

Life Beneath The Veneer:
The Black Community in Asheville, North Carolina from 1793 to 1900

Darin J. Waters

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Approved by:

Dr. Harry Watson

Dr. Fitzhugh Brundage

Dr. Heather Williams

Dr. Genna Rea McNeil

Dr. James E. Crisp

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Abstract

DARIN J. WATERS: Life Beneath the Veneer: The Black Community in Asheville, North Carolina from 1793 to 1900
(Under the direction of Harry Watson)

The focus of this dissertation is the social, economic, and political development of the black community in Asheville, North Carolina from 1793 to 1900. It spans the period of slavery, the Civil War, emancipation, Fusion politics, and disfranchisement. From 1865 to 1900, blacks in Asheville experienced some progress. As the city's popularity as a national tourist and health resort grew, especially after the arrival of the railroad in 1880, blacks found jobs in the city's growing service sector. Service sector jobs did not provide blacks with the type of financial opportunities necessary for any significant economic or social progress, however. The racial attitudes of whites added to the challenges that blacks faced in Asheville. As a very small minority, blacks never had any significant degree of political power in Asheville and, thus, were thus without any means through which they might challenge their marginalization.

Asheville's importance rests in its role as the economic, social, and political center of western North Carolina. After the Civil War, blacks throughout the South were drawn to towns and cities out of a belief that such places offered them greater social, economic, and educational opportunities than what they might find in the rural South. Although small when the Civil War ended, Asheville was more urban than any other area in western North Carolina and thus attracted blacks from the surrounding countryside. While, Asheville did

offer blacks more opportunities than elsewhere in the region, the small size of their population and the racial attitudes of whites ensured that any opportunities for advancement were more significantly limited than those of blacks in towns and cities that boasted larger black populations.

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Introduction

When the Civil War ended in 1865, life changed drastically for blacks who had been slaves when the war began. For the first time in their lives they faced a world that offered them the opportunity to control and guide their own destinies. While much has been written about the efforts that these former slaves made to take advantage of their freedom, little is known about the specific experiences of blacks who lived in Asheville and western North Carolina. Instead, most of what is known about the black experience after the Civil War comes from studies that focus on areas of the South that were dominated by the plantation economy. The number of blacks who lived in those areas was large since their labor was needed to produce cash crops for domestic and foreign markets. Not surprisingly, historians are drawn to study those areas because they afford the opportunity to examine the social, political, and economic impact of emancipation in environments where the black population was more highly concentrated. In such areas, emancipation not only upset social and political relations, it also threatened to unravel local economic structures and did in many cases.

This was not the case in Asheville and western North Carolina. Unlike towns and counties of the lowland regions of the state, Asheville and its neighboring mountain region was never dominated by the plantation system. Instead, much like the entire southern Appalachian Mountains, Asheville and the surrounding county of Buncombe were primarily the domain of white yeomen farmers, whose views on issues such as slavery, and later secession, were different from those of lowland plantation owners. Traveling through the

North Carolina mountains in 1854, Frederick Law Olmsted, a northern journalist and social critic, noted that white highlanders tended to be contemptuous of slaves, slavery, and slaveowners. Olmsted even discovered that many were proud that the region's slave population was small and believed that the state and nation would have been better off without the institution of slavery.¹

Despite the absence of a large-scale plantation system, slavery did exist in Asheville and western North Carolina and was the primary reason that there were blacks in the region. According to the 1860 census, there were 15,522 slaves and 1,831 free blacks living in the 18 counties that fell within the Appalachian region of western North Carolina. Out of the more than 15,000 slaves who lived in the region, 1,933 lived in Asheville and Buncombe County. In addition, there were 111 free blacks in the area before the war, creating a total population of 2,044 blacks constituting 16.2 percent of the total population.

While the number of blacks living in Asheville and western North Carolina were far fewer than the more than 300,000 blacks who lived in the state's eastern coastal counties, emancipation was still an event of major significance. Although it did not threaten to overturn the structure of the region's economy, it did challenge the area's social and political norms. Like their counterparts in other parts of the state, the people of western North Carolina were forced to make many social, political, and economic adjustments after the Civil War. This was especially true in Asheville because the size of the post-war black population grew significantly. Examining how Asheville's black population adjusted to

¹ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country in the Winter of 1853-58*, (New York, New York: Mason Brothers, 1860), 226.

freedom, and how a distinct mountain culture and the lack of a plantation economy influenced and shaped their adjustment is the primary focus of this study.

Although scholars have begun to give greater attention to the social, political, cultural, and economic history of western North Carolina, there is a persistent belief that blacks have little history in the region. In this sense, western North Carolina shares much with southern Appalachia, the region of which it is a part. For years, it was assumed that there were few blacks in southern Appalachia and western North Carolina. Writing in 1967, John C. Belcher, a sociologist who examined the region's racial demographics, wrote that "the number of Negroes in the Appalachian Region is such a small proportion of the total population that the social consequences of their presence and migration are not of any great significance."² While it is true that Appalachia's antebellum and post-bellum black population was smaller than the black population of other regions of the South, the experiences of Appalachian blacks should not be ignored, especially since population statistics show that from 1865 to 1900 blacks constituted approximately 14 percent of the total population of southern Appalachia.³ This figure is comparable to what one finds in Asheville.

Writing about the lack of research about the black experience in the mountain South, historian William Turner, who published an anthology about blacks in Appalachia in 1985, states that the failure to examine the presence of blacks in the southern Appalachia leaves us

² John C. Belcher, "Population Growth and Characteristics," *The southern Appalachian Region: A Survey*, ed. Thomas R. Ford (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1962), 152.

³ William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell, *Blacks in Appalachia*, Lexington, Kentucky: The University of Press of Kentucky, 1985), 5.

with an incomplete picture of the region's history.⁴ According to Turner the absence of studies about mountain blacks has led many to believe that unlike the lowland regions of the South, southern Appalachia is a testimony to "white purity" and "racial innocence," a view that was first articulated by John C. Campbell, the pioneering scholar of Appalachian studies in 1921.⁵ In his often cited book, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, Campbell stated that while there were more blacks in the mountains than one might expect the "often repeated statement that there are no Negroes in the mountains" is generally true. "In many of the more remote counties, especially those where there are few large valleys, few mining or industrial developments, or few cities there are few Negroes," he wrote.⁶ Because of this, Campbell, and many of the scholars who followed him, gave little attention to the experiences of blacks in the southern Appalachian Mountains.

The publication of Turner's anthology in 1985 shows that scholars are no longer ignoring the experiences of black highlanders. In one of the essays that Turner included in his collection, historian Theda Perdue argues that the genesis of the black presence in the Appalachian region of western North Carolina can be traced to the mid-1500s. In an essay titled, "Red and Black in the southern Appalachians," Perdue explores the relationship between blacks and Native Americans in western North Carolina. She also states that there is substantial evidence to suggest that the Cherokee Indians, whose nation encompassed a large portion of the mountains of western North Carolina, "encountered Africans at least as early

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, (Lexington, Kentucky: the University Press of Kentucky, 1921), 201.

⁶ *Ibid.*

*as they did Europeans and may have seen blacks even before the Spanish conquistadors visited their towns” in the 1540s.⁷

Recent research not only confirms the long history of blacks in the region, but also establishes that mountain race relations were “no less complex than anywhere else in the South or the nation.”⁸ Historian John Inscoe made this point in the introduction to an even more recent anthology about race relations in southern Appalachia. According to Inscoe, the latest scholarship about blacks in Appalachia, which includes research by such noted scholars as Richard Drake, Wilma Dunaway, Gordon McKinney, and Fitzhugh Brundage, shows that black slaves were in the region during the antebellum period and were used in a variety of ways. In addition to agriculture, they were employed in regional mining operation, ironworks, and salt industries.⁹ They were also used to build and maintain regional roads and railroads. In Asheville many blacks worked as servants in the town’s antebellum resort industry, and as staff in local business establishments, especially businesses that catered to the needs of livestock drovers who during the early period, drove livestock through the region each year.

Besides enhancing our knowledge and understanding of the antebellum experience of blacks in southern Appalachia, recent research also shows that racism had a profound impact

⁷ Theda Perdue, “Red and Black in the Southern Appalachians,” *Southern Exposure*, vol. 12 (November/December, 1984), 56.

⁸ John Inscoe, *Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South from Slavery to Segregation*, (Lexington, Kentucky: the University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 2.

⁹ David Williams, “Georgia’s Forgotten Miners: African Americans in the Georgia Gold Rush of 1829”, *Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South From Slavery to Segregation*, ed. John C. Inscoe (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001) 40-49; John e. Stealey III, “Slavery in the Kanawha Salt Industry”, *Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South From Slavery to Segregation*, ed. John C. Inscoe (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001) 50-73.

on the social, political, and economic experiences of mountain blacks after the Civil War.

This challenges the idea that on the issue of race the mountain South was distinctly different from the lowland regions of the South. According to Inscoe, “the exploitation of black labor, slave and free, along with the racial violence and political manipulation of the post-Civil War era, all seem to chronicle patterns and trends very much like those elsewhere in the South.”¹⁰

In Asheville and western North Carolina, blacks were virtually invisible—especially politically—and were thus marginalized in all areas of the city’s post-Civil War development. This marginalization might have been missed by the casual observer because the city’s white leaders were successful in constructing a veneer that suggested the city was peaceful and progressive in all areas of life. The reality of white racial attitudes in Asheville and the surrounding region, however, hampered the ability of blacks to fully participate in the city’s social, political, and economic structure after the war.

Besides racism another reason for the marginalization of blacks in Asheville after the war was the small size of their population. Indeed, since their population numbers were much smaller than those of blacks in eastern North Carolina, blacks in Asheville and western North Carolina were easy for local whites to ignore. This was especially the case among white Republicans. In fact, the local Republican Party’s increasing need to attract white voters led the region’s Republican leaders to develop a political strategy that tried to mask any connection with blacks. This meant that highland blacks had no real political allies, which left them without any means by which they could demand greater resources for their post-emancipation development. Nevertheless, as laborers, blacks played an important role in Asheville’s economic development.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10

As Asheville's economy recovered and grew during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, a development that was fueled by the city's reemergence as a popular tourist and resort area, the city's leaders found the projection of a progressive and peaceful image economically beneficial. That image insured that the tourists, who were so important to the economy, would continue to find the city attractive as a place to spend their leisure time. In one way this benefited blacks because despite their minority status, their participation in maintaining the city's image was important. For this reason, Asheville's white leaders were willing to support the black population's efforts to build community institutions like churches, schools, and other benevolent enterprises. Through their institutions blacks worked to improve their lives as best they could, but their overall political marginalization meant that their efforts would only go so far. Unlike blacks in places where their numerical strength was greater, Asheville's blacks never offered any direct protest against the discrimination they faced in the city and region. Instead they were, as whites expected them to be, a community set apart, quiet and in no way threatening the racial status quo.

Chapter One

The Beginnings: The Black Presence in Asheville before the Civil War

In 1850, Robert Scott Duncanson, a black landscape artist, visited the small village of Asheville in the mountains of western North Carolina. While there, Duncanson, who had been apprenticed as a painter and carpenter in his native New York, painted what has since become one of his most memorable works, “A View of Asheville.”¹¹ In the painting, Duncanson depicts a small settlement that is surrounded by a majestic mountain range and canopied by a crisp blue sky. While the painting includes the images of three people who gaze admiringly from a mountaintop onto the village below, there is no evidence of a black presence in the town. Nevertheless, despite their absence in Duncanson’s painting, blacks have always had a presence in Asheville, and have played a vital role in the town’s emergence as western North Carolina’s leading economic center.

