

“A SOCIETY TURNED
BOTTOMSIDE UP”

[Democrats] do not care so much about Congress admitting negroes to their halls . . . but they do not want the negroes over them at home.

Henry McNeal Turner, 1871

The gallery of the U.S. Senate was crowded with spectators waiting expectantly but uneasily to witness “the novel sight.” Two days earlier, the State of Mississippi had been officially restored to the Union, and now its Republican senator-elect Hiram R. Revels sat on a sofa behind Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner as prospective colleagues debated his qualifications for a seat in the chamber. A freeborn mulatto from North Carolina, Revels had been ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and had preached in many of the border states before moving in 1865 to Mississippi, where he worked for the Freedmen’s Bureau, served as an alderman in Natchez, and gained election to the first state senate chosen under the auspices of the Radical constitution. Hostile Democrats thus insisted that, owing to the *Dred Scott* decision, Revels had not been a citizen for nine years as required by the Constitution.

But Sumner, among others, responded to such arguments with thunderous contempt, and when debate finally closed at five o’clock on the

afternoon of February 25, 1870, forty-eight of the fifty-six senators present, in a strict party vote, ordered Revels sworn in. Amid "a general buzz in the galleries, a rising up and a bending forward," Revels then advanced toward the clerk's desk "with a modest yet firm step," took the oath of office, and walked to the seat directly behind Tennessee senator William G. Brownlow, which he then occupied, becoming the first African American to serve in either chamber of the U.S. Congress. The seat had been vacant since January 1861, when Mississippi had seceded from the Union and its claimant, Jefferson Davis, had resigned from the Senate to lend his support to the slaveholders' rebellion. "Within a brief decade," wrote the black historian George Washington Williams—himself in attendance for the event—"Mississippi sent to succeed the arch traitor a *Negro*, a representative of the race that Mr. Davis intended to be the cornerstone of" the Confederacy.¹

Hiram Revels's accession to the Senate may have served as a particularly dramatic symbol of the social and political revolution sweeping the country, but in state capitals like Jackson, Mississippi, the changing of the guard was far more arresting and consequential. For there, the legislature that elevated Revels, once the arena of slaveholding planters and their white allies, was now wholly dominated by the party that had waged war on the Confederacy, thirty-six of whose members (31 of 83 in the house, 5 of 26 in the senate) were black and well enough organized to agree unanimously on presenting Revels's name to the Republican Legislative Caucus and then to carry the vote of every Republican in joint session.² The scenes in Montgomery, Little Rock, Austin, Tallahassee, New Orleans, Atlanta, and Raleigh were similarly striking. Everywhere the nascent Republican party claimed the majority of seats in the newly constituted state legislatures, and everywhere except Tennessee black men were among their numbers.³

Then there was South Carolina, the home of militant proslavery theory, of nullification, of secessionist radicalism, and of the haughtiest slaveholding class to be found in the southern states, where in 1868 75 of 124 seats in the house and 10 of 31 seats in the senate—fully 55 percent of the entire legislature in the state capital of Columbia—were occupied not simply by Republicans but also by black Republicans who formerly had no political standing in the state. "The body is almost literally a Black Parliament," the northern journalist James S. Pike would scoff a few years later. "The Speaker is black, the Clerk

is black, the door-keepers are black, the little pages are black, the chairman of the Ways and Means is black, and the chaplain is coal black. . . . [I]t must be remembered, also, that these men, with not more than a half dozen exceptions have been themselves slaves, and that their ancestors were slaves for generations." Reflecting on the "orators and statesmen" who had once walked the aisles, and on the "white community" of "wealth, culture, and refinement" that now lay "prostrate in the dust," Pike could only see "the spectacle of a society suddenly turned bottomsides up."⁴

Yet nowhere was "the spectacle" more compellingly in view than in the many small county seats that dotted the rural districts where former slaves composed the majority of the population. Once virtual appendages of the surrounding plantations where slaveholding clans and their clients resolved disputes, reinforced their local rule, and enacted hierarchies of class, gender, and kinship, these courthouse towns experienced political transitions and inversions of an immediacy and magnitude unprecedented in the region, nation, or hemisphere. Here, where the most pivotal social relations were to be mediated and enforced, those long subject to almost unbridled personal domination could now hold the official levers of power: as jurors, magistrates, county commissioners, tax assessors, constables, and even sheriffs. Whatever their disgust and discomfort at the idea of black men representing their counties and parishes in the Congress or the legislatures, the old rulers were absolutely aghast at the prospect of losing their grip on local power. "There is not half so much interest on the part of democrats in this State about Congress as there is about the Legislature, or ordinaries or sheriffs," explained Georgia's black Republican leader Henry McNeal Turner. "They do not care so much about Congress admitting negroes to their halls . . . but they do not want the negroes over them at home." The Georgia planter, politician, and former Confederate Howell Cobb made the same point more threateningly. "I am very conservative as to the Legislature—which sits in Atlanta and can tolerate my driver voting for his own color then," he wrote, "but when it comes to the home-municipal government—all the blacks who vote against my ticket shall walk the plank."⁵ Never before—and rarely again—in the history of the United States would such a substantial section of the working class have the opportunity to contest the power of their superiors in the formal institutions of

governance that affected their lives most directly. It proved to be a turbulent and telling experiment in the meaning of democracy.



During Reconstruction, black men held political office in every state of the former Confederacy. More than one hundred won election or appointment to posts having jurisdiction over entire states, ranging from superintendent of education, assistant commissioner of agriculture, superintendent of the deaf and dumb asylum, and member of the state land commission to treasurer, secretary of state, state supreme court justice, and lieutenant governor. One African American even sat briefly as the governor of Louisiana. A great many more—almost eight hundred—served in the state legislatures. But by far the largest number of black officeholders were to be found at the local level: in counties, cities, smaller municipalities, and militia districts. Although a precise figure is almost impossible to obtain, blacks clearly filled over 1,100 elective or appointive local offices, and they may well have filled as many as 1,400 or 1,500, about 80 percent of which were in rural and small-town settings.⁶

The geography of local black officeholding was shaped by demography, state politics, and the experience of local mobilization. Which is to say that black officeholders were most commonly and widely in evidence where state Republican governments ruled the longest, where black populations were densest, and where organization by the Union League and Republican party had provided direction to leaders and constituents alike. Not surprisingly, this meant the Deep South and particularly the states of South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, though black men also held a significant number of offices in North Carolina and Texas. In Virginia and Tennessee, relatively few blacks held local office and those who did resided chiefly in the urban areas of Richmond, Petersburg, Norfolk, Nashville, Memphis, Knoxville, and Chattanooga. Within individual states, moreover, blacks had their best opportunities to hold local office in counties where at least 40 percent of the population was black, and their best opportunities to hold a number of offices where at least 60 percent of the population was black. Thus, the bases of black officeholding stretched from the cotton plantation counties of east-central Texas; through the

Red River counties and parishes of east Texas and Louisiana; up the Mississippi River counties and parishes of Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi; across much of north-central Mississippi; through the Tennessee Valley, central black belt, and southwest of Alabama; along the northern tier of counties in Florida and the coastal counties of Georgia; through all but northwestern South Carolina; and into coastal and north-central North Carolina. In all, in more than two hundred counties in the former Confederacy at least one black man held local office during Reconstruction, and in more than eighty, at least three did so.

At one time and place or another, a black man occupied virtually every office available at the local level. Black men served as coroners, surveyors, treasurers, tax assessors and collectors, jailors, solicitors, registers of deeds, clerks of court, police officers and marshals, fire-fighters, and even mayors. But the greatest number (roughly two-thirds of the total), especially in the plantation districts of the Deep South, served as members of county and municipal governing boards, as magistrates and justices of the peace, as election officials and registrars, and as sheriffs and their deputies. In some locales, blacks came to dominate the county governments by claiming majorities on the governing boards and perhaps two-thirds of the remaining offices including sheriff, and whites, according to one disgruntled informant, could at best “try to secure the elections for certain negroes who they thought would make fairly honest officers.” In other locales, a black officeholder or two helped more numerous white Republican allies wrest the reins of local power from the hands of the old landed elite. In still others, black officeholders formed part of a contentious, two-party mix.⁷

Wherever black men vied for and assumed local office, the stakes were high. Although sheriffs, magistrates, county commissioners, and registrars might appear to be less consequential officeholders, they in fact represented the formal linchpins of the postemancipation South’s emerging political order. For with the petty sovereignties of masters destroyed by the abolition of slavery, local officials became the arbiters and enforcers of social relations and constellations of power still being determined. They established county and municipal regulations; took care of roads and bridges; levied taxes, imposts, and fines; controlled appropriations; designated militia districts and townships; and oversaw boundary disputes. They issued warrants, made arrests, kept arma-

ments, enforced vagrancy statutes, and carried out foreclosures. They assessed property values and collected taxes. They heard civil and criminal cases, selected jurors, and meted out punishments. They created school districts, helped allocate funds, and apprenticed minors and orphans. And they supervised the electoral process from registration to balloting to the counting of votes. They therefore had much to say about the settlement of contract disputes, the resolution of personal injuries, the use of public and private land, the prerogatives of employers and the obligations of employees, the condition of educational and charitable institutions, the fortunes of political parties, and the overall balances of local power: much to say, that is, about the essentials of everyday life for former slaves and their prospects for building stable, just communities.⁸

Elevating black—or for that matter white Republican—officeholders demanded the mobilization of entire communities. In no other way could African Americans successfully overcome the obstacles of inexperience, illiteracy, economic vulnerability, and widespread harassment to secure their objectives in the novel arena of formal politics. When blacks in Wilson County, Tennessee, “voted solid” to elect their candidate as magistrate over four white candidates, making him “the first negro ever elected to any [local] office,” another black leader drew an important lesson. The result, he observed, “thoroughly demonstrated . . . the absolute necessity of organization.”⁹

Effective organization invariably required an institutional structure tied directly to the conduct of elections and the hierarchy of party politics, and this customarily meant Union Leagues (or their equivalents) and Republican clubs. Through these vehicles eligible voters could be identified and educated, candidates for office could be nominated or advanced for appointment, local grievances could be aired and issues debated, campaigns could be charted, preparations could be made for balloting, and—perhaps most important—some level of protection could be afforded to leaders and the rank-and-file by raising veils of secrecy and either incorporating or establishing paramilitary companies. In Jefferson County, Georgia, where about three-quarters of the population was black, members of a club resembling the Union League pledged not only to ensure the acceptance of their votes at polling places but also to resist the legal or economic harassment of their comrades even if it required battering down the county jail or

seizing some of a landlord's property. To many freedmen, the Union League and other semisecret political orders such as the Lone Star Society in Virginia or the Grant Rangers in Georgia were necessary to all public political projects. Requesting authority "to establish Leagues," blacks in Rusk and Panola counties, Texas, told the state Union League president that "there is no better way than that agency to organize the Republican party."¹⁰

Local activists served as the pivots around which these institutions revolved. Usually in their late twenties and early thirties, often previously enslaved, and grounded by birth or kinship, they boasted one or more attributes that set them apart from most rural freedpeople and that proved indispensable to the life of their new political communities. The great majority had attained functional literacy and many possessed special skills as craftsmen, farmers, squad leaders, teachers, and ministers. Some had joined or aided the Union army during the Civil War; some had accumulated small amounts of real or personal property; and some had attended early freedmen's conventions. Almost all combined strong provincial attachments with an emerging worldliness, and almost all displayed an independence of mind and spirit. Together they struggled to build not just a new political citizenry but a new political culture. Remarking on the progress made along the coast of South Carolina, where mobilization began well before the war had ended, Elizabeth Hyde Botume noted by 1869 that once a black man had joined a political club, "these duties became more absorbing than all else. Every boy considered himself a man at eighteen and every man had some office in his neighborhood which was to him of vast importance even if only that of doorkeeper in their small meetings."¹¹

