to Chattanooga. “The recruiting orders provided that slave owners could receive up to \$300 if they permitted their slaves to enlist, but if within thirty days the enlistment of slaves had not been completed satisfactorily, the impressment of slaves without the owner's consent was permissible.”<sup>10</sup> However, free blacks and fugitive slaves were recruited as well. One of the most memorable battles African American soldiers from the mid-South faced was also one of the war’s greatest atrocities.

General Nathan Bedford Forrest, a native Tennessean and the largest slave trader in Memphis before the war, was still terrorizing the Union forces in the Mississippi River Valley and throughout the region. In late March of 1864 Forrest’s cavalry had their first encounter with African American troops in a battle at Paducah, Kentucky; they were forced to retreat. On April 12, 1864, Gen. Forrest’s army of 1,500 troops attacked Fort Pillow in retaliation. The fort, along the Mississippi River about fifty miles north of Memphis, Tennessee, housed roughly 600 soldiers, 300 were white Tennessee Unionists and the 300 black troops were former runaways. According to General Forrest most died by drowning in the river when retreating and the majority of victims were African Americans. The official policy of the Confederate Government was to take no African American prisoners or white troops serving alongside African Americans. However, Forrest biographer Ronald K. Hutch contends, “the men who managed to escape claimed that soldiers and civilians in the fort had thrown down their arms and were attempting to

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<sup>10</sup>National Archives, “The Negro in the Military Service of the United States, 1639-1886” Volume 6 1865-1867, Call No. 858 Role 4, Memphis Public Library.

surrender when they were killed.”<sup>11</sup> While no official number of dead was reported by the Federal government (mainly because the ranking officers were all murdered per Confederate policy), later estimates place the number of casualties as at least forty seven percent of the fort’s population, or roughly 277. One hundred and ninety-five of the casualties were African American, or sixty four percent of the black population at the fort, and 102 were white, or thirty four percent of the white population.<sup>12</sup> The battle became a rally cry for black soldiers for the remainder of the war and lifted General Forrest as a legend in the eyes of Confederate sympathizers even though many Southerners felt that he was a butcher who callously carried out the Confederate policy of taking no black prisoners, which was considered a war crime even then.<sup>13</sup>

The third and final phase of this part of the African American labor evolution in Memphis began when African Americans were empowered to negotiate their own contracts and wages. At the close of the war, General Clinton B. Fisk was appointed Assistant Commissioner for the Kentucky and Tennessee Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands in March of 1865 to facilitate the transition from slavery to freedom, to control and assist vast numbers of refugees, and to manage abandoned lands

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<sup>11</sup>Ronald K. Huch, “Fort Pillow Massacre, the Aftermath of Paducah”, *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984)*, Vol. 66 No. 1 (Spring, 1973), p. 69. Huch argues that the humiliation of losing at Paducah was the main source of hostilities which lead to the massacre at Fort Pillow seventeen days later.

<sup>12</sup>John Cimprich and Robert C. Mainfort Jr, “The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Statistical Note, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 76 No. 3 (Dec., 1989), 837.

<sup>13</sup>For information on this policy see James G. Hollandsworth Jr., “The Execution of White Officers From Black Units By Confederate Forces During the Civil War”, *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Autumn, 1994), 475-48; Herbert Aptheker, “Negro Casualties in the Civil War”, *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Jan., 1947), 10-80. For information on the Fort Pillow Massacre, see also John Cimprich, *Fort Pillow: A Civil War Massacre and Public Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

and properties throughout the South. Serving under him, by early July, Brigadier General Davis Tillson became the first Sub-Assistant Commissioner for the Bureau in Memphis.

The Freedman's Bureau main priority was to establish a new African American working force that would understand the need to become self sufficient and gainfully employed. It also intended to establish schools and hospitals with the aid of benevolent associations from the North to educate African Americans and provide teaching positions within the community. Finally, it established a court to regulate labor contracts and disputes between white plantation owners and black laborers. African Americans set additional priorities; many families were determined to reunite after being split apart by slave traders. Working was also a main priority, and many were interested in working for shares of profit or on their own tracts of land. White plantation owners were determined to find a way to maintain control of the labor force, some through violence and other forms of 'preserving' the past slave system, others through manipulation of the new system, which quickly evolved into sharecropping.<sup>14</sup> Many Tennesseans were not receptive to these drastic changes. Governor of Tennessee William Gannaway Brownlow wrote,

The Negroes, like Indian tribes, will eventually become extinct, having no owners to care for them at not owning property in them, they will cease to increase in number- cease to be looked after and cultivated- while *educated labor* will take the

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<sup>14</sup>On African American land ownership and sharecropping, see Litwack, *Been in the Storm*, Chapter 8.

place of slave labor. Idleness, starvation, and disease will remove the majority of negroes in this generation.<sup>15</sup>

The white community had been accustomed to having a workforce that could be pushed to any desired amount of work and therefore, it is important to understand that these interpretations of idleness come from a viewpoint of a former ruling class no longer having unquestioned dominance and control. Thus, they began creating 'Black Codes' in an attempt to regain control of the work force now considered idle.<sup>16</sup> Severe restrictions were put on African Americans after the war by local authorities, whether free or enslaved; they were not allowed to congregate in public or hold church, and free people were required to show documentation of employment or they were arrested as vagrants. However, these policies conflicted with Union Army policy.<sup>17</sup>

When the war concluded, General Tillson issued numerous orders which, in turn, led African Americans and planters to define the meaning of freedom through agricultural labor. On July 18, 1865, General Tillson reported his understanding that African Americans were leaving the surrounding plantations regardless of mistreatment or provocation and fleeing to the city. Subsequently, all able-bodied black people were

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<sup>15</sup>William Gannaway Brown, "Governor Brown on 'Africa'", *Daily Argus*, August 24, 1865. For more on the plantation mentality see Foner, *Reconstruction*; Peggy G. Hargis, "For the Love of Place: Paternalism and Patronage in the Georgia Lowcountry, 1865-1898", *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Nov., 2004), 825-864. These laws were not fully put into effect on a state or local level until nearly a decade after the end of Reconstruction, the policies were beginning to be fought for much earlier.

<sup>16</sup>Randall B. Woods, "C. H. J. Taylor and the Movement for Black Political Independence, 1882-1896", Source: *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Summer, 1982), 122-135.

<sup>17</sup>Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Post Emancipation South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) pg 29. City laws and ordinances prevented or severely limited free and enslaved African Americans from gathering and thus they were rarely seen in a public setting before the war.

ordered to return to the surrounding plantations for work.<sup>18</sup> He decreed that any disputes between former slaves and owners would be handled by the department and that the workers must remain on the plantations until these issues were resolved.<sup>19</sup> However, this proved more difficult to control than initially anticipated. Memphis began experiencing a transformation of labor when African Americans were now allowed to voice grievances, contribute to the local economy through commerce, and take control of their own destinies by accepting new job opportunities. Most African Americans were not willing to return to the plantations after experiencing freedom in the city, which was more closely monitored by the Bureau than in the country. However, the main source of commerce in Memphis was still cotton, and without cotton, Memphis would collapse as a financial giant of the cotton kingdom.

Commerce had been severely restricted under occupying General William Tecumseh Sherman, General Stephen A Hurlburt, General Cadwallader C. Washburn and the Memphis Board of Trade.<sup>20</sup> Towards the end of the war, restrictions were increasingly tighter because of smugglers aiding the Confederate guerillas in West Tennessee as the supply of goods dwindled and prices plummeted.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, plantation owners needed labor to harvest the crops in order to rejuvenate the local

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<sup>18</sup>General Davis Tillson, Circular order No. 2, "General and Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865, Roll 8, Records of the Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

<sup>19</sup>"Letters Sent Sub-Assistant Commissioner, 1865-Sept. 1866" Roll 1, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

<sup>20</sup>The board of trade was created in 1862 and comprised of local men who had sworn an oath of allegiance.

<sup>21</sup>John Howard Parks, "A Confederate Trade Center under Federal Occupation: Memphis, 1862 to 1865", *The Journal of Southern History*, Aug 01, 1941; Vol. 7, No. 3, 289-314.

economy that was disrupted by the invasion. African Americans as a workforce were now more empowered and needed new employment after escaping from enslavement. Therefore, Tillson needed a way to determine precisely what the population numbers were and called for a census of all freed people in Memphis and President's Island.<sup>22</sup>

The categorizations of the census records taken by the Union Army indicate its intentions of understanding the population demographics. In 1865, an aggregate number of 15,828 African Americans lived in and about Memphis and 681 on President's Island for a total of 16,509.<sup>23</sup> The census also reported the number of children under the age of thirteen (4,105 in the city and 249 on the island), and number of persons permanently incapable of supporting themselves (201 in the city and nineteen on the island). Further, a summary of the findings reported 4,412 males were twelve and over and what net 'worth' they had acquired.<sup>24</sup> One of the Bureau's overall responsibilities was to focus on the transition from forced labor to paid labor. Clearly, Tillson was interested in determining the number of able-bodied workers, while indicating twelve as the minimum age for employment, and establishing a method of monitoring economic progress.

General Tillson was in constant contact with General Fisk as the two attempted to establish the Bureau's limitations, power, and means of enforcing that power. While the

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<sup>22</sup>General Davis Tillson, Circular order No. 2, "General and Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865, Roll 8, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>"Letters Sent Sub-Assistant Commissioner, 1865-Sept. 1866" Roll 1, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau). Roll 1 also states that 300 persons were worth between \$100 and \$500, eighteen worth over \$500 but less than \$1,000, four over \$2,000, and three over \$5,000. Precisely how these monetary numbers were determined is not indicated on the summary report. Yet it is clear it was a personal income figure as opposed to a slave value number.

majority of troops stationed in Memphis at this time were African American, the Bureau had very few agents to take charge of its affairs and therefore better understand their authority. The refugee population was difficult to control. African American workers were thus expected to stay on the plantations, honor contracts, and support themselves through wage labor.<sup>25</sup> To deal with the refugee crisis in the city, General Tillson and General Fisk agreed that the best solution was to take care of only those who could not work. African Americans were gaining empowerment and opportunities for economic independence that were propelling the race in a positive direction on a mass scale for the first time in Memphis history. The Union supervisors intended to reorganize the Southern economy and social structure in a fashion similar to the capitalistic model seen in Northern states. Labor in Southern states was previously controlled almost exclusively by slave owners. Now the control of labor was being reinterpreted by the Federal Government and workers became responsible for themselves by having control over their wages. The Union Army occupiers recognized the perceived advances of Northern society, driven by their understanding of labor. They fully intended to establish this system of labor in the South.<sup>26</sup>

Once General Tillson established the goal of getting African Americans to work the surrounding plantations, the strategy of how the Bureau intended to accomplish this began revealing itself in his Special Orders. The Bureau was focused on obtaining land that had been considered abandoned with the intention of distributing it to former slaves to tend and own, but they also readily recognized property rights of former Confederates

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Litwack, *Been in the Storm*, 346, 376, 393-4.

who had signed loyalty oaths and petitioned to regain control of their land. However, African Americans who began arriving from surrounding plantations had other intentions for work.

