

Railroading Black Families:
African American Men, Family, and Labor in Post-Emancipation Georgia

by

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Daniel prayed and said, Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are His: And He changeth the times and the seasons: He removeth kings, and setteth up kings: He giveth wisdom unto the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding: He revealeth the deep and secret things: He knoweth what is in the darkness, and the light dwelleth with Him. I thank thee, and praise thee, O thou God of my fathers, who hast given me wisdom and might, and hast made known unto me now what we desired of thee: for thou hast now made known unto us the king's matter.

Daniel 2: 20-23

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of Sister Veronica Mullings, one of my favorite teammates and ministry partners. She was a tall, statuesque, singer/teacher/preacher, with broad shoulders, a bright smile and a big voice. She had a baker's touch, stood with perfect posture, and spoke with almost flawless diction. Sis. Mullings was one of the finest Christians I've ever known.

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skills. She encouraged me to apply to graduate school. And, when my dissertation was in shambles and my career vision was muddy, she offered timely advice and a listening ear. She has been critical to my success.

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Introduction

*Workin' on de railroad, fifty cents a day.
De boss at de comp'ny sto sign all I makes
Away.
Mammy po'ly write, "Please sen' money,
Son."
But I ain't got no ready made money!
But I ain't go no ready made money, my God
Damn black soul I can't send her none*

Not long after Civil War hostilities came to an end General Clinton B. Fisk, recently installed as an Assistant Commissioner of Freedmen's Bureau operations in Kentucky and Tennessee, embarked on a speaking tour of his province. He hoped to give recently emancipated black men and women the kind of advice that would help them "set forward in the path of progress."¹ His message to black men was pointed and simple: "Be a man." Black men's manhood, Fisk explained, would be measured by their ability to create and sustain financially independent households. "Earn money, and save it... Husbands must provide for their families," he explained,

¹ Brevet Major General C.B. Fisk, Plain Counsels for Freedmen: In sixteen brief lectures (American Tract Society: Boston, 1866), 1.

warning “Your wives will not love you if you do not provide bread and clothes for them.”²

Representative of the Freedmen’s Bureau’s approach to the newly emancipated, Fisk’s lecture series was a direct response to the large numbers of African Americans who were petitioning their local bureau offices for material support in the wake of emancipation.³ The Bureau believed that the sooner ex-slaves learned their duties as free citizens the sooner the numbers needing aid would diminish. For men, duty meant hard work and learning how to financially provide for their families. For black women, it meant respecting and obeying their husbands and fathers. The Freedman’s Bureau head, General O.O. Howard, believed that Fisk’s presentations were vital to teaching former slaves how to become independent. Indeed, he distributed published copies of the speeches, collected in a pamphlet titled “Plain Counsels for the Freedmen” to Bureau outposts across the South with instructions to circulate and read them to newly emancipated freedmen and women.

Undergirding Fisk’s teachings and the Bureau’s anti-poverty strategy was the assumption that for black men, family life and labor were inseparable. Whereas under slavery, bondspeople had neither rights to family or remuneration, in freedom, Fisk opined, blacks would “begin life anew ... on a pure foundation.”⁴ Black men would be compensated for their work and establish households with wives and children who

² Fisk, *Plain Counsels*, 31.

³ Mary Farmer-Kaiser, “With a Weight of Circumstances Like Milestones About their Necks”: Freedwomen, Federal Relief and the Benevolent Guardianship of the Freedmen’s Bureau,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 115.3 (2007): 413-442.

⁴ Fisk, *Plain Counsels*, 31.

were politically, economically and legally dependent on them as husbands and fathers. Men's work and work conditions would no longer conflict with their familial commitments as they had in slavery, Fisk assured. Wives, he warned black men, cannot happily "greet you with a kiss, when you come home, if they are hungry, ragged and cold." Fisk stressed that only through "industry and economy," would freedmen be able provide, "a real good home, and plenty of food and clothing for your family," and concluded, "you should not rest until this is done."⁵ Post-emancipation black men across the South were taught that the ideal man was a working man, and only working men could be successful husbands and fathers.

Many freedmen did not need white men to tell them to pursue this path. They sought jobs that could help them establish independent households isolated from white interference. Ironically, despite Fisk's assurances, black men's work and family lives remained at odds even after emancipation. "Working on the Railroad Fifty Cents a Day," was just one of many work songs that Southern black men sang describing the reality of their post-emancipation employment opportunities. Unfortunately, the song's lyrics presents a very different picture of the possibilities of patriarchal families and labor opportunities than than the ones Fisk envisioned. The lyrics communicate the resentment black workers felt when they discovered that building southern railroads would not compensate them enough to support themselves or their families. While officials across the South loudly touted the pay offs black men would accrue for diligent work, promising economic independence and familial

⁵ Fisk, Plain Counsels, 32.

happiness, the railroad men soon discovered that they would be doing back-breaking, dangerous work for less than a living wage.

The song makes this clear by stressing employer dishonesty, manifest in paychecks that were invariably less than what he “earned.” Employer’s underhandedness deducted from wages for a range of expenses, and in the song, prevented one worker from taking care of his desperate mother, who concludes: “my God Damn black soul I can’t send her none.” The lyrics confess that the singer’s self-worth and his family life are at risk. Fisk’s vision for working black men hardly considered the role of white supremacy in undermining black men’s work-family relationships. The well being of black families was not simply a matter of hard work.

Over the five decades after emancipation, southern black men engaged in a variety of work arrangements and industries. In the wake of the Civil War, plantation agriculture remained central to the economic life of the South. Most blacks who stayed in the South remained agrarian people, working other people’s land as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. As southern industry and the railroads expanded in the 1880s, both free and incarcerated black laborers were employed in railway camps and on locomotive engines. But even after emancipation and well into the early 20th century, Southern white capitalists and employers, very much like slave owners before them, did not take emancipation seriously, and continued to ignore black familial interests and relationships, except when certain policies directly benefited their own economic interests. Those interests usually meant the exploitation of freedmen and their families, whose roles in the southern economy

continued to keep them subjugated. Thus, rather than finding a pathway to reconstituting black familial life after emancipation, many black men and women found their work roles, cultures, and environments to be incompatible with parenting, familial duties, aspirations, and exploring their “rights” as freedpeople.

This dissertation examines the role of work and family in shaping black men’s masculine identity in the post-emancipation South. More pointedly, it asks how black men’s working conditions influenced their familial life and identities as fathers and/or husbands. It also explores how family and ideas and expectations about family life motivated men’s work habits and desires. Black men’s work opportunities and familial identities, I argue, have been mutually constitutive. At times, black men sought employment through which they could support their households, not just financially, but through deliberate separation from white superiors. Black men also used their family roles to give purpose and value to their lives, given the hardness of underpaid physical labor. Family concerns were at the heart of many of the criticisms black men leveled, against their tasks and employers, both formally and informally. Previous scholars have sometimes argued that black men used industrial labor as an escape from family responsibility, a fact that contributed to the breakdown of black families. My project demonstrates, however, that black family ties were very important to black men, and that they both wanted and needed their families as industrial workers much more than previously thought. My research suggests that many black workers did their best to balance work and family in ways that were previously denied them under slavery. Black men’s interpretations of their paternal,

relational, or marital rights and duties, and their attempts to contribute to the well being of their families were factored into men's work choices. The drastic shifts in Southern industry, economy, race and gender relations that occurred over the period from 1865 to 1914 did more than introduce black men to varying degrees of freedom and new sectors of the labor market. These shifts also opened up new ways for them to establish new work skills and define the limits of their work and family responsibilities, as well as offer them opportunities to think differently about their notions of masculine authority and autonomy.

Historiography

The song "Working on the Railroad Fifty Cents A Day" describes the exploitation, physical and emotional hardships, and unrealized aspirations of Southern black industrial workers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For the most part, scholars have construed the relationship between industrial work and the health of the black family as antagonistic. Beginning soon after emancipation, a school of scholars in the 1880s and 1890s began to investigate social and economic changes they witnessed during industrialization in the North and the South, citing them as primary causes for what they argued was the "dysfunction" of black family life. Much of this work was intended to remove the "blame" from slavery as the cause of the disruption of black family life, a theme which threads through American

historical and social science literature even today.⁶ With the emergence of sociology and anthropology as academic disciplines in the last third of the 19th century, scholars turned to the subject of black family life to chart a history of adverse relations between black men's domestic relations and labor relations. This was also a time, interestingly enough, that immigrant families from Southern and Eastern Europe were also examined, and though they too were found wanting, their families were never thought to be as wanting as those of the ex-slaves.

Even educated black scholars participated in these studies. Carter Woodson, the son of slaves himself, contended that many recently emancipated families were morally drained and psychologically and physically crippled by rapid, relentless changes in the American economy. For Woodson, capitalist industrialization stretching from the 1880s through the first several decades of the 20th century, unsettled familial ties even more severely than slavery itself. The Negro Family in the United States, still hailed as a seminal work, along with that of another prominent black intellectual, E. Franklin Frazier, challenged the prevailing view that the social position of African Americans was biologically pre determined.⁷ Instead, he identified social and economic forces, such as rural industrialization and racism as the causes of deepened black poverty. Industrialization required many black men to abandon their

⁶ John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community: The Reality of Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) Eugene Genovese's Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (1974) Hebert G. Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

⁷ For more on this debate see, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime and the Making of Modern Urban America (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010).

families for work in sawmills or on the railroads.⁸ Frazier argued that black men did not handle what he defined as a novel work-family conflict, and many abandoned wives and children. .

More recent scholarship has resurrected a revised version of the argument that industrialization had damaging effects on black families. In 1993, historian Jacqueline Jones characterized rural industrialization as an “assault” on white and black agricultural traditions. Her book, The Dispossessed: America’s Underclass from the Civil War to the Present, argues that migration from farm to factory “eroded family integrity,” encouraged alcoholism and prostitution and threatened workers with a “slippery descent into peonage and convict labor.”⁹ The dissolution of rural family life began, according to Jones, in the first few decades of the 20th century, when young men first migrated to lumber camps, mines, and railroad camps.

Other historians agree that black industrial labor and its demands adversely affected black families. But many of these scholars emphasize the consequences of “absent” fathers, eliding the complex the ways families responded, both within their households and on the job, to their work and work culture. What has been less explored are the questions of *how* these families and black men in particular

⁸ Frazier writes, “Among the million Negroes who deserted the rural communities of the South, there were thousands of men and women who cut themselves loose from family and friends and sought work and adventure as solitary wanderers from place to place. Some of the men had their first glimpse of the world beyond the plantation or farm when they worked in sawmills, turpentine camps, or on the roads.” Frazier also noted that the stability of black families was undermined by a lack of quality housing and education, and the pressures on wives to supplement men’s low wages by going to work and leaving their children unattended. E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 272.

⁹ Jacqueline Jones, The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses, from the Civil War to the Present. (New York: Basic Books, 1992)

experienced and negotiated their familial identities in the day to day and the impact of industrial wage work both within and outside of their homes in terms of day-to-day experience.

Two historians William P. Jones and Joseph Kelley have recently challenged portrayals of black southerners as either excluded from the industrial South or victimized by it. Their work on black industrial labor claims agency for black people by demonstrating that first, black southerners had more than a fleeting foothold in southern industry, and second, they welcomed industrial employment as a means to strengthen their families and communities.¹⁰ Jones' study of black lumber workers concentrates on the self-identity of these black workers as semi-proletarian small farmers. Jones argues that rather than undermining traditional ways of life, industrial work catalyzed the emergence of a small, settled, family-oriented black working-class.¹¹ Joseph Kelley looks at subsequent decades—the 1920s and 30s. Though he does not ignore the endemic racial violence and job discrimination black railway workers experienced, he finds that even in the face of harsh treatment, black people maintained a resilient presence as workers on the railroads. They persistently pushed back, organizing against unequal opportunities and continually challenging low wages. Far from previous assumptions that industrial labor held African Americans

¹⁰ William P. Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South*. (University of Illinois Press, 2005); Joseph Kelley. *Organized for a Fair Deal: African American Railroad Workers in the Deep South, 1900-1940*. Dissertation, University of Toronto.

¹¹ According to Jones, lumber work allowed many black men to accumulate livestock, farming equipment and land that contributed to the goal of market independence that had defined many black men's aspirations since the Reconstruction era. Industrial wages allowed black men to establish households in sawmill towns and to contribute to schools, churches and other institutional bases of what became southern working class societies.

back, Kelley finds black workers' agitation effective, especially in shaping the determined self-consciousness the black workers. These subtle effects on the black community have only recently been explored by historians. Jones and Kelley's work demonstrates that Southern industrialization generated a collective resistance and community solidarity as important to the story of black lives as the transition from farm to industry. But what was the impact of men's industrial experiences on black family life? That work and family lives are intertwined and mutually construct each other is one of the most important contributions of women's and family historians. This dissertation will ask questions that can help us better understand how the personal, social, and political exigencies shaped black men during Southern industrialization.

Michael McCoyer's article, "Rough Mens' in 'The Toughest Places I Ever Seen,'" is one of only a few works that seeks to understand the relationship between the brutal realities of industrial work and black men's actions and identities.¹² Focusing on the construction of black masculinity in Mississippi and Arkansas Delta levee camps in the first decades of the 20th century, he argues that black sharecroppers—who toiled seasonally in the levee camps—fashioned an image of themselves as hyper-masculine "rough men" whose prowess and will to survive rose above the daily mistreatment and often-violent relationships white contractors fostered. According to McCoyer, black sharecroppers' saw themselves as "rough

¹² Michael McCoyer, "Rough Mens' in "The Toughest Places I Ever Seen': The Construction and Ramifications of Black Masculine Identity in the Mississippi Delta's Levee Camps, 1900-1935," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 69 (2006): 57-80.

men”—they forged a sense of hyper-masculinity linked to their declining ability to provide for their wives and children. As black sharecroppers’ ability to turn a profit in plantation agriculture steadily diminished, pushing wives out of the home for alternative economic opportunities as maids and child-minders, black sharecroppers’ masculine identities felt diminished.¹³ Black levee workers “performed” their rough men personas in their interactions with other black levee workers and their sexual relationships with black women. They also channeled the “rough men” hyper masculine identity in occasional encounters with white authority in levee camps.

McCoy’s work demonstrates the importance of exploring how work and labor conditions help shape masculinity (and vice versa) –sometimes counterproductive ways. In my project, I explore how family, both real and imagined, served as an important touchstone for many black workers as they attempted to cope with their work environments. Their decisions had a complicated impact on black men’s domestic and work relations: at times, work provided social and economic benefits, but often at great risk to personal life and family well-being.

This dissertation is a contribution to scholarship on the family, gender, and the history of American fatherhood. Gender is an analytical tool for exposing power relationships, but historian Anne S. Lombard argues, gender is not just about men dominating women.¹⁴ A gendered analysis can also reveal connections and affective ties. Thus, while fatherhood in this period usually implied patriarchy, a system of male

¹³ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁴ Anne S. Lombard, *Making Manhood: Growing Up Male in Colonial New England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 13.

dominance and female subordination, it also describes a system of relation and responsibilities in which men must take into account the needs of their families. A man's relationship to his family influences his work choices, decision-making, aspirations, and values.

One of the earliest works on 19th century fathers did not dwell on men's emotional ties as important to men's paternal identities. Instead, fathers were described as hardworking but distant patriarchs. In Fatherhood in America (1993), the first book-length study of white American fatherhood, historian Robert L. Griswold argued that men's breadwinner roles "sabotaged" their efforts to establish emotional bonds with their children at a time when home and work were separated. To Griswold, fathers' emotional connectivity would not become a real aspect of men's parenting until the 1920s and 1930s when social scientists and magazine editors encouraged men to take a more active role in their children's lives as role models. To be fair, Griswold recognized that some fathers saw life as a breadwinner as part of an emotional connection to the families that they were providing for. However, Griswold labels affective relations between breadwinner fathers and their families as "uncommon."¹⁵

It was not long before subsequent studies of fatherhood critiqued Griswold's thesis. His representation of fathers as emotionally distant providers and authority

¹⁵ Robert L. Griswold, Fatherhood in America: A History (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 14. Part of the limit of Griswold's argument is that it essentializes the power and structure breadwinning gave to men's lives, thus his work emphasizes the loss of fathering power and duties. Furthermore, the traditional image of fathers as emotionally distant providers and authority figures is imbedded in the secondary sources he depends on for almost all of his views of 19th century fathers.

figures would go through a major shift with the publication of Stephen M. Frank's Life with Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth-Century American North (1998) and Shawn Johansen's Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in Early Industrializing America (2001). Frank argued that though men fathered in a wide variety of ways in the nineteenth century, the majority "occupied places toward the affectionate end of the emotional spectrum to refute stereotypes of the starched Victorian patriarch, self-contained and presiding remotely over his family."¹⁶ Emotional attachments to wives and children made these more than just breadwinners, though the provider role, as Griswold pointed out, was also a role most fathers took pride in fulfilling.¹⁷ Johansen, in his review of the letters and diaries of over three hundred antebellum white men, concluded that most prized the support and connection they attained from their families while taking pride in their roles as fathers.¹⁸ Johansen found that men drew upon their economic authority to become involved with their families in a variety of ways, including caring for their sick children.¹⁹ The works of both Frank and Johansen suggest that men were committed to *both* wage work and home life.

Frank's and Johansen's studies focused on the letters, diaries, and memoirs of white middle-class men of the 19th century U.S. North and Mid-west. Variations of region, class, and race were not much considered. Addressing regional differences in

¹⁶ Stephen M. Frank, Life with Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth-Century American North (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 3.

¹⁷ Griswold, Fatherhood in America, 2.

¹⁸ Shawn Johansen, Family Men: Middle-class Fatherhood in Early Industrializing America (New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

the fatherhood among white men, Anthony Rotundo argues that southern fathers were more likely to retain aspects of what he called “patriarchal fatherhood” well past the mid-19th century. Rotundo describes the patriarchal father as a “towering figure” and a “distant, didactic, and condescending” person who subscribed to the notion that too much affection and parental indulgence could ruin a child’s character.”²⁰ As Hebert Gutman pointed out concerning slave fathers, differences existed in the ways men pursued the fulfillment of their roles as providers for and protectors of families according to race and class.²¹ Still, Frank and Johansen challenge the representations of 19th century fathers as aloof economic providers. Certainly, men’s monetary connections, because they are *connections*, have a reciprocal quality that refutes a mere master and subject opposition. My work on black men suggests that they attempted to enhance and/or create a more personal identity as a worker-family man through the work arrangements they agreed to, the labor they performed, the wages they earned, and the songs and stories told during and after work. Their work-related absences from their homes does not tell the whole story of how black men felt and thought about their families. Industrial work did not absent black men from family life as completely as many scholars have argued. Instead, many black men approached such jobs with a desire to pair work and family responsibilities, and clearly understood where and how one impeded the other. For these men, work was a family affair.

²⁰ E. Anthony Rotundo, “American Fatherhood: A Historical Perspective,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 29.1 (September/October 1985): 7-25.

²¹ Griswold, *Fatherhood in America*, 34-67. Hebert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 189.

Place and Time

Long before Fisk issued his advice, blacks in Georgia had been looking for opportunities to merge work and family interests. During the Civil War, a time when the state was one of the nation's leading producers of cotton throughout the antebellum period, military officials promised African Americans residents farmland through which they hoped to attain self-sufficiency and autonomy in their private lives, as well as their work lives. For the most part, the promises of the Confiscation Acts of 1861 and Sherman's Order No. 15 in 1865 went unfulfilled.²² Moreover, the Freedmen's Bureau soon abandoned land redistribution, and adopted the contract labor system so that plantation owners' property rights, and their access to a cheap, controllable labor force were secured. State and local governments also dedicated themselves to enforcing labor contracts, publishing notices of runaway blacks, and threatening anyone who harbored fugitives. Yet, from 1865 to 1914, Georgia experienced a drastic collapse in agricultural production and workers, while at the same time, witnessing a meteoric rise in industrial wage work that opened new opportunities for black workers and their families. While many African Americans from rural areas and towns travelled north of the Mason-Dixon Line in search of better wages and opportunities, others stayed in-state and traveled to briskly-industrializing cities like Atlanta. Thus, Georgia is an excellent site to compare the

²² Russell Duncan, *Freedom's Shore: Tunis Campbell and the Georgia Freedmen*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 7.

changing forms of Southern labor and their varying interactions with black men's familial and work identities.

After the Civil War, sharecropping and tenancy became the dominant forms of labor organization in Georgia. Of the 82,826 farms cultivated by Georgia blacks, 70,568 were farmed on a sharecropping or tenancy basis. In 1900, 85.2 percent of Georgia's black agricultural labor force consisted of sharecroppers and tenants.²³ Farmers and farm workers were 60 percent of the state work force in 1900, and of this number over half were black. Few black farm tenants in this region were owners; most farmed someone else's land as tenants and received a share of the crop. As late as 1910, 70 percent of black and 40 percent of white farmers in the South were tenants of some kind.

The "railroad economy" functioned alongside the dominant plantation economy in post emancipation South.²⁴ Between 1887 and 1890, one third of all rail construction in the United States took place in the South. Southern railroad expansion increased by 136 percent between 1880 and 1890, as compared to 87 percent for the overall U.S.²⁵ By 1880, Georgia had increased its track mileage from 1,404 miles in 1860 to 2,432 miles, more than any southern state besides Texas.²⁶ Clearly, there were ample opportunities to get involved in the industrial economy,

²³ Bureau of the Census, Twelfth Census, Statistics of Agriculture, Table 10, 69-71
In contrast, 44.6 percent of Georgia's white farmers were similarly employed.

²⁴ Joseph Kelley, *Organized for a Fair Deal: African American Railroad Workers in the Deep South, 1900-1940*. Dissertation, University of Toronto, Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI 2010. (Publication No. AAT 870511295.)

²⁵ Ray Marshall, *Labor in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 50.

²⁶ John F. Stover, *Iron Road to the West: American Railroads in the 1850s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 61.

and railroad employment, though risky, usually meant higher wages and more job security.

The expansion of southern industry gave African Americans more avenues to escape the poverty that sharecropping wrought. Between 1902 and 1925, 35.3 percent of Georgia's black farmers—in excess of 36,000—left farming occupations. Family farming no longer provided a workable alternative to wage employment for many blacks. In addition, large numbers of tenant farmers and sharecroppers were forced off of the land when the boll weevil ravaged the cotton fields.²⁷ Between 1910 and 1920 the nonfarm sectors of the Georgia economy could not expand quickly enough to accommodate all of the displaced farmers. Employment levels dropped as many workers left the state for industrial centers in the North. Other displaced farmers took jobs in the manufacturing and service industries in the state. The decline of plantation agriculture and the simultaneous growth of the railroad industry drew increasing numbers of black men to railroad work.

The period of my study, 1865-1914, allows me to examine a range of labor arrangements utilized by black men and their employers from post-emancipation through the turn of the century. Over this fifty-year period, African Americans became apprentices, convict laborers, sharecroppers and unskilled and semi-skilled railroad employees. They worked on plantations, in railroad camps, and on moving locomotives. They were paid in crops, cash, or nothing at all. On trains, they labored under white supervision, together with other black men organized into teams,

²⁷ Numan V. Bartley, *The Creation of Modern Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983).

usually laying track. Others worked semi- autonomously with their families, on isolated plots of land. Sometimes, black men worked in more than one type of labor situation. For example, Georgia sharecroppers might work with their children, the eldest of whom might also be part-time railroaders. Because of its complex work opportunities, Georgia is an ideal state for a case study of changing patterns of black men's work in the post-emancipation period and how these work opportunities and exigencies shaped black men's self-awareness and familial relations.

During the Jim Crow era, countless instances of lynching, beating, and threats of violence directed at black men went unpunished. The combination of legal disenfranchisement and extralegal violence proved to be a formidable opponent to African American men. Among all southern states during this era, none exceeded Georgia in the prevalence of repressive mechanism of social control directed towards blacks. Between 1882 and 1936, at least 389 black men were lynched. Similarly, the state executed 415 black offenders which was the highest number among southern states. Likewise, the incarceration rate for black males, which gradually rose throughout the period, ranged between two and a half to nine times higher than the rate for white males. A study of black men in Georgia reveals much about the daily peril black men experienced in their efforts to "be a man" amid the thickly toxic atmosphere of mob violence, disenfranchisement, and segregation.²⁸

²⁸ James L. Massey and Martha A. Meyers, "Patterns of Repressive Social Control in Post Reconstruction Georgia, 1882-1935," *Social Forces*, 68.2 (December 1989): 459. Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

Sources

Working class blacks in this period left behind few written sources, so historians must turn to a disparate collection of materials to better understand black men's investment in family life. The records of Georgia's Freedmen's Bureau are replete with letters received and sent by Bureau officials, as well as affidavits from cases they adjudicated between black and white citizens. This archive is particularly useful because it includes letters written to and from freedmen. Moreover, as Ariela Gross observes, trial records also provide information not only on the behavior or experience of ordinary people, but also on their consciousness, opening a window into the ways law was understood not only by arbitrators, but by black people themselves.²⁹ I use these legal documents to track the efforts African American fathers made to resolve tensions between white landowning employers and the black families they used as workers. Much of this evidence is in the form of oral testimony and written appeals to Bureau officials. Given that the Bureau in Georgia was the final arbiter of these disagreements, these accounts must be read as strategically placed arguments intended to garner Bureau support against their white

²⁹ "Trial records," Gross suggests, "offer great promise because there are few historical documents in which ordinary people speak or even appear—beyond being counted in the census or having their births or deaths noted. Looking at trial evidence means getting at the lives of ordinary people, going to the local level." Ariela J. Gross, "Beyond Black and White: Cultural Approaches to Race and Slavery," *Columbia Law Review* 101.3 (April 2001): 650.

adversaries, who had a great deal of power. Thus, they may not actually communicate black men's most sincere thoughts around family life and fatherhood.³⁰

Georgia's WPA interviews of ex-slave provide revealing first-hand accounts of family life and labor under sharecropping. Many scholars have expressed doubts about the reliability of these narratives, citing the biases of interviewers, the possible inaccuracy of interviewees' memories, and even potential errors in the transcription process.³¹ Unfortunately the narratives provide scant biographical data about the informants and their families. The information the reader gleans from them varies based on how articulate the informant could be. Dates and places of birth, occupations, names of children, and spouses are intermittently provided. Nevertheless, oral histories, when read alongside census data, employment contracts and landowner's journals, do in fact shed light on the family-work dynamics and relationships among Georgia's black sharecropping families. They offer a range of information, including how individual families divided up labor responsibilities within their households and what was entailed working in homes and fields, while also offering insights into landowners' policies and behaviors. They also reveal a great deal about how black men and women thought about family and marriage in slavery

³⁰ Ariela Gross' analysis of civil cases reveals how politically marginalized individuals used everyday understandings of race to persuade a juries of their racial identity and assert the legal rights they gained during Reconstruction. These trials on racial identity were influenced less by legal definition of race than on the way people presented themselves to their communities and demonstrated their moral character. Ariela J. Gross, What Blood Won't Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

³¹ Lynda M. Hill, "Ex-Slave Narrative: The WPA Federal Writers' Project Reappraised," *Oral History* 26.1, (Spring 1998): 64-72. Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1935), 16-18.

and freedom. Certainly these narratives raise as many questions as they answer, but they also provide important information on the intersection of work and black family life in the 19th century.

The testimonies of 19th century railway employees have been preserved in union records and published periodicals. *The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Engineers Magazine* and *The Railroad Brakemen's Journal* were the official publications of two of the major railroad unions of the period. These magazines regularly engaged in public campaigns on a variety of work-related issues. As I show, the union championed certain railroad safety legislation and train modification, and decried the hiring practices of specific railroad companies (particularly those firms that hired blacks). They also outed unfair employers by publishing lists, provided statistical evidence to reinforce claims made in disputes, and warned members about blacklisted firms. To promote their campaigns, they reprinted articles on trade concerns from other journalistic sources, and published political poetry submitted by readers.

The periodicals also offered a forum for members to express their views through reader correspondence. In these exchanges, I found a wealth of information on railroaders' schedules, life, work environment and culture. The correspondence of white railroaders and railroaders' wives on the topic of family life, labor, and the relationship between the two, can also be found in these journals. Here, women and men reflect on how railroaders' hours and work environments often strained husband-wife and father-children relationships, and reveals how families and railroad

companies navigated these tensions. White trainmen's fears about and solutions to the "negro question" in Southern railroad employment figure prominently in these papers as well, especially at the turn of the century. Moreover, various categories of articles within these periodicals, including letters, short stories, reports, essays and debates between union members, reveal white workers' anxieties about manhood, which fueled their literary, political, and physical attacks on black railroaders in Georgia.

The absence of black working class men's voices from these official publications is not surprising; it is emblematic of white workers' erasure of black workers shared experiences and contributions to the workforce. Additionally, it denies black men a presence in one of the most important historical sources on railroad work. My interest in working class black men, however, led me to also consult black railroaders' creative works, specifically work songs.

This music born of hard labor was used as a form of entertainment, as a way to tell stories, as a means to achieve solidarity and as an avenue of voicing their concerns. Song allowed black workers to exercise a form of agency over their situation and gave them a voice that otherwise might have been silenced. Work songs also provided a means through which black workers could rhetorically construct their gender and work identities within racist and repressive work environments. Scholars such as historian Clark Halker have embraced the value of labor songs to history scholars in general, and those interested in the working class in

particular.³² Like oral histories, songs add the “affective power of sound” that uncovers an additional emotional dimension of the past.³³ Songs can help provide interpretations of historical moments while making the past come alive. My dissertation examines workers’ creative art as meaningful expressions of their hopes and fears, beliefs and values, complaints and aspirations while working on the railroads in the 19th century South. Through these songs, black railroad workers communicated what kind of men, fathers, and husbands they hoped to be while condemning their exploitation in jobs that they understood interfered with their ability to fulfill the familial roles as husbands and fathers as they would have wished.

These songs cannot tell us how railroaders handled family bonds and arrangements in real time, but they do communicate railroad men’s desires and ideals. Only a few of the works songs were audio-recorded by collectors, others were only transcribed. Thus my analysis of songs is limited; I examine them as text rather than sound. Reading lyrics as opposed to hearing them sung may change slightly their meaning, form, and reception. The singer’s voice, after all, is a part of his performance.³⁴ Still, as the collective creation of the workers, the lyrics capture the sorrows, desires, complaints, and anxieties that ebbed and flowed among workers’ consciousness while on the job. I observe what railroaders found meaningful and

³² Clark D. Halker, For Democracy, Workers, and God: Labor Song-Poems and Labor Protests, 1865-1895 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

³³ Siobhan McHugh, “The Affective Power of Sound: Oral History on Radio,” *Oral History Review* 39. 2 (2012): 188-206.

³⁴ Songs, according to scholar Peter Hawkins, “are inseparable from the inflection of the voice that sings them, the melody line and the orchestration, not to mention the public image of the singer. If there is, indeed, text to be analyzed, it is surely the complete recorded performance, not the printed lyric.” Peter Hawkins, Chanson: The French singer-songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day. (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000), 11.

fascinating about work and family, and ask how they understood their familial relationships while away at work.

Chapter Outline

In the five chapters that comprise this study, I delineate and analyze the relationship between family and labor for black men in the post-emancipation South. Chapter one surveys black men's complex gender and work identities, beginning in the period of enslavement through the Reconstruction era. It demonstrates that American slavery and the system of Southern apprenticeship tested aspects of black men's familial identities, including parenting and spousal support. Both systems of labor required the involuntary legal separation of black men from their family members and unwanted white intervention in black domestic affairs. The consequence was limiting black men's opportunities to provide economic support for their households.

In the slave South, poor and propertied white men alike shared a definition of manhood rooted in landownership and the control of women, children and slaves. Each of the latter groups were believed to lack both self-control and the capacity for reason, therefore requiring the protection and guidance of white men. As Stephanie McCurry observed, "Dependence was the stuff of which independence—and manhood—were made."³⁵ To those who held the reins of power, such men—white

³⁵ Stephanie McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 72.

adult propertied males— were the only people capable of bearing the responsibilities of governance, whether in private or public. The stain of dependency and irresponsibility tainted all those who lacked sufficient property to control their own labor and maintain households of their own. Enslaved black men, nevertheless, expressed their manly identities in ways that were heroic, tragic, productive, and harmful, sometimes all at once. Many retained powerful family connections and, in spite of the contexts, created full identities as men and fathers. Moreover, in freedom, black men strategically utilized fatherhood and the various meanings and responsibilities parenthood represented both to themselves as well as representatives of the Freedman’s Bureau— as a defense against white employers’ claims on their children.

Writing about American understandings of masculinity, Anthony Rotundo explained that, “work...lay at the heart of man’s role: if work was a problem, so was manhood.”³⁶ Agricultural failure was not only a lack of achievement but an indictment of an individual’s manhood. In the South, however, the reward for good black leadership was also less white oversight.³⁷ This potential for supervision spoke to black men’s desires to escape the category of “dependent” and prove themselves

³⁶ E. Anthony Rotundo, American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 191.

³⁷ This was particularly attractive to the man who possessed skills or gained experience beyond that of the average worker. Sharecropping, by paying him by a fraction of the output, would reward his superior skills and diligence. This is distinct from earning a locked in standard wage based solely on their sex and age. Ransom and Sutch, One Kind of Freedom, 95.

to be good providers.³⁸ Chapter two considers how black men's entrance into sharecropping, a labor system that, however financially oppressive, provided limited opportunity to engage in agricultural production as head of his family, both influenced and was influenced by black men's sense of manhood. It compares and contrasts the hopes and expectations of a manhood characterized by the obligation to protect and care for one's family, with the reality of and white proprietors' power and control over the sharecropping system. It argues that black men negotiated their identities as men, fathers, and workers within a punishing labor system that, for all its brutality, at least to some extent, enabled their daily presence in the family home, enacting their roles as heads of households, farm managers, and authority figures, all of which might in some ways contributed to the stability of families.

Chapter three functions as a bridging chapter in this narrative, which examines African American men's transition at the turn of the century from agriculture to railroad work in Georgia. It demonstrates how family concerns, both economic and social, shaped black men's patterns of industrial employment even before they moved into full-time railroad work. Examining the history of African American farm labor and railroading in Georgia, I show how black men's commitment to family life and a self-respecting sense of manhood, led them first to sharecropping,

³⁸ After emancipation, countless numbers of African American men reunited with their family members living on different plantations in search of new homes and new lives for their reconstituted families. For example, Freedom Martha Colquitt of Athens, Georgia recalled, "When freedom comed my pa wanted us to move off right away over to Mr. Smithies' place so our family could be together." Interview of Martha Colquitt of Athens, Georgia in Work Projects Administration, Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves: Volume IV, Georgia Narratives, Part 1 (Washington, 1941).

and, when that was not remunerative enough, to leave family farming for industrial work. This chapter also considers the effects these decisions had on the dynamics of sharecropping households and family identities. For example, because of the move to wage labor, black men shifted their definitions of manhood from one based on landownership to one measured by the ability to earn cash wages which would enable them to support of a family. These decisions led to tensions in households where sharecroppers' sons were sent to work on the rails part-time, but were expected to return to the family farm after a season.

While the focus in the earliest chapters is on agricultural work and the transition away from it, Chapter four centers on black railroaders' ascent into the *skilled* labor of locomotive firemen in Jim Crow Georgia. In particular, it explores the controversy over hiring black skilled workers in the context of changing standards of railroad safety and new notions of manhood beginning in the 1880s, at a time when whites made efforts to keep blacks out of public life and "put them in their place" in public spaces. Most scholars agree that because of changes in the U.S. economy, among other factors, fewer and fewer men were able to own their own land, own their own businesses, or control their own labor.³⁹ Men responded to the country's rapid industrialization and urbanization by seeking new ways to define themselves and to demonstrate their manliness. This quest gave rise to a concept of manhood

³⁹ The factors that contributed to the perceived "crisis of masculinity" include increasing urbanization, the emergence of the so-called "new woman," and the closing of the western frontier.

that combined traditional notions of hard work, intelligence and discipline with a new emphasis on physical development, endurance and courage.⁴⁰

In the early 1880s white railroaders considered the fireman's post to be the "proving ground" of *their* manhood. The locomotive fireman task was coveted because it provided railroaders the unique opportunity to demonstrate the mental and physical demands of the new dual manly ideal. At the same time, Georgia's railroads began to hire mostly black firemen, thereby frustrating white railroaders who also sought to claim their manhood. The threat of "negro domination," in public place (train cars, legislative offices)—whether real or imagined— struck a raw nerve in many white Americans. This chapter explores the efforts of Georgia's white firemen and citizens to wrest the valued position of locomotive fireman away from black men who had ascended to this rank in the Georgia Railroad Company. This contest played out in periodicals, white union journals, boardrooms, and back alleys, and reveals how social and political concerns about the relationship of manhood and labor, intersected with race and racism to shape the meaning of work for both black and white men. Black firemen's work performances, though manly according to the new definition of American manhood, were significantly curtailed by discrimination at work and at the bargaining table. Denied union membership and equality in the workplace, some black men took a servile posture towards white colleagues and authorities to keep their jobs. Those who rejected the silent servant model were terminated or worse.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18; Kimmel, Manhood in America; Elliott J. Gorn, The Manly Art: Bare Knuckle Prize Fighting in America (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

Chapter five focuses on how black railroaders thought about their work and family roles. Drawing on work songs, this chapter investigates the ways in which black railroaders practiced and constructed both work and gender identities. Here, I consider how Southern black railroaders represented and understood the two most important, interrelated aspects their lives: family and work. Through the songs they sang, we learn that black men understood the ways railroading served as an exploitative system that disrupted their attempts to embody the proud, traditional conceptions of American manhood. Railroading was more than just hard physical labor; it involved engaging in a network of relations among employers, co-workers, supervisors around work conditions, a set of demands that took time and had a negative impact of men's earnings and family life. In fact, as we shall see, black men believed there was a direct connection between their low earnings because of economic discrimination and family dissolution. My analysis of work songs also reveals that railroaders still considered financial provision—inadequate as it was—remained—their most important family contribution. They relied heavily on their familial identities to rationalize working in an underpaid, dangerous, and physically taxing vocation. Their songs often spoke of the needs of women family members as they searched for meaning during working hours. In their songs, railroaders described themselves as sincere, family-oriented laborers whose concern for their wives and children dictated their hard work.

Especially in the South, black men's work ethic, or lack thereof, has been an object of concern and ridicule since emancipation. Commentators range from

northern Freedmen's Bureau officials and ex-slave owners, to 19th century social reformers and social scientists. For many, *the* problem of the 19th century was the inadequacy of black men's labor. But how did black men *themselves* interpret their work identities? This question, too, is crucial to this study. The following pages address the reciprocal relationship between the demands and desires of the work/family binary for black men. While they endured difficult labor in distant places that strained their family roles and relationships, many derived huge satisfaction from fulfilling their roles as husbands and fathers. We shall see that just as they did under slavery, black men relied on family to give them the sustenance to survive and occasionally to resist the antagonistic work environments they encountered in the post emancipation era.

Chapter 1

Black Fathers, Families, and White Labor Interests from Slavery to Southern Reconstruction

In May 1868, an Atlanta freedman named Charles Billings visited Fred Mosebach, his local Freedmen’s Bureau agent hoping to get help in recovering his six-year-old daughter, Caroline. The child was living with a white landowner named P. Collins near Whitesville, Georgia, eighty miles from Atlanta. Her mother had died, but Billings refused to relinquish his parental rights, claiming “sole control of said child.”⁴¹ It is unclear exactly what Billings said to Mosebach in appealing for his help, but Mosebach’s notes describe Billings— a single father— as “able and desirous to bring [Caroline] up properly by caring for her and sending her to school.”⁴² Although there is no record of this conversation, evidently Billings was able to present himself as a responsible parent whose integrity, paternal affection and financial security was examined. Mosebach’s willingness to consider Billings’ request to provide a home for his daughter in the place of her current guardian, was based not just on Billings’ biological tie to the little girl but the agent’s conviction that Billings was both

⁴¹ Received Statement of Charles Billings, Atlanta, Georgia, May 5, 1868, Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 45, BRFAL-GA.

⁴² *Ibid.*

emotionally and financially ready to assume the responsibilities of fatherhood.

However, Billings' claims would undergo an investigation by another Atlanta Bureau official before he would be reunited with his daughter.

There are hundreds of cases like Billings' located in the Freedman's Bureau records and other archives of the Reconstruction period. A number of scholars have attempted to narrate the experiences of thousands of ex-slaves in the post-Civil War period who made passionate and patient attempts to reconstitute their families at the end of the Civil War.⁴³ I am primarily interested in black fathers. I examine how black men who were ex-slaves constructed their masculine identity and to what degree their understanding of their roles as fathers and husbands contributed to their masculine identities as free men and citizens in the post-war South. Being a husband and parent are often intertwined: how did individuals view their relationships with partners and/or children and to what degree did this relationship support or undermine an ex-slave's feelings of self-worth? The post-war context is crucial to answering this question because white capitalists and employers, like slave owners before them, continued to deny African Americans' humanity. The restoration of white economic and social power in the immediate post-emancipation era gave rise to new institutions like sharecropping, which replaced the more brutal

⁴³ See Williams, [Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery](#) (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Mary Farmer-Kaiser, [Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation](#) (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); Karin L. Zipf, [Labor of Innocents: Forced Apprenticeship in North Carolina, 1715-1919](#) (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Noralee Frankel, [Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi](#) (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

system of total control that was slave labor. Soon after emancipation and well into the early 20th century, Southern whites reasserted their power over black labor in ways that continually ignored black familial interests and relationships. As the sharecropping regime gradually replaced its predecessor, bonded labor, white southerners created new roles for black people in the southern economy that continued to keep them subordinate. Despite these limitations, the black family experienced a form of economic subordination that provided some room for creating more traditional gender role identities with their families. Reconstruction offers a unique context for examining Southern black men's earliest experiences negotiating post-emancipation relationships which helped black families create more sustainable work and family relationships.

We shall see that the trauma of slavery did not obliterate freedmen's and freedwomen's longings for family. Black fathers and husbands in slavery were denied the manhood status that was taken for granted by whites. Enslaved black men expressed their manly identities in ways that ranged from heroic to tragic, productive to damaging. Many retained powerful familial concerns and created identities as men and fathers in spite of the challenging conditions. With emancipation, they were able to better negotiate their expressions of manhood and familial care even when contending with the virulent racism and the New South's labor relations which kept them subordinate. Still, black men strategically used their identities as fathers, as well as the different meanings and responsibilities parenthood represented for the Freedman's Bureau, to challenge white employers' claims on the labor of their

children. Exploring black men's familial goals and examining their struggles and strategies in achieving them, we shall see that despite the very real challenges new labor systems posed to black families and communities, black men's commitment to family as well as to their very identities as men remained a defining characteristic of their post-emancipation struggles.

U.S. Slavery and Black Families

The antebellum slave South was built on the high priced flexible labor of enslaved people.⁴⁴ Slave owners could require their bondspople to work anywhere in the region, assigning them to any activity of the owner's choosing. Slave preferences and familial relations were rarely considered.⁴⁵ The self-contained character of a slave plantation allowed planters to begin cash cropping in new areas without worrying about the extensive and expensive infrastructure needed to do so in the manufacturing North. Slave owners simply transported their labor, cleared and improved land, and built residential and farming structures as needed. Transferring entire operations so easily meant that land values on rich cotton lands in the

⁴⁴ In *Slavery and American Economic Development* (2006), Gavin Wright reminds us that slaves constituted legal property, a form of wealth and thus a basis for credit and exchange. Slaves could be purchased and transported to any geographical location where the system was legal. Owners were entitled to require many things of their slaves that could not be legally required of free labor. See Wright, *Slavery and American Economic Development* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 68. See also, Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁴⁵ A complex network of slave codes, explicit racial hierarchies, other slave owners, slave drivers and pro-slavery whites also policed this regime minimizing the chances of slave escape and defending planters against revolt. Slave owners' rights prevailed everywhere.

Southwest were capitalized much faster than on comparable farmland in the North.⁴⁶ Not only was slavery profitable for Southerners, it played a substantial lucrative role in the larger American economy.⁴⁷

African Americans were slave owners' personal property and had no rights. Legally, slaves had no private lives. A notable Louisiana law made this clear: "The master may sell him, dispose of his person, his industry, and his labor; [the slave] can do nothing, possess nothing, nor acquire anything but what must belong to his master."⁴⁸ Each enslaved human being was principally measured as an individual unit within his master's material possession, a unit, at least in theory, with no meaningful affective ties.⁴⁹ Slaves could not legally enter into a marriage contract, and thus, certain aspects of the marital relationship of slaves were deemed unenforceable. For example, husbands could not be held financially responsible for the support of their wives because they had no legal right to be paid for their labor.⁵⁰ Male slaves were

⁴⁶ Wright, *Slavery and American Economic Development*, 68.

⁴⁷ In 1860, two-thirds of the American men with estates of \$100,000 or more lived in the South. In the same year, enslaved African Americans comprised more wealth than railroad and manufacturing assets combined. James L. Huston, *Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1989).