Profiles of these activists suggest less a representative "type" than a social division of politics attuned to the demands and dangers of electioneering in the rural postemancipation South. Thomas M. Allen, an ex-slave shoemaker and Baptist preacher, organized first a Union League chapter and then a Grant Ranger club in Jasper County, Georgia, and "the colored people came to [him] for instructions." It was no wonder. Having attended a freedmen's convention in 1866, Allen also took the *New York Tribune* and other papers, and therefore "found out a great deal" and could tell "them whatever I thought was right." "I said to them that I thought they had been freed by the Yankees and the Union men," Allen explained, "and I thought they ought to

vote with them." Mississippi-born George Washington Albright could not match Allen's skills as a tradesman and minister, but by the age of twenty he had acquired substantial experience and tools of his own. A former slave, Albright had learned to read and write and subsequently served as a messenger for the clandestine Lincoln's Loyal League during the war. Thereafter he enrolled in a freedmen's school, became a teacher, and helped organize a black volunteer militia "to keep the common people on top and fight off the . . . attacks of the landlords and former slaveowners."¹²

Jack Johnson, a stone mason and farmer from Laurens County, South Carolina, who "took a great propriety in counseling the people which way to vote," was the only black man in his neighborhood to own a mule, and so "would go 'way off to speeches, and come back and tell the news how the speeches were." In Coosa County, Alabama, Smith Whatley managed to gain a measure of independence by renting land, and, partly as a result, became "the regular one" to distribute ballots. Bully Jack, from Noxubee County, Mississippi, built on his reputation under slavery as "a most powerful physical man, a great foot racer, and an uncommon good worker," to emerge as "a sort of leading man in the neighborhood" after emancipation, going so far as to "form himself into a court, or a judge of a court, and h[o]ld negro courts about." Abram Colby of Greene County, Georgia, combined good fortune, an assortment of skills, and family support with sheer courage in the face of violent intimidation to represent the interests of local freedpeople with whom he was closely connected. Born and raised in the county, Colby had been freed by his owner and father in 1851 and worked variously as a barber, laborer, and minister. Soon after the war, he sought redress from the Freedmen's Bureau for injustices done to the county's African Americans, and, although illiterate, he was able to depend on his son, who had been sent to school, to read and write for him. Pressured by local whites who "said I had influence with the negroes of other counties and had carried the negroes against them," Colby was initially offered \$5,000 to become a turncoat. "I told them," Colby testified, "I would not do it if they give me all the county was worth."¹³

Black Republicans relied on men such as these not only to chair meetings, address constituents, do the rounds of campaigning, and rally the faithful, but also to enable eligible blacks to carry out the basic

task of voting. It was not an easy assignment, for polling practices of the day left illiterate and economically dependent voters vulnerable to harassment and effective disfranchisement. Polls were sometimes placed at inaccessible locations or on the land of hostile planters. Election supervisors could ask unwarranted questions, make confusing demands, or open and close the polls at will. Members of opposition parties attempted to bribe voters or hand them the wrong tickets. Employers congregated at voting boxes and threatened their employees, while other white landowners and their allies jostled, abused, and assaulted blacks seeking to cast ballots.¹⁴ The problems were especially pronounced—and often intractable—where African Americans composed a minority of the population. In an early election in Crenshaw County, Alabama (20 percent black), the sitting white sheriff summoned men “known for their violence and recklessness in dealing with freedmen” to “crowd around the polling-window and occup[y] all the space behind the ropes, so that every voter had to run the gauntlet of their jeers and threats.” “For some time,” according to one report, “they made every colored man take off his hat and bow, before they could pass” and then assisted employers who watched to see whether their hands had voted.¹⁵

Union League and Republican party activists therefore had to prepare carefully for election day lest their other efforts be nullified. They had to petition military commanders and Republican governors to appoint favorable (and dismiss hostile) election officials and to designate suitable polling sites, particularly if Democrats still controlled county governing boards. They had to get their voters to the polls, at times over a distance of many miles, and make sure that those voters received the correct tickets. They had to minimize the opportunities for bribery, manipulation, and intimidation. And they had to oversee the counting of ballots. Voting required, in essence, a military operation. Activists often called a meeting of fellow leaguers or club members the night before an election to provide instructions and materials. The chairman of the Tunica County, Mississippi, Republican executive committee had men come to the town of Hernando from all over the county on the day before the election and distribute tickets to those political clubs meeting that night. At times groups of black voters might spend the night before an election on a safe plantation or in the woods, perhaps sending a small party ahead to check for possible traps or ambushes,

and then move out at first light to arrive at the polls well before their opponents or "rebel spies" could gather. Henry Frazer, who organized for the Republican party in Barbour County, Alabama, claimed that he went out with as many as "450 men and camped at the side of the road" before going into the town of Eufaula at eight in the morning where they would "stand in a body until they got a chance to vote."¹⁶

At all events, it was imperative that black voters traveled to the polling sites collectively and in large numbers, for those who arrived individually or in small, unorganized groups could most readily be, as one east Texan put it, "browbeaten . . . intimidated [or] driven from the polls." Most often, they would mobilize and march "in a solid column"—as they had been preparing to do for weeks—sometimes wearing similar attire or emblems, frequently carrying "flags and banners," sticks and corn stalks, projecting a martial spirit and demeanor. When necessary or possible, they might be accompanied by armed guards on foot or horseback, or, in some places, details of state militia. Once at the polls, they might then form a line between their ticket distributor and the ballot box, making it difficult for hostile parties to intercede. Facing particularly intense harassment during the fall of 1868, Abram Colby of Greene County, Georgia, organized his followers into companies and, on election day in November, marched company after company to the polls. He succeeded in carrying the local contest for the Republicans.¹⁷

Protecting black Republican voters from white intimidation was only the most obvious goal of such martial organization and display, however. There was also the need to prod the timid and punish the apathetic or disloyal within their own communities. Activists learned early that elections could only be carried by securing overwhelming allegiance to the Republican party and then by ensuring that the eligible voters overcame fear or inertia to cast ballots. Political parades and torchlight processions during election campaigns and on the eve of polling—often with black men dressed in their club uniforms, beating drums, "halloing, hooping," and, on occasion, riding full gallop through the streets—thereby served several purposes: to inspire enthusiasm, advertise numbers and resolve, and coax the participation of those who might otherwise abstain. Where coaxing proved insufficient, more coercive tactics could be deployed. Union League members in a North Carolina county, upon learning of three or four black men

who “didn’t mean to vote,” threatened to “whip them” and “made them go.” In another county, “some few colored men who declined voting” were, in the words of a white conservative, “bitterly persecut[ed].” One suffered insults, the destruction of his fences and crops, and “other outrages.”¹⁸

Especially harsh reprisals could be brought against blacks who aligned with conservatives and Democrats, for they were generally regarded not merely as opponents but as “traitors.” As black Mississippian Robert Gleed put it, “[W]e don’t believe they have a right to acquiesce with a party who refuse to recognize their right to participate in public affairs.” In the rural hinterlands of Portsmouth, Virginia, black Republicans attacked “colored conservatives” at a prayer meeting and beat two of them badly. In southside Virginia’s Campbell County, a black man who betrayed the Union League was tied up by his heels and suspended from a tree for several hours until he agreed to take an oath of loyalty. Two “conservative negroes” in Lincoln County, North Carolina, had their houses stoned and doors broken down, and one, who had previously belonged to the Union League, was told that “joining the conservative club was a commission of perjury” and was threatened with incarceration; he relented and “went back to the society.” The other “continued his connection with the conservative club” and the night after the election had his house surrounded by black leaguers who, in a further ritual of community intimidation—“with tin pans and horns, guns and pistols”—cried that “they had come to ride him on a rail, that he had voted himself back into slavery.” Such disciplinary compass and persistence were not unusual. Monday, the foreman of a South Carolina rice plantation who, along with several other blacks, voted Democratic at a recent election, acknowledged that every one of them “had been punished.” One saw his colt killed, one was “bombarded in his cabin,” and one had his rice crop lifted. Monday himself lost a cow. “Ef I didn’ vote de ’Publi-can ticket,” he informed his Democratic employer, “I couldn’ make dese niggers work. I couldn’t do nothin’ ’tall wid ’em.”¹⁹

Monday’s troubles with the rice workers in his charge suggested that effective imposition of political discipline depended on strong community backing. Indeed, violent retribution was only one of several sanctions—and not necessarily the last or most effective—that could be directed against those who, in the eyes of kin and neighbors,

either faltered in or betrayed their political responsibilities. Young and old, male and female served on the court of local opinion and helped carry out the punishments. Family members might be cast out, friends might be shunned or subjected to public humiliation, and preachers might be driven from the pulpit. One black man living outside Augusta, Georgia, went so far as to insist that he would cut the throat of any son "willing to be a Democrat." But in a kin-oriented world in which subsistence was precarious and white patrons quixotic, social isolation could be a devastating, and potentially lethal, sentence in its own right. Speaking of an "intelligent colored man that was on our ticket," a white Mississippi Democrat found that the man "was ostracized to such an extent that he got back among the negroes in a hurry." "[I]t was," he reckoned, "positively dangerous for any negro to pronounce himself a democrat in my county."²⁰

Women, the hubs around which kin and community networks ordinarily grew, were particularly well placed to influence mobilization and discipline, together with conduct in the political arenas that officially denied them direct participation. Here we can see how dependent the electoral sphere was on other spheres of political and social life, and how the social division of black politics overlaid the very boundaries of those spheres. For women not only attended rallies and meetings and often registered their sentiments; they also became so deeply involved in the creation and expression of partisan loyalties that the vote could itself be regarded as something of a household and family property. Some gathered and transmitted necessary intelligence; some taught rural schools; and some helped to defend public assemblies from attack. Where possible, a good many more accompanied voting-age men to the ballot box, providing added cover, showing the depth of community support, and steeling the nerves of those in the male ranks. Commenting on what he considered the absurdity of "unlettered blacks" going up and "voting on questions of state interest," a Tennessee planter could scowl that on election day he stayed home while his "negroes went to the polls." To make matters worse, the "negro women went, too," leaving his wife as "her own cook and chambermaid."²¹

Yet it was as enforcers that black women may well have made their most powerful and distinctive contribution to the developing political culture of their communities. Manipulating gender conventions and the

expectations of courtship and sexual favor, they both shamed reluctant menfolk into performing their political duties and wreaked the most intimate and humiliating vengeance on those who strayed from the fold. The northern planter and politician Albert T. Morgan, who worked closely with freedpeople in Yazoo County, Mississippi, told of a particularly revealing episode during the election campaign of 1868 when Grant and Colfax badges became “the cause of domestic troubles almost without number.” “[I]f a freedman, having obtained one, lacked the courage to wear it at home or on the plantation in the presence of ‘ole marsa and missus’ or of ‘the overseer,’” Morgan remembered, “his wife would often take it from him and bravely wear it upon her own breast.” And if “the husband refused to surrender it” or “hid it from her or locked it up,” she might walk “as many as twenty or thirty miles” to “buy, beg, or borrow one, and thus equipped return and wear it openly, in defiance of husband, master, mistress, or overseer.”²²