Although many writers trace the black presence in western North Carolina to 1784, there is considerable evidence to suggest that black slaves were a part of the Spanish expedition that explored the region in the 1500s. According to historian Theda Perdue, black slaves accompanied Luis Vasquez de Ayllon on his ill-fated attempt to establish a colony along North Carolina’s Pee Dee River in 1526. Some of those slaves, she notes, even used

¹¹ Robert Scott Duncanson’s A View of Asheville.

the occasion to revolt against their captors and fled to the Indians who lived nearby.¹² Blacks were also a part of the subsequent Spanish expeditions of Hernando De Soto in 1540 and Juan Pardo in 1566.¹³ During the 1540 expedition, “when,” according to Perdue, “De Soto’s prized Indian prisoner, the Lady of Cofitachequi, escaped from the Spanish, a black slave belonging to one of his officers accompanied her to Xuala, perhaps a Cherokee town, where they ‘lived together as man and wife.’”¹⁴ Thus, “the first blacks Appalachians,” Purdue points out, “did not live under the control of white planters, railroad builders, lumber companies, or mine operators.”¹⁵

Despite the evidence of a black presence in what would become western North Carolina in the 1500s, their more permanent settlement in the region occurred when Samuel Davidson became the first person of English descent to establish a homestead in the area in 1784. Prior to this time English settlement in the Blue Ridge Mountains had been prohibited by the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Issued by England’s King George III at the conclusion of the French and Indian War, the proclamation expressly prohibited any settlement of whites in the territory. After the newly independent American states gained the rights to these lands at the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783, however, whites began quickly settling the area. According to one historian, Davidson and his relatives, who followed him to the region after his untimely death at the hands of Cherokee Indians in 1784, established the first permanent

¹² Theda Perdue, “Red and Black in the Southern Appalachians,” *Southern Exposure*, vol. 12 (November/December, 1984), 56.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

white settlement in the mountains along “the mouth of the Bee Tree Creek.”¹⁶ Among the members of the first settlement were Major William Davidson, Samuel’s twin brother, their sister, Rachel Alexander, other relatives, friends, and slaves.¹⁷

The exact number of slaves who accompanied the original settlers in 1784 is not known. Historians believe that in addition to the cabin that Davidson constructed for his wife and daughter, both of whom escaped the Indian attack that cost Davidson his own life, he also built a separate and smaller room to house their one slave girl. After the discovery of what was characterized as “unbelievably lush and fertile land” in the North Carolina mountains, more settlers poured into the region. There was so much growth in this region that not long after the North Carolina General Assembly officially established the county of Buncombe in 1791, regional leaders were enacting local ordinances to control the area’s growing slave population. The first such ordinance, which was enacted in 1794, empowered local officials to appoint “discreet and proper persons to act as patrollers for the space of a year”¹⁸ Modifications that extended the authority of the slave patrols were made in 1802, 1803, and 1808.¹⁹

Among the people contributing to the early growth of slavery and the black population in Buncombe County were David Vance, who owned three slaves, and William Davidson, who owned eight. Additional members of Buncombe County’s early slaveholding

¹⁶ Foster A. Sondley, *A History of Buncombe County, North Carolina*, (Asheville, North Carolina: The Advocate Printing Co., 1930), 398.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Minutes of the Buncombe County court of Pleas and quarter Sessions, Spring Term of 1794, State Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

elite included John Patton, Samuel Chunn, Charles Lane, and George Swain (the father of David Lowry Swain, a future governor of the state) with fifteen, five, eight, and three slaves respectively.²⁰ Of the more than five thousand people who lived in Buncombe County by the turn of the nineteenth century, 107 owned more than 300 slaves.²¹ These figures reveal that within the first nine years of Buncombe County's existence, blacks made up 6.5 percent of the county's population, a larger portion it should be noted, than in piedmont Wake County, the location of the State's capital.

The contrast between Buncombe and Wake Counties is worth noting because as Appalachian historians John Inscoe and Wilma Dunaway observe, the overwhelming assumption of many students of Appalachian history has been that slavery was of very little consequence in the mountain South. According to Inscoe, who published a ground breaking study on slavery in the mountains of western North Carolina in 1989, this assumption grew out of a belief that as a system of labor, slavery was only profitable in regions that were conducive to "large-scale, cash-crop agriculture."²² The mountainous region of western North Carolina, it was argued, was not such a region for two reasons. First, "large-scale, cash-crop agriculture" required "long growing seasons," and secondly, it demanded that the area have "accessible markets" in which the goods that were produced could be sold. Because of its rugged terrain, cool climate, and supposed isolation from larger markets, western North Carolina, like the rest of Southern Appalachia, was believed to not have been

²⁰ Second Census of the United States, 1800: Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² John C. Inscoe, *Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina*, (Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 59.

environmentally favorable to the development of slavery; especially on the scale that one finds in the lowland regions of the state.²³

Among the early Appalachian scholars making this argument was John C. Campbell. Writing in 1921, Campbell, who examined the economic, social, and political culture of southern Appalachia, pointed out that while it was not uncommon for prosperous families to “bring slaves into the strictly ridged and mountain areas” of southern Appalachia “there were few Negroes in the highlands in the early times.”²⁴ According to Campbell, this was mainly because the region’s terrain, climate, and isolation were inhospitable to the development of plantations and the use of slave labor. It was, Campbell argued, difficult “to utilize their labor advantageously in growing the usual crops, corn, in the narrow valleys and on the steep slopes of the more mountainous region”²⁵ Campbell went on to note that while the passage of time had seen the number of Appalachian blacks grow, especially in the “rich valley areas, particularly where there has been urban or industrial development, they have never been a factor in rural mountain life.”²⁶ Echoing this sentiment, Ora Blackmun, another Appalachia scholar whose book, *Western North Carolina: Its Mountains and its People to 1880*, was published nearly 50 years after Campbell’s work, wrote that western North Carolina’s highland pioneers had no real interest in “slaves and the problems that slave holding involved. The economy of the mountains,” she states, “generated no need or desire

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, (Lexington, Kentucky: the University Press of Kentucky, 1921), 94.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

for slaves. Small fields were cleared a few at a time and cared for by members of the families”²⁷

While it is true that the number of slaves in western North Carolina was small, especially when compared to those who lived in the lowland regions of the South, mountain slavery was not the anomaly that early scholars suggested. As industries such as mining and ironwork operations developed, slavery grew making the acquisition of slaves both desirable and profitable to mountaineers. Aside from slavery’s steady growth in the region, the profitability of slavery, as Inscoc argues, can be seen in the fact that mountain slaveowners often refused to hire out their slaves to work on public works projects, at least not in large numbers. This suggests, he concluded, that they did not necessarily see such opportunities as critical to ensuring a good return from their slave property. According to Inscoc, the need for manpower in either antebellum mining operations or railroad construction projects presented mountain masters with many chances to hire out their slaves, and yet despite the considerable financial gains to be had from such operation, many mountain slaveowners never exploited them.²⁸ Thus, Inscoc finds that contrary to early scholarship, slavery did indeed thrive in the Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina. Moreover, it proved to be more profitable than early scholars believed.

As noted, the argument that slavery was not profitable in the mountain south grows out of the assumption that slavery thrived only in areas where it was used for large-scale agriculture production. Unlike the coastal and piedmont regions of the state, where the

²⁷ Ora Blackmun, *Western North Carolina: Its Mountains and Its People to 1880*, (Boone, North Carolina: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1977), 132.

²⁸ Inscoc, *Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina*, 81.

cultivation of cash crops like cotton, tobacco, and rice resulted in the development of a large-scale plantation system, western North Carolina was not dominated by the plantation system. Even so, the antebellum agricultural output of western North Carolina was significant and in some cases the quantity of products grown was greater than those grown elsewhere in the state. For example, as Inscoe found, western North Carolina often supplied buckwheat, rye, flax, potatoes, honey, cheese, butter, and wool to distant markets where such products were not grown or produced. As Inscoe writes, “despite a cooler climate and a shorter growing season than the surrounding ‘lowlands’ the mountain counties more than held their own in the variety and quantity of their output.”²⁹ Consequently, while the plantation system was not the dominant force that it was in eastern North Carolina, the agricultural production of farmers in western North Carolina was significant enough to support the use slaves.

Agriculture was not the chief cause for the growth of slavery in the mountains, however. Another and more prominent factor for its growth and expansion in places like Asheville and Buncombe County was the nonagricultural activity of the region’s slaveowners. In stark contrast to their counterparts in eastern North Carolina, for instance, mountain slaveowners were usually men who engaged in professions other than farming. Frederick Law Olmsted, who before his successful career as the nation’s leading landscape architect worked as a traveling journalist and social critic for the *New York Times*, noticed this distinction when he traveled through western North Carolina and southern Appalachia in 1854. According to Olmsted, a major difference between mountain slaveowners and their counterparts elsewhere in the South was the diverse nature of mountain slaveowner’s economic activity. “Of the people who get their living entirely by agriculture, few own

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

negroes,” Olmsted wrote.³⁰ Instead, he found that in the mountains, the majority of those who owned slaves were “chiefly professional men, shop-keepers, and men of office, who give a divided attention to farming.”³¹

Inscoe confirms Olmsted’s observations in his study of slavery in western North Carolina. By examining the economic activity of some of the region’s largest slaveowners, primarily those who lived in Buncombe, Burke, Ashe, Cherokee, and Yancey Counties, he concluded that “with few exceptions the largest slaveholders in western North Carolina derived significant amounts of income from nonagricultural enterprises.”³² Inscoe went on to say that on the whole, the economic activity of the majority of the slaveowners in this five county survey can be characterized as “professional, 32 percent; mercantile or commercial, 68 percent; real estate and or mining, 24 percent; hotel management or other aspects of the tourist trade, 12 percent; and agriculture alone, only 3 percent.”³³ Inscoe found that rather than farmers or plantation owners “almost a third of all mountain masters were doctors or lawyers.”³⁴

From the time that Buncombe County was established in 1791, the economic activity of county’s slaveholding class was no exception to this rule. Few of the county’s most prominent slaveholders can be classified as just farmers or plantation owners. For instance, David Vance, a prominent player in the establishment of the county, not only held such

³⁰ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country in the Winter of 1853-58*, (New York, New York: Mason Brothers, 1860), 226.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² John Inscoe, *Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina*, 62.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

public offices as Clerk of Court and Justice of the Peace, he also owned and operated livestock feeding stands in Asheville and the neighboring town of Marshall. At these stands, which became lucrative business enterprises in antebellum western North Carolina, Vance provided feed for the thousands of hogs and other livestock that drovers moved through the county and town each year. Using slave labor to operate his stands, Vance reported that in just one month he had provided feed for more than 90,000 hogs at the stand in Marshall alone.³⁵

Another Asheville slaveowner who derived a significant amount of wealth from such nonagricultural activity was James Patton. Shortly after settling in Asheville in 1791, Patton, a native of Ireland who owned several trading posts throughout western North Carolina, opened a general store, hotel and a livestock feeding stand in Asheville and like Vance used slaves to maintain some of his daily business operations. In all, an examination of the business activity of many of Buncombe County's slaveholding population reveals that most were men who had diverse economic activity. In 1860, for example, the majority of the County's slaveowners were professional men.

Raising and driving livestock through Asheville and western North Carolina became an important part of the region's antebellum economy. The livestock trade was so important to the region that for much of the period it was "the primary means of exchange used by merchants and those they dealt with locally and out-of-state."³⁶ Once the stock was ready to be driven to markets that were mainly located in Georgia and South Carolina, the owners of

³⁵ Manly Wade Wellman, *The Kingdom of Madison: A Southern Mountain Fastness and its People*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 45.

³⁶ Inscow, *Mountain Masters: slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina*, 45.

the feeding standings made a comfortable living supplying feed for the livestock and providing lodging and meals to the drovers. Businesses that catered to the needs of drovers and their livestock emerged as one of the earliest and most important industries in Asheville and Buncombe County.

James Alexander owned one of the region's most successful livestock feeding operations. According to historian Melton Ready, Alexander's enterprise occupied "up to fourteen acres and consisted of lots, barns, corn cribs, sleeping halls, and large commodious boardinghouses."³⁷ After spending a night at what locals called Alexander's Inn, William Lenoir described a place that was bustling with activity. In a letter to his son Thomas, Lenoir reported that there were at least "five-thousand hogs and seventy-five people at the Inn the night he stayed there."³⁸ Lenoir's wife characterized the place as a bit out of the ordinary in that it doubled as a drover stand and a resort. She complained to her mother that while she had hoped for a restful stay at the Inn, that desire "was spoiled by the incessant noise of hogs and hog drovers who daily passed through that elegant hotel's grounds."³⁹

Catering to livestock droves became even more lucrative after the completion of the Buncombe Turnpike, western North Carolina's first major thoroughfare, in 1828. Commissioned by the state's General Assembly in 1824, the turnpike ran from the Tennessee to South Carolina and was a major economic stimulus to Asheville. The turnpike significantly enhanced Asheville's economic prowess by increasing the volume of livestock

³⁷ Melton Ready, *Asheville, Land of the Sky: An Illustrated History*, (Northridge, California: Windsor Publication, Inc., 1986), 21.