⁴⁸ Laws of Louisiana, Civil Court, Art 35.

⁴⁹ In "An Impossible Marriage: Slave Law and Family Law" (1987) legal scholar Margaret A. Burnham argues that in the early 19th century the courts wrote slaves out of family law by declaring them to be fundamentally different kinds of human beings from whites. Burnham demonstrates that the law decided that slaves were, "innately and immutably immoral (therefore not legally marriageable), too dumb and childish to parent (therefore incapable of childrearing) and sexually licentious (therefore unsuited to marriage and family bonds)." Margaret A. Burnham, "An Impossible Marriage: Slave Law and Family Law," *Law and Inequality* 5.187, 189.

⁵⁰ Burnham notes that because, "The slave husband had no marital ownership interest in his wife... he had no ownership interest of his children. This was in effect a double

denied the authority over their kin as well as the fruits of women's labor and reproduction. In contrast to white male husbands and fathers, slave fathers were considered all but irrelevant.⁵¹ As succinctly expressed by a Kentucky court in 1811, "the father of a slave is unknown to our law..."⁵² Black men were expected, indeed, encouraged, to procreate, but it was the master who owned the child.

The same was true in terms of Black women's parental authority. When mothers were recognized as the parent of a child it was often in order to discern whether the child was born free or enslaved. Black women were also denied the protection or privileges afforded to most white women and were prohibited by law from defending themselves against abuse, sexual and otherwise, at the hands of whites. If they were married, their nuptials did not provide them with the economic support, childrearing choices or social respect given to white women of any class. With enslaved men and women legally dispossessed of their rights, slave owners' dominion over them extended beyond controlling their labor and its fruits; it also lead to purposeful intrusion into their intimate lives.

With the law on their side, masters exercised unchecked power over slave family life. Many female slaves, adults as well as children, were forced into sexual

diminution of the slave father's legal and social status; he could not claim ownership of his child, as could free men nor could he, through his progeny, enrich his master, as could slave women. He had only his labor to "give" his master." *Ibid.*, 216.

⁵¹ As Brenda Stevenson has maintained, "many masters... frowned upon separating mother from their young children, but refused to act similarly for fathers. Slave owners' preferential treatment of slave mothers made it difficult for slave men to have equal influence in the day to day activities of their families, particularly since many of them did not live with their children." Brenda E. Stevenson, Life in Black & White: Family and Community in the Slave South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 222.

⁵² *Frazier v. Spear*, 5 Ky. (2 Bibb) 385, 386 (1811).

encounters with their masters for pleasure and profit.⁵³ Owners separated fathers and mothers from their children. They often dictated the choice of a marriage partner for a slave, or forbade a couple's association.⁵⁴ Herbert Gutman argues that one out of every six or seven slave marriages ended by force or sale.⁵⁵ The risk of sale and/or interference, however, was always a threat to the family lives of all enslaved people.

These practices were upheld and enforced by slave-owning and non slave-owning Southerners alike. By the 1830s and 1840s many pro-slavery advocates defended the institution and ignored its deleterious effects on black family life by asserting that slaves and masters were one happy family.⁵⁶ Writing in 1857, George Fitzhugh claimed, "the Negro is but a grown up child, and must be governed as a child, not as a lunatic or criminal. The master occupies toward him the place of parent or guardian."⁵⁷ Historian Willie Lee Rose argued that this representation of slavery as a "domestic" institution helped slaveholders avoid living with the contradiction of

⁵³ Control over enslaved women's reproduction meant a steady supply of slave labor.

⁵⁴ To be sure, slaveholders were of two minds about slave marriage. On the one hand, married slaves bore children who would grow into productive workers. Marriage also linked slaves in a web of interpersonal relationships that made them less likely to try to escape. Some slaveholders therefore encouraged marriages and celebrated them with elaborate rites. On the other hand, marriage threatened to confer on African Americans a marker of adulthood and morality. Slaves in monogamous relationships undermined ideas of black childishness and immorality which helped justify enslavement.

⁵⁵ Hebert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 318.

⁵⁶ The argument that slavery was vital as a system of control for a potentially dangerous black population began to weaken as black activists exposed the contradictions in the rhetoric of American equality and black bondage to those who cared to listen. In its place, the defense of slavery as a positive good was mapped onto the doctrine of permanent black inferiority, using evolutionary theories and race science as proof. Blacks, it was argued, need white oversight.

⁵⁷ George Fitzhugh, "The Universal Law of Slavery" (1857).

owning human property while championing a natural rights philosophy.⁵⁸ For some slaveholders, it enabled representation of the plantation as a proper patriarchal family, complete with cheerful obedient slaves (children/domesticated animals) and a kind, paternalistic master (father/owner) who provided wisdom and protection. Within this framing, whatever personal loss a slave experienced was ordained for his or her good by a benevolent omniscient father-figure.⁵⁹

Whether benevolent or not, white slave owners in the antebellum South often felt themselves having both authority and security in their identities as heads of their plantation households.⁶⁰ After all, these households were the backbone of the

⁵⁸ The natural rights philosophy maintains that all individuals are created equal in the sense that they are born with certain “inalienable” fundamental rights. Willie Lee Rose, *Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 21.

⁵⁹ To be sure, the master and his slaves formed together a corporate household. The crops grown and the labor performed fed the slave owner’s family, paid for the education of his children, and expanded his property in slaves and land. The same crops provided food and clothing for the slaves who tilled them, shod them in winter and paid for the roofs over their heads. It was constellation of relationships slave owners often cast in the language of family, securing to themselves an authority over their slave dependents similar to the authority most heads of antebellum free households claimed over dependent kin. The metaphor of family imposed not only a sense of unity, it also provided guidelines for a hierarchy of dominance and subordination.

As heads of these units, propertied white men assumed economic, legal, and moral responsibility for all their dependents, including their black slaves, white women and children. They also shouldered the duty of representing their dependents’ interests in the public arena of politics. To some extent, owners held themselves accountable for the treatment of their slaves, although their behavior fell far short of what slaves considered compassionate. They did agree to abide by somewhat nebulous standards for slave care which called for slaves to have adequate food, clothing, shelter, and rest which kept them alive and working in their owners’ fields.

⁶⁰ Lorri Glover and Craig Thompson Friend discuss how planter-elites constructed a “hegemonic southern masculinity” that prized landownership, mastery over women and children, the use of violence to enforce patriarchy, and the importance of honor to unite the Southern white men. Bertram Wyatt-Brown professes that these men exhibited both paternalism and a “code of honor” in the privacy of the household and particularly in “public... [where] expressions of manhood emphasized physical power and violence.” Yet, elite and non-elite men additionally exercised physical and sexual violence against

Southern economy and society. “To head a household,” Anthony Rotundo observes, “was to anchor the status system, preserve the political order, provide a model of government, sustain piety, ensure productive activity, and maintain the economic support of one’s dependents.”⁶¹ The plantation-as-family paradigm was only effective, however, because slave owners already had full rights of governance and interference in the lives of enslaved people.⁶² White slave owners’ economic productivity, social standing and masculinity was also advertised to society through their control over enslaved families.

The antebellum fantasy of African Americans as complementary, though unequal members of white families, and the deleterious effects of white interference into black family life demonstrate how vulnerable black family life was to the interference of white plantation owners. A master’s insistence on keeping “order in the home” led many slave owners to interfere in slaves’ private lives. It is certainly

dependents to affirm masculinity and maintain control over patriarchal households. Edward Baptist and Walter Johnson similarly insist that slave-owning men defined manhood through sexual violence against black women’s bodies, especially as the domestic slave system increasingly resembled a “sex trade” where southern men bought enslaved women for personal gratification. Baptist in particular argues that southern white men utilized sexual violence to “revel in their own patriarchal power,” reassert manhood emasculated by non-compliant white women or even redefine their masculinity amid social and economic dislocation. See Craig Thompson Friend, Lorri Glover, eds. Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004); Bertram Wyatt Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Walter Johnson, Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999); Edward E. Baptist, Creating an Old South: Middle Florida’s Plantation Frontier before the Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

⁶¹ Anthony Rotundo, American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 12.

⁶² The law of personal privacy held that “[t]he house of the slave is the house of his owner; and the fact that it is used by the former as his dwelling does not change its character.” *Thompson et al. v. The State*, 25 Alabam. 41 (1854), 46.

difficult to imagine the existence of an independent black family when practices as intimate as having children and parenting required slaves to negotiate with their owners as they raised their children to adulthood.⁶³ All too often African Americans had to reconcile their desires for family with the master's whim and submit to a range of restrictions on their autonomy. The relationship between white owners' labor interests and black family life were often at odds, leading many influential historians to suggest black fathers roles in nurturing their children were often severely restricted.

The Historiography of Black Familial Involvement

In the slave South, poor and propertied white men alike shared a definition of manhood rooted in landownership and the control of women, children and slaves. Each of the latter groups were thought to lack both self-control and the capacity for reason, therefore requiring the protection and guidance of white men. As Stephanie

⁶³ Historian Marie Jenkins Schwartz's *Born in Bondage* illustrates the complex relationship between enslaved children, parents, and their owners during a child's maturation. The slave mother and father could not shape their child's fate— either immediate or long term. Parents could and did exercise some discipline and provide guidance and all important survival skills, but the enslaved child soon learned it was the master who really held the whip. In the eyes of the master and the law, good childrearing was not essential; good slave rearing was. Slaveholders intended to teach boys and girls that they— not their parents— headed the plantation household. Thus slaveholders attempted to transfer the love and allegiance of the children from parents to themselves by offering special gifts to children who would bring the master the news they overheard in the fields or in the cabins. This strategy proved particularly divisive because life in the slave quarter was already precarious. Slaves relied on one another to keep secrets from their owners and to assist each other in times of trouble. The rewards of clothes, food and toys children received, however, would teach them that they could turn to someone other than their parents for sustenance and relationship. Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000).

McCurry has observed, “Dependence was the stuff of which independence—and manhood—were made.”⁶⁴ To those who held the reins of power, white adult propertied males were the only individuals capable of carrying out the responsibilities of governance, whether public or private. The stain of dependency and irresponsibility tainted all those who lacked the means to maintain households of their own and control their own labor.

Being a slave thus presented insurmountable challenges to achieving manhood. African American men were denied the ability to legally create, protect, provide for, and/or publicly represent their families, households or property. White ownership denied them the fruits of their labor, seized their possessions, destroyed their marriages through sale and forced migration, and kept them from raising their own children. In addition, in support of this oppressive regime, racist myths and minstrel shows proliferated in the North, branding the image of the black male in the minds of a majority of Americans as the embodied antithesis of self-restraint. According to the definition of American manhood, enslaved men were not men at all.

Many scholars have asked what effect the circulation of such cultural mythologies had on black men’s familial relationships and self-esteem. Prior to the 1950s and the Civil Rights Movement, scholars believed that black men played little role in slave family life. Early in the 20th century, several of the best known writers were white southerners who subscribed to the assumption of black inferiority. In

⁶⁴ Stephanie McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 72.

1918, Ulrich B. Phillips, for example, argued that slavery was a benevolent institution which aimed to “civilize” African slaves. Slaves, in turn, were so dependent that they took to bondage quite naturally.⁶⁵ Phillips’ American Negro Slavery (1918), the authoritative work on the slave South at the time, provided readers with the misguided impression that Christian paternalistic masters went out of their way to encourage stable family unions among the enslaved. He argued that slave owners tried with little success to teach black people family values. For example, they celebrated slave weddings and punished adultery when it occurred in the slave quarters. African Americans, he concluded, were “by nature” simply too childlike, irresponsible, and promiscuous to maintain families.⁶⁶

W.E.B. DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier were among the first scholars to challenge Phillips. They insisted that black fathers’ absence from family life was not a sign of indifference, but the result of the harsh conditions of enslavement. Writing in 1908, W.E.B. DuBois lamented that bondage disempowered black men to such a degree that even within the slave quarters, presumably a private sphere of sorts for the slave community, black men were unable to participate. DuBois emphasized the slave father’s “lack of authority” resulting in his inability “to govern or protect his family.” Their own physical and psychological exploitation caused them to “easily

⁶⁵ Phillips’ ideas were rooted in the romantic myth of the Old South and widespread belief among whites that blacks were inherently immoral and loose. Ulrich B. Phillips, American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime (Gloucester, Mass: Appaleton and Company, 1918).

⁶⁶ In the aftermath of Reconstruction and in the midst of Jim Crow segregation, Phillips appears to be have influenced by the stereotypical assumptions and perspectives the permeated the American social scene. In particular, the assumption of the innate inherited inferiority of non Anglo-Saxons.

s[i]nk to a position of male guest in the house, without respect or responsibility.”⁶⁷

Similarly, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier noted that the forced separations, the impossibility of legal marriage, and the abuse slaves experienced left men unable to fulfill their traditional roles as providers and protectors. They were reduced to mere accessories in homes where mothers ruled.⁶⁸

With the emergence of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s, historians began to radically alter their interpretations of American slavery and its effects on black families. The scholarly focus shifted from the perceived character deficiencies of black people to the dehumanizing brutality of the slave regime. Like Du Bois and Frazier before them, postwar historians such as Kenneth Stampp suggested that slave family life had been crushed in every possible way by slavery. To accentuate their point, these historians elided the more salient fact that neither mothers nor fathers had parental rights to rear their offspring and focused exclusively on the denial of the black male’s patriarchal privilege. Partly responding to U.B. Phillips’ interpretation of slavery as a benevolent and benign institution, Stampp proposed that slaves lived “in a kind of cultural chaos” where parents exerted little influence in the raising of their children. Fathers in particular lacked authority; their only important family function was to help produce offspring.⁶⁹ Stanley Elkins maintained that the brutality of slavery robbed the enslaved man of power and led to his “utter

⁶⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, The Negro American Family (Atlanta: The Atlanta University Press, 1908), 49.

⁶⁸ E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939).

⁶⁹ Kenneth M. Stampp, The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956).

dependency upon his master,” reducing him to a childlike figure known as “Sambo.” Utilizing studies of the effects of prisoners in the German concentrations camp, Elkins painted a similar portrait to Frazier’s, noting that the slave mother’s role “loomed far larger” than the father’s. She controlled the few household activities left to the slave family while “the very etiquette of plantation life removed even the honorific attributes of fatherhood from the Negro male,” who was reduced to being addressed as “boy.”⁷⁰

Scholars in this period emphasized the *totality* of the slave system, denying the possibility of spaces within it for even small acts of resistance. They also emphasized the brutal effects on the slave family life, usually concluding that parenting was commonly disengaged or absent. Referring to slave historiography in the 1950s and 1960s, John Blassingame determined that slavery had been depicted as a “monolithic institution which [stripped] the slave of any meaningful and distinctive culture, family life, religion, or manhood.”⁷¹ By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, this paradigm of slave family came increasingly under attack.

Revisionists, such as Herbert Gutman and John Blassingame, rejected the theory of enslaved people’s passivity and victimhood, in part because it stripped them of their humanity. These historians looked for slave agency and asked, “What were enslaved people able to do for themselves and how did they resist being dehumanized completely under bondage?” Many turned to previously unused

⁷⁰ Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

⁷¹ John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

sources that helped them shift focus from the master's cruelty to the enslaved's humanity. Autobiographies by former slaves were consulted, as were Freedmen's Bureau records, and, especially rich evidence was found in the many interviews of ex-slaves conducted by the New Deal's Works Progress Administration during the 1930s. Reinterpreting the lives of enslaved people, a new generation of historians discovered and defined a flourishing autonomous slave culture that sustained the community, despite the horrors they experienced. Scholars concluded that enslaved people survived by resiliently seeking comfort in one another and building community. When possible, they established stable, monogamous relationships which often resulted in the generation of a cohesive family life that gave strength and support to its members.⁷²

These scholars insisted that family life among bondspeople did not emerge at the encouragement of slaveholder. John Blassingame, for example, challenged the "Sambo" thesis by using slave narratives to demonstrate that many slaves remained psychologically independent of their masters. He highlighted descriptions of the slave household as an important site for enslaved people, who retained their sense of self within the diverse support systems created by the community. On large plantations Blassingame found many planters who encouraged stable monogamous families and believed that successful family ties often reduced the number of escape attempts. He also found that planters welcomed the discipline slave parents

⁷² Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom.

exercised in raising their children, offering them guidance and survival skills that helped them adjust to the system of forced labor.

Moreover, Herbert Gutman, in his classic study *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1740-1925* (1976) argued that slaves' dedication to family resulted in long lasting marriages and two-parent households throughout the South, contrary to what historians previously believed. The majority of slave marriages endured, and when death or the slave trade intervened to disrupt marriages, other slaves assumed kinship roles in place of parents. In addition, his study of slave names reveals the persistence of particular family names spanning generations, as grandchildren were often named after their grandparents. Gutman concluded that family connections—both biological and “fictive” kinships—served as conduits for cultural continuity between generations. Scholars argued that the ability of black people to withdraw into their spaces of their own creation—however temporary or porous they might be—enabled the community to craft rituals that enabled a sense of pride and dignity within successful family life, countering slaveholders' attempts to cast them as perpetually immoral and childish.

Although African American men were denied the patriarchal rights of fathers to make decisions about their children, they did not limit themselves to traditional expressions of manhood. Their ability to parent varied from plantation to plantation, often depending on size, the number of slaves, living situations, and the primary form of work. More recently, historians have begun describing the range of roles men

used to define their manhood and demonstrate familial responsibility apart from the traditional measures so staunchly denied them.⁷³

For better or worse, some black men asserted their manhood by exercising control over themselves and their families through violence, both individual and state sanctioned. In the first half of the 19th century, a number of free black authors explained that masculinity required resistance against efforts to enforce slavish submission, even if it resulted in death. Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins argue that black men sometimes employed self-mutilation, the results of which might limit their ability to perform forced labor. Physical assault against masters, and even full-scale insurrection occasionally occurred as a means of expressing a “will to survive, for themselves and their descendants with their humanity intact.”⁷⁴ According to Susan Mann and Laura Edwards, since a violent defense of one’s honor in the form of defending self and family could not reasonably be practiced against

⁷³ Joan Scott states that the goal of gender studies, in part, is to explore “the range in sex roles and in sexual symbolism in different societies and periods.” Applying this approach to 19th century African American men’s experiences will prevent closed-minded and fatalistic conclusions that “men could not be “real” men/fathers under slavery” without exploring the expansive range of roles men may have carved out for them. Some of which may eschew clear categorizations under “manhood.” This lack of acceptance for range, buttressed by an anxiety of emasculating men (inherently marking manhood as a definable entity) has prevented much of the gender analysis of black men lives in the 19th century. See Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review*, 9.5 (December 1986): 1053-1075.

⁷⁴ Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine L. Jenkins, *A Question of Manhood, Volume 1: A Reader in U.S. Black Men’s History and Masculinity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 2.

white southerners, such violence was regrettably often inflicted upon members of the slave household.⁷⁵

During the Civil War, radical abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and Henry McNeal Turner challenged black men prove their manhood through military service on the battlefield. Fourteen percent of the black male population, about a quarter of a million men between the ages of 18 and 45, served the Union effort in some formal capacity as soldiers, laborers, craftsmen and servants. Yet, even as these men participated, many were mindful of the potential strains their absence placed on their children and wives who remained on plantations and in refugee camps.⁷⁶ Some of the families of runaway slaves who became soldiers endured reprisals from angry slave owners. Thousands of soldiers wrote to Union officials expressing their worries about the pernicious economic situation their families suffered after their enlistment, their anxieties about having to serve so far away from their homes and the difficulties of keeping in touch with family members. Though black men took pride in being part of the Union war effort, the high death toll among black soldiers on the battlefields represented the bitter irony of their desire to prove themselves free men. During the Civil War, black men's freedom struggle meant having to kill and be killed.⁷⁷ Only

⁷⁵ Laura Edwards, "Sexual Violence, Gender, Reconstruction and the Extension of Patriarchy in Granville County, North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 68 (July 1991): 237-260. Susan A. Mann, "Slavery, Sharecropping, and Sexual Inequality," *Signs* 14 (1989): 787-88.

⁷⁶ Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1867-1867. The Black Military Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁷⁷ Heather Andrea Williams has demonstrated that black soldiers were not blind to the perils of a manhood established through violence and death. In contrast to exhibiting one's manhood solely through battlefield violence, black men wielded literacy within the

after the fighting was over did emancipation translate into opportunities to prove themselves in venues independent of life-threatening consequences and white supervision.⁷⁸

army as well as the black community to elevate their status and masculine reputation. Many had an eye towards becoming self made men by using wartime education and experience to take leadership positions in local and state affairs, thereby fulfilling their concepts of manhood. Former soldiers joined the black men who convened and attended statewide black political conventions in southern states following the war. Heather Andrea Williams, Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

⁷⁸ Interestingly, slavery influenced even the free black man's need to prove his role as protector and provider for his family. As James Oliver Horton noted, for early 19th century free black men, "the ability to support and protect their women became synonymous with manhood and manhood became synonymous with freedom." Indeed, in New York and Philadelphia black mutual aid groups and fraternal organization were specifically established to care for widows and orphans in the absence of husbands and fathers. At the same time, black newspapers encouraged free men to be strong enough to protect their wives and children. It was a black man's duty to his family and to his race, to develop skills, and be industrious and enterprising. The role modeling and economic stability black men passed on to their children in many places in the North ensured racial progress. In the eyes of black men especially, part of protecting their wives meant keeping them out of the labor force. Racist economic conditions, however, made it impossible for black men to support their families without supplementary income from their wives. Consequently, many women ended up working for abusive white men and women. Under these conditions, it was unrealistic for black men and women to attain and sustain the gender conventions the small group of middle class blacks prescribed in the presses and in their organizations. After abolition in the North as in the South, the large majority of African American fathers would have to negotiate a range of conflicting constraints: poor economic conditions, black middle class ideologies and prescriptions for uplift, the lasting effects of the institution of slavery, and their own desires to protect and provide for their families—all of these conditions complicated their abilities to perform their paternal identity. James Oliver Horton, "Freedom's Yoke: Gender Conventions among Antebellum Free Blacks," *Feminist Studies* 12.1 (1986): 55.

For more on constructions of family among antebellum free blacks see, Leonard P. Curry, The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979); James Borchert, Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion and Folk life in the City, 1850-1870 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

Freed Families in Reconstruction

In the postwar period during Reconstruction, new conditions enabled black men to express their identities as men and fathers in ways denied them under slavery. They were no longer legally subject to the demands of the slave regime or forced to seek the consent of their owners. To be sure, plantation agriculture survived the Civil War and there was surprising continuity in terms of white landownership. Most blacks who stayed in the South were employed as agrarian workers and sharecroppers. But emancipation drastically reduced the force and scope of former slave owners' rights and resources on southern plantations.

The expansion of freed peoples' rights over time, combined with the masters' loss of power in the sphere of family relationships meant that black families enjoyed greater security and independence. The threat to families of losing loved ones who were sold or inherited had passed. The difficulties of maintaining family relationships across plantation boundaries also came to an end. A notable result of these changes was the shift from long hours working in the fields to time spent within the household, particularly for black women and children.⁷⁹ Certainly freedom offered

⁷⁹ Many historians have asserted that freedwomen withdrew from agricultural production in the post-emancipation South. The reasons attributed to freedwomen for doing so vary. Some scholars have contended that freedwomen gladly yielded to the demands of their husbands and fathers to abandon field labor and accepted freedmen's claims to the rights and privileges of the patriarchal family. Others, such as Deborah Gray White, have argued that freedwomen not only accepted but emulated white behavior, claiming the right to "play the lady" in the wake of emancipation. Still, a number of Reconstruction historians such as Jacqueline Jones have claimed that freedwomen's redistribution of their labor was a defining act of freedom in which they claimed control over themselves, their labor and their families. Historians have long debated the degree to which black women withdrew from the workforce in the Reconstruction South. To a certain extent, however, there can be little doubt that freedwomen remained active participants in the southern workforce. As Leslie

black men opportunities to construct a relatively unconstrained manly performance in relation to their families and communities—an opportunity that freedmen relished. And though white Southerners contested postwar black manhood whenever possible, both in law and with the gradual institution of segregation, black men pursued a number of new roles that were scarcely imaginable under a slave regime.

In the wake of emancipation, Congress passed several measures that granted black men the opportunity to express their manliness, and provided them vital avenues for legal redress. The 14th Amendment made all African Americans citizens; 15th Amendment established black male suffrage; and the Civil Rights Act of 1875 guaranteed equal protection under the law, and equal access to public accommodations. As Leslie Brown observes, black men saw their new opportunities for political participation— what they termed “manhood rights”— as their gendered responsibility to act in the public sphere as “guardians, protectors, and custodians of their families, and by extension, their communities.”⁸⁰ Indeed political participation afforded freedmen public avenues to express their responsibility for others and engage in communal uplift. Black voters, for instance, advocated on behalf of their

Schwalm has shown, few black men had the means to support both themselves and their families without the contribution—whether full time, part time or seasonal—of wives’ and other female family members’ labor. Nonetheless, black women (and men) clearly distinguished freedom from slavery by determining for themselves the extent and rate to which they or their wives, in the case of freedmen, entered and participated in the labor force. See Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

⁸⁰ Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008) 140.

communities, expressing communal concerns regarding relief funds for impoverished free blacks, access to land ownership, and the passage of civil rights laws. Moreover, legal access to voting and holding office helped black men construct their public identities as citizens, without the permission or representation from a white patriarch.

In 1867, when Congress overrode the failed policies of Andrew Johnson's Presidential Reconstruction and called for new state constitutional conventions under the aegis of Congressional Reconstruction, black male voters turned out in droves for the election of state delegates to their respective constitutional conventions. In total, an estimated 700,000 black men throughout the South registered to vote, with 70% casting their votes in Georgia and 90% turning out in Virginia.⁸¹ In fact, throughout the South, one-fourth of all delegate seats were held by black men.⁸² Whether they voted for constitutional convention delegates on the state level or for congressmen, freedmen demonstrated proudly claimed their citizenship rights.

Freedpeople also used marriage to create and control their private familial lives after emancipation. Unlike slave marriages, which were neither legal nor binding, and were performed under the patronizing eye of white enslavers, free marriages could be entered into with much dignity, complete with official ceremonies, paperwork, and legal standing which legitimized their family ties and the

⁸¹ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 315.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 294.

sanctity of their households.⁸³ According to literary scholar Ann duCille, “for nineteenth-century African Americans recently released from slavery and its dramatic disruption of marital and family life, marriage rites were a long-denied basic human right – signs of liberation and entitlement to both democracy and desire.”⁸⁴ While marriages undoubtedly bolstered freedwomen's performance as moral and respectable women, for black men in particular, whose previous enslavement marked them immature boys, their ability and willingness to marry in a free, legal and dignified manner stood in surprising contrast to their enslaved manhood. As Nancy Cott observes of black husbands during this period, “having and supporting dependents was evidence of independence.”⁸⁵ Marriage was an opportunity to express their mastery over their dependents within the home and, as much as possible, to secure their families from unwanted white intervention, particularly former slave owners who sought opportunity to reclaim antebellum control over black people and their labor.

The Freedmen's Bureau played an important role in supporting African Americans' desires to formalize their family relationships through marriage.⁸⁶

⁸³ This is not to suggest that there was nothing gracious about love and marriage during slavery, but to acknowledge that watchful eye and discretion of slave owners could at any moment dissolve a marriage. In freedom, blacks could create legitimized and truly independent households.

⁸⁴ Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*. (New York: Vintage Books), 14.

⁸⁵ Nancy F. Cott, “Marriage and Women's Citizenship in the United States, 1830-1934,” *The American Historical Review* 103.5 (1998): 1452.

⁸⁶ The role of the federal government in facilitating this transition from slavery to citizenship in the US South was made very clear even before the official end of the Civil War. On March 3, 1865, Congress passed an act establishing the Freedmen's Bureau for the duration of the war and one year thereafter. Its stated objectives were to provide clothing

Although the Bureau's primary agenda was to instill the principles of free labor and set free blacks to work, Bureau officials recognized marriage as central to this process.⁸⁷ By imposing narrow and gendered definitions of the rights and duties of black families and households, the Bureau sought to create autonomous black male-headed households that would reduce the government's material aid to freedwomen and children. Black men now free were told that they had they had an obligation to become responsible, industrious, free laborers who supported their wives and children.⁸⁸

In his series of lectures advising emancipated blacks on how to "begin life anew on a pure foundation," General Clinton B. Fisk, Assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, explained that marriage was an essential part of freedom because it would give them "the civil rights of married persons, and ... make [freedmen's] children the legal heirs to [their] property."⁸⁹ The twofold purpose of marriage, he explained, was to confer on black men the independent right to govern

and rations to needy former slaves as well as to distribute abandoned and confiscated lands to loyal refugees and freed people. The Bureau soon established itself as a considerable economic and political presence in the defeated South by mediating land and labor disputes between whites and former slaves. Beyond laying the foundation for a free labor society in the South, the Bureau also attempted to define freedom by regularizing freed people's familial relationships.

⁸⁷ Amy Dru Stanley, From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage and the Market in the Era of Slave Emancipation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁸⁸ In her article "Becoming a Citizen," Katherine Franke explains that marriage was used to compel freed black people to comply with the heteronormative ideal of the family—the self-sufficient American family with a working husband and a dependent wife and children—and to therefore absolve the government of responsibility for financially supporting needy black women and children. Katherine Franke, "Becoming a Citizen: Reconstruction Era Regulation of African American Marriages," *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 11 (1999).

⁸⁹ Brevet Major General C.B. Fisk, Plain Counsels For Freedmen: In Sixteen Brief Lectures (American Tract Society: Boston, 1866), 31.

their households, but more importantly, the obligation to work to provide for the dependent members within it. Emphasizing how essential money was to domestic bliss, Fisk warned, “your wives will not love you if you do not provide bread and clothes for them... Your children will not run to meet you, dance before you and climb upon your knees, and call you papa, if you make beggars of them.”⁹⁰ Black women, on the other hand, possessed the right to raise their own children. Their duties to accept the authority of their husbands and to work for the support and preservation of their families were the fruits of freedom. In the Bureau’s eyes, the effectiveness of labor contracts and marital contracts working together was integral to a successful Reconstruction.⁹¹

Although many former slaves did legally marry, others held their marital bonds formed in slavery in disdain and saw divorce as one of freedom’s avenues to control their private lives and “begin life anew.”⁹² Some freedpeople experienced their marriages as a negative aspect their enslavement.⁹³ To be free but remain partnered with their former master’s spousal choice or to endure a failing and/or abusive partnership was intolerable. Thus, thousands of freedmen and women chose to formally sever their marital bonds in acts of self-ownership or “emancipation”.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁹¹ Many obstacles, both legal and extralegal, stood in the way of black men fulfilling this role, particularly the resistance from white planters who, although they accepted the demise of slavery, rejected the concept of free labor by which laborers freely sold their labor and worked without coercion.

⁹² Fisk, *Plain Counsels*, 31.

⁹³ Elizabeth B. Clark, “Matrimonial Bonds: Slavery, Contract, and the Law of Divorce in Nineteenth Century America,” *Critical Matrix* 3.1 (September 1987): 1.

⁹⁴ Dylan Penningroth, “African American Divorce in Virginia and Washington D.C., 1865-1930,” *Journal of Family History* 33.21 (2008); Dylan Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk*:

Moreover, as Dylan Penningroth documents, freedpeople engaged in custody battles and property disputes with their former partners in the hopes of leading economically viable single lives, or constructing completely different families, now that they possessed the right to choose. Others bypassed the county courts and simply abandoned their family members.⁹⁵

In addition to postwar marriage and divorce, freed people's mobility enabled many to search for lost family members represented another means of exercising mastery over their personal lives. Thousands of former slaves wrote to the Freedmen's Bureau to find and reunite with their children and partners. They also placed advertisements in newspapers such as *The Christian Recorder*, requesting information concerning loved ones. These appeals were often read publicly in black churches.⁹⁶ For black men in particular, who had been disproportionately sold away from their families through the domestic slave trade, or separated from their loved ones for military service, it was their ability as freedmen to search for and reconstitute their families without traveling permits or the need to evade slave patrollers that contributed to their manly esteem, despite how unlikely or difficult that search would be.⁹⁷

African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁹⁵ David Silkenat, Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce and Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

⁹⁶ Heather Andrea Williams, Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

⁹⁷ Horton, "Freedom's Yoke." See also Carole Emberton, "Only Murder Makes Men": Reconsidering the Black Military Experience," *The Journal of the Civil War Era*, 2.3 (September 2012).

Even as emancipation provided new opportunities for black men to take on the responsibilities of fatherhood, they encountered formidable obstacles as they endeavored to establish control of their offspring and defend their family autonomy. For example, white men saw black political expression during Reconstruction as a threat to their racial and political dominance, and tried to drastically curtail black civic involvement. Many freedmen faced verbal assaults and physical confrontations and even death when recalcitrant white Southerners sought to “redeem” the South. David Godshalk notes, “in addition to its symbolic function in reaffirming the power and dominance of white men, mob violence played a powerful role in intimidating blacks, controlling black behavior, discouraging open black resistance against racial injustice, and preventing black economic competition.”⁹⁸ White citizens used disenfranchisement efforts, vigilante violence, and blacklisting to keep politically active freedmen from exercising their rights. Additionally, they seized black property and cut funding for black public schooling was curtailed. These actions resulted in ill-equipped facilities and insufficient resources, and secured a decidedly inferior educational experience for black children compared to their white peers.⁹⁹ Job discrimination ensured that education rarely functioned as a means for upward social mobility for blacks. Consequently, even as the Freedmen’s Bureau readily granted black men the economic responsibilities of fatherhood, and the federal government

⁹⁸ David F. Godshalk, “William J. Northern's Public and Personal Struggles against Lynching.” *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*. Eds. Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 147.

⁹⁹ Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

conferred “citizen” status upon them, many barriers remained to obstruct black men’s (and their families’) economic, legal and social stability.

Reclaiming the legal rights to their children was often a difficult process for black parents. Barriers legal and extralegal stood in black men’s way as they sought to reconstruct their patriarchal household rights. The most notable resistance came from white planters who refused to see their labor force and long-term financial investments dissipate. One of the most effective methods former slave-owners used to challenge the authority of black parents, and re-establish white control the apprenticeship system, which threatened slaves’ newly legitimated independent households.¹⁰⁰

African-American Families and Southern Apprenticeship

Although many Bureau officials tried to do their part in supporting the authority of black parents, within days of emancipation, across the South, planters and farmers desperate for laborers began to seize black children by convincing county courts and Bureau officials to bind their former slaves’ children to them as apprentices.¹⁰¹ White southerners became the legal guardians of black children—

¹⁰⁰ On the black codes, in general, and their apprenticeship provisions, more specifically, see Donald G. Nieman, *To Set the Law in Motion: The Freedmen’s Bureau and the Legal Rights of Blacks, 1865-1868* (Millwood, NY: KTO Press, 1979), 72-98; Barry A. Crouch, “All the Vile Passions’: The Texas Black Code of 1866,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 97 (July 1993): 13-34.

¹⁰¹ Karin L. Zipf notes that the Freedmen’s Code of 1866 modified antebellum apprenticeships laws which limited apprenticeship to the children of laborers who the master deemed dishonest and inconsistent, to apply to children of freedmen and give priority to their former masters. Karin L. Zipf, “Reconstructing “Free Woman”: African American

many of whom were young men and women well beyond childhood—and, in doing so, procured an abundant supply of involuntary labor.¹⁰² Yet many of these apprenticeship agreements violated freedmen’s parental rights.¹⁰³ Atlanta Bureau agent D. C. Poole made this perfectly clear to a former slave owner who refused to give up a child “bound out” to him during slavery, “said laws have become null and void... you can therefore no longer hold him under your former contract or agreement.” What mattered more, Poole claimed, was the child’s parents’ rights to take care of him, insisting that they were “desirous to have him with them.”¹⁰⁴ Similarly, as another Bureau authority in Atlanta repeatedly explained to white employers who refused to return illegally indentured children to their parents, “parents and children (however black) cannot be forcibly separated from each other nor can any person or magistrate bind a child out to you so long as one or both of its parents are living.”¹⁰⁵ Agent Fred Mosebach, for example, wrote to a fellow agent in Jonesboro, Georgia, in October 1867 asking for his help in rescinding an indenture agreement that Mosebach had allowed that sent four black children to Mr. DeVaugh, a white proprietor. In this particular case, the children’s mother—who Mosebach originally thought was dead—came to his office and “objected to the binding of her

Women, Apprenticeship, and Custody Rights during Reconstruction,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 12.1 (Spring 2000), 9.

¹⁰² The chaos of emancipation left ex-slave children unprotected, particularly children whose parents were not present on property of their former slave owners.

¹⁰³ According to Karin L. Zipf, “African American women endured the laws and practices of apprenticeship in a fashion different than African American men.” Zipf, “Reconstructing Free Woman,” 9.

¹⁰⁴ Lt. Col. D.C. Poole to Mr. Mason, February 10, 1866, Letters Sent by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, reel 43, BRFAL-GA.

¹⁰⁵ Major A.S.A. Comir to George Jones Esq., September 17, 1866, Letters Sent by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, reel 45, BRFAL-GA (M1903).

children.”¹⁰⁶ To rectify the matter, Mosebach ordered that the children to be returned to her, and compensated Devaugh with four orphan children from an orphan asylum in Atlanta. Although black parents’ rights, at times, were held in high esteem, they were not considered inalienable.

If they found parents to be unfit providers the Freedmen’s Bureau and the courts sometimes voided blacks’ claims to their children . For example, George R. Walbride, a Bureau agent in Atlanta, advised a colleague in Gwinnet County, Georgia, to allow a black girl whose parents were still alive to remain apprenticed to Mr. Thomas Pitts until he was “satisfied that [the parents were] competent to take charge and provide for her a suitable support.”¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, though most courts needed parental consent when binding out black children, often this meant little more than their physical presence.¹⁰⁸ In the eyes of the Bureau, for example, some parents—most often single mothers—could not fulfill the responsibilities and obligations of being a parent.¹⁰⁹ The Bureau often encouraged and sometimes compelled parents to apprentice some or even all of their children to white employers who could provide “good” homes.

¹⁰⁶ Fred Mosebach to J. S. H. Waldrop Esq, Atlanta, Georgia, October 22, 1867, Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 43, BRFAL-GA.

¹⁰⁷ George R. Wallbridge to Adam Robinson, Atlanta, Georgia March 2, 1866, Letter Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 43, BRFAL-GA.

¹⁰⁸ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 201.

¹⁰⁹ Outside of a male-headed household, the rights and duties of single freedwomen were ill defined. Bureau officials and the courts often debated whether single mothers be autonomous households heads especially as they demanded their children. Zipf, “Reconstructing “Free Woman,” 11.

To be sure, black men and women resisted these initiatives as violations of the sanctity of their households. Not only did apprenticeship agreements threaten blacks' claims to familial independence, they also denied parents the rights to the labor of their children, an advantage highly valued in harsh economic times, such as the harvest and sowing seasons. In the Bureau's mind, however, apprenticeship, was not necessarily incompatible with freedom from slavery, even though it often violated African Americans' right to mastery over their private lives. Once again, the interests of southern white capitalism threatened the forms and functioning of black families.

African Americans also frequently turned to the Freedmen's Bureau to protest the legal kidnapping of their children, hopeful that local Bureau agents would be sympathetic, investigate the matter, and, ultimately, void the apprenticeship.¹¹⁰ A lengthy list of black parents' complaints compiled by Bureau officials suggests that the Bureau was responsive.¹¹¹ After a child was taken away, parents would either write to the agent or appear before him to give a sworn testimony of the facts. Sometimes family members, friends, and neighbors testified as well, bolstering the assertions of parent. If the agent chose to follow through, he would then write to the child's employer asking that he present his case for a continuation of the relationship.

¹¹⁰ As Zipf points out, while Bureau agents "idealized free-labor principles, their racist bias made them believe in the inferiority of African Americans, and, consequently, in their unfitness to enjoy full independence. So, they mostly endeavored to restrict, rather than eradicate apprenticeship." Karin L. Zipf, Labor of Innocents: Forced Apprenticeship in North Carolina, 1715-1919 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 73.

¹¹¹ The Field Office Records of Freedmen's Bureau are replete with letters received and sent by Bureau officials and affidavits from cases they adjudicated among black and white citizens. The letters cited in this chapter are all from the Records of the Field Offices for the State of Georgia, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872.

If the apprenticeship was illegal, the official would demand the immediate return of the child.

The records of these cases between black parents and white proprietors provide insight into how African American fathers used the law to resolve tensions between the desires of white landowners and the rights of black families. These records demonstrate how eager black men were to regain bound-out children and demonstrate to the Bureau that they were not only qualified, but wise and nurturing parents. This meant proving their financial stability and, to a lesser extent, their deep emotional ties to their children.¹¹² The white men and women holding black children were usually skeptical of these claims. In their counter-testimonies before Bureau officials, guardians questioned everything from black men's preparedness and interest in parenting, to the very legitimacy of their biological links to the indentured children. In their accounts, the figure of the black father operated as a negative stereotype: black fathers were indifferent, ignorant, and inept men.

This archive of disputed claims is an important source for several reasons. They capture black men's sincere, determined, and often anxious efforts to re-establish and legitimate their relationships with their children; they communicate black men's fatherly aspirations; and, perhaps most importantly, they demonstrate how often freedpeople challenged white interference in black domestic affairs. These significant moments offer scholars insight into black men's expectations that

¹¹² The Bureau's main concern was that black families did not become "dependent" on the federal government and its agencies. In official Bureau communication, Bureau agents often documented and lamented the numbers of heads of households dependent on government rations. Each man represented an entire destitute family.

they were now operating in a free labor market required to take seriously their vision of their roles and identities as fathers. Given that the Bureau was the arbiter of these disputes, these fathers' accounts must also be recognized as strategically placed ideas intended to garner Bureau support against their white opponents. Black fathers' narratives of their paternal actions and desires were also a means of casting apprenticeship, now becoming a legal mode of organizing black labor, in a more pernicious light. To that end, freedmen argued that apprenticeship, rather than keeping black families out of poverty as the Bureau claimed, was denying responsible black fathers their right to provide for their children as heads of households. Historians analyzing these pleas must also consider black men's aims.

Defining The Black Father in Contests over Black Children

In determining if a father was worthy of being a parent, Bureau officials usually contacted agents located in the area where the missing child resided to make known the father's request. For example, on September 24, 1868, Mosebach wrote to Major Lewis in Glynn County on behalf of freedman Alonzo Allen, who sought custody of his six children.¹¹³ Narrating the facts of the case and presenting Allen's request, Mosebach explained that until recently Allen's children had been living with their mother, who died four months prior. Since her passing, her employer had refused to keep the children and had "requested [Allen] to send for" them. According to Mosebach, Allen was "unable to furnish them with means of

¹¹³ Fred Mosebach to Major J. R. Lewis, Atlanta, Georgia, September 24, 1867, Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 45, BRFAL-GA.

transportation,” and proposed that Lewis act as the children’s temporary guardian until the next payment cycle when he could use their wages to pay for the trip. In the only editorialized portion of the letter, Mosebach described Allen as “anxious to have children,” adding that he was employed at Atlanta Medical College demonstrating that Allen would be a gainfully employed and caring parent, one worthy of the Bureau’s efforts to reunite families.

Many freedmen also requested Bureau aid when claiming the right to raise the children of their relatives when necessary, and testified to their emotional ties and financial stability as evidence of their parental competence. Solomon Peterson from Lawrenceville, Georgia, wrote to the bureau regarding his grandson. His daughter, the boy’s mother, had died and the father was unknown. Peterson had “taken care of him and supported him since he became free.” But a few days prior, the child had been abducted from his home by a white man who “carried away his grandson... against [Peterson’s will] and under protest of his wife.” For undisclosed reasons, his local Bureau representative, Mr. Clairborne, “would not or could not help him.”¹¹⁴ Frustrated with the lack of support he received, Peterson turned to Mosebach in Atlanta for assistance.

White applicants applied to the Bureau for apprentices, and they too were vetted by agents , who often exchanged information on the character and qualifications of potential guardians. Before Mosebach allowed James Morris to keep

¹¹⁴ Affidavit of Solomon Peterson from Lawrenceville Georgia before Major Fred Mosebach, Atlanta Georgia December 2, 1867, Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 45, BRFAL-GA.

a child bound to him, he consulted his colleague J. S. H. Waldrop, an agent in Jonesboro, Georgia, asking about Morris's local reputation, "respectfully" requesting him "to state whether or not Mr. Morris is a proper and suitable person to be entrusted with such a child and his ability to fulfill his obligations of the indenture."¹¹⁵ A week later, when James Morrison, a plantation owner near Morgan County, Georgia, asked to apprentice several orphans, Mosebach consulted his colleague in Athens, Georgia. He sought comments on Morrison's "general character..., and whether he is a proper and suitable person to whom colored children might be apprenticed."¹¹⁶

White Southerners' applications to become guardians of black children, especially the children of their living former slaves, suggest that they were desperate to revive a version of the plantation household regime by regaining control of black labor. They obstructed and fought against freedpeople's desires to decide how, when and where their children might work. In slavery, black parents had long relied on children to help them, but emancipation opened up the possibility of children contributing to their families' collective economy rather than former slaveowners' needs. Hence, white landowners were careful in their applications to the Bureau, not only to highlight their parental skills to the Bureau, but also to denigrate black parents' ability successfully reconstitute their families. The contested everything, from the legitimacy of African Americans' paternity, to their financial competency. In

¹¹⁵ Fred Mosebach to J. S.H. Waldrop, September 3, 1867, Atlanta, Georgia Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 44, BRFAL-GA.