Black men who voted the Democratic ticket or in other ways chose to support the Democratic party suffered even more summary rebukes from women, who were best able to sever ties of family and community where they seemed most firmly knotted. In many places, such a male turncoat could not “get any countenance from a colored sweetheart,” and, if married, might be denied bed, board, and field labor—might, in fact, be outright abandoned. A black Democrat in Opelika, Alabama, testified “about 30 or 40 colored women” who “belonged to a club” and went “around and talk[ed] to the Democratic men.” “I know women today,” he insisted, “who are away from their husbands because they voted the Democratic ticket.” As a crowning, raucous act, black women could well spark and head up local crowds organized to assault and drive a traitor into exile. “The negroes are as intolerant of opposition as the whites,” a conservative white South Carolinian observed at the end of Reconstruction, ostracizing, expelling, and even killing “all of their own” who “would turn democrats.” And, by his lights, the “women are worse than the men, refusing to talk to or marry a renegade, and aiding in mobbing him.”²³

It was, therefore, a significant measure of the success achieved by grassroots mobilization—in educative, protective, and disciplinary forms—that during the early phases of Congressional Reconstruction black Democrats were so few. They were most likely to be found

in cities and smaller towns working as barbers, waiters, and personal servants: that is, physically cut off from the mass of freedpeople and engaged in occupations wholly reliant on white patrons. "As a general thing," Mississippi carpetbagger and governor Adelbert Ames claimed, "it is only where a negro has been working with the same man for a very long space of time—a relation found to exist chiefly in the villages—that he votes as his employer desires." This seems to have been true in Warren County, North Carolina, for when the local newspaper listed the names of blacks who supported the conservatives in 1868, more than half of the thirty-one resided in the county seat of Warrenton. The remainder could be found scattered across three other militia districts.²⁴

In the countryside, Democrats might attract the allegiance of black voters in counties and districts where whites formed decisive population majorities and the Democratic party was well organized, or in locales remote from railroads where freedpeople fell "almost entirely under the influence of the whites." There they might also attract the votes of blacks who, owing to special circumstances, were inordinately dependent on powerful white landowners: blacks who continued to live on the estates of longtime former owners; blacks who had been left land and other property at their old master's death; blacks who were accustomed to seeking and receiving assistance from whites in times of need; and blacks who could not pry themselves free of extreme economic subordination. A planter in Claiborne County, Mississippi, describing the harassment to which black Democrats were subjected, bluntly drove home the point. "I have five or six negroes on a plantation that I venture to say will vote side by side with me always, because they are released from that intimidation that formerly existed. . . . They are dependent on me for every morsel they eat."²⁵

Even so, black allegiance to the Democratic party proved extremely thin, extracted principally by bribery or (more likely) threats from men less vulnerable to retaliation from black Republicans. In most instances, white pressure would discourage blacks from voting altogether rather than prompt them to vote the Democratic ticket. Only a handful of blacks supported the Democrats "to keep on the good side of white people, to keep from being interfered with," explained William Ford, a north Alabama freedmen—but because of black intimidation "when they can't vote for a republican they don't vote at all." Appearing

before a congressional committee, a Freedmen's Bureau agent who served at three different posts in rural Mississippi between August 1867 and December 1868 put the matter succinctly. Asked if any black men aligned with the Democrats from instinct, he replied: "Only from the instinct of self-preservation."²⁶



The community support necessary to conduct electoral politics found its institutional anchors not in the clubs and committees attached to the Republican party, but in black religious congregations. This was most readily apparent in the urban South, where various African churches had been organized longest and where the postemancipation withdrawal from white denominations occurred with breathtaking speed. Even before the Civil War had ended, black Baptist and Methodist churches in Union-occupied cities provided the settings for political assemblies, and by the late summer of 1865 they were hosting the first state freedmen's conventions: at the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches in Nashville and Raleigh, the Zion Church in Charleston, and the AME Zion Church in Mobile. Soon they would be the sites of Union League meetings and Republican party convocations.²⁷

In the countryside, the process of church formation—and reconstitution—was more complex and protracted, though in the end perhaps even more consequential. On the one hand, organized Christianity had made fewer and generally less even inroads among rural slaves. Northern observers and missionaries (black and white) in the early post-emancipation South seemed almost unanimous both in recognizing the freedpeople's intense faith and spirituality and in disparaging the substance of what was depicted as their religious practice. "Ignorance," "infidelity," "heathenism," and especially "superstition" were the terms most frequently used to describe the freedpeople's customs of worship and their understandings of the Bible and Christian doctrine, and to explain the great challenges that missionaries faced. Charles Stearns, the northerner who took up a plantation in Columbia County, Georgia, was typically scornful. "A more melancholy misnomer than that of the Christian religion, as applied to the heathenish observances

of the plantation blacks, cannot be conceived," he recorded. But Stearns and others clearly identified an African-American religious culture that assimilated Christianity to a larger body of folk beliefs, and did so in ways that varied from place to place.²⁸

At the same time, even those rural freedpeople who claimed church membership usually had belonged to biracial churches presided over by whites and in most instances lacked the opportunities and resources to construct churches of their own quickly. Separation, particularly among black Baptists, therefore occurred on a congregation by congregation basis and might take several years to complete. In the rural districts of central Georgia, blacks had only a handful of church structures by 1867 and not a single one in at least three entire counties. In the Mississippi Delta county of Issaquena, it was 1875 before blacks (who outnumbered whites by nearly nine to one) succeeded in establishing the Pleasant Green Church on Dunbar Ridge, their very first. Small wonder that black laborers often sought to use their limited bargaining leverage to persuade employers to build—or permit to have built—houses of worship on their plantations. And small wonder that chapels such as these were, at best, plainly framed and rudely furnished cabins, with leaky roofs, glassless windows, and crude flooring.²⁹

During the earliest years of freedom, rural congregations for the most part improvised as well as they could, gathering and holding services in the old quarters, in dilapidated plantation sheds, in abandoned crossroads or village shacks, or in clearings in the woods. Freedpeople on one Louisiana estate met to worship in half of a double cabin so that, in the words of a visitor, "you had your choice—you could visit the family or go to church." In the eastern section of Lincoln County, North Carolina, they assembled "near the river, in a rough building made of old field pine poles, and with an earthen floor." In this, they built directly on the experiences of slave folk religion, which grew in small praise houses and brush arbors and defied rigid denominational categories. Too impoverished to support a full-time minister, most congregations relied on circuit riders and itinerants who arrived for preaching once or twice a month, and, more regularly, on elders and exhorters from their own ranks who led meetings on Sunday and perhaps on one or two evenings during the week. They also may have worshipped on occasion with other congregations nearby, even those

of different denominations, and attended large interdenominational camp meetings that could draw hundreds of the black faithful from miles around.³⁰

Yet if rural black congregations often lacked the visible structure and clear denominational orientation that we commonly associate with “the church,” they were bound unmistakably to the localized lattices of kinship, work, and obligation. Composed chiefly of interconnected families laboring on a single plantation or on adjacent plantations and farms—and sometimes dominated by one or two extended clans—they were, in effect, the very embodiments of reconstituted African-American communities. Indeed, denominational affiliations and rivalries were as likely to be reflections of specific kinship networks as of doctrinal differences. Commenting on the difficulties of attracting freedpeople to his services in Port Royal, South Carolina, the American Missionary Association minister Augustine Roots noted that “their ties to the old places and old associations are strong,” and “the watchmen and elders” would call those who strayed to account, in one case “scolding” a plantation foreman “for being absent from ‘the church’ to attend service.” Identifying “a strong sectarian Baptist current which sets against other brethren in Christ,” Roots concluded “that the colored people understand the doctrine of ‘*close communion*’ perfectly well.”³¹

Given the still skeletal associational life—fraternal and benevolent societies—to be found in much of the postemancipation rural South, the churches and congregations became virtual community centers, assuming a range of vital functions. Almost invariably they established Sunday schools and welcomed other educational activities, disseminated news and information, helped resolve disputes among members, defined collective norms, and brought sanctions against their transgressors. They offered, as best as circumstances allowed, assistance to congregants suffering illness or special hardship and proper burials to the deceased. And they provided unique forums for discussion, debate, and the fashioning of sacred and secular opinion that lent influence and authority to women as well as men. There were, to be sure, congregations in which women were “allowed no part in the church meetings,” and few if any in which women were permitted formally to preach. But females normally composed the majority (and often the sizeable majority) of congregants, and there is a good deal of evidence

for what one scholar has called "dual-sex politics": a structure of power that could institutionalize a base for women who, owing to age, spiritual maturity, and community service, had earned special deference and respect. A black male Baptist acknowledged as much in complaining about the "church mothers," "gospel mothers," and "old shepherds"—veritable "officials" of the congregations who were "quite outside of the New Testament arrangement." They "claim to be under the special influence of the spirit and exercise an authority, greater in many cases than that of the ministers," he grouched, and "woe to that disciple who is so unfortunate as to be out of their favor."³²

Congregations and churches, therefore, had an unrivaled ability to mobilize community sentiment and action and to unify rural African Americans across district and county lines. To this extent, they were by definition political institutions, and most everywhere they devoted organizational resources to partisan ends. In them newspapers, proclamations, contracts, and legal documents were read aloud for the edification of illiterate congregants; in them local, state, and national issues bearing on their future were considered and argued over; in them local Union Leagues often conducted business; in them Republican party activists and returning black veterans came to speak; and in them the bonds of political solidarity could be forged. Some ministers and congregations sought to steer clear of electoral politics in an effort to cultivate peaceful relations with whites, but this was not a choice that most thought possible to make. The AME Church officially regarded politics as indispensable to preserving and expanding the domain of freedom, as an "imperative duty"; and it eagerly placed the time and talents of its organizers in the service of the Republican party. Baptists left the initiative to individual congregations, which without much exception determined to enter the fray.³³

But congregational embrace of electoral politics expressed a deeper popular sensibility that drew no clear distinction between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the political. The churches did not simply open their doors to the world of politics; they assimilated politics into their very rhythms of worship and community life. Nothing better testified to such an integrated worldview than the tirades of white landowners and politicians about the "religious fanaticism" of the freedpeople. Like the Louisiana sugar planter William J. Minor, they complained about "the designing preachers" who attracted freed-

people “from all parts of the country” to twice-weekly meetings that lasted “until morning”—meetings where the “women become hysterical” and the laborers generally grew “demoralized.” A white lawyer from Barnwell, South Carolina, claimed that “the great mass of our plantation hands” relished preaching, funerals, and political speeches in no special order. “They are of a very religious turn of mind, . . . a superstitious people, and believe strongly in the spiritual world,” he observed, and then added immediately that “they are organized into leagues” and that “those leagues are opened by prayer, for the preachers are generally there, and they are counseled as they love their immortal souls to vote no other than the straight republican ticket.”³⁴

The prominent place that black ministers and exhorters occupied in local social and political life exemplified this sensibility and set of interconnections. For the very qualities that lent individuals spiritual authority in their communities also tended to thrust them forth as leaders in the secular arenas of politics. Working principally as farmers, croppers, and laborers, rarely having the benefits of formal education and training, they often showed independence of mind, special fluency of speech, a facility for conducting call-and-response communication, a folk wisdom, and an ability to resolve conflict. Most could also read and write, and probably enjoyed rich local kinship ties. Thus, former South Carolina governor James L. Orr thought that “the native leaders” in his home county of Anderson “constitute the leaders of the colored race,” and although he could not “say that the political leaders have been preachers,” he did believe, significantly, that “most of the preachers are politicians.” At the same time, black preachers needed to reflect as well as shape popular sentiments, and missteps in one arena would likely compromise their standing in another. When a preacher in Madison County, Mississippi, voted Democrat, the congregants “had no more to do with him; turned him off,” and “would not hear him preach or do anything else any more for us.”³⁵

The encapsulation of spiritual and political energies by congregations and churches, and the intensive mobilization it allowed, had a very tangible logic: the reconstitution of black communities was increasingly seen to require institutional power at the local level. By the time Congressional Reconstruction had enfranchised black men in the former Confederate states, freedpeople had obtained a substantial—and unsettling—education in the workings of local “democracy.”