³⁸ William Lenoir to Thomas Lenoir, April 12, 1841, Lenoir Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

that could travel on the road. While the turnpike made it easier for individuals to travel through the region, the primary business activity along the road was livestock driving. It was not uncommon to see herds of horses, cattle, sheep, hogs, and flocks of turkeys being driven down the turnpike throughout the year. In his official capacity as one of the directors of the turnpike George Swain recorded in his records that shortly after the turnpike opened, “livestock,” especially “hogs crowded the road continuously.”⁴⁰ Writing to Zebulon Baird in 1822, Swain stated that the number of hogs driven along the road exceeded the previous “year’s considerably for that time of year; 19,406,” he reported “have already passed by. The whole number last year did not exceed 20,000,” he noted.⁴¹ A little less than a week later he reported that “my list now contains 25,594 . . . since that 2 other droves containing 617 has come forward.”⁴²

Charles Lanman, a self-described tourist and sportsman, who wrote extensively about his travels, reported a similar scene in 1848. Lanman noted that as he traveled along the Buncombe Turnpike he was accompanied by “an immense number of cattle, horses, and hogs,” all of which were annually driven to the seaboard markets further south. He went on to observe that “over this road also, quite a large amount of merchandise is constantly transported for the merchants of the interior, so that mammoth wagons with their eight and ten horses, are as plenty as blackberries and afford a romantic variety to the stranger.”⁴³ The

⁴⁰ George Swain to Zebulon Baird, 15 November, 1822, David L. Swain papers, Epistolary Correspondence, North Carolina Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, (Typescript in Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Charles Lanman, *Letters From the Alleghany Mountains*, (New York, New York: G.P. Putnam, 1849), 123.

turnpike was so well traveled by livestock droves that year that within the months of November and December alone, approximately 160,000 hogs worth an estimated value of two to four million dollars were reported to have passed through Asheville.⁴⁴ Asheville's role as a major junction for the livestock industry grew so much after 1828 that one resident recalled that during the "fall and winter seasons of the year one passing along that road in daytime was scarcely ever out of sight and hearing of one or more of these droves."⁴⁵

Along with the livestock industry, the turnpike also stimulated the growth of tourism in the region. Even before the turnpike was completed, the Blue Ridge Mountains were seen as an appealing place for people to find rest and relaxation, especially since the region offered a much cooler climate than that of the lowland regions of the South. Seeking to escape the hot and humid conditions of places like Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah and Augusta, Georgia, southern planters often sought relief in North Carolina's mountains. Growing concerns about the unhealthy conditions that accompany the summer seasons in the lowlands also contributed to western North Carolina appeal. During the 1790s, when illness like yellow fever and malaria plagued the lowlands, many planters in Georgia and South Carolina sought refuge from their mosquito-infested plantations in the mountains.⁴⁶ Thus, early on, many of Asheville's and western North Carolina's wealthiest residents were lowland plantation owners who maintained summer homes in the region.

⁴⁴ Sondley, *A History of Buncombe County, North Carolina*, 665.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Richard Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina*, (Tuscaloosa, Alabama Press, 2005), 13.

Although southern planters played an important role in the early development of tourism in Asheville and western North Carolina, the foundation of this industry was rooted in the continued growth of the livestock industry. During the early years poor road conditions prevented many wealthy travelers from coming into the region, but the necessity of business ensured that livestock droves continued to pass through the area. By expanding their livestock feeding operations to provide more services and hospitality to these “less affluent, but equally profitable travels,” local merchants were putting themselves in the perfect position to take advantage of the opportunities that improved road conditions brought.⁴⁷ Such opportunities allowed many to increase the number of slaves they already owned and to use those slaves in capacities other than agriculture. As one of the earliest merchants to recognize the economic potential that lay in tourism, James Patton—who was already providing expanded services to livestock drovers—built one of Asheville’s first hotel establishments, the Eagle Hotel, in 1814. At his Inn, Patton provided guests with pleasant accommodations that were most often administered by slaves. During a visit to Asheville in 1827, Juliana Conner, the wife of a prominent South Carolina planter, described the town as “beautifully situated, bounded on all sides by mountains” and noted that Patton’s hotel, where she stayed, “was the largest structure in town.”⁴⁸

As road conditions improved and travel through the region increased, other local businessmen expanded their business operations to take advantage of the opportunities that early tourism created. Additional livestock feeding stands—one of which was reportedly owned by a free black man—and hotels were built after the turnpike opened. To the north of

⁴⁷ Milton Ready, *Asheville, Land of the Sky: An Illustrated History*, 23.

⁴⁸ Juliana Margaret Conner Diary, June 16, 1827, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

town was the Vance Inn, which initially opened as a feeding stand, and the Barnard Inn. To the south of town there was Foster's Inn, Fletcher's Tavern, McDowell's Hotel and others. As the area attracted additional travelers, more of whom came for leisure, existing hotel space proved inadequate. During the early period, many guests had to seek lodging in private homes. As local residents and business owners worked to provide the services that visitors sought, slave labor became all the more important.

Almost all the hotels and boardinghouses that operated in Asheville during this early period employed black women as cooks and chambermaids, and black men as teamsters, gardeners, and waiters, some of whom exercised a great deal of independence in their work. Recounting his time in the region in the late 1830s, the English author and anti-slavery activist James Silk Buckingham was struck by the independence and unsupervised responsibility that slaves had in local hotels. Noting that many of the region's hotel owners were "practicing physicians as well as planters,"⁴⁹ he felt that their divided economic activities cause some of their business concerns to suffer. Because they "give most of their attention to that which is most profitable," he wrote, "they occupy the greatest portion of their time attending to the business of their plantation, and the increase of their live-stock—little Negroes included—while their patients have but a very partial attendance; and the business of the inn," he added, "is left mostly to the black servants to manage as they see fit . . ."⁵⁰ Buckingham complained that even when slaves were better supervised by their owners the accommodation were not much better. "The manners of the whites and blacks,"

⁴⁹ James Silk Buckingham, *A Journey through the Slave States of North America*, (Charleston, South Carolina: History Press, 2006), 322.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

he wrote, “are equally rude; and among all, there seems to be a determination to do just as much, or as little, as they see fit, and no more”⁵¹

Similar observations were made by the British geologist George Featherstonhaugh. While passing through Asheville in the mid-1830s, Featherstonhaugh was surprised to find his hotel “overrun with black servants”⁵² Featherstonhaugh found the unique status that blacks seemed to occupy in Asheville and the surrounding region to be a stark contrast to slaves he had encountered in other regions of the South. “What a merry race of people the Negroes are,” he wrote, “all were well dressed and well fed, and more merry, and noisy, and impudent than any servants I had ever seen.”⁵³

Interestingly, Featherstonhaugh expressed greater discomfort with the whites he encountered. Unlike the accommodations he had received during a stay in Flat Rock, North Carolina, his Asheville hotel, while employing blacks in some positions was quite disorderly, he recalled. Here “boisterous disorder, dirt, and coarse vulgarity prevailed. Many of the white *gentlemen*, I met in the breakfast-room seemed to know a little of everything except genteel society and manners; spitting, smoking, cursing and swearing in the most frightful manner, giving them a bad pre-eminence even over the Negroes.”⁵⁴ Overall, Featherstonhaugh believed that slavery was an impediment to the future development of not only western North Carolina, but the nation as a whole.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁵² George W. Featherstonhaugh, *A Canoe Voyage Up the Minay Sotar*, 314.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Featherstonhaugh, Buckingham, and other observers agreed that mountain slavery was different from what one encountered in the lowland regions of the South. Olmsted noted that there was a general sense among mountaineers that slaves were not very profitable in their region, unless they were used as commodities to be sold to slaveowners in other areas of the country. Olmsted concluded that when compared to slavery elsewhere, even the negative impact of slavery on the slaves themselves was diminished in the mountains.⁵⁵ He pointed out that a close examination of mountain slavery revealed that the “direct moral evils of slavery . . . are less—even less proportionately to the number of slaves,” and argued that the more diverse nature of the economic activity of mountain slaveowners contributed to this fact.⁵⁶

Olmsted said that unlike slaveowners on large plantations, mountain slaveowners found it unnecessary to spend their time supervising and overseeing their slaves, and this allowed the slaves greater freedom and variety in their work.”⁵⁷ As a testament to his own views about slavery, Olmsted noted that many mountain slaveowners seemed to be fully aware that the supervision of fifty slaves took almost as much work as the supervision of five. “A man can compel the uninterrupted labor of a gang of fifty cotton-hoers almost as absolutely as he can that of a gang of five, and it takes, he wrote, scarcely more superintendence to make sure the proper feeding of thirty mules when they are collected in

⁵⁵ Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country*, 226.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

their stable, then of three.”⁵⁸ Slavery, Olmsted was clearly arguing, was simply not a profitable form of labor.

On the matter of the diverse use of slave labor in the mountains, recent research tends to support Olmsted’s observations. For instance, juxtaposing the number of slaves with the number of improved or cultivated acreage on several farms in western North Carolina, Inscoc found that there was practically no “correlation between the number of slaves and the number of improved acres owned by mountain residents.”⁵⁹ Inscoc found that small slaveowners often had the same, or in some cases, more cultivated or improved land than large slaveowners. To illustrate this he pointed to data collected on four slaveowners in western North Carolina; Abram and Joshua Harshaw of Cherokee County and James and Robert Pain of Madison County. Inscoc notes that although Abram Harshaw had 50 slaves and 150 improved acres of land in Cherokee County in 1850, his brother Joshua had cultivated twice as much land (350 acres) with almost half as many slaves (28).⁶⁰

Moving his investigation forward 10 years to 1860, Inscoc uncovered the same pattern. He noted that according to census data James Pain reported 40 improved acres and 10 slaves, and his bother Robert reported 60 improved acres and only three slaves.⁶¹ This data, as Inscoc points out, suggest a “gross inefficiency in the use made of slave labor,” especially if the slaves were used only as farm hands. “If seven or twelve slaves were adequate for a two hundred-acre farm,” Inscoc writes, “then twenty or thirty-two slaves

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Inscoc, *Mountain Masters*, 69.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

performing the same amount of labor suggests poor management and considerable waste,” at least from the stand point of agricultural production.⁶² Given the diverse nature of the jobs that slaves performed in western North Carolina, however, the extra slaves that people like Abram Harshaw and James Pain owned were no doubt employed in other capacities.

This was undoubtedly the case in Buncombe, where a pattern of the apparent inefficient use of slave labor on area farms can be seen. Data in the 1860 census shows that while William Johnston, a Buncombe County farmer who owned 55 slaves, had at least 200 acres of his nearly 500 acre farm under cultivation, his neighbor Daniel Reynolds, who owned only 15 slaves, had 250 acres of cultivated land.⁶³ Similarly, the same census shows that Joseph Chunn, another Buncombe farmer who owned five slaves, had nearly the same cultivated acres as William McDowell, whose 40 slaves made him one of the county’s largest slaveowners. The census shows that while McDowell had 225 acres of land under cultivation, Chunn, with his much smaller labor force was cultivating only 25 fewer acres than McDowell.⁶⁴

Such data are all the more striking when one discovers that in some instances non-slaveholding farmers were cultivating just as many acres as their slaveholding neighbors. For example, although there is no evidence that Buncombe County resident Robert Wells owned slaves, he had more acres under cultivation than either William McDowell or William

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Eight Census of the United States, 1860: Buncombe County, North Carolina Agriculture Schedules, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Johnston.⁶⁵ According to the census, he had 300 acres of his more than 1000-acre farm under cultivation in 1860.⁶⁶ The larger point of this is that while agricultural production was a part of the economic activity of some mountain slaveowners, it did not, as Inscoe found, rise to the level that would have ensured the continued and efficient use of slave labor. “The diversity and self-sufficiency of mountain agriculture,” Inscoe writes, “called for a greater variety of activity than was likely the case in commercial-crop plantations elsewhere in the South.”⁶⁷

This is not to say that no mountain slaves were used as field hands and did not endure some of the same harsh conditions that prevailed on large plantations. Sarah Gudger, a former slave who had lived on a plantation just east of Asheville, recalled that working in the “field, plowing, hoein’, and singin’ in de boilin’ [sic] sun,” was commonplace to her.⁶⁸ In an interview she gave in 1921, Gudger stated that as a slave she had had a hard life. “I sho’ has had a ha’d life. Jes wok, an’ wok, an’ wok. I nebbah know nothin’ but work,” she recounted.⁶⁹ “No matter how bad the weather was we had to work. We had t’ go t’ de mountings, and cut wood an’ drag it down t’ de house. Many de time we com in wif ouh closes stuck t’ ouh poah ole bodies, but ‘twarnt’ no use t’ try t’ git ‘em dry. Ef de Ole Boss o’ de ole Missie see us dey yell” ‘git on out ob heah yo; black tin’, an’ git yo’ wok outen de way.’” Gudger said that neither she nor the other slaves on the plantation took these

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Inscoe, *Mountain Masters*, 68.

⁶⁸ George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, vol. 11 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1976), 356.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

admonishments lightly. “We knowed t’ git, else we git de lash. Dey did’n cah how old o’ how young yo’ wah, you’ nebbah too old t’ git de lash.”⁷⁰ In her recollections she remember that seeing slave speculators come to purchase slaves for sale further south created an air of fear among the slaves. In short, while the nature of the economy in western North Carolina may have given rise to a form of slavery that was not as pervasively harsh as the slavery that existed in other places in the south, the difficulties and inequities of the system still remained.