¹¹⁶ Fred Mosebach to Major J. G. Knox, September 16, 1867, Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 44, BRFAL-GA.

hundreds of letters of interest or testimonies before the Bureau, potential white guardians engaged in a crucial battle over the future lives of black children.

They circulated evidence presenting themselves as more capable than black parents in determining black children's future, which sometimes succeeded, given the absence of expert opinion on how slavery might affect African American life post-emancipation.

By the 1880s, Northern attention gradually shifted away from the consequences of master-slave relations, to query instead the competence and autonomy of the freedpeople in general: their aptitude, character and ability to participate in civic life while negotiating positively in marketplace and contractual relationships. But what could be accurately known about 4 million people in the midst of a momentous historical transition? How were they to become competent citizens? The abolitionist Edward Pierce, a special agent of the Treasury involved in experimental efforts to reconstruct plantation society in the Sea Islands, South Carolina, believed that, before granting former slaves freedom and political rights, the answer to these questions had to be determined.¹¹⁷ "The slave is unknown to all, even to himself, while the bondage lasts..." Pierce lamented. "Not even Alex de Tocqueville or Olmsted, much less the master, can measure the capacities and possibilities of the slave, until the slave himself is transmuted to a man."¹¹⁸ Answers to these questions proved especially problematic, because there were no experts on

¹¹⁷ Willie Lee Rose, Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964).

¹¹⁸ Edward L. Pierce, "The Freedmen at Port Royal," *Atlantic Monthly* 13 (September 1863): 301.

slavery or black community life in the federal government. Nor was there even an existing apparatus at the federal level to investigate how African Americans experienced the transition to freedom.¹¹⁹

The federal government increasingly took responsibility for African American's well-being through the Freedmen's Bureau.¹²⁰ Yet, many former masters believed that they knew a great deal more than the federal government about black life and the potential of freedpeople. Steeped in the racialized imagery of the antebellum period which depicted slaves as childlike, and still committed to the plantation economy with its ideal family paradigm, ex-slave owners believed they had the best perspective on the potentialities of labor and race relations in the reconstructed South. Only a year after the end of the Civil War, a Southern commentator remarked, "We of the South would not find much difficulty in managing the negroes, at least tolerably well, if left to ourselves, for we would be guided by the *lights of experience* and teachings of history, sacred and profane."¹²¹ Offering their expertise, many landlords wrote to the Freedmen's Bureau and offered categorical opinions on how to handle black freedom, black labor, and black

¹¹⁹ Oz Frankel, "The Predicaments of Racial Knowledge: Government Studies of the Freedmen during the U.S. Civil War," *Social Research* 70.1 (Spring 2003): 48.

¹²⁰ On March 3, 1865, Congress passed an act establishing the Freedmen's Bureau for the duration of the war and one year thereafter. Its stated objectives were to provide clothing and rations to needy former slaves as well as to distribute abandoned and confiscated lands to loyal refugees and freed people. The Bureau soon established itself as a considerable economic and political presence in the defeated South by mediating land and labor disputes between whites and former slaves. Black education, while secondary, was nevertheless important to the Freedmen's Bureau. "An Act to establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees" March 3rd 1865 in U.S., Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America, Vol. 13 (Boston, 1866), 507–9.

¹²¹ "What's to Be Done with the Negroes?" *DeBow's Review*, I. VI (June 1866): 577, *emphasis added*.

families.

These letters are fascinating. For example, defending his claim over the lives of Sarah and William Tolson, two black children he had apprenticed in slavery, D.H. Johnson presented himself as a selfless, concerned citizen, accusing the children's parents of being careless caretakers. He rescued the children, he explained, only after they had been forsaken by several black guardians. They were first "abandoned by their father," and then by other relatives, who placed them in the care of a "free negro who was not able to care for himself."¹²² According to Johnson, the children had no capable black male custodians. Indeed, they were so neglected that locals called him for help. "Complaint was made to me by the neighbors," he explained, "that the children [were] terribly neglected." Furthermore, when he found the children's father, a free man, he had been "temporarily sold into servitude for debt." The father requested that Johnson to take care of them stating, "it was out of his power to do anything for them." Johnson saw his own willingness to care for them as a public service, rather than an opportunity to acquire free black labor. From his point of view, the children, their father, and the citizens of Atlanta all benefitted from such an intervention; the fact that he profited from the children's labor was beside the point.

Johnson presented a sympathetic narrative of indenture; other white custodians painted a more disparaging and accusatory portrait of black family dynamics when their rights to an apprenticed child were questioned. In response to

¹²² Affidavit of D.H. Johnson, Atlanta, Georgia, June 13th 1867, Atlanta, Georgia Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 44, BRFAL-GA.

Agent D.C. Poole's inquiry on behalf of freedman Simon Pealtry, who alleged that Pleasant B. Jones was illegally holding his daughter, Jones' aggressively challenged "Simon's misrepresentation to your office." First, he claimed, Pealtry had no "rightful claim" to the girl because he was her stepfather, "not her father." Not only lacking a biological connection, Pealtry and the girl enjoyed no emotional or financial connection either. In fact, the girl's mother had died shortly after the couple married. Pealtry "soon married again." He "never contributed anything to the girl's satisfaction or support or in any ways as [under] the authority of a parent or guardian, or performed the duties of such relation." Clearly this man's concern for the child had ended when her mother died. Whatever plea he was making through D.C. Poole was "inhumane." Finally, Pealtry was untrustworthy, "recognized by this community both, white and colored, as a bad character." As for the girl, Jones stated, she had been "in [Jones's] family for many years, [was] kindly treated, and [wished] to remain."¹²³ Jones emerges as a more deserving, honorable caregiver than Pealtry, his home seems to be the most stable environment for the child, and Pealtry appears not to be even a "real father," but a predator manipulating the Bureau for selfish gain. For Jones, the definition of a good father was a biologically-related, financial, and emotional caregiver; everything Pealtry was not.

White people's testimonies on black men's parenting was often considered "expert" and relatively objective and often shaped Bureau workers' decisions in many apprenticeships cases. In one instance, Bureau agent Harry Haskell denied

¹²³ Pleasant B. Jones to D.C. Poole, January 29, 1866, Atlanta, Georgia Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 44, BRFAL-GA.

Charles Billings' custody suits solely on the testimony of Mr. Collins, the white man who held Billings' child. Like Pleasant B. Jones, Collins raised questions about the legitimacy of Billings's paternity. According to Haskell, Collins told him, "the child (Caroline) was born three months after Billings married the girl's mother," that she was "a bright mulatto, lighter color than its mother," and that "Billings is a black man." Based on Collins's intimate knowledge of Billings's family history, Billings "could not in his opinion have been the father of Caroline." Collins also alleged that he would not stop Caroline from going with Billings but the girl herself was unwilling "to go to Billings whom she did not know." According to Haskell, Caroline had grown very close with Collins's family: "Since 1865 the family is much attached to the child and [Collins'] daughter had already commenced to educate it." This closeness apparently placed her on the road to a financial security and a good future. On the other hand, Haskell alleged that Collins had only received five dollars of support from the girl's estranged father. Based on Collins' testimony, Haskell decided that "freedchild Caroline should not be returned to her father Charles Billings."¹²⁴ In Haskell's eyes, he was a bad father.

Conclusion

U.S. slavery and apprenticeship tested the nature of black men's familial identities, including parenting and spousal support. Both systems of labor facilitated involuntary legal separation of black men from their family members, unwanted

¹²⁴ Harry Haskell to Colonel Caleb C. Sibley, May 29, 1868, Atlanta, Georgia Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 43, BRFAL-GA.

white intervention in black domestic affairs, and challenges to black fathers' opportunities to provide economic support for their households. Indeed, white capitalists' labor demands affected what men did and how they behaved as fathers. As I have demonstrated, however, African American men in slavery and through the Reconstruction period were not "emasculated" or detached emotionally from wives and children. In ways both traditional and unique, utilizing ads for lost loved ones, mounting disputes with their children's white guardians, entering military service and marriage, black men enacted their familial concern and identities.

In letters and testimonies to the Freedmen's Bureau, black men described the ideal black father as one who aspired to be a consistent emotional, economic and physical presence in his children's and grandchildren's lives wherever and whenever possible. Labor arrangements that denied them these opportunities, they argued, harmed black families, and, ultimately blighted the emancipation process, imagined by ex-slaves as the freedom to reconstitute their familial relations. It is true that many of these interpretations of fatherhood, family life and labor were carefully crafted to strike a chord with Freedmen's Bureau officials who were highly invested in supporting black independent households, black male parenting, and black labor. But these cases recounted here, can also reveal much about black men's sincere efforts to shape their family lives according to traditional and familiar notions of fatherhood as they challenged and expose hostile white employers' interests in continually exploiting their labor. White applicants' efforts to disprove the parental attributes claimed by black fathers and husbands underscores how crucial Freedman Bureau

officials' own perspectives on proper fathering were. Their decisions favored the fatherly rights claimed by newly emancipated slave men, many of whom hoped to assume a patriarchal role.

The study of black fathers, whether as real men, rhetorical figures in apprenticeships cases, or actors in historical accounts of slavery and freedom, has been important in attempts to understand and resolve the conflict between black familial independence and white property owners' desire for continued control of black labor. As slaves, as soldiers, as free applicants and appellants, black men drew upon their familial commitments to create new identities. As free men, fathers, patriarchs and husbands, they resisted the oppressive post-Civil War labor regimes that were designed to control both their labor and familial livelihood. But how did black men in the Reconstruction era respond to this work-family conflict within their intimate households? In what ways were their actions as men and fathers shaped by where and how they worked? The next chapter will explore the effects of the political economy of sharecropping in Georgia during the late on black men's definitions and achievements of manhood.

Chapter 2

“He Was Now Master”: Work-Family Dynamics in Black Sharecropping Households

Slavery was the primary means of mobilizing black agricultural labor in the antebellum South. In the wake of the Civil War and emancipation, however, a new type of labor regime was necessary to engage an adequate supply of free workers: cotton still needed picking. To be sure, former slave-owners were unwilling or unable to imagine black labor organized in radically different ways than those with which they had grown up and profited. Thus, most sought to impose a new labor system that reproduced, as much as possible, what they saw as the virtues and benefits of plantation slavery. As James Roark observed, “The dominant theme in the planters’ lives became the search for a substitute for slavery.”¹²⁵

Freedpeople, in contrast, demanded work opportunities and employers that would support their definitions of freedom. Historian Tera Hunter found that for one black woman, freedom was the “opportunity to protect her dignity, to preserve the

¹²⁵ James Roark, Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 131.

integrity of her family and secure fair terms for her labor.”¹²⁶ By refusing to work as long and continuously as they had under slavery, attempting to restore their families, and redirecting the labor of wives and children to serve the needs of their black households rather than planters’, African Americans were demanding a freedom in both their work lives and private lives rooted in self-sufficiency and autonomy.

For the most part, white proprietors and black laborers were staunchly at odds in terms of work hours and proper compensation for the former slaves. Landowners’ desires to replace slave labor with another subordinate labor force clashed with the freedpeople’s determination to own land, and to resist the imposition of what Ronald Davis has described as “a wage system of labor which they found to be slavery in all but name.”¹²⁷ For southern whites, the prospect of widespread land ownership among blacks was horrifying. Not only would it require some of them to give up large tracts of land, but it would also raise the former slave population socially and economically to a level equivalent to, or exceeding, that of many struggling whites, a prospect inconsistent with the common perception that blacks were subhuman. Despite many violent conflicts, political debates, and the campaigning of Freedmen’s Bureau agents, neither side was strong enough to force through their preferred options.¹²⁸ The freedmen would not own their own land; the

¹²⁶ Tera Hunter, To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

¹²⁷ Ronald Davis, Good and Faithful Labor: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District, 1860-1890 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 3.

¹²⁸ There was much confrontation among laborers, planters and Freedmen’s Bureau agents because planters were long accustomed to wielding unquestioning authority over all their workers. See, for example, Julie Saville, The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to

planters would not own their own laborers. By the mid to late 1870s, however, a “compromise” was struck in the form sharecropping.

Sharecropping represented something of a reluctant concession in that neither landlord nor tenant could achieve their desired goals. Under this system, laborers were hired in family units; each family received a plot of land, a house to live in, tools and supplies, along with animals and feed for the stock.¹²⁹ Landlords told croppers what to plant and determined the expected annual yield.¹³⁰ Some planters gave their employees additional duties, such as clearing land or cutting fence rails. In return, at the end of the growing season, the proprietor would get half the crops grown by the tenant and his family, constituting pay for seed and other materials the landlord had provided. In a few cases, he also furnished food to the cropper, while he took two-thirds of the produce.¹³¹

Sharecropping met at least some of the needs of the interested parties: Blacks regarded tenancy, especially the familial closeness and independence it fostered, as

Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 102-110; Laura Edwards, Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

¹²⁹ The tenants and their large families crowded into two-room frame shacks with no sanitary conveniences of any kind. The front room held the beds according to the number of tenants. If need be, there were also beds in the backroom where the cooking was done. The rest of the cabins furnishings were limited to a few chairs and a kitchen table plus whatever the tenants brought with them. Elizabeth Rauh Bethel, Promiseland: A Century of Life in a Negro Community (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 387.

¹³⁰ The landlords right to determine the acreage to plant, the crop mix, equipment and improvements, sometimes oppressed sharecroppers, especially when they demanded an inefficiently high acreage in cotton, forcing greater borrowing to purchasing food, depressing their income, and reinforcing indebtedness. Jay R. Mandle, “Sharecropping and the Plantation Economy in the United States South.” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 10.2 (1983): 125. Ransom and Sutch, One Kind of Freedom, 149-168.

¹³¹ Albert V. House, Jr., “A Reconstruction Sharecropper Contract on a Georgia Rice Plantation,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 26.2 (June 1942): 156-165.

infinitely better than slavery. Sharecropping husbands and wives retained a minimal amount of control over their own labor and that of their children. They could plan their own work in ways that reflected the family's needs, both day-to-day and on a seasonal basis.¹³² On the other hand, because the sharecropper remained in debt to the landowner for the entire growing season, the arrangement, as Ronald Davis suggests, "immobilized... good and faithful labor" for the entire crop season.¹³³

Blacks were wary of the limited autonomy of sharecropping system. But having already experienced unresolved labor struggles over black families' desire for independence and white owners demands for cheap labor, not unlike tensions employers and black workers experienced over apprenticeship and wage labor contracts, African Americans agricultural workers became willing to accept share tenancy. At the very least it satisfied their desires for familial independence and self-governance. For many freedpeople, family was more than a biological grouping; it was a refuge from the mistreatment of wives and children. This alone enabled parents to tolerate a caste subordination which they were often powerless to prevent.¹³⁴ No matter how poor or exploited, recently emancipated slaves viewed the

¹³² Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 45.

¹³³ Ronald Davis found that, although whites did not want sharecropping, they conceded to this form of labor because it provided some safe guards against blacks abandoning plantations if and when they found better employment elsewhere. They abhorred the sight of black workers, hired as wage laborers, dropping their hoes and leaving fields at will to work for another planter or to simply to take an unscheduled rest. Davis, Good and Faith Labor.

¹³⁴ Jones identified the succor of family as one of the "tangible benefits of freedom that could not be reckoned in financial terms." Jones, Labor of Love, 45; Davis, Good and Faithful Labor, 179. One of the themes to emerge from recent studies of Reconstruction and sharecropping has been the significance of family labor to meeting household objectives.

security and stability of their families to be paramount. Threats of forcible separation, which happened too often in slavery, was intolerable. Sharecropping, in contrast, required constant family interaction and cooperation in ways that wage labor did not. Thus, sharecropping agreements increased rapidly, becoming a central feature of agricultural labor throughout the cotton South by 1880.¹³⁵

In Georgia, sharecropping and tenancy were the dominant forms of labor organization. Of the 82,826 farms cultivated by Georgia blacks, 70,568 were farmed on some kind of sharecropping or tenancy basis. In 1900, 85.2 percent of Georgia's black agricultural labor force consisted of sharecroppers and tenants.¹³⁶ Between 1880 and 1900, the number of sharecroppers and tenants increased by 72,000 farm families, or at a ratio of 5.1 sharecroppers and tenants for each new landowner.¹³⁷

The experience of black fathers as sharecroppers provides a lens through which historians can better understand how work and family functioned for many poor families in the South. In particular, sharecropping helps us understand how black men negotiated their identities as men, fathers, and workers within a punishing labor system that, at least to some extent, enabled their daily presence in the home as heads of households, farm managers, and authority figures, all of which in certain ways contributed to the stability of households. How did black men understand and

For more on the meaning of family in freedom see Heather Andrea Williams, [Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery](#) (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

¹³⁵ Jacqueline Jones, [Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow](#), 61.

¹³⁶ Bureau of the Census, Twelfth Census, Statistics of Agriculture, Table 10, 69-71. In contrast, 44.6 percent of Georgia's white farmers were similarly employed.

¹³⁷ Lewis N. Wynne, "The Role of Freedmen in the Postbellum Cotton Economy of Georgia," *Phylon* 42.4 (1981): 318.

enact the opportunities and challenges of sharecropping in relation to their familial identities? How was their vision of fatherhood and manhood challenged or alternatively buttressed by this family-centered regime of agricultural labor? In the process of explaining how black men dealt with family and labor conflicts that emerged within the world of share tenancy, this chapter will explore the meanings and work-life experiences that shaped those sharecroppers who would, by the 1890s, be pushed off the land and required to enter industrial employment.¹³⁸

The Emergence of Sharecropping

In 1868, after two years of employing former slaves as agricultural workers, an anonymous planter wrote to the *Southern Cultivator*, an agricultural journal whose primary readership was Southern white planters, claiming to have unearthed the “correct mode of working our present labor [freed blacks].” Based on his “close observations,” this proprietor found “the old plantation style” whereby all workers collectively labored on the same crop to be unnecessary and inefficient. In its place, he encouraged readers to “let each family work by itself, in separate fields or farms.” This work regime would reveal to landowners whether their employees were working or playing, and create rivalries among the family units regarding “who will

¹³⁸ Information about black male slaves and sharecroppers is scant. Most records only offer the planter point of view. To overcome some of the methodological difficulties of studying slaves and black sharecroppers, whose voices are not a part of the existing historical record, I have interwoven available quantitative data with more qualitative types of data, such as oral histories. By combining these methodologies this study attempts to piece together the social fabric of these people’s lives and to place their lives within the larger context of economic and social history.

make the most.” He suggested this system would improve both workers’ effort and output. This commentator had already employed two families under this system, and in one of them “there [was] no one to work but the man and his wife.” He concluded that organizing his plantation according to this work plan, where each family operated as a self-regulating body, brought “less trouble to myself, than under the old plantation system... .He who tries it will find so.”¹³⁹

For this landowner, family cultivation made labor management “easier” and “far better.” An overseer, he concluded, was unnecessary. The only catch to the arrangement, however, was the implicit necessity of extending independence in farming to black families, something many planters in the post emancipation South found unthinkable. I’ve already noted that pro-slavery whites were convinced that black slaves were childlike and incapable of self-care, and would most likely die off as a people if left to themselves.¹⁴⁰ Yet, the writer believed that empowering black families could actually maximize agricultural profit and eliminate labor inefficiencies.

¹³⁹ “To Manage Negro Labor Successfully,” *Atlanta Constitution*, July 18, 1868.

¹⁴⁰ The President of the 1865 Convention of the People of Georgia commented, “We are convinced that the destruction of slavery at the South, while it is a great injury to the white race, will prove to be a great curse to the black race.” Journal of the Proceedings of the Convention of the People of Georgia held in Milledgeville in October and November 1865, Together with the Ordinances and Resolutions Adopted (Milledgeville: R.M. Orme & Sons, 1865), 191.

The notion that blacks were doomed by nature itself to perpetual slavery was not new. However, when asserted dogmatically and with an aura of scientific and philosophical authority by leading southern spokesmen and their northern supporters, it became an explicit ideology around which the beneficiaries of white supremacy could organize themselves. The Rev. Joseph B. Jackson of New Orleans summed it up, maintaining that under the federal emancipation, blacks would “perish before races of superior civilization.” Racial incapacity, not slavery, had rendered blacks unfit to compete; cradle to grave security provided by masters sustained the race. George Fredrickson, The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914 (London: Harper Torch Books, 1972), 43.

It remained to be seen whether or not his contemporaries would take up his proposal and be willing to relinquish a measure of power over their laborers in order to increase their productivity.

Even as this particular property owner was encouraging his fellow owners to transition to family-based labor schemes, officials at the Freedmen's Bureau were pleading with planters to recognize black families as legitimate households and viable economic units, worthy of respect and deserving of employment. One of the first tasks bureau officials undertook was to teach African Americans (men, in particular) that real freedom meant new familial and economic responsibilities. Bureau officials specifically emphasized the importance of marriage and signing contracts in their lectures to African Americans.¹⁴¹ General Wilson, for example, in command of a large part of Georgia at the end of the war, believed that establishing the black nuclear family as a working unit was a most promising strategy to advance the freedmen's cause. In June 1865 Wilson wrote to an army colleague:

I am convinced that the first step towards the civilization and elevation of the negro, by which he is to be made a useful and self-sustaining member of society, is to establish the family of every worthy man upon such a basis as will ensure it all the advantages of industry, good management and virtuous aspirations.¹⁴²

Wilson also insisted that planters should play a central role in the "elevation" of freedpeople by employing them in semi-autonomous family-oriented work and giving

¹⁴¹ Katherine Franke, "Becoming a Citizen: Reconstruction Era Regulation of African American Marriages," *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 11 (1999): 251-309.

¹⁴² General Wilson to Brig. Gen. Whipple, June 1865 quoted in Clara Mildred Thompson, *Reconstruction in Georgia: Economic, Social, Political, 1865-1872* (New York: The Columbia University, 1915), 53.

black men both economic responsibility and patriarchal recognition. “Practically, every landed proprietor who has freedmen upon his estate,” he argued

should be compelled to give every respectable and trustworthy man a life-lease upon as much land as he and his family could cultivate; to build or allow the removal of houses and enclosures to the land, and require the lessee to live upon his own possessions, and paying a fair rate of rent either in money or in kind to the proprietor.¹⁴³

Clearly the idea of family tenancy was being discussed amidst the free labor experiments of the post-emancipation South. In these conversations, however, some form of sharecropping as an experiment was presented as mutually beneficial to both black families and white landowners. From both colleagues and Bureau officials, planters were hearing that through this idea they could mobilize black labor *and* respect black family independence; the one did not have to limit the other. They were advised further that establishing black men as the patriarchal heads of their households, or at the very least, allowing black families to live and work together independently would in the end be the best regime for landowners, black men, and the federal government.

Throughout the 1870s, a process of labor experimentation and negotiation among the various parties gradually gave rise to sharecropping.¹⁴⁴ By the late 1870s, family tenancy was moving rapidly from proposal to practice. Across the South, large plantations were being broken up into smaller, family-sized plots of land and given to families to manage. These families moved out of the old slave quarters and into small

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Jay R. Mandle, The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy After the Civil War (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978).

houses scattered about the plantations. In 1880, sharecroppers operated 24 percent of farms across South and 32 percent of Georgia's farms. By 1910, 37 percent of the state's 291,027 farms were worked by sharecroppers. By 1890, one in three white farmers and three out of four black farmers were either tenants or sharecroppers.¹⁴⁵ As late as 1910, 70 percent of black and 40 percent of white farmers in the South were tenants of some kind.¹⁴⁶

Why did this system of labor eventually come to define the agriculture regime in the postbellum South? The U.S. Department of Agriculture, reflecting on these new developments in 1870, believed the change was driven by ex-slaves.

“Sharecropping,” it argued “had not developed as “a voluntary association from similarity of interests but [was] an unwilling concession to the freedman’s desire to

¹⁴⁵ Under the share system, the landowner provided a house, farming tools, animals and fertilizer for the worker who paid a share of their harvest. The tenant farmer, in contrast, usually brought their own equipment, bought their own seed and fertilizer and, at the year’s end, paid a set amount of money or a share of the crop.

¹⁴⁶ Poor whites and farmers also fell victim to the expanding plantation economy in the wake of the Civil War. In addition to establishing black codes to control black workers, the Southern planter class engineered postbellum changes in crop lien and tax laws that jeopardized small farmers’ land holdings. As they slipped from landed independence to landless tenancy, poor white came to be marked as racially inferior whites whose inability to thrive economically threatened notions of white male superiority. Alston and Kauffman conclude that white racism caused white tenants and sharecroppers to still make more than their black contemporaries. At the lowest rungs of the agricultural ladder, however, blacks’ and whites’ wages were comparable. For a short time, poor whites and blacks cooperated in a struggle for status and power. These ventures in class collaboration failed however as poor whites—both men and women—reaffirmed their racial allegiance by supporting the mission of white supremacy. Lee J. Alston and Kyle D. Kauffman, “Competition and the Compensation of Sharecropping by Race: A View from Plantation in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Explorations in Economic History* 38 (2001): 181-194; Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Jacqueline Jones, “Encounters, Likely and Unlikely, Between Black and Poor White Women in the Rural South, 1865-1940,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 76.2 (Summer 1992): 333-353; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Time to 1970* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975).

become a proprietor.”¹⁴⁷ But more recent scholarship contests the extent to which freedpeople’s demands and desires made a difference.

Economists and many historians have argued that Southern sharecropping’s origins lay in planters’ inability to overcome their constant lack of capital.¹⁴⁸ In *One Kind of Freedom* (1977), for example, economists Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch discredited the prevailing argument that sharecropping was imposed by blacks on a reluctant class of white landowners. Planters made concessions to ex-slaves, they argued, because it helped them to solve their own economic struggles. Citing the crop failures of 1865, 1866, and 1867, scholars have shown that most farmers were left short of the ready cash essential to a wage system. Many, having mortgaged their property to secure advances for stock, tools, and food, were financially strapped, even though the price of cotton remained high. Thus, Ransom and Sutch concluded, planters were willing to accept sharecropping arrangements.¹⁴⁹

A few years later, in 1986, historian Gerald D. Jaynes also concluded that sharecropping was adopted because economically disempowered planters could not pay prompt wages to their employees. Jaynes argued that for some laborers, the most “preferred contract of all [was] the day wage.” Indeed they rejected planters’ attempts to pay wages annually:

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1988), 405.

¹⁴⁸ See also, Steven Hahn, “Emancipation and the Development of Capitalist Agriculture: The South in Comparative Perspective,” in Gispes Kees (ed.), *What Made the South Different?: Essays and Comments* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 71-88.

¹⁴⁹ Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 2.

A labor market based on money wage contracts failed to evolve not because the field hands provided an inherently unstable labor supply, but because the financial position of too many planters was too weak for them to make a reasonably periodic payroll and because free labor, after a disastrous experience, wisely declined to extend credit to planters on such risky terms as a pseudo-guaranteed wage to be paid with a lump sum at the end of the season.¹⁵⁰

Sharecropping, in this light, was a symptom of the South's economic crisis; it was a calculated response by a financially-strapped planter class to the existing market conditions for cotton.

These scholars' economic analyses offer helpful contributions to our understanding of the emergence of sharecropping, but they focus primarily on the fiscal choices and conditions whites in positions of power made, without considering the influence of freedpeople themselves, whose traditional work habits and desire for independence through landownership influenced post Civil War developments. Former slaves' transition from bond labor to freedom was collectively envisioned as an escape from oppressive supervision of white overseers, an opportunity to claim self-sufficiency, and, whenever possible, emancipation from dependence on white landlords. These aspirations of black people after the war are essential to understanding how southern agriculture came to be organized during Reconstruction and beyond. In an economic environment in which the newly-

¹⁵⁰ Gerald D. Jaynes, Branches Without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862-1882 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 220.

emancipated were compelled to reside on land still owned by their former masters, how did the sharecropping system develop?¹⁵¹

Scholars Robert Higgs and Ronald Davis were among the first to suggest that the scholarship of the 1960s marginalized the significance of freedpeople's desires, emphasizing their insistence upon the sharecropping arrangement. In his monograph *Competition and Coercion* (1977), Higgs agreed with other historians' claims that many former slaves were first paid wages and later worked for shares, though it was not unknown for some freedpeople to work for shares as early as 1865.¹⁵² Yet, he disagreed as to the causes of the arrangement, suggesting that this transition was not solely the result of an economic downturn. He emphasized black resistance to a wage labor system because wages kept them too dependent on whites.

Higgs shows how powerfully blacks resisted working in gang labor under the overseers' whip and pistol, while simultaneously being forced to endure wages withheld at the master's whim. Moreover, many wage contracts stipulated that black families were forbidden from keeping chickens or tending gardens, an effort by landlords to render the black households completely dependent on supplies extended on credit by them.¹⁵³ Landlords endeavored to keep their workers in debt from one year to the next, sometimes forcing them at gunpoint to work to pay off

¹⁵¹ Across the South, the hope of the freed people to acquire their own land was dashed by President Andrew Johnson, who proclaimed an amnesty for Confederate rebels and restored their property.

¹⁵² Robert Higgs, *Competition and Coercion: Blacks in the American Economy, 1865-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

¹⁵³ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002).

earnings already spent. At the same time, black labor was in high demand, enabling African Americans to break contracts if they felt they were being violated. With support from Freedmen's Bureau officials who were willing to challenge planter authority on their behalf, blacks used the tight labor market to their advantage. Higgs showed that with black farmers able to choose where and for whom they would work, planters were forced to make concessions and compromises they would have never made during slavery. In fact, historian Edward Ayers found that many planters began competing with each other for workers.¹⁵⁴ With former slaves capitalizing on this competition, we can better understand how sharecropping began as a result of black bargaining strength in a free market, as opposed to something wrought by declining cotton prices.

Ronald Davis also rejected the idea that sharecropping arose as a compromise between landlords and tenants, which enabled both parties to share the costs and risks of agricultural work.¹⁵⁵ He too emphasized blacks' insistence on sharecropping as a means of escaping the gang labor system associated with slavery. Even if most freedpeople could not secure land of their own, they were determined to rent and work in family units under their own supervision. "Planters," Davis explained, "literally were dragged kicking and screaming into the system."¹⁵⁶

As we have seen, whites were not the only ones making calculated economic decisions. For ex-slaves, the single most important ingredient of true freedom was

¹⁵⁴ Edward Ayers, The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 200.

¹⁵⁵ Ronald Davis, Good and Faithful Labor.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

control over their labor and families. Sharecropping enabled the combining of economic and social welfare of black families. Without fear of sexual exploitation, women could be wives, mothers and daughters first, and cotton pickers second. Sharecropping also enabled families to counter the very low wage scales that had been set early in the postwar period. They hoped to function as economically independent of the planter as possible, letting the market rule. In a post-Civil War world where black landownership was close to impossible, sharecropping met their immediate needs.

Historian Gerald Jaynes was correct in his assessment that planters agreed to sharecropping because their own economic dislocation in the post-Civil War period was palpable, and they hoped to share these economic losses with their tenants. Blacks could not have as easily overthrown the plantation regime had white landowners not been so weakened by the financial losses of crop failures. Their own precarious economic position fueled their willingness to accede to blacks' insistence on tenant farming as an experiment. They soon learned free blacks' attitudes toward work depended on the extent to which they could rid themselves of white supervision.

David Barrow Jr.'s frequently cited 1881 account of the transformation of his father's plantation in Oglethorpe County, Georgia from a plantation organized in work gangs to one worked by family share farmers paints a helpful picture of the

process described above.¹⁵⁷ In 1860, the Barrow Plantation consisted of a gin house, master's house, and slave quarters. By 1881, there were 26 additional houses, a church, and a school, all belonging to his 162 free black workers.¹⁵⁸ Barrow credited laborers' desires for autonomy as crucial to their excellent work habits. He noted as well that the distribution of their earnings had "led to the present arrangement, which, while it had difficulties in the way of its inception, [had] been found to work thoroughly well." In Barrow's fascinating account of this transition, he notes that, initially, workers were organized into squads, supervised by a white "supertender," who lived on the plantation, kept the accounts, and watched over Barrow's property. Freedmen, Barrow Jr. claimed, had grown tired of gang labor and of being constantly under the direction of a foreman, not because the latter was abusive, but because "each man [was] feeling the very natural desire to be his own "boss," and to farm to himself." Black men wanted independence.

Black workers' desires for autonomy led to the subdivision of the plantation into small family units. These units, Barrow Jr. emphasized, were "responsible only

¹⁵⁷ Barrow's "A Georgia Plantation," is the best known first hand description of the evolution from the wage labor system. David Barrow Jr. was a faculty member and eventually, chancellor of the University of Georgia. His father, David Barrow Sr., was one of the wealthiest landowners in the region. In 1850, Barrow owned \$25,000 of real estate and 17 slaves in the country; by 1860 he had \$95,000 worth of land and \$240,000 in personal property, including 81 slaves in Oglethorpe County, Georgia. David C. Barrow, "A Georgia Plantation," *Scribner's Monthly*, 21 (April 1881), 832-33. Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 70.

¹⁵⁸ Mr. Barrow donated the land for the Baptist church at his workers' request. By 1880 the church had close to two hundred members from the country around the plantation and a Sunday School program organized by one of Barrow's tenants. The tenants also paid the salary of the local schoolteachers. J. William Harris, "Plantations and Power: Emancipation on the David Barrow Plantation," in O.V. Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr. (eds), *Toward a New South: Studies in Post Civil War Southern Communities* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 255.

for damage to the farm they work and for prompt payment of their rent.”¹⁵⁹ The system not only gave black male workers independence from Barrow Sr., it invested them with authority over their own households as well: “The labor of the farm is performed by the man, who usually does the plowing,” while “wife and children” hoed “under his direction.” Black men used their newfound freedoms to become responsible workers and parents, Barrow Jr. noted. This was significant, he insisted, when compared with the constant complaints about black laziness articulated by pro-slavery whites. “It is commonly thought that the negroes when freed, would care very little for their children and would let them die for want of attention,” he explained. But his experience proved this assumption “unfounded.” “On the contrary,” he concluded, “I suppose they take as good care of them as do the same class of people anywhere.”¹⁶⁰ Indeed, Barrow Sr. held sharecropper Lem Bryant in great esteem. As a slave, he had given the overseer so much trouble that “he was almost beyond control,” but freedom had transformed him. As a sharecropper Bryant assumed a new sense of responsibility as a father and employee: “Since he has been freed, he has grown honest, quiet, and industrious; he educates his children and pays his debts. Mr. Barrow asked him, one day, what changed him so. “Ah, master!” he replied, “I’m free now; I have to do right.”¹⁶¹

David Barrow Sr.’s response to the labor-management problems was typical of large planters throughout the South. By 1875, when the Georgia Department of

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

Agriculture made its first survey of the situation, it found that 177,000 non-landowning farm workers covered in the survey, about 70 percent were croppers or renters.¹⁶² In fact, according to Gerald Jaynes, “it can confidently be stated that by the year 1876 the dominance of nuclear family tenancy had been established.”¹⁶³ The Census of 1880 found that 45 percent of all the farms in the state were operated by tenants of one kind or another: the number grew to 60 percent by 1900.

Sharecropping and Black Male Responsibility

But how did black men respond to the opportunities to “do right” that this new system of labor offered? How did the nature of sharecropping labor and arrangement support black men doing “right” as workers and parents? In what ways were black men empowered or constrained by the work?

Cotton cultivation was no easy task. Successful cotton production required a sizable and skilled labor force, which would provide timely, and consistent labor throughout the year.¹⁶⁴ As one planter explained, “cotton is a tender and delicate

¹⁶² Of course, not every planter abandoned the wage system. Some employees were hired several different ways on the same plantation. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, when circumstance allowed, blacks took advantage of wage labor opportunities and drifted back and forth between farming and any other alternative. For a discussion of the different forms of contractual labor in the post-emancipation South see Robert Higgs, “Patterns of Farm Rental in the Georgia Cotton Belt, 1880-1900,” *The Journal of Economic History* 34.2 (June 1974): 468-482 and Lee. J. Alston and Robert Higgs, “Contractual Mix in Southern Agriculture since the Civil War: Facts, Hypotheses, and Tests,” *The Journal of Economic History* 42.2 (June 1982): 327-353. Georgia State Department of Agriculture, *Publications*, V (1879), 361.

¹⁶³ Gerald Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots*, 188.

¹⁶⁴ The cotton production cycle went as follows: The first period of planting and cultivation occurred during the spring and early summer. As soon as the cotton appeared, the rows of crop—usually a 1 ½ or two feet apart— had to be carefully cultivated in order to keep out grass and prevent the soil from hardening. This operation is performed either by

plant. Good culture and tender care increases its yield per acre. Any delay and loss of time in the picking season is disastrous.”¹⁶⁵ Indeed, this requirement for steady and diligent labor was particularly important during the so-called “critical” periods in the growth and maturing of the crop. One of these periods, for instance, was after a growing season with heavy rainfall, when the cotton plant became engulfed in weeds and grass. The entire labor force had to be mustered into service to save the plant by removing weeds and grass as quickly as possible. Neglect or suspension of work during these crucial moments could not be recovered, not even by additional work at a later stage. Crops would already be lost if weeding was even a few weeks late.¹⁶⁶

From this description of the usual procedure it is evident that the cultivation of cotton required an annual cycle of organized and skilled farm activity with continuous and constant attention to the crop. As one correspondent for the *Southern Cultivator* insisted,

On account of the pressure of work at these critical periods, a cotton plantation is obliged to be despotism. Every one employed on it must yield to the urgency of the occasion, and submit implicitly to the will of the controlling

one-mule plows or by hand hoeing. This was followed by a slack period in August, when the crop is “laid by.” As soon as the cotton bolls started to open—usually around the beginning of September— it was “cotton-pickin time.” The cotton had to be picked quickly because it could be significantly damaged by high winds and rain. This was followed by another slack period during the winter months until the cycle began again in February. So fundamental were these periods of farm work that tenants dated their social activities not by reference to the calendar but to “choppin’ out time,” “layin’ by time,” and “cotton-pickin’ time.” Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1941), 270.

¹⁶⁵ F.W. Loring and C.F. Atkinson, *Cotton Culture: The South Considered with Reference to Emigration* (Boston: Williams & Co., 1869), 4.

¹⁶⁶ John H. Moore, ed., *The Juhl Letters to the Charleston Courier: A View of the South, 1865-1871* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974).

mind; and he must have such a hold upon his hands, that he may retain them, and secure their labor at these critical periods.¹⁶⁷

But planters could no longer control black workers as they did under slavery, especially now that black farmers were not exclusively focused on producing cotton. On large cotton farms, blacks engaged in personal gardening. When they were not working from sun up to sun down, they harvested their own crops, hunted their own livestock and chopped enough firewood to last them the winter.¹⁶⁸ Others used the slack period in cotton cultivation to engage in temporary work in the emerging southern industries or in domestic service. Although planters would have preferred their workers stay available and tend to their crops, black sharecropping households had become dynamic economic collectivities that sought to capitalize on farm and non-farm work possibilities to supplement their income.

The responsibility of marrying black household interests and the interests of landowners was given to the black husbands and fathers who headed the sharecropping household.¹⁶⁹ As the only signee of the share contract, he was

¹⁶⁷ "Contracts with Laborers," *Southern Cultivator*, XXIII (1865), 180-81.

¹⁶⁸ Davis, *Deep South*, 328.

¹⁶⁹ Women were household heads as well. In the 1870, according to some local studies, perhaps 10 to 15 percent of rural black households were headed by women, who no doubt continued to experience difficulties in an economy organized around the labor of nuclear families. Thomas Edwards found, "upon almost every plantation of considerable extent some women sharecroppers are usually found. They are as a rule widows with children large enough to help out with the farm work. These croppers are most common in black-belt countries, where the large plantation systems prevail." Thomas J. Edwards, "The Tenant System and Some Changes since the Tenant System and Some Changes since Emancipation," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 49, (September, 1913): 41.

responsible for organizing and directing his family's labor.¹⁷⁰ In the language of the standard contract, the household head guaranteed that all family members would work the entire course of the crop cycle. Should any members leave the family, the head was obliged by law to substitute another person.¹⁷¹

Understanding the nature of this opportunity for black male leadership is particularly important. Short of landownership, African Americans aspired to working conditions that allowed them to guarantee the security of their families and control their own labor.¹⁷² Yet, whenever black husbands and fathers asserted their rights to direct the labor of their wives and children, they risked confrontation with the planters, who were long accustomed to wielding unquestioned authority over their workers. As heads of households and the signees of the share agreement, however, black men felt themselves responsible for combining subsistence and commercial agriculture. This gave them both economic and familial responsibility for directing the work lives of their wives and children. As one Georgian planter explained, "this system appealed to the negro for he was now master."¹⁷³ Considered against the backdrop of wage labor, sharecropping agreements in some ways elevated the

¹⁷⁰ The exact number of men and women within the household were registered and listed on the contract. The larger a family was, the more workers the landlord expected to work his land and the greater his expected crop-yield. Consequently, when looking to contract with sharecroppers, proprietors sought units that were large enough to farm the land, while not consisting of too many small children or infirm members. A family was all the more desirable if they had no debts and owned their own farming implements and household furnishings.

¹⁷¹ Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*.

¹⁷² Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990), 48, 80.

¹⁷³ E. Merton Coulter, "A Century of a Georgia Plantation," *Agricultural History* 3.4 (October 1929): 159.

status of heads of households from that of dependent wage hands whose familial roles and responsibilities were generally ignored by employers, to essential partners with employers in a mutually beneficial enterprise. The form and function of sharecropping arrangements, theoretically at least, provided black men unique opportunities to realize their desires for personal responsibility, family mastery, and independence.¹⁷⁴

Unlike the factory where producers worked together and alongside each other under a more cooperative and specialized division of labor, the familial nature of sharecropping created a relatively isolated work setting. In these private units, fathers were both the family leaders and the representatives of the landlord interests within their homes. They could legally exercise much of the power planters tried, but usually failed to exercise over laborers under the fixed wage system. For example, planters did not have enough control over the freedmen to secure their labor throughout the year and to provide sufficient labor at the most critical periods of the crop cycle.¹⁷⁵ Their powers to push and retain workers were limited. The impersonal

¹⁷⁴ At least in theory, the sharecropping arrangement presented black men with some opportunity to realize what Michael Kimmel has term the “Self-made Man” ideal: a sense of manliness demonstrated by a man’s self-constraint and control of his own body and home. Of course, black and poor men did not have the same legal and political rights white middle class men had to fully this type of manhood status. Although Kimmel identifies this as a northern middle class conception, Robert Desrochers argued that since slavery African American men aspired to this ideal. Michael Kimmel, Manhood in America: A Cultural History (New York: Free Press, 1996); Robert E. Desrochers, ““Not Fade Away”: The Narrative of Venture Smith, an African American in the Early Republic,” A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men’s History and Masculinity, Vol. 1: The Construction of Black Male History and Manhood, 1750-1870 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 81.

¹⁷⁵ “Southern Agriculture,” United States Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1867, 416-17; “Labor in the South,” Merchants’ Magazine and Commercial Review, LXI (1869): 272.

relations between overseers and wage laborers could only produce so much. Under sharecropping, however, black fathers took on some of these roles, assigning tasks and ensuring constant reliable work through supervision and discipline. With his family as his co-workers/subordinates, the emotional commitments to family well-being may have enhanced labor productivity. Moreover, unlike landowners and overseers who were now forbidden to use the lash, husbands and fathers could legally use corporal punishment to discipline their wives and children.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, such obligations for disciplining family members were even contractually specified.¹⁷⁷ Thus, as the white overseer's control dwindled, some of his authority and power was conceded to black fathers to ensure the most effective labor output from their families.

Black fathers mediated between the wishes of the landowner and the exigencies of the sharecropping family. The only family member in direct contact with the landowner, a father not only oversaw his share's operations, he also made

¹⁷⁶ Legal Historian Reva Siegel has demonstrated how the notion of "family government" with the father as head patriarch was central in the opposition to women's suffrage. After all, why would a woman need to vote when her husband already represented her interests to the outside world? This framework was also used across the country in judicial decisions to justify the right of wife whipping, to permit fathers to punish their children as they saw fit and to require husbands to pay their wives' debts. In his role as head of the "family government," the husband had vast discretion over discipline of the family. Reva Siegel, "She the people: The nineteenth amendment, sex equality, federalism and the family," *Harvard Law Review* 115.4 (February 2002): 947-1046.