They had passed, in effect, from slavery to a form of subjecthood that offered limited standing in civil and political society. No longer bound to owners as individuals and, at least in theory, able to make contracts, form families, own property, and sue in court, freedpeople nonetheless encountered a new system of group dependency legislated in the main by former slaveholders acting under the reconciliation program of President Andrew Johnson. An assortment of laws enacted by state assemblies and local governing bodies—laws familiar to most rural societies in the wake of servile emancipations—hedged in the prospects of freed laborers and left them few avenues of redress that their employers did not control. Vagrancy ordinances, apprenticeship laws, antienticement statutes, stiff licensing fees, heavy taxes, the eradication of common-use rights on unenclosed land, and the multiplication of designated "crimes" against property constructed a distinct status of black subservience and a legal apparatus that denied freedpeople access to economic independence. Citing the "rules and regulations" issued by the "high and mighty police juries of the country parishes," which demanded that "negroes must do this" and "negroes must do that," the radical *New Orleans Tribune* thus saw in the late summer of 1865 "an entering wedge to divide the population of the state into two classes with separate interests, rights, and privileges." Where the Freedmen's Bureau managed to establish offices and "Freedmen's Courts," former slaves might challenge the prerogatives of white landowners and find a modicum of justice; elsewhere they met planters and their clients, many of them ex-rebels, who held the local offices and judgeships and sat on the local juries.³⁶

The consequences threatened the integrity of freed households, families, and kinship networks and therefore the basic relations necessary to placing freedom on a stable foundation. County courts, governing boards, magistrates, grand and trial juries, and sheriffs—all elected by white men who had their political rights restored or had received pardons from the President—reflected the concerns (and usually the direct interests) of landowners and employers. They bound out black children designated as "orphans" (generally to former masters), failed to prosecute acts of personal violence, ruled for employers in contract disputes, taxed dogs and confiscated firearms, debarred testimony by African Americans against white people in legal proceedings, imposed excessive fines and jail terms for minor infractions, arrested freedpeople who

refused to work for white employers, and harassed those who sought to supplement their subsistence. “Justices of the Peace attach and seize property of freedmen *that under the state law is exempt*,” charged a Freedmen’s Bureau agent in Huntsville, Texas, while “sheriffs serve writs, make arrests, [and] seize crops for rent.” In Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana, a freedwoman and three of her husband’s relatives were indicted in early 1867 “for going into a field and picking from the ground a few walnuts,” and although a lawyer induced the husband to give him a note for \$150 to mount a defense, the prospects for acquittal were dim. “If this is to be settled according to the manner of disposing of such cases in this parish heretofore,” a federal official predicted, “these parties will certainly be sent to prison, perhaps to the penitentiary.”³⁷

Rural blacks who sought to protect themselves and their families and gain legal remedy discovered a host of onerous hurdles, unless they had the support of a white patron. There were burdensome lawyers’ fees and court costs, hostile judges, unsympathetic juries, and the likelihood of further white retaliation. A “Committee of Freedmen” in the cotton belt of eastern Georgia, complaining that they can “obtain very little justice . . . as the civil courts are now managed,” poignantly explained that while white men, “mostly rebels,” regularly drove them off without pay as soon as their crops were laid by, they were “too poor” to hire a lawyer and unable “to incur the expense” of traveling to Augusta (forty-five miles distant) to place their grievances before the Freedmen’s Bureau. In central Alabama, freedmen had been persuaded to withdraw lawsuits entered against their employers for non-payment of wages because they lacked money sufficient to “carry it through.” One Freedmen’s Bureau agent, struggling to assist similarly aggrieved black laborers in Wilkinson County, Georgia, found it “impossible to procure anything like justice,” and acknowledged the delight of those “who believe blacks dont have rights whites are bound to respect.”³⁸

The spirit of *Dred Scott* did indeed prevail in the South of Presidential Reconstruction and would surely have defined the postemancipation landscape were it not for the advent of Radicalism and the accompanying mobilizations of freedpeople. Together, they pushed the spirit into retreat and summoned new forces and possibilities that could

hardly have been to the liking of those who had no respect for the rights of black folk.



White conservatives of the time and their apologists of a later day had a term for it: "Negro rule." It captured in the most direct way their view that the dreaded revolution of the middle period came neither with the military defeat of the Confederacy nor with the abolition of slavery but with the enfranchisement of the freedmen and their participation in state and local government. Nothing seemed more menacing or illegitimate, nothing more vindictive or humiliating, than the installation in positions of official political power of former slaves, of abject and "ignorant" dependents belonging to an "inferior race." In an inversion that even Christmas revelry never conjured, the ruled had become the rulers and the rulers the ruled.

So deeply did this image of inversion and usurpation leave an imprint on the story of Reconstruction that serious historians still feel the need to address and expunge it. And they have certainly mounted an impressive rebuttal. Outside of South Carolina, they show, blacks never dominated either the executive, legislative, or judicial branches of any southern state, and in South Carolina, the executive and judiciary always remained under white control. Statewide, African Americans were most likely to be found in "ceremonial" positions (lieutenant governor or secretary of state), and they rarely chaired important legislative committees. On the local level, the best that blacks could generally hope for was a significant share of county and parish offices, and then usually the ones offering the least police authority or access to entrenched wealth. The prospects for using state power to carry through a social revolution faltering in Congress were, in short, virtually nonexistent, and most black officeholders appeared to pursue relatively moderate objectives.³⁹

Yet we must not to allow the racist fears and condescension that the term "Negro rule" embodied to blind us to the context in which it acquired meaning. For in a manner that only one other revolution before the twentieth century approached (that in St. Domingue), Radical Reconstruction occasioned a massive transfer of power at the state

and local levels. Whereas during the period from disunion through Presidential Reconstruction there effectively occurred a *shift within* the slaveholding elite, from younger planters-on-the-make who had aligned with the secessionist faction of the Democratic party to older, more established planters who had aligned with the Whig party, during Radical Reconstruction there was a *shift away* from the former slaveholding elite toward a collection of groups who had been outsiders to the formal arenas of southern politics. They included white northerners who had served in the U.S. Army and Freedmen's Bureau, had taken up planting or merchandising, or had engaged in teaching and missionary work; white southerners who had been Unionists or unenthusiastic Confederates, had been nonslaveholders and small slaveholders, or had lived beyond the immediate orbit of the planter class; black northerners, some having escaped from slavery, who had acquired education and skills, had joined the Union military effort, or had served as ministers and missionaries for the AME Church; and black southerners who either had been free before the Civil War or had gained their freedom as a result of it. Together, they were substantially less wealthy, less experienced politically, and less committed to perpetuating the old plantation order. And together, they usually owed their positions to black votes.⁴⁰

The emergence of genuine bases of black power was, therefore, only the most spectacular of these transitions, but it was also unexampled. It occurred not on the periphery, but in the very heart of what had been the Old Regime, and it simultaneously stanching the efforts of local elites to enforce new forms of black submission while enabling freedmen and women to negotiate the terms of freedom from new circumstances of strength. Black power, which took shape in enclaves—generally a county or a number of adjacent counties scattered across the plantation districts of the Deep South—always showed the marks of particular conditions, experiences, and leaders. At the same time, it revealed a widespread impulse to use the instruments of official politics to achieve community reconstitution and self-governance, and to imagine the electoral process as a vehicle of community definition and empowerment. Not the destruction of established institutions or the redistribution of private property but the pursuit of simple justice proved to be its predominant device. Ostensibly modest in design, in

the postemancipation rural South this agenda was both radical and consequential.

Few enclaves of black power more clearly displayed the marks of local history or the revolutionary repercussions of the moment than the one in McIntosh County, Georgia. At the southern end of the antebellum rice kingdom and home to some of the Old South's wealthiest planter aristocrats, the county's staple-crop economy unraveled during and immediately after the Civil War and, by the spring of 1868, experienced a drastic recomposition of its political power structure. In place of the grandees, their kinsmen, and white clients, black men now served as county clerk, county ordinary, justice of the peace, constable, city marshal, and election registrar, and represented the county in the general assembly and state senate. Before long they would also serve as sheriff, deputy sheriff, coroner, election manager, and city alderman, not to mention as jurors and bailiffs. A dense and generationally rooted black population that outnumbered whites by a factor of nearly three, the departure of planter families in the face of wartime federal incursions, and the effects of Sherman's Special Field Orders No. 15 (which had set aside land for blacks) made possible this stunning transition; a remarkable and energetic leader from afar proved to be the lightning rod.⁴¹

Tunis G. Campbell was one of many northern black men who brought considerable talents and resources to the task of reconstructing the ex-slave South, but few built such a formidable local following or invited such intense controversy. Born in New Jersey in 1812 and educated at a white Episcopal school in neighboring New York, Campbell became active in both the antislavery and black convention movements, converted to Methodism, and worked for more than a decade as a hotel steward. Too old to enlist for active military service, he set out for Union-occupied Port Royal, South Carolina, in the summer of 1863 with the endorsement of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and more than three thousand dollars of his own money, hoping to assist in educating the freedpeople and promoting a biracial democracy. Commissioned in the spring of 1865 as the superintendent of the Georgia Sea Islands and already convinced of the need for "separatism for strength," Campbell then established freed colonies on St. Catherine's and Sapelo Islands with their own governments, militia companies, and

schools, and, when it became necessary, helped mobilize settlers to fend off the restoration of their lands to the original white owners. But federal harassment eventually persuaded Campbell to abandon the islands and to seek a new base on the mainland of McIntosh County, where he and many of his followers could be found when Congress initiated Radical Reconstruction.⁴²

Campbell had a keen understanding of the essentials of political power and the aspirations of freed communities. Advancing \$1,000, he leased a 1,250 acre plantation from a Union sympathizer and divided it among black families who would control the plots and pay an annual rent in kind. He wrote a constitution and organized the BelleVille Farmers Association to function much like a local government with elected officials. And he gained appointment as an election registrar, thereby enrolling and educating prospective black voters in McIntosh and two adjoining counties; the potential of the fivefold registration advantage that blacks subsequently enjoyed was not lost on him. By the summer of 1867, a Freedmen's Bureau agent found the colony in "a most promising condition" economically and the hundred-odd denizens preparing to erect a schoolhouse. In November, Campbell was selected as a delegate to the state constitutional convention, and the following April Campbell's son was elected to the statehouse while Campbell himself won election as state senator and local justice of the peace. The rice planter Frances Butler Leigh saw in these results the "most absolute control" that Campbell exercised over McIntosh County blacks.⁴³