African Americans began taking jobs and positions the Freedman's Bureau was desperate to fill quickly. The Bureau also used confiscated buildings in the city for creating additional refugee camps, hospitals, and military offices which were largely concentrated in Wards six, seven, and ten, then known as South Memphis.<sup>27</sup> In his brief time as Sub-Assistant Commissioner in Memphis, General Tillson quickly set precedents for the Bureau's expectations and intentions. On July 12, 1865, he wrote an endorsement based on a communication with D. O. Mc Lord, Medical Director and Inspector of Freedmen; the two discussed the funding cut to the Freedmen's Hospital in March of 1864. The General reported that the colored stewards of the hospital had not been paid in over a year, all the hospital funds had been exhausted, and supplies had been depleted. The urgency of the situation is noted at the end of the letter, when General Tillson requested the matter be forwarded to Washington D.C., "as there is a necessity for an immediate reply to prevent great suffering."<sup>28</sup> African Americans were now wage earners and dependant on these wages for their survival. Jobs in the city of Memphis were available as an alternative to work in the surrounding plantations. Before leaving

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<sup>27</sup>General Davis Tillson, Circular order No. 2, "General and Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865, Roll 8, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau). Special Orders No. 2 and 3 from Gen. Tillson establish acting Assistant Surgeon S. B. Varney as the head of the Freedmen's Hospital and Major W. Grath as the head of the pay department in the building that was once the Bank of Tennessee on Madison Street.

<sup>28</sup>Endorsement from Gen. Tillson, July 12, 1865 "Endorsements Sub-Assistant Commissioner & Disbursing Officer of Claims, July 1865-Dec, 26, 1871" Roll 8, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

Memphis in September 1865, Gen. Tillson ordered acting Assistant Surgeon S. B. Varney on August 10<sup>th</sup> to begin charging patients for treatment so they may fund the hospital internally.<sup>29</sup> Health conditions in the camps were deplorable due to overcrowding and malnutrition and the Bureau office in Memphis saw this as a serious problem, but the limited funding was simply not able to adequately keep up with the needs of the hospital. Another priority of the Freedmen's Bureau they could not afford to carry out alone was education.

Schools in the city would rely almost exclusively on the charitable donations of money and manpower from various Northern benevolent societies, and eventually from within the African American community. After reviewing the credentials of several potential teachers from the North, General Tillson began designating areas within the city to establish five schools that would commence classes on Monday, October 2, 1865.<sup>30</sup> The teachers who came from specific societies were grouped into the same schools and at each school the teachers served as committee members who dealt with any issues that would arise. In addition to the women teaching, night classes were offered by the Reverend Joseph Chatham at school No. 2 on the corner of Ponotoc and Hernando Streets for older African Americans who worked during the day. School cost one dollar per month per pupil.<sup>31</sup> Education was seen as a tool to understanding freedom and uplift from very early on by both the Bureau and African Americans. Since children no longer

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<sup>29</sup>Special Order No. 2 from Gen. Tillson, August 10, 1865 "General & Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct 1865", *ibid*.

<sup>30</sup>Circular Order, Sub Assistant Commissioner, 30 August 1865, General Davis Tillson, "General and Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865", *ibid*.

<sup>31</sup>"General and Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865", Roll 8, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

had to toil in the fields thanks to the evolving labor situation, they now had time for a proper education. It also became an opportunity for African Americans to redefine the relationships between former slaves and former masters and the Bureau shared in this endeavor.

The Freedman's Bureau established courts to mediate disputes between African Americans and white citizens. General Tillson appointed General A. J. Reeve as Provost Marshall.<sup>32</sup> The new Tennessee Constitution, however, forbade blacks from testifying or bringing cases to court. In the eyes of the Tennessee government, free or not, blacks would not have the same rights afforded to them as white citizens did. However, this was overruled by the Bureau. The Bureau began taking complaints and settling disputes involving former slaves and their former masters. Freedmen began utilizing the court for justice and compensation almost immediately. In one case, former slave Abram made a statement on August 18, 1865 which claimed that he was promised by Abner W. Lanier in 1864 that he could keep the entire cotton crop he could raise, "but could not dispose of the crop until 1865, when Lanier returned and claimed the whole of the crop." Lanier seized the crop and was unwilling to split the profits with the workers. Abram pleaded that, "Unless military authorities hold the cotton until the case is properly tried, Lanier will dispose of it and defraud him (Abram) of his rights."<sup>33</sup> The court awarded four of the eight bales of cotton to Abram and the other plantation hands.

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<sup>32</sup>Circular Order No. 4, General Order No. 1, "General and Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865", Roll 8, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

<sup>33</sup>Circular Order No. 4, General Order No. 1, "General and Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865", Roll 8, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

In another case, Gabriel Sledge from Panola County Mississippi fled to the Bureau office in Memphis in late June of 1865 to report the beating of him and his wife by their former master, Oliver Sledge. The report described, “[his] back had been terribly cut to pieces by the lash in the hands of his former master.”<sup>34</sup> Along the way, other former slaves had heard of this event and joined the Sledges on their journey to Memphis for protection. Gen. Tillson reported that, unfortunately, the perpetrators of this crime were out of his district, otherwise; “the undersigned would proceed to have them arrested and put to hard labor on the fortifications of this city.”<sup>35</sup> Instead, the letter was forwarded to the Assistant Commissioner of Mississippi in hopes of arresting Oliver Sledge, the former owner.<sup>36</sup> These particular cases indicate that not only did having a right to testify in a court allowed African Americans to express their grievances, but that the court was willing to settle in their favor; a new phenomenon to the region. African Americans now had the opportunity to ensure that their labor would not be taken for granted or exploited. Freedmen were exercising the right to choose where they wanted to work for the first time. Men were using their newfound mobility as leverage to negotiate contracts and would often leave for other plantations if they heard the conditions or pay were better, or flee to the city if the contract was not fulfilled by their current employers. To appease

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<sup>34</sup>“General and Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865”, Roll 8, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman’s Bureau).

<sup>35</sup>“Letters Sent Sub-Assistant Commissioner, 1865-Sept. 1866” Roll 1, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman’s Bureau).

<sup>36</sup>An endorsement from Gen. Tillson, *FBR* roll 8 Tillson further suggests “that it may be found for the interest of the service to make districts with reference to centers of population, instead of geographically, as now arranged.” This indicates the unclear nature during the first year after the war not only of the Bureau, but of the authority a Sub-Assistant Commissioner held.

planter outrage, the Bureau deemed it unlawful for a person to lure or attempt to lure workers off of farms they had already been contracted to work.<sup>37</sup> This suggests that the Bureau intended to quell large plantation owners' competition for labor between themselves, but in particular with smaller land owning yeomen.<sup>38</sup>

For the first time, vagrancy was now clearly defined.<sup>39</sup> To thin the numbers of refugees living in Memphis, all freepersons within the city were required to carry a certificate from their employer stating the duration of their contract in order to avoid being sent to the country for work; those who did not would be arrested for vagrancy.<sup>40</sup>

Lt. Isaac Boatman was assigned the "Chief of Patrols" position. He officially "superintended the gathering up of freed people in and about this city, who have no permanent employment, or not sufficient means to provide for their own support during the coming winter, with a view to furnishing them comfortable homes in the country and providing for their immediate wants."<sup>41</sup> Land was the largest commodity disputed over,

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<sup>37</sup>Circular order No. 3, "General & Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865" Roll 8, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

<sup>38</sup>Joseph P. Reidy suggests these early restrictions were to prevent yeomen from gaining advantages over larger land owners by competing with them over wage labor and therefore forced the plantation owners to honor contracts with their workers to prevent them from running away. He demonstrates this in relation to the beginning of sharecropping and control of workers through wage labor as an acceptance of the loss of slave labor in *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism*; see also, Hahn *Freedom*.

<sup>39</sup>As noted in Chapter One, 'vagrancy' was never identified specifically and was thus open to an interpretation that could include any African American, slave or free, and for any reason.

<sup>40</sup>Circular order No. 5, "General & Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865" Roll 8, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau). Hahn further explains this order from a letter Brig. Genl. Davis Tillson sent to Capt. W.T. Clark wherein he explains it is "for their own good" and an attempt to help those within the city limits to find a means of providing for themselves while not ignoring their freedoms. *Freedom*, 269.

<sup>41</sup>Special Order No. 4, "General & Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865" Roll 8, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, &

however; former slaves had specific and very articulated concepts of freedom's definition and actively attempted to enact their priorities, which were often in conflict with those of former owners and the Bureau. Additionally, many African Americans saw the city as a place of congregation before departure to new areas and a way to reunite with separated family members.

One of the first priorities for freed people was to exercise their newfound freedom to reunite families that had been torn apart. African Americans were active in attempting to define and understand their freedom in relation to empowering themselves and their families. One of the first requests General Tillson received was from Bill Jones, an African American man, on July 12, 1865<sup>42</sup>; the letter represents one of many requests to reunite families, a major priority of so many African Americans that had been split apart by being sold before the war by slave traders like Nathan Bedford Forrest. The letter was addressed to Captain Walker, Provost Marshall of the Freedmen's Bureau. Bill Jones' family was still in bondage near Jackson, Tennessee. General Tillson approved Mr. Jones' request to bring his family to St. Louis, Missouri and ordered that Mr. White, the former owner, was not allowed to interfere with the move.<sup>43</sup> Former slaves of the South also understood land possession as a means of independence and freedom; this ideal was one of the most commonly in conflict with the former owners. One case in particular

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Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau). African Americans understood that the homes referred to were the slave quarters on the plantations of their former oppressors and were intent on not returning unless adequate shelter and provisions were supplied.