¹⁷⁷ Planter Charles Stern noted how one black father attempted to ensure labor discipline. "The industrious ones have no notion of working hard, while others are listlessly performing their tasks; and I cannot possibly blame them. One man, this year, felt obliged to give his own son a tremendous beating, for not performing his share of the labor." Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots*, 185.

decisions regarding family expenditures for food, clothing and household goods.¹⁷⁸ In the sharecropping household, it was the head's responsibility to assign particular duties to each family member on the basis of sex, age, and personal abilities. A father ensured that his family members would perform satisfactorily. He negotiated rental agreements and arranged for credit and supplies in the spring; in the fall, crops were hauled to market, accounts were settled and fathers pocketed any proceeds. Thus family, land, time and resources were, in theory at least, placed under the black father's control.

Male decision-making was also buttressed by the state: sharecroppers were held legally responsible for crop production and for meeting share agreements. There is some evidence to suggest that black men's families also expected them to be industrious workers and leaders. For instance, Georgia freedwoman Alice Green, divorced husband George Huff, because he had poor work habits:

I don't recollect when I married George Huff or what I wore dat day. Didn't live wid him long nohow. I warn't goin' to live wid no man who sot 'round and watched me wuk. Mammy done larnt me how to wuk, and I didn't know nothin' else but to go ahead and wuk for a livin'. I don't know whar George is. He might be dead for all I know; if he ain't, he ought to be.¹⁷⁹

For black men, leadership was never simply be titular. The share arrangement stipulated that black families would thrive or fail based on the leadership qualities of

¹⁷⁸ Mann, "Slavery, Sharecropping, and Sexual Inequality," 786.

¹⁷⁹ Interview of Alice Green of Athens Georgia, May 6, 1938 in Work Projects Administration, Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves: Volume IV, Georgia Narratives, Part 1 (Washington, 1941).

its head. Black men earned or lost the respect of their families based on how they lived up to these expectations.¹⁸⁰

In accepting black heads of households as partners, albeit unequal ones, planters implicitly recognized that blacks were fit for the autonomy sharecropping afforded them.¹⁸¹ Thus a drastic change in perspective about the capacity of black men as leaders and black families as viable independent units emerged after emancipation. Ironically, as African Americans exercised the freedom to leave their former masters' plantations they were bombarded with threats and predictions of hopelessness for trying to live independently from the master's care. Arrie Binns, a former slave from Wilkes County, Georgia, recalled that emancipation was a period of confusion for her family: "Us didn't know whar to go an' what ter do." But her father decided to move the family to Arkansas after connecting with some landowners there who were looking for help. The wife of her former slave owner was devastated: she "cried and cried," lamenting "You'al just goin' off to perish."¹⁸² It is unclear whether these were tears of sympathy or the expression of a belief in black families' incompetence at self-sustainability or both.

Indeed, many contemporary commentators were not only outraged but deeply cynical about the prospects of black family autonomy, even within

¹⁸⁰ Manliness was demonstrated through behavior and conduct. Because manhood had to be achieved and demonstrated, it was always somewhat tenuous. There was always a risk that a man would fail to acquire or demonstrate the necessary traits. For more on masculinity and role anxiety see Gail Bederman, Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995)

¹⁸¹ Ransom and Sutch, One Kind of Freedom, 95-97.

¹⁸² Interview of Arrie Binns of Washington-Wilkes, May 8, 1937 in Work Projects Administration, Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves: Volume IV, Georgia Narratives, Part 1 (Washington, 1941).

asharecropping arrangement. In 1871, while sharecropping was still in its infancy, J.R.

Dodge of the Department of Agriculture offered a reason to dissolve the system:

It le[ft] uncontrolled and almost undirected those who have never been subject to self-management or self-restraint... . it debars the proprietor from exercising a control over the plantation and its operations essential to present success and the permanent improvement of the estate.¹⁸³

Many former masters agreed that African Americans would not work well without control and coercion.

Not only did opponents argue that the lack of planter control would be a problem, they also feared an increase of blacks' civil liberties would harm the entire agricultural system. Some planters complained that voting rights and political participation "ruined" African Americans as laborers. It is not hard to imagine how irksome it must have been for former masters to submit to the independence of former slaves, especially when many croppers were openly making claims to the respectability that should have come along with their increased autonomy. The Georgia freedman who asserted his right to stop work and attend a political meeting did so in no uncertain terms: "I am not working for wages," he declared, "but am part owner of the crop and as I have all the right that you or any other man has I shall not suffer them abridged."¹⁸⁴ Indeed, in 1869, when asked by researchers to provide information on the general condition of southern labor, one planter from Baldwin County, Georgia opined,

¹⁸³ Monthly Reports of the Department of Agriculture for the year 1870. Ed. J.R. Dodge, Statistician (Washington: Government Printing Office. 1871).

¹⁸⁴ Peter Kolchin, First Freedom: The Response of Alabama's Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972), 42.

The labor value of the free negro, as a cotton producer, is greatly impaired by his indiscriminate political privileges, which subject him to all the low acts and corrupting appeals of demagogues in our present form of popular government... The number of negro men for the field grow daily less, and will never be recruited, as the young negro is coming forward utterly untrained, and intolerable... As our once beautiful system of States, is gone now, we need Caesar. Hail Caesar! Happy if he be Julius; contented, if he be Tiberius. Anything but a negro democracy.¹⁸⁵

For this planter, the civil liberties guaranteed by the Constitutional amendments elevated African Americans to a status that directly limited whites' authority over them and, in doing so, endangered Southern agriculture and the very fabric of its cultural and economic institutions.

These complaints notwithstanding, landlords continued to contract with freedmen because they were needed to manage their isolated households and agricultural activities. Many proprietors, however, did not completely remove themselves from attempting to interfere in African American household affairs. After all, their economic interests were tethered to the success or failure of these units.

While sharecropping gave blacks the opportunity to work relatively free of white oversight and organize the division of labor within their households as they saw fit, this independence was treasured, in no small part, because it was still insecure. Under state laws across the South, sharecroppers as employees were

¹⁸⁵ The researchers' stated objective was to attain "detailed facts and opinions relative to labor, the methods of cotton culture, and the general condition and capacities of the South." Quoted in F.W. Loring and C.F. Atkinson, Cotton Culture: The South Considered with Reference to Emigration (Boston: Williams & Co., 1869), 14.

subject to daily rounds of managerial control by the landowner.¹⁸⁶ In share contracts, the landowner retained a right to command and regulate the households on his plantation to some degree. He reserved the right to inspect both the well-being of the laborers and the product. In the event of failing to properly cultivate the crops, the sharecropper agreed that the landlord could hire what labor he may deem necessary to work the crop and then deduct the cost of this additional help from the cropper's half of the crops. Similarly, if a cropper was deemed to be unfair to his family of workers, the landlord reserved the right to intervene.¹⁸⁷ Thus, the amount of administration a cropper received depended largely on how successfully he kept his crops and managed his workers.

For example, when asked if it was necessary to closely supervise his tenant families, one cropper replied,

We always ride the fields just after they have planted to see that they put in enough acreage to make their rent. Then we ride the fields several times during the season to see that they are working the crops properly. If a tenant isn't working the crop right, we get after him and threaten to cut down on his ration-advances unless he gets busy. There are some that we don't really have to watch, as we know we can depend on them to make their crop just as well if we never see them.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ In 1872, the Georgia Supreme Court ruled that a sharecropper did not own a share of the crop until after he paid his employer. Moreover, the landlord retained authority to supervise the activities of the cropper. *Appling v. Odum*, 46 *Georgia Reports* 587.

¹⁸⁷ One Georgia landowner promised his former slaves that if they worked as sharecropper he would take care of them just as he did when they were enslaved: "Long as [Old Master] lived atter de war, he wukked most of his help on sheers, and seed dat us was tuk keer of jus' lak he had done when us all b'longed to him." Interview of Jasper Battle of Athens, Georgia in Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves: Volume IV, Georgia Narratives, Part 1* (Washington, 1941).

¹⁸⁸ Davis, *Deep South*, 330.

Yet, the barometer for what constituted good household management varied from planter to planter. Speaking before the Industrial Commission in 1900, O.B. Stevens, Georgia's Commissioner of Agriculture claimed "it [was] impossible [for a planter] to get just the kind of labor he wants all the while and have it just like he wants it."¹⁸⁹

Many landowners justified their intervention in sharecropping families by citing African Americans' allegedly casual approach to farming.¹⁹⁰ Planters and sharecroppers often disagreed on what a successful day's work looked like. J.R.

Godwin, a Tennessee planter, explained this conflict:

If you rent on the share system, you undertake a supervision of cultivating the crop, and you watch how they are managing it; they feel as if they are partners in it, and it sometimes brings up friction. They feel as if they are going to make a good crop and ought not to be interfered with and you feel they are not doing it just to suit you.¹⁹¹

Clearly, landlord administration was not completely withdrawn in the share system but was reallocated from personal driving to managerial decision-making which could be equally as burdensome for freed families. Yet, for both household heads and their employers, a landowner's intervention was a sign of mismanagement, irresponsibility and directly questioned black men's manhood.

¹⁸⁹ U.S. Industrial Commission, Report X (Washington: U.S.G.P.O., 1901): 455-456.

¹⁹⁰ From 1870 on, the census reports showed that the average Georgia worker rarely produced more than half as much as workers in the country as a whole and when compared to laborers in such states as Illinois or California his record was extremely dismal. It would not be fair to blame all the incompetent management and the low productivity of Georgia's lands and workers on blacks. Historian William Range has argued that the failure of agriculture in Georgia was that a bulk of Georgia's farmers were unable to adjust to industrialism, post-war South. Instead they persisted in slovenly agricultural practices. Willard Range, *A Century of Georgia Agriculture, 1850-1950* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954), 89.

¹⁹¹ U.S. Industrial Commission, Report, 479.

Writing about American cultures of masculinity, Anthony Rotundo explains that, “work... lay at the heart of man’s role: if work was a problem, so was manhood.”¹⁹² Agricultural failure was not only a lack of achievement but an indictment of an individual’s manhood. In the South, however, the reward for good black leadership was also less white oversight.¹⁹³ This potential for supervision spoke to black men’s desires to escape the category of “dependent” and prove themselves to be good providers.¹⁹⁴

Ex-slave Mary Johnson’s testimony to a WPA worker concerning her childhood experience as the daughter of a tenant farmer provides us a glimpse into the type of family interactions and choices that were made by sharecropping families:

We all was big farmers and had to work hard’ us chillum would go to de field. At dinner time ma would bring our dinner and a big pail of water fo’ us. We crawled up under de wagon to git in de shade. Pa would be tired, too, but he’d finally say, ‘Come on out kids, lets go back to de fields now. We’s done

¹⁹² E. Anthony Rotundo, American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 191.

¹⁹³ This was particularly attractive to the man who possessed skills or gained experience beyond that of the average worker. Sharecropping, by paying him by a fraction of the output, would reward his superior skills and diligence. This is distinct from earning a locked in standard wage based solely on their sex and age. Ransom and Sutch, One Kind of Freedom, 95.

¹⁹⁴ After emancipation, countless numbers of African American men reunited with their family members living on different plantations in search of new homes and new lives for their reconstituted families. For example, Freedom Martha Colquitt of Athens, Georgia recalled, “When freedom comed my pa wanted us to move off right away over to Mr. Smithies’ place so our family could be together.” Interview of Martha Colquitt of Athens, Georgia in Work Projects Administration, Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves: Volume IV, Georgia Narratives, Part 1 (Washington, 1941).

rested long enuff. My school days was short 'cause we was po' folks an' had to work. Co'se Miss, us had plenty to eat and some clo's.¹⁹⁵

Johnson and her siblings, though children, were “big farmers.” They worked in the fields alongside their father doing important agricultural labor, sharing in the family enterprise.¹⁹⁶ According to Jacqueline Jones, rural children did not attend school regularly, for at the age of ten or twelve they worked in the fields or in the homes of white employers.¹⁹⁷ Most pre-teenaged sharecropping children engaged in heavy labor, such as picking cotton, hoeing and plowing. They performed lighter tasks as well, such as taking care of animals, baby-sitting, running errands, gardening, fishing and toting buckets of water.¹⁹⁸ Fathers reluctant to use child-labor to its fullest potential were often forced to do so by their landlords. Some landlords even closed schools to ensure that children worked.

Presumably, it was Johnson's father who taught his children how to work with him: how to handle the tools, load the wagon, keep a good pace, and care the soil and crops. However, it is difficult to determine who socialized children into the world of work, for sometimes both mothers and fathers worked in the fields. In the fields,

¹⁹⁵ Interview of Mary Johnson of Athens Georgia, October 27, 1939 in Work Projects Administration, Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves: Volume IV, Georgia Narratives, Part 1 (Washington, 1941).

¹⁹⁶ Many scholars have demonstrated that children were economic assets; they augmented the household's labor supply and provided security for parents in old age.

¹⁹⁷ Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, 62.

¹⁹⁸ Charles Johnson describes the daily routine of sharecropper's daughter that he interviewed: “Sadie's daily duties get her up at 4:20 in the morning. Her mother prepares breakfast—usually fried okra, salt pork, tomato gravy and bread. The ailing aunt washes the dishes. By five o'clock they are all in the field. The blistering heat sends them in about eleven and dinner is cooked—turnip greens, cornbread, salt pork, and sometimes pie. They lie around and rest until about 1:30, then return to the field until sundown. Supper consists of the leftovers from dinner.” Charles S. Johnson, Growing Up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South (Washington: American Council on Education, 1941), 8.

women often hoed and picked cotton, and they might have been the ones to teach children these skills. On the other hand, men usually did the plowing, so the children might have learned it from their father. Nevertheless, it is clear that Johnson's father directed his children's labor. He determined what they did and when they worked. He was also their role model. Johnson remembered that her father led by example and he pushed them to keep working just as he pushed himself. Her father was also sensitive to their needs for rest, leisure, and an education, ensuring that his children were well-rounded. The challenge for Johnson's father was ensuring that his children and crops both thrived. Never compromising the one for the other.

The sharecropping system enabled mothers to divide their time between field and housework in a way that reflected a family's needs. In Johnson's family, her mother was solely responsible for the domestic labor; in particular, the timely provision of food and the making and maintenance of clothes. Her mother's skillful and difficult work, though apart from the fieldwork, was integral to their agricultural efforts. Her labor kept her children and husband nourished and adequately prepared for the season's climate so that they could work effectively and consistently. As Elizabeth Bethel observed, there were certain advantages for households in which adult women spent more time in housekeeping tasks. These advantages included the ability to spend more time preparing food, tending gardens, and caring for young children. These reproductive activities not only provided a more varied and balanced

diet but also contributed to the material well being of the family.¹⁹⁹ Certainly, the care of children and domesticity provided important motivations for wives and mothers to withdraw from estate labor but farming their own crops was equally crucial to most of these women. Several scholars have demonstrated that because the slaves' own household was one of the few realms of social life where labor took place outside of the strict supervision and purview of whites, domestic activities offered black women a degree of personal autonomy and fulfillment.²⁰⁰

This distribution of power in sharecropping arrangements, which afforded household heads to act as co-partners with their employers as directors of families' labor, represented a revolutionary change from the imposed black subordination of the past. Within their households African Americans pursued family strategies aimed at securing the survival and welfare of their family units. In the face of daunting odds, they strived to carve out meaningful social and economic lives which would not be wholly dependent or determined by their white landowners. At the same time, however, the share system, along with the actions of white proprietors, politicians

¹⁹⁹ Elizabeth Rauh Bethel, *Promiseland: A Century of Life in a Negro Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 45.

²⁰⁰ Separate spaces were rare in slavery. Moreover, because slave-owners placed a higher priority on agricultural production than on the day-to-day reproduction of their slave labor force, slaves were allowed little time for their own domestic labor. To increase the efficiency of slave labor time, cooking and child rearing were sometimes carried out communally, particularly on larger plantations. One Georgia planter from Danbury County found this to be one of the greatest offenses of all: "All the negro women are out of the fields, doing nothing and a great many of the men are loafing around the towns; our climate is such that his wants are easily supplied and a little work will do it." Landowners recognized the usefulness of the male sharecropper's patriarchal authority in putting women and children to work in the fields. Quoted in F.W. Loring and C.F. Atkinson, *Cotton Culture: The South Considered with Reference to Emigration* (Boston: Williams & Co., 1869); John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 94.

and vigilantes, denied some of black men's claims to manhood through legal and extralegal violence, economic and political repression.

The threat of white violence haunted African Americans' family and work lives since slavery.²⁰¹ Under slavery, blacks often had to choose between staying with their families and escaping violence at the hands of their owners. For example, Ellen Baker, an enslaved woman in Grinnell County, Georgia, had to leave her son with her owner because she could not tolerate the mistreatment she received at the hands of her owner's wife. Among other things, her mistress "shot at her and wounded her in the eye." After freedom, Baker went back to Mr. Jones to claim her son but "he always refused and drove her away."²⁰² Similarly, Annie Price of Spaulding County, Georgia recalled that her father ran away to escape a beating from their master. If he returned, he would have to pay the penalty for running away and "be whipped, tied across a log or to a tree... and lashed with a cowhide whip until his back was raw." Rather than returning to face punishment, he remained in hiding until emancipation, "then he was able to show himself without any fear."²⁰³ Clearly, the violence of slave owners drove black families apart.

Moreover, as wage laborers, blacks faced the threat of violence from their employers. For example, on March 14, 1866, after learning that their employer, John

²⁰¹ On the continuity of racial violence from the antebellum through the postbellum period, see Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

²⁰² Fred Mosebach to Assistant Commissioner Colonel. C.C. Sibley August 1, 1867, Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 43, BRFAL-GA.

²⁰³ Interview of Annie Price of Spaulding County, Georgia in Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves: Volume IV, Georgia Narratives, Part 1* (Washington, 1941).

P. Harrington, had been underpaying them, Jane and George Harris, a Georgia married couple, left the Harrington Plantation to complain to their local Bureau agent.²⁰⁴ While on their way to the office, Harrington chased them down on horseback “and beat the man George Harris severely with a club, and, draying a revolver, threatened to blow his brains out, if he did not return, which he did.”²⁰⁵ Likewise, on July 5, 1867, after a Georgia freedmen took Mr. Smith, his employer, to court for back pay “Smith threatened to kill the freedman for bringing him before the Bureau.” Smith followed his employee into the house of a neighbor, “carrying his hand in his bosom under the vest as if holding a weapon there concealed.”²⁰⁶ Furthermore, freedwomen constantly worked under the risk of sexual and other abuse as wage laborers and in gangs.²⁰⁷ In fact, a number of historians have argued that the threat of sexual abuse was greater for black women in the postbellum era

²⁰⁴ Captain Raymond Demere, an officer in the British Army, came to Georgia in 1738 and built the Harrington Hall Plantation. Demere named his plantation after his commanding officer Lord Harrington. By 1830, his grandson Raymond Demere III inherited the property and kept 85 slaves. Dania Berry, ““We’m Fus’ Rate Bargain”: Value, Labor, and Price in a Georgia Slave Community,”” in Walter Johnson (ed.), The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 60. Edward J. Cashin, William Bartram and the American Revolution on the Southern Frontier (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 86.

²⁰⁵ General R. Walbridge to Park Arnold Esq, March 15, 1866. Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 43, BRFAL-GA.

²⁰⁶ Fred Mosebach to Assistant Commissioner Colonel. C.C. Sibley July 5, 1867 Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 43, BRFAL-GA.

²⁰⁷ Hannah Rosen, Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence and the Meaning of Race in the Post-emancipation South (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2009); Catherine Clinton, “Bloody Terrain: Freedwomen, Sexuality and Violence During Reconstruction,” The Georgia Historical Quarterly 76.2 (Summer 1992): 313-332; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

than under slavery.²⁰⁸ Free labor was unsafe labor because of the often unchecked power of lascivious white employers.

African Americans were optimistic that as “co-partners” in the sharecropping enterprise they would not be pushed or brutalized by their employer-partner as they had been as wage hands or, at the very least, that they could better protect themselves from the abuse of white supervisors. Many cherished the isolation sharecropping afforded them as an opportunity to minimize the chances for white male-black female contact by removing female kin from work environments supervised closely by whites.²⁰⁹ For black men in particular, removing their wives and daughters from the reach of white supervisors was an opportunity to keep loved ones secure and to be both their protectors and leaders. Unfortunately, for some black families, maintaining isolated households was not enough to prevent violence from being an ever-present threat.

Landowners did threaten their workers and, more importantly, relied on the violence of other citizens and local authorities to enforce black labor compliance.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Laura Edwards maintained, “If anything, emancipation heightened the vulnerability of African American women to violence at the hands of white men, who used rape and other ritualized forms of sexual abuse to limit black women’s freedom, and to reinscribe antebellum racial hierarchies.” Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 199. See also, Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

²⁰⁹ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

²¹⁰ Although employers were not often violent with their employees, on occasion, employers did take the law into their own hands. For example, on October 12, 1868, William Lathan was stabbed and killed by his employer Thomas Lathan in Campbell County, Georgia. Thomas Lathan was later acquitted. Fred Mosebach to Assistant Commissioner Colonel J. R.

The Ku Klux Klan, for example, repressed the social and political insurgency of freed people and restored to employers a measure of coercive control over their workers.²¹¹ The spread of tenant farming which dispersed freed families throughout the countryside rendered them more susceptible to violence than they had been when concentrated in the old slave quarters. The fact that whites owned horses and sharecropping families generally did not, gave Klansmen superior mobility and helped them to organize large numbers of vigilantes against individual families.

Georgia freedwoman Willis Cofer described the breadth and impact of Klan terrorism in Athens, Georgia:

Ku Kluxers went 'round wid dem doughfaces on heaps atter de War. De Niggers got more beatin's from 'em dan dey had ever got from deir Old Marsters. If a Nigger sass'd white folkses or kilt a hoss, dem Kluxers sho' did evermore beat him up. Dey never touched me for I stayed out of deir way, but dey whupped my pa one time for bein' off his place atter dark. When dey turned him loose, he couldn't hardly stand up. De Yankees jus' about broke up de Ku Kluxers, but day sho' wuz bad on Niggers while dey lasted.²¹²

During May 1868, in Forsyth County, Georgia, groups of masked white men broke into the homes of Georgia freedmen John Lambert, G. Molbrook and Jerry Garrison on separate occasions. In each case, the men were severely beaten and their families were shot. In all cases, the civil officer either refused to take action on their behalf or

Lewis, November 6, 1868. Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 43, BRFAL-GA.

²¹¹ Allen W. Trelease, White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 81.

²¹² Interview of Willis Cofer of Athens, Georgia in Work Projects Administration, Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves: Volume IV, Georgia Narratives, Part 1 (Washington, 1941).

the use of disguises frustrated identification of the perpetrators, making conviction in court difficult.²¹³

White employers also relied on police violence to intimidate their employees. For example, in May 1867, Mr. Hoyt, a Georgia landowner, complained to Policeman Barry that Mary Price, one of his black employees, “used profane language towards him.” Officer Barry, in turn, charged into Price’s home and “drag[ged] her mother, Barbara Price, who objected to this in a rude and violent manner, out of her house into the street and [threw] her into the guard house.” Price’s mother was “in an advanced state of pregnancy” and was ill for quite some time after the attack. Though her “father [was] a respectable freedman,” neither his good standing nor his position as a father and husband was enough to stop the attack.²¹⁴ Barry was acquitted of the charges made against him by a unanimous vote of the City Council. Two months later, Officer Barry stripped and dragged a freedman through the street while threatening him with a club.²¹⁵

Physical and sexual assaults, home invasions and verbal threats directly challenged black men’s sense of manhood, rooted as one would expect, in autonomy and the ability to protect those in need. They connected their household authority to their political power and rights as citizens. As historian Hannah Rosen has

²¹³ Fred Mosebach to Assistant Commissioner Colonel J. R. Lewis, November 6, 1868. Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 43, BRFAL-GA.

²¹⁴ Fred Mosebach to His Honor the Mayor and City Council of Atlanta, Georgia, May 15, 1867. Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 43, BRFAL-GA.

²¹⁵ Fred Mosebach to Colonel C. C. Sibley August 1, 1867 Letters Received by Atlanta Subassistant Commissioner, Record Group 105, Roll 43, BRFAL-GA.

demonstrated, attacks on freed people's homes by white vigilantes reminded African American men that they did not have the patriarchal authority or power to protect their families and, therefore, were not worthy of citizenship.²¹⁶ The recognition and authority conferred by the sharecropping arrangement-- because they were not coupled with protected civil rights-- could not guarantee the security of black independent households on sharecropping plantations. Instead, they were points of contention between black employees and white citizens.

In addition to the brash violence of the Klan and law enforcement, planters relied on legal devices to undercut African Americans' hope of independence and assert their control over sharecroppers by separating them from the crops that gave them a measure of independent subsistence. Southern courts revised the legal status of sharecroppers and came to define these workers as wage laborers with no legitimate claim to ownership of the crops they grew.²¹⁷ As a result, if a sharecropper removed and/or sold his share of the crop without his planter's permission he could be prosecuted for theft. He could also be made to forfeit all claims on his share if he and his family departed before the end of the contract period, or were involuntarily

²¹⁶ Hannah Rosen, Terror in the Heart of Freedom (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

²¹⁷ Charles Flynn observed that, "Landowners were using law to change social relationships, to force even upwardly mobile blacks to remain subordinate to them, exploitable by them. If the legal logic was elusive, its effects were clear. These changes in law, deliberate and unquestioned, can be explained only as they increased the authority of the landowners and protected their profits." Charles L. Flynn, Jr., White Land, Black Labor: Caste and Class in Late Nineteenth-Century Georgia, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 91.

discharged.²¹⁸ Some laws allowed the landowner to seize practically all of a tenant's property—rather than just his crop—if he were to default on his loans.²¹⁹

Other examples of Southern measures designed to assure that the blacks would remain attached to the land and dependent on their landlords were vagrancy laws, anti-enticement and anti-recruitment legislation, convict labor laws, debt peonage, and discriminatory real estate practices.²²⁰ Through Southern legislatures, whites enacted labor laws and “black codes” that foreclosed black opportunities to participate in a free labor market, binding freedpeople to lives of poverty and dependence in the cotton fields. Not surprisingly, the net effect of these measures was to keep the black population concentrated in the South, working at artificially low wages, primarily in the agricultural sector. Between 1870 and 1910 the proportion of the black residents in the South remained virtually stationary, standing at 91 percent in the earlier year and 89 percent in 1910. As late as 1910, 87.8 percent of the black labor force in five cotton growing states worked in agriculture and domestic

²¹⁸ According to Jay Mandle, “The compensation system associated with sharecropping and share tenancy immobilized plantation workers for most of the crop year, because the cropper could leave an employer only by forfeiting the compensation to which he or she was entitled, which was received only at the time of the harvest. Thus except for the period at the end of the crop year, sharecropper mobility came at the cost of foregone income for which the cropper had already performed work.” Jay R. Mandle, Not Slave, Not Free: The African American Economic Experience Since the Civil War. (Durham and London: Duke University Press 1992), 22.

²¹⁹ Harold Woodman, New South, New Law: The Legal Foundations of Credit and Labor Relations in the Postbellum Agricultural South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 83.

²²⁰ Anti-enticement laws restricted the economic opportunities of tenant farmers by limiting the recruitment of agricultural laborers by Northern manufactures. These laws required labor recruiters to pay hundreds of dollars for state, county, and city permits to seek workers or risk fines and imprisonment. Mandle, Not Slave, Not Free, 23.

and personal services.²²¹ Certainly, as Harold Woodman explained, these legal barriers thrown up around Southern agricultural workers “created a repressive labor system that gave property-owning landlords almost complete control of their workforce.”²²² Thus, while men sought mastery in sharecropping, under the idea that sharecropping would reward hard work, white control over the political and economic landscape prevented them from achieving these aspirations.

In addition to suffering physical violence, sharecroppers were often cheated by their landlords when settling their accounts, preventing them from exercising much economic autonomy. When faced with a bad crop year or a bad market, for example, landlords sometimes raised the price of items they supplied their employees, thereby increasing a cropper’s debt, which was carried over to the next year. As a result, the meager cash income sharecroppers did earn went year after year mostly to repay credit advances for food, clothes, fertilizers, and miscellaneous farming supplies, charged at high interest rates.²²³ Most made barely enough in cotton to repay landlords for food and supplies and lived in constant debt. Over the long run, croppers, not landlords, bore much of the costs of crop loss or falling prices. Unless they were prepared to live indefinitely off of subsistence produce,

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²²² *Ibid.*, 93.

²²³ Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, “Debt Peonage in the Cotton South After the Civil War,” *Journal of Economic History* 32 (September 1942): 641-669. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “A Portrait of Southern Sharecropping: The 1911-1912 Georgia Plantation Survey of Robert Preston Brooks,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 77. 2 (Summer 1993): 380. Barrow Jr. similarly admitted that sharecropping was truly a means to economic prosperity, “Candor compels the admission that only a few tenants reach this standard of good farming; the other work sufficiently well to pay their rent, and make money enough to by their clothes and spend at Christmas, and let the rainy days of the future take care of themselves.” David C. Barrow, “A Georgia Plantation,” *Scribner’s Monthly*, 21 (April 1881): 832-33.

sharecroppers were constantly at the mercy of white men when trying to market their crops. Repeated injustices led W.E.B. Du Bois to calculate that white landlords had withheld three fourths of the wages earned by black farmers since emancipation.²²⁴ Moreover, blacks rarely challenged the settlement terms because the majority of black croppers were illiterate, kept no records, and constantly lived with the threat of both legal and extralegal violence. It is not surprising that white employers' authority and control of croppers persisted, and stifling the productive capacity of many workers.²²⁵

At the same time, planters pointed to sharecroppers' struggles as a way to advertise African American inferiority and lack of responsibility. Even though many planters deliberately cheated their workers, they blamed the difficulties black workers faced on black incompetence: failure to thrive "[was] more in the negro himself than in any hard terms of the white landlord or any extortions of the country merchant." Sharecropping, this planter continued, could be a step towards landownership and independence for blacks and "millions of them might have owned their own homes had they proved themselves worthy of their opportunities."²²⁶ In this view, black workers' struggles stemmed from a lack of

²²⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Negro American Artisan* (Atlanta: The Atlanta University Press, 1902), 135.

²²⁵ J.Z. Green, "The Merchant's Crop Lien Again," *Progressive Farmer*, XXX July 17, 1915, 663. Stanley B. Greenberg, *Race and State in Capitalist Development* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). Greenberg states, "Debt, false pretense laws... were critical to sharecropping: they helped landowners keep their labor force through the growing season and encouraged laborers to 'renew' their contracts." There were false pretense laws that presented the sharecropper with the sanction of imprisonment for abandoning his fields.

²²⁶ John Corrigan Jr. "South Being Held Back By the Negro Farmers," *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 3, 1909.

motivation and responsibility. As a writer for the *Atlanta Constitution* suggested, black sharecroppers' own incompetence was responsible for making them "anything but profitable help to [their] employer or landlord."²²⁷ Captain P.H. Fluker a plantation owner in Green County, Georgia asserted that not even black men's familial responsibilities were enough to make them work well. "The country negro," he opined, "is utterly regardless of family ties. It is frequent for one of them to quarrel with his wife and make a bee-line for another locality with his sweetheart, leaving his family without provision."²²⁸

Collectively, such writers viewed the responsibilities of hard labor and family leadership—sharecropping's "opportunities"—as too taxing for black men. No amount of autonomy—whether familial or agricultural—would make them work well enough to thrive. Black farm labor, agreed an *Atlanta Constitution* writer, was simply "the least intelligent, least thrifty and least productive in America," and "mitigate[d] against southern success."²²⁹ In the opinion of many white landowners, freed blacks were proving themselves unable or unwilling to truly be men; the federal government extended them citizenship (or manhood) rights prematurely.

African Americans had no choice but to endure these assaults on their manhood. Frustrated with his treatment at the hands of his landlord, a black

²²⁷ "The Negro on the Farm," *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 8, 1904, 6.

²²⁸ Samuel W. Dibble, "God Knows! Is This Georgia Planter's View of the Negro Problem," *The Atlanta Constitution* February 7, 1909, 5.

²²⁹ John Corrigan Jr. "South Being Held Back By the Negro Farmers," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 3, 1909. On the issue of sharecropping and Southern economic development see Joseph D. Reid, Jr. "White Land, Black Labor, and Agricultural Stagnation: The Causes and Effects of Sharecropping in the Postbellum South," *Explorations in Economic History* 16 (1979): 31-55. Jonathan M. Wiener, "Class Structure and Economic Development in the American South, 1865-1955," *American Historical Review* 84. 4 (Oct. 1979): 970-992.

sharecropper named Randolph abandoned his white employer and began working for a black landlord. “I’d rather work with my own color,” he explained, “They talk to you like you was a man. The white man talks to you like you was a boy. The colored boss don’t cuss you out, neither. I make a better showing here than where I was before and get more out of my crop ‘cause I’m working for a colored man.”²³⁰

Randolf noted that his previous employer’s attempts to emasculate him through verbal assaults affected his work ethic and labor productivity. In order to preserve the sense of self that he and many other black men imagined could be won through agricultural success and familial autonomy, he needed a new place to work, where he could be treated not as a boy but as a man. Unfortunately, the mobility and amenable labor option Randolph eventually achieved was rare for most African Americans.²³¹

Conclusion

Although the interests of black male heads of households and white planters coincided in share tenancy, the partnership between the two parties was far from equal. Black sharecroppers too often endured contentious and abusive relationships with their landlords, which often led to difficulties in earning power and political status. The system that extended African American men some opportunity for semi-

²³⁰ Charles S. Johnson, Growing Up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South (Washington: American Council on Education, 1941), 7.

²³¹ As previously discussed, white political power and the imposition of black codes and Jim Crow laws introduced a range of coercive and repressive measures against blacks that ensured that they were driven into renewed social, political, and economic subservience. Gerald D. Jaynes, Branches Without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862-1882 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

autonomous agriculture and family leadership haunted them by the constant assumption that they were incapable of autonomy. The abuses encouraged by this system itself undermined black people's ability to sustain profits, and "proved" to all those who would listen that blacks were undeserving of economic and political citizenship. In this light, the responsibilities of fatherhood and manhood could often become too much for black men.

Black families continued to reject white control and resisted it whenever and wherever they could. But when black men were not given fair opportunities to prove their manhood through economic independence on southern farms, they turned to new work opportunities as they arose that allowed them prove themselves and escape the stigma of dependence. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 3, the journey from southern farms to southern railroad camps had its origins in embattled black workers' desire for economic independence. As one Georgia planter observed, "a negro won't plough at ten dollars per month, when he can get twenty dollars on a railroad; and to my knowledge, labor representing at least fifty thousand bales of cotton—is now employed on railroads in southwestern Georgia."²³²

The following chapters will explore how Southern industrialization, and railroad development in particular, shaped the economic and social worlds of black families in Georgia. They examine how the work culture of railroading helped black men rethink their personal relationships, their responsibilities at home and their very

²³² Quoted in F.W. Loring and C.F. Atkinson, Cotton Culture: The South Considered with Reference to Emigration (Boston: Williams & Co., 1869), 17.

identities as men. In addition, they consider the ways in which men's conceptions of work and family life influenced their responses to new work environments.

Chapter 3

Bond, Free, and Temporary: Georgia's Black Railroad Laborers, 1850-1914

In August 1900, several Georgia planters alerted Phillip Cook, their Secretary of State, to what they feared was a state of emergency. The problem centered around cotton production. Their fields were being damaged by “cotton rust,” rendering acres of their plantings unusable.²³³ A more worrying difficulty was a disquieting decline in their traditional workforce. African Americans were finding better paying jobs in the state’s expanding industrial sector, and planters struggled with insufficient numbers of black agricultural workers. Southern planters were quite familiar with the first difficulty; they were accustomed to being plagued by occasional outbreaks of agricultural blight that threatened the viability of the season’s crops. Southern agricultural experts and local farmers had libraries full of books and articles to reference in periodicals such as the *Southern Cultivator* when

²³³ Cotton rust is a fungi that attacks well developed cotton plants. They appear as small, yellowish spots on the plant leaves, bolls, and stems. As the rust enlarges it weakens stalks and stems, causing breakage on these parts. This makes cotton cultivation and harvest increasingly difficult. Georgia State Department of Agriculture For the Year 1896: Together with Portions of Other Agricultural Bulletins, Of Interest to Farmers. Vol XXII. Published by R.T. Nesbitt Commissioner of Agriculture (Atlanta, Geo. W. Harrison Printer, 1897).

crops were thus threatened.²³⁴ But the lack of sufficient workers was not only unprecedented, it was alarming: “The negroes,” many reported, “have left the farms and gone to work for the railroads, lumber camps and turpentine farms.”²³⁵

Although some planters described black men’s movement towards full-time industrial work as forsaking the “golden opportunity” of agricultural labor because of “[their] own inherent weaknesses,” savvy planters recognized that this exodus resulted from a rational economic decision.²³⁶ As early as 1879, the *Daily State Gazette* reported that many Southern planters noticed this decline in numbers. Indeed, those “who [knew] the peculiar fitness of the negro labor on Southern plantations, [were] beginning to feel alarmed and willing to conciliate the colored people as far as possible.”²³⁷ Yet in May 1900, a writer for *The Columbus Daily Enquirer-Sun* expressed surprise and shock at the dearth of black agricultural workers, concluding “[the] status of affairs cannot be explained.” This writer guessed that “the railroads and turpentine mills, etc., have been the cause of the lack of hands in some sections.”²³⁸

In 1902, F.J. Merriam, editor of the *Southern Ruralist*, reported that African

²³⁴ See for example, Dr. E. M. Pendleton, *Text Book of Scientific Agriculture, with Practical Deductions* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1875); B.S. Wright, “Rust in Cotton,” *The Southern Cultivator and Industrial Journal* L (January 1892).

²³⁵ “Negro Labor Very Scarce: Farmer of South Georgia Need Cotton Pickers,” *The Macon Telegraph*, August 25, 1900.

²³⁶ The author further explained that “negro character has much to do with the hegira of negroes to town and until the negro rises superior to his own inherent weaknesses and takes up the burden of life with an optimistic heart and a willing hand, he will not do well anywhere on God’s green footstool.” “The Negro on The Farm,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 8, 1904.

²³⁷ “Another Great Exodus of the Colored People,” *Daily State Gazette*, September 1, 1879, *emphasis added*.

²³⁸ “Thi Chat of Farmers: Condition of the Crops, Negro Labor Rather Scarce,” *The Columbus Enquirer-Sun*, May, 23, 1900.

Americans' movement towards southern industrial work was clearly the topic of conversation "whenever and wherever farmers come together." "Our hands are leaving us," he claimed,

to work in mills, on railroads, and for other large enterprises. We cannot grow cotton as we have been doing and pay the higher prices for labor such as these large concerns are able to give. We have been compelled to abandon part of our cultivated fields and shall have to abandon more. Our revenue is thus decreased, while our expenses are as great, if not greater, than ever, owing to the general advance in prices.²³⁹

Southern planters and commentators in these years had legitimate causes for concern. Between 1887 and 1890, one third of all rail construction in the United States occurred in the South. Southern railroad lines expanded by 136 percent in the decade of the 1880s, as compared to 87 percent for the U.S. overall.²⁴⁰ By 1880, Georgia had increased its track mileage from 1,404 miles in 1860 to 2,432 miles, more than any southern state except Texas.²⁴¹ Clearly this growth provided ample opportunities for laborers to enter into the burgeoning industrial economy. Railroad employment, though dangerous, meant higher wages and more job security than farm labor.²⁴² When other opportunities arose, African American men quickly grew weary of the overworked and underpaid nature of agricultural work. For many

²³⁹ F.J Merriam, "Negro Labor Problem on the Southern Farm," *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 8, 1902.

²⁴⁰ Ray Marshall, *Labor in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 50.

²⁴¹ John F. Stover, *Iron Road to the West: American Railroads in the 1850s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 61.

²⁴² Of course, most of those workers were unskilled laborers, but African Americans were also well represented in semiskilled positions, such as fireman and trainman, particularly in the South. African American firemen and trainmen earned about 10 to 20 percent less than whites. Eric Arnesen, " "Like Banquo's Ghost, It Will Not Down": The Race Question and the American Railroad Brotherhoods, 1880-1920," *The American Historical Review* 99.5 (Dec. 1994): 1624.

blacks, family farming as sharecroppers held less appeal than wage employment. After 1880, the average wages of even the lowest-paid industries were higher than the average income per farm worker.²⁴³ The emerging railroad industry drew in increasing numbers of black men.

Along with the railroads, southern industry in general expanded in the 1890s, creating more opportunities to escape the poverty of sharecropping. In the two and a half decades between 1902 and 1925, over a third of Georgia's black farmers left farming. The percentage of husbands claiming farming as their occupation dropped to 3/4ths among landowners and about 2/3rds among renters, among blacks and whites alike.²⁴⁴ Historian Stewart Tolnay found that between 1910 and 1940, the proportion of rural African Americans working for wages, as opposed to those in share or tenant farming or working their own land, increased by 42 percent. In the same period, the number of black tenant farmers decreased by ten percent and the number of black farm owners was reduced by half.²⁴⁵

²⁴³ Clarence Heer, Income and Wages in the South (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1930) 12, 25.

²⁴⁴ Stewart Tolnay, The Bottom Rung: African American Family Life on Southern Farms (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 33. As one historian of the Mississippi Delta has observed, "by 1900 blacks dominated the lists of the Delta's landowners," and yet "the glow of opportunity faded after the turn of the century. Black farmers lost hope of climbing up the agricultural ladder, and whites took political and economic advantage of their greater access to credit. The proportion of landowners ceased expanding, and many farmers slid swiftly down into tenancy." John C. Willis, Forgotten Time: The Yazoo-Mississippi after the Civil War (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 3. Carter G. Woodson reported that the number of farm laborers declined 4.1 percent from 1890 to 1910. According to Greene and Woodson, this number was inflated: "This would have reported much smaller had there not been an acknowledged over-count in the number of Negro women agricultural workers." Lorezno J. Greene and Carter G. Woodson, Negro Wage Earner (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1930), 52.

²⁴⁵ Tolnay The Bottom Rung, 14.

Simultaneous with these changes from 1890 to 1910, in the United States as a whole, black numbers working in manufacturing and mechanical pursuits increased one-third more than the rate of those in the agricultural sector.²⁴⁶ In the first three decades of the 20th century, for example, they outnumbered whites as locomotive firemen on Georgia's railroads, holding 60 percent or more of these positions.²⁴⁷ One study has shown the number of black steam locomotive employees increased from approximately 48,000 in 1890 to almost 104,000 in 1910.²⁴⁸ After being frustrated with the limited success and opportunities of agricultural production, African Americans seized the opportunities to enter the industrial sector.

The transition from agricultural work to railroad employment was not sudden. Railroad tracks were first laid on Georgian soil in the 1830s by enslaved workers who were already a vital part of the state's industrial labor force.²⁴⁹ After the Civil War, Georgia exploited incarcerated black men and women's labor to expedite its fiscal and structural reconstruction. Many free black families also took employment in the burgeoning railroad industry, rejecting the cycle of debt and poverty that share tenancy and abusive landowners often imposed. Some families engaged in part-time industrial work during slow-growing seasons to supplement household economies. Railroading was often a family decision which, for many black men, began during

²⁴⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, *Negro Population*, 526-27.

²⁴⁷ The U.S. Census of 1910 reported a 56,058 worker (117.9%) increase in the black railroad workers from 1890. Arnesen, "Like Banquo's Ghost," 1609. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Special Census Reports on Occupations*, 1890, 19.

²⁴⁸ By the 1880s, coalmines were effectively supplanting railroad camps as the principal destination of leased convicts at this time. Instead, railroad construction and maintenance reverted largely to free labor.

²⁴⁹ Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York: Verso 1996), 4.

adolescence. Seasonal forays into the work exposed black men and teenagers to additional avenues of income, and to work environments that gave them experience beyond the plantation, ultimately shaping their economic decisions and familial relationships in both the short and long term.

This chapter will discuss African Americans' transition from agricultural work to railroad employers in Georgia at the turn of the century, in order to demonstrate how family concerns—economic and social—shaped black men's patterns of industrial employment even before they moved into full-time railroad work. Through this history of African American labor and railroading in Georgia, I evaluate how black men's twined interests in family life and manhood, which led them to sharecropping, also provoked them to leave family farming for industrial work, and the effects these decisions had on sharecropping households and familial relationships.

Antebellum Georgia's Black Railroad Workers

In 1860, Georgia's 41,084 slaveholders owned 435,000 slaves, the largest number of enslaved people outside of Virginia.²⁵⁰ These workers built and maintained the homes of Georgia's white citizens, cooked for and nursed their children, cared for their livestock, and did a variety of other tasks that their owners could not or did not want to do. Most of the enslaved population, however, was primarily engaged in agricultural work, producing staple and provision crops such as rice and cotton. By

²⁵⁰ U.S. Census Office, Eighth Census [1860], *Agriculture of the United States in 1860*, Washington, D.C., 1864.