Although Campbell's control was hardly absolute, he did come to wield enormous influence. Not only as leader of the BelleVille colony, as election registrar, and as justice of the peace, but also as an elder in the AME Zion Church, he could play the roles most closely attuned to the needs of rural freedpeople and speak a language that resonated with their political sensibilities. Frequently calling county blacks together to answer questions about labor relations, counsel them about contracting, encourage them to "save their money so that they may buy homes," and instruct them as to their political duties, he seemed to mix practical advice and "good republican doctrine" with a spiritual cadence and fervor. Equally impervious to bribery or intimidation, Campbell thereby won deep and abiding personal support (one federal official claimed that his followers "almost worship him") and used it

to build a political machine and grassroots organization, replete with a citizens' militia company that strongly resembled a chapter of the Union League. While Republican prospects in the State of Georgia and most black initiatives at the local level there either began to flounder or meet strong conservative resistance, black power in McIntosh County continued to grow and become more firmly entrenched.⁴⁴

Nowhere were the implications more evident or irritating to white planters than in Campbell's justice's court. With two black constables to assist him, and eventually a black sheriff and deputy sheriff to lend added muscle, Campbell provided black laborers with new leverage in their relations with white employers. Showing no patience for the mistreatment, insults, swindles, and personal abuse to which the freed-people were customarily subjected, he had the accused arrested, brought before his bench, and, if found guilty, fined. Not surprisingly, local planters became indignant and charged that Campbell "administered justice with a high hand and happy disregard of the law." "[H]e is tyrannical overbearing and determines questions not upon principles of law but by his individual prejudice and caprice," one scowled; and his "teachings" are "calculate[d] to destroy the efficiency of labor in this section and inaugurate a reign of terror." For their part, freed-people often left the plantations "en masse" to attend Campbell's court and associated political meetings and, by one account, commonly returned with "a disposition to refuse to enter into contracts, or if already made to violate them." It would not be long before McIntosh County whites launched a series of vindictive, and ultimately successful, strikes against Campbell. But it would be years before black political power in the county was fully dislodged, and never would there be a return to the old order. During the early twentieth century there was an atmosphere of moderation in race relations and an economic landscape in which three of four black families owned their homes.⁴⁵

Mississippi presented a very different political map, for if McIntosh County was an exception to the local experience of Reconstruction in most of Georgia, it had many more analogues in the Magnolia state. No former Confederate state gave rise to as many enclaves of black political power or to as many local black officeholders. Home of Jefferson Davis, the rich Natchez "nabobs," and many of the largest cotton plantations to be found in the antebellum South, Mississippi seemed to epitomize Black Reconstruction as much as it did the cotton king-

dom of slavery times. Stretching from Wilkinson and Adams counties in the south to De Soto and Panola counties in the north, the bases of black political strength ran principally along the Mississippi River and through the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, but also spread into the northeast sections of the state to include Monroe, Oktibbeha, Pontotoc, and Chickasaw counties. In counties such as these, blacks may have come to hold two-thirds of the offices.⁴⁶

Unlike coastal Georgia and South Carolina, black political achievements in Mississippi did not benefit from the effects of either generationally rooted slave communities or war-related land reform: the social and economic development of Mississippi was a product of the four antebellum decades (and of the interregional slave trade) and the federal government had fewer than fifty thousand acres of rebel-owned land under its control at war's end. Yet the early appearance of Yankee troops, the early experiments with free labor in the lower Mississippi Valley, the importance of black troops in the early army of occupation, and the work of effective Union League organizers simultaneously hastened political mobilization in the river counties and put an unusually large contingent of carpetbaggers on the scene. This, together with a substantial number of counties boasting heavy black population majorities (26 of 74 counties were at least 60 percent black), helped bring the radical faction of the Republican party to statewide power under the leadership of Union army general Adelbert Ames. And Ames initially used his executive and military authority to notable effect: appointing blacks to local office, demanding that they be regarded as "competent jurors," and using troops to protect black voting rights.⁴⁷

Panola County, situated in the northwestern corner of the state only a few miles from the banks of the Mississippi River, seemed to exemplify the process of local political revolution. Blacks accounted for six of ten county residents, and for even greater majorities in most of the election precincts. A garrison of black troops had been stationed there in the late summer and fall of 1865 and they appear to have emboldened freedpeople before being removed. And a trio of determined white Republicans, two of whom hailed from Massachusetts and had purchased a large plantation, helped establish an active Union League and advance the cause of voter registration. But the first stunning signs of change were to be seen in the jury box, where black men made their initial appearance during the November term of 1869. Soon thereafter,

it became the "custom" for jurors to be equally divided between the races. When local elections were finally held in 1871 (the ratification of the Radical constitution having been delayed), blacks then began to turn their numerical advantages to good effect. They immediately succeeded in claiming two of five seats on the governing board of supervisors, at least three positions as magistrate and two as constable, and both of the county's seats in the state legislature. Two years later, after another round of elections, they claimed three of five seats on the board of supervisors.⁴⁸

Other river and Delta counties and a few counties on the Alabama border to the east experienced much the same political results during the early 1870s. In Claiborne County, amid a Republican sweep, three of five supervisors, several justices of the peace and constables, and the sheriff were black. In Madison County, grand and petit juries were "mostly composed" of blacks and a local white complained that "they had a board of supervisors there . . . not one of whom could write his name." In Monroe County, blacks served as magistrates, treasurer, state legislators, and sheriff while dominating the board of supervisors, with one of their number—a former slave and preacher—chosen as board president. In Issaquena County, blacks eventually held all five seats on the board of supervisors. And in Warren County, with Vicksburg the county seat, blacks would hold the office of sheriff, circuit clerk, treasurer, and justice of the peace and briefly control four of five supervisory seats. When a correspondent for the *Christian Recorder* arrived in Greenville, Mississippi, in May 1871, he marveled that "there were two juries empanelled with about two-thirds colored men" and noted that "the courthouse yard was crowded with the descendants of Africa." Four years later, a visitor to Leflore County found that nine of eleven justices of the peace were "negroes" and "white property-holders are compelled to appear and submit to their judgment on questions of law, upon which sometimes great interest depends." Looking back on this period in Bolivar County, a white state senator recalled that "the twelve jurors were often negroes, with a negro clerk of court, negro lawyers in the courtroom, and all witnesses negro with the court deputies [and] almost every justice of the peace of the county negroes." A total of thirteen counties, composing about one-third of Mississippi's black population, elected black sheriffs.⁴⁹

With the levers of local office in their grasp, black Republicans,

with the support of some of their white allies, moved to adjust the balances of power and shift important resources toward their communities. They generally raised taxes—in some cases forcing plantation land onto the market—initiated beneficial building projects, established and aided charitable institutions, and provided for the educational opportunities envisioned at the Radical constitutional convention by constructing “colored” schools, hiring teachers, increasing salaries, and purchasing basic supplies. Even a white critic of “Negro rule” had to concede that many of these efforts were “extraordinarily successful.” Most of all, they curtailed the arbitrary and coercive power of white landowners, bringing perpetrators to heel and lending substance to the notion of civil equality. Appointed a justice of the peace in Adams County by General Ames in April 1869, the former slave John R. Lynch discovered that his duties were even more critical than he had supposed. With original jurisdiction in petty civil cases and in criminal cases below the grade of felony, he could sit as a committing magistrate, examine witnesses, and decide whether testimony sufficed to bind the accused over to a grand jury and fix bail. Little wonder that some of Lynch’s constituents “magnified” his position far beyond its official description and determined to seize on the smallest offense to “come to law.” “To them,” Lynch observed, “this was something that was entirely new, and they were anxious to avail themselves of such a glorious privilege”—and the expected sympathy that would flow from “a colored man . . . in charge of the office.”⁵⁰

The winds of political revolution did not seem to sweep through Warren County, North Carolina, as turbulently as they did through Warren County, Mississippi. Federal armies had not marched through eastern North Carolina and voters there never elevated a black man to the office of sheriff. But the cotton, tobacco, and grain-growing county had been one of the most rabidly secessionist in the state during the late winter of 1861 and the potential consequences of Radical Reconstruction were not lost on the conservative *Warrenton Indicator*. The editors reeled, in 1868, at the spectacle of “depraved adventurers and ignorant negroes” taking seats at the state constitutional convention “once occupied by the most illustrious citizens,” rejected the principle of black suffrage, and fretted at the prospect of black judges and increased taxes on real and personal property. They could hardly have greeted the resulting black political accession with much relief. Begin-

ning in the summer of 1868, well over fifty black men came to serve regularly in several capacities that contributed to the protection, edification, and vitality of their families and communities: as election registrars and judges, justices of the peace, and school committeemen. A smaller number would serve as tax assessors and list-takers, coroners, and county commissioners. But from the late 1860s through the 1870s, the greatest number (over three hundred) would serve on superior and inferior court juries, generally composing between one-third and one-half of the jurors during any given term. There, they deliberated on civil and criminal actions and oversaw probate, guardianships, and the apprenticing of orphans—of no small importance in a state where former slaveholders had been especially notorious for using apprenticeship to regain control of black children and undermine the integrity of black family life.⁵¹

A large black majority and the organizing work of the Union League clearly enabled freedmen to wield institutional political power in Warren County, as in many other counties of eastern North Carolina. So, too, did the state constitution of 1868, which lent county townships "corporate powers for the necessary purposes of local government" (including taxation) and permitted eligible voters in them to elect justices of the peace (who also constituted a board of trustees) and school committeemen. "All the old courts have been abrogated or essentially changed by the new state constitution," a Freedmen's Bureau agent reported in July of 1868, "and now with colored men as magistrates in every precinct of these counties, and a fair proportion of colored men on every jury we may hope for justice." Black officials struggled to find resources to build schoolhouses and provide instruction for at least four months of the year, to give aggrieved laborers means of legal redress, and to offer some manner of social service and assistance to freed communities. Although it is difficult to know just how much justice they secured, they did establish a base of political strength that withstood the full onslaught of the state's redeemer Democrats and may have contributed to noteworthy economic gains by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1870, fewer than 80 of the nearly 2,500 black household heads in Warren County owned real property and fewer still owned farmland; by 1900, blacks owned 33,212 acres or more than one-sixth of the county's farmland and almost one-third of all black farm operators were owners rather than tenants.⁵²

The examples can be multiplied a good many times over. In Edgefield County, South Carolina, well-organized and armed black Republicans, benefiting from Union League activity and their party's command of the governorship and legislature, gained control of the county courthouse despite the opposition of Democratic clubs and agricultural societies. Led by the charismatic former slave and Union army sergeant Prince Rivers (a man, according to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who made "Toussaint perfectly intelligible"), they challenged the power of local landowners and advanced the cause of African-American community development. By 1872, white planters felt the squeeze of higher taxes and complained that they could not get a fair hearing in the trial justices' courts; two years later, black schoolchildren outnumbered whites by a ratio of two to one, while black and white teachers received identical pay. At the other end of the Deep South, in Washington County, Texas, black power was hitched to a biracial and multiethnic Republican party that took the reins of county government in 1870 and held them for over a decade. Although blacks routinely yielded the offices of sheriff, district judge, and county judge to their white allies, they did claim most of the nominations for state legislature and eventually served as clerks of court, treasurers, deputies, and justices of the peace. Perhaps more consequentially, they were heavily represented on grand and petit juries. Together, they helped promote black access to local offices (by accepting black sureties on bonds) and gave black defendants meaningful protection.⁵³