While the nature of the enslavement that most slaves experienced in Asheville and Buncombe County is impossible to quantify, the observations of contemporary observers suggest that many had experiences that closely resembled those of William Holland Thomas’ slave Cudjo. Thomas, who was an adopted member and representative of the Cherokee Indians, owned a number of trading post in western North Carolina and often entrusted his slaves with responsibilities that gave them significant freedom and mobility. On many occasions Thomas was known to allow Cudjo to travel throughout western North Carolina delivering messages and other goods from his stores. Thomas even permitted Cudjo to travel as far away as Tennessee to deliver items that included cash money. Thomas, who in 1860 was one of western North Carolina’s largest slave owners, gave similar responsibilities to a slave named Wagoner Dick. On more than one occasion Dick made the long trek to South Carolina and Georgia to buy and sell goods for his master.⁷¹

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ E. Stanly Godbold Jr., and Mattie U. Russell, *Confederate Colonel and Cherokee Chief: The Life of William Holland Thomas*, (Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 28.

Observing the unrestricted movement of the slaves that he encountered when he traveled through western North Carolina in the 1840s, Charles Lanman said that their relative freedom as laborers made them the “happiest and most independent portion of the population . . . I have had many a [slave],” he wrote, “pilot me over the mountains who would not have exchanged places even with his master.”⁷² While the subsequent actions of many of the region’s slaves during the Civil War would reveal that Lanman was not completely right about the seeming happiness of mountain slaves, the unrestricted nature of mountain slavery was not lost on other observers as well. Olmsted noted, for example, that because the diverse nature and use of slaves in the mountains made it unnecessary for them to be closely supervised “their habits more resemble those of ordinary free laborers” than slaves.⁷³ Unlike their counterparts in the lowland regions of the South, highland slaves, Olmsted observed, tended to “exercise more responsibility” than slaves elsewhere and because of this he found them “in both soul and intellect” to be “more elevated,” than slaves elsewhere.⁷⁴

While it is impossible to determine if the spiritual and intellectual capacity of mountain slaves was more “elevated” than those of slaves in other areas of the South, it is clear that their labor was indeed applied to a wide variety of activities. In fact, the ability to use slaves in jobs other than agriculture was what made the institution profitable and ensured its growth in places like Asheville and Buncombe County.

The business activity of William Coleman, a Buncombe County slaveowner who owned a hat factory in Asheville is a case in point. Colman, who listed his occupation as that

⁷² Charles Lanman, *Letters From the Alleghany Mountains*, 125.

⁷³ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country*, 254.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

of a hatter in the 1860 census, also owned a farm that was left mostly to the supervision of his son Robert. During the 1840s, when he began to experience financial difficulties, Colman faced the unpleasant decision of either selling his land or his slaves, and chose the former instead. In a letter to his brother-in-law, David Swain, Coleman said that he believed the slaves were more valuable to him than the land. "If I could get clear of the farm," he told Swain, "I could make them [the slaves] earn something in the shop."⁷⁵ Coleman even said that if possible he would like to purchase two additional slaves to work in his shop, believing that they would allow him to increase his output and thus eliminate some of his financial stress. "Upon the whole," he concluded in the hopes that Swain might buy his farm, "it will be better for me to be without the farm. If I have to sell my negroes and land I want the land sold first."⁷⁶

Other Asheville and Buncombe County slaveowners found ways to ensure a profitable return from their slaves by hiring out their slaves, sometimes on public works projects. In addition to helping with the construction of the Buncombe Turnpike in the 1820s, others were used to work on the region's early railroad construction projects. The need to construct railroads that would better link the region with eastern North Carolina and markets in other states was seen by regional leaders as early as the 1830s. However, despite early hopes of initiating a railroad project that was to be led by South Carolina senator Robert Hayne and was projected to run from Cincinnati, Ohio to Charleston, South Carolina, nothing of any consequence was accomplished with railroad construction in western North Carolina

⁷⁵ William Coleman to David Swain, 25 February, 1842, David L. Swain Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

until the North Carolina General Assembly chartered the Western North Carolina Railroad in 1852.

Even after the Western North Carolina Railroad was chartered, work on the railroad, which was to run from Salisbury to Tennessee, did little to satisfy the wishes of the citizens of western North Carolina because political disagreement, funding difficulties, and later the Civil War delayed any significant progress on the project. When work was being done, however, the slaves of many mountain slaveowners worked on the projects construction crews. James Patton and Nicholas Woodfin, two of Asheville's largest slaveowners, had slaves working on the project. In 1861, for instance, Patton informed David Swain that he had at least 400 hands, both black and white, work on regional railroad projects.⁷⁷ Noting the difficulty of the work and the financial strain that it placed on him and other investors, Patton told Swain that he was optimistic that they would have another section of the railroad completed soon. He noted that the successful completion of an additional section of the railroad would allow investors to draw on funds that would be made available in Tennessee.⁷⁸

Railroad construction projects carried with them significant labor demands, and to meet those demands local slaveowners were often asked to allow their slaves to work on the projects. While working on a section of the Western North Carolina Railroad in the late 1850s, Charles Fisher, a native of Salisbury and president of the North Carolina Railroad, hired at least 60 local slaves to work alongside his own slaves as they work to lay tracks just

⁷⁷ James Patton to David L. Swain, 5 Feb. 1861, David L. Swain Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

east of Morganton in Burke County.⁷⁹ John Hunt, a Massachusetts surveyor who was contracted to work on the railroad, used the same method to fill his labor needs. After relocating to Morganton, Hunt hired more than 30 slaves from slaveowners throughout western North Carolina. Recognizing that economic benefits that would follow the railroads completion the Asheville based firm of Chunn and Patton ran advertisements in the local newspapers offering to “pay the highest cash prices” to slaveowners who would allow their slaves to be hired to work on local railroad crews. In an advertisement that ran in the *Asheville News* on February 10, 1859, Chunn and Patton stated that they were interested in “buy from 100 to 500” blacks to work on railroad projects and were willing “to pay the highest cash prices.”⁸⁰

Slave hiring, not just for railroad construction, but in general, provided many mountain masters with the opportunity to obtain substantial financial returns. In May of 1862 Nicolas Woodfin advised David Swain, the former governor and Asheville native, that he could get high hiring prices for Swain’s slaves.⁸¹ After updating Swain, who was then serving as president of the University of North Carolina, on local concerns and conditions due to the war, Woodfin shifted to the issue of slave labor. “Now upon the subject of your Negroes...,” he wrote, “...I can yet hire them to your advantage for the rest of the year. The men especially will command high prices, particularly before harvest commences. There is great demand for labor” he reported, and will be to the end of the year. I do not doubt, he

⁷⁹ Edward W. Phifer, “Slavery in Microcosm: Burke County, North Carolina,” *The Journal of Southern History* vol. 28 (May, 1962): 157.

⁸⁰ *Asheville News*, February 10, 1859.

⁸¹ N.W. Woodfin to David L. Swain, May 12, 1862, Walter Clark Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina

informed Swain, “that you can dispose of them for the season this side of the mountains....”⁸² Regarding the hiring of women and children Woodfin stated that “it won’t be easy to place women [and] children, but it can be done.”⁸³ Although there is no evidence to suggest how Swain responded to Woodfin’s offer, it is clear that he and many other slaveowners in Asheville and Buncombe County did allow their slaves to be hired out from time to time. For instance, in 1841, Swain encountered problems when a planter in Shelbyville, Tennessee delayed the return of two slaves he had hired out.

Many mountain slaveowners were cautious about to whom and where their slaves were hired. Jane McDowell, a Buncombe County resident who owned 11 slaves in 1850, would not allow her slave Jim to be hired out to just anyone. As she was trying to make arrangements for Jim to be hired out, McDowell told her brother who was acting as her agent that “Jim does not like Yancey County and I will let him try some other county even if,” she went on to say, “I only get half price.”⁸⁴

Similar concerns about the wishes of the slaves regarding where they were hired were expressed by Polly McKee, who resisted the efforts her brother-in-law made to hire out two of her husband’s slaves. In a letter to his brother John, James McKee reported that Polly was reluctant to hire out the slaves Adeline and her son Thomas “for fear that she or her child

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ N.W. Woodfin to David L. Swain, May 12, 1862, Walter Clark Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

⁸⁴ Douglas Swain, ed., *Cabins and Castles: The History and Architecture of Buncombe County, North Carolina* (Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1981), 17.

might be abused or not taken care of.”⁸⁵ James informed his brother that Polly had grown attached to the two slaves and did not wish to send them back Iredell County, especially since Adeline had indicated that she did not wish to go. In the end, John McKee, agreed to let the slaves remain in Asheville and be hired out there if proper terms could be arranged.⁸⁶ By either hiring out their slaves or using them on their farms, hotels, or manufacturing enterprises, Asheville’s and Buncombe County’s slaveowners and slaveowners throughout western North Carolina found ways to make the ownership of slaves profitable.

From the time that the first settlers arrived in the mountains of western North Carolina and until the beginning of the Civil War, slavery was the primary impetus behind the growth of the black population in Asheville, Buncombe County. Census data reveals that from 1800 to 1860 Buncombe County alone experienced a 576 percent increase in its slave population.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, not all of the blacks who lived in the town and county were slaves. Some like Jerry Smith, a former slave who was emancipated by Thomas Foster in

⁸⁵ James S. McKee to John McKee, 4 February 1850, John McKee Sharpe Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

⁸⁶ John McKee to James S. McKee, 5 Dec. 1850, John McKee Sharpe Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

⁸⁷ Second Census of the United States, 1800, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedules, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh); Third Census of the United States, 1810, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedules, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh); Fourth Census of the United States, 1820, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedules, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh); Fifth Census of the United States, 1830, Buncombe County North Carolina, Population Schedules, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh); Sixth Census of the United States, 1840, Buncombe County North Carolina, Population Schedules, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh); Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Buncombe County North Carolina, Population Schedules, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh); Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Buncombe County North Carolina, Population Schedules, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

1802, were free. Throughout the antebellum period, however, Asheville and Buncombe County's free black population, which never exceeded 111 people, remained small.

Other eastern North Carolina counties, like Wilmington, and Halifax, where free blacks totaled 1,332 and 2,452 respectively, had much larger free black populations. Nevertheless, the small size of Asheville and Buncombe County's free black population did not diminish sentiments against them. Local whites were never comfortable with their presence and exhibited just as much fear about free blacks as did whites in places where the number of free blacks were greater.

In 1824, when there were only 33 blacks in Buncombe County, whites residents in Asheville appealed to the state's lawmakers to do something to prevent free blacks from entering the state. In a petition that was submitted to the General Assembly in 1824, some of Asheville's white citizens asked lawmakers to adopt a "heavy capitation tax to prevent the 'constant influx of free Negroes of every character [and] description into the western part of the State.'"⁸⁸

With so small a free black population, it is unclear why Asheville's white residents found them such a menace. The concern may have stemmed from a sense that state laws against the inward migration of free blacks were inadequately enforced. According to historian John Hope Franklin, it was well known by many leading citizens in North Carolina that the state not only lagged behind other southern states in the enactment of laws against free blacks, but that the state was also lax in the enforcement of its laws in this respect.

⁸⁸ Senate Journal, December 7, 1821, p. 36; House Journal, December 6, 1824 p. 133; MS in Legislative Papers, in Senate, December 25, 1822. (North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina).

Blacks in other states apparently knew North Carolina's lax enforcement of its laws. Olmsted recalled that while he was in South Carolina one free black man that he spoke to made note of this fact.⁸⁹ Throughout the antebellum period, many blacks did cross into North Carolina undetected, but neither Buncombe County nor Asheville appear to have been directly affected by this. In fact, according to the 1860 census, the year that Buncombe County's free black population reached its zenith, only six were identified as having been born in states other than North Carolina.⁹⁰

Resistance to free blacks remained high in Asheville and Buncombe County. In 1858, as tension between the states mounted, Asheville's residents again appealed for stronger restrictions against free blacks. Writing to J. T. Baird, Buncombe County's representative in the State Legislature, James Patton encouraged Baird to support new legislation restricting free blacks. "You must be aware," he wrote, "that if any section of our country or state is troubled with free negroes, ours is the most vexed in this way. The continued inroads of free Negroes from the surrounding counties and States, has brought so many upon us that they can no longer be borne."⁹¹ Patton went onto say that Asheville and Buncombe County residents had sent a petition to the General Assembly supporting legislation that called for the re-enslavement of free blacks. "The petition," he told Baird, "was carried around by Mr. [Ephraim] Clayton and finds its warmest advocate in him. He informs me," Patton wrote, "that it was not refused *by a single man*. We are earnestly

⁸⁹ Olmsted, *Journey Through the Back County*, 251.

⁹⁰ Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina).