1826, Georgia became the world's largest cotton producer and in 1860 ranked fourth among U.S. producers.²⁵¹

The growth in cotton production raised new concerns about Georgia's underdeveloped transportation system. Effective cotton production had to be coupled with effective distribution in order for the crops to get from the farmlands to coastal markets.²⁵² Inadequate routes, state leaders understood, would radically curtail Georgia's burgeoning economic development.²⁵³ But the work of improving canals and roads, and – most challenging– building new railroads, was backbreaking, dangerous, and dirty. According to historian Walter Licht, early 19th century southern railroads faced severe difficulties meeting their need for both skilled and unskilled labor, in part because most white men considered railroad work unmanly and degrading.²⁵⁴ In addition, some railroad employers believed white men were less capable than blacks of tolerating the work, which often took place in unbearable

²⁵¹ Buddy Sullivan, *Georgia: A State History* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 65.

²⁵² Until the 1840s, transportation by way of turnpikes, canal boats and steam boats provided a loose organization and irregular routes. In his "Queer History of the Railroad in Georgia and the South," Dr. R.J. Massey recalled that before the railroads, planters sent their most trusted slaves to carry cotton to a cotton merchant who would sell it. The merchant would then give the money to the slave who would bring to the master. The whole excursion would take around ten days. "Queer History of the Railroad and the South," *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 2, 1902.

²⁵³ It seems clear that effective railroads increased the production of cotton. This is not to imply that railroads were only for cotton transportation. Railroads also transformed southerners' opportunities to travel and trade slaves as well. Cecil Gray Lewis, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United State to 1860*, 2 vols. (Washington: Carnegie Institute), 714.

²⁵⁴ Independent landownership was the epitome of ideal manhood. Walter Licht, *Working for the Railroad: The Organization of Work in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 65-68; Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 9.

conditions.²⁵⁵ Enslaved people, on the other hand, could be put to any task, did not go on strike, and were available even during the growing season. Bondspeople were thus the often preferred option to hiring either whites or free black workers, so Georgia's railroad industry incorporated slave labor into public works projects as much as possible.²⁵⁶

Southern railroads were some of the largest slaveholding and slave employing entities in the South.²⁵⁷ According to historian William Thomas, "since no single plantation used more than 1,200 slaves, the railroads in the 1850s stood out as some of the largest users of slave labor in the region."²⁵⁸ In 1850, Georgia's Western and Atlantic Railroad reported owning just 19 enslaved workers, the Macon and Western owned four and the Georgia Railroad listed working five enslaved individuals in Decatur, Georgia. In a financial statement released a year later, the Georgia Railroad

²⁵⁵ L.O. Reynolds the chief engineer of the Central Railroad led a team of 500 workers—most of whom were enslaved men— through extremely dry weather in the swamp grounds of Savannah, Georgia. He paid \$922.25 for the slaves. He opined, "had the force employed consisted of whites instead of blacks, the sickness and mortality would doubtless have been great." Reports of the President, Engineers in Chief and Superintendents of the Central Railroad and Banking Company of Georgia (Savannah: Power Press of John M. Cooper and CO. 1854), 45.

²⁵⁶ Georgia's railroads had a diverse work force which included diverse Irish immigrants, northerners and native southern whites. Furthermore, they were not the only industries capitalizing on slave labor. According to Robert S. Starobin, slaves were commonly used in textile and steel mills, coal, salt and gold mines, canal construction, commercial fishing, the lumber factory, carpentry, cotton gins. Robert S. Starobin, Industrial Slavery in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970)

²⁵⁷ As Douglas Blackmon documented, "Southern railroads also became voracious acquires of slaves, purchasing them by the hundreds and leasing them from others for as much as \$20 per month in the 1850s. By the beginning of the Civil War, railroads owned an estimated twenty thousand slaves." Douglas A. Blackmon, Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 47.

²⁵⁸ William G. Thomas, The Iron Way: Railroads, the Civil War, and the Making of Modern America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 21.

reported \$34,346 in Negro property.²⁵⁹ The Southwestern Railroad's 498 slave laborers made up a larger slave workforce than all but two Georgia plantations in 1850.²⁶⁰ By 1860, the Atlantic and Gulf Railroad had 1,200 enslaved workers cutting its line through the woods of South Georgia. In total, over 14,000 bondspeople worked on the railroads in 1860 across the South. According to Theodore Kornweibel, 76 percent of the 118 railroads in operation at the start of the Civil War used slave labor to build more than a thousand miles of Georgia's antebellum roadbed.²⁶¹

Most of the enslaved individuals engaged in railroad building were not owned by the railroads, but were leased out to them by slave owners who had a surplus of workers. It was common for railroads to hire these workers annually from planters living along the line of their roads.²⁶² The contracts between owners and railroads stipulated the hiring costs, payment dates, housing, food, clothing and the variety of tasks the worker would be assigned. They also outlined the responsibilities of each

²⁵⁹ U.B. Phillips, American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1918), 377.

²⁶⁰ William Kauffman Scarborough, Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth Century South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 440.

²⁶¹ Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., "Railroads and Slavery," *Railroad History* 18.9 (2003): 35. Kenneth Stampp, The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 62.

²⁶² L.O. Reynolds reported that he was optimistic at the "disposition on the part of several of the planters residing along the line, to engage in contract to enable us for the future to keep up a more uniform scale of operations during the whole year and also to render the work more popular." Reports of the President, Engineers in Chief and Superintendents of the Central Railroad and Banking Company of Georgia (Savannah: Power Press of John M. Cooper and CO. 1854), 34. According to Robert Black, in the 1850s unskilled slaves brought their owners \$75 to \$100 per year. Skilled workers brought up to \$250 per year. Robert C. Black, III, The Railroads of the Confederacy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 30.

party in the event of sickness or an enslaved worker's escape. Additionally, due to the inherent risk of injury or even death in railroad work, some owners insured their slaves so that they were compensated in incidents resulting in the dismemberment or death of their slaves.²⁶³

The large majority of enslaved railroad workers served as general laborers and track hands on the railroad lines. They cleared the terrain for track laying, which involved chopping down trees and digging out boulders and tree stumps. The next step was “grading” the land: leveling off and filling uneven ground in preparation for laying the crossties and rails.²⁶⁴ Scott Nelson explained how the primitive and labor-intensive technologies of the early 1800s made this work extremely arduous:

Workers used shovels and wheelbarrows to build up or break down the earth so that it could ‘make the grade’ and to form a flat foundation for the crossties. . . . To clear away rocks, slaves dug small holes with picks, packed the holes with gunpowder, and blasted the rock into pieces before digging with picks and shovels.²⁶⁵

Once the land was prepared, workers would lay tracks with planks they had crafted from logs, fastening them to solid iron rails that weighed around fifty pounds per yard.

²⁶³ Black, The Railroads of the Confederacy, 30. R.R. Cuyler, President of the Central Railroad reported that The Central had its own doctor look after the freed men. He claimed, “only one hired negro lost a limb in the Company’s business.” Reports of the President, Engineers in Chief and Superintendents of the Central Railroad and Banking Company of Georgia (Savannah: Power Press of John M. Cooper and CO. 1854), 200.

²⁶⁴ Allen Trelease, The North Carolina Railroad, 1849-1871, and the Modernization of North Carolina (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 34.

²⁶⁵ Scott Reynolds Nelson, Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways, Klan Violence, and Reconstruction (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 17.

Other enslaved railroaders worked on the trains themselves as brakemen and firemen.²⁶⁶ Firemen kept the train's fire evenly fueled with fresh coal, which required shoveling at least five tons a day through the small firebox door as the engine rumbled along. These workers were also responsible for climbing out onto a train's boiler to oil the valves, even while the train was moving. This, of course, required a unique combination of skill, intelligence, and physical endurance. Wasted coal meant wasted fuel, which jeopardized the train's movement. Failing to oil the boiler properly could cause the entire engine to explode. Firemen also had to battle heat exhaustion and the constant risk of being burned.

Brakemen held the lowest and least-skilled jobs on a train. Their main tasks were to help stop the train and connect rail cars together. On passenger trains, they stood on open-end platforms, ready to apply the hand brake. On freight trains, brakemen jumped from the top of one car to another to manually turn brake wheels. Many died falling off swaying cars, especially at night, or in inclement weather. Another danger could occur during the connecting process, which required the brakeman to stand between two cars, ready to drop a heavy pin through a cast iron link. Brakemen got their fingers mashed in couplers, their feet cut off by wheels, and occasionally men would be crushed between cars.²⁶⁷ Enslaved laborers also worked as switchmen, performing the same coupling and uncoupling functions as brakemen

²⁶⁶ See John F. Stover, *The Life and Decline of the American Railroad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970)

²⁶⁷ Automatic couplers and air brakes were not introduced until the 1870s and not generally required until the 1890s. Until then, brakemen appear to have suffered 35 to 50 percent of all railroad worker injuries and fatalities while constituting only 10 percent of the work force. Licht, *Working for the Railroad*, 181-96.

(though stationed in train yards). Slave labor also tended to wood and water stops along the railroad's route. Whether for construction, maintenance, or operations, southern railroads literally could not function without enslaved black men risking life and limb to perform these most dangerous tasks.

It is unclear to historians how enslaved railroad life compared to plantation slavery. Enslaved men who were sold or leased to the railroads had little opportunities for domestic life. Those individuals who worked close to their homes might visit on weekends, but the majority saw family members primarily during Christmas. It is easy to imagine that over the course of a year a railroader's child or partner might be sold from his home plantation and the father would not know until the end of his contract.²⁶⁸

Life may have been marginally better for slaves employed by the railroads, however. Firemen, wood passers, and brakemen avoided the gang labor system by the nature of their tasks.²⁶⁹ Moreover, their geographical mobility, a by-product of working on trains may have lessened one of the harsher realities of bondage, immobility.²⁷⁰ Occasionally bonded laborers were permitted to earn extra money.

²⁶⁸ Allen Trelease found that the North Carolina Railroad gave their bondsmen a week off for Christmas vacation. Trelease, *The North Carolina Railroad*, 63.

²⁶⁹ The typical train was manned by an engineer, firemen, conductor and two brakemen.

²⁷⁰ In *Closer to Freedom*, Stephanie Camp argues that planters attempted to carefully delineate the boundaries on their property so as to control where and when their property was located through a "geography of containment." She uses this concept to describe slaveholders' use of restraint in exercising control over their bound laborers. Camp explains that "laws, customs, and ideals [came] together into a systematic constriction of slave movement that helped to establish slaveholders' sense of mastery." Equally important for her, however, is that enslaved men and women continually strove to create a "rival geography," featuring "other kinds of spaces that gave them room and time for their

Henry Beedles, for example, a former slave from Fulton County, Georgia, was initially leased by his owner to the Georgia Railroad and Bank Company, but later sold to the Atlanta and West Point Railroad. There he worked a wide range of tasks and invested his earnings in property. Of course, enslaved individuals could not own property in the legal sense, so all his transactions were conducted under his wife's name because she was a free woman.²⁷¹ With the income he earned as a railroad worker, Beedle was able to acquire land, a home and a stable. As scholar Allan Trelease has concluded, the best that researchers can say about railroad slavery is that life was “not much better or worse than the farm life that most slaves experienced.”²⁷²

Slaves were the most significant group in the building of Southern railroads, but employing slave labor was not without its problems. Accounts of time sensitive work being stalled or postponed because a railroad's contract with a slave owner expired before the work was done fill the archives of Georgia railroad companies. Another problem companies had with slave owners was their arbitrary decisions to raise the price of enslaved work to capitalize on increasing demand for slave labor.²⁷³ In the 1850s-- a decade of rising cotton prices--the price of slaves increased so rapidly that railway managers began to question slave purchasing as a profitable

families, for rest from work, and for amusement.” Stephanie M. H. Camp, Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 7.

²⁷¹ Testimony of Henry Beedles [20 December 1875], Claim of Henry Beedles and his wife Polly, Fulton Country Georgia case files, Approved Claims, Southern Claims Commission, U.S. General Accounting Office, Record Group 217, National Archives.

²⁷² Trelease, The North Carolina Railroad, 1849-1879, 63.

²⁷³ Reports of the Directors, and of the Engineer in Chief, of the Georgia Rail Road and Banking CO. (Augusta, 1844), 11.

investment. By 1860, the per capita cost of hiring and keeping slaves was \$200 per year, a sum approximately double that of a decade earlier. The cost of slave hiring increasingly approached the bottom rung of the railway wage scale for free laborers.²⁷⁴ In addition, free railway workers could be dismissed or have their hours reduced during slack periods, while slaves had to be kept through the duration of their contracts.

The Civil War had a profound impact on Georgia's railroad slave labor. During wartime, thousands of slaves seized the opportunity to desert their masters in what historian W. E. B. Du Bois called a "general strike against the Confederacy."²⁷⁵ This resistance drastically diminished the slave labor pool for all industries dependent on bondspeople-- from agricultural production to wartime manufacturing. At the same time, white men were leaving the work force to join the Confederate war effort, thereby contributing to war-inflated prices for hired slaves and increasing the

²⁷⁴ In 1860, firemen on the Western and Atlantic made between \$17 and \$30 per month, with the common rate being \$22. At \$17 a month, which was a common wood passer's pay, the savings of slave labor were almost nonexistent. Reports of the Directors of the Georgia Railroad and Banking Company (Augusta, 1850), 13.

²⁷⁵ W.E.B. DuBois, Black Reconstruction in America (New York: Russel and Russel, 1935)

competition and cost for enslaved railroad workers.²⁷⁶ As a result, many southern railroads had to purchase their own slaves or tap into an alternative work force.²⁷⁷

The special problems that arose when hiring slave labor eventually convinced railroad leaders to seek alternatives. Southern railroads began to replace slave laborers with whites hired by the month or even the day, who could be laid off when necessary.²⁷⁸ The slave firemen that were relatively common on Atlanta's roads in the first half of the 1850s became increasingly rare by the Civil War years. But reducing slave labor did not happen before Georgia possessed the most extensive railway network of any southern state. By the war's end, the state would once again need and seek to exploit un-free black labor.

Post-Civil War Georgia's Black Railroad Workers

The War—and General William Sherman's slash and burn strategy in particular—resulted in considerable damage to Georgia's railroads. Sherman and his Union troops captured Atlanta and its vital railroad depots which could be used to store and transport ammunition. Before leaving Atlanta in November 1864, Sherman literally burned the “bridges” behind him, destroying the railroads lines that ran from

²⁷⁶ In the South, the war only exacerbated an already serious labor shortage. Many companies complained that the high wages offered by the Confederate government to carpenters and machinists were hampering their efforts to find men to rebuild bridges and keep locomotives and cars in repair. In Georgia the state assembly was forced to vote a 50 percent increase in pay to skilled workers on the state-owned Western and Atlantic Railroad in order to keep their workers from leaving. Demand and inflation in other areas boosted railroad mechanics' wages from \$2.50 to as high as \$20.00 a day. The draft also depleted the lines of available trainmen. See Robert Black II, *The Railroads of the Confederacy*, 128-129.

²⁷⁷ Black, *The Railroads of the Confederacy*, 130.

²⁷⁸ Trelease, *North Carolina Railroad*, 62.

Chattanooga through Atlanta and Macon to Savannah, a total of 317 miles of track.²⁷⁹

He also raised depots and machine shops and burned down Georgia's state prison, Milledgeville Penitentiary.²⁸⁰ What had not been deliberately destroyed was simply worn out or used up.

In the wake of Sherman's March, Georgia faced at least a million dollars in reconstruction costs, in addition to its already crushing debt. But the need to rebuild basic infrastructure was dire.²⁸¹ White Southerners understood how pivotal the railroads were to the region's economy, and only economic development could erase the stain of Southern defeat.²⁸² State legislators and railroad companies were both in search of cheap and efficient ways to rebuild their broken system.

²⁷⁹ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), 137.

²⁸⁰ Founded in 1816, Georgia's state prison was located at Milledgeville, Georgia which was named after the former Governor John Milledge who asked the legislature to create the penitentiary in 1804. During the war, Milledgeville penitentiary served as a gun factory for the Confederacy. Anticipating that Sherman would destroy the facilities, Governor Joseph E. Brown freed prisoners in exchange for their promise to fight for the Confederate cause. In 1865, only four inmates were in the custody of the state. Glenn McNair, *Criminal Injustice: Slaves and Free Blacks in Georgia's Criminal Justice System* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 171. James C. Bonner, "The Georgia Penitentiary at Milledgeville, 1817-1874," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Volume 55, No. 3 (Fall 1971), 303.

²⁸¹ The repair work on southern railroads was extremely expensive. The rail lines had to buy new rails, locomotives, and machinery, and most found their rolling stock scattered all over the South at the end of the war. The Central Railroad of Georgia, for example, had only 14 operating engines in 1866, compared to 49 in 1861. In 1866, the road procured 2,375 tons of new rail and re-rolled 1,650 tons, and bought three engines, 150 boxcars, and 75 platform cars. Thirti First Report Central Rail Road and Banking Company of Georgia (Savannah, Georgia, 1866), 303.

²⁸² There was much evidence for this optimism because Georgia's antebellum railroads were so profitable. For example, Georgia spent five million dollars to build the Western and Atlantic Railroad in the 1840s. By the 1850s this investment was paying dividends. For one, the railroad was able to cover its own maintenance costs from their revenue, no longer relying on the state treasury for funding. The railroad also brought considerable returns to the state. State revenue from the Western and Atlantic Railroad in 1860 (\$450,000) exceeded that from all taxes combined (\$430,614). In addition, relying on

Once the Union Army returned control of the railroads to Georgia's government in September 1865, railroad managers assigned top priority to recruiting a work force to replace war-torn tracks, bridges, and roadbeds. As the *Atlanta Constitution* explained it:

An extraordinary spirit is now displayed in Georgia in respect to railway enterprises... Our people are not indulging in useless repining over their immense losses of property during the war but are busily planning to redeem their fortunes and open a new career of prosperity.²⁸³

With the state treasury empty, however, and the population reduced by some 40,000 Georgians who had been killed or dispersed by the war, Georgia could not initially afford to rebuild railroads and other public works through wage employment alone.²⁸⁴ At the same time, more than 460,000 newly freed (and unemployed) Georgians entered the picture; many of them were desperate and some resorted to theft and robbery to survive. With punishment now in the hands of Georgia's state authorities and its only prison in ruins, the state adopted the concept of leasing out convicts, whereby the state could capitalize on prisoners' labor and skill—much of it gained from working on the railroads, fields and factories of the South— without

profits from the Western and Atlantic Railroad, Georgia quintupled its spending on elementary schools from \$30,000 in 1859 to \$150,000 in 1860. Peter Wallenstein, *From Slave South to New South: Public Policy in Nineteenth-Century Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 59.

²⁸³ "Railway Movements in Georgia," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 9, 1868.

²⁸⁴ According to Edwin C. Woolley Georgia's first historian of Reconstruction, after the War, the Georgia's debt was \$6,544,500. Edwin C. Woolley, *The Reconstruction of Georgia* (New York: The Columbia University Press, 1901), 103.

paying them. The convict lease system was ideal for the cash-strapped Southern states.²⁸⁵

Black Codes were an important mechanism for securing convict labor. These laws enacted by many southern states applied excessive sentences to minor offenses and reserved corporal punishment for blacks.²⁸⁶ For example, grand larceny was restructured to include the pettiest of thefts (even the intent to steal was considered a crime); vagrancy now included those who were disorderly or who misspent their income; and new offenses such as the use of “insulting language and gestures” were now deemed criminal behavior.²⁸⁷ This sort of legislation allowed authorities to return black men and women deemed unruly or vagrant to a condition of forced labor.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁵ Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 3.

²⁸⁶ Martha A. Myers, “Inequality and the Punishment of Minor Offenders in the Early 20th Century,” *Law and Society Review* 27. 2 (1993): 319-321. Edward Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 151.

²⁸⁷ According to Nayan Shah, vagrancy laws revealed American manhood’s reliance on norms of employment and economic performance. Through these statutes, states continued to enforce a heteronormative nuclear family headed by a male breadwinner. Historian Martin Summers has noted that the laws also made black men more susceptible to arrest as racial hierarchies impeded the organization of black families along normative patriarchal lines. Nayan Shah, “Between ‘Oriental Depravity’ and ‘Natural Degenerates’: Spatial Borderlands and the Masking of Ordinary Americans.” *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 703-725. Martin Summers, *Manliness and its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 187.

²⁸⁸ In 1870, the editor of the Georgia Weekly Telegraph spoke to the economics of Georgia’s developing convict lease system: “The machinery of justice provided by Georgia is so slow and cumbrous and costly that rather than resort to it, the planter will pocket his losses and say nothing, and the negro kills and eats the breeding stock and steals crops from the field with little danger of punishment, even if detected... Every neighborhood ought to have its intelligent magistrate armed by law with full power to investigate and punish on the spot all such petty offences, whether committed by whites or blacks, and to deal with vagrants and petty trespassers of all kinds summarily by fine collectable in money or labor on

Freedpeople constituted a large percentage of the convicted labor force. For example, on January 1, 1876, the Georgia's prison population numbered 926 persons, 805 of whom were black men, and thirty of whom were black women.²⁸⁹ Many, in fact, did the same jobs they had performed before the war: ditching, graveling, and rail replacement. Georgia officially began leasing convicts to private employers in May 1868, when the state signed a lease under which the Georgia and Alabama Railroad acquired 100 black convicts for \$2,500. That same year Georgia sold the labor of 134 prisoners to the Selma, Rome and Dalton Railroad, and sent 109 others to work on the rail line being built between Macon and Brunswick, Georgia. As in a contract system, the state leased convicts to private employers after receiving bids. Under this arrangement the lessee provided housing, clothing, and food for the convicts, and was responsible for their incarceration.²⁹⁰ They were also empowered to punish the prisoners. By this method, Georgia relinquished all responsibility for the care of its prison population. At the same time, employers did not have to worry about inconsistent labor, striking workers, or paying wages. As Edward Ayers observed,

the public roads, bridges and buildings—subject, of course, to an appeal on such suitable conditions as should discourage appeal without adequate cause or reason. Never can we hope for any relief from petty thieving from the house, crib, meathouse, fowl yard, garden or field crop, until we make the means of redress and punishment easy, swift and inexpensive.” “The Labor Question,” *Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, February 28, 1871. James Grossman, “American Gulag.” *Reviews in American History* 25.2 (1997): 271.

²⁸⁹ A. Elizabeth Taylor, “The Convict Lease System in Georgia, 1866-1908” (unpublished Master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 1940), 34.

²⁹⁰ Martha A. Mayers, *Race, Labor and Punishment in the New South* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998) 9.

“the lease system was tailor-made for capitalists concerned only with making money fast.”²⁹¹

In Georgia alone, more than 2,000 felons were held in private lease camps between 1868 and 1908.²⁹² By 1908, there were over 2,400 convicts—95 percent of whom were African American.²⁹³ In general, employers worked and housed these men and women under horrendous conditions, with some of these workers actually dying on the job.²⁹⁴ They were forced to shovel dirt with painstaking speed in conditions of excessive heat. Insolent or inefficient prisoners were denied food and water, and/or whipped as punishment. Some were chained in their sleeping quarters to ensure that they did not escape. Du Bois found that in one Georgia camp, “sixty one men slept in one room, seventeen by nineteen feet, and seven feet high. Sanitary conditions were wretched, there was little to no medical attendance, and almost no

²⁹¹ Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 193.

²⁹² This is not meant to minimize the unique experiences and important labor of black female convicts. Although the sources are scant, several scholars have begun to explore the histories of incarcerated black women. Talitha L. Leflouria, *Chained Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Sarah Haley, “Like I Was a Man”: Chain Gangs, Gender and the Domestic Carceral Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia, *Signs*, 39.1 (Autumn 2013): 53-77. *The Atlanta Constitution* reported that the police were looking for Lula Brooks, an escaped convict who ran from the North Georgia Railroad camp. “Convict Caught,” *The Constitution*, August 18, 1876.

²⁹³ Milfred C. Fierce, *Slavery Revisited: Blacks and the Southern Convict Lease System, 1865-1933* (Brooklyn: Africana Studies Research Center, 1994), 140.

²⁹⁴ As McNair notes, slaves lives were more valuable than those of convicts because at least they had some “value” placed on their lives as indicated by the insurance taken out by slave owners. McNair, *Criminal Injustice*, 172.

care of the sick.”²⁹⁵ More than 400 prisoners died during the first twelve years of Georgia’s convict lease system.²⁹⁶

In 1908, legislators passed a measure abolishing the convict lease system.²⁹⁷ Yet, convict labor was critical to Georgia’s post-war private companies and public works projects. Between the end of the war and 1873, Georgia added 840 miles of new track.²⁹⁸ By 1880, Georgia’s convict laborers added 1,000 miles of track to the state’s rail system. As historian Alex Lichtenstein noted, “The Georgia Penitentiary soon became nothing more than mobile squads of forced laborers.”²⁹⁹

With convict labor providing so much of the work on Georgia’s railroads, large numbers of free blacks, particularly unskilled laborers, were not needed. Free blacks were often the last hired and lowest paid but first fired in slack periods, regardless of their individual job tenure or skills.³⁰⁰ Furthermore, they faced systemic job discrimination from railroad superintendents and were largely excluded from the highest skilled and best paying jobs of engineers, switchmen, and conductors.³⁰¹ In addition, they had very little redress since all the early railroad unions were “whites only.” For example, the engineers’ brotherhood officially restricted its membership

²⁹⁵ W.E.B. DuBois, “The Spawn of Slavery: The Convict-Lease system in the South,” In S.L. Gabbion (Ed.), *W.E.B. DuBois on Crime and Justice: Laying the foundations of Sociological Criminology* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 119.

²⁹⁶ Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor*, 46.

²⁹⁷ For a comprehensive examination of the long death of the convict lease system see, A. Elizabeth Taylor, “The Abolition of the Convict Lease System in Georgia,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 26.4 (September-December, 1942): 273-287.

²⁹⁸ Stover, *Railroads of the South*, 79.

²⁹⁹ Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor*, 49.

³⁰⁰ Henson, *Industrial Workers*, 197.

³⁰¹ As late as 1910, more than four-fifths of all the Negro railroad workers were common laborers. They were primarily employed in the rail yards and on the trains as mechanic’s helpers, locomotive firemen and brakemen.

to white men, as did the Locomotive Firemen union. Any applicant for membership had to be “white born, of good moral character, sober and industrious, sound in body and limb, and not less than eighteen years of age, and able to read and write the English language.”³⁰² Subsequently, many left Georgia for railroad labor in other states such as Texas and Louisiana where better wages could be earned.³⁰³ Prior to the 1880s, Georgia’s free blacks comprised a minority of railroad employees.

Most of Georgia’s black workers remained agricultural laborers hoping to achieve economic security, but faced the decreasing possibility that they could eventually support themselves and their families through farming.³⁰⁴ A good year for a cropper was one in which he ended with a little cash and the assurance of food, shelter and clothes for the coming season. At the very least, he hoped to accumulate no debt.³⁰⁵ It was not uncommon for debts to be transferred as an inheritance from a parent to the children who remained on the plantations after a cropper’s death. Historian Joseph Reidy has noted “African Americans paid a heavy price” for the

³⁰² Starobin, Industrial Slavery in the Old South, 28; Licht, Working for the Railroad, 65-69.

³⁰³ Henry Latham found that in Louisiana, railroad workers received as much as \$1.75 a day in 1875. Wages for farm hands ranged from 30 to 75 cents a day during the regular season; at harvest time from 60 cents to \$1.00 a day and board. Henry Latham, Black and White: A Journal of a Three Months’ Tour in the United States (London: Macmillan and Co., 1867), 140. Greene and Woodson, Negro Wage Earner, 52.

³⁰⁴ From 1870 to 1900, the annual value of production for farm workers declined from \$239 per laborer to \$199. The value of the average farm dropped from \$1,849 to \$1,016; this was higher than only four other states. Willard Range, A Century of Georgia Agriculture, 1850-1950 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954), 151.

³⁰⁵ Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 157. According to DuBois, in one black belt county in Georgia at the end of the 1898-1899 growing year, out of 271 farm families, 165 were either in debt or bankrupt. 53 made no profit. W.E.B. DuBois, “The Negro Landholder of Georgia,” *U.S. Department of Labor Bulletin*, No. 35, 663.

modicum of independence sharecropping afforded: abject poverty.³⁰⁶ Ironically, a cropper was less likely to end the year in debt, however, if he or his family could find extra work on the farms of others or in non-agricultural work, including railroad labor.³⁰⁷

Temporary Industrial Work and Black Families in Transition

Several historians have documented black families' attempts to merge different kinds of industrial work with agricultural labor. These scholars' efforts help us measure how deep familial ties had become among former slaves. For example, in his 1962 study of Southern lumbering, Nollie Hickman found that a number of sawmill laborers in Northern Georgia and Mississippi in the late 1890s through the early 1900s were black men sharecroppers looking for temporary work during light farming periods. These workers were so critical to the labor force that when workers left for their farms, the mills dealt with crippling labor shortages at the end of their seasons. Hickman reasoned that for blacks, the promise that rations would be provided as stipulated in the sharecropping contract was too good of a guarantee to risk leaving,

³⁰⁶ Joseph Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 239.

³⁰⁷ As discussed in Chapter 2, it was the responsibility of the household head not only to oversee the farm's operations but also to make decisions regarding the family expenditures for food, clothing and household goods. Some of those choices led family members away from the plantation in order to supplement the household income.

even when mill work paid up to \$2.00 per day. Thus, “the black man would choose cotton picking every time in preference to sawmill work.”³⁰⁸

William P. Jones has similarly argued that before black Southerners accepted permanent jobs in sawmills and on railroads in the 1910s, they approached industrial wage work primarily as a means of accumulating quick income in their pursuit of independent landownership. Jones argued that black men’s commitments to family responsibility—as expressed through their desire to sustain independent family farming—motivated blacks’ brief forays into railroad and logging camps.³⁰⁹ Peter Gottlieb confirms this in his study of Southern black migrants employed in Pittsburgh’s steel mills in the early 1900s. In surveying their employment history, Gottlieb observed that several of these former sharecroppers had worked in southern factories before making the move to the North. This experience enabled them to learn about and acclimate to the industrial opportunities provided by the wartime economy.³¹⁰ Clearly, some sharecropping families sought to combine industrial work and sharecropping by having specific family members engage in temporary non-agricultural labor.

The decision to merge farm and non-farm labor had a significant impact on the dynamics of agricultural households. In families with very young children, either the husband or his wife could move in search of temporary employment, but not both.

³⁰⁸ Nollie Hickman, *Mississippi Harvest: Lumbering in The Longleaf Pine Belt, 1840-1915* (Oxford, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1962), 241.

³⁰⁹ William P. Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2005), 42.

³¹⁰ Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks’ Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 24.

The remaining partner tended to the crops and the children.³¹¹ When jobs could be found close by, members of a family lived at home while working elsewhere. In more remote areas, taking seasonal non-farm jobs often meant migration away from the family and the plantation. By the age of fifteen or so, when he had attained the necessary physical stamina and experience, a cropper's son would be expected to handle most of the work of the cotton crop.³¹² At the same time, his parents would also rely on him to help capitalize on non-farm work opportunities. Parents would take their adolescent children along as extra helpers at the seasonal jobs, or assign them employment in nearby towns so they too could contribute a wage to the family's annual income. Consequently, during their teenage years, black children in farm families were likely to spend the year at both farm and nonfarm labor, supplying cash income to their families when their help at home was not needed and supplying their own labor when making the crop demanded work from every family member.³¹³

There is some evidence to suggest that as teenage temporary workers grew older, conflicts developed between their dual status as subordinates and providers,

³¹¹ Jones, *Labor of Love*, 63. Jones noted that during the work year black man would seek additional work on rice plantations or mines or mills while leaving their wives and children to tend to the crops. Black women marketed vegetables, served as midwives and laundresses. Others were day laborers in white homes.

Women's migration was also common in other industries. In his 1908 community study of blacks in Georgia's oyster industry, Sociologist Monroe N. Work found that the seafood processing plants of Warsaw, Georgia were overwhelmingly female. In fact, more than 60% of the immigrants to Chatham County were black women. Men stayed in the surrounding towns to work as oyster gatherers, especially during the harvesting season, while their wives and daughters travelled as far as ten miles to move to the factory town of Warsaw seeking employment. Monroe N. Work, "The Negroes of Warsaw, Georgia," *Southern Workman* 51 (January 1908), 39.

³¹² Charles Johnson, *Growing Up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South* (Washington, D.C.: Council on Education, 1941), 100.

³¹³ Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way*, 24.

sometimes disrupting family relationships. As children, they were subject to their parents' direction and discipline. They shared in the same labor, risk and deprivation that the rest of the household experienced. At the same time, as providers for their parents and siblings, these young people demonstrated independence, responsibility, and maturity in order to benefit their families. They disciplined themselves to learn the skills and perform the actual labor for which they were compensated. Moreover, in their nonfarm jobs and labor camps, these young people began to experience a more financially rewarding kind of work and a new work culture. For examples, whereas farm income came seasonally and in the form of credit or shares of produce, railway work paid weekly or monthly and most often in cash. Railroad and levee camps were also predominately male spaces, often characterized by dangerous work and violence between coworkers.³¹⁴ There, the children of sharecroppers also engaged in leisure activities and socialized with men and women from varied backgrounds.³¹⁵ Thus, those who returned to work in the

³¹⁴ Michael McCoyer, "'Rough Mens' in the 'Toughest Places I Ever Seen': The Construction and Ramifications of Black Masculine Identity in the Mississippi Delta's Levee Camps, 1900-1935," *International Labor & Working Class History* 69 (2006).

³¹⁵ Between the 19th and 20th centuries, work camps in the South typically served as outposts for private companies or government agencies, who provided living quarters for the workers engaged in extracting raw materials or constructing the infrastructure needed for industrial and urban development. The economy of work camps involved the flow of not only capital and commodities, but also of the workers themselves. As Michael McCoyer argued, these labor camps were not just places of work devoid of cultural or social significance. They were spaces of leisure and community, of multi-generational, multi-racial, and sometimes, mixed gender interaction. They were also important sites of identity construction. In 'Rough Mens' in the 'Toughest Places I Ever Seen,' McCoyer observed that the levee camps in Mississippi were places where black men sought to reclaim a "manly" identity in the after hours culture of levee camps. He argued that because Jim Crow and sharecropping eroded a sense of masculine autonomy, in the isolation of these camps, black workers would fight or take part in other risky activities to assert their masculinity. Michael

fields again did so with new life experiences, an awareness of alternative career opportunities, and a sense of themselves as wage earners who could influence their familial relationships and make plans for a more permanent move away from their families and sharecropping.

In his 1902 study of black sharecropping families on two plantations in Louisiana, J. Bradford Laws, a researcher for the Department of Labor, observed patterns of adolescent male off-farm employment during slack periods of crop cultivation.³¹⁶ According to Laws, these young men so valued the independence and economic benefits of the part-time factory work, that many of them resented having to turn their wages over to their parents. Laws explained, “as a rule Negro parents who make their children work retain most, if not all, their wages. The result of this is that the boys run away from home and become independent very early in life.”³¹⁷ Laws’ findings suggest that black adolescences took great pride in the autonomy and profits from industrial wage work—if only because it was truly their ‘own’ work—and saw it as an important turning point in their relationships with their parents.

Parents similarly recognized their children’s entry into the temporary workforce as a meaningful transition from dependent childhood to adulthood. Laws discovered that some of them allowed their children to keep part of their wages,

McCoy, “‘Rough Mens’ in the ‘Toughest Places I Ever Seen’: The Construction and Ramifications of Black Masculine Identity in the Mississippi Delta’s Levee Camps, 1900-1935,” *International Labor & Working Class History* 69 (2006). See also, William P. Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses*, Chapter 3.

³¹⁶ J. Bradford Laws, “The Negroes of Cinclare Central Factory and Calumet Plantation, Louisiana,” U.S. Department of Labor, *Bulletin of the Department of Labor*, 38 (1902): 116.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

albeit reluctantly, and “probably from fear that otherwise they will leave.” In addition, the young people who resided at home during this adolescent-wage worker stage were given more independence by their parents. For example, they were expected to purchase their own provisions, dress themselves and chop their own wood. These teenagers, perhaps because of the feelings of maturity and responsibility that accompanied their economic contributions and work experiences, also had higher rates of marriage than sharecropping children who did not work outside the family system.³¹⁸

Seasonal industrial work not only influenced young black men’s understandings of themselves as adults— and, subsequently, their family relationships, which included fatherhood— it also introduced them to new work environments where the job tasks and pace were different from their parents’ and sometimes at higher wages. Given that farm families generally lived and worked in isolation, these jobs were also critical networking spaces, connecting the children of sharecroppers to other workers who might inform them about work in other occupations and regions. A future of poorly-compensated farm labor often paled in comparison to opportunities that railroading and logging offered. Moreover, the temporary work these young men did also allowed them to test the work available in their own agricultural communities before they were ready to travel longer distances

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

to northern cities. In this regard, temporary supplementary labor created the potential for a deeper, more lasting break with cotton farming.³¹⁹

Based on his research in Georgia's black belt counties in the early 1900s, D.D. Scarborough's 1924 study observed that young black males who grew up on Georgia's farms were permanently withdrawing from agricultural work. Unlike their fathers, who engaged in part-time non-farm work, more than half of the sons Scarborough interviewed left the plantation to engage full-time in public works projects. The author attributed this migration to the "unsatisfactory conditions" of Georgia farming for all workers in the agricultural ladder. In fact, the only significant difference he noted between the condition of farm owners and sharecroppers was that owners had a permanent residence. Consequently, both the children of croppers and farm owners were leaving the family business to find full time work in the industrial economy.³²⁰

Young men contemplating their economic prospects in the rural South between the 1880s and 1920s were certainly aware of their limited options. From 1865 to 1900, the majority of Georgia farmers never got out of debt. Falling cotton prices and costly farm supplies and equipment prevented many black farmers from

³¹⁹ For more on the role of networking in stimulating black migration away from farm labor see Joe William Trotter's Coal, Class and Color (1990). Joe William Trotter Jr., Coal, Class and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

³²⁰ D.D. Scarborough, An Economic Study of Negro Farmers as Owners, Tenants and Croppers Bulletin of the University of Georgia, 24 (September, 1924): 34.

purchasing Georgia land, whose value gradually declined from 1870 to 1890.³²¹ By the 1880s, thousands of tenant farmers had failed to meet their quota in crops or had defaulted in some other way and slipped down the tenancy ladder, increasing the number of indebted sharecroppers.³²² Having witnessed the struggles of their fathers and gained meaningful experience doing temporary work off the farm, black men were shifting their definitions of manhood from one based on landownership to one measured by the ability to earn a cash wage that enabled the support of a family.³²³ From the turn of the century through the end of World War I, the railroad industry throughout the South served that purpose for free black labor, enabling hybrid farmhand-industrial workers to become fulltime industrial employees.³²⁴

Conclusion

The labor shortages that the Georgia's planters noted in the late 1800s were just the beginning of a huge exodus from agricultural labor that would last through the 1930s. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimated that by 1919, the supply of

³²¹ Alex Matthews Arnett, "The Populist Movement in Georgia: A View of the 'Agrarian Crusade' in the Light of Solid-South Politics," in *Studies in History, Economics and Public Law* no.104 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1922), 316; Ronald M. Harper, "Development of Agriculture in Lower Georgia from 1890 to 1920," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, VI (December, 1922): 346.

³²² Jonathon M. Weiner, "Class Structure and Economic Development in the American South, 1865-1955," *American Historical Review*, LXXXIV (October 1979): 970-92.

³²³ William Jones has similarly argued that temporary work along with the struggles of the agricultural economy led to this shift in definition between generations of black men, or a "remaking of black manhood" for black men who came of age at the turn of the century. William P. Jones, *Tribe of Black Ulysses*, 50.

³²⁴ The outbreak of World War I diminished the supply of cheap immigrant labor and stimulated a search for local and national sources of industrial workers in almost all types of manufacturing industries in the North and South. The creation of federal agencies overseeing railway labor relations during this period also increased the number and tenure of black railway workers. Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 43.

farm laborers of all ranks in Georgia was less than three-fourths the demand. From 1919 to 1929, more than one fifth the total area of crops in the state remained out of cultivation. The depression of the 1930s generated constant complaints about the lack of a sufficient supply of day laborers.³²⁵ The low wages and long working days of farm work made industry's promise of higher income and shorter hours appealing to southern blacks. Industrial development in the North as well as the South created opportunities for them to escape the poverty of sharecropping with the promise of a steady income. This transition, however, was already familiar to many because of the seasonal shifting from farm to factory or labor camps and back. Black men's definitions of manhood were influenced accordingly.

One consequence of this merging of agricultural and non-agricultural labor could be seen in family life. Temporary separation of nuclear family members was frequent depending on a family's proximity to industrial work. Adolescent sons and daughters were exposed to alternative job possibilities and were able to develop new aspirations for the future. The prospect of making a living working on the railroad, or moving to a city like Atlanta (or, increasingly, migrating even further North) became less daunting, given the migratory experiences for temporary work that were already occurring. On the other hand, full time railroad work required considerable economic and social adjustment for black laborers. Chapter 4 discusses the unique challenges and consequences black railroaders faced pursuing black masculine authority and autonomy through railroading in Jim Crow Georgia.

³²⁵ Report of the Commissioner of Commerce and Labor (1916); US Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook* (1926), 1232.

Chapter 4

Derailing White Manhood: Georgia's Black Locomotive Firemen, 1880-1914

Historians have written extensively about white, middle-class American men's gender anxieties in the 19th century.³²⁶ Most scholars agree that because of changes in the U.S. economy, among other factors, fewer and fewer men were able to own their own land, own their own businesses, or control their own labor.³²⁷ Gail Bederman notes that a "recurring round of severe economic depressions" between 1873 and 1896 "drove home the reality that even a successful . . . small businessman might lose everything, unexpectedly, through no fault of his own."³²⁸ The demise of self-employment amidst the growth of great corporate bureaucracies also meant that the hallmarks of Victorian manly accomplishment—independence and

³²⁶ The term "crisis of masculinity" has been denounced by several scholars because it assumes that there is such a thing as "normal masculinity," and also because middle-class men clearly retained power, at least relative to women and working-class men, amidst the changing social, economic, and ideological conditions at the turn of the 20th century. Kristin L. Hoganson, Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Michael Kimmel, Manhood in America: A Cultural History (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

³²⁷ The factors that contributed to the perceived "crisis of masculinity" include increasing urbanization, the emergence of the so-called "new woman," and the closing of the western frontier.

³²⁸ Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 11-12.

freedom—were increasingly out of reach. As discussed in Chapter 3, this inability to achieve self-sufficiency was one of the factors that led many black agricultural workers to move into industrial wage labor. But men also responded to the country’s rapid industrialization and urbanization by seeking new ways to define themselves and to demonstrate their manliness. This quest gave rise to a concept of manhood that combined traditional notions of hard work, intelligence and discipline with a new emphasis on physical development, endurance and courage.³²⁹

Using the body as an outward sign of virility, American males embraced a wide variety of physical activities including competitive sports, outdoor activities, and industrial work. Accordingly, the formerly disreputable characteristics of the working class laborer’s physique became more attractive. To working class men, manliness was epitomized by toughness, ferocity and prowess.³³⁰ By the late 19th century, middle-class American men started to revere these attributes as well. “Men took a second look at their ‘animal nature,’” E. Anthony Rotundo writes, “and found it just as useful—and just as necessary to their manhood—as reason.”³³¹ There is some evidence to suggest that this reshaping of American manhood also allowed working class and black men to transcend the limits of class, ethnicity and race, and use their bodies as proof of manhood and self-worth.³³² For Georgia’s black locomotive

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18; Kimmel, *Manhood in America*; Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

³³⁰ Gorn, *The Manly Art*.

³³¹ E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 232.

³³² Elliot Gorn argues that this criterion for masculinity opened up a way for working class men who struggled as breadwinners to prove their manhood. Gorn concludes, “The

firemen, however, claiming manhood through this type of labor proved very difficult and dangerous.

During the 1890s, the locomotive fireman profession, like many railroad posts, underwent significant changes. New legislation and technological advancements made firing an engine —previously considered “nigger work”— much safer, cleaner, and more appealing to white railroaders looking for an entry-level position from which to climb the ranks. As semi-skilled workers, firemen earned a competitive salary and qualified for performance based benefits through a system of seniority, which rewarded a fireman’s length and quality of service with job security and increases in pay.³³³ The locomotive fireman task was also coveted because it provided railroaders the unique opportunity to demonstrate the mental and physical demands of the new dual manly ideal. Firemen needed great endurance and strength to collect and spread the engine’s coal evenly in the firebox and ‘fire’ the locomotive, in addition to other physically demanding tasks. They also needed intelligence to function as the co-pilots of their engineers, observing train signs, and monitoring a train’s fuel consumption. Failure in any of these duties could cause the entire engine to explode or crash. As the definition of American manhood shifted, the fireman post transitioned from ‘nigger work’ to ‘man’s work’.

manly art defined masculinity not by how responsible an individual was but by his sensitivity to insult, his coolness in the face of danger and his ability to give and take punishment.”
Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 141.