<sup>42</sup>Endorsement No. 3 Gen. Tillson, July 13, 1865, "General & Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865" Roll 8, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

<sup>43</sup>Endorsement No. 3 Gen. Tillson, July 13, 1865, "General & Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865" Roll 8, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

highlights the frustrations of many former slaves. Billy Lee, an old former slave who, before the war:

Was considered too old to be serviceable [by his former owner] ... was put in possession of a piece of land, on which he built a cabin & made a good living & accumulated property. Albert Lee, an officer of the so called Confederate Army returned home and took away from Billy a wagon, yolk of oxen, (selling them) and dispossessed him of his growing crops of corn, cotton & telling said Billy he might remain with him, if he would, as an old servant.<sup>44</sup>

General Tillson ordered all property and possessions be returned to old Billy, and requested all officers to use whatever force necessary to “compel Albert Lee to comply with this order.”<sup>45</sup> Further, Gen. Tillson ordered Albert to report to the Bureau office immediately to defend himself from being thrown in jail. Freed people also had specific ideas for contracted labor.

Former slaves expected their labor contracts to provide necessary provisions if they were to return to the plantations; including housing, food, and a monthly wage. Many plantation owners grew to understand this as a new means of exploitation. For example, when Jerry and Hester were liberated from bondage under “the firm” of A & J L Lea, they agreed to enter into a year-long contract working for them beginning July 1, 1865. The contract called for a sum of ten dollars a month to be paid at the end of the harvest season, food, clothing, and medical attention for Jerry, Hester, and their children. Also included was the stipulation that if general labor is not performed, Miss Lea

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<sup>44</sup>Endorsement No. 4, Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

reserves the right to deduct or withhold wages at her discretion. Ransom and Burrell, another couple, entered into a similar contract with the Lea's at the same time.<sup>46</sup> African Americans were arranging similar contracts throughout the South, some stipulating tracts of land for personal use, others for shares of crop profits, but nearly all were with the expectation of paternal care, which quite quickly began taking on the form of sharecropping as it is known today.<sup>47</sup>

Planters begrudgingly attempted to adjust to post-emancipation life. However, they were reluctant to relinquish control of labor and the wealth it procured and these conflicting ideals between plantation owners and freed people manifested themselves early in the cases adjudicated by the Bureau. Freedman Black Joe pleaded his case to the bureau on July 12, 1865. On the first Sunday of July, 1865, Joe and his former master, Amos Black, borrowed of Robert Black a yoke of oxen. The following weekend, Amos ordered Tom, another black worker on the plantation, to return the oxen to Robert. Tom said he did not know where Robert Black lived so he would send his brother Walker in his place, since he knew the roads. At first, Amos accepted this arrangement, but later reneged and ordered that Tom go instead. Apparently, Tom crossed his arms and told Amos that he could not go and again repeated that he did not know the way.

A. Black then drew a revolver, put it to Tom's head and shot him dead saying, 'you have been fooled with damned Yankee lies, you thought you were free and got so you could not obey your master. There is no law agst Riffling negroes, and

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<sup>46</sup>Endorsement No. 3 Gen. Tillson, July 13, 1865, "Endorsements", "General & Special Orders and Circulars, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, July-Oct. 1865" Roll 8, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

<sup>47</sup>For more on this process of evolution, see Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*, & Joseph P. Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism*.

I will kill every damned one, if they do not obey me and work just as they did before the war.’ Louisa and Clarissa Black & Frank Ford witnessed the transaction.”<sup>48</sup>

In another instance, an unknown representative wrote of Eveline, a freewoman, and pleaded to the bureau that her children were being held hostage by a Mrs. Caroline Walker, who they were ‘bonded’ to. A letter from Mrs. Walker was intercepted which, according to Gen. Tillson, “is strong evidence of the unfitness of the parties to hold the children.” In the confiscated letter, Mrs. Walker wrote, “I do not want them (the children) on the place. If necessary, I can show them the bottom of Spring Creek, but wish to get rid of them before.”<sup>49</sup> J. Yauncey of DeSoto County Mississippi expressed similar feelings of former slaves reuniting their families instead of working when he wrote the Bureau of a girl he was holding on his plantation. On Christmas day of 1865, Yauncey wrote of an affidavit by Randolph Brown, searching for his daughter:

As for recognizing the right of freedmen to their children-I can say that not one Southern man nor woman in the whole south recognizes the negro as a free man but as stolen property forced by the bayonet by the damnable United States Government. Inform Randolph Brown, negro, that he can have the girl whenever he comes for her. <sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Gen. Tillson, July 18, 1865, “Letters Received (Unregistered) Sub-Assistant Commissioner, 1865” Roll 17, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman’s Bureau).

<sup>49</sup>(NAME UNKNOWN) December 29, 1865, ““Letters Received (Unregistered) Sub-Assistant Commissioner, 1865” Roll 17, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman’s Bureau).

<sup>50</sup>J. Yauncey, December 25, 1865, *ibid.*

Occurrences of violence and hostility began increasing as the first year of Reconstruction carried on. Enfield Henry requested of the Bureau protection and an investigation after being shot at by his former master, Leander Black of Fayette County, after the crop was harvested.<sup>51</sup> With little means of enforcing the orders and endorsements of the Bureau, many incidents like this tragically still occurred in Tennessee, throughout Reconstruction, as it was the first state reinstated into the Union and was thus never under military district Marshall Law. These cases demonstrate the confusion of African Americans who saw themselves as free when entering Memphis, but still trying to rescue their families from surrounding plantations that were not aware of the newfound freedom.

The rest of the South was divided into five military districts after the war. District One was Virginia, District Two included North and South Carolina, District Three was comprised of Alabama, Georgia, and Florida, District Four included Mississippi and Arkansas, and District Five was Texas and Louisiana. Because the Bureau in Tennessee was organized without military occupation, it became a haven for organizing against African American freedom. Without any strong regulation, the Ku Klux Klan was able to form in Pulaski, Tennessee.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the nature of defining African American freedom in the city of Memphis faced greater challenges from the beginning than did the rest of the South. African Americans had seen Memphis as a gathering point during the war because of military occupation, but the military was not as prominent in the city as in other places after the war. Therefore, Tennessee then became a harbor for organizing racist groups from the surrounding area, including Arkansas, Alabama, and Mississippi.

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<sup>51</sup>Enfield Henry Affidavit, August 14, 1865, *ibid*.

<sup>52</sup>Hurst, *Nathan*, 284-308.; Chester L. Quarles, *The Ku Klux Klan and related American racist and antisemitic organizations : a history and analysis* (Jefferson, NC: 1999).

Memphis had become a city of polarity. All around the mid-South, bitterness and resentment from all parties reached a boiling point when the riot of 1866 occurred.

### Chapter III

#### A Riot of Serious Magnitude<sup>1</sup>: Memphis Riots of May 1866

The future of African American labor and race relations for the next century and a half in Memphis, Tennessee took a decisive turn in May 1866. For three days, the river city was ablaze with fires, rapes, murders, beatings, robberies, and terror. Initially police officers and, eventually, white elites were attacking black people and property on sight.<sup>2</sup> This riot, which took the lives of 46 African Americans (though the official number may never be known) and consumed three African American churches, eight school houses, and roughly fifty private dwellings, was arguably the largest riot of the Reconstruction Era. This riot and the riot in New Orleans was the catalyst of military Reconstruction throughout the South.<sup>3</sup> Congress then took control of Reconstruction and Radical Reconstruction began. Yet historians have not fully examined such a momentous event that radicalized Reconstruction and ultimately defined a city as separate from the rest of Tennessee. Consequently, many questions remain unanswered; mainly, how was African American labor affected by these riots? What economic and social circumstances among the white elite efforts to control black labor determined why this riot occurred? What circumstances in the labor structure were similar or different from other cities in the South that did not have riots? How did the attempt to control black labor contribute to a

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<sup>1</sup>*Memphis Daily Appeal* May 2, 1866.

<sup>2</sup>Irish and Blacks in America had been competing for work all over the US. For information on labor riots in New York City drafts in 1863 see Albon P. Man, Jr., "Labor Competition and the New York Draft Riots of 1863" *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Oct., 1951), 375-405.

<sup>3</sup>Richard L. Hume and Jerry B. Gough, *Blacks, Carpetbaggers, and Scalawags: the Constitutional Conventions of Radical Reconstruction*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

riot confined to a specific neighborhood, rather than occurring throughout the city?

Ultimately, the riots were the first initiation of a privileged class demonstrating a control through fear and manipulation that would manifest itself for years to come. Those who were attacked were outsiders physically and theoretically. Physically, those attacked tended to be from the surrounding countryside, former slaves. Theoretically, the victims were those unwilling to comply with the social order that had been in place since before the war.

Only in the past thirty years has the Memphis race riot of 1866 garnered attention by historians who attempt to decipher precisely what fueled the three days of horror. The first investigation, “The Memphis Riots of 1866: Terror in a Black Community during Reconstruction,” by James Gilbert Ryan, who blames both the black and white community for the riots, charges the white political leaders as having a significant role in the disorder, and places much of the blame on General George Stoneman, the Union Army commander in Memphis at the time.<sup>4</sup> Almost a decade later, Altina L. Waller in, “Community, Class and Race in the Memphis Riot of 1866,” examines in detail the rioters themselves, the specific locations where the violence occurred, and who the victims were. “The motivation and intentions of the rioters reflect a pre-modern set of attitudes while its results accelerated the modernizing process. There was more to this riot than tensions produced by post-war dislocation.”<sup>5</sup> Waller contends that the largely middle class status of the rioters and the specific centralization of the violence stemmed

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<sup>4</sup>Gilbert James Ryan, “The Memphis Riots of 1866: Terror in a Black Community during Reconstruction”, *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 62, No. 3, (July 1977), pg. 244. Ryan looks strongly at the tensions between Irish police officers and black soldiers competing for respect and authority but ultimately points to the inaction of Gen. Stoneman who did not declare martial law until May 3, 1866, after the riots had largely subsided.

<sup>5</sup>Altina L. Waller, “Community, Class and Race in the Memphis Riot of 1866”, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 18, No. 2, (Winter 1984), 233-246.

from a tradition of collective violence to save the community from a perceived threat. While Waller pays careful attention to specific facts and details of the riots, Kevin R. Hardwick investigates the implications of these facts in, “Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned: Black Soldiers in the Memphis Race Riot of 1866.” He writes, “The violence of the riot was not random. It was targeted at those black individuals and institutions most symbolic of black empowerment—the soldiers themselves, and the institutions that their presence sheltered.”<sup>6</sup> He contends that the violence was an attempt to establish a new code to control racial interaction. Collectively, these historians have opened the door to new interpretations of a defining event for the African American community in Memphis.