⁹¹ James A. Patton to Dr. J.S.T. Baird, December 1, 1858. Ms. In the Legislative Papers for 1858-1859, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina).

desirous that you do something. If the bills on hand are unconstitutional (I do not see wherein) then do the best you can.”⁹²

The reaction of whites against free blacks in Asheville and Buncombe County demonstrates the existence of strong anti-black attitudes among whites in a region that late nineteenth and early twentieth century writers portrayed as largely free of such views. It was implied by writers such as William Frost, Walter Whittaker, and Samuel Wilson, that the absence of a large black population in Southern Appalachia freed the region of many of the racial problems that plagued other regions of the South. These writers even argued that one of the most distinguishing features of Southern Appalachia during the antebellum period was the existence of views that were highly contemptuous of slavery and slaveholders. According to this view of Southern Appalachian history, a view that found a central place in Wilson’s 1914 book, *Southern Mountaineers*, there was a great deal of antipathy between the slaveholding elite of the lowland regions of the South and the members of the non-slaveholding class in the highlands. Emphasizing this idea, Wilson told his readers that, “The aristocratic slaveholders from his river-bottom plantation looked with scorn on the slaveless dweller among the hills; while the highlander repaid his scorn with high disdain and even hate.”⁹³

Contemptuous feelings did indeed exist between the non-slaveholding white population in the mountains and the slaveholding elite in the east. When talking with one highlander during his time in the region, for instance, Olmsted saw and heard expressions of that contempt. The mountain resident informed Olmsted that the presence of so many slaves

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Samuel Wilson, *Southern Mountaineers*, (New York, New York: J. Little and Ives, 1914). 57.

in the east was “the reason the West and the East don’t agree in this State; people out here,” the highlander told Olmsted, “hates the eastern people.”⁹⁴ When pressed to give a deeper explanation, Olmsted said that when it came to the politics of slavery, easterners always supported policies that strengthen the power of the state’s slaveholding elite. Eastern North Carolinians,” he said, “always vote on the slave basis, and there’s some of them nigger counties where there ain’t more’ than four or five hundred white folks, that has just as much power in the legislature as any of our mountain counties where there’ll be some thousands of voters.”⁹⁵ What this highlander was saying was that he and others in the region understood that the concentration of large numbers of slaves in eastern North Carolina gave that region a disproportionate share of the state’s political power and this fact had led to the development of a deep seated antipathy for the white slaveholding elite in the east.

The disdain that white highlanders had for lowland slaveowners was just as great for black slaves, a fact that many late nineteenth and early twentieth century writers seemed to ignore. Olmsted noted that this contempt was prominently exhibited whenever he talked to highlanders about the possibility of blacks being free. When he informed one white mountaineer that blacks lived as free people in the north and did so comfortably, the mountaineer expressed disgust. “I wouldn’t like that,” he told Olmsted, “I wouldn’t like to live where niggers was free, they are bad enough when they are slaves...if they was to think themselves equal to we, I don’t think white folks could abide it....”⁹⁶ Olmsted found that this sentiment prevailed throughout the region. While discussing the matter with another

⁹⁴ Olmsted, *A Journey In The Back Country*, 259.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Appalachian resident Olmsted was told that although “he’d always wished there hadn’t been any niggers here...he wouldn’t think there any better way of getting along with them than that they had.”⁹⁷ In short, despite the negative views that non-slaveholding mountaineers had of slavery, they were, for the most part, even more opposed to the idea of abolition.

As sectional conflict with the northern states grew, opposition to abolition intensified in western North Carolina. Throughout much of the late antebellum period, Thomas Clingman, a prominent Asheville attorney who represented the state in both houses of Congress, argued that “slavery was the only means to ensure white security and care for blacks.”⁹⁸ In a speech before Congress in 1847, Clingman expressed views that were becoming increasingly popular throughout the South—the view that slavery actually benefited the slave. “The physical wants of the slaves are sure to be provided for because he can never be owned by a pauper,” he said.⁹⁹ “The negro race in the Southern States, when considered with reference to their physical comforts, industry, and moral qualities are in advance of the same race either in Africa or in the Northern States,” Clingman argued.¹⁰⁰ Thus for Clingman and many other leading Southerners at that time, the suggestion that slavery should be abolished was absurd and those who advocated such a policy were “reckless in their consequences to the well-being of society.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁹⁸ John Inscoe, *Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina*, 186.

⁹⁹ Thomas Clingman, “Political Aspects of the Slave Question,” in *Selections from the Speeches and Writings of the Hon. Thomas Clingman of North Carolina*, (Raleigh, North Carolina: John Nichols Printer, 1877), 210.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

The recklessness of abolition became highly apparent when John Brown and other militant abolitionists attempted to provoke a slave revolt in Harpers Ferry, Virginia in 1859. After years of attempting to arrive at a compromise between northerners and southerners on the issue of slavery, Clingman as well as the people he represented saw Brown's actions, and "its apparent approval by many northerners," as a direct attack upon Southern rights.¹⁰² Even before Brown's reckless behavior at Harper's Ferry, Clingman, whose rhetoric grew more secessionists over time, came to believe that the arguments of anti-slavery forces in the North needed to be met head on. Speaking before Congress in 1850, Clingman advised Southerners to begin developing their own, and largely untapped natural resources and commercial prospects independent of "northern domination and restrictions."¹⁰³ Without overtly endorsing the idea that the South should leave the Union, he said that he thanked "God that there is no one in my district that I think so meanly of, as to believe that he would not readily come into whatever movement might be necessary for the protection of our rights and liberty."¹⁰⁴ In other words, if secession was the only way to protect and defend southern rights as he saw them, then the state must secede.

Prior to the militant abolitionist attack at Harpers Ferry, most southern highlanders had remained firmly committed to the Union and quite opposed to the idea of secession. Robert Love, a conservative leader in North Carolina's Whig Party and a resident of Waynesville, reflected the general position of most of western North Carolina's population when in reference to South Carolina's threats to leave the Union in 1851 he said that South

¹⁰² John Inscoe, *Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina*, 211.

¹⁰³ Thomas Clingman, "Political Aspect of the Slave Question," *Selections for the Speeches and Writings of Hon. Thomas Clingman of North Carolina*, 210.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Carolina's actions had "produced much excitement against her in this section of our state."¹⁰⁵

In a letter to his brother James, Love said that he believed South Carolina should rethink its position, and that he was quite sure that "secession and disunion receive no countenance here—and the people appear to be pleased that they have an opportunity, in the coming elections to signalize their attachment to the Union of the States. Secession," he wrote emphatically, "will be killed as dead as nullification was in the year 32."¹⁰⁶ But that was 1851, and as the decade passed and tension increased, attitudes shifted.

After Harpers Ferry, many in western North Carolina began moving more toward the position that Clingman had articulated years earlier; this was especially the case in Asheville and Buncombe County. At a meeting at the Buncombe County courthouse on December 20, 1859, Asheville's residents adopted a resolution that required local authorities to begin closely watching and scrutinizing the activities and movement of any people who were not resident of the town. "[H]aving reason to believe that this portion of the country, like many other portions of the slaveholding states is infested with Abolitionists, who under various disguises are endeavoring to sow the seeds of dissatisfaction among our slave population...be it resolved," the resolution read, "that all strangers, particularly those from non-slaveholding states, who come in our midst under suspicious circumstances, although claiming to be in pursuit of peaceful occupation, shall be subjected to the most rigid scrutiny, and if there is

¹⁰⁵ Robert G.A. Love to James Love, 1 June 1851, William W. Stringfield Papers, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, North Carolina.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

probable cause to believe they are abolition emissaries they shall be taken up and made to undergo a searching examination and be dealt with accordingly.”¹⁰⁷

Even as sectional tension increased and local residents took steps to protect themselves and their property from potential attacks by abolitionists, support for the Union remained strong in many areas of the mountains. As Inscoe and historian Gordon McKinney note, although some of western North Carolina’s political leaders had called for westerners to be prepared for the worst, most still held out hope for a more peaceful solution to the growing sectional divide. As other Deep South states were seceding from the Union, western North Carolina’s Whig representative in Congress, Zebulon Vance urged North Carolinians to take a “watch and wait” approach to the mounting crisis. As he traveled through his congressional district during the fall and winter of 1860, he told his constituents that “we have everything to gain and nothing on earth to lose by delay, but by too hasty action we may take a fatal step we can never retrace—may lose,” he added, “a heritage that we can never recover.”¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, North Carolinians followed their fellow southern states, and seceded from the Union, but sentiment for the Union, even during the war, remained strong in western North Carolina.

The continued existence of pro-Union sentiments in western North Carolina does not mean that the region was entirely Unionist in its outlook, an image that late nineteenth and early twentieth century writers promulgated. Much like the idea that the mountain south was not plagued with the same racial problems that troubled the lowland regions of the South,

¹⁰⁷ Asheville News, January 15, 1857.

¹⁰⁸ Frontis W. Johnston, ed., *The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance*, Zebulon Vance to William Dickson, December 11, 1860, (Raleigh, North Carolina: State Department of Archives and History, 1963), 71.

especially after the Civil War, the view that Southern Appalachia in general and western North Carolina in particular, were overwhelmingly Unionist is an over simplification of the real picture. While it is true that there were strong Unionist majorities in East Tennessee and West Virginia, Unionist convictions never completely dominated western North Carolina. Instead, the region was divided between Unionists and Secessionists throughout the conflict. After the war started and the state seceded from the Union, pro-Confederate supporters did question the loyalty of many in western North Carolina, especially since the majority of the region's counties had opposed the convention that was called to take the state out of the Union. Nevertheless, there was never any doubt about the position of the majority of Asheville and Buncombe County's residents. The citizens of Asheville and Buncombe County were and remained firmly committed to the Confederate cause once the war commenced. That support was so firm that Andrew Johnson, the Unionist United States senator from Tennessee and future president of the United States, reportedly referred to the town as "that damned secessionists hole in the mountains..."¹⁰⁹

Asheville and western North Carolina were spared any direct military trauma from the war until its closing days. In fact, as battles ensued elsewhere, residents and visitors to Asheville spoke about the "the seeming calm that prevailed in the midst of the storm that raged in other parts of the South."¹¹⁰ Katherine Polk Gale, whose family relocated to Asheville in 1863, said that in western North Carolina "peace and plenty ruled everywhere; the country was so shut in from the world, it seemed almost impossible for the desolations of

¹⁰⁹ Milton Ready, *Asheville, Land of the Sky*, 27.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5

war to reach the happy homes along the route.”¹¹¹ The region’s slaveowners appear to have shared this sentiment because even during the war interest and trade in slaves remained high. In fact, the institution, as Inscoc and McKinney found in their study of western North Carolina during the war, “proved so resilient that few highlanders took seriously the possibility of its demise until the waning weeks of the conflict...”¹¹² Thus, while the institution of slavery was under constant threat in the lowland region’s of the South, trade in slaves continued unabated in western North Carolina.

Much as the case had been before the war, slaveowners in Asheville, Buncombe County, and much of western North Carolina, continued to get substantial returns from hiring out the labor of their slaves. As most recognized, the war increased labor demands, especially as men left to fight in the Confederate Army. Some mountain slaveowners even advertised their interest for additional slaves in eastern North Carolina newspapers. They even went as far as to suggest that the removal of slaves from the state’s coastal region would prevent that region’s slaves from falling into the hands of the Union Army. This was a real problem and a legitimate concern for eastern slaveowners. Some, with the support of mountain slaveowners, advocated the adoption of a formal policy requiring the removal of eastern North Carolina slaves to the mountains. In a letter to Governor Vance, William Holland Thomas encouraged the governor to enact such a policy. Thomas argued that by doing so, the labor of the slaves could be used to continue construction of the Western North Carolina Railroad, which had stalled in Morganton. Thomas wrote:

¹¹¹ Katherine Polk Gale, “Life in the Southern Confederacy, 1861-1865,” Leonida Polk Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 17.

¹¹² John Inscoc, Gordon McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War*, 209.

Would it not be advisable to make an arrangement to have able bodied negro men belonging to the counties in reach of the enemy employed by the state and transferred from their present positions to work on the extension of the Railroad? They could be employed,” he said, “for the cost of ensurance [sic] and food and raiment. By this two objects would be gained. 1st every negro would be a saving of \$1000, to the owner, 2d [e]very able bodied negro kept out of the hands of the enemy would lessen the number of troops we have to raise in defense, equal a saving of at least \$1000 per year. If North Carolina employed ten thousand negroes on the road where a small force could keep them in subjection, \$10,000,000 would be saved to the owners and 10,000 men less would be needed to defend our cause.¹¹³

Faced with the unpleasant reality that Union forces controlled much of North Carolina’s coast, the governor issued a removal order in 1864. With knowledge that some Union commanders were actively encouraging slaves to escape, the removal order held that it was the obligation of every slaveowner to move their slaves away from areas where they might easily fall into Union hands.