Even where black representation in office was limited, the advent of Republican rule on the local level—especially when black votes proved crucial in elections—could make an immense difference to freed inhabitants. "Since the resumption of the civil supremacy and the removal of the old county and state officers, much of the most difficult labor of this office has become a thing of the past," a Freedmen's Bureau agent stationed in northern Alabama found. "Colored complaints in cases of trespass, assault, debt &c. are now referred directly to the civil officers who, where sufficient cause of action appear, commence proceeding at once." The Vermont carpetbagger Marshall Twitchell, who presided over the organization of Red River Parish, Louisiana, in the early 1870s from a post in the state senate and a plantation near the new parish seat of Coushatta, made a similar point in waxing exuberant over his own achievements: "For the first

time since the war, the laborer felt a degree of confidence that he would get the profits of his labor." The significance of black political power resided not only in the array of officials who would attend to the pressing concerns and grievances of freedpeople, but also in the effective institutionalization of what had been informal mechanisms for resolving disputes, thereby lending voice to those who remained formally disfranchised. Without strict regard to age or gender, rural blacks crowded county courthouse grounds or made their way to the sites of magistrates' courts—sites that may have included farms, plantations, churches, schoolhouses, or crossroads—and simultaneously witnessed and influenced the proceedings. They rendered their support, their opinions, and their judgments so that elected officers and jurors could serve as leaders, mediators, and vehicles of neighborhood sentiment.⁵⁴

At all events, Radical Reconstruction gave tremendous stimulus to the development of black associational life, extending the already dense civic sphere found in the cities and larger towns into the countryside. Mutual aid and benevolent societies that, of necessity, had been clandestine now came to public light while new ones were launched. In Front Royal, Virginia, freedpeople started up a "Union Relief Association" to tend to the sick and bury the dead. In Rowan County, North Carolina, they organized a savings bank and pooled resources to purchase land for use as a cemetery. In Baldwin County, Georgia, where federal troops had been stationed and a Loyal League had been active, they established a welfare society, an "axe club" to assist in firefighting (and perhaps to act in the community's defense), and a farmers' club to aid tenants and freeholders. In Pontotoc County, Mississippi, they founded a mutual aid society, "the purpose of which," according to a less-than-sympathetic local observer, "was the betterment of the freedmen and the establishment of their rights." Even in nonplantation districts, the pulse of organizational activity was in evidence. In Cass County, Georgia, where blacks composed less than one-third of the population, "colored men" formed a "Mechanic and Labroing [*sic*] Men association" in 1869, which met monthly "to unit the labroing [*sic*] men in the county," assess their economic prospects, and collect dues "tell we can make some good amounth to due some good with." "We wants to pays land as soon as we can to give homes to our poor peoples," one of the leaders explained, "for maney ar be dout homes and land to worke and cheated out what maney Workes for."⁵⁵

Writing from the Virginia piedmont county of Orange on the last day of 1868, a Freedmen's Bureau agent accordingly reflected on the changes he could observe among the freedpeople since the war. In 1865, he remembered, they were "abject and fearful in the presence of the master class" and "joyous and affectionate in the presence of representatives of the [federal] government." They were "unsettled and working for small or no remuneration," knew "little about saving or spending money," and, by his lights, were "largely ignorant and superstitious" and gave "family relations" slight regard. Now, however, the picture was wholly different. The freedpeople were "much less abject and more settled, ambitious and industrious." They will "generally resist if attacked." They "receive higher wages and take better care of themselves." Some had "purchased homes and most aspired to" do so. Families had been "gathered together and relations between husband and wife and parent and child are," the agent thought, "better understood." "Many schools and Sabbath schools" had been organized in the county and, as a consequence, "large numbers of adults have learned to read." And, to round out the impressive accomplishments, "various societies for the promotion of temperance, charity, schools, and politics have been established." In all of this, the agent saw "honest pride and manly integrity" and a wonderful advance "toward civilization and enlightenment."⁵⁶

The South Carolina planter Henry W. Ravenel more likely saw a further descent into barbarism when he tersely recorded on May 14, 1870 that all his hands "have gone from here" into the nearby town of Aiken for a celebration "with processions, drums, and a barbecue." For what the freedpeople commemorated on that day was the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment—officially prohibiting the denial of "the right to vote" on the grounds of "race, color [or] previous condition of servitude" but doubtless imagined by most in attendance as a constitutional conferral of "certain rights." The crowd was large and enthusiastic as the procession formed and proceeded to an assembly point across from the new residence of the black Republican leader Robert Elliott, who after the amendment was read, spoke for about three hours. Yet a low-country newspaper correspondent also took care to note the many "organizations" in evidence from Aiken and the surrounding towns and counties: colored fire companies, benevolent associations, brass bands, military outfits, and cavalry—as well as a

host of "prominent persons" from Hamburg, Edgefield, Columbia, and Augusta. It was a picture of black political and civil community constructed in the whirl of revolution and gathering momentum for challenges to come.⁵⁷



Extraordinary as they were, black political achievements were from the outset tempered by tensions, frustrations, and obdurate hurdles that only grew over time. Rural blacks had to struggle not simply to organize their supporters, nominate candidates, and win elections, but also to assume, hold, and wield the powers of office. In large part this was because of the enormous pressures brought to bear by white Democrats through formal and paramilitary means, but it was due, as well, to deepening conflicts among southern Republicans and a battle for the soul and apparatus of the party. A unified Republican party with a shared set of objectives and sense of purpose may have been able to defeat the counterrevolutionary moves of the Democrats; an increasingly fractious party at odds with itself was almost fatally exposed.

The product of war and emancipation, black affiliation with the Republican party was unique and contradictory. On the one hand, no other group of working people in the nation's history has ever become so closely aligned with a political party; on the other, the Republican party's program and leadership was never determined by black constituents—it never became "their" party. The consequences were to be felt at all levels of political life, yet nowhere more intensely than in the counties and municipalities as the faith, hope, and guarded optimism that accompanied the advent of Radical Reconstruction widely soured. In some cases the disenchantment could set in with remarkable speed. In the early spring of 1867, a black Union League leader in Tennessee sang the praises of Republican governor William G. Brownlow, who had labored "unceasingly for the elevation and education of the colored race" and made it possible for them to "cast [their] votes," "inherit and transmit property," "sue and be sued in courts," "make and enforce contracts," and "testify in the courts of the country." But little more than a year later, a local black organizer and officeholder asked what Brownlow and other "home Radicals," had "done for us" and suggested that "we have got nothing to expect from

him” in the way of either patronage or policy. “What is the use of talking about ecology before the Law there is noone,” a former slave from Fayette County told Brownlow’s Republican successor in 1869, “you have been telling us that we are allowd to hold office I do not see noone of my collor in office and you says that we are allowd to sit on the juree bench but that is not so.” Writing pseudonymously, a black South Carolinian complained just as bitterly in 1872 about the white Republicans who made “loud and big promises to the freedmen till they got elected to office, then did not one single thing,” who refused to support the nomination of “a colored man” for major office, who “removed a number of black trial justices,” and who “disarmed a number of black militia companies in the upcountry.” “The first duty of any race of people,” he thundered, “is to see to their own interests specially.”⁵⁸

Looking after “their own interests” was, however, a difficult endeavor. Early on, local Republican organizations were headed disproportionately by northern and southern whites, and black leaders and constituents alike widely accepted those claims to authority and office. In large part, this reflected the party’s role in advancing the cause of black civil and political rights and the belief that white party members could be counted as true allies. But it also represented an act of deference to those better educated and experienced in the workings of electoral politics, as well as a desire to appear politically “responsible.” In plantation districts, blacks would ordinarily find places on county executive committees, help fill delegations to state party conventions, and receive nominations for a seat or two on the county governing board, for a few (usually less consequential) county offices, and perhaps for a seat or two in the state house of representatives. Nominations for the more visible and prominent posts—Congress, the state senate, judgeships, the majority of governing board seats, sheriff, tax assessor and collector—generally were tendered to whites. In nonplantation districts, where Republicans were far more dependent on white votes, blacks rarely received nominations for public office and, at best, could hope for influence within local party circles.⁵⁹

The problem was at least twofold. With scant exception, white Republicans neither clearly understood nor entirely supported the aspirations and objectives of the black rank-and-file. Nor were they prepared to accord local black leaders the status of full partners in the political

project. And given their social profiles and locations, this should not be surprising. Although white Republicans may well have been outsiders to the formal arenas of southern politics, they were similarly outsiders (and likely antagonists) to the informal arenas of black politics. Where black voters formed majorities, white Republican leaders were either northerners who had served in the Union army or had taken up plantations, southerners who had been paternalist slaveholders and supporters of the Whig party, or local merchants who wished to pry black laborers loose from their traditional economic dependence on white landowners. Where black voters found themselves in the minority (and often the distinct minority), white Republicans were southerners who owned property but had little sympathy for the Confederacy and a good deal of interest in empowering those regions (white majority) and social groups (white yeomen and former nonslaveholders) that had regularly fought and lost the internal political battles of the antebellum period. Under the best of circumstances, white Republicans embraced the ideals of civil and political equality, pressed to see the freedpeople treated justly by their white employers and neighbors, came to their assistance in a variety of ways, and perhaps imagined an identity of economic and political interest between them. In most instances, they viewed themselves as the freedpeople's political tutors and hoped that black votes would compose a stable foundation for the power and livelihood of the Republican party and leaders like themselves—that is, if they did not seek to marginalize black constituents and interests entirely.⁶⁰

But there was an even deeper dilemma. Either the Republican party failed to attract a significant bloc of white voters or, when it did, those voters would rarely support black candidates and specifically black demands. In the black belt, white Republicans were generally so sparse in number that they could often be identified in name by the party faithful who registered similar assessments from county to county and state to state: "There are only 43 white men of this county who call themselves Republicans"; "the only white man of this vicinity" who supported Grant; "they are all rebels here except a few white men and the Negroes"; "there is no white Republican in either of those Townships." The Republican Central Club of Ward 12 in the Red River parish of Natchitoches (60 percent black) claimed nearly one hundred members, but fewer than ten were white. In Greene County,

Georgia, where black voters outnumbered whites by more than two to one, Abram Colby reckoned that when he ran for the state legislature he received the votes of only four white men.⁶¹

Although Colby could win an election without the aid of white votes, his experience not only illuminated the highly limited basis of white Republicanism in black-majority districts; it also suggested the more widely precarious nature of the support that was to be found anywhere, for Colby polled less than half of the identifiable white Republican votes in his county. Black Republican leaders and office seekers quickly discovered, to their dismay, that white allegiance to the Republican party was often thinly tendered and readily shaken, and that black interests and aspirants could easily be sacrificed. This was especially true in white-majority areas, where white votes were crucial to party prospects and sympathy for black civil and political equality was regarded as a great political liability. Perhaps the most glaring example was the expulsion—with strong moderate Republican support—of duly elected black legislators from the Georgia General Assembly in 1868. But there were many others. Republicans in a Bertie County, North Carolina, township nominated Jordan H. Parker and George Bishop—a black and white man, respectively—for magistrate in 1869, confident that each was loyal to the party. They erred. A few days later, Bishop announced that “he would not surve with Parker,” and when black Republicans dug in their heels and stood behind Parker, Bishop bolted and ran as a Democrat. “If the white Republicans are such good men,” a disgruntled black leader in east-central Texas complained, “why will they not vote for a colored man[?]” What a Houston newspaper observed in 1870 was far more generally fitting: “Not a colored man in Texas has a good office that was not conferred upon him by the votes of his own people.”⁶²

It was not very long before black Republicans in many parts of the rural Deep South—but particularly in those states where the party controlled the governorships and legislatures into the early 1870s—began to push for a larger share of offices and patronage and more influence in party affairs. “All the colored men wanted and demanded,” Mississippi leader John R. Lynch maintained, “was a voice in the government under which they lived and to the support of which they contributed, and a small but fair and reasonable proportion of the positions that were at the disposal of the voters of the state and of the

administration." Greene Lewis of Perry County, Alabama, who served as a justice of the peace, a state legislator, and a convention delegate several times over, was more militant and direct. "We are done begging and pleading for our rights," he exclaimed in 1874. "Hereafter we intend to demand them and press [for] them on every occasion."⁶³