The May 1866 riots in Memphis were a culminating result of rising class tensions between former slaves and white middle class citizens, while both attempted to define the term freedom at the dawn of a new era. At the close of the Civil War, Memphis faced the challenges of restructuring society and rebuilding a city that had not been destroyed physically by the war, but economically. The riots resulted in a congressional investigation which led to the beginning of Radical Reconstruction throughout the South, yet the resulting gains of African American laborers would be short lived; no local action was ever taken to bring those responsible to trial for the heinous acts committed. The riots also had the effect of later establishing a new labor system of racist-fueled oppression, which differed from the paternalism of the plantation system. Ultimately, the riots were not a result of tensions between Irish and African Americans, as long understood. Rather, the three days of violence was manipulated by local white elites of

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<sup>6</sup>Kevin R. Hardwick, “Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned’: Black Soldiers and the Memphis Race Riot of 1866” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 27, No. 1, (Autumn, 1993), 120.

the sixth ward who were attempting to regain dominance of labor in a neighborhood they saw as overrun with minority outsiders competing for capital gain through instituting a new form of the old plantation system in an urban setting.

African American soldiers were the prime example of workers in a role of empowerment. For the first time, black soldiers actually held greater influence in the city than the police, their white counterparts. Local law enforcement in the city greatly resented being in a restricted role; while officers were still allowed to make arrests, U.S. Army troops, often black, patrolled the streets. When police officers did make arrests, all cases dealing with African Americans were handled by the Bureau rather than local magistrates and courts. Consequently, police officers frequently harassed black citizens and clashed with black soldiers in abuses of power and disputes over jurisdiction. White residents often heard of these conflicts through police articles and believed that the increase of freedom for former slaves would undermine the definition of freedom for white men. The *Memphis Weekly Post* reported: "The Civil Rights Bill, recently passed... over the President's veto may be well described as a bill to destroy the civil rights of white men in the States, and to exalt the negro to superior immunities and privileges."<sup>7</sup> White residents were unaccustomed to seeing African Americans in positions of power, wearing uniforms and bearing arms, gaining an education, walking the city streets freely, and having the choice not to work at all.<sup>8</sup> Further, when police

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<sup>7</sup>"A Specimen of Moderate Southern Sentiment," *Memphis Weekly Post*, April 28, 1866.

<sup>8</sup>While many African American women still worked, for the first time, the choice was *optional*. Black women were now able to tend house if they so desired, they were also able to see their children attend school, rather than work in the field. Old men were able to rest and be free of the stresses and horrors of working on a plantation until they died. This was in great contradiction to what the white Southerner idea of labor was, but the irony is that for the first time, African American women, children, and old folks were afforded the same rights as their white counterparts; the right to choose how to run their days.

officers began acting as headhunters for the surrounding plantations by arresting ‘vagrants’ and shipping them out of the city for work, black soldiers began spreading a different ideology among the African American population and thus undermining white authority.

The rising tensions over how to define freedom through labor during the first year after the Civil War resulted in the Memphis riot of May 1866. Almost immediately after General Tillson left and Brigadier General B.P. Rinkle assumed command of the Memphis Bureau in September of 1865, the tone of the Bureau and its attitudes towards the refugees turned bitter and malicious.<sup>9</sup> In a letter from General Rinkle, freed people are reported as stealing uncontrollably throughout the city and becoming increasingly demoralized and girls in their teens are living “promiscuously together” in the same cabins. Meanwhile, the office reported to General Fisk that thousands of applications from “old planters and gentlemen from the North who are anxious to secure hands from this very class of laborers.”<sup>10</sup> The letter requested, rather forebodingly, orders instructing how much force can be used “to control this character of our colored people to

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<sup>9</sup>The racist mentality was not limited to the South, even some Northerners in the Union Army had forked tongues. Gen. Reeve, a subordinate of Gen. Rinkle and provost of the Freedman’s Courts wrote to Gen. Fisk and forwarded to the Assistant Commissioner of Alabama a justification for arresting ‘vagrants’ and shipping them to outside plantations. He proclaimed, “There is at this present writing five or six thousand lazy, worthless colored men, women and children who will never go to work unless forced to.” “Letters Received (Registered) Sub-Assistant Commissioner, 1866” Roll 10, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman’s Bureau).As explained in the footnote above, perceptions of African American ‘vagrancy’ was the site of women, children, and old folks no longer seeing the need to work, rather than not wanting to work.

<sup>10</sup>“Letters Received (Registered) Sub-Assistant Commissioner, 1866” Roll 10, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman’s Bureau).

receive homes for themselves.”<sup>11</sup> In April 1865 African American soldiers were largely discharged from the Union Army. Local forces were increasingly relied upon without adequate manpower to carry out the will of the Bureau.

Local officials and police officers resumed their roles at the end of the war, though in a limited capacity and under the direction of the Bureau.<sup>12</sup> Presumably, with such large numbers of ‘vagrants’ within the city, the Bureau increasingly relied upon the local police for arrests and holding violators. Former African American soldiers were expected to return to the surrounding plantations for work. Yet this concept of forced labor seemed to strike African Americans as too close to their former bondage, and black soldiers stationed in the city, the embodiment of freedom for many African Americans, began fighting back against this oppression.

African American soldiers, who outnumbered white soldiers in the city and the region,<sup>13</sup> contradicted their white counterparts and told former slaves that the orders to leave the city and work on the plantations again were false. Prior to the riot, General Tillson requested that the officers of the Colored soldiers instruct them “not to interfere in any manner with the action taken by officers of the Bureau of R.F. & A.L.”<sup>14</sup> This Bureau report confirms the growing defiance of black soldiers and clearly indicates

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Rosen, *Terror*, 25.

<sup>13</sup>Rosen *Terror*, pg. 29, reports seven regiments, or over 10,000 black Union soldiers, were patrolling the streets and stationed at Fort Pickering. See also Hahn, *Freedom*, 173.

<sup>14</sup>“Letters Sent Sub-Assistant Commissioner, 1865-Sept. 1866” Roll 1, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman’s Bureau).

where tensions between Memphis police officers and stationed black soldiers originated, yet white workers were not the only Memphians responsible for the outbreak of violence.

Shortly before the riots, newspapers began propagandizing numerous incidents where white police officers and black soldiers were in conflict over jurisdiction and authority. On March 7, 1866, the *Memphis Daily Appeal* reported of nearly twenty arrests daily by the Bureau of “colored men dressed in uniform without belonging to the service.”<sup>15</sup> This insinuates that the local white population, which was already at odds with the freedmen population and resented the sight of African American soldiers patrolling the streets, were now skeptical of whether or not these men in uniform were even soldiers. Hardwick states, “Soldiers provided clothing for their families and perhaps for others in the black community as well.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the conditions around Fort Pickering were considered deplorable by the white population after the discharge of most African American soldiers in April 1865.<sup>17</sup> It is imperative to note that the editor of the

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<sup>15</sup>“Local Matters”, *Memphis Daily Appeal*, March 7, 1866.

<sup>16</sup>Kevin R. Hardwick, “‘Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned’: Black Soldiers and the Memphis Race Riot of 1866” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 27, No. 1, (Autumn, 1993), 113. Hardwick contends that this tied the black soldiers even more closely to the surrounding community as it became difficult to distinguish soldiers from civilians.

<sup>17</sup>Most white Memphians likely never went down to the area surrounding Fort Pickering as many stayed within their own neighborhoods; the city had not really developed a sense of identity and community throughout the entire city and it is arguable that this has still not occurred. For more on this, see Waller, “Community”, 237. White Memphians saw the black residents as “the most drunken, blasphemous and licentious wretches that can be found among the negro race, in any city on this continent living in wretched, miserable huts and hovels, rudely constructed, with capacity of holding barely one person, and yet many of them crowded almost to suffocation.” *Daily Avalanche*, May 17, 1866. These stereotypes and exaggerated rumors were printed by the paper whose editor was one of the participants in the riots and represent the ignorant fears of a white population that would stop at nothing to reinstitute the old order of control and domination of a race in order to control the workforce, and thus commerce. White Memphians who read these lies would have accepted them as truth because they came from a ‘trusted’ source. However, what was not taken into account by the readers was the great strides the African American workers were making and the immense pressure the tiny Bureau worked under to create a new African American middle class; something the City of Memphis had never seen and many were in opposition to because of the loss of control.

local newspaper, *The Daily Avalanche*, purveyor of many exaggerated lies and rumors, was noted in Congressional reports as one of the leaders of the riot.<sup>18</sup> His racist mentality had not wavered after the war and his paper clearly indicates a dedication to spreading malicious propaganda. Reports of freedmen stealing cotton bales off of docks and then resisting arrest, or robbing white business men in the city and sometimes shooting them, also began surfacing.<sup>19</sup> Nearly every day, white readers of the paper were exposed to exaggerated writings about increases in crime. The *Memphis Daily Appeal* reported, “Constant complaint is made of the disorderly conduct of Negroes in this quarter of the city, and we desire to call the attention of the police to the subject.”<sup>20</sup> Always, of course, the white citizens were only attempting to defend against this oppression from African American outsiders.

One example of such defense occurred when a group of African American boys stole some clothes from Mr. Heckle of the sixth ward on Front Street, south of Beale, on Saturday, April 17<sup>th</sup>. Mrs. Heckle had been in the store and called for her husband, who pursued the boys down Beale until they were stopped by the wall of bullets from black soldiers.<sup>21</sup> In another incident, white Memphians read in the papers about local Officer Sweat who, while not on duty, came to the aid of a white lady recently robbed by a black female. When he went to the house of the lady to apprehend her, “after arresting the

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<sup>18</sup>“Affidavits Related to the Memphis Riots, May 1866” Roll 37, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman’s Bureau). Waller cites that among the 28 percent of rioters who were entrepreneurs, one of them was an editor of the *Avalanche*, although no name is given.

<sup>19</sup>“Local Matters”, *Memphis Daily Appeal*, March 7, 1866.

<sup>20</sup>*Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 15, 1866.

<sup>21</sup>*Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 17, 1866.

wench, he was met by a party of negro soldiers, who, with manly oaths, declared he should not arrest anyone in *their* part of the city.” The *Appeal* reported that soldiers then knocked him down and, finding that he was unarmed, began shooting at him and “otherwise shamefully maltreating him.”<sup>22</sup> Mysteriously, however, one older black man was the only one killed in the incident. The main source of conflict was control of the neighborhood. White citizens’ rage was increasingly fueled by the paper’s responses to such occurrences, in this case:

These frequent outrages on the part of the lawless freedmen, who are congregated like so many beasts in South Memphis, and who are too lazy to work or do anything but *steal* to support themselves in an idle and vicious existence, is becoming past all endurance, and should be suppressed by the strong arm of the law.<sup>23</sup>

Undoubtedly, the combination of suppressed authority of police power by the Freedmen’s Bureau, the challenges of authority by black soldiers, the testing of freedom by African Americans who were outsiders, and the constant pressure by terrified local citizens led the police to drastic actions. The sixth and seventh wards, which held the largest African American population, quickly escalated into battlegrounds for control of the neighborhood.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>*Memphis Avalanche*, April 20, 1866.