Some lowland slaveowners from not only eastern North Carolina, but also from Georgia and South Carolina did not need removal orders to get them to move their slaves inland. Many had already relocated their slaves to areas in western North Carolina long before the governor’s removal order was issued. While this was seen as good policy to some in the west, others expressed trepidation. Some highlanders believed that the growing number of slaves in western North Carolina would threaten to upset the region’s social order. Writing to a family friend in 1863, William Lenior of Haywood county noted that the number of slaves in the region “has increased rapidly since the war commenced,” and worried that

¹¹³ William Holland Thomas, to Zebulon Vance, November 22, 1862, in Frontis W. Johnston , Papers of Zebulon Vance, (Raleigh, North Carolina: State Department of Archives and History, 1963), 385.

recent talk about the “removal order” would only increase that number.¹¹⁴ He expressed concerns about the ability of regional officials to maintain proper control in the face of such growth. William Pickens, an Asheville resident spoke of similar concerns in a letter to Governor Vance in March 1863. According to Pickens the number of blacks was growing so quickly in Asheville and Buncombe County that he and other residents were demanding more protection from what he called “Negro Ravages.”¹¹⁵ Pickens complained that the 1862 Confederate Conscription Law that required “all able-bodied white males from eighteen to thirty-five years old” to serve up to three years in the Confederate Army or longer, had placed tremendous strain on the people of the region. He ensured the governor that the men from his region were more than ready to fight for the state’s defense but were currently disposed to believe that more was needed at home because “so many negroes have been brought up from the coast.”¹¹⁶ Many feared that as the region’s black population grew the likelihood of social unrest also increased.

Despite such concerns, the efforts of men like Woodfin and Patton to bring more slaves to the region by either purchase or hire continued throughout the duration of the war. The primary motivation behind their actions was their interest in the construction of the Western North Carolina Railroad. In late 1861, months after the war had started, Woodfin and his business associates ran an advertisement in the *North Carolina Standard*, a Raleigh

¹¹⁴ W.W. Lenior to Joseph Norwood, May 3, 1863, Lenior Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

¹¹⁵ William Pickens to Zebulon Vance, March 2, 1863, Vance’s Governor’s Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

newspaper, seeking the opportunity to hire the labor of “100 able-bodied negroes.”¹¹⁷ This ad was followed by another seeking to hire 50 more slaves in 1862.¹¹⁸ Even in 1864, long after the President Lincoln had issued his Emancipation Proclamation and Confederate success in the war unlikely, highlanders like Alfred and Mary Bell, Macon County slaveowners who sold three slaves to their neighbors in November of 1864, continued to participate in the slave market.¹¹⁹ It was only after military invaders descended on the region in the waning weeks of the war that slavery, as Inscoc and McKinney note, “showed any real signs of collapse.”¹²⁰

How significant an impact the continued purchase, sale, and hiring of slaves had on Asheville and Buncombe County’s black population during the war is not clear, but as we have seen, the town and county were never without a black population. Nevertheless, unlike the lowland regions of the south, where large scale agricultural production was the dominate industry of the economy, the economic activity for which mountain blacks, especially slaves, were used was much more diverse.

Since most of the agricultural production of western North Carolina was for subsistence purposes, highland slaves were most often used in industries such as mining, manufacturing, and the antebellum tourism and resort industries, two industries that became even more important after the war. In addition to using black slaves as cooks,

¹¹⁷ North Carolina Standard, December 1861 and March 1862.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ John Inscoc, “The Slave Purchases of Mary Bell: The Civil War’s Empowerment of an Appalachian Woman”, *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 75.

¹²⁰ John Inscoc, Gordon McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War*, 209.

chambermaids, teamsters, gardeners, and waiters in local hotels, mountain slaveowners also used them to build the infrastructure that was needed to support the region's economic growth.

Thus, while the 1962 remarks of sociologist John C. Belcher that "the number of Negroes in the Appalachian region is such a small proportion of the total that the social consequences of their presence and migration are not of any great significance," may be true of some areas, it was not true in Asheville and Buncombe County.¹²¹ Antebellum blacks made a significant contribution to the town's economic development and this contribution did not end with the collapse of slavery in 1865.

¹²¹ John C. Belcher, "Population Growth and Characteristics," *The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey*, ed. Thomas R. Ford (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1962), 152.

Chapter Two

Working to Serve: Blacks in Asheville's Post-Civil War Economy

Despite Asheville's position as the economic, political, and cultural center of western North Carolina, the town was still no more than a tiny hamlet when the Civil War began in 1861. Its population was slightly less than 1,100 people. In this way the town was no different from most other towns in the state at that time. Prior to 1860, only Wilmington—with its population of more than 5,000 people—could claim the status of a city in North Carolina.

In the years following the war, Asheville's population grew substantially. By 1880, the town's population exceeded 2,000, and by 1890, the population reached more than 10,000 people.¹²² A chief factor for this growth was Asheville and western North Carolina's re-emergence first as a popular health resort—especially for tuberculosis patients—and later as a primary destination for people who traveled for pleasure and relaxation. As these industries grew, blacks, along with others, migrated to the area to fill the many service

¹²² Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh); Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh); Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh). Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh). Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

related jobs that these industries created, further solidifying the important economic role that they played in the city's development.

During most of the Civil War, Asheville and western North Carolina were largely spared any direct impact from the fighting that occurred elsewhere in the state and in the South as a whole. By the time this changed, the Confederate capital in Richmond, Virginia was already under the control of Union Army commanders. Even before the collapse of the Confederate capital on April 3rd, 1865, Confederate Army troops were retreating into western North Carolina where they undoubtedly hoped the mountains would allow them to continue their struggle against the Union.

Cognizant of the fact that western North Carolina's topography could offer the rebels a place from which to launch what one writer has called a "last-ditch guerrilla stand" against the Union Army, Union commanders initiated a three-pronged military campaign in the region in the early months of 1865. Colonel George Kirk, Major General George Stoneman, and Colonel Isaac Kirby led this operation and brought Union troops into Asheville on April 5th. The result of this military incursion was a five-hour shooting battle between Confederate and Union forces. Although the loss of ammunition was the only consequence of this confrontation, it did nothing to stem the economic and social misery that the town and region was experiencing.

Despite its isolation from most of the fighting, life was difficult in Asheville and western North Carolina during the war. The region instantly felt the war's economic impact on the southern economy. Six months after the war began, the region's residents complained that the war was causing significant economic distress. In late 1861, Elizabeth Watson of nearby Jackson County, told her husband, who was away serving in the Confederate Army,

that “times in our county is hard for the poor class of people for everything is giting so deer that they cant be hardly a noughf to live on[.] Salt,” which was a very important staple, “is from nine to ten dollars a sack her[e] and every other thing in proportion.”¹²³ After offering some further observations about crop production in the surrounding area, Elizabeth depressingly concluded that “I don’t know how we will git our nessaries for money is scarce here.”¹²⁴

As the war dragged on, concerns about the economic stress that people were experiencing intensified. Troubled by the implication of the Confederate Conscription Law, many Asheville and western North Carolina residents did not believe that their families could survive, especially since the law drained the region of its most important sources—able bodied men whose families depended on them for their support. In a letter to Governor Vance, David Siler, a western North Carolina resident who feared that he would have to leave his family to serve in the Army, wrote that neither his nor his neighbor’s families could afford the loss of any family members because their labor was so important. “Our people,” he wrote, “have learned to subsist mainly on the immediate productions of their own labor. Deprive us of that labor and the innocent [and] helpless must perish....What consolation or encouragement,” he asked, “can come to a man[‘s] heart in an hour of trial from a home where the helpless are perishing for want of his hand to provide?”¹²⁵

¹²³ Elizabeth Watson to James Watson, October 29, 1861, James Watson Papers, Special Collections, Hunter Library, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, North Carolina.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Frontis W. Johnston, ed., *The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance*, David W. Siler to Zebulon Vance, November 5, 1862, (Raleigh, North Carolina: State Department of Archives and History, 1963), 71.

There were also growing concerns about an enlarged and seemingly restless slave population. Although some mountain slaveowners continued to buy slaves, there were signs that some highland slaves were beginning to realize that the war had loosened the restraints that restricted their activity in normal times. In late 1864, Rufus Patterson, a prominent mountain slaveowner, told his father that “a general spirit of devilment is through the country and I deem it best to be constantly on the lookout. Our negroes need watching.”¹²⁶ He noted that he was having problems with two slaves in particular, Rob and George, and felt that it was not advisable to allow either of them to be hired out. “George,” he wrote, “might flee so he will give you much trouble unless he alters greatly.”¹²⁷ Patterson went on to suggest that inclination towards dishonesty and deception among the region's slaves made it unwise for anyone to be imprudent in supervising their slaves. Writing to Confederate Army Captain Walter Lenior, Patterson stated that “unless I could see more interest in the institution as a permanent one, I do not care to be troubled with dishonest slaves.”¹²⁸ He went on to tell Lenior, who owned slaves in the region as well, that “I fear you do not know some of yours [slaves] very well, but I hope they have not been as bad as some here.”¹²⁹

As the war continued, simple dishonesty and deception among the region's slaves turned into outright abandonment of area farms and plantations. Even before federal troops appeared in the region, mountain slaveowners reported that slaves were running away. In the

¹²⁶ Rufus L. Patterson to his father, December 8, 1864, Jones and Patterson Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Rufus L. Patterson to Walter Lenior, December 12, 1864, Lenior Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

early weeks of 1865, Ella Harper, whose husband George was serving in the Confederate Army, recorded in her diary that several of their slaves had left the plantation. “The negro man, Dick and others,” she wrote, “had abandoned the farm two days before the appearance of General Stoneman’s forces in Caldwell County. On the day that Stoneman’s army arrived she reported that “at least fifty additional slaves fled.”¹³⁰ Calvin Cowles, another mountain resident who had hired two slaves from Reverend C.B. Reddick, was forced to tell the Reddick that the two slaves had run away. “It becomes my painful duty to inform you that your Boys Nelson & James have gone off with the Yankees. On April 6 Gen. Stoneman pass[ed] through here [and] the Boys took my Horses and one saddle [and] went off with them, not even bidding me good-bye.”¹³¹ Perhaps in an effort to assuage Reddick’s certain irritation, Cowles informed him that “the greater number of negro fellows did likewise.”¹³² He noted that because Union forces “had appeared so suddenly no one had time to run property to a secure place.”¹³³

Mountain slaves who did not run away often undermined the Confederate cause by providing assistance to “escaped prisoners of war, deserters, bushwhackers, and other fugitives who moved through the Carolina highlands for refuge....”¹³⁴ After the war, many former Confederate Army deserters and Union Army veterans recalled the aid they received

¹³⁰ Ms. George W. F. Harper, Dairy entries for March 26, 28, 1865, quoted in Van Noppen, “Significance of Stoneman’s Last Raid,” 149.

¹³¹ Calvin J. Cowles to C.B. Reddick, April 6, 1865, Cowles Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ John C. Inscoe and Gordon McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: the University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 226.

from slaves in the region. Albert Richardson, a war time correspondent for the New York *Tribune* newspaper, who passed through the area after escaping from a Confederate prison in Salisbury in 1864, recalled that “every black face was a friendly face and so far as fidelity was concerned we felt just as safe among the negroes as if in our Northern homes. Male and female, old or young, intelligent or simple we were fully assured that they would never betray us.”¹³⁵ Richardson went on to say that whether slave or free, black highlanders “were always ready to help anybody opposed to the Rebels. Union refugees, Confederate deserters, escaped prisoners—all received from them the same prompt and invariable kindness”¹³⁶ On the other hand, he noted, “let a Rebel soldier, on his way to the Army or returning from it, apply to them, he would find “but cold kindness.”¹³⁷ Junius Browne, a fugitive Union soldier, who traveled through the region with Richardson, recalled that “the magic word ‘Yankee’ opened all their hearts, and elicited the loftiest virtues. They were ignorant, oppressed, and enslaved” he said, “but they always cherished a simple and beautiful faith in the cause of the Union and its ultimate triumph.”¹³⁸

Although Richardson and Browne recalled that highland slaves were interested in the progress of the war, and even expressed confidence that the Confederacy would be defeated, their confidence was not shared by all. According to Sarah Gudger, neither she nor the slaves who lived around her believed that they would ever be free. Gudger recalled that

¹³⁵ Albert Richardson, *The Secret Service, the field, the dungeon, and the escape*, (Hartford, Connecticut: American Publishing Company, 1865), 444.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Junius Browne, *Four years in Secessia adventures within and beyond the Union lines, embracing a great variety of facts, incidents, and romance of the war, including the author’s capture at Vicksburg, May 3, 1863, his imprisonment at Vicksburg, Jackson, Atlanta, Richmond, and Salisbury, his escape and perilous journey of four hundred miles to Union Lines at Knoxville*, (Hartford, Connecticut: O.D. Case, 1865), 368.

while there was one slave on the plantation where she lived who believed that the slaves would one day be free, that opinion was generally dismissed as nonsense by others. “On de plantation,” she said, “wah an old woman whut the boss bough f’om a drovah up in Virginny. De boss he bought huh f’om one of de specalaters. She laff an’ tell us: ‘some ob dese days yo’ all gwine be free, jes’ like the white folks,’ but we all laff at huh. No, we just’ slaves,” Gudger remembered the other slaves saying, “ we just allus hafta work and neveh be free.”¹³⁹