Black assertiveness varied in its particulars but was similar in its essentials. It looked toward local political power and independence and began to construct a new political identity. Black laborers called white party leaders to account. They moved to control the county and district party machinery. They rejected white office-seekers and substituted black ones. They nominated all-black electoral slates. Much less frequently, they arranged deals with cooperative Democrats. In Yazoo, Mississippi, the carpetbagger Albert T. Morgan found the freedpeople, "whose sterling good sense and practical knowledge of affairs in some measure made up for their lack of school training," no less hesitant about deferring to "colored men from the North" than to white northerners, and claimed that "unless the Northern colored man could make his argument . . . the freedman who aspired for leadership was likely to carry off the prize." A white Republican who had moved recently to Mecklenburg County in Virginia's southside discovered the party there to be "headed by negroes." A district nominating convention in the Alabama black belt in 1869 saw "the negroes . . . arrayed against both carpetbaggers and scalawags." In a speech at the courthouse in Washington County, Texas, in 1871, radical Matthew Gaines "openly denounced many of [the] leading white Republicans and advocated the establishment of a *black man's party*, and a general ousting of *scallawags* and *carpetbaggers*." In Leflore County, Mississippi, during the mid-1870s, according to the testimony of Republican planter Thomas Walton, "the negroes have their clubs" and they "have generally acted in such a way as to leave me to believe that they did not want my presence there." When county conventions met, Walton "observed that the negroes . . . very strongly resisted white influence," and "it produced an impression . . . that these meetings meant nothing but the organization of one race against another." "The truth is," he concluded, "a white man, especially a southern white man, belonging to the republican party, does not seem any more acceptable as one of their counselors or advisers than those who belong to the opposition."⁶⁴

Writing in early 1877, a conservative South Carolinian who thought

ill of the “negro’s capacity for government” nonetheless acknowledged blacks’ political acumen when he reported perceptively that whereas “on national questions the negroes . . . implicitly follow the dictation of northern republicans,” in “home matters they are more independent.” For several years they had “displayed great dissatisfaction with their white leaders,” so that those who had not been “discarded” had to use “money and official patronage to retain their influence.” “The negroes have been accused of being easily led by demagogues,” he noted, “but they really rule the demagogues, not the demagogues them. Let the politicians do anything which is distasteful, and opponents spring up in every quarter.” On his travels through Louisiana in 1875, the northern journalist Charles Nordhoff similarly found that the “negroes are becoming a nuisance to their corrupt white allies” and “begin to grasp after all the offices.” “They are ready to give judgeships to the whites,” he explained, “but the legislature, the sheriffs’ places, the police-juries (county supervisors)—all the places where the money is spent or appropriated—they demand in those parishes where they are in the majority.”⁶⁵

There were tangible results, notably in those states where Radical Reconstruction did not come to a quick end. The combination of black militance in the plantation districts and white retreat in many of the nonplantation districts turned the southern Republican party blacker and blacker over time. Fewer whites were to be found at rallies and conventions and more black claimants won nominations and offices. Indeed, the incidence of black officeholding appears to have grown during the 1870s, peaking on the state and local levels around 1874. But at the same time, the party became a weaker and weaker vehicle for achieving and maintaining power, as factionalism intensified and many white Republican leaders pursued new avenues to broaden their base and appease their opponents. Struggles over the dispensation of state and federal patronage were in part to blame, and they knew no neat racial boundaries. Even more damaging, however, were various “reform” initiatives that responded to—or themselves advanced—charges of “corruption” and “financial mismanagement” and looked to ally moderates in both parties in the interests of property, tax relief, and economic retrenchment.⁶⁶

Thus, as blacks increased their grassroots leverage in the Republican party, white party leaders proved less able or willing to see that lever-

age have significant consequence for policy and power. But black and committed white Republicans also found that, without strong party support and a meaningful threat of force in their favor, the winning of elections (and appointments) and the putative right to hold office did not necessarily or easily translate into actually holding and wielding the instruments of office. The snares and obstacles to be encountered were so numerous, formidable, and institutionalized as to try the forbearance and courage of even the most determined local leader; and they suggest how difficult it was to dislodge the old guard and govern in the name of the new. Where military commanders did not or could not remove sitting officeholders before the installation of those elected under the provisions of the Radical state constitutions, Republican claimants might find the entrance to the courthouse blocked, Democratic incumbents refusing to relinquish their offices, or no one available to administer their oaths. Where Democrats or moderate Republicans filled a share of the posts, black officeholders in particular might find that they would not carry out directives or serve warrants. And where federal troops were not readily at hand, white community opinion might be sufficiently hostile and organized as to reject the authority or even force a Republican officeholder out.⁶⁷

The carpetbagger Charles Stearns felt the wrath of the white community. Elected judge of ordinary in Columbia County, Georgia, "by a majority of over 1,200 voters" in the spring of 1868, he set out for the county seat in September to take up his important duties: selecting jurors, designating election precincts, choosing election managers, and disbursing county funds. He was not welcomed. A raucous mob had assembled and greeted Stearns with hisses and threats, crying out that he was "elected by nigger votes and the niggers had no right to vote." Although the mob eventually dispersed, Stearns could get no protection from the sheriff and another crowd soon dragged him out. Fearing for his life, Stearns left town and resigned. Around the same time in neighboring Alabama, several newly elected Republicans experienced similar harassment and "Riotness." One traveled to the seat of Washington County to assume the offices of probate judge and circuit court clerk but discovered "a black flag flying before the Court House door" along with "about 50 or 60 men assembled all armed with revolvers." Another probate judge was "assaulted and assailed in his office" and complained of "a virtual rebellion" against the authority of the state

government in the county of Butler. In Choctaw County, the Republican sheriff managed to take office in the summer of 1868, but owing to “the hostile actions” and “malicious threats” made against him found it impossible to execute the law.⁶⁸

Intimidation and obstruction could assume other, less blatant though not much less effective, forms. When the registration board of Hinds County, Mississippi, met in June 1868 they found their work “greatly retarded and incommoded” by a committee of three who claimed a right to witness the manner in which the board’s business was transacted “and to interrogate the members as to their knowledge of the official duties imposed on them.” The frustrations of James Syms, an African American appointed judge of the district court of McIntosh County, Georgia, began when his solicitor “refused to swear in under him.” But they became almost intractable when the local “bar met and refused to take cases before his court,” thereby preventing “him from being able to do anything.” Even a context of black power proved no guarantee that the affairs of government would be duly administered. And in many cases, appeals to federal military authorities for assistance only served to confirm the political and logistical dilemmas. Forwarding a plea “for any available force” from the Republican sheriff of Warren County, Georgia, who felt stymied in carrying out the legal actions of the courts, Governor Rufus Bullock received a reprimand in return. If the situation in Warren County qualified as an “emergency,” commanding general George Meade told Bullock, then troops would have to be sent “not only into every county in this state, but in all the five states comprising this department.”⁶⁹

Yet some of the most troublesome obstacles in the path of local Republican, and especially black Republican, power were embedded in the very framework of governance. Indeed, they were explicitly intended to obstruct the “unsponsored” political ascent of poor working folk after property qualifications for voting and officeholding had been eliminated: county officer bonds. Every southern state required county officers to post bond before they could take their oaths, receive their commissions, and begin to carry out their duties. Although the provisions varied from state to state, locality to locality, and office to office, the most important offices everywhere carried the most substantial bonds while even lesser offices called for bonds well beyond the means of ordinary propertyholders, let alone laborers. Sheriffs had to

post between \$5,000 and \$90,000; tax assessors and collectors had to post as much as double the tax revenues owed the state by their counties; and lowly clerks of court might have to post up to a few thousand dollars. Prospective officeholders could, of course, call on men of means to stand as security, but such sureties generally had to own unencumbered real estate and live within the immediate jurisdiction of the offices for which they stood.⁷⁰

Bond posting requirements thereby turned large landowners into a local electoral jury of ultimate resort, giving them the opportunity either to rein in the choices of county voter majorities or dispense with them entirely. This proved particularly daunting to Republicans in the plantation districts, where few white propertyholders supported the party and few black supporters held real property, but it dogged black elected and appointed officials almost everywhere owing to the poverty of their constituents and the hostility of most white southerners to black officeholding. In North Carolina, Republican governor William W. Holden learned of numerous sheriffs, commissioners, clerks, constables, coroners, and magistrates in the eastern part of the state—many of them black—who failed to qualify on this account in 1868 and 1869. “I was Elected Coroner of Hertford County . . . and afford my siceurity of the Best Colard men in the County and men of Property,” one explained. “But the Commishers would not take them and i think the Reason is becace that i am a Colard man for all the white men that offerd thair Bonds wase all taken.” In Glynn County, Georgia, Democrats who worried about the “influence” of Hosea Sherman, the newly elected black tax collector, first threatened Sherman’s sureties and then “nixt him on acct of taking insufficient security bond.” Small wonder that a Republican observer, having finished a tour of southwest Georgia, urged Governor Bullock to commission “our new officers . . . immediately” since “many of them will be unable to give bonds as required by law oweing to the combination of Democrats to prevent men of means from going on the bonds.”⁷¹

The rejection or subversion of bonds, sporadically employed in the earliest years of Radical Reconstruction, appears to have emerged as part of a concerted strategy to deny blacks (and other Republicans) local offices and return them to white control. Outlining the road to the White-Line campaign of violence in Mississippi in 1875, E. H. Stiles, a Republican lawyer in the river town of Port Gibson, explained

that hostile whites first attempted to intimidate Republican voters, then organized a taxpayer's league and began to persecute Republican officials, and then quickly moved to harass individual bondsmen and pressure the board of supervisors to reject bonds that were submitted. Stiles himself "had to go out in various parts of the county" to make what he described as a "very good bond" for the newly elected sheriff in 1874 but discovered upon returning to Port Gibson that "some of the most responsible men . . . said that they would have to go off that bond." Only when such tactics did not prove uniformly successful did White-Liners determine to carry the next elections "at all hazards."⁷²

At the very least, the need to make acceptable bonds could either limit the independence of black officials and the constituents they represented or enable Democrats to hedge the maneuvering room of Republican officeholders more generally. When the former slave J. J. Evans was elected sheriff of the Mississippi Delta county of De Soto in 1873, he had to post a \$75,000 bond. A longtime county resident later assumed that Evans's six sureties, two or more of whom were carpetbaggers, "really administered his affairs and ran his office." But exaggerated and racist as this assumption undoubtedly was, it nonetheless identified a kernel of truth: Evans was in some measure beholden to his bondsmen and dependent on their continued good graces. In Fort Bend County, Texas, where eight of ten inhabitants were black, such a recognition framed contests for local power. Soon after the advent of Radical Reconstruction, county Union League president Walter Burton won an election to become sheriff and found that although "he could give the Bond required by law," it was "rejected on the grounds that the parties on the Bond was not worth anything." Somehow Burton managed to qualify and serve in office until 1874, but his successor, Henry Ferguson, also African American, had no supporters with resources to stand as sureties. Ferguson's only option was to cut a deal with a number of Fort Bend whites, including the wealthiest man in the county. They would make Ferguson's bond if Ferguson agreed to accept two "reputable" whites as deputies. "As it now stands," Albert T. Morgan sighed in the midst of his own frustrating bond experience in Yazoo County, Mississippi, "not more than a handful of landowners may defeat the will of a majority of two thousand out of three thousand voters, and where they combine as they

have here, secure entire control of the offices." A "society turned bottomside up" was, it seems, far easier to imagine than achieve.⁷³