<sup>23</sup>“Local Matters”, *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 20, 1866; The *Memphis Daily Appeal* (later the *Commercial Appeal*) was an overtly racist paper and advertised themselves as such in their credo printed in every edition of the paper which stated: “Principals Governing the conduct of the Appeal: A government of white men, for white men and no political miscegenation.”

<sup>24</sup>See appendix 3.

The City of Memphis erupted in a race riot that directly resulted from tensions fueled by the conflicting definitions of African American labor after the Civil War. Irish officers felt their jobs were threatened upon seeing so many black soldiers patrolling the streets after the war and the Bureau undermined local officials by taking court matters regarding African Americans into their own hands. Therefore, the Irish officers felt justified during the riots as being officers, judge and jury on their own because the Bureau had shown that it would not always rule in favor of white men involved. When black soldiers were officially mustered out of service on April 30, 1866, trouble was imminent. Soldiers who had enlisted before 1863 were to be paid a \$100 bounty, those enrolled after October 23, 1863 and before April 1, 1864 would earn \$300, and all soldiers who were enlisted after July 16, 1864 would receive \$100 for each year of service.<sup>25</sup>

However, the soldiers had not yet received their pay and would not for another one to two years. On May 1, a black ex-soldier was harassed by a group of Irish cops when he fell while trying to move off the sidewalk to let the officers pass. When officers tried to arrest the young ex-soldier, he ran to a crowd of thirty to sixty other former Union soldiers. A shootout began, though no one was killed. At this time, General Stoneman quickly ordered the troops back inside Fort Pickering; for a moment, it seemed as if the crisis had been averted, but in reality, it had just begun.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>B.W. Brice, Paymaster General, "Bounty to Colored Troops", Washington DC May 26, 1865, National Archives "The Negro in the Military Service of the United States, 1639-1886", Volume 6, 1865-1867, Call No. 858 Roll 4 Memphis Public Library.

<sup>26</sup>"Affidavits Related to the Memphis Riots, May 1866" Roll 37, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

On the night of May 1, 1865, young H. Rankin was studying at his school on Seventh and Clausey streets. When he looked up from his books, he saw, “a number of policemen coming in the direction where I was studying, with their revolvers was firing at all the colored soldiers they could see, and in a few minutes, they commenced firing indiscriminately at every colored person they could see.”<sup>27</sup> Rankin also reported that citizens joined in shooting at black civilians. On the following day, Rankin solemnly recalled seeing his school house burned down. He further found out those two men with shotguns from the night before had been looking for him. Rankin bitterly testified that he saw the whole affair commence and that it could have been stopped by a dozen men; he also swore it was started by the police.<sup>28</sup> Rankin’s school was one of eight burned during the riot.<sup>29</sup> John Walker, Benjamin Bullard, and others of the Collins Chapel made their marks in the testimony after describing their church being burned down on the night of the 2<sup>nd</sup>;<sup>30</sup> their church was one of three burned that night.

For three days, white citizens and police burned the homes of black residents, robbed, murdered, and raped.<sup>31</sup> Dozens of affidavits from black citizens describe mobs entering their home and ‘searching for weapons’. Wesley Ware was on the roof of his

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<sup>27</sup>H. Rankin testimony to Michael Walsh, “Affidavits Related to The Memphis Riots, May 1866” *ibid*.

<sup>28</sup>H. Rankin testimony to Michael Walsh, “Affidavits Related to The Memphis Riots, May 1866” Roll 37, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman’s Bureau).

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid*. Four of the black schools were located on Echoes Street in the Seventh Ward.

<sup>30</sup>Testimony to Michael Walsh, “Affidavits Related to the Memphis Riots, May 1866” Roll 37, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman’s Bureau).

<sup>31</sup>Col. Charles F. Johnson, Inspector General States of Ky. And Tennessee and Major T. W. Gilbreth, A. D. C. To Maj. Genl. Howard, Commissioner Bureau R. F. & A. Lands.

home on the second night. He was attempting to keep a fire spreading from his neighbor's house to his, when several men barged in and demanded his wife Martha let them search for guns. Obliging, she let them search through every trunk and drawer in the house; not finding any weapons, the men stole \$100 in cash from the Wares instead. The men claimed to be police officers, but Wesley made his mark on the affidavit and stated he could see no badges.<sup>32</sup> There were numerous incident reports of rioters looting their victim's homes which further contradict the idea of Irish police officers attacking African American soldiers based solely on outrage over job competition. These rioters were after the money of African Americans who finally had the opportunity to earn a living wage and did not have to depend on the white man for assistance any longer. Based on the Congressional reports, seventy-three percent of the rioters themselves who were identified resided in wards six, seven, and ten, where the riots occurred.<sup>33</sup> Ward Six was located between Union Street to the north, South Street to the south, the river to the west, and Hernando Street to the east. Ward Seven began at Hernando Street, east of Ward Six, and Ward Ten shared a border with the Sixth Ward on South Street.

These neighborhood men were responsible for the worst of the violence. "I saw the girl Frances Johnson who was shot and groaning, her mother was upbraiding the mob when they took the girl who was still alive and threw her into the fire and shot at her

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<sup>32</sup>Testimony to Michael Walsh, May 8, 1866, "Affidavits Related to the Memphis Riots, May 1866" Roll 37, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

<sup>33</sup>"Affidavits Related to the Memphis Riots, May 1866" Roll 37, Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau). The names of the rioters were cross-referenced in the Memphis City Directories, 1865-1870, Roll 182, Memphis Public Library.

mother who ran away. The girl was burned to death.”<sup>34</sup> So swore Anna George to an investigator named Sergeant Michael Walsh of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, sent to investigate the deadly riots. The riots were a manifestation of rising tensions building over the past year. The rioters were mostly small businessmen or tradesmen (almost 75%) and were not the Irish policemen and general laborers competing with African Americans for work as initially reported and long assumed.<sup>35</sup>

The riot of May 1866 in Memphis represented the fears and uncertainty in the South during the beginning of Reconstruction in America. Clearly, tensions on the surrounding plantations had led former slaves to seek a better life in the city, but with a crippled economy and oppressive elite, the dream of this better life was threatened almost from the start. Black soldiers were largely depended upon by the military to enforce peace within the city, and many were defining their power individually. The daily barrages of propaganda from racist papers like the *Avalanche* and *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, quite possibly fueled resentment in some officers who believed that African Americans were undermining their authority. However, this is unfounded because the Union Army put the soldiers in charge and the black soldiers were simply following orders. Additionally, while African Americans were certainly looking for better work than what they experienced in the fields, it would be false to assume it was with the motivation to take jobs away from anyone else. Instead, African Americans were actively defining their ideas of how to control their own labor both on the plantations and

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<sup>34</sup>Affidavit of Anna George, “Reports of Outrages, Riots, and Murders, Jan 15, 1866-Aug. 12, 1868”, Roll 34 Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedman’s Bureau).

<sup>35</sup>“Reports of Outrages, Riots, and Murders, Jan 15, 1866-Aug. 12, 1868”, Roll 34 Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedman’s Bureau). The names of the rioters were cross-referenced in the Memphis City Directories, 1865-1870, Roll 182, Memphis Public Library.

in Memphis, which caused great resentment and outrage in the white population, which had its own plans for regaining dominance. Yet while the explanations of why police initiated the riot are relatively clear, what caused common white citizens to erupt in violence, other than building tensions within the city, warrants further discussion.

The Union Army had attracted thousands of former slaves to the city of Memphis for their protection, for work, and for service. After occupation, most of the Freedman's hospitals, schools, and courts were located within the largest parts of the black community, in between Beale and South streets in Ward Six, and provided a means of agency through employment. It is therefore no coincidence that this ward is where the majority of the violence occurred, as this was the neighborhood experiencing the most profound changes of the city. Yet economic competition cannot account for the participation of prominent businessmen in the riot; three city officials and the editor of the city newspaper *The Avalanche* were involved in the riots, while only six participants were listed as unemployed or laborers.<sup>36</sup> John Pendergast and his two sons, John Callahan and George McGinn, were grocery store owners who had stores on South and Causey Streets near where the riots occurred. David Roach was a policeman who lived two blocks away.<sup>37</sup> These prominent members of the community could not have been in fear for their jobs. However, they decided to lead attacks on African American workers who were taking control over their own lives and succeeding without the consent or help of the oppressive white community. These newly freed African Americans were defying

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<sup>36</sup>Memphis City Directories, 1865-1870, Roll 182, Memphis Public Library.; See also, Waller, "Community, Class", p 237. See also Waller's list, 244.

<sup>37</sup>"Reports of Outrages, Riots, and Murders, Jan 15, 1866-Aug. 12, 1868", Roll 34 Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau).

the old paternalism and becoming independent, taking power away from those who had hoarded it for so long. The terror and violence of the riot served to reset the social order.

As the large amount of looting indicates, rioters were also outraged at the benefits African American workers were now gaining, which, in addition to being armed and receiving court justice rights from the Bureau, also included economic prosperity.<sup>38</sup> This new prosperity is the first time that African Americans en masse were no longer dependent on the paternalism of the Old South. Yet not all African American workers were attacked. In fact, some were specifically avoided. It therefore appears that the white residents of Ward Six and the surrounding wards were focusing their attacks on the migrant African Americans who were coming from the surrounding countryside and unfamiliar with the tight control that white Memphians had over the free black population before the war. John Pendergrast, one of the leaders of the riot, was in fact reported to have saved black grocery store owner Henry Porter and many other local black business owners from the mob terror.<sup>39</sup>

Neither racial tensions nor economic uncertainty alone can fully account for the riots; a combination of the two in an effort to maintain control of the labor force resulted in neighborhood residents of all economic backgrounds to terrorize for three nights the black workers who were not compliant with the old social order. White citizens were outraged by the upturning of a social structure that stood long before the war; African Americans were terrorized in a white middle class attempt to begin reverting back to the

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<sup>38</sup>“Memphis Riots and Massacres” House report NO. 101, US 39<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, July 25, 1866. P 388.