Interestingly, while Gudger was aware of the war, she claimed that neither she, nor the slaves who lived near her knew what the fighting was about. She only remembered that it was an “awful time.”¹⁴⁰ In fact, while Richardson and Browne remembered mountains slaves as overly friendly to Yankees, Gudger recalled that she and the slaves that she lived among were fearful of a potential Yankee invasion of their area of the state. She recalled that on many occasions, they would hear that the Yankees were coming and that they would hurriedly hide their food and stock until they were sure the Yankees were gone.¹⁴¹ Gudger said that despite any real knowledge of what the war was about she felt a deep sorrow for the men and boys who had to fight. “One day, I nebbah fo’ git,” she observed, “we look out an’ see sojers ma’ chin; look lak de whole valley full ob dem. I thought: poah helpless crittashs, jes’ goin’ away t’ git kilt.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Vol. 11 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1976), 356.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 357

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

Perhaps because of the region's isolation from much of the fighting, mountain blacks, while cognizant of a possible Union invasion, were never consumed with such thoughts.¹⁴³ Even though the region's white residents were aware of President Lincoln's 1863 proclamation freeing many of the South's slaves, Gudger recalled that the slaves on her plantation were surprised when they were informed that they were free once the war was over. Unlike the slaves who lived in other areas of the South, especially where the mere presence of Union soldiers had been enough to cause them to leave their masters, Gudger recalled that her master had to formally tell them that they were free when the war ended. Gudger reported that her master brought the slaves together and simply asked "did yo'all know yo'all's free, Yo' free now."¹⁴⁴

Based on the recollection of others, Gudger's claim that she did not know that the end of the war had brought about her freedom may have been an isolated occurrence. As noted, the mere appearance of Union soldiers was enough to cause many slaves to leave their masters. This fact did not escape the observations of Asheville resident Mary Taylor Brown. Writing to her son a few weeks after the war was over, Brown reported that "all of Mrs. J. W. Patton's servants left her and went with the Yankees, not a single one of all she had remained to do a thing in the house or in the kitchen. They even took her beautiful carriage and, crowding into it, drove off in full possession."¹⁴⁵ As for their family's own slaves, Brown informed her son that they had remained loyal, even though they were fully aware that they

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Mary Taylor Brown to John Evans Brown, June 20, 1865, 18-19, W. Vance Brown Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

were “now free to leave,” she said.¹⁴⁶ “At the present time,” she went on to add, “we are getting along in our domestic relations much the same as before the Yankees came.”¹⁴⁷

Once the war was over, the first thing that many of Asheville’s and western North Carolina’s slaves did was to leave their former owners, and in some cases the region. In this way they followed a pattern that was common throughout the South. Historian Eric Foner observes that since the freedpeople’s ability to move had been severely restricted before their emancipation, the freedom to migrate at will after their emancipation was important. Foner notes that many of the former slaves took great pleasure in “flaunting their liberation” and simply packed up what possessions they had and walked away.¹⁴⁸ Mountain whites in Asheville and the surrounding region did not miss this. Feeling somewhat distressed by all that was happening around her, Buncombe County resident Cornelia Henry informed her husband that freedom had significantly changed the attitudes of the former slaves. “You have no idea how big the nigs feel....Even Rose,” who must have hidden her desire to be free prior to her emancipation, “feels her freedom,” Henry wrote.¹⁴⁹ She went on to note that one slave had left the region altogether. “The negro had gone to Tennessee now and I hope he may never come back again.”¹⁵⁰ For many ex-slaves, relocating—if only a short distance—

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, (New York, New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1989), 79.

¹⁴⁹ Cornelia Henry to William Henry, May 27, 1865, Robert Henry paper, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, North Carolina.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

was seen as the only way to affirm their freedom. “If I stay here,” one freedwoman reportedly told her former master, “I’ll never know I am free.”¹⁵¹

The decision that many blacks made to leave their former owners elicited a mixed response from whites in western North Carolina. Convinced that the former slaves were being shortsighted, Mary Brown informed her son that “thousands of poor deluded Negroes have left their Confederate homes to seek a better life and found a worse . . .”¹⁵²

Interestingly she noted that “none of our own servants have left us, tho’ we told them to go if they wished.”¹⁵³ Despite her willingness to let her former slaves go, Brown expressed trepidation about the loss of her slaves. “I should be very sorry to part with any servants, for they are to me as a part of our family, and I feel attached to them as to my own children.”¹⁵⁴ Such familial sentiments notwithstanding, Brown could not begin to imagine a world in which black and whites were equals. “I cannot approve [of] their remaining here other than as slaves,” she insisted, “for they will not do without the care of the white man. They will require continual watching and daily instruction in their labors.”¹⁵⁵ She went on to say that if no arrangements could be made to ensure that whites maintained their control over blacks

¹⁵¹ Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*, (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 82.

¹⁵² Mary Taylor Brown to John Evan Brown, June 20, 1865, 19-20, W. Vance Brown Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

then they should be “sent to Africa as soon as possible,” a view that was shared by others, as we shall see.¹⁵⁶

Despite the fact that some former slaves chose to leave the region, Asheville’s post-Civil War black population increased. In the weeks and months following the end of the war, the town became a gathering place for many blacks who were anxious to move away from the countryside, from all areas of the South. Although exact figures are hard to ascertain, subsequent census data confirms a steady increase in the size of Asheville and Buncombe County’s black population. The 1860 census shows that Buncombe County’s population stood at 12,654, with blacks making up 16.2 percent of the county’s population.¹⁵⁷ There were, as noted, 1,933 slaves and 111 free blacks in Asheville and Buncombe in 1860.¹⁵⁸ By 1870, just five years after the war, the county’s population had reached 15,412, and blacks, whose number had reached 2,303, made up 15 percent of the total population.¹⁵⁹ From 1860 to 1870, Buncombe County witnessed a 21.7 percent increase in its population. Since population figures for Asheville were not adequately recorded until 1880, the total number of blacks who migrated to town immediately following the war is not known. However, Asheville did attract many people, both blacks and whites, after the war.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: buncombe County, North Carolina Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington D.C., (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

Asheville's population growth after the war is not surprising when one considers that similar trends occurred throughout the South. Historian David Goldfield, who studied the post-Civil War growth of the South's urban landscape, observes that the search for greater economic opportunities and security were major factors in the movement of blacks to towns and cities following emancipation. Goldfield notes that because many blacks tended to associate the countryside with slavery, cities and towns became the places where they believed they could enjoy their freedom fully. Former slaves, Goldfield writes, believed that "the first act of freedom was to leave the farm and move to the city."¹⁶⁰ They did this to not only test the limits of their freedom, but also to try and "take advantage of the benefits of urban life—the increased economic opportunities, the decreased surveillance, and the greater possibilities to read, write, and learn a trade."¹⁶¹ Because of Asheville's status as an economic center, mountain blacks were drawn to it after the war, and after the city's post-war economy stabilized and industry grew, they continued to come.

The immediate influx of people into Asheville after the war put tremendous strains on the town's already limited resources. During the war, Asheville economy had deteriorated so much that in many ways it was more isolated after the war than before. Author Nan Chase notes that from 1861 to 1865, Asheville's economic decline was so pronounced that what was once a busy crossroads was now "a throwback to isolated rusticity and a want of advancement."¹⁶² Instead of jobs, the people who migrated to Asheville in the early years after the war encountered a dirty, violent, and poor environment. The public square was

¹⁶⁰ David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980*, (Baton rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 103.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Nan Chase, *Asheville: A History*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2007), 28.

reported to be muddy and always “crowded with wild hogs, and lowing long horned oxen pulling wagons.”¹⁶³ Added to this, was the presence of an unsavory element of people who drank corn whiskey continuously, creating an atmosphere that was “unwelcoming to anyone seeking peace and tranquility.”¹⁶⁴ With practically no resources with which to maintain public peace, criminal activity was reportedly rampant in the town. Chase notes that since “the armies had consumed or driven away much of the livestock, poverty and hunger settled in. The specter of starvation bred unprecedented violence and brutality; robbery,” she writes, “swept through like a cyclone, and some accounts describe how thieves used torture by fire—‘roasting’—to force victims to reveal their caches of valuables.”¹⁶⁵ Under such conditions, reestablishing order, especially in the hopes of getting the economy moving again, was foremost on the minds of the town’s white leaders in the weeks and months following the end of the war.

Reestablishing links with the outside world was also important to Asheville and regional leaders. The region’s transportation system had suffered greatly during the war. Roads and bridges had been destroyed by both Union and Confederate forces, and with few economic or financial resources to draw from, maintenance and repair had been impossible. To make matters worse, new modes of transportation made much of the region’s roads obsolete, especially the Buncombe Turnpike. Even before the war, the turnpike’s importance as a means of transporting goods to larger markets was falling victim to the development of railroads—not just in eastern North Carolina, but in neighboring states as well. Farmers in Virginia and Tennessee no longer needed the Buncombe Turnpike to move their goods to

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

markets that were primarily located in Georgia and South Carolina. Unfortunately, the same developments had not occurred in western North Carolina because the state had lacked the resources to continue rail construction during the war. Despite the continued efforts of Asheville and western North Carolina's leaders, construction of the Western North Carolina Railroad came to a halt in 1861. With railroad service still non-existent in western North Carolina, economic growth and social stability was tenuous in the mountains after the war.

Given the important connection between transportation and economic growth, restarting the region's railroad projects was a top priority for Asheville's leaders. Post Civil War progress was still slow. In addition to continued political disagreements, financial scandals, and the difficulties of the region's terrain, labor shortages were a significant challenge as well. To address the issue of labor, regional and state leaders turned to the state's black prison population. Following a pattern that was used in other southern states, North Carolina's political leaders adopted policies that allowed the state's prison population to be used on railroad construct projects. At the request of Ephraim Clayton, a civil engineer and Civil War veteran who lived in Asheville, the state sent hundreds of convicts to work on the railroad. In fact, during the heaviest period of construction in the mid-1870s, there were more than 1800 men working to clear ground for the railroad in western North Carolina, and most of them were convicts.¹⁶⁶

After the demise of slavery, convict labor became a major tool in the efforts of whites to control the labor of blacks. Eric Foner points out that this movement was initiated almost immediately after the Civil War, and was often just as brutal as slavery. Foner notes that

¹⁶⁶ Western North Carolina Railroad Company, Annual proceedings of the Western North Carolina Railroad Company, (Statesville, North Carolina: Eugene B. Drake & Son, printers, 1868-1892).

since emancipation prevented employers from arbitrarily subjecting “black[s] to corporal punishment [the] courts could mandate whipping as a punishment for vagrancy or petty theft. If individual whites could no longer hold blacks in involuntary servitude, courts could sentence freedmen to long prison terms, force them to labor without compensation on public works, or bind them out to white employers who would pay their fines.”¹⁶⁷ Much like slavery, the post-Civil War convict labor system, or convict leasing system as it became known, provided private employers with a supply of cheap labor.

Blacks formed the majority of the convicts. In an 1887 report to the North Carolina bureau of Labor Statistics, Coleman Twining, a resident of Wilmington, reported that the state’s convict labor crews were overwhelmingly dominated by black men, who in most cases had only been convicted of minor infractions of the law. He noted that by and large, most of the men who made up these crews had been found guilty of little more than petty theft, but yet they were generally sentenced to as many as ten years in prison. Once their sentences were imposed, Twining reported, the men “were made to labor on convict labor crews across the state.”¹⁶⁸ Recognizing the discriminatory nature of the system, Twining wrote that “we have two races in our State who are nearly equally divided as to numbers, and while we find prejudice prevalent throughout the white population, and...does not stop and rest with the common citizen, but goes further, and...extends to and enters our courts of justice....If a man of color is brought before a court,” he observed, “it is no difficult matter to prove him guilty. The jury is composed of all white men—perhaps one or two colored; they say guilty; the judge sentences the prisoner to from three to ten years in the State

¹⁶⁷ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, 205.

¹⁶⁸ First Annual Report of the North Carolina Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1887, (North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina).