Bonding requirements fell under the authority of the state legislatures, and in Louisiana at least, Republicans in that body moved quickly to allow prospective officeholders to seek sureties outside of their official jurisdictions. In this way, as in many others, access to local power could be heavily dependent on control over the levers of state government. And in this way, as in many others, the limits to what freedpeople in the rural districts could accomplish became ever more apparent. Legislative Republicans clearly sought to undermine the patron-client politics long practiced by parish planters and extend the party's hold over areas where most of the state's population resided. But rather than dispensing with or scaling down the bond requirements, they instead effectively shifted the patronage to Republican bankers and brokers who lived chiefly in New Orleans and who likely had reservations about the development of black power in the countryside.⁷⁴

The centralization that Radical state constitutions generally made possible and that many of the Republican regimes for a time pursued must, of course, be regarded as a political revolution, given the conditions that had previously prevailed: conditions that enabled slaveholders to claim the status of sovereigns, plantations to dominate the social and economic life of much of the South, and big landowners during Presidential Reconstruction to use state and county governments to reinvigorate their direct control over black laborers. With the overwhelming support of black voters and the influence of black legislators, these regimes widely commenced a transformation of civil society and political economy in the former Confederate states, undoing the worlds that slaveholders had made and ex-slaveholders initially tried to remake. They repealed the vestiges of antebellum slave codes and post-emancipation black codes, ended corporal punishment, and modified the penalties for crimes against property. They adjusted the burdens of a tax structure that had rested "lightly upon the large land holders and heavily upon the laboring man and the poor." They dramatically expanded the public sector and social services, especially in the area

of education. And they moved against laws and traditions of racial exclusion and discrimination in public life. They also slowed, and in some cases halted, a veritable flood of local legislation designed to hedge or defeat black struggles to escape dependence on white landholders: laws prohibiting the “enticement” of laborers, the violation of contracts, the grazing of livestock and hunting of game on unenclosed land, and the sale of agricultural produce after dark.⁷⁵

Where African Americans attained substantial representation in Reconstruction legislatures, moreover, they could develop an agenda, shape Republican party policy, and help advance contests for power at the local level. In South Carolina, blacks not only held a majority of the seats, but also came to control most of the committees and thereby pressed potentially far-reaching legislation in the areas of civil rights, labor relations, and landownership. The newly created state Land Commission, which in the words of Union League president Francis L. Cardozo “proposes to give the poor people the opportunity to become owners of the soil they cultivate,” stood alone in the former Confederacy in directly addressing the explosive issue of land reform.⁷⁶ Mississippi blacks never dominated their state’s legislature to such an extent, yet at the height of their power they claimed 55 of 115 seats in the house, 9 of 37 seats in the senate, and the speakership of the house. Accordingly, they moved to restructure the mechanisms of county law enforcement, pushed through an act that one carpetbagger described as “equally strong as Sumner’s civil rights bill,” and supported tax packages that soon put about one-fifth of the state’s land area in public hands for delinquency, purportedly to be sold in small tracts. Most strikingly, they succeeded in electing Blanche K. Bruce, a former slave, teacher, editor, and local officeholder, as well as Hiram Revels, to the U.S. Senate.⁷⁷

Even then, the direct aspirations and grievances of rural laborers rarely took center stage, and legislative efforts meant to address them often failed to pass. In part, this owed to the subordination of state parties in the South to the interests and objectives of the national Republican organization (which were clearly shifting away from those of “producers”). Far more important, however, were the divisions provoked—under the most auspicious of circumstances—not only among southern Republicans generally but also among black Republicans in particular. Although the black legislative delegation in South Carolina

achieved impressive unity on issues relating to civil rights, that unity dissipated when the issues were "economic" and "political." A variety of bills designed to protect farm and plantation laborers against eviction, fraud, and extra-economic coercion either died in committee, were gutted by compromise, or went down to defeat before the entire assembly with the aid of black votes, many cast by the freeborn mulattoes who had a disproportionate voice in policy-making. In Louisiana, where African Americans composed as much as one-third of the legislature and well-educated, freeborn mulattoes wielded even greater power, the results were much the same. Republican legislators quickly enacted a law penalizing employers for discharging or pressuring laborers for political purposes, but most of the bills advanced by black parish representatives that would have aided the struggles of plantation workers met a different fate. A bill to establish an eight-hour day was buried in committee; one to repeal plantation trespass statutes failed to come up for a vote; one to permit laborers to sue employers who lived in other parishes for nonpayment was defeated in the senate; and one to allow laborers provisional seizure of their employers' property in contract disputes was defeated in the house.⁷⁸

It may well have been that the social and cultural distance between many of these legislators and their constituents largely accounts for what, to rural black laboring people, must have been seen as law-making limits and failures. The sensibilities of freeborn mulattoes clearly resonated with the rhythms and relations of urban public life and with petit bourgeois notions of respectability, and in no southern state did as many as half of the legislators claim agricultural occupations; in most of the states, well under one-third did.⁷⁹ Yet we should not make too much of this. In no popular movement—even the most effective—do the social profiles of leaders and elected representatives match those of the rank-and-file. And many of the black artisans, ministers, and teachers who won seats in the legislatures were closely tied to their rural supporters through residence, experience, and kinship. More relevant was the underrepresentation of African Americans as a group in almost all of the state Republican legislative delegations, and especially on the important legislative committees. They simply did not have the numbers or leverage to shape the agenda and enact laws in the face of the ignorance, indifference, or hostility of their white Republican colleagues (not to mention their white Democratic oppo-

nents). Outside of South Carolina, and to some extent even there, the best that they could hope to do was to construct bills that would enhance the ability of the Republican party to maintain power, offer some protection to their constituents against personal and political coercion, and advance the development of their localities through minimally controversial measures: incorporating municipalities, securing ferry privileges, changing district boundaries, and aiding benevolent societies.⁸⁰

It was not, therefore, in state legislatures but rather in “colored mens’” and “colored labor” conventions that the concerns, expectations, and wishes of rural black folk found the best venues for public articulation. With antecedents in the antebellum North and the immediate postemancipation South, these conventions assembled chiefly on a statewide basis, and served as political mouthpieces and pressure groups, urging Congress and Republican legislatures to action while attempting to stimulate further organization on the local level. Already in the spring of 1867, soon after the passage of the Reconstruction Acts, their militance set them apart from the freedmen’s conventions of 1865–1866. No longer were they simply petitioning for their rights; they were demanding to exercise them: to hold office, sit on juries, and use all public accommodations. In at least one case, they threatened confiscation for white landowners who fired black workers for political reasons. But it was in 1869, responding to a set of disappointments in state and national politics, that they began to take decidedly new shape by gathering large numbers of rural delegates and placing the experience of laborers and laboring communities at the center of their proceedings.⁸¹

One of the largest of these conventions met in October in Macon, the heart of Georgia’s cotton belt. With nearly 250 delegates representing as many as eighty counties, it reported on conditions and “outrages” throughout the state and resulted in the formation of a mechanics’ and laborers’ association. The convention’s leaders included local Union League president Jefferson Long, Republican party activist Henry McNeal Turner, McIntosh County political boss Tunis G. Campbell, and several grassroots organizers from the surrounding plantation districts: Philip Joiner of Dougherty County, Abraham Smith of Muscogee County, and George H. Clower of Monroe County. Several of them had been expelled from seats in the Georgia legislature and all were closely in touch with the struggles of black

workers in town and country. Creating more than ten committees, urging "the heads of families in every neighborhood" to "unite themselves together for the purpose of establishing schools," and emphasizing the importance of having black preachers, lawyers, doctors, and editors, the delegates directly addressed the interests and aspirations of rural freedpeople. They demanded higher wages for field hands and recommended the establishment of cooperatives for the purchase of supplies and land, the "withdrawal of women from field labor whenever possible," the formation of clubs for self-defense among plantation workers, and the welcoming of "any immigrants who may choose to cast their lot among us as laborers . . . whatever nativity they may be."⁸²

Shortly thereafter, an even larger convention assembled in Columbia, South Carolina. Although prominent black "politicians" were much in evidence, so too were Union League and state militia officers, and of the three hundred delegates representing all of the counties, most were farmers and agricultural laborers. They elected as convention president the freeborn lawyer and editor Robert B. Elliott, who represented rural Edgefield County in the statehouse and had helped to organize the Republican party in the country districts. And the concerns of black rural workers came to the fore. Indeed, the convention's chief product was a memorial itemizing legislation "of benefit to agricultural laborers," which came to some effect: it provided them with a "preferred lien" for wages on the employer's land; appointed a commissioner of contracts in each county and an officer to draw up jury lists, seeing to it that "the laboring classes . . . have a fair representation"; gave their lawsuits for wages precedence on court calendars; directed that land sold under execution be divided into tracts of fifty acres or less; and established a nine-hour day for skilled labor.⁸³

Similar, though smaller, gatherings took place in Virginia and Texas before the year was out, and in early 1871 ninety-eight delegates from forty-two counties, a majority of whom were "farmers and farm laborers," met in the statehouse in Montgomery to form the Labor Union of Alabama. With the "interest" of rural workers "more largely represented than any other class of labor," the convention heard reports on wages, schools, and churches. But much of the time during three days of organization, discussion, and debate was given over to the question of emigration. It was not the first occasion on which the matter arose in such a public forum. Strong resolutions favoring emigration had

been introduced at the labor convention in Macon in 1869, and an emigration meeting had taken place in Nashville at about the same time. But in Montgomery both the committee on homesteads and the committee on “the condition of the colored people of Alabama” presented emigration as the logical answer to the predicament that blacks had come to endure. Believing that “the present condition of our people, as a mass, is infinitely worse than that of any other class of laborers in any country known to us,” that they were “huddled” in a market that depresses “wages down to starving rates,” and that “under existing circumstances it will be impossible for us to procure homes advantageously,” they saw emigration, preferably to Kansas or to some other territory “in the broad and free West,” as a “panacea.” There, they imagined, “we will be able to sit under our own vine and fig tree,” far from the “midnight hauntings” of the Ku Klux Klan. There, “we can produce abundantly more with the same labor than we can here” and “not be compelled to plant one kind of crop.” And there, we “can enjoy [our] political opinions without being murdered” and hold “religious meetings” without the “danger of being fired into” by “men who are opposed to our moral and political advancement.”⁸⁴

The convention’s delegates “unanimously” adopted the reports and resolved to appoint a committee to “proceed to Washington city, to memorialize Congress and also visit Kansas” to gather information “as to the location of a colony, prices of lands, implements for farming, etc. and the best route of travel, and means of transportation.” One year later, when the labor union met again, the delegates heard from a committee spokesman, who had made the journey the previous summer, that “it is within the reach of every man, no matter how poor to have a home in Kansas.” Although the assessment was greeted favorably, prevailing sentiment seemed to suggest that they “rest here a while longer,” trusting “in God, the President, and Congress, to give us what is most needed here—personal security to the laboring masses—the suppression of violence, disorder, and ku-kluxism—the protection which the Constitution and the laws of the United States guarantee,” and hoping that they might “secure homesteads . . . here.”⁸⁵ Reconstruction was, after all, still alive in the state and the nation. But most of the delegates, and likely most of the black folk at home, undoubtedly feared that, for them, the revolution had already run its course.