<sup>39</sup>Memphis Riots and Massacres” House report NO. 101, US 39<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, July 25, 1866. p 168, see also p. 332 for a similar account involving Mary Grady, a boarding house owner on South Street.

old paternal social order that had ruled the mid-South before Emancipation. Further investigation into Reconstruction and how Memphis began adapting to new ideas of labor is necessary to better understand the repercussions of conflicting ideas of freedom, race, and class. Each region in the South, each city, and every rural region had different experiences that warrant a separate examination to better understand how African Americans participated in and were affected by the changing nature of labor and how a city began redefining itself. The next decade would be an attempt by African Americans, with the help of the Bureau, to change a system of oppression that would not break easily.

## Chapter IV

### Radical Reconstruction

The effects of the riot would be felt immediately and would resonate throughout the city. Almost immediately, African American workers began gaining more influence and participation in shaping their right to work for a living wage without discrimination, threat of violence, or death. While the riot signaled a beginning of a new white oppression in the New South, it also signaled the beginning of radical, Congressional Reconstruction that opened up new economic and labor opportunities for African Americans. Black Memphians now began to take control of personal destiny by accepting respectable jobs and opening businesses, schools, and churches. No longer would the African American community live under the oppressive hand of injustice; instead, a new and prominent community began emerging from the ashes of the riot. The years from after the riot to the end of Reconstruction represent the third phase in the evolution of African American labor in Memphis, a phase where skilled artisan positions, business ownership, educational opportunities, and economic freedom opened doors that had been closed in the city since its founding.

According to the 1870 census, over seventeen thousand African Americans were living throughout the city, though wards seven and ten held 5,244 and 2,328 of the population, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after the riot, four young African American men petitioned General Fisk in a response to the constant push of the Federal government to return former slaves looking for work to the surrounding plantations and farms. The men, led by Joseph P. Cohrell, proposed that five influential men of the African

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<sup>1</sup>See appendix 3.

American community be organized into a citizen's board whose responsibility would be to convince other African Americans to return to work on the farm. This board would draw up labor contracts, instruct the workers on their duties, ensure their comfort and safety, and provide the community with a sense of self-empowerment. The Bureau agreed, "Believing this to be the most efficient mode to assist the Bureau in its endeavors to work for the good and welfare of our people, we submit this to you. Knowing the deep and heartfelt interest you have always taken in the forwarding of interests of our people."<sup>2</sup> Circular Order number 70 was issued on May 30, 1866 by Brigadier Major General Clinton B. Fisk. It ordered General Runkle to appoint Joseph P. Cohrell, George W. Preston, C.C. Dickenson, and Peter Robinson to begin carrying out the board powers, "such as all may be induced to leave the city."<sup>3</sup> Not only was the Bureau ready to assure that another riot would not start, African Americans were also ready to take the next step in becoming leaders within the community and surrounding area. Black citizens of Memphis were determined to thrive in the city as well as on the surrounding plantations.

Many African Americans came from the surrounding area in hopes of earning a living from some of the specialized skills they acquired while slaves. Warren Bonner, a baker, and his wife Francis were able to make a comfortable living and a home for themselves while managing a savings of over \$3,000.<sup>4</sup> Robert Miller and his wife Mary

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<sup>2</sup>Special order 70, May 30, 1866, "Special Orders and Circulars Oct. 1865-Oct. 1868" Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>1870 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Rolls 1562-1563, Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, Memphis Public Library; Indexes to Deposit Ledgers in Branches of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company 1865-1874—Memphis, Norfolk, Richmond Counties, Roll 5, National Archives M817, Call No. 474.

moved from North Carolina. Robert's job as a blacksmith let them live in the sixth ward in a home of their own; not many were able to afford such a luxury. Men such as Charles Bethel, a forty year old carpenter from Kentucky, lived with William Boyd (twenty-one years old) and John Collyer (twenty years old) who were bakers from Tennessee. Eight young men who worked as barbers lived together in Kate Butler's boarding house in the fifth ward. They earned a living from trades they had likely acquired under the yoke of slavery.<sup>5</sup> Other African Americans were self employed and decided to open their own businesses.

While business ownership was not a common opportunity for all African Americans, despite the growing population, some were successful. Joseph Moseby moved from Virginia and opened a saloon in Memphis's sixth ward. While he had no family living with him, at forty five years old he was able to support himself and live alone. John Hudson from Ohio and William Jones from Arkansas were saloon keepers living with Matthew Serrells and Lewis King, both from Virginia, who were restaurant owners. Joseph Oliver moved from New Jersey and opened a grocery store.<sup>6</sup> He managed a savings of \$70,000.<sup>7</sup> Frank Brown and Washington Brown were from Tennessee and opened grocery stores as well. A twenty two year old young man named Joseph Purdy became a book and shoe maker, and Matthew Harden, a fifty year old man

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<sup>5</sup>1870 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Rolls 1562-1563, Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, Memphis Public Library.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Indexes to Deposit Ledgers in Branches of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company 1865-1874—Memphis, Norfolk, Richmond Counties, Roll 5, National Archives M817, Call No. 474.

from Georgia, became an ice dealer in the seventh ward.<sup>8</sup> Memphis had never seen African American owned businesses before.

Some African American men brought talents that undoubtedly made them pillars of the community. Clement Bakes moved his wife Mary, his four children, and his father, Abraham, from Virginia to work as a physician in the sixth ward. Columbus Polk, a fifty year old single man from Virginia became an assistant cashier at the Freedman's Bank. Edwin Jones was a twenty one year old architect, also from Virginia. John Moody moved from Virginia and made his living as a hat maker in the first ward.<sup>9</sup> Wesley Simmons was a twenty six year old musician who managed to save \$3,174.<sup>10</sup>

The diversity of these jobs represents a new phase in the evolution of African American labor. Their lives also represent the importance of kinship in the African American community and the diversity of origins for the new African American citizens of Memphis were coming from. African Americans were now able to own the land they worked for the first time; the life of a farmer has never been simple, but it was a true sign of independence. James McCrossen, a forty-four year old sailor, met his wife Ann who was born in New York. He took in a teacher from Virginia named Hempton Peinn, a barber named William Washington and his wife Mary, both from Virginia, Fobe Williams from North Carolina with his wife Margaret, and Harriet Rodgers, a washerwoman from Missouri and her son William. Together they were able to stay in a

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<sup>8</sup>1870 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Rolls 1562-1563, Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, Memphis Public Library.

<sup>9</sup>1870 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Rolls 1562-1563, Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, Memphis Public Library.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid; Indexes to Deposit Ledgers in Branches of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company 1865-1874—Memphis, Norfolk, Richmond Counties, Roll 5, National Archives M817, Call No. 474.

house valued at \$50,000.<sup>11</sup> In another home in the same ward, carpenter Albert Willis and his wife Ann lived with Wesley Simmons, a twenty six year old musician, and two other men, Archie Demis and Monroe June. This household represents the special trades and artisan positions that were now opening up for African American workers that had previously been denied. Stubbs Green, a farmer from Georgia, his wife Maria, and their two boys lived in the sixth ward with Harriet, his mother from Tennessee, a twenty seven year-old porter named William Burgen, and his wife Cecilia from Alabama, and a twenty year old washerwoman from Tennessee named Ella Smith.<sup>12</sup> The variety of new jobs available for workers, new living arrangements, and many more like them demonstrate that African Americans were bringing skills and an eagerness to work with them from all over. Further, a community was beginning to form as the kinship ties grew with families and friends coming together to begin a better life as workers finally in control of their own destinies. The Freedman's Bureau did its best to continue these trends and support this eagerness.

A major goal for both the Bureau and African Americans alike was creating an educated population. Now that adults were able to earn a living that could provide for the entire family without reliance on plantation owners or white bosses, the children were able to gain an education not afforded to their parents less than a decade ago. With the help of benevolent societies from the North and African Americans within the community, Bureau schools and private schools were opened to help African American

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<sup>11</sup>1870 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Rolls 1562-1563, Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, Memphis Public Library;

<sup>12</sup>1870 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Rolls 1562-1563, Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, Memphis Public Library.

children. Sabbath and night schools were also opened for African American working adults who wished to broaden their horizons.

However, throughout the South, and in the city of Memphis in particular, there was a white hostility that made this goal difficult to realize fully from the start. With short funding and such a small staff, the Bureau was forced to rely on the compliance of State and local officials to aid in the funding and supply of the Bureau schools, which was met with great resistance. In 1868, the report from Shelby County noted,

It is a sad fact that some very bad men are opening such schools. Several complaints have been made to the State Supt. Against men who have collected as much money as possible out of communities under promise of teaching a school which was never opened or only for a few days. Some very immoral white persons are attempting to teach such schools.<sup>13</sup>

It was clear that the state and city governments needed to cooperate and contribute if the schools were to be successful. However, the city officials in Memphis were particularly resistant and did not direct tax funds accordingly. In addition to the Bureau reports, the *Memphis Daily Post* reported, “The suggestion is necessary that the colored people hold their political leaders strictly to the promises that have been made [to] them respecting free and general schools. They will do it, and if our legislators are wise, they will soon remove the obstacles which now obstruct the motion of machinery for schools.”<sup>14</sup> The *Memphis Daily Post* also reported on a meeting of the Commissioners of the School Fund

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<sup>13</sup>Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Tennessee Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1870, Roll 6 National Archives M-1000, Memphis Public Libraries.

<sup>14</sup>“Freedman’s Schools”, February 12, 1868, *Memphis Daily Post*.

that the Controller's Report cited a debt to the State in the amount of \$1,500,000.<sup>15</sup> To combat this hostility, the Bureau began monthly reports from each district in 1866 in order to monitor the progress that was being made. Superintendent of the Bureau Lt. Col. Charles E. Compton reported the resentment tended to be more toward white teachers teaching black children rather than black teachers teaching black children.<sup>16</sup>

African Americans throughout Tennessee began petitioning for schools to train teachers from within the community. The Bureau agreed and in 1868 the Tennessee Central College was opened in Nashville. However, no such college was ever opened in Memphis. The *Memphis Public Ledger* report reflected the popular sentiment found in dozens of articles over the Reconstruction years in Memphis. "A lot of vagrant negroes from the county are enjoying school privileges free of expense while white children from outside the city limits are strictly excluded. They teach the negro child one great lesson above all others, to wit: that the white race is an enemy to the negro."<sup>17</sup> Some of these schools were taught and run exclusively by African Americans and an enthusiastic enrollment occurred despite the white resistance. The article specifically mentions "'imported' radical teachers", which clearly demonstrates the root of anger directed towards white teachers in free schools rather than black teachers at the same educational

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<sup>15</sup>"Meeting of the Commissioners of the School Fund" March 30, 1868, *Memphis Daily Post*; A report from the "Memphis Public Ledger" supports evidence of the corrupt and abused distribution of education funds. It states, "People have become tired of asking what has become of the school fund. Indeed waste, peculations, prerequisites, and stealage [sic] have become so common of late, and so utterly without any danger of resulting responsibility, that it seems useless to pry very curiously into such matters." 'School Fund and What Has Become of It' April 3, 1868, *Memphis Public Ledger*.