Penitentiary, when had it been a white man, he, if found guilty at all, would have been sent to the county work-house or jail for sixty or ninety days.”¹⁶⁹ Twinning concluded his report by saying that state’s criminal justice system was being used to supply private individuals and corporation with a cheap and easily controlled labor force.¹⁷⁰

Twining’s report did little to change the convict leasing system in North Carolina. As the demands for labor increased, especially among railroad contractors, the State’s prison population grew. In his study of the black experience in North Carolina from 1876 to 1894, historian Frenise Logan observes that the black prison population in North Carolina nearly tripled.¹⁷¹ “In 1876 there were,” Logan writes, “676 Negro prisoners in the State penitentiary. Four years later their number had increased to 979. In 1890 there were only 408 whites, but 1,623 Negroes in the state prison.”¹⁷² Along with racism, the continued demands for a cheap supply of labor, especially for railroad construction was a major reason for the increase in the number of black inmates in North Carolina. “The need for an ever-ready cheap supply of manpower to do the laborious and hazardous work of rail construction,” Logan notes, “contributed a large degree toward the increase of the Negro prison population. Without a doubt,” he asserts, “Negro prisoners were responsible for most, if not all, of the 3,582 miles of railroad track laid between 1876 and 1894.”¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Frenise A. Logan, *The Negro in North Carolina, 1876-1894*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 78.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 79

Although railroad construction was difficult no matter where it was done, it was especially difficult and dangerous in western North Carolina. The region's topography posed significant challenges to railroad construction and made the potential loss of life a major threat to those performing the work. The records of the State Penitentiary show that from 1877 to 1889, at least 139 convicts died while working on the railroad.¹⁷⁴ While the State's official records do not disclose the exact causes of these deaths, newspaper accounts suggests that construction accidents were the most prevalent reason. The opening of the Swannanoa tunnel on March 13, 1879, is a case in point. While the event was heralded as a remarkable achievement and "the dawning of daylight" in Buncombe County, subsequent reports revealed that on the same day a cave-in near the western portal of the tunnel took the lives of 20 convicts.¹⁷⁵ Additionally, in an 1880 report to the General Assembly, the warden of the State Penitentiary reported that of the 537 convicts working on the Western North Carolina Railroad in 1879, 75 died in construction accidents, six were killed while trying to escape, and at least another 35 escaped.¹⁷⁶

Despite the dominant role that black convicts played in the construction of the Western North Carolina Railroad, the construction teams also included laborers who were not convicts. Throughout the railroad's construction company officials used the labor of hundreds of local residents who helped remove blasted rubble and debris from construction sites. Using "picks and shovels as their tools, and with the help of ox and mule teams, these

¹⁷⁴ Homer Carson, III, "Panel Reform and Construction of the Western North Carolina Railroad 1875-1892", *Journal of Appalachia Studies*, vol. 11, (Spring/Fall 2005), 205.

¹⁷⁵ North Carolina State Penitentiary Reports 1882, Prepared by J. W. Hicks, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

laborers removed boulders and carted away other debris in wheelbarrows.”¹⁷⁷ How much non-convict laborers were paid for their labor is not known, but in the face of the economic hardships that prevailed at the time, these workers were probably grateful for whatever pay they received. No doubt, like many others in western North Carolina, local resident who helped with the railroad’s construction realized that its completion would enhance their ability to earn a living in the future.

As the region’s leaders had predicted, the arrival of the railroad in Asheville did much to stimulate the town’s economic recovery and development. Over the next decade, Asheville’s population grew to more than 10,000, making it one of the largest cities in the state. As the case was before the Civil War, Asheville and western North Carolina continued to attract the interest and attention of tourists, and the arrival of the Western North Carolina Railroad, and later the Spartanburg and Asheville Railroad in 1885, ensured that the region’s tourism industry would be revitalized and grow. But while tourism would be one of the biggest beneficiaries of train service to Asheville, it was not the only post-Civil War industry that developed in and around the town.

At the same time that regional leaders worked to revamp the region’s transportation system, local farmers were successfully cultivating tobacco, which in turn laid the foundation for a small tobacco industry in Buncombe County. During the antebellum period, as Foster Sondley, a local attorney and armature history pointed out, “no one seemed to think it was wise to cultivate in that region any considerable quantity of the plant for manufacture or

¹⁷⁷ Ora Blackmun, *Western North Carolina: Its Mountains and Its People to 1880*, (Boone, North Carolina: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1977), 393.

market.”¹⁷⁸ This opinion changed after Samuel Shelton moved to Buncombe County in 1868. With a knowledge of how to grow the plant in quantities that made it worth producing for markets outside the region, Shelton began growing the plant successfully on his farm. Before long his success convinced others to grow tobacco, and within a short period of time tobacco was being grown on almost every farm in the county. Data from the 1860 and 1870 census shows a significant increase in the quantity of tobacco that was grown in Buncombe County during this period. In 1860 the county produced 23,006 pounds of tobacco, and 30,689 pounds were reported in 1870.¹⁷⁹ By 1880, the county was producing 475,428 pounds of tobacco; and in 1890, that amount had increased to more than 1 million pounds.¹⁸⁰

Although white farmers were the primary growers of tobacco in Buncombe County, a few black farmers grew the plant as well. In 1870, the year that the cultivation of tobacco expanded in the county, four of the 20 blacks who were identified as the owners their farms, grew tobacco.¹⁸¹ Among these farmers was Henry Anderson, a South Carolina native who migrated to western North Carolina after the Civil War. According to the 1870 census, Anderson, who had 35 acres of his 126-acre farm under cultivation, produced 100 pounds of

¹⁷⁸ Foster Alexander Sondley, *History of Buncombe County North Carolina*, (Asheville, North Carolina: Advocate Print Company, 1930), 728.

¹⁷⁹ Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

¹⁸⁰ Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

¹⁸¹ Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

tobacco that year.¹⁸² Following him was Isaac Gudger, a native of the region, and Arthur McKinney, a Virginia native, who each produced twenty pounds of tobacco each in 1870.¹⁸³

Despite the success of tobacco production in Buncombe County most of the county's black farmers confined their agricultural activities to the cultivation of corn, wheat, buckwheat, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, and beans. Most of these farmers did not own their farms, however. Of the 69 blacks who identified themselves as farmers and farm laborers in Buncombe County in 1870, only 20 said that they owned their farms.¹⁸⁴

The majority of the county's black farmers may have been sharecroppers or tenant farmers, individuals who lived on plots of lands that were owned by white landowners. In such instances, they cultivated crops both for themselves and the owners of the land. This appears to have been the case with Joseph and Thomas Davidson. According to data in the 1870 census both men, who identified themselves as farmers, lived on property that was owned by John Burgers, a white farmer whose real estate holdings were valued at \$4,500.¹⁸⁵ The agricultural schedules of the 1870 census show that Burgers had at least 300 acres of his 1,700 acre farm under cultivation. In addition to raising livestock, and growing wheat, corn, potatoes, and oats, the census also shows that his farm produced 200 pounds of tobacco that

¹⁸² Ninth Census of the United State, 1870, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

year.¹⁸⁶ As sharecroppers or tenant farmers, Joseph and Thomas, who both migrated to the area from South Carolina, may have been responsible for a portion of the tobacco that Burgers reported that year.

The development of the South's post-Civil War sharecropping system was, as historian Ronald Davis writes, important for blacks in that it appeared to grant them a degree of independence in their daily lives which they desired greatly. Nevertheless, while time would demonstrate that it was not an ideal system, it did offer both the planter and the laborer a number of incentives. Under the sharecropping system, Davis observes, planters or landowners who were often strapped for cash, found it convenient to offer potential laborers "housing, a mule, tools, and seed to farm a small plot of land. In return the laborer, or sharecropper, bought provisions on credit from the planter and reserved the sale of one-half to three-quarters of the crop for the planter."¹⁸⁷ The reason this system appealed to so many former slaves, as Davis notes, was that it "eliminated the pain and humiliation of gang labor and allowed [the] freedmen to move their families out from under the direct supervision of white supervisors, and this was important to the former slaves."¹⁸⁸

It is unclear how important sharecropping and tenant farming were to agriculture and labor in Asheville and Buncombe County after the Civil War. According to the 1880 census, only 19 percent of the 350 blacks who identified themselves as farmers or farm laborers in

¹⁸⁶ Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Agricultural Schedules, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

¹⁸⁷ Ronald Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor: A Study In the Origins, Development and Economics of Southern Sharecropping, 1860-1880*, (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1974).

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

the area reported that they owned their farms.¹⁸⁹ This suggests that the others were either sharecroppers or tenant farmers. During the last three decades of the nineteenth century the number or percentage of blacks who identified themselves as farmers, or farm labors in Asheville and Buncombe County declined significantly. From 1870 to 1900, census data reveals that there was nearly a 32 percent decline in the number of blacks who identified themselves as farmers or farm laborers. In light of the growing importance of tourism in Asheville, this decline is not surprising. Instead of farming, many of the area's black residents began to move into jobs that were created by the region's burgeoning tourism and health resort industry.

Prior to the reemergence of Asheville's popularity as a vacation spot its reputation as a health resort stimulated the development of a health care industry which created jobs for blacks. The driving force behind the development of the health resort industry in Asheville was Edward Aston, a local businessman and political leader. Beginning in the late 1860s and throughout much of the 1870s, Aston conducted "an extensive correspondence campaign" extolling what he called "the climatic and scenic virtues of the North Carolina mountains," to prominent health care workers throughout the country.¹⁹⁰ In his letters he urged physicians to come to Asheville and "experience the mountain climate for themselves."¹⁹¹ Aston believed that by doing so they would see the health benefits of the region and recommend it as a retreat for their patients. Through his efforts, which included the publication of a

¹⁸⁹ Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

¹⁹⁰ Richard Starnes, *Creating Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina*, (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, University of Alabama Press, 2005), 25.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

number of pamphlets by prominent Ohio physician Dr. Horatio Gatchell, who Aston convinced to come to Asheville, Aston was able to attract a number of prominent doctors and medical researchers to Asheville.

After moving to Asheville, Dr. Gatchell and his brother, Dr. Edwin Gatchell, were convinced that western North Carolina possessed medical benefits of all kinds and began actively promoting the region to their colleagues. After opening a sanitarium in the area in 1870, Horatio Gatchell published a promotional pamphlet titled, *Western North Carolina—Its Agricultural Resources, Mineral Wealth, Climate, Salubrity and Scenery*. Gatchell argued that the region’s environment attracted many unhealthy people “in the hope of being able to prolong a little their stay on earth.”¹⁹² He advised his colleagues that while Asheville’s summer seasons were popularly known as the healing season, the “winter season has been demonstrated to be equally restorative.”¹⁹³ Gatchell’s testimony prompted medical professionals from all over the country to come Asheville where they established medical practices and sanitariums to treat patients who suffered from respiratory and other diseases.

The development of area sanitariums generated a number of jobs that the region’s black population was able to fill. Since many of the city’s sanitariums, like The Oakland Heights Sanitarium, offered medical treatment and services such as exotic baths, massages, and private rooms; having a staff to attend to the patients needs was important. So at sanitariums like the Oakland Heights Sanitarium, which opened in the late 1880s, blacks

¹⁹² Dr. Horatio P. Gatchell, *Western North Carolina—Its Agricultural Resources, Mineral Wealth, Climate, Salubrity and Scenery* (Asheville: E.J. Aston, 1870). 10.

¹⁹³ David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America*, (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 45.

were employed as support staff, working as chambermaids, janitors, bellmen, or as was the case with John Brooks in 1887, as drivers and coachmen. Although this area of employment was not the exclusive domain of blacks in Asheville, these jobs were the place where many found their niche. In 1886, the year that Asheville's health resort industry saw its most significant growth, the city directory and the census show that more than 45 percent of the more than 4,500 blacks living in and around the city were working as service employees at the city's sanitariums, hotels, and boardinghouses.¹⁹⁴

Occasionally black women like Martha Brooks, who worked at the Ambler Heights Sanitarium, were identified as nurses. At that time, however, this position—for black women at least—was no different from that of a domestic worker. Whether in sanitariums or private homes, the women who were employed in these positions were expected to perform a variety of duties. Aside from cooking, cleaning, laundering clothes, and serving meals, women who served as nurses or nursemaids were also expected to provide childcare for the children—especially when they worked for private families. Historian David Katzman notes that domestic labor was a field that women dominated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, he writes, “domestic service was the single most important class of women’s gainful employment” in the United States.¹⁹⁵ Data in the United States census and the Asheville city directories confirms that this certainly was true in Asheville. From 1880 to 1900, more than 38 percent of the black women employed in the city were working in some capacity as domestic laborers. Using a sample of 500 black women in each

¹⁹⁴ Asheville City Directory, 1886.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

census year, the data shows that domestic labor was the primary occupation of most black women in Asheville and Buncombe County.

Working as domestics often demanded significant amounts of the employee's time. In fact, many women who held these positions complained that the job demanded so much that they rarely had time for their own families. In an interview published in the *Independent* in 1912, one black woman reported that in her capacity as a domestic servant it was not uncommon for her to "work from fourteen to sixteen hours a day. I am compelled by my contract to sleep in the house. I am allowed to go home to my own children, the oldest of whom is a girl of 18 years, only once in two weeks, every other Sunday afternoon—even then I'm not permitted to stay all night."¹⁹⁶ She went on to describe an experience that bore striking similarities to slavery. She stressed that while she was paid a wage, the amount was practically nothing. "You might as well say that I'm on duty all the time—from sunrise to sunrise, every day in the week. I am the slave, body and soul, to this family. And what do I get for this work—this lifetime of bondage? The pitiful sum of ten dollars a month!"¹⁹⁷

Little or no education was a major reason that so many women, especially black women, worked as domestic servants and nursemaids. An 1889 and 1890 survey of female domestic servants conducted by