³³³ Firemen who worked the longest were given the first pick of which trips they wanted to work. The less experienced firemen were paid less and worked the shorter trips. When there was a reduction in the number of firemen because of a slackening of business, firemen with greater seniority bumped firemen with lesser seniority and so maintained a job. Reed Richardson, *The Locomotive Engineer, 1863-1963: A Century of Railway Labor Relations and Work Rules* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963).

The presence of black firemen complicated white men's claims to an exclusive manhood, and frustrated white railroaders who sought to prove their manliness through the fireman's role. Black men had been firing Georgia's locomotives since the 1800s, well before it became a desired proving ground for manhood. But even after the position underwent reform, the Georgia Railroad replaced white firemen with black firemen who worked for a lower wage. From the 1890s to roughly 1930, blacks outnumbered whites as locomotive firemen on Georgia's railroads, holding 60 percent or more of these positions.³³⁴ Between 1902 and the spring of 1909, the number of white firemen dropped from almost 100 to 68, and their pay decreased.³³⁵ Moreover, black firemen—barred from promotion to engineer because of their race—were able to build up seniority and choose the best assignments, thus gaining an advantage over young white firemen looking for enough experience to climb the ranks.³³⁶ Black men's service as firemen made them the envy and enemy of white railroaders, who sought better pay, better work hours, and better opportunity to embody both aspects of the evolving male gender ideal.

³³⁴ According to the U.S. Census of 1910, there was an increase of 56,058 workers or a 117.9 percent increase in the number of black railroad workers from 1890. Arnesen, "Like Banquo's Ghost," 1609.

³³⁵ "Georgia Railroad Firemen Say They Will Go on Strike Monday Night May 17th," *Augusta Chronicle*, May 16, 1909.

³³⁶ For a white man, the fireman position was an apprenticeship that could prepare him for a possible promotion to the most coveted, highly skilled, and best-paying position of engineer. As long as he had a willing teacher—usually his supervising engineer—a fireman could learn and practice the engineer's functions while fulfilling his standard duties. If he was well-taught, well learned, and the opportunity for work presented itself, a white fireman could be promoted within two or three years. As early as 1873, the job ladder on the locomotive led from firemen to engineer in "90 percent" of the cases. Richardson, *The Locomotive Engineer*, 154.

This chapter will explore the ways in which Georgia's white firemen and citizens wrestled for control over the locomotive fireman role, and examine how this struggle for semi-skilled railroad work served to protect white manhood, while simultaneously denying black men's claims to manhood. This contest which took place in the Georgia's periodicals, white union journals, back alleys, and boardrooms reveals how the shifting definitions of manhood and labor work together with race and racism to shape the meaning of work. Black firemen's work performances, though manly according to the new definition of American manhood, were significantly curtailed by discrimination at work and at the bargaining table. Denied union membership and equality in the workplace, some black men took a servile posture towards white colleagues and authorities to keep their jobs. Those who rejected the silent servant model were terminated or worse.

Black firemen also had to weigh their dangerous work very differently than white union firemen did. For example, they recognized that their uncompensated bodily injuries were threats to their ability to work, provide for their families, and prove their manliness. At times, these concerns led non-union black firemen to work differently— sometimes more cautiously and tentatively— than their white counterparts. White firemen and their sympathizers, in turn, spotlighted these differences to argue that black firemen were unmanly, and therefore unfit for the fireman's post. As we will see, while African American firemen attempted to combine physical prowess with intelligence and respectable character, whites worked equally as hard to discredit and denigrate black men's rights to work and self-worth.

Refining the Fireman: From ‘Negro Labor’ to a ‘Good Brotherhood Men’s Position’

From its beginnings in the early 1800s until World War I, the Southern railroad industry set very clear limits on the positions that black men could hold.³³⁷ Individual railroad companies and white railroad unions strategically kept black workers relegated to service work onboard the trains and manual labor in rail yards. On the locomotives, blacks were primarily porters, dining car attendants and baggage handlers. Whites deemed these tasks unmanly because service workers had to take a submissive and servile posture before white passengers. Black men, they believed, were at their best in these roles; it reminded them of the antebellum South in which black servants waited on white elites hand and foot.³³⁸ Off the train, African Americans were tracklayers.³³⁹ This type of labor was extremely dangerous, dirty, and paid so little that white workers felt it was beneath them. It was out of necessity that railroad companies would then turn to blacks, Mexicans and new immigrants

³³⁷ Railroads in the North and West were also stratified by race through economic discrimination. See W. Thomas White, “Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Railroad Work Force: The Case of the Far Northwest, 1883-1918,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 16 (July 1985); Howard W. Risher *The Negro and the Railroad Industry* (Philadelphia: Industrial Relations Research Unit, Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, 1971).

³³⁸ By the mid 1910s, the Pullman Company was the single largest employer of black labor in the U.S. with 6,000 African American employees in 1914. The situation of Pullman Porters was unique among the service roles because these jobs were relatively secure and, with tips, could provide a living wage. Some porters could even occupy middle class status in the black community, especially in Chicago and Boston. Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

³³⁹ For a discussion of the racial structure of Southern railroad labor see, William A. Sundstrom, “Half a Career: Discrimination and Railroad Internal Labor Markets,” *Industrial Relations* 29.3 (Fall 1990): 423-440.

from Europe.³⁴⁰ Aside from service and manual labor, blacks were barred from most other railroad jobs, especially the skilled trades. They could not be conductors or work in maintenance shops until World War I. The two most coveted positions in the running trades—locomotive engineers and train conductors—remained off limits to blacks throughout the United States until the 1960s.

One of the few skilled positions African American men could hold since the antebellum period was that of a locomotive fireman.³⁴¹ Firemen rode in the engine alongside the engineer and were responsible for the engine's power and maintenance. This involved frequent stooping and swinging back in order to collect and spread the engine's coal evenly in the firebox and 'fire' the locomotive. These workers risked burns, eye problems and even blindness every time they shoveled coal or crawled under the engine to empty the ash pan of the firebox. Should the engineer forget the whereabouts of his fireman and move the engine as the fireman was cleaning the firebox, the fireman stood little chance of escaping death.³⁴² Firemen also suffered sprains and broken bones because most of their work was

³⁴⁰ The work of Matthew Frye Jacobson and Karen Brodtkin are helpful in understanding how shifting boundaries of American racism enveloped and excluded European immigrants. Both of their studies explore when and how specific immigrant groups "became" white in America. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folk: And What that Says about Race in America* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

³⁴¹ David E. Bernstein, "Racism, Railroad Unions and Labor Regulations," *The Independent Review* 5.2 (Fall 2000): 238.

³⁴² "Negro Fireman Hurt While Cleaning Fire Box," *Macon Daily Telegraph*, January 18, 1907, 6.

done on moving trains.³⁴³ When there were no porters available, black firemen helped load and unload baggage on passenger trains and performed other tasks as ordered by the conductor. Black firemen also did “all [white engineer’s] dirty work such as oiling, packing wiping and many other things.”³⁴⁴ Because their assignment involved a combination of service and hot, dirty, strenuous labor since the early railroading days, the fireman post had been widely known in the South as a “negro job”.³⁴⁵ By the 1890s, however, the profession would become much safer and more appealing to white men in the South.

A rising tide of railroad accidents in the late 1880s prompted railroad unions, middle class reformers, and government officials to lobby for laws requiring railroad companies to install safety appliances and improve working conditions for all skilled trades, including firemen.³⁴⁶ In 1889, the newly formed Interstate Commerce Commission conducted the first national study of railroad safety.³⁴⁷ Their research revealed that firemen and other skilled workers, despite making up only twenty percent of the railroad labor force, accounted for sixty percent of the work-related deaths and fifty-six percent of injuries that year. The Commission found that many

³⁴³ Henry J. Harris, “The Occupational Hazard of Locomotive Firemen,” *American Statistical Association*, XIV (September 1914).

³⁴⁴ Benn, “The Sunny South,” *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* 11 (September 1887), 546-547.

³⁴⁵ Hugh B. Hammet, “Labor and Race: The Georgia Railroad Strike of 1909,” *Labor History*, XVI (Fall, 1975): 474.

³⁴⁶ Mark Aldrich, *Safety First: Technology, Labor, and Business in the Building of American Work Safety, 1870-1939* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

³⁴⁷ In 1887, the U.S. government established the Interstate Commerce Commission, the first permanent federal agency to have the exclusive duty of regulating interstate transportation. Interstate Commerce Act, ch. 498, 24 Stat. 379 (1887).

trains were going too fast, operating with outdated equipment, and containing few or no safe guards, ultimately endangering the limbs and lives of the train crews.³⁴⁸

Risk and danger had long been accepted parts of the railroading profession. A railroader's ability to successfully confront danger in a variety of perilous situations allowed him to exhibit his skills, as well as demonstrate the quality of his manhood to himself and others.³⁴⁹ Some railroaders even claimed that competent men did not need a safer workplace because their skills would protect them. In his widely read article, "The Every-Day Life of Railroad Men," reprinted in the *Railroad Brakemen's Journal*, B.B. Adams Jr. reported that many locomotive brakemen chose to use their hands to connect train cars instead of the company recommended brake clubs, partly because they feared being "called out by the exhibition of a lack of dexterity."³⁵⁰ Brakemen worried that using clubs signaled a lack of manliness; only railroaders who doubted their abilities to safely jump between cars would consider using a club.³⁵¹ Ignoring company work rules in favor of their own was also an attempt to maintain

³⁴⁸ Of 704,743 railroaders in the U.S. 1,972 trainmen were killed and 20,028 were injured from work accidents. U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission, *Second Annual Report on the Statistics of Railways in the United States to the Interstate Commerce Commission for the Year ending June 30, 1889* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1890).

³⁴⁹ For an example of railroad bravery being celebrated see "A Brave Firemen," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* 23 (December 1896), 458.

³⁵⁰ B.B. Adams Jr., "The Everyday Life of Railroad Men," *Railroad Brakemen's Journal* 5 (December 1888), 533.

³⁵¹ To apply the brakes, the brakeman turned a large brake control wheel located atop each freight car of the train. Brakemen ran along the car tops, leaping from car to car, and tightening these brakes. Using the brake club gave them leverage in turning the wheel.

informal control over their day-to-day conduct in the highly regulated railroad industry.³⁵² Workers soon found this risk-taking approach too costly to maintain.

By the 1890s, the same work related injuries that once “proved” a railroader was experienced and brave would cost him his job and bar him from promotion. Employers, increasingly concerned about efficiency and cost, feared that disabled workers would work too slowly and be too much of a financial burden with their medical costs. As a result, railroad companies treated a trainman’s crushed or missing fingers as a sign of carelessness as opposed to a badge of courage. Most firms refused to hire even slightly disabled men.³⁵³ In response, rather than embracing the risks of railroading, skilled trade workers began condemning the dangerous working conditions that caused injury, and campaigned for national laws requiring railroad companies to adopt safety technology. Their efforts brought about several notable reforms: air brakes and automatic couplers had to be installed on railroad equipment; limits were placed on the hours of service for trainmen; the cost of work injuries to companies increased; all engines were required to be equipped with self-dumping

³⁵² Railroads used extensive rulebooks to inform their employees of their duties and company protocols. The topics ranged from alcohol consumption and appropriate language to proper handling of equipment and calling out of work. No matter how detailed these regulations were, workers constantly violated and ignored them in order to retain discretion over their labor. For a discussion of railroad work rules see, Walter Licht, Working for the Railroad: The Organization of Work in the Nineteenth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 80-89.

³⁵³ Historian James Ducker suggests that railroad companies feared disabled workers were more susceptible to injury, would work too slowly and would only add to their financial burdens through medical care. John H. Ducker, Men of the Steel Rails: Works on the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, 1869-1900. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 122.

ash pans; and all railroads were required to make monthly reports of train collisions and accidents.³⁵⁴

As new legislation and technological advancements “cleaned up” the fireman’s role and made train work safer, white men were more willing to embrace the work. A spot on a fireman’s roster was certainly worth fighting for. Railroad employment was erratic by nature and unskilled laborers suffered the worst of it.³⁵⁵ During periods of financial difficulties, railway executives ordered immediate staff and wage reductions; common laborers were the first fired. Unskilled workers were also the hardest hit by the seasonal changes in railroad work. In the spring, maintenance workers were in high demand when intensive efforts were needed to repair winter-torn roadbeds. In the summer months they were expendable. Even when they were employed, track workers labored daily under the threat of arbitrary

³⁵⁴ Statistics from the Interstate Commerce Commission showed that between 1901 and 1908, 108 firemen were injured and 24 killed because their engines collided with the train car behind it which did not have air brakes. Firemen spent much of their work time standing over the connection between the engine and train car. There was a high probability that they might fall to the track, directly into the path of the engineless train when the engines’ brakes were suddenly applied. Air brakes were not installed on all trains until mandated by the Safety Appliances Act of 1893. “Killed and Injured by Separation of Engine and Tender,” *Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine*, XLVI (February 1909), 243. Jeffry M. Netter and Philip L. Hersch, “The Impact of Early Safety Legislation: The Case of The Safety Appliance Act of 1893,” *International Review of Law and Economics* 10 (1990): 61-75. Mark Aldrich, *Safety First: Technology, Labor, and Business in the Building of American Work Safety, 1870-1939* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

³⁵⁵ In 1889, the U.S. Bureau of Labor conducted a study on the stability of railroad employment by investigating the payroll of sixty of the largest companies in the country, employing 241,910 people. The researchers found that more than half of all employees working on the road had been employed on that railroad less than six months. More than a quarter of the group, in fact, were actually on various company books for less than twenty-five days. *Fifth Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor, 1889: Railroad Labor* (Washington, D.C., 1890), 82.

discharges by their foremen.³⁵⁶ Holding a skilled post such as locomotive firemen could allay some of the concerns about job insecurity. Skilled workers were in higher demand and tended to be employed a greater number of days per year than men in the lower rungs.³⁵⁷ They were also better paid. In the South, brakemen and firemen made \$1.29 a day while common laborers made about eighty-eight cents.³⁵⁸ The seniority system also allowed experienced, skilled workers to choose the trips that fit their economic and familial needs. Longer runs offered more opportunities to travel, make money, gain experience and build seniority.

White men's desires to corner the market for these newly renovated jobs brought them into direct conflict with black workers.³⁵⁹ They believed that having black men on the fireman's roster sullied their remodeled profession and made it a less respectable work. Blackness, after all, was associated with menial labor and degradation.³⁶⁰ How much could their work have really changed from the days of "nigger work" if black men were still employed as firemen?³⁶¹ In addition, the low wages black men were paid compared to whites made them more attractive hires in

³⁵⁶ Walter Licht, *Working for the Railroad*, 164.

³⁵⁷ On average common laborers were employed less than 100 days a year because they were often fired or went searching for work elsewhere. Brakemen and fireman were employed a little over 150 days a year. Conductors and engineers worked over 200 days a year. This is a full year's work because train crew on the best roads worked only four days a week. Considerable rest was needed.

³⁵⁸ Conductors were paid \$2.58 and engineers made \$2.91.

³⁵⁹ Abram L. Harris and Sterling D. Spero, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 284. Mark Aldrich has found that "fatality rates that had averaged nearly one per million man-hours in the 1890s had declined nearly 80 percent by the eve of World War II." Mark Aldrich, "A Mighty Rough Road: The Deterioration of Work Safety on American Railroads, 1955-75 *Labor History* 46. 3 (August 2005), 308.

³⁶⁰ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 55.

³⁶¹ Taillon, *Good, Reliable, White Men*, 33.

the eyes of the Georgia Railroad. One disgruntled southern firemen claimed it was a “shame for such to go on regularly—for engineers and conductors to take negro firemen and brakemen out on the road and teach them how to fill good white men’s positions in the way that some of them do.”³⁶² A member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen (BLF) described it as “a hard pill to swallow, to see black faces on engines where six or eight weeks ago all were white... this road has always been a white man’s road but is growing darker day by day.”³⁶³ Black men’s wages also depressed white firemen’s earnings, leading one railroad union member to suggest there were several “enemies of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen and all other organized labor, chief among which (in my humble opinion) is the negro.”³⁶⁴ Black firemen, opponents argued, were literally getting in the way of white men seeking opportunity and security on the rails and depreciating the value of the trade.

Firemen and American Manhood

White firemen’s attempts to refashion their work into a technologically advanced and racially exclusive trade coincided with white men’s reshaping of American manhood. As previously discussed, the fluctuations of the market economy created daunting challenges for middle class men trying to live up to the Victorian

³⁶² *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 24 (1898).

³⁶³ *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 30-31 (1901), 153.

³⁶⁴ *The Railroad Trainman Journal* 17 (1900), 677. According to Eric Arnesen, black railroaders made 10 to 20 percent less than whites. Eric Arnesen, “Like Banquo’s Ghost,” (1994).

ideals of the independent provider.³⁶⁵ Middle class white men thus opted for another vehicle through which to prove their manhood: their bodies. This emphasis on the body was informed in part by Social Darwinist notions of “survival of the fittest,” and these notions of “fitness” “became rooted in a muscular white male ideal.”³⁶⁶ Men’s strong bodies, which could make them dominant in competitive sports and successful in physically rigorous labor, were “a monument to strength [and] an emblem of discipline.”³⁶⁷ The newfound admiration of bodily command did not replace the old Victorian ideals, however. Instead, Eliot Gorn contends, “the martial values of hardiness, courage and endurance took their place beside the older Victorian ideals of piety and earnest hard work.”³⁶⁸

The reshaping of American manhood at the turn of the 20th century, which linked bodily strength and intelligence to white supremacy, opened up opportunities

³⁶⁵ Changes in the U.S. economy led to the decline of the reserved business oriented Victorian manly ideal. In the preceding decades, historian Gail Bederman explains, “middle class parents taught their sons to build strong manly character as they would build a muscle, through repetitive exercises of control over impulse... The mingled honor, high mindedness and strength stemming from this powerful self mastery were encapsulated,” she concludes, “in the term manliness.” Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 12.

³⁶⁶ T. Runstedtler, “White Anglo-Saxon Hopes and Black American Atlantic Dreams: Jack Johnson and the British Boxing Colour Bar,” *Journal of World History*, 21.4 (December 2010): 661. According to Stephen Riess, “The rising middle class interest sport reflected a desire by workers in sedentary jobs to demonstrate physical prowess and manliness and to gain recognition which bureaucratic occupations did not always supply.” Stephen Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 61.

³⁶⁷ John F. Kasson, *The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 8. Christian Messenger writes, “The decades between 1850 and 1890 produced perhaps the most far reaching changes in American sport, moving from the days of little organization, scant codifying of rules, and a limited communication and transportation network to the time when boxing, baseball and college football became American popular obsessions as spectatorial pastimes.” Christian Messenger, *Sport and the Spirit of Play in American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 83.

³⁶⁸ Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 188.

for white working-class men to make additional claims to manhood and whiteness. For working-class men, the ideal of independence and competition that were integral to traditional middle-class notions of the self-made man were rarely attainable. They had long expressed their manhood and virility through control over their bodies, however. Participation in prize fights, for example, was one means through which working-class men showed toughness, strength and mastery over other men. Under the new manly ideal, moral, intellectual and physical strength became inextricably linked. Middle-class men embraced working-class physicality as a necessary corrective to their increasingly sedentary lives. They also believed men's participation in sports and physical labor could "restore" their manhood, while "Americanizing, whitening [and] civilizing" working class and immigrant men.³⁶⁹

Historians have noted that the mutually constitutive relationship between the new manly ideal and whiteness made sports an important site for public debates over questions of racial difference.³⁷⁰ White men postulated that only they could successfully strike the proper balance between intelligence and physical development, between emotion and reason. Blacks, they contended, "lacking the biological capacity to develop racially advanced traits like manliness of

³⁶⁹ P.T. Alter. "Serbs, Sports and Whiteness." In E. J. Gorn *Sports in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 124. Staged sporting events like boxing were ideal sites for the performance of the new dual manly ideal in that they simultaneously promised the steady rule of order while reenacting an instinctive, primal struggle for survival.

³⁷⁰ Many found the boxing ring to be an ideal proving ground for the Social Darwinism theory. What better example of "survival of the fittest" than the spectacle of two men squaring off in an enclosed space until only one remains standing? Runstedtler, "White Anglo-Saxon Hopes and Black Americans' Atlantic Dreams," 661.

character... might struggle as hard as they could to be manly without success.”³⁷¹

When black men demonstrated dominance in athletic competitions or business, however, white people panicked. Blacks’ successes were treated as unwelcomed threats to the U.S. racial order.³⁷²

Georgia’s white locomotive fireman faced similar challenges as they championed their work as a proving ground for white men’s physical strength and intellectual capacity. The tenure and quality service of black firemen frustrated their claims to an elevated professional status and a racially exclusive manhood. J.L. Welch, a white fireman from Georgia, explained to the *Augusta Chronicle* that black firemen were not just working for the railroad, they were “taking bread out of a white man’s mouth.”³⁷³ For Georgia’s white citizens, black men’s ascent from the ranks of unskilled labor was an attack on “the white man’s supremacy in the white man’s country.”³⁷⁴ This was a threat they sought to contain and eliminate.

Unions, Insurance and Railroad Work

Both on and off the tracks, Georgia’s white railroaders and citizens made concerted efforts to deny black men the psychic and economic benefits of firing

³⁷¹ In contrast, Bederman asserts, “civilized manly power... stemmed from two combined factors: manhood and whiteness. To wield manly power [therefore] on [needed to] possess both a male body and the racial ability to restrain the masculine passions of the body.” Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 29.

³⁷² Gail Bederman explains that Jack Johnson’s 1908 victory over Jim Jefferies, “The Great White Hope,” was seen as a threat to the U.S. racial order, leading to race riots across the country. White men’s boxing, she argues, was about more than skill; it was about enduring white male strength over racial inferiors. Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 15.

³⁷³ “Georgia Railroad Firemen Say They Will Go on Strike Monday Night May 17th,” *Augusta Chronicle*, May 16, 1909.

³⁷⁴ “The Color Question,” *The Daily Picayune*, June 9, 1909.

locomotives. Railroad unions were an important resource in dealing with the “problem” of negro firemen. These organizations, on the one hand, tried to completely eliminate black firemen through strikes and bargaining with railroad corporations. Black firemen’s service proved too good and cost-effective for the Georgia Railroad to part with. The insurance and injury benefits and legal support white brotherhoods provided their members made an important difference in black and white firemen’s job requirements, approaches to work, treatment on the job, and ultimately, these differences were reflected in the racialized and gendered representations produced by the local press.

Firemen were renowned for having one of the most hazardous positions in the railroad industry. The unpredictability of their work conditions and situations, the negligence of co-workers and employers, and the nature of their tasks made firing a locomotive a dangerous vocation. Firemen, however, took pride in accepting the risks of railroading. High incidents of injury contributed to railroaders’ belief that bravery was an essential trait for prospective firemen. Moreover, they maintained that a fireman’s intelligence and discretion would help him survive these dangers. A willingness to skillfully disregard danger to sacrifice themselves for the safety of passengers and to work long hours without reprieve, allowed firemen to see themselves as embodying a unique class of manhood when compared to other wage earners. Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, a protestant minister and supporter of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLE) went so far as to compare the courage of firemen to that of soldiers. Firemen, he explained, “are men who have periled their

lives, have stood and given themselves for safety of the charge behind them with a heroism never surpassed on any battle field or in any other scenes of human life.”³⁷⁵

Until the 1880s, railroad firms avoided responsibility for hazardous workplaces and accident liability by endorsing workers’ notion that the best and manliest railroaders avoided injury through their own ability. Injury, they argued, was an indication of a laborer’s inability to master their duties, not the fault of the employer.³⁷⁶ As the casualty rates mounted, railroaders grew frustrated with what they considered to be a misapplication of their manhood. In the words of one southern fireman:

No sadder sight is known or can be imagined than where a laboring man with a large family dependent upon his daily labor is suddenly called into eternity or crippled for life and his family with a good claim against the railroad company that ought to yield sufficient to support them for years, is precluded from receiving any benefit whatsoever.³⁷⁷

Some businesses did offer to pay a worker’s medical expenses but this coverage was often inconsistent and depended on their assessment of a worker’s loyalty and worthiness to receive aid.³⁷⁸

Receiving support also came at a price. Beneficiaries usually had to waive their right to sue the railroad for damages. Companies also took advantage of illiterate workers who did not understand the waiver’s contents. C.R. Seaman, an engineman

³⁷⁵ *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* 11 (1887), 263.

³⁷⁶ In his study of nineteenth century workplace accidents, John Fabian Witt found that “courts deflected the issue of employers’ power over their employees by appealing to the work ethic and the notion of character inhered in the sound exercise of discretion in the workplace.” John Fabian Witt, “The Transformation of Work and the Law of Workplace Accidents, 1842-1910,” *The Yale Law Journal* 107.5 (March 1998): 1477.

³⁷⁷ *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* 30 (1901), 633.

³⁷⁸ Walter Licht, *Working for the Railroad*, 206.

from Ohio, cautioned union firemen that railroads were, “fertile in their expeditions to relieve themselves of liability...by having their men sign contracts, waiving any claim for damages.”³⁷⁹ It was also difficult to receive medical support from railroad companies because of their categories of injury. In order to secure indemnity for total disability, for example, the insured had to be completely unable to work, not just on the rails, but anywhere.³⁸⁰ The exploitation of railroaders led them to organize brotherhoods, which in addition to lobbying for safer work conditions, developed important mutual insurance programs that covered workers in case of accident.

Railroad unions provided important safety nets for members and their families for the hazards of railroad work. Sickness and accident insurance provided weekly benefits to those temporarily incapacitated. Death and disability insurance plans made lump sum payments to members who were totally disabled or to the widows and families of those who were killed.³⁸¹ Railroad unions also had a much looser definition of total disability than railroad corporations, which allowed more workers to qualify for coverage.³⁸² Historian Mark Aldrich found that in 1900 the annual full-time earnings ranged from about \$600 for trainmen to \$1,100 for engineers. Death benefits for those insured averaged about two to three years’ income.³⁸³ S.E. Wilkinson, the head of the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen, encouraged

³⁷⁹ *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* 30 (1901), 633.

³⁸⁰ J.B. Kennedy, “The Beneficiary Features of the Railway Unions,” in Jacob H. Hollander and George E. Barnett, *Studies in American Trade Unionism* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1907), 333.

³⁸¹ Arnesen, “Like Banquo’s Ghost,” 1609.

³⁸² To secure indemnity for total disability, the insured must be unable to continue in his specific position. *Ibid.*, 333.

³⁸³ Mark Aldrich, *Death Rode the Rails: American Railroad Accidents and Safety, 1828-1965* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 161.

railroaders to protect themselves and families by capitalizing on these union programs:

There is nothing more uncertain than life, especially to those of our calling, and it becomes the positive duty of all of us to protect those dependent upon us from a cold and unfeeling world and trying emergencies of life. But how often are seen instances of widows and children left destitute through the culpable negligence of husband and father.³⁸⁴

For workers who had no access to affordable insurance, brotherhood disability benefits meant that a crippling injury would not leave them and their families completely destitute and dependent. And in the case of death, the union literally stood in the place of the deceased breadwinner.³⁸⁵

Union members reasoned that mutual aid and insurance, rather than rewarding incompetent workers, emboldened men to act heroically. One white fireman from the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen (BLF) boasted that because of these insurance initiatives he and his colleagues can “procure for our wives and children the protection they have a right to demand of us.” Moreover, if an insured brother died in service, “then he dies like a man, knowing that... his home shall not be robbed of the necessaries of life.”³⁸⁶ From 1894 to 1904, white firemen made up for 24.5 percent of the total number of paid disability claims and about one-third of the number of death claims paid.³⁸⁷ In addition to calling for better conditions, white

³⁸⁴ *The Railroad Brakemen's Journal* vol. 5 No.1 (January 1888), 485.

³⁸⁵ Paul Michael Taillon, *Good, Reliable, White Men: Railroad Brotherhoods, 1877-1917* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 41-47.

³⁸⁶ Anonymous member from Pine Bluff Arkansas, Oct 31, 1886 letter to the editor of *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* 10, 1886, 744.

³⁸⁷ J.B. Kennedy, “The Beneficiary Features of the Railway Unions,” 331.

brotherhoods provided benefits that supported and compensated white firemen financially in their pursuit of the new dual-manly ideal.

Celebrating Insured White Firemen

Supported by their union insurance policies, white firemen daily risked injury or worse firing locomotives. This was considered to be an exceptional act of courage by railroaders and non-railroaders alike. The 19th century emphasis of physical masculinity coupled with firemen's skilled work on speeding engines made them heroes in the eyes of many. They were selfless and self-sacrificing figures worthy of honor. Robyn Cooper observes that this celebration and creation of heroes was done partially in response to American concerns about emasculated passivity and indifference in the 19th century. The American public, she argues, was searching for examples of manly strength and bravery.³⁸⁸ According to union members and their supporters, white locomotive firemen fit the profile.³⁸⁹

At the 13th annual convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Grand Master F. P. Sargent, head of the brotherhood in the 1880s, identified fearlessness as a central quality of union firemen. "The class of firemen we would supply, would be such as the traveling public would prefer to have in such responsible positions," he proudly declared. Unlike other firemen—presumably black

³⁸⁸ Robyn Cooper, "The Fireman: Immaculate Manhood," *Journal of Popular Culture* 28.4 (Spring 1995): 161. Other heroes included business leaders, explorers, firemen and inventors.

³⁸⁹ Firemen's heroism was the impetus for many poems and stories recorded in journals and newspapers. See for instance, Georgie M. Sargent, "Lines to a Hero," in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* 29 (1900), 85.

and other non-union firemen—, he continued, the BLE fireman is, “a faithful employee, always at his post and not afraid to do his duty.” This is noteworthy, he explained, because a fireman “must be a man of nerve, one that can face danger in all its trials and in the hour of disaster retain his presence of mind.”³⁹⁰ Judge W.S. Shirk of Sedalia, Missouri, a patron of the BLE, lamented that firemen were not as celebrated as train engineers for their heroism, despite their shared risks and traits: “My friends, we always hear more of the engineer than we do of the fireman... The firemen deserves as much praise for bravery and nerve as any engineer that ever went down to death while performing his duty.”³⁹¹

Similarly, at the opening of the 1904 Convention of the BLE, Edward A. Moseley, secretary of the Interstate Commerce Commission, described firing a locomotive as a “brave deed unflinchingly performed” and admired how firemen “unselfishly and heroically hazard their lives that others may be saved from injury or death.”³⁹² In a letter to the editor of the *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine*, an anonymous BLE member submitted what he saw as the uniqueness of firemen’s bravery and job related risks:

If there is a class of men that needs more than another to be prepared for death, it is the firemen. His situation is even more perilous than that of the engineer because he is not in so good a position to watch for danger. Often blinded by the fire and busy with shoveling coal, he neither feels nor fears danger until the crash is over and the hissing of steam, the crashing of

³⁹⁰ *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* 10 (1886), 740.

³⁹¹ Judge W.S. Shirk of Sedalia, *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine*, 14 (1890), 565.

³⁹² Honorable Edward A. Moseley, secretary of the Interstate Commerce Commission

timbers, the groans and wails of injured ones are ringing in his ears a warning to him to meet his God.³⁹³

In his poem, “The Men at the Throttle” written for the BLF, Edward Sheasgreen dramatized the complexities of firemen’s and engineer’s mastery over their “powerful monsters.” He celebrated that if trainmen were to lose control over the machine they would undoubtedly fight until the very last moment to control it. In doing so they would be heroes until the end: “should the line be fraught with danger at their post they ever stay. Like the brave Pompeian watchman, through their sky grew dark at day.”³⁹⁴ For firemen and their supporters, firing was not simply a skill; it was an exclusive vocation for the most selfless and courageous men. Every time they rode the rails firemen demonstrated their heroic manhood.

The Double Burden: Black and Uninsured

Railroad danger knew no color line. Black railroaders endured some of the same workplace injuries and abuses their white colleagues experienced. Mike Trace, for example, was knocked unconscious by falling train equipment as he was raking coals in the firebox. Wade Holmes lost four fingers on his right hand when the engine door slammed on his hand; he was already missing one finger from a previous work injury. At eighteen years old, locomotive fireman John Holmes of Augusta, Georgia,

³⁹³ Anonymous member from Pine Bluff Arkansas, Oct 31, 1886 letter to the editor of *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine*, *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* 10 (1886), 744.

³⁹⁴ *The Men at the Throttle*, Ed E. Sheasgreen *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 36 (1904), 940. Sheasgreen made frequent contributions to the *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* as a poet.

died while working on a train for the Southern Railway.³⁹⁵ Like their white counterparts, black firemen lost life and limb in service of Southern railways. They put often aside their personal and familial concerns for the safety of passengers and property; they performed their duties at the risk of their own security. However, they did not share the same resources and rewards as white firemen.

While the notion of heroism was not overtly racialized, it was rare for a black fireman to be publically acknowledged for bravery in the line of duty. To be branded a hero was to be “set forth as an example and inspiration to all” and “presented as leaders, as exceptional men.”³⁹⁶ Firemen’s visible and daily acts of courage helped make them models of American manhood to the public at large. At the turn of the century, however, the dominant narratives about black men were that they were either too ignorant or too dangerous to be given any elevated status. Black men’s social, economic and political gains were being condemned as evidence of “Negro domination” and an endangered white manhood.

Between 1890 and 1910, most Southern states attempted to deal with the “problem” of black manhood through disenfranchisement and violence. Black men, white supremacist politicians reasoned, were too irresponsible to vote and hold office. They, in turn, pushed for poll taxes and constitutional amendments in order to eliminate black voters. The immense popularity of the “coon” image—an ignorant black man who mimicked sophisticated whites—reflected the country’s

³⁹⁵ “Lived in Augusta,” *Augusta Chronicle*, December 28, 1906, 6; “Negro Fireman Lost Fingers of Right Hand,” *Augusta Chronicle*, April 24, 1909; “Negro Fireman Hurt,” *The Macon Telegraph*, June, 13, 1905, 3.

³⁹⁶ Cooper, “The Fireman: Immaculate Manhood,” 161.

commitment to the racist assumptions that underlay Jim Crow policies in which blacks were held in subordinate and subservient roles.³⁹⁷ Whites also justified suppressing the black vote by claiming that suffrage made black men a threat to fragile white womanhood. This resulted in the rampant lynching of black men between 1889 and 1899 through which white supremacists aimed to put sexually aggressive black men “in their place.”³⁹⁸ Yet, as firemen, black men occupied a position of prestige and pride. Could they be both the antithesis and paragon of American manhood? Their presence certainly complicated white men’s claims to racially exclusive manhood and heroism.

One of the only times a black fireman received public commendation in the Georgia press for heroism was on May 10, 1912 after Arthur “Soap” Lockett risked his life to save a three-year old white girl. According to reports, Lockett, a thirty-three year old fireman, was in the cab of his locomotive, tending to the fire, when he heard the screams of his engineer, Tom Adair, and ran to see what the matter was. On the track, only 150 feet ahead of the steaming engine, stood a little girl.³⁹⁹ Adair

³⁹⁷ The “coon” image represented an ignorant and dishonorable black man who attempted to reenact the manners of sophisticated white folks. Through their stage performances, white minstrels in blackface created a socially accepted description of black life and culture. According to James H. Dormon, this was the accepted version of what was commonly perceived to be the “real” black; African Americans were not to be taken seriously. James H. Dormon, “Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction American Blacks: The “Coon Song” Phenomenon of the Gilded Age,” *American Quarterly* 40.4 (December 1988); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³⁹⁸ Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 241.

³⁹⁹ Statistics from the Interstate Commerce Commission reveal that “trespassers” walking or crossing the tracks made up nearly half of all fatalities in 1890. This number rose

immediately applied the emergency brakes causing the train to jerk violently. At the same time, Lockett climbed outside the train, maneuvered along the running board and positioned himself on its bumper. When the head of the train was less than 10 feet from the child, Lockett leaped to the track in front of the locomotive. Falling forward as he struck the ground, Lockett grabbed the girl and quickly threw himself and the child off the track to safety. *The Macon Daily Telegraph* reported that Lockett acted “in a heroic manner, the equal of which is seldom recorded.”⁴⁰⁰ The people of Jefferson, Georgia were so moved by his actions that they even nominated Lockett for a Carnegie Medal, an award given to a citizen who voluntarily risks his or her own life for another person.

What made Lockett’s bravery so noteworthy? Lockett’s actions were probably a welcomed relief for white Southerners given the heightened anxieties over the threat of “black beast rapists” destroying white women.⁴⁰¹ Rather than using his physicality, strength and skill to exploit the child, Lockett used his to rescue a child. The portrayal of Lockett’s heroism in terms of his capacity to willingly risk his life to save this white girl is also reminiscent of the racial hierarchies and power dynamics under slavery. The value of white life over black life was sustained through his selfless act. In this light, Lockett was no threat to white supremacy; he was a monument of

through the 1900s as railroad work became safer. Railroad companies would be held liable for injury to a trespasser if they court found that the trainmen failed to “take reasonable precautions to avoid trespassers.” Mark Aldrich, *Death Rode the Rails*, 121.

⁴⁰⁰ “A Negro Fireman Saves Life of Baby,” *The Macon Daily Telegraph*, May, 10 1912, 2; “Saved Baby’s Life,” *The Grand Forks Daily Herald*, May 11, 1912; “Dives to Track, Saves Child,” *Belleville News-Democrat*, November, 12, 1914, 7.

⁴⁰¹ Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*, 115.

acceptable black firemen and a reminder of the antebellum South in which enslaved black men served white people. This could explain why Lockett was awarded the Carnegie Medal and a one-thousand-dollar prize.

While this racialized sacrificial service may have been the standard whites held for black firemen, it was not always beneficial to or chosen by black men. In fact, many black firemen attempted to avoid danger as much as possible. Unions provided important support for white firemen. Black firemen, however, were denied access to the major railroad brotherhoods.⁴⁰² White trainmen feared that admitting black men would be the equivalent of embracing them as social equals.⁴⁰³ The Brotherhood of Locomotive Fireman's constitution explicitly mandated that its applicants be first and foremost "white born."⁴⁰⁴ "We do not believe in the two working together," explained one member of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen. "It is distasteful to the white and the influence of the other is to drag his forced companion down to his own level of cheapness and servility."⁴⁰⁵ Additionally, white unions saw black workers as threats to their wages and working conditions. "Who is it that is keeping wages down to scab pay?" South Carolina fireman A.D. Wright asked rhetorically.

⁴⁰² See Chapter 3 for a discussion of racially exclusive railroad unions.

⁴⁰³ Hebert Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1944), 209.

⁴⁰⁴ Applicants should also be "of good moral character, sober and industrious sound in body and limb, not less than eighteen nor more than forty-five years of age and able to read and write the English language." *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, Constitution* (1888), 41.

⁴⁰⁵ *The Railroad Trainmen's Journal* 10 (1893), 745.

“Mr. Burrhead,” he concluded. “And who is it that is responsible for most of the wrecks in our southland?” he continued, “the incompetent negro.”⁴⁰⁶

In their classic study, The Black Worker, Spero and Harris confirmed that Southern railroad corporations, “frankly used the Negro to weaken the organization which barred him from membership. They also used him to depress the current wage standard.”⁴⁰⁷ Historian Eric Arnesen, in a more recent work on railroad unions, similarly argues, “railroad managers found that they could use black labor to ensure control over their white labor force. Simply put, black labor could serve as a bulwark against white unionism and union power.”⁴⁰⁸ White workers, in turn, attempted to eliminate black men from the railroad service. Railroad brotherhoods journals are full of letters from white firemen attempting to galvanize other union men around the “problem” of black railroaders. Fireman E.B. Griffith, for example, called for “each and every Brotherhood of Railroad Trainman [to] redouble his efforts to get all candidates for his lodge, both north and south, and let us keep at this negro question until we have him out of the train and yard service.”⁴⁰⁹

In addition to being barred from the railroad brotherhoods, prior to World War I, black unions were relatively weak and inactive and were not officially recognized by any of the railroads.⁴¹⁰ Most black railroad unions did not come to form until the federal government took control of the railroad industry during the

⁴⁰⁶ *The Railroad Trainmen’s Journal* 14 (1898), 507.

⁴⁰⁷ Abram L. Harris and Sterling D. Spero, The Black Worker, 286.

⁴⁰⁸ Arnesen, “Like Banquo’s Ghost,” 1622.

⁴⁰⁹ *The Railroad Trainman Journal* 17 (1900), 598.

⁴¹⁰ Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., Railroads in the African American Experience: A Photographic Journey (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 73.

war.⁴¹¹ Until then, black firemen had little control over their workplace conditions, and the unique racialized aspects of their interactions with employers and co-workers. If death and danger were concerns for insured white firemen, they were undoubtedly on the minds of black firemen who had no promised income in case they missed time from work or died in service.⁴¹² By providing insurance and mutual aid, unions enabled a skilled worker to continue his breadwinning role, maintain his independence and self-respect, and shield him from the stigma of dependency and degradation of needing government relief. But who would support the black fireman's family if he died in duty? Could he reasonably expect his railroad to do right by him if he was hurt during work? Who would advocate on his behalf if a railroad company refused to dole out relief payments? Branded enemies of railroad unions—the greatest ally of the skilled trades—black firemen were forced to stand on their own legally and fiscally against railroads when they were injured or discriminated against.

⁴¹¹ Black workers recognized that government railway administrators responded far more to organized groups of workers than to individuals. African American trainmen also used wartime government takeover of the railroads as an opportunity to try to gain an equal footing with white workers, both with respect to pay and access to lucrative positions in the train service. Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 56.

⁴¹² Historian John Dittmer has shown that many black workers relied on lodges to fill the need for insurance. Between 1870 and 1920 Georgia blacks paid about \$16.5 million to the insurance departments of fraternal orders. As membership increased, these organizations professionalized by establishing insurance companies. For example, the Atlanta Benevolent and Protective Association, founded by Rev. Peter Bryant of Wheat Street Baptist Church developed into the Atlanta Life Insurance Company. Some expanded their financial services by establishing insurance companies and then banks. These institutions had limited holdings compared to white insurance companies. *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 45. W.E.B. DuBois, *Economic Co-operation among the Negroes of Georgia* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1907) M.S. Stuart, *An Economic Detour: A History of Insurance in the Lives of American Negroes* (New York: Wendell Malliett and Company, 1940).

To cope with this predicament, many black firemen attempted to avoid danger as much as possible. The historical record is replete with accounts of black firemen jumping from moving engines when they feared that a collision was imminent. These acts of self-preservation, however, were in stark contrast to the heroic firemen ideal, and black men were subsequently portrayed as cowards by the local press.⁴¹³

On January 20, 1908, *The Macon Daily Telegraph* shamed John Williams, a black fireman, for jumping from his engine, by comparing his actions with those of his engineer who died in the wreck. The accident occurred when their train hit a broken switch and came off the rails.⁴¹⁴ According to the *Telegraph*, “No sooner had the engine left the tracks... Williams left his post and jumped, saving his life thereby.” “The engineer, however, stuck to his post,” the report continued, “endeavoring to bring the train to a stop though he must have seen that death was inevitable.” Engineer Tarver’s choice to stay in the engine was deemed even more remarkable

⁴¹³ Black men could not regulate the amount and intensity of work so they tried to escape danger and live to ride another day. Historian Robin Kelley expressed the importance of recognizing personal strategies for maintaining dignity in the face of direct personalized assaults. In his article, “We Are Not What We Seem,” he discusses forms of resistance as they occurred at home, work and leisure, so as to force a reconsideration of how action in daily life contributed to political change in the South. “These daily, unorganized, evasive, seemingly spontaneous actions,” he explains, “form an important yet neglected part of African American political history.” Robin D.G. Kelley, ““We Are Not What We Seem”: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *The Journal of American History* 80. 1 (1993): 76; Randy Hodson, “Worker Resistance: An Underdeveloped Concept in the Sociology of Work,” *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 16 (1995): 79-110.