<sup>16</sup>"School Fund and What Has Become of It" April 3, 1868, *Memphis Public Ledger*.

<sup>17</sup>"City Schools: How the Colored Idea is taught to Shoot" February 18, 1870, *Memphis Public Ledger*. In fact, this was not the first time the *Memphis Public Ledger* made such accusations and the Shelby County School Board began investigating the matter. See also; *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, February 15, 1870.

institutions. The lack of a black teacher's school in Memphis reflects sentiments toward the African American population in Memphis after the Civil War; black teachers were allowed to work, as long as they were not too independent of the paternalism of the white society.

The anger over integrated schools and African Americans gaining an education from white teachers was undoubtedly driven by the white middle and upper classes that feared the loss of control over the workforce. Nearly every day in the newspapers, white Memphians read the outraged rants of the editors who were campaigning for segregated schools and the right of Memphians to choose what schools their tax dollars would fund. For example, the *Memphis Daily Appeal* editorial discussed a bill which would allow parents the right to choose what school to fund, and what school they can attend:

Whatever may be the immediate effect of this policy, that it will definitely break up the common school system in the South no rational man can doubt. The intelligent white people in the South of course, will not send their children to the same schools with the blacks. It is contrary to reason, to good conscience, to the course of human events, to tax the man of substance and compel their children to associate with those who endeavor to force them to pay expenses, and to give them the supposed benefit of social intercourse.<sup>18</sup>

The paper claimed that those just freed from "servitude" were not fit to be students and that allowing this would admit social equality, which "cannot be". The article expresses the fear of education and the possibility of intelligent, ambitious African Americans wanting more to life than to work as sharecroppers or in white homes as servants when it

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<sup>18</sup>December 8, 1867, *Memphis Daily Appeal*, Memphis Daily Appeal (TN) Sept 21, 1867 thru Jul 20, 1868 Roll 98, Memphis Public Library.

claims that the schools are, “very often devices to maintain idleness.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly, certain papers wrote with a specific agenda.

However, *The Memphis Daily Post*, the liberal paper, was in support of such efforts from African Americans and northern benevolent societies: “The opportunities afforded to colored parents to obtain for their children an education, without charge, should not be neglected. No more important subject than the education of the children can attract their attention and the advantages of it should be secured at almost any sacrifice.”<sup>20</sup> However, funding was never appropriately distributed and thus African Americans were largely contributing to the school funds through their own finances.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, with the understanding that the northern benevolent societies were funding and proctoring the schools in Memphis and the South on a temporary basis, it is clear that there was a call in the African American community for teacher training colleges. Yet the growing resentment in the city of educated African Americans prevented this from coming to fruition.

Despite a hostile resistance in Memphis, African Americans took advantage of the opportunity for education and employment and began training themselves to teach their children. In 1869 the City of Memphis Schools for African Americans had a 945 full time pupil enrollment in nine schools.<sup>22</sup> Five of these schools were located on Orleans

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<sup>19</sup>December 8, 1867, *Memphis Daily Appeal*, Memphis Daily Appeal (TN) Sept 21, 1867 thru Jul 20, 1868 Roll 98, Memphis Public Library.

<sup>20</sup>“Free schools for colored children” January 16, 1868, *Memphis Daily Post*. Roll 101, Memphis Public Library.

<sup>21</sup>Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Tennessee Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1870, Roll 6 National Archives M-1000, Memphis Public Libraries.

<sup>22</sup>Nashville had a grand total of 1,281 pupils in regular attendance.

Street, at the Lincoln School House. The Centenary Chapel School was located on South Street, the Phoenix School on Rayburn Avenue, and the Washington Street School on Washington Ave. There were twenty nine teachers total, nineteen white and ten African American.<sup>23</sup> In the entire state of Tennessee, the total number of pupils was 5,623, the total number of teachers was 138, and the total number of schools was 127.<sup>24</sup> The average salary in 1870 for teachers in black schools was \$650; in white schools, the average annual pay was \$943.75.<sup>25</sup> People like Whettie Graw, a twenty year old from Alabama, twenty four year old Elizabeth Webster from Tennessee, seventeen year old Charlotte King from Ohio, seventeen year old Samuel Nails from Virginia, and Horatio and Maria Rankin (husband and wife from Kentucky and North Carolina, respectively), all found employment teaching fellow African Americans for the Bureau in a dangerous climate to better their lives and the lives of those around them.<sup>26</sup>

Schools were a direct means of forming a community and a potential means of improving job opportunities for African Americans. The School Act had established a state school system and guaranteed equal distribution of funds to schools without discrimination. However, it was abolished in 1870. Despite its exciting efforts, the Bureau and the State were not able to adequately regulate the collection of taxes or their equal distribution. Therefore, all school matters were now in the hands of the county

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<sup>23</sup>Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Tennessee Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1870, Roll 6 National Archives M-1000, Memphis Public Libraries.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>"The School Board" *Memphis Daily Appeal* February 15, 1870.

<sup>26</sup>1870 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Rolls 1562-1563, Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, Memphis Public Library.

governments. The *Ledger* reported, “According to the ACT of December 14<sup>th</sup>, all contracts then made to the schools were to be carried out, but no new ones can be made. Whatever funds on hand should be disbursed to the counties according to scholastic appointment, that the teachers might be employed as long as the money will last.”<sup>27</sup> Memphis was given \$9,000 for the remainder of the year. From that point on, the parents of students were responsible for any funding of their children’s education and “the negroes will have to go work and educate themselves.”<sup>28</sup> After the election of a conservative government in Memphis in 1868, the dream of adequately staffed and equally funded African American schools had all but vanished.<sup>29</sup> While the Free Schools were not closed, they were now at the mercy of a racist and conservative white government.

Another opportunity for community building, personal growth, and employment came through the churches. Before the war, African Americans were not allowed by law to worship unsupervised or even congregate in large numbers and not at all unless under the watchful eye of a white person. However, after the war, the church afforded African Americans an opportunity for employment and community, much like schools. In one household in the fifth ward, Jordan Early, a thirty five year old pastor from Virginia, and

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<sup>27</sup>“The System Abolished: Teachers Abroad and Houses Closed” February 10, 1870, *The Memphis Public Ledger*.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>In 1868 the *Memphis Daily Appeal* reported excitedly about the election of a conservative city government that won against the ‘Radical’ party. With the election of Mayor John W Leftwich, the franchise law was repealed, and those white citizens who refused to swear a loyalty oath to the US government could once again vote. (“The Victory: Grand Celebration, Immense Procession, --A Large Meeting, Serenades, ETC ETC ETC” January 4, 1868, *The Memphis Daily Appeal*. The white conservative population of Memphis was already gaining more control and influence than the Bureau, which was underfunded and not able to fully regulate their orders throughout the city.

his wife Sarah lived with his brother Richard, a twenty three year old schoolteacher from Missouri, and his ten year old daughter Soren.<sup>30</sup> Sam Anderson and George Washington from the seventh ward were fellow preachers living together. Since churches were a means to form a communal identity, it is not surprising that the majority of African American preachers lived in the seventh ward.<sup>31</sup> The titles of the men indicate a variety of faiths represented as well. Alfred Anderson was a thirty seven year old minister, Elder Algec a forty nine year old preacher, Elijah Marlow a church Sexton, and Blackburn Williamson a pastor.<sup>32</sup> The church represented a newfound freedom never before experienced by the African American population. It provided a means of employment, of community, of spiritual growth, and of independence.

Yet there was something else working against the success of African Americans in Memphis besides white resentment; the threat of disease. As populations grew in the cities, so too did the impact of diseases. Already in 1868, New York companies were advertising remedies for small pox and yellow fever, something many Memphians took seriously.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the years, the papers reported on death rates in Memphis and other cities. One year it was reported that eighty-two people had died from yellow fever

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<sup>30</sup>1870 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Rolls 1562-1563, Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, Memphis Public Library.

<sup>31</sup>Interestingly though, ward one, while holding the fourth largest African American population had no preachers reported. However, wards two, three, four and nine were also without a preacher. Ward five was home to three, ward seven to nine (as stated above), and only one each lived in wards eight and ten.; See Appendix four for population breakdowns of each ward.

<sup>32</sup>1870 Tennessee Census, Shelby County Rolls 1562-1563, Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, Memphis Public Library.

<sup>33</sup>June 23, 1868 *Memphis Daily Appeal*.

in New Orleans and twenty one in Arlington, Texas over two days.<sup>34</sup> Fear of a loss of family was obviously a main concern, but the fear of a depleted workforce had also grown. The *Appeal* claimed, “The disease is spreading in the country...the stores have closed and the newspapers have ceased publication.”<sup>35</sup> Plantation owners were outraged over not having a full time work force at their disposal and feared the dwindling numbers would adversely affect their crop yields. Less than a year later, the *Appeal* reported, “Almost the only hope for raising cotton for export in [the] future now depends upon its cultivation upon small farms by white labor. Congress is now imperatively called upon to make such provisions for the ‘wards of the Nation’ as will save them from famine and pestilence.”<sup>36</sup> These increasing fears of an uncontrolled workforce coupled with a massive plague would ultimately be realized in the epidemic of 1873. The hope of African Americans searching for true freedom in Memphis would be short lived due to a white population that saw its city invaded by two forces, former slaves and pestilence.

The hopes of the 1860s were briefly realized in the 1870s. When the Bureau left in May of 1869, in accordance with the act of July 25, 1868, the African American population was left to the devices and will of the bitter and outraged white population. The conservative political party began a systematic disenfranchisement which all but eliminated African American voting through poll taxes, intimidation, and voter

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<sup>34</sup>“Late Night Dispatches”, September 23, 1867, *Memphis Daily Appeal*.

<sup>35</sup>“Late Night Dispatches”, September 23, 1867, *Memphis Daily Appeal*.