⁴¹⁴ Through 1900, derailments took the lives of more employees than train collisions. In 1902 there had been 1,609 derailments from equipment defects, most of them involving freights; by 1920 the total had risen by nearly 600 percent. They were often the result of faulty equipment, poorly laid tracks, roadbed obstacles, inclement weather, and speeding locomotives. Mark Aldrich, *Death Rode the Rails*, 20, 44, 198.

because he had a family. In fact, the paper characterized Tarver as the quintessential family man. He had recently reported back to work after taking two months off to care for his sick wife who was pregnant with the couple's twins. After his wife was better and his children were about a month old, Tarver returned to the railroad. The journal did not mention Williams' family in this story. Evidently, despite having more to lose than Williams, Tarver still risked his life in the hopes of preventing damage to the engine and its cargo. The true measure of a trainman was his ability to put the safety of others above anything else. That a black fireman was unwilling to do this only confirmed white firemen's belief that bravery was a white man's quality. The article's headline summarized this contrast: "Engineer Tarver gave up his life unflinchingly while Negro fireman jumped."⁴¹⁵

The Augusta Chronicle used a similar strategy to humiliate an unnamed black fireman from the Georgia Railroad by juxtaposing his escape with his engineer's 'heroism'. According to the report, the fireman leapt once he recognized that the wheels of the engine of his passenger train were running off the tracks while the connected passenger cars behind it stayed on. This, he surmised, made remaining in the locomotive cab unsafe. He jumped off the engine, landed down a steep embankment and injured his knee "pretty badly." Engineer Thomas, however, stayed behind, applied the brakes, and brought the train to a stop before the others cars completely derailed. He too was injured but his wounds came in an act of valor. As the *Chronicle* illustrated, "the engineer stuck to his post until the engine had come to

⁴¹⁵ "With Death In Sight He Stuck to His Post," *The Macon Daily Telegraph* January 20, 1908, 1.

a standstill and was bruised himself being jolted against the side of the cab.” “Had he jumped as the fireman did,” the paper concluded, “passengers might not have gotten off safely.”⁴¹⁶ In this account, Thomas was clearly the brave protagonist for attempting to control the danger rather than avoid it. The black fireman, on the other hand, was an irresponsible deserter.

The Columbus Daily Enquirer likewise mocked George Green, a black fireman for the Central of Georgia, for jumping from a train engine he thought was about to crash. On March 5, 1909, while Green was tending to his firebox, his train began to screech and rock. His engineer had suddenly applied the brakes and Green assumed it was an effort to avoid a collision. It was not. Still, fearing for his life, Green decided to jump first rather than check on the cause of the commotion. *The Enquirer* called this an irrational choice: “The Negro thought he saw the engineer in the act of jumping... He thought he would leave the engine first and investigate afterward and so sprang out into the air.” The newspaper went on to explain that both the engine and engineer were unscathed in the incident. Green, on the other hand, needed emergency surgery after striking his head on the track and lay bed-ridden in the Columbus hospital. *The Enquirer* questioned Green’s courage and his reasoning by demonstrating that what he “thought” was incorrect and ultimately led to his hospitalization.⁴¹⁷ Apparently, Green fled for no good reason.

In reality, black firemen knew that the best way to avoid injury, dependency, and death was to not get hurt in the first place. These attempts to avoid peril were a

⁴¹⁶ “His Cool Head Prevented Harm,” *Augusta Chronicle* June 20, 1904, 8.

⁴¹⁷ “Thought Engineer was about to Jump,” *Columbus Daily Enquirer* March 6, 1909.

clear rejection of the heroic ideal so celebrated by white firemen and the public. The worker who embraced danger to the point where he risked dying at his post was believed to be the epitome of manhood. The self-sacrificing heroism of fireman was sometimes self-destructive. Anna Young Wiley, the sister in law of a white Southern fireman expressed to the BLFE how costly and unrewarding this expectation was:

Scores of people are dependent upon the brave engineer and firemen who, through the glaring heat of day and howling storms of night must stand unflinchingly at the post of duty, receiving as their reward when unavoidable accidents occur and their lives go out in the performance of duty, "nobody killed but the engineer and fireman."⁴¹⁸

For Southern editors of news publications, however, black men's escapism confirmed Jim Crow ideas of black irresponsibility and demonstrated that they were not manly enough for the fireman's post.⁴¹⁹ Black firemen were in a no-win situation: Save their lives and be humiliated for it, or lose their lives and endanger their families. Their attempts at taking control of their labor and asserting their manhood in such a risk-filled vocation, especially without union support, were limited, and sometimes counterproductive.

Working on the Railroad: Black Firemen and Violence

A fireman's daily travels took him far from his employer, the railroad manager, and placed him in close contact with, and under the absolute authority of his engineer. For most of the workday, firemen and engineers shared the engine cab,

⁴¹⁸ "Looking Forward," *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Engineers* 33 (1902), 430.

⁴¹⁹ "Track and Negro Fireman Jumped." *Augusta Chronicle* June 19, 1904, 8.

observed train signals, endured similar occupational hazards and often experienced the same fate in train collisions.⁴²⁰ Their travel schedule and conditions meant that much of their time together was spent on the road, away from family, homes and communities. The pair often became important to each other's social and professional networks. They formed small social groups that provided regular companionship, support, and sometimes collusion in the face of oppressive managerial authority.⁴²¹ Some firemen and engineers were even 'brothers' in the same railroad union and made similar demands for railroad safety reform.⁴²² One fireman described the fireman-engineer connection as one of shared interests: "An engineer is exposed to no danger that his fireman does not share. If the engineer has a grievance, nine times out of ten, it is his fireman's grievance too; and, even the tenth one is rarely an exception."⁴²³ These dynamics helped to facilitate a veteran-apprentice bond between white fireman and white engineers, whereby the latter mentored the former. Although such interactions were far from perfect, they were at the very least civil.⁴²⁴ The same cannot be said for the relationship between black firemen and white engineers.

⁴²⁰ On the fireman's occupational hazards see "Dirty Work and Clean Air: The Locomotive Firemen, Environmental Activists and Stories of Conflict," *Journal of Urban History* Vol. 28. No. 1, November 2001, 35-54.

⁴²¹ Reed, *Locomotive Engineer*, 105.

⁴²² Some firemen and engineers belonged to both the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers—a mostly engineer union—and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Engineers—mostly firemen. George R. Horton and H. Ellsworth Steele, "The Unity Issue among Railroad Engineers and Firemen," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 10.1 (October 1956), 49.

⁴²³ X.Q. of Loveland, Iowa, Letter to the Editor of the Firemen's Magazine, October 30, 1889. *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* 13 (1889), 889.

⁴²⁴ Horton and Steele, "The Unity Issue," 51.

Being offered the position of fireman was a rare opportunity for black men in an industry that restricted black occupational mobility. Barred from almost all of the major railroad unions, it is not surprising that black men had little redress against job discrimination and mistreatment. White engineers took advantage of black men's precarious situation, maintaining a different set of demands and expectations for black firemen. One engineer admitted that he and his colleagues enjoyed having, "the nigger [black firemen] because we can drive them if necessary and get good service from them."⁴²⁵ Southern black firemen's responsibilities were both excessive and degrading.

In addition to doing the standard engine maintenance, black firemen were required to come earlier than their white co-workers to prepare for their runs, and to stay behind later to clean the under portion of the engine; all of these responsibilities were unpaid. They were also instructed to search the train floors for loose nuts and bolts, fill oil cans, and carry the engineer's toolbox. Off the locomotive, some firemen even shined their engineer's boots, and shopped for his food while they were out on their runs. Some even tended to his home garden. Victory Clark's 1916 federal study of railroad labor concluded that "a negro fireman or trainman is almost the personal servant of his white superior... his job depends on the favor of his boss."⁴²⁶ A member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen remarked that if he and his

⁴²⁵ Victor S. Clark, "Employment Conditions in Train and Yard Service Under the Eight Hour Law," in Report of the Eight Hour Commission: Commission on Standard Workday of Railroad Employees (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918), 416.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 415.

white colleagues were assigned the same tasks as black firemen, “there would be a grievance committee in the Master Mechanic’s office before breakfast.”⁴²⁷

Black firemen knew that white employers expected submissiveness, and many played the role just to keep their positions. They behaved as though they were content with their treatment and the relational dynamics at work, simply in order to shield themselves from the charge of stepping out of place. One black fireman was jeered by a white fireman for “tak[ing] off his cap and say[ing], ‘Thank you, Cap’n,’” after a day’s work.⁴²⁸ These performances certainly paid. White firemen frequently complained, “there are many engineers who would rather have a ‘nigger’ than a white man, because the engineer can treat the negro just as he pleases and *he will not talk back to him.*”⁴²⁹ *The Right Way Magazine*, the official periodical of the Central of Georgia Railway, even celebrated the eighty-first birthday of Dan Winter, a black fireman and fifty-year veteran of the railroad, for his enduring servile behavior. The article, which included a full-length picture of Winter, described him as a “splendid type of the old darkey, faithful, honest and polite... he gives good service to the company.”⁴³⁰ Undoubtedly, it took great skill, intelligence, and inner strength to survive twenty years as a fireman. What was most commendable in the eyes of the

⁴²⁷ *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* 26 (1899), 540. The Master Mechanic was the supervisor of the locomotive foremen. These foremen hired the engineers and firemen and kept track of their work hours. Donald L. McMurry, *The Great Burlington Strike of 1888: A Case History in Labor Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 28.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, 540.

⁴²⁹ Firemen Litchfield of Chicago, Illinois, *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* 27 (1899) 448. *emphasis added.*

⁴³⁰ Railroad Pays Tribute to Old Negro Employee, *The Columbus Enquirer-Sun*, July 3, 1918; *The Right Way Magazine*, Central of Georgia Railway, June 1918.

railroad, however, was Winter's stereotypical behavior, a lesson for all black firemen who hoped for a long career on the railroad.

The exploitation and abuse of black firemen made the locomotive cab a site of potential racial discord and conflict. Black men hated spending extra time running personal errands for their engineers and being referred to as "boy," "burrhead" and "fireboy."⁴³¹ Without union representation however, they could neither strike nor demand better working conditions.⁴³² Like Winter, many firemen tolerated this environment because losing their jobs meant returning to either the rail yards or the farm. Despite the humiliation they experienced, black firemen grounded their masculinity and self esteem in their contributions to their families. But going to work in a place where they were essentially servants was not something all firemen could effectively manage. Often they responded to personal insults and disrespect with aggressive and confrontational behavior, needing to prove that they were the equals of their engineers.

Wiley Craig, a black fireman, actually fought his engineer, Mr. Bishop, over the disrespectful way that Bishop spoke to him. Reports suggest that Craig objected to the manner in which Bishop instructed him to fire the engine, so he ignored the order. When Bishop repeated the command, Craig retorted, "I'll stir the fire when I

⁴³¹ "Boy" carried a social stigma that could be traced back to or associated with American slavery. "Boy" implied that the father was always the white man who looked down upon the childlike black man who was incapable of being an adult.

⁴³² This would change during World War I when the federal government took control over the railroads. Eric Arnesen, Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

get ready, damn you.”⁴³³ Craig then took out his pistol and shot Bishop, barely missing him. Bishop then charged Craig, knocked the gun out of his hand and the two exchanged blows as the train rolled down the tracks. Craig stabbed Bishop several times in the chest before Bishop turned the gun on Craig and killed him.⁴³⁴

Floyd Jones, a former fireman for the Central of Georgia Railway, had a reputation for talking back to his engineers, which led to frequent clashes with authority. In February 1912 he was fired after a verbal altercation he had with Engineer Courtney escalated into a fistfight. Two months later, apparently still fuming over his termination, Jones was arrested and charged for derailing a train—an act he allegedly committed under the assumption that Courtney was driving.⁴³⁵

Being fired from the fireman position, which meant the prospect of losing a secure and respectable existence, might also be seen as an attack on one’s manhood. Daily harassment, verbal assaults and name-calling were also emasculating. Jones and Craig’s violent confrontations display the intensity of anger black firemen harbored against engineers who were perceived to question their manhood. As labor historian David Montgomery has argued, many 19th century skilled production workers could their manhood both in their mastery of their work and in assuming a

⁴³³ “Fight on Engine,” *New Haven Evening Register*, November 20, 1897, 4; “Tragedy on A Locomotive,” *The Daily Picayune*, November 20, 1897, 1; “Life and Death Struggle,” *The Savannah Tribune*, November 27, 1897, 4.

⁴³⁴ Engineer Fought Crazy Negro Fireman Shot Him at Short Range, *Augusta Chronicle*, November 20, 1897. “Engineer’s Narrow Escape,” *Dallas Morning News*, November 20, 1897; “In an Engine Cab a Fireman and Engineer Fight a Fatal Duel,” *The Morning Herald*, November 20, 1897.

⁴³⁵ “Negro Seen at Switch before Flyer Wrecked Damaging Testimony Against Floyd Jones,” *The Macon Daily Telegraph*, May, 23, 1912; “Think Mystery Dixie Flyer Wreck Cleared,” *The Macon Daily Telegraph*, May 5, 1912.

“manly bearing toward the boss.”⁴³⁶ While white industrial workers’ resistance and white railroad workers’ disobedience was an accepted part of railroad culture, occasionally resulting in asserting their will over a supervisor’s demands, black railroaders’ disobedience was intolerable. Black firemen who confronted their white superiors risked both their jobs and their lives when defending their dignity through violence.⁴³⁷

Getting Black Men Off the Rails

Under the leadership of abusive white engineers, black men powered Georgia’s locomotive engines with very little protection from workplace injury and injustice. They also endured continuous assaults from white firemen and some American citizens over the right of black men to work at all. Capitalizing on the increased concern for railway safety and technology in the 1890s, white union firemen began to define their trade as an arduous physical *and* challenging intellectual task. Black firemen, they argued, might be able to perform the manual aspects of the fireman’s task by embodying the physicality needed to do the job, but they were decidedly unable to master the intellectual and emotional aspects of the work which were very important Americans’ definitions of manhood. They believed

⁴³⁶ David Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁴³⁷ Moreover, their resistance was characterized as less than heroic. The local press characterized Wiley Craig as a “crazy negro fireman” and explained, “the fireman became manic” and was “crazed with rage.” Engineer Fought Crazy Negro Fireman Shot Him at Short Range, *Augusta Chronicle*, November 20, 1897. “Engineer’s Narrow Escape,” *Dallas Morning News*, November 20, 1897.

that only white firemen could strike the delicate balance between intellect and brute strength; in the end, black men were simply not smart enough for the work.

The “unintelligent” black fireman and the “intelligent” white fireman were common tropes among white union firemen beginning the 1890s. One BLF fireman described what the passage of the Safety Appliance Act of 1893 meant for the profession:

Today the knowledge and enlightenment of men employed on locomotives must not be limited, and this is one reason why two first class men are needed on every locomotive today, instead of a moderately fair engineer and an uneducated thick-headed negro who only knows enough to spade in all the coal that is within his reach and cause the investments of the stockholders to ‘go up in black smoke.’⁴³⁸

In his opinion, the technological advancements being made in firing rendered black firemen anachronistic. Another participant explained that the Georgia Railroad was making a mistake in hiring black firemen when “it is an additional safeguard to have two intelligent white men instead of one, on the head end of every train.”⁴³⁹ Fireman

W.P. Logan from Augusta, Georgia confidently explained:

One thing is certain, they [black firemen] are unreliable and cannot be depended upon to perform duties that an intelligent white fireman can be relied upon to do... How many of the negro firemen can read a train order and detect a mistake?... I will ask if this class of men are as thoroughly competent to be placed in those responsible positions as are intelligent and competent white men?”⁴⁴⁰

Buttressing this image of the unintelligent black fireman was the open confession by many white engineers that they preferred black firemen to whites because they

⁴³⁸ *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 27 (1899), 85.

⁴³⁹ *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 26 (1899).

⁴⁴⁰ *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 27 (1899), 84.

wanted “a person whom they can order around like a dog and compel to do their bidding.”⁴⁴¹

White firemen did not question black men’s physical capabilities; they argued that they had little else going for them. “Physically, the negro is competent to fire the engine,” Georgia firemen C.E. Pane admitted, “ [but] he is totally unfit, both socially and mentally, to properly man a locomotive.”⁴⁴² Another BLF member claimed that black firemen were “almost devoid of ambition, energy, business ability, and manly qualities, [and] know nothing but shovel coal, shine, brass and accept whatever the company wants to give him.”⁴⁴³ As we have seen, traditionally, in the late 19th century, railroad workers developed a sense of masculine pride that was rooted in their physical strength. Even middle class men found this rough working-class masculinity appealing, which gave black railroad workers a chance to assert their manliness across racial and class lines.⁴⁴⁴ Ironically, by the early 1900’s white firemen began claiming that the modern fireman not only needed to be brave but intelligent. Blacks, they contended, could not meet the latter requirement.

White firemen’s commentary on black men’s smarts insulted black firemen and deliberately demonstrated a lack of respect for black workers’ knowledge and skill. Despite the technological changes wrought by increasing concern over railway

⁴⁴¹ Vice President Garret Ball, *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 47 (1909), 261.

⁴⁴² C.E. Pane of Augusta Georgia, *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 27 (1899), 204.

⁴⁴³ M.E. Dowdy of Springfield Missouri, *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 30 (1901), 441.

⁴⁴⁴ R.W. Connell suggests, “True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies.” R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 45; Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (1995).

safety, black firemen, whites argued, were a permanent liability for the railroads and, by extension, the travelling public:

When any company hires a person who is incompetent or not endowed with a high sense of intelligence and places him upon an engine as a fireman, because his services can be secured at a cheaper rate, then that company is saying to the traveling public and to those who have occasion to use their road, that they have less respect for their passenger and freight than they have for the financial affairs of the company; or, in other words, dividends first, public last.⁴⁴⁵

For them, the Georgia Railroad did not need cheap black labor; it needed white labor along with all the intangible benefits they brought with them that black railroad workers could not offer. These arguments were presented both in the local press and in union publications, but they were only one tool in white unionists' arsenal against Georgia Railroad's black firemen and their alleged insufficiently masculine skills. The Railroad Brotherhood's collective antagonism moved beyond rhetoric over the 1890s to strikes and violent encounters with black firemen.

In May of 1909, a group of white union firemen confronted the General Manager of the Georgia Railroad, Thomas K. Scott, regarding the railroad's equal distribution of seniority among black and white firemen. This application of seniority proved problematic for whites because black firemen, who could not be promoted to engineer, acquired considerable seniority and claimed a large number of preferred runs on passenger and freight trains. Led by Eugene A. Ball, Second Vice President of the union, the group accused Scott and the railroad of "forcing negro supremacy,"

⁴⁴⁵ Garret Ball, *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen's Magazine* 47 (1909), 259.

and trying to “drive the white man out of work as fireman and trainmen.”⁴⁴⁶ White people, they reasoned, have preference, “in all classes of life in the South, on the streets, on the street cars, in the theaters, churches and parks, hotels, stations, trains and other public places,” yet on the “Georgia road this distinction does not exist.”⁴⁴⁷ They demanded that the railroad give white firemen with seniority preference over black firemen with similar or more experience. Scott, however, refused to discriminate against black firemen in an already racially-stratified industry. Scott explained that since blacks could not be promoted it was “unfair and unjust to deprive them of the only opportunity offered them to win a small degree of promotion.”⁴⁴⁸

The following week, ten white Atlanta-based firemen were put on the extra board without notice, replacing ten black firemen who were paid less.⁴⁴⁹ This was a significant blow to these white firemen, because “on-call workers” were not guaranteed convenient or consistent assignments. The wife of a BLF member shared the difficulty of having a husband on the extra board with the readers of the *BLF*

⁴⁴⁶ “Guards on All Georgia Railroad Trains,” *Augusta Chronicle*, May 21, 1909.

⁴⁴⁷ Vice President Garret Ball, *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 47 (1909), 261.

⁴⁴⁸ “Georgia Railroad Firemen Say They Will Go On Strike,” *Augusta Chronicle*, May 16, 1909.

⁴⁴⁹ While senior firemen could count on some consistency in their daily work hours, in order to build up seniority, less experienced workers volunteered to be on the extra board — a list of workers who were available on call. These employees had to be ready to go on a run at a moment’s notice; their free time was not completely their own. Once notified by the company callboy, whether at the pool hall, or baseball park, the off duty fireman was officially on duty. The callboy was responsible for notifying the crew at least two hours before their train was scheduled to depart. For the man on the extra board this meant that he must live close enough to the yard to be easily available to the caller. William Cottrell, *The Railroader* (Stanford University, Stanford University Press, 1940), 45.

Magazine: “there are the spoiled evenings and interrupted family gatherings and lonely walks to church caused by engine No. something getting stuck on the turntable.”⁴⁵⁰ In his ethnographic study of railroad work culture, Sociologist Fred Cottrell described the unpredictability of the new on-call fireman’s work life in the early 1900s:

Today he is working out of this point, in place of an absent regular man; tomorrow he may be deadheaded to some other point to handle a work train. Next month he may be idle, only to be called on short notice to bring a train that was too long delayed or to handle an extra glut of business or other work connected with some derailment, washout, or other emergency.⁴⁵¹

On the one hand, by the time this railroader gained seniority, he would have amassed valuable experience working a variety of different routes under diverse work conditions. On the other hand, the indeterminate nature of such temporary tasks demanded that firemen put in long hours and absent themselves from their families for days or weeks at a time.⁴⁵² Geographical separation and irregular work hours made it difficult for railroad families to maintain regular contact and involvement in each other’s lives. But the fact that white firemen were being replaced by black workers made such work requirements all the more unbearable. White firemen felt that black men were not only interfering with their work lives, but with their home routines as well.

⁴⁵⁰ *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 46-47 (1909), 11.

⁴⁵¹ Cottrell, *The Railroader*, 43.

⁴⁵² By 1910, laws were enacted to standardize the workday at ten hours—and later eight hours—and penalize railroad firms for employing trainmen in “excess service.” U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, “Hours of Service of Railroad Employees,” by Mr. Dewalt, H. doc. 608, 64th Congress, 1st session., 1918, 2; Edwin Clyde Robbins, “The Trainmen’s Eight-Hour Day,” *Political Science Quarterly*, XXXI (Dec., 1916), 545.

On May 15, 1909, Ball and eighty white firemen from the Georgia Railroad joined together to strike. He warned General Manager Scott that white firemen and hostlers on the Georgia Railroad would leave the company on Monday, May 17, “until such time as a white fireman is respected as much if not more than a negro.”⁴⁵³ That Georgia Railroad’s cost-cutting measures, were, in his view, being accomplished at the white men’s expense was intolerable. Even more alarming, however, was the promise from Ball and the striking firemen, that if the railroad continued to replace white workers with black men, “there [would] be violence and bloodshed and the life of neither employee or passenger [would] be safe.”⁴⁵⁴

Historian David Godshalk argues that violence was increasingly used as a weapon by whites in order to restrict or discourage the citizenship opportunities available to black men.

In addition to its symbolic function in reaffirming the power and dominance of white men, mob violence played a powerful role in intimidating blacks, controlling black behavior, discouraging open black resistance against racial injustice, and preventing black economic competition.⁴⁵⁵

In truth, black firemen’s work did not pose an actual threat to white citizens, but the symbolism of power and independence embodied by the position of fireman was so universally understood that it needed to be countered by a ritual of submission and

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁴ “Georgia and the Eternal Negro,” *The State*, June 24, 1909.

⁴⁵⁵ Godshalk, David F. “William J. Northern’s Public and Personal Struggles against Lynching,” *Jumping Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*. Eds. Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 147.

compliance: the act of quitting their jobs, in effect, surrendering their claims to manhood.

True to their word, strikers caused considerable damage to both the railroad, its workers, and the communities the railroad served. Locomotives were stalled, broken into, and even broken apart. The disruptions in train services had a domino effect: produce and goods spoiled, mail services were delayed, even funerals were postponed.⁴⁵⁶ But white firemen were not the only ones disturbing the peace. Support for strikers came from whites all along the route of the Georgia Railroad, which ran from Atlanta to Macon and Augusta. Communities held mass meetings, vowing to do without mail and to haul food in wagons in the name of white supremacy, before surrendering to black firemen's demands regarding the locomotive cabs. A writer for *Afro-American* covering the strike noted:

It was the communities which the railroad served that stopped every wheel of the system during the past three days; not the officials of these communities, but a few men who are said to have fighting blood in their veins, who came forward and announced that negro firemen should not be given seniority over the white firemen.⁴⁵⁷

Violence from Georgia's citizens, Ball reasoned, "must be expected. Never in the history of civilization has the white man submitted to negro domination."⁴⁵⁸ White citizens believed themselves entitled to ridiculing and committing acts of violence towards black firemen without retribution.

⁴⁵⁶ "A Hundred Men Tie Up Railroad," *Afro-American*, May 29, 1909.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁸ Guards on All Georgia Railroad Trains, *Augusta Chronicle*, May 21, 1909.

The strike lasted for thirteen days. Demonstrating their frustration with working conditions, mobs of angry white men assaulted several black firemen to discourage them from seeking advancement and to secure their vision of the social order, shouting “the white man’s supremacy in the white man’s country.”⁴⁵⁹ The *New York Times* reported that black firemen were being dragged from engines and mobbed at every town along the line.⁴⁶⁰ John Wesley, a black fireman, was preparing for his trip from the Thomson Depot when a throng of white men encircled his engine and “intimidated Wesley by threats and demonstrations against him.”⁴⁶¹ The record is unclear about what was said and done to him but the mobbing was evidently effective. Wesley immediately left the engine and caught another train home to Augusta as a passenger, forfeiting the day’s work and wages. The train he was supposed to staff was delayed more than four hours because there were no other firemen readily available for work.

Other incidents followed. On May 22, 1909, as fireman Ben Rucker’s train came close to the Union Station in Augusta, Georgia, a gang of white men and boys ran alongside his engine, mocking and threatening him.⁴⁶² Rucker was able to jump off the train and hide in the hallway of the depot’s office under the protection of the local police reserve. From 12 noon when the train reached the station until 1:30 p.m., the small clan of rioters had grown to somewhere between 250 to 400 people, their

⁴⁵⁹ “The Color Question Question Passes Formally into the Hands of Arbitration,” *The Daily Picayune*, June 9, 1909.

⁴⁶⁰ “Anti-Negro Strike Ties Up Railroad,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1909.

⁴⁶¹ “Georgia Trains Moving O.K. Intimidating The Firemen,” *Augusta Chronicle*, May 20, 1909.

⁴⁶² “Mob Negro Firemen On Georgia Railroad,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 1909.

stated goal to “get the negro.” Observers heard “jeering and hissing at the negro firemen and others connected with the Georgia road” coming from the crowd.⁴⁶³ Realizing that they could not get to Rucker, the mob moved on to the next station where he was supposed make his next run. After waiting an hour, they dispersed, while Rucker left the depot under police escort.

A few days later, on May 27, 1909, two hundred white men rallied at a train station in Lithonia, Georgia and waited for the engine staffed by another black fireman. As the train pulled into the station, the crowd hurled stones through the locomotive cab, missing the fireman but striking the engineer, Mr. Downing. When the train stopped, the rioters, some of whom were railroad employees, disconnected the rail cars and other parts of the engine so that it could not run.⁴⁶⁴ Downing, fearing for the life of his firemen, quickly found an Atlanta bound train for them to escape in safety.⁴⁶⁵ However, there was no attempt by local authorities to prevent the violence.

Other firemen were not as fortunate as Downing’s firemen. While laying over in Dearing, Georgia, six white men attacked and badly beat William Parker behind a store. The Georgia Railroad offered a five hundred-dollar reward for information

⁴⁶³ “Angry Crowd Tried to Get a Negro Fireman at Depot,” *Augusta Chronicle*, May 23, 1909.

⁴⁶⁴ “Violence Breaks Out in Georgia Railroad Strike. Negro Firemen Cause of Attack on Freight Train and Race Situation,” *The Lexington Herald*, May 29, 1909.

⁴⁶⁵ “Georgia Railroad Train Stoned and Stopped by Mob at Lithonia; Negro Rushed to Atlanta,” *The Macon Daily Telegraph*, May 29, 1909.

leading to the attackers, who were eventually arrested and convicted. Fireman Joe Bryant was also viscously assaulted by a mob in Augusta while firing a yard engine.⁴⁶⁶

This violence, along with numerous threats of violence haunting black firemen during the 1909 railroad strike, made firing the engine an even more life threatening profession for black men than it had already been. There was certainly no insurance policy or safety measures available to fight mob violence. It is unknown how many firemen stayed in the service, refused to work for a period, or quit out of fear for their lives. It is also unknown how employers felt about black firemen who refused to work for fear of an attack. Were they understanding, given the volatile social climate and as implied by the Railroad offering rewards for information on attackers?

The violence enabled white citizens who were not part of the arbitration process to keep black firemen off the rails.⁴⁶⁷ Forcing a black fireman to run for his life, hide in fear, and abandon his post, these citizens believed they were helping “to drive the negro out of employment on railroads altogether.”⁴⁶⁸ They were also fighting for white men’s exclusive access to a new manly ideal offered by railroad work. As one rioter and striker explained, “We have only one demand—*put the negro firemen off*. We can not arbitrate a thing like that. There is no half-way ground.”⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁶ “Georgia Trains Moving O.K. Intimidating The Firemen,” *Augusta Chronicle*, May 20, 1909; “History of the Strike on the Georgia Railway,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 30, 1909.

⁴⁶⁷ Robert Connell has argued that violence demonstrates “domination and subordination—and competition and affiliation among men.” R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 84.

⁴⁶⁸ “Would Eliminate Negro Employees,” *The State*, May 19, 1909.

⁴⁶⁹ “The Georgia Road First; Then All Down the Line,” *Atlanta Georgian*, May 1909.

But while whites may have felt that their violence in the back alleys and rail yards was successful, in the board room their efforts fell flat.

After two weeks of disrupted service and sporadic violence, the Georgia Railroad and the union agreed to arbitration. In addition to demanding the reinstatement of the white hostlers, the strikers railed against the railroad's use of black workers to keep wages down and its strict observance of seniority regardless of race. Former Alabama Congressman and Secretary of the Navy Hilary Herbert, one of the three arbitrators, explained that the only way for unionists to get black men out of the locomotive cab was to show that they were not competent. The brotherhood representatives certainly tried.

Throughout the six days of testimony, union lawyers paraded engineers, firemen, and city and railroad officials before the arbitration board. All recited the predictable racist arguments about black inferiority. Witnesses testified that blacks were perfect for menial tasks, but unfit for the highly-skilled and demanding work of the fireman. Black firemen were a safety liability: "Railroading is getting to be too much on the scientific order for the burrhead," argued the *Railroad Trainmen's Journal*.⁴⁷⁰ The brotherhood representatives further suggested that it was a contradiction to force black and white workers to labor in close quarters when such contact was outlawed in other aspects of Georgia society: "white men are compelled to go out on the same engine fired by a negro, put his clothes in the same box as a

⁴⁷⁰ *The Railroad Trainmen's Journal* 17 (1900), 578.

negro when perspiring and smelling—in fact use all the utensils that the negro uses and then be placed on the same equality.”⁴⁷¹

On the other hand, utilizing its own racist terms, the Georgia Railroad argued that black firemen were equally qualified for their roles, and that no mere fireman could truly get in the way of a deserving white man:

Every negro fireman must stand aside while the white fireman passes on to the position to which the white fireman alone may aspire. What more striking and emphatic exhibition of white supremacy could there be than the relative position of a white and negro fireman on the Georgia Railroad. ⁴⁷²

The railroad further contended that firing was a labor intensive task rather than an intellectual one, for which black men were better-suited than white men because of their animal-like strength and ability to withstand the heat. In doing so, they countered white men’s claims that firing was a highly technical and manly profession.

In the end, the panel decisively ruled that the Georgia Railroad could retain its black employees, keep its seniority system, and that white men should not have preference over black firemen in working runs. White firemen’s derogatory arguments about black men’s incompetence, and their disdain for working side by side, failed to convince the panel that preferential treatment for brotherhood members made sense. In a public statement after the completion of the hearings, Herbert explained that the unionists provided no evidence that the employment of black firemen on the Georgia railroad endangered the traveling public. “No traveler

⁴⁷¹ Vice President Garret Ball, *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 47 (1909), 261.

⁴⁷² “Georgia Road Not Trying to Establish Negro Supremacy,” *Augusta Chronicle*, May 22, 1909.

had ever lost his life by the carelessness of a fireman,” he explained.⁴⁷³ He reasoned that, “if experience has shown that negro firemen endangered the safety of the traveling public, the railroad company would have given them up.”⁴⁷⁴

The board also called for equal pay among black and white skilled workers. White firemen were satisfied at this point because they believed that a single salary scale would take away the financial incentive for employing blacks, and lead to increased white employment. They were wrong on this count, however. Cost was only one of the reasons the Georgia Railroad relied on black workers. The Railroad was simply not in the business of white supremacy. Black workers had been reliable and dependable employees since the antebellum period and, in the eyes of employers, their record of service earned them a spot on the fireman’s roster. While the evolving manly ideal of whiteness influenced citizens’ desires and interpretation of their work, it did not appear to shape railroad management’s hiring policy. Black men continued to serve as firemen until the 1930s, by then at higher pay.⁴⁷⁵

Conclusion

African American men who joined the ranks of Georgia’s locomotive firemen at the turn of the century were not simply taking up a new vocation. Black men’s entry into the engine cab was layered with social, political and economic significance for them, their white co-workers and Georgia’s white citizens. To some, black firemen

⁴⁷³ “Hilary A. Herbert on Negro Workmen,” *The State*, July 11, 1909.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁵ Spero and Harris, *Black Worker*, 291-294.

were dependable labor; but to others they were cowards and liabilities to public safety who needed to be eliminated.

These conflicting interpretations of black labor and black manhood shaped how employers, colleagues and communities treated black firemen men both on and off the tracks. They also directly affected the kinds of labor men performed, and how effectively, how often, and how long black men could work. Black men's opportunities to cope with the hazards of industry and racialized aspects of their interactions with employers and co-workers were likewise constrained by whites' gross stereotyping.

Black firemen faced many unique consequences in realizing their manhood through railroading as a result. The black fireman's career was characterized by incidents of racial violence and antagonism, little institutional representation, mental and physical wounds, and separation from family support networks. In order to keep their jobs, however, black men had to behave as though they were content with their work conditions. They also created their own strategies for confronting the daily dangers of railroading, but these strategies had deleterious consequences. Thus, while black firemen took pride in accepting the risks of railroading and enjoyed the financial benefits, the shifting definitions of manhood made the firing of Georgia's locomotive increasingly dangerous and costly work.

This chapter has focused much on how whites understood manhood and labor, and their efforts to police black men's relationship to the two. But, how did the work culture and work conditions of railroading shape black men's notions of

manhood or ideas about the family in particular? Chapter 5 explores black railroaders' interpretations of their identities as men and workers, and the meanings of their labor. It also considers how they attempted to use notions of family family responsibility to assert their manliness as workers in a way that physicality of railroad labor alone could not.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁶ R.W. Connell suggests, "True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies." R.W. Connell, Masculinities, 45; Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization (1995).

Chapter 5

Hammer in the Hand, Home on the Heart: Negotiating Relational and Work Identity in Black Railroad Work Songs

*Working on the railroad
Ten cents a day,
Working to get my babe some shoes.
Hopes I get my full
Week's pay,
And don't spend it for liquor or booze.*⁴⁷⁷

“Working on the Railroad Ten Cents a Day,” is one of the many tunes black railroaders in the early 1900s wrote and sang as they laid tracks, cleared roads, and worked on Southern engines. Its lyrics communicate several ways of understanding how these men approached their work and its significance. The refrain suggests, for example, that many black workers, particularly unskilled laborers, were well acquainted with wage discrimination and dishonest employers. They “hoped” for a full week’s wages but expected very little and earn even less.⁴⁷⁸ In addition, the text implies that for men, working on the railroads involved more than just endurance and

⁴⁷⁷ Newman I. White, *American Music Folk Songs* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1928), 266.

⁴⁷⁸ Ten cents a day in 1914 is equivalent to \$2.37 in 2015. This rate was well below the reported average for unskilled railroad employees. Based on national survey data, the average hourly earnings of unskilled labor on the railroads were 16.1 cents in 1914 and \$9.42 per week. In 1920, the hourly wages increased to 50 cents for an average of \$26.50 per week. The standard work week in 1914 was 58.1 hours. *Research Report Number 46: Railroad Wage and Working Rules* (National Industrial Conference Board, February 1922), 109.

physical discipline. Financial responsibility and using discretion, especially around drinking, in their off-duty and on-duty activities were critical to successfully navigating the work environment.⁴⁷⁹ We learn that the railroad environment presented both institutional and personal obstacles that could test or stifle a railroader's ability to support his "babe,"—a wife, a girlfriend or a romantic interest. Workmen felt constant tension between family responsibility, the desire to alleviate the exhaustion of labor, and fully embracing the work culture of one's railroading comrades. Working "to get my babe some shoes," identifies his woman as a primary reason for the risks he takes within the work culture and arduous nature of railroad work. However, his success as a railroad man is tied to his ability to provide for his family and/or loved ones, and not solely in his ability to lay track. The lyrics mark the significance of railroad work rooted in a man's relational identity as lover or husband and provider.

Several notable scholars, argue that Southern black men's entry into industrial work at the turn of the century was a particularly catastrophic period in the history of

⁴⁷⁹ According to railroader's wives and union officials, it was also their greatest vice and ruined their homes. This cannot be overstated. Railroaders earned reputations for on- and off-the-job drinking. Drinking with other men in public spaces was central to the shaping of industrial working class men's masculine identities. Ritual drinking helped railway men to make sense of their shared work experiences and served to mark out an oppositional space against management. Craig Heron argues that public drinking, "symbolized a collective defiance of bourgeois efforts to control them, as well as the privilege to participate in a public life that was closed to most women in their communities." Craig Heron, "The Boys and Their Booze: Masculinities and Public Drinking in Working-class Hamilton, 1890- 1946," *The Canadian Historical Review*, 86.3 (September 2005; 412; Norman Kerr, Value of Abstinence to Railway Men (New York: National Temperance Society and Publication House, 1880); Paul Michael Taillon, "What We Want is Good, Sober Men": Masculinity, Respectability and Temperance in the Railroad Brotherhood, 1870-1910," *Journal of Social History* 36.2 (2002).

black men's work-family relationships. E. Franklin Frazier's masterful work, The Negro Family in the United States, argued that rural industrialization deepened black poverty by encouraging black men to abandon their families for work in sawmills or on the railroads. Frazier writes:

Among the million Negroes who deserted the rural communities of the South, there were thousands of men and women who cut themselves loose from family and friends and sought work and adventure as solitary wanderers from place to place. Some of the men had their first glimpse of the world beyond the plantation or farm when they worked in sawmills, turpentine camps, or on the roads.⁴⁸⁰

For Frazier, black men could not handle the complexities of what he defined as a novel work-family conflict. Jacquelyn Jones concurs that the dissolution of rural black family life began when black men migrated to railroad and lumber camps in the 1880s. She shows how such men, isolated from their small agricultural communities, descended into a life of habitual drinking, prostitution, and other self-destructive activities. Jones charts the ways in which such self-destructive escape mechanisms dominated the "all male camp" a place she describes as "a little man made hell where men were stripped of all dignity and of the hope that flows from the nearness of and contact with family members."⁴⁸¹ This work culture among a range of black industrial workers, many scholars conclude, contributed significantly to the ruin of black families.

⁴⁸⁰ E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 272.

⁴⁸¹ Jacqueline Jones, The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 156.

Certainly, some black men's prolonged familial absences led them to cheat on their wives and spend time drinking and gossiping at male bars and backrooms.⁴⁸² Indeed, many wives had good reason to worry that their spouses would squander their wages on commercial sex, while toiling in the industrial towns along the railroad route. Most industrial communities saw prostitution as a 'necessary evil,' and employers generally refrained from policing men's marriages.⁴⁸³ Unfortunately, the paucity of black railway unions and union records prior to World War I makes it difficult for scholars to locate black male workers who either directly or indirectly articulated their feelings about laboring and its relation to their family life.

But thanks to early twentieth century folklorists, who have gathered a rich body of railroad camp songs and stories written and sung by workers themselves, historians have a unique archive that offers us a perspective on railroaders' experiences, in particular their efforts to construct a work, gender, and familial identity that kept them going. This archive of creative production reveals that family responsibility was neither an afterthought or a liability for many black railroaders. On the contrary, many black workers put their periods of of isolation from loved ones to

⁴⁸² Railroaders earned reputations for on- and off-the-job drinking. Drinking with other men in public spaces was central to the shaping of industrial working class men's masculine identities. Ritual drinking helped railway men to make sense of their shared work experiences and served to mark out an oppositional space against management. Craig Heron argues that public drinking, "symbolized a collective defiance of bourgeois efforts to control them, as well as the privilege to participate in a public life that was closed to most women in their communities." Craig Heron, "The Boys and Their Booze: Masculinities and Public Drinking in Working-class Hamilton, 1890- 1946," *The Canadian Historical Review* 86.3 (September 2005), 412; Norman Kerr, *Value of Abstinence to Railway Men* (New York: National Temperance Society and Publication House, 1880).

⁴⁸³ Julie Ann Laite, "Historical Perspective on Industrial Development, Mining, and Prostitution," *The Historical Journal* 52. 3 (September 2009): 739-761.

good use: they saved substantial sums of money and provided for wives and children. Moreover, their familial identities were crucial in giving meaning and value to their degradingly harsh work lives away from home.

Railroaders' work songs served laboring men in a number of ways.⁴⁸⁴ They helped set and synchronize a collective work pace. They distracted the men from the the challenge of arduous and grueling labor. Railroaders sang as they replaced rotten ties, tamped down the gravel between them, spiked rails and laid tracks. The track itself was heavy, and moving it required a coordinated effort by the track gang. Some of the songs were sung by different teams of workers to goad and satirize each other, which helped them escape and yet stay focused on the task.⁴⁸⁵ Refrains were usually led by a crew leader in a call and response fashion.

In addition to bringing workers together physically and emotionally, song allowed workers to communicate shared concerns and vent their frustrations. It also provided a means through which black workers could rhetorically and creatively construct their own gender and work identities within extraordinarily repressive

⁴⁸⁴ The existing scholarship on workers' music refers to workers' musical creations as "work songs," "labor songs," and "folklore songs" among others. Rafael Gely proposes using the term "workplace songs," which he explains, includes occupational songs—songs to pass the time at work—, work songs—songs that allow a worker to voice their work complaints—, and "labor songs"—songs that generate a sense of class consciousness. Rafael Gely, "Workplace Songs: Developing a Framework for Research and Teaching," *The International Journal of Comparative Labour Law and Industrial Relations* 25. 1 (2009): 52-54; T. Gioia, *Work Songs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 231.

⁴⁸⁵ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1978), 212.

work environments.⁴⁸⁶ Such articulations of workers' grievances and aspirations enabled them to exercise some form of agency over their situation and gave voice to a demographic which might otherwise have been deemed inarticulate.⁴⁸⁷

To be sure, work songs cannot provide historians with a comprehensive understanding of individual railroaders' experience of family bonds and arrangements; they communicate more about men's desires and ideals than they do men's actual familial practices. Still, as the collective creation of the workers, they capture the sorrows, desires, complaints, and anxieties that occupied the collective consciousness of railroad workers as they experienced the routine drudgery of daily toil. By analyzing these sources, we can learn what railroaders found meaningful about work and family, and how they endured their relationships to their families while away at work.

In this chapter, I analyze the songs black men created and sang as they worked in order to better understand how Southern black railroaders represented and understood two aspects of their lives, family and work. Compared to black skilled workers, whose positions offered them tangible economic benefits and public prestige, unskilled black employees were poorly-paid. By the 1890s, their work was deemed unmanly, according to the rethinking of definitions of American manhood

⁴⁸⁶ Michael McCoyer, "'Rough Mens' in the 'Toughest Places I Ever Seen': The Construction and Ramifications of Black Masculine Identity in the Mississippi Delta's Levee Camps, 1900-1935," *International Labor & Working Class History* 69 (2006).

⁴⁸⁷ According to Lawrence Gellert, an independent music collector in the 1930s, "these songs aside from their musical and literary worth are human documents [and] embody the living voice of the otherwise inarticulate." Lawrence Gellert, *Negro Songs of Protest* (New York: American Music League, 1936), 14.

that emerged in that period. Now, both physical strength *and* intellectual acumen was required of proper men.⁴⁸⁸ However, unskilled black men's work songs sought to elevate the significance of their work by connecting their degrading labor with the fulfillment of familial obligation and duty. Their lyrics emphasized fulfilling the needs of women and beloved children, giving deep meaning to their otherwise repetitive and unfulfilling work lives.⁴⁸⁹ In so doing, they presented themselves as family-oriented laborers whose concern for their loved ones dictated when, where, and how they worked. Similarly, their criticisms of the railroad environment were based on the ways in which work stifled their attempts to embody traditional measures of manhood as financial providers for their wives and children. Railroading was more than just a physical task for black men; it involved engaging in a network of relations among employers, co-workers, supervisors and unstable work conditions, all of which could negatively affect men's earnings and family life. As we will see, black railroaders considered financial provision as their most important family contribution, and thus drew a direct connection between economic discrimination on the job and family dissolution at home.

⁴⁸⁸ See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the shifting measures of American manhood at the turn of the century.

⁴⁸⁹ The songs used for this chapter have been culled from several edited collections of folklore. They include, for example, Howard Odum's two published collections of African American folk song, *The Negro and His Songs* (1925) and *Negro Workday Songs* (1926), which focused on the South's folk life, specifically its black folk music and the folks culture of the "common man." Many of these collectors set out to capture a "traditional black folk culture" that they feared was vanishing in the face of modern civilization. Alan Lomax, in particular, used sound recording to create what he called "sound photographs of Negro songs, rendered in their own element," fearing the loss of this art form to modern progress and industrialization. It fair to assume then that these collections are not free of problems connected to selection and editing process. Still, their works contain transcribed and, in some cases, recorded songs as they were actually performed by the workers themselves.

Origins of the Work Song

Many scholars trace the origins of the African American workplace song tradition to slavery, when enslaved people's performative culture, which included songs, ceremonies and festivals, offered, at times, a counterpoint to their oppression. In his seminal study of blues history and culture, *Blues People*, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) contended that the work song "was the music of the second generation of slaves" and evolved from their "musical origins in West Africa."⁴⁹⁰ The music of slave culture was diverse. Lyrics were improvised and articulated whatever was on the mind of the vocalizer. Historian Lawrence Levine observes that "there were songs of in-group and out-group satire, songs of nostalgia, nonsense songs, children's songs, lullabies, songs of play and work and love."⁴⁹¹ A song might tell of loves lost, tired bodies, or the birth of a new child.

As men and women worked in the fields, the songs they sang were called out by a single voice, or, if a group was working together, one individual would sing a line and other workers would repeat it. The rhythm of this call and response facilitated cooperation between workers doing both solitary and collective tasks in the fields during their long workdays.⁴⁹² Depending on the type of work, rhythm was kept by

⁴⁹⁰ Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (Harper Perennial Publishing, 1999), 18.

⁴⁹¹ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 15.

⁴⁹² Austin Sonnier, Jr., *A Guide to the Blues: History, Who's Who, Research Sources* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 7.

clapping hands or using their tools as instruments. For instance, a worker required to chop wood could establish a song's rhythm with the axe striking against the wood.

White slave owners and overseers assumed that a singing slave was a happy slave..⁴⁹³ Frederick Douglass's autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, notes that masters and overseers grew suspicious of slaves who were quiet. "A silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers," he recalled. 'Make a noise, make a noise,' and 'bear a hand' are the words usually addressed to the slaves when there is silence among them."⁴⁹⁴ Owners also assumed that enslaved people's limited vocabulary restricted their ability to communicate through words or songs, leading them to conclude that slave songs were primitive and non-symbolic.⁴⁹⁵ Interestingly, Douglass confessed that when he was a slave even he "did not... understand the deep meanings of those rude and apparently incoherent songs."⁴⁹⁶ Historians now know that enslaved people's communication to one another expanded over time: their

⁴⁹³ Lawrence-McIntyre explains that most, "masters felt that the singing of spirituals reflected the slaves' inner sense of well-being, and they placed comparatively few restrictions on their use." C.C. Lawrence-McIntyre, "The double meanings of the spirituals." *Journal of Black Studies* 17, 389.

⁴⁹⁴ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, (Boston, 1855)

⁴⁹⁵ As successive generations of enslaved people learned English, their calls incorporated English language words, a development that would have made them intelligible to whites, at least to some degree. Still, slaves continued to sing songs that contained either no or very few English words. African American vocal music also sounded strange to many whites not only because of its use of harsh tones but also because slave singers inflected the pitches of notes in ways distinct from regular melodic practice in Western art music. Shane White and Graham White, "'Us like a Mixtery': Listening to African American Slave Music," *Slavery and Abolition*, 20.3 (1990): 40.

⁴⁹⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 13.

songs became more complex and potentially subversive.⁴⁹⁷ Verses of the song “Follow the Drinking Gourd” for example actually instructed escaping slaves to use the constellation we call “The Big Dipper” to help them find their way North.

Some of the songs of the enslaved expressed a range of news, such as the whereabouts of a missing slave, secret plans for revolt, or plans for escape. Lyrics directed them to a meeting place or a specific underground escape route.⁴⁹⁸ Black people also communicated to one another through songs in order to solidify membership in a community that hoped to strengthen their collective identity as slaves. Spirituals, in particular, both in the act of singing and in listening to the words of the songs were a critical part of countermanding the master’s ideology, utilizing metaphors from the Bible to do so.⁴⁹⁹ This form of rhetorical resistance enabled them to continually refute the definitions and assumptions on which their bondage was based. These collective acts of resistance helped strengthen morale. In spirituals, for example, they defined themselves as God’s chosen people, reinforcing a sense of their divine worth.⁵⁰⁰ Many songs were coded to denigrate masters and overseers in

⁴⁹⁷ Bryan Sinclair argues that bondspeople’s illiteracy had little impact on the quality of their religious life. They would often set the stories they heard from the Bible and preachers to memory. Bryan T. Sinclair, “Merging Streams: The Importance of the River in the Slaves’ Religious World,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 53.2 (1997): 10.

⁴⁹⁸ Slaves’ songs, Douglass explains, “told a tale of woe... they were tones loud, long and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.” Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 14.

⁴⁹⁹ Josephine Wright, “Songs of Remembrance,” *The Journal of African American History* 91.4 (Autumn 2006).

⁵⁰⁰ See Rev. Solomon Iyobosa Omo-Osagie II, ““Their Souls Made Them Whole”: Negro Spirituals and Lesson in Healing and Atonement,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 31.2 (2007); Sociologist Richard Flacks argues that singing is a form of role playing, requiring one to take the identity articulated in the song, at least momentarily. This process, he argues,

metaphors unrecognizable to whites. ⁵⁰¹ The construction of a social space where discontent and antagonism could be freely articulated was no small achievement in a regime that repressed even the most modest acts of disobedience.

Following the Civil War, African Americans scattered throughout the South and engaged in different types of labor, but they continued to create new songs about their still onerous work environments. By the 1870s, these work songs became more widespread. They could be found among workers building levees and railroads, laboring in mining camps, prisons, and lumber yards, and on ships and plantations.⁵⁰² Wherever they worked, there was song. Booker T. Washington maintained that “whenever companies of Negroes were working together, in the cotton fields and tobacco factories, on the levees and steamboats, on sugar plantations and ... in the fervor of religious gatherings, these melodies sprang to life.”⁵⁰³ Sociologist Howard Odum travelled through Georgia and Mississippi collecting African American songs in the early 1900s. “The railroad and sections gangs, the contractors, hands, the mining groups and convict labor camps,” he wrote, “all echo with the sound of shovel and pick and song.”⁵⁰⁴

may be further reinforced by collective signing, a symbolic gesture whereby participants demonstrate membership in, and commitment to, the group. Richard Flacks, *Culture and Social Movements: Exploring the Power of Song*. Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association. Chicago. August 1999.

⁵⁰¹ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 240.

⁵⁰² Ronald D. Cohen, *Work and Sing: A History of Occupational and Labor Union Songs in the United States* (Crockett: Carquinez Press, 2010), 5.

⁵⁰³ “Preface.” Booker T. Washington. *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies Transcribed for the Piano* (Boston: Oliver Ditson Company, 1905), p. viii.

⁵⁰⁴ Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson, *Negro Workaday Songs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 7.

These songs often mirrored the ones sung during slavery, in that they too dealt, “with the subject of labor... [and were] accompanied by the rhythmic movements of the work, thereby making the task easier.”⁵⁰⁵ They also mounted subtly veiled critiques of oppressive labor systems and the often heartless personnel that managed them. Even the white foreman who listened to them could not discern the political critique embedded in the lyrics. Bruce Jackson, a historian of southern blues, concludes that, “there is a long tradition in the South of [blacks] being permitted to sing things [they] were not permitted to say... it is as if sung words were not real.”⁵⁰⁶ Speaking of the early 19th century black work songs, Guy Johnson also noted that “the Negro in his songs sometimes takes off his mask and gives us that mean look which he would like to give us oftener if he dared.”⁵⁰⁷ Singing and song-making were not just forms of resisting masters and managers, they were also vehicles through which black workers could create their own perspective on identity and the meaning of their work environments.

Historians of slavery and black culture were among the first to recognize the value of African American music and lyrics to understanding black people’s interiority. John Blassingame’s The Slave Community, Eugene Genovese’s Roll, Jordan, Roll and Lawrence Levine’s Black Culture and Black Consciousness, among others, helped pioneer the growing scholarship on how slave songs can expand our

⁵⁰⁵ Austin Sonnier, Jr., A Guide to the Blues (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 7.

⁵⁰⁶ Bruce Jackson, Wake Up Dead Man: Hard Labor and Southern Blues (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 30.

⁵⁰⁷ Guy B. Johnson, “Negro Folk Song,” in W.T. Cough, ed., Culture in the South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 564.

historical interpretation of the slave experience.⁵⁰⁸ Singing was a meaning-making activity for enslaved people, one of the few activities available to them that enabled them to redefine themselves while living under a brutal and oppressive regime. “The slaves’ expressive arts and sacred beliefs,” historian Larry Levine observes, “were more than merely a series of outlets or strategies; they were instruments of life, of sanity of health, and of self-respect.”⁵⁰⁹ The earlier work of historians such as Stanley Elkins, who argued that slaves lost their will to resist and became childlike within the confines of an often vicious regime was set aside.⁵¹⁰ In its place the work summarized above confirmed suspicions that no matter how confining the system was black people found ways to exercise forms of personal autonomy when possible. This chapter takes a similar approach to the lyrics of Southern black railroad songs as system for black workers to construct an affirming definition of their work and familial identities.

A Note on Sources and Selection

During the 1930s, collecting, archiving and documenting American history reached new heights. Historians are privileged to have access to a range of edited collections gathered by folklorists who set out to capture black folk culture in the

⁵⁰⁸ John W. Blasingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974). Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness.

⁵⁰⁹ Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, ix.

⁵¹⁰ Stanley M. Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

South before it vanished completely in the face of relentless modernization. The songs cited in this chapter have been culled from a range of catalogues created in this period and beyond. They include, for example, two published collections of African American folk songs by Howard Odum, The Negro and His Songs (1925), and Negro Workday Songs (1926). Both focus on the South, and more specifically, on the music of black people. Also helpful have been Alan Lomax's collection of the ballads of Western cowboys, Southern tenant farmers, and the "field hollers and moans" of southern levee camp and lumber mill workers. Fearing the loss of this art form to modern progress and industrialization, Lomax's approach was unique among his contemporaries. He used sound recording to create what he called "sound photographs of Negro songs, rendered in their own element."⁵¹ The truth of black folk songs, he implies, is evidenced by its lack of cultivation: authenticity manifests in simple forms.

It is important to note that Lomax and other collectors had a special interest in certain kinds of singers, songs and experiences. He prized traditional folk music, located, he said, in the "eddies of human society" that were "dammed up" in self-contained homogenous communities cut off from the corrupting influences of

⁵¹ Lomax's idealization of the mechanics of recording is typical of the era: "The needle writes on the disc with tireless accuracy the subtle inflections, the melodies, the pauses that comprise the emotional meaning of speech, spoken and sung. In this way folklore can be truly recorded." Alan Lomax, Selected Writings: 1934-1997. Ed. Ronald D. Cohen. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 64.

popular culture.⁵¹² It is fair to assume that despite this goal, the collections are not free of problems created by the selection and editing process.⁵¹³ In fact, Paige McGinley, suggests that Lomax was often frustrated with what he considered inauthentic or “made up” songs that he believed were not true to the singer or the demographic.⁵¹⁴ Folklorists could and did “capture” songs they found useful, while ignoring others that did not fit their expectations of “authentic” black music.

Nevertheless, the documentary projects of Lomax and others contain transcribed and, in some cases, recorded songs as they were actually performed by the workers themselves. Many of these them appear without analysis of the text and some musical notation. The compositions, therefore, are rich with values and cultural experiences, and are an important resource for scholars and archivists.

The songs discussed in this chapter represent a small subsection of the archive of Southern black railroaders’ music. The larger archive contains black workers’ songs which in varying degrees, address a range of themes: family, relationships, manhood, identity and work. Many of these refrains discuss work without addressing kinship. Consider, for example, the chorus “John Henry.”⁵¹⁵

⁵¹² John A. and Alan Lomax, eds. *Negro Folks Songs as Sung by Leadbelly, “King of the Twelve-String Guitar Players of the World,” Long Time Convict in the Penitentiaries of Texas and Louisiana*. (New York: MacMillan, 1936), 35.

⁵¹³ For critiques of Lomax see, P.B. Mullen, *The Man Who Adores the Negro: Race and American Folklore* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2008); Aaron N. Oforlea, “[Un]veiling the White Gaze: Revealing Self and Other in The Land Where the Blues Began,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 36.4 (2012); Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 157-187.

⁵¹⁴ Paige A. McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014) 23.

⁵¹⁵ John Work, *American Negro Songs and Spirituals* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1940), 233.

*This is the hammer that killed John Henry
This is the hammer that killed John Henry
This is the hammer that killed John Henry
But it won't kill me Lord, but it won't kill me*

John Henry's story began at Big Ben Tunnel, West Virginia, in 1872. He was employed as a steel driver on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. He gained everlasting fame when he defeated a steam drill in a contest organized to determine which of the two—man or machine-- could drive a spike deeper into a rock surface being prepared for blasting. Unfortunately, John Henry's victory was a costly one, because he died soon after from exertion that caused a ruptured blood vessel. The larger meaning of John Henry's feat represented an early example of American workers whose jobs were being threatened gradually by automation and technology. John Henry became an instant hero to black workers especially, and his memory has been kept alive in a range of folk songs written about him.

In the refrain quoted above, this singer consciously and confidently embraces the risks of railroad work, just like John Henry did. Though John Henry lost his life, the singer declares he will avoid death through his mastery on the job. For him, confronting and surviving the dangers of railroad work is a heroic act, making him a man to be reckoned with and his work special. Rather than John Henry being a cautionary tale about railroad labor, this lyricist uses Henry's story as a proud tale for future laborers to celebrate. According to the lyrics, men working on the rails can do what John Henry failed to do by mastering their work. Emphasizing resilience and hardiness in the pursuit of a legendary status also disavows the potential injuries inflicted through the work. The glory of surviving in the wake of John Henry's demise

obscures the realities of railroad work, perhaps purposefully. Railroad men were more likely to be maimed, inhale lethal dust, or die before they could enjoy a full career without incident. This chorus suggests that some unskilled railroaders took pride in the perils of their work when they could not glory in their pay.

This chapter explores another source black railroaders drew upon to understand their work and their connections to it: family ties and responsibility. Through song, men used familial relationships to critique railroad work and justify their engagement in this taxing and demeaning system from which many struggled to eke out a meager existence.

Representing Railroading as a Labor of Love

While Frazier posited that industrial work allowed black men to “cut themselves loose from family,” the following two work songs, “Don’ Let Yo Watch” and “Black Gal” demonstrate how some black men, in fact, knit together their work away from home on the rails with their positive familial relationships, seeing themselves as active romantic partners despite the distance couples often had to endure. “Don’ Let Yo Watch” depicts one side of a conversation between an employee and his supervisor about his work hours. The worker/singer is presumably engaged in some taxing and squalid labor, the type of work that railroad men generally sought to avoid altogether, or at the very least, seek an occasional reprieve from. However, the vocalist asks his supervisor for an extended work period.

*Don' let yo' watch run down, Cap'n, Don' let yo' watch run down.
Workin on' de railroad, mud up to my knees,*

*Workin' for my Lulu, she's a hard ole gal to please.*⁵¹⁶

By the end of the standard twelve-hour shift, railroaders must have already been exhausted, so asking for more work was no casual request. Moreover, tired workers were all the more susceptible to accidents— high rates of fatalities in railroad work was caused by derailments, land slides, explosions and a host of other workplace dangers.⁵¹⁷ Yet, this worker is willing to embrace additional risks because someone is depending on him. He wants to please “my Lulu”—his wife or romantic interest— but also implies that she is not satisfied with what he can provide from his standard earnings. She is a “hard ole gal to please.” Whatever he gains (money) or loses (life or limb) as a result of his extra hours of work is nevertheless for her. By coupling Lulu’s interests to his labor productivity, the worker portrays himself as a man willing to sacrifice, one who disregards his own wellbeing for Lulu’s needs. His self-image, however is manly. Though low paying and grueling, his work is honorable because he is using all his resources and enduring “mud up to [his] knees” to provide for his partner.

Similarly, in the song “Black Gal,” a worker claims to be laboring exclusively to satisfy his female companion’s material desires.

*Well, that Black gal keep on a grumblin
bout a new pair of shoes, bout a new pair of shoes
Yes that black gal keeps on a grumblin*

⁵¹⁶ Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1955), 370.

⁵¹⁷ Cicero Fain, “Into the Crucible: The Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad and the Black Industrial Worker in Southern West Virginia, 1870-1900,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 17. 2 (Spring 2011): 46.

*bout a new pair of shoes, bout a new pair of shoes.*⁵¹⁸

As in the previous song, the railroader's partner is in want. A new pair of shoes is her desire, perhaps because to serve as a marker of social status and household wealth among other women. The tone of the lyrics suggest that the woman's desires place a financial and emotional strain on her partner. That he calls her requests "grumbling" implies that she is dissatisfied with what she already has, which the singer may have previously provided. The singer's use of the label "that black gal," rather than "my black gal" is somewhat distancing, suggesting tension in the relationship, perhaps because he has come to see her as a financial burden. Although the new pair of shoes is her most immediate request, it is not necessarily the only one she has made of him. The fact that costly demands occupy his mind while he works also suggests that her wants, in part, motivate his labor. For the vocalist, his efforts on the rails can provide some relief from a contentious personal relationship. The more money he makes at work, the more satisfied his woman will be and the less "grumblin" he'll hear at home. Far from emancipating themselves from their families, many black men sought to retain and reinforce familial connections through industrial work and song.

Evidently, some black railroaders believed their economic contributions amounted to more than just providing the basic necessities for their families. The song "Good-bye Pretty Mamma," demonstrates that some men believed that their wages could elevate the social status of their women. This vocalist and his woman

⁵¹⁸ Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1960), 546-547.

are separating. The singer, perhaps in an attempt to cope with the pain of a lost relationship, revels in the prospect of the break up.

*I'm gonna take those shoes I bought you,
Put yo' feet on de groun', Put yo' feet on de groun'
I'm gonna leave you jes' like I foun' you,
All out an' down, All out an' down
I ain' gonna buy you nothin' else,
When I go to town, When I go to town*⁵¹⁹

He claims to have been her her economic provider, a fact that helped her build a better life. He “found” her when she was “out an’ down.” His efforts and his gifts brought her security and self-worth. He sees himself as having endured the grit and grime of railroad work so that her needs would be met and she would not have to work. He helped her become the “Pretty Mamma” of the title. Without his support, he predicts her quality of life will drastically decline. Reclaiming the shoes he bought her indicates serious anger and in fact her possible betrayal.

Shoes form one of the primary boundaries between the body and the world. Not only do they enable walking protected by the dangers on the ground, they enable people to travel long distances and even explore hostile landscapes.⁵²⁰ One might argue in this song, and many others, that “shoes” serve as a metaphor for individual agency. Without her shoes—which provide both a practical and signifying function — she will have to “put her feet on the ground;” she will have to work for what she

⁵¹⁹ Alan Lomax and John A. Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: MacMillan Company Inc., 1960), 20.

⁵²⁰ Eleanor Margolies, “Were those boots made just for walking? Shoes as performing objects in everyday life and in the theatre.” *Visual Communication* 2.2 (2003): 172.

desires. Without the railroader as her provider, she will lose her status as a “pretty mamma.”

“Good-bye Pretty Mamma,” implies that despite men’s paltry wages and extended absences from home, women were still dependent on them. The implication that railroad women did not contribute to men’s earnings or to their own livelihood was certainly not true in real life. Railroader’s wives contributed essential unpaid domestic labor to men’s families that kept them functioning in the workplace, cared for children and the elderly and buttressed family economies against potential income fluctuations. Women planted vegetable gardens, kept hens, mended clothes and manufactured items that would otherwise have to be purchased with cash.⁵²¹ Some women earned money by taking in washing or boarding railroaders. Husbands generally disliked their wives “taking strangers in as boarders” but understood their pay was often not enough to meet expenditures.”⁵²² Recounting his tour of railroad men’s house, a BLF spell out commentator claimed he did not find, “one railroad man’s wife who did not, with her own hands, fashion some article to adorn its cozy rooms.”⁵²³ It is clear that many black railway employees, though occupying one of the most physically demanding and dangerous occupations, aspired to keep their

⁵²¹ According to a cost of living investigation by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1916, a constantly increasing amount of firemen’s income went to food and rent and a decreasing amount went to clothing and luxuries. Carter, *Hearings of Federal Wage Commission*, 65.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 275.

⁵²³ *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 53 (1912), 277.

wives from working outside the home as well.⁵²⁴ Railroad men's belief that their quality work could keep their women "pretty," suggests that they still idealized the patriarchal family structure while engaged in industrial wage work apart from their families.

"*Workin' on the Railroad Line*," yet another favorite of black railroaders conveys the centrality of men's wage labor to their vision of their domestic responsibilities by correlating links between domestic turmoil and the sometimes inconsistent paychecks they brought home.

*Listen Big Boy what I hear the people say
On the railroad line
Yo' gal's goin' quit you 'cause you
Never gets no pay
Workin' on the railroad line
Get you a gal like mine
Workin' on the railroad line.*⁵²⁵

The melody appears to be one part of a conversation between a veteran railroad worker and a novice trainman about the tensions between love and labor in their demanding world. The songster (a veteran) warns "Big Boy" about the potential difficulties that the sustained economic exploitation caused for married men. A man's prolonged familial absences and extended work days were not always able to make up for the unpredictability of an individual's pay. Families were often plagued by

⁵²⁴ Charles W. Maier, Third Vice Grand Master of BLF, declared that, "were it possible to avoid it she [the fireman's wife] should never become a breadwinner... Such conditions, arising from whatever cause, are to be deplored and ought not to exist." Similarly, a BLF Magazine contributor bemoaned the experience of firemen's wives, "in the factories, in the mines, in the sweat shops bearing the threefold burden of house keeping, of maternity, of wage-earning, [as] a condition worse than slavery."

⁵²⁵ Work, *American Negro Songs and Spirituals*, 245.

uncertain and inconsistent household incomes, a situation that placed additional stresses on worker's wives.

The pressures wives often felt cannot be understated. Men expected them to stretch an already modest income often at the woman's personal expense. In his 1918 testimony before the Federal Wage Commission, for example, W.S. Carter, International President of Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Engineers, described the "ideal" railroader's wife as someone "who wastes no calories in food preparation," a person with "expert knowledge of sewing," and "a graduate in domestic economy."⁵²⁶ In her essay, "Pleas of Veteran's Wife," Kathryn Middleton, the wife of a veteran railway man testified to the Federal Wage Commission that she had "to wear back-number apparel" and had "never a dollar spent for pleasures" when her husband became a railroader. During the inevitable labor shortages, she continued, "I had to dress by no means in accordance with my tastes or desires. My husband and I both tried to work and save."⁵²⁷ In addition to being frugal and working for pay themselves on occasion, many wives also took responsibility for tasks that were traditionally considered the province of men: chopping wood and making minor household repairs when necessary.⁵²⁸

⁵²⁶ Carter, *Hearings of Federal Wage Commission*, 94.

⁵²⁷ "Plea of a Veteran's Wife," *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen's Magazine* 52 (1912), 120.

⁵²⁸ Marriage was an advantage for trainmen. A wife saved money considerably over and above what she added for her own maintenance. The Women's Department of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen described the importance of firemen's wives labor in several op-eds and literary pieces. For example, in the short poem "Santa Claus Auxiliary." This article describes the unsung role of "Misses Claus" to the more celebrated work of Santa Claus. *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen's Magazine* 42-43 (1907), 860.

Many women found the burden of managing the railroad household exasperating and isolating. Wives often felt abandoned and exploited by their husbands. The archives of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Engineers Magazine, for example, feature letters from women who complained that railroaders simply did not acknowledge the toll such work took on their spouses.⁵²⁹ At the Twelfth Biennial Conference of the BLF, Mrs. Georgie Sargent, Grand President of the Ladies Society accused some men of being “narrow-minded” because “he doesn’t think how much he goes away from and leaves his wife there at home day in and day out.”⁵³⁰ “Many good and loyal women,” she continued, “are shamefully neglected by the one who promised to love and cherish,” reported a member of the BLF Ladies Society. Husbands “seem to forget that a woman has a right to live and enjoy any of the pleasures of life.”⁵³¹ Trainmen’s wives were often frustrated that their husbands were either unwilling or unable to meet their emotional and economic needs. As a result, many of them “quit” their relationships, confirming men’s interpretation of the connection between steady income and happy wives.

Another railroad wife composed a short poem on the experience of being married to a fireman which ended with: “We’ve offered them the homage received by the knights of old and they have left us alone ‘til the night’s old.”⁵³² One singer

⁵²⁹ A BLFE leader cautioned men not to get used to women’s unselfishness: “Men get so used to woman’s unselfishness that they take it as their just due but every wife performs dozens of unselfish acts everyday of her life that no one but herself is ever aware of.” *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 46-47 (1909), 153.

⁵³⁰ *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 49 (1910), 111.

⁵³¹ *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 52 (1912), 589.

⁵³² *Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen’s Magazine* 32 (1902), 589.

advises a new worker that should he pursue a career in railroading, he should find a woman who can handle a lack of steady income or is willing to support him even when he cannot support her. This conclusion suggests that both men and women in the world of railroading needed to prepare for disruptions in family life and income, two traditional measures of manhood. Railroading could upend men's earnings and, with it their familial roles and responsibilities.

“Working on De Railroad” captures the disdain many black trainmen had for their work. The inconsistent wages, cheating bosses, difficult tasks, dangerous work conditions, and long days left many feeling bitter. Consequently, through song, they depict railroading as a lackluster trade with little economic rewards and no personal benefits.

*Workin' on de railroad, fifty cents a day.
De boss at de comp'ny sto sign all I makes
Away.⁵³³
Mammy po'ly write, “Please sen' money,
Son.”
But I ain't got no ready made money!
But I ain't go no ready made money, my God
Damn black soul I can't send her none*

*Trouble never layin' dead on de bottom of dis
Here worl'
Every thin' you can see shinin' ain't no gol'
Railroad it completed, cars a-running on de*

⁵³³ Stores were known to carry high quality merchandise but largely at inflated prices compared to cash-only stores. Some employers gave workers payment of wages in store goods. This system was arbitrarily enforced, especially when work was scarce, for then men's necessities were taken advantage of and their wages paid in part or in whole in store goods, at exorbitant prices. The geographic isolation of some railroad stores made the company store a necessity and laborers could not go find a better bargain if they wanted to. Laura Sawyer, “Contested Meanings of Freedom: Workingmen's Wages, the Company Store System, and the *Godcharles v. Wigeman* Decision,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 12.3 (July 2013): 294.

*Track.
No mo' work for me here here abouts,
Time for packing up de ol' raggedy grip sack.*

*Helped to build dat railroad, can't afford no
Ridin' tag.
Walkin' long side de track, hungry wantin' to
Eat.
Dog dead tired, shoes were out, and Lawd,
Burnin' blisters on my feet.⁵³⁴*

The song portrays the actions and personal experiences of a worker who invests his labor into the building of a railroad, but receives almost nothing in return. He is underpaid—50 cents a day—and does not even see much of that because of his employer's dishonesty. Time-keepers often short-timed black workers anywhere from \$1.00 to \$5.00 a week.⁵³⁵ Thus, when he needs cash—"ready made money"—to take care of his desperate mother, for example, it is not available. His employer's underhandedness and his subsequent failure to perform his manly duties hurts him so deeply that he feels as if he has sinned in not being able to support his mother. This realization prompts the exclamation: "my God Damn black soul I can't send her none." Moreover, when the railroad was finally completed he did not have the money to purchase a ticket to travel on the line. Tired and hungry, he was forced to walk along the tracks he helped build as he headed to find another railroad camp and start this cycle all over again. The walk was not only emotionally taxing but physically draining as well. His worn out shoes left him without the necessary support for his

⁵³⁴ Lawrence Gellert, *Negro Songs of Protest* (New York: American Music League, 1936), 35.

⁵³⁵ Steven Reich, *The Making of a Southern Sawmill World: Race, Class and Rural Transformation in the Piney Woods of East Texas, 1830-1930*. Dissertation, Northwestern University. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 1998 (Publication No. AAT 9913873), 140.

weary joints and lower body. Railroading, the song explains, “ain’t no gol[d]” and the man in search of prestige and stability through this occupation will only be frustrated and exploited.

Much like the previous tune, “East Colorado” suggests that there was no consolation—financial or otherwise— for men from the familial separation that railroading required. For some black men, having to move from job to job or spend weeks at a time at a great distance from their homes was unbearably painful.

*I want to see my wife and children
Oh yes I do, do, Buddy yes I do
Cap-n Walker where in the world did you come from?
When’d you come here, here buddy when’d you come here?
Captain send me down a cool drink of water
Just to heal my side, side, buddy just to heal my side. Evalina.*⁵³⁶

“East Colorado” provides one of the most overt expressions of familial affection in the archive of black railroad work songs. The chorus begins with a man confessing a longing for his wife and children to a co-worker. He misses them and wants to see them. Because he cannot just leave work to check on them, he turns to “Captain Walker,” presumably a locomotive engineer whose tasks involve extensive travel along railroad lines, to inquire about his train route and schedule. The songster is hopeful that Walker has heard from or seen his wife. News about “Evalina” is a balm and “a cool drink of water” for the weary worker. This song serves as evidence that railroaders claimed to possess strong emotional ties with their families that were tested, but not severed, by job related absence. Certainly, the amusements (or

⁵³⁶ Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 94-95.

temptations) of railroad towns had much to offer tired workers, but the songs represent the “adventure” of living as “solitary wanderers from place to place” as difficult and lonely, compared with the opportunity to reunite with family.⁵³⁷ Time off is represented as the greatest pleasure for these men. In fact, it could improve the quality of their work; family life and labor could support each other, they proposed. Unfortunately, in railroad work, their roles as economic providers and emotional caregivers were constantly at odds.

The emotional and economic strains of work on the rails were sometimes too much for families to bear. In 1908, Sociologist Frederick Hoffman concluded that long work days meant “no time or energy ... left for the development of the healthy home life essential to the welfare of the nation.” Rather than improving their family’s conditions, Hoffman claimed, “the men employed for such long hours are taxed beyond their strength and the physical exhaustion, day after day, week after week, soon results in a lower standard of life.”⁵³⁸ Sociologist William Cottrell confirmed that railroaders’ schedules alienated them from their families: “It prevents normal relationships between wife and husband, father and child... these time relationships also interfere with normal family group activities such as eating, sleeping, and recreation.”⁵³⁹ Wives, he found, had to get up at odd hours to prepare meals for their husbands, while also maintaining regular mealtimes for their children. If their

⁵³⁷ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, 272.

⁵³⁸ Frederick L. Hoffman, “Mortality from Consumption in Dusty Trades,” *Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908), 453.

⁵³⁹ William Cottrell, *The Railroader* (Stanford University, Stanford University Press, 1940), 77.

husbands slept during the day, wives had the difficult task of quietly cleaning, cooking and entertaining their children so their husbands could rest for work.⁵⁴⁰ Moreover, if the demands of the household were too much for a man to deal with, his travels provided him an escape from the home, something which often undermined family stability .

Railroaders' wives experienced many of the consequences of the men's inability to participate actively in household affairs most acutely. Family tensions sometimes culminated in separation, desertion or divorce, as Jacqueline Jones observes. Based on the work-family obligations in railroad households, Cottrell subsequently concluded that only men with limited familial attachment would even consider embracing the railroading post: "Those who enter the work are men who are ready and able to make immediate sacrifice for future gain who value income above family life."⁵⁴¹ What these scholars do not account for, however, is that black railroaders tried hard to balance family life with their work responsibilities. The song lyrics demonstrate that family stability was a goal for black workers, and its challenges were a familiar topic of conversation. This was especially true for those in unskilled positions, who struggled to provide a steady income and a steady presence in their families. The theme of family dissolution appears in the chorus "Heavy Hipted Woman," for example:

*Quit yo long time talkin bout yo heavy hipted woman
She done gone, oh babe, she done gone
Quit yo long time talkin bout yo heavy hipted woman*

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵⁴¹ Cottrell, *The Railroader*, 79.

*She done gone, oh babe, she done gone*⁵⁴²

The lyrics portray an interaction between a man in mourning and his coworker. The mourner is probably in pain from the absence of his lover and he grieves by talking about the woman he has lost with whomever would listen. It is unclear how long he has been suffering, but according to the singer, the mourner spent a “long time talkin” about the break-up. Though he could be experiencing a temporary crisis from which he would soon recover, the vocalist encourages him to accept the event and move on.

On the other hand, the separation might have long-lasting effects. As evinced in other songs, satisfying women’s needs were important to men’s investment in their labor. By mourning the woman, the railroader could also be lamenting the loss of what she meant to his identity as a worker and a man. Her departure could pose a real crisis for the worker: If she “done gone” why does he still work the rails? How then should he spend his money? This emotional predicament, in combination with the trappings of the railroad environment, could certainly lead railroad men towards self-destructive and risky activities, prostitutes and hard drinking, that were so pervasive in railroad camps.

Not only did men connect their work with their romantic relationships, they also saw their vocation as an inheritance for their children. Rather than abandoning their families to work the rails, as Frazier suggested, in the songs, men claim to be

⁵⁴² Lomax and Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, 13.

establishing a legacy of hard work. One of the rare articulations of fathering, for example, can be found in the song “John Henry.”⁵⁴³

*John Henry had a little baby
an he held him in the palm of his hand
And the last word I heard him say
Son be a steel driva man
Lawd Son be a steel drivin man*

This tune would surely resonate with railway men who worried about life for their families should they suffer a debilitating or life threatening injury. John Henry died working on the railroad. He would never see his child grow up, nor would he be there to provide material and emotional support. According to many of the work songs discussed here, he most likely struggled to provide that when he was alive. It is curious then that his dying wish is that his son become a “steel drivin man.”

This song exposes one of the dangers of coupling family ties to risk-filled work. Historically, parents transferred wealth to their children through inheritance. When a man died, two-thirds of his estate transferred directly to his children, while a third was reserved for the support of his widow.⁵⁴⁴ Consequently, the bulk of wealth flowed directly from fathers to their children. Instead of leaving a financial inheritance, however, — probably because he had very little capital to bestow— Henry offered his son an occupational inheritance. He attempted to pass down his “status” as a railway worker to his child. The song suggests that it is worth the sacrifice to be a “steel drivin man.”

⁵⁴³ John W. Work, *American Negro Songs and Spirituals* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1940), 243.

⁵⁴⁴ Patricia Seed, “American law, Hispanic traces: Some Contemporary Entanglements of Community Property,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 52.1 (1995): 160.

Yet, being a railway worker meant submitting to potentially life threatening and poorly-compensated labor; this is the very labor that led to Henry's tragic demise. How beneficial could railroad work be to family life if the most heralded black railroader died leaving his young family to fend for themselves? In this light, Henry's encouragement for the boy to work the rails can be considered short sighted and irresponsible. Could he genuinely want the child to share his same fate: low wages and the loss of life? Perhaps Henry celebrates his work because it is literally all he has left to offer his son. His work has extracted everything else from him. Though he died a folk hero, it is unfortunate that the best Henry could do for his own child was push him toward a daily life teemed with the risk of accident. This conclusion discloses the frustration many railway fathers felt about unskilled track labor and its inability to provide a future for men and their offspring.

Taken together, these work songs demonstrate that industrial work did not uncouple or unburden black men from family life as completely as several scholars have argued. Instead, many black men approached railroading with a desire to pair work and family responsibilities, and clearly understood where and how one impeded the other. Black worker's aspirations for the normative masculine ideal based on economic provision, though at times frustrated by their work conditions, inspired their work efforts and criticisms. Evidently, while they worked, black men sought to rail against and reconcile the conflict between work and family duties.

Conclusion

Captain says hurry
Strawboss says run
*I gotta good notion to do nar one*⁵⁴⁵

As I have shown, many black railroad workers saw themselves as exploited and were confined to the lowest segments of a social and occupational ladder shaped by the politics of white supremacy. White engineers often treated black railroaders as their personal servants, requiring them to perform menial chores both on and off the job. Black men were in a subservient position and were infantilized. The song “Captain says hurry” describes the demands placed on the railroader’s work pace and his body, and dramatizes the daily struggle over control of his labor. The text reads as a short list of the railroad hierarchy with the singer at the bottom. Captain and Strawboss (gang leader) outrank the worker and it is within their right to demand him to work more quickly. Even if black workers did not actively undermine this order, they were not entirely overwhelmed by it. The singer discloses that he is considering disregarding both instructors and taking control of his own work pace. In fact, through song, black workers attempted to control the speed at which they worked and established their own workplace hierarchy. For several black workers, family was at the top. Instead of being told how to feel about the work and their value as employees, these singers determined what it meant and in this way made the work their own. The constraints on workers’ movements and actions were very real and thus it was increasingly difficult to sustain a manhood rooted in individual

⁵⁴⁵ Work, *American Negro Songs and Spirituals* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1940), 236.

autonomy. A notion of manhood based in family responsibility, however, was more accessible and less risky. Thus, industrial railroad work did not completely “erode family integrity” among black men, as Jacqueline Jones argues. Family duty and responsibility was a central motivator in black railroader on-duty efforts.

Certainly, the pressures placed on black men and families by dishonest bosses, poor wages, and long hours were strenuous. These songs suggest that not all black railroaders buckled under the weight of the industrial work-family conflict. Rather than abandoning family for work and pleasure, as Frazier argued, many men clung to their families or their ideas of family responsibility and service in order to ground the meaning of their work outside their oppressive and antagonist work environment. In doing so, they attempted to secure, in whatever way possible, a positive identity for themselves as workers and family men. The persistent repetition of women’s needs in railroad workers’ songs aided in the discursive construction of the workers as caring providers. They were more than what they seemed to their employers: expendable black hands. Claiming to work for the material and emotional benefit of their partners could also help men cope with familial separation and a subsequent sense of failing to fulfill their obligations due to their loved ones.

Clearly, black workers’ family ties, though stressed, were not always readily discarded or easily broken. It remained difficult for them to combine railroad work with their desires to create a meaningful family life, however. Through their songs, black workers discussed, lamented, and explored the dilemma. The family oriented railroader had to compromise both quality time at home and personal safety at work

in order to provide even a minimal economic foundation for his family. In other vocations balancing family and work was easier. Striving for the manly ideal of supporting and protecting one's as a black, unskilled, uninsured, railroad worker in the end, could cost him both his home and his life.

Conclusion

Family life became central to the masculine identities of Southern black men in the post-emancipation South. Their interpretations of their paternal, relational, and marital roles shaped their identities and, ultimately influenced and were influenced by the occupations they chose. Considerations of family did not disappear when black men participated in dangerous and distant vocations such as railroad work. Family obligations served as a standpoint for these men to critique the uncaring employers and adverse working conditions inherent in the occupations available to them. Thus, even when they took jobs, such as railroad work, that offered limited familial closeness or provision, many black men viewed their labor, with its risks and rewards, as a significant aspect of their familial duty.

The consequences of these choices included personal injury, divorce, and/or overworked wives and mothers. They remained an important aspect of the challenges black men faced in pursuing the paid work available to them. Such work enabled them to bolster their sense of manhood in the Jim Crow South: they could unequivocally claim “breadwinner” status. This was especially important because of the persistence of white supremacy in the South, which placed clear limits on black

men's wages, work responsibilities, and opportunities for demanding improvements in both areas. White supremacy, as we know, also fueled a great deal of racialized, both in the workplace and at large, especially in the South, and in states that straddled the Mason-Dixon line. Even the most secluded of black sharecropping families were vulnerable to white interference and terrorism. It is easy to see how black men's desires for authority and autonomy were frustrated and went too often unrealized under such an antagonistic economic and social climate. For black men living and working under the institutionally-sanctioned discrimination of Jim Crow, other institutions like marriage and work were constantly in peril.

Still, black men's sense of family responsibility was powerful among emancipated slaves and their children. Black families were motivated by freedom in ways that made even the most exploited work tolerable, even under Jim Crow. Looking at black men's work through the prism of family relationships allows us to see work choices as black husbands and fathers thought them through. The nature of African American fatherhood and black men's aspirations to manhood in the post-emancipation South was partially demonstrated on the job. The work arrangements men agreed to, the labor they performed, the wages they earned, the songs and stories told during and after work, kept them going, and were meaningful in that helped created and reinforce new family identities. For many black men, earning money and sustaining their loved ones through their labor were extensions of their parenting practices, familial roles, and aspirations.

Under slavery, African American men were denied households and property

as well as the ability to legally create, protect, provide for, and/or publicly represent their families. The system of labor undergirded by the law, allowed slave owners to exercise unchecked power over slave family life. After emancipation, former masters attempted to recapture and put to work the children of their former slaves through the apprenticeship system. As freedmen, however, black men asserted their rights as fathers to control the labor of their children and tried their grievances before the Freedmen's Bureau, challenging white employers' attempts to continually exploit their families and their labor.

Blacks regarded sharecropping, especially the familial closeness and independence from white interference that it fostered, as infinitely better than slavery. The system afforded black men the opportunity to combine black household interests and the interests of white landowners. At the same time, however, the share system, along with the actions of white proprietors, politicians and vigilantes, denied attempted to undermine of black men's claims to manhood by legal and extralegal violence, economic exploitation and political repression. With opportunities opening up for them as semi-skilled railroad workers, black men were afforded new opportunities to sustain their newly won self-respect by proving their manhood through highly technical but dangerous labor as firemen. Not only did railroad firemen risk life and limb, but black firemen endured the wrath of envious white citizens and co-workers. Providing decent wages for their families and gaining not only self respect but the respect of others in this dangerous job made black firemen an easy target for white violence. Unskilled black railroaders constantly had

to reconcile the dangers of their arduous tasks with its rewards. Wages were still comparatively low and work conditions deplorable. Nevertheless, black men viewed their efforts as selfless service to their families. In this light, they considered themselves manly.

There are several areas of interest in this project left for other scholars to address. For example, black men's choices, though motivated by family concerns, were not always the best choices for their families. Future research based on family diaries and letters, as such sources become available, might certainly provide historians with a better understanding of how black men's choices were made and how individual families dealt with the consequences. What kinds of adjustments were being made in the home as a result of men's work decisions? What role did extended black family networks play in replacing fathers absent for long periods of time? How did work decisions impact childcare? Family discipline? Or providing role models for older children? A few of these issues were discussed in Chapter 5; however, none of those sources came specifically from black families.

This project is not a community study. It is a study of men's work and gendered lives. A community study approach, however, could further unpack the relationship and interaction between workers. By situating this project in a railroad town, one could also explore the boundaries between family and friendship, and individual and community in connection with black men's interpretations of family life. An examination of the conversations or expressions of family in railroad camps would also be another fruitful way of approaching the family-work relationship. How

did men define their relationships with each other in the railroad camps? What kinds of families were formed among veteran and novice railroaders who live and work together? What impact did these relationships have on the work they performed and their relationships with their biological families outside the camp?

Men's political activism in response to their mistreatment has not been explored in this project. Black men were barred from the major railroad unions until World War I, when the federal government took control of the railroads. A study of black workers during the war and beyond, based on the records of railway unions, could provide further insight on how these men perceived and were influenced by family matters. These were also sites, I suspect, in which men were likely to discuss fatherhood and its responsibilities, and probably work together to craft new fatherhood and family narratives in light of their economic conditions. Industrial employment brought black southerners under the jurisdiction of an expanding federal labor bureaucracy in the 1930s. New Deal labor laws raised wages for black common and semi skilled laborers. Through a close reading of men's petitions and complaints to railroad companies, the U.S. Railroad Administration and National Mediation Board, one might demonstrate how the material requirements of "good fatherhood," as well as the masculine ethos of railroading, figured critically in workers' assessments of a "just" wage and respectful working conditions. In the same way the men's ties to families and their attempts to enhance their authority validated their industrial work, these factors may have also shaped their labor activism.

It is my contention that black men assessed their work in relation to their familial identities and responsibilities. This approach was not specific to sharecroppers and railroaders. Future research could consider how the ties of family and labor played out in other work contexts. While historians have studied black labor in a variety of industries in the post emancipation South, few historians have directly assessed the form and function of their work-family conflicts during the early 20th century. We know much less about how working-class black men attempted to fight against or reconcile the deleterious effects of their varied work systems on their families and familial identities in the Jim Crow era. Certainly mining camps, lumber works, and the sea-faring trades carried their own risks and rewards which black men with families had to contemplate and evaluate. As we have seen, sharecropping offered the incentive of autonomy, and firing a locomotive gave men an opportunity to realize a shifting manly ideal. In what ways did men connect to their work away at sea, for example, with their identities as men as fathers? This type of analysis would shed new light on the relationship between black men, gender, and labor in the 19th century. It would also demonstrate how family life practices of black men differed by trade and how, in ways both traditional and unique, black men expressed their familial concern and identities.

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