<sup>36</sup>“The Suffering Freedmen” January 5, 1868, *The Memphis Daily Appeal*. Roll 98, Memphis Public Library.

requirements by the 1890s.<sup>37</sup> While African Americans in Tennessee did experience some voting in Tennessee until the 1880s, this disappeared by the turn of the century.<sup>38</sup> Further, African American business ownership became more difficult to achieve. Elaine Frantz Parsons contends, “In the Reconstruction-era South, where freed people were increasingly asserting their own agency, the very form of the Klan attack relegated them to passive spectatorship.”<sup>39</sup> However, African Americans did enjoy another form of empowerment in Memphis briefly when permitted to join the police force during the yellow fever outbreak, and did keep these positions until segregation was reinstated after the city recovered.<sup>40</sup> By 1892 there was only one African American police officer in Memphis left, Dallas Lee, who resigned in 1895.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the prosperity and the variety of employment, business ownership, education, and church brought to the African American community in Memphis, it was

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<sup>37</sup>Numan V. Bartley, “In Search of the New South: Southern Politics after Reconstruction”, *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 10, No. 4, *The Promise of American History: Progress and Prospects* (Dec., 1982), 150-163.

<sup>38</sup>Joseph H. Cartwright, *The Triumph of Jim Crow: Tennessee Race Relations in the 1880's*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1976).; see also J. Morgan Kousser, “Post-Reconstruction Suffrage Restrictions in Tennessee: A New Look at the V.O. Key Thesis”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No. 4 (Dec., 1973), 655-683.

<sup>39</sup>Elaine Frantz Parsons, “Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan”, *The Journal Of American History* Vol. 92, No. 3 (Dec., 2005), pp. 811-836. Parsons contends that the political influence the Klan gained was through the secretiveness coupled with the dramatic displays of pageantry and parade which made the initial attacks appear like more of a performance to white people and therefore not seen as intimidating or threatening to whites in both the North and South, while obviously horrifying for African Americans targeted.

<sup>40</sup>Dennis C. Rousey, “Yellow Fever and Black Policemen in Memphis: A Post-Reconstruction Anomaly”, *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 51 No. 3 (August, 1985), pp 357-374. Rousey notes that in 1870 the percentage of Blacks in the total urban population was 39 and there were no African American officers, yet in 1880 the percentage of the total population was 44 and 23 percent of the police force was African American. (Rousey, “Yellow Fever”, Table one, 359).

<sup>41</sup>bid.

not enough to boost the economy of the city that was largely dependent on one industry, cotton, now that slavery was abolished. The white citizens that depended on this crop were likely fearful at the loss of the untold wealth and privilege they had before the war. The threat of a total collapse of this social structure to unregulated black employment, education, and voting was constantly in the minds of former slave owners and cotton traders; African American empowerment was a direct threat to this prosperity. The resentment extended to Free Schools because the limited and corrupt funding distribution demonstrated a misuse of funds that the racist papers claimed could otherwise be going towards the benefit of poor white children.<sup>42</sup> Again the papers edited by and representative of powerful whites systematically turned working class whites against the African American population through the insinuation of theft, this time of education.

Coupled with the fear of a weakened economy and a labor pool threatened by disease, African American Memphians were now at the mercies of New South oppression from the white population of Memphis which escalated once the Freedman's Bureau left in 1870. The hopeful gains of the black citizens diminished once there was no Federal intervention over the white dominance of work, education, and politics. In one generation, Memphis had reverted back to a form of social inequality that nearly mirrored conditions before the Civil War. Work and social freedoms for all African Americans in Memphis were nearly erased. While African Americans were no longer under the yoke of slavery, there would be no celebration of total freedom from oppression for over a hundred years after the war.

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<sup>42</sup>September 26, 1867, *Memphis Daily Appeal*.

## Conclusion

African Americans were brought to Memphis for sole purpose of making profit for plantation owners by any means necessary. The white planter class came to the area to make a profit off of African American labor. A pattern of white control over African Americans continued throughout the history of Memphis.<sup>1</sup> A new way of looking at southern African American history is beginning to emerge. Unique conditions existed in Memphis since its founding that created extremely oppressive conditions for slaves and free people of color, creating a resonating struggle for the African American community to overcome. Control over African American labor came in many forms, including work, economics, education, and other social factors. Before the Civil War, labor conditions within the city for free people of color and slaves were almost identical; both were dependent on the white population for jobs, which mirrored work on the plantations.<sup>2</sup> For example, neither slave nor free persons were able to move about or congregate freely, the papers of free people of color were questioned, curfews and laws in place limited African Americans only to work granted by the white population.<sup>3</sup> Once the Union Army invaded, the free population increased and white citizens had to find a new way to control African American labor. After Emancipation, however, when the army put refugees to

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<sup>1</sup>Recently, Cynthia Jones Sadler's dissertation, "Standing in the Shadows: African American Informants and Allies of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission" supports this by examining sovereignty committees which prevented any organization in the Civil Rights Era in Tennessee and Mississippi.

<sup>2</sup>Jobs for free people of color were almost exclusively limited to dray work for men and washer work for women, jobs many slaves held outside of the city.

<sup>3</sup>Eugene D. Genovese in "The Slave States of North America", discusses the fears and dangers free people of color faced in the late antebellum period in the work; David W. Cohen & Jack P. Greene, Eds., *Neither Slave Nor Free: The Freedmen of African Descent in the Slave Societies of the New World*. (Baltimore: The St. Johns University Free Press, 1972), 258-278.

work, the African American community began a road to empowerment. No longer considered contraband, black men and women were now able to actively create futures with limitless possibilities.

The riots of 1866 demonstrated the understanding (but not unity) among black business owners and white business owners. Those who were not considered outsiders were allowed to become successful, but those considered a threat (mainly former slaves) were attacked. The increase of the African American population at close of war generated fear of the large number of free blacks in city, African Americans who were not compliant with the pre-war social order. Therefore too much black agency, rather than strictly race, caused the riots. White Memphians attempted to assert authority over the black population. The riots initiated the Federal Government's Radical Reconstruction on national level, but no local law enforcement measures were ever taken and the perpetrators of the violence were never prosecuted. In essence, black people in the area who were attacked during the riot were sacrificial lambs for benefit of the entire South. After the riots, there was a brief period of gain and empowerment for the community when African Americans gained skillful employment, business ownership, education, and community building and employment through churches. Further, while women rarely held skilled positions, it was still a sign of empowerment to contribute to the economy of the household. Yet after the Union Army left the city, African Americans were gradually beaten back into submission by the close of the century. New questions have risen about the leaders of this community; with all of the new empowerment under Radical Reconstruction, who were the men who came forth to the Bureau to ask to be liaisons between workers and the plantation owners? What motivated

such a bold move, or *who* motivated them? What motivated African American doctors, architects, and ministers to migrate to Memphis from Northern cities?

When the city was invaded, a cyclical pattern of oppression began that lasted for generations. For example, when Ida B. Wells attempted to establish independent schools and had to flee the city in the 1890s, the additional riots in the area during the early twentieth century,<sup>4</sup> and white middle and upper class people controlling African American leaders through institutions like schools and churches. This pattern continued into the Crump years and the labor demonstrations in the 1960s; the unifying factor throughout the city's history of African American oppression is the white population targeting the middle class black population that resisted forms of social control put in effect after the collapse of Reconstruction.<sup>5</sup>

Almost immediately after the Civil War, white Southerners began trying to find a way to return African Americans back to some form of slavery or control over labor. When federal forces left Memphis and the South in the early 1870's, an exploitative system of labor was immediately put into effect that relied on force, brutality, and oppression that was different from the old paternal system of slavery. African Americans were systematically denied any access to the mechanism of wealth achievement and gain, which consequently left families in debt and poverty for generations to come. Not only were African Americans in Memphis denied an opportunity to achieve the American dream, it was stolen from them. A pattern of violence developed whenever African

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<sup>4</sup>Some of the worst violence of the Red Summer Riot of 1919 occurred in Elaine, Arkansas, less than one hundred miles away from Memphis. For more on this, see: O.A. Rogers Jr., "The Elaine Race Riots of 1919," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 19, NO. 2, (Summer 1960), 142-450.

<sup>5</sup>See Laurie Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

Americans made too many economic strides and consequently, leadership in the African American community was regularly being driven out of the city.

The Reconstruction era was the foundation for keeping a system in place throughout the years, with periodic episodes of violence attacking labor to maintain control over it. White citizens determined who controlled businesses and who was in charge of schools and churches; those chosen were working with the white community to allow them to maintain control over the city. Those who were not compliant, most commonly the Black middle-class intelligentsia, were run out of town or forced to flee. In order to understand the legacy of social history in this city, it is important to give voice to those who were denied recognition in their lifetimes, those forgotten or ignored. Examining the lives of African American laborers reveals the evolution of a labor system that began with slavery, showed a brief glimmer of great promise and self reliance, but eventually turned to a system of oppression in a new era know as the 'New South'.

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**Appendix One**  
**African American Free Populations in the**  
**City of Memphis**  
**Before The Civil War**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Free Population</b>	<b>Black Men</b>	<b>Mulatto Men</b>	<b>Black Women</b>	<b>Mulatto Women</b>
<b>1820</b>	0				
<b>1830</b>	83	UNK	UNK	UNK	UNK
<b>1840</b>	99	63	UNK	36	UNK
<b>1850</b>	125	30	26	43	26
<b>1860</b>	193	43	35	43	72

**Appendix Two**

**Total Slave Populations in Memphis and Shelby County**

**City of Memphis**

	<b>Ward I</b>	<b>Ward II</b>	<b>Ward III</b>	<b>Ward VI</b>	<b>Ward V</b>	<b>Ward VI</b>	<b>Ward VII</b>	<b>Ward VIII</b>
<b>1850</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>420</b>	<b>420</b>	<b>599</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>
<b>1860</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>319</b>	<b>366</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>1081</b>	<b>420</b>

**Total in Shelby County (Including Memphis)**

	<b>Shelby County</b>	<b>Memphis</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1850</b>	11,998	2,362	14,360
<b>1860</b>	12,817	3,451	16,268

**Appendix Three**

**City of Memphis Free African American**

**Ward Populations 1850-1870**

<b>Ward</b>	<b>1850</b>	<b>1860</b>	<b>1870</b>
<b>I</b>	16	21	1276
<b>II</b>	17	6	606
<b>III</b>	10	5	484
<b>IV</b>	14	1	343
<b>V</b>	41	36	802
<b>VI</b>	26	33	1,645
<b>VII</b>	—	90	5,244
<b>VIII</b>	—	4	1,736
<b>VIII</b>	—	—	983
<b>X</b>	—	—	2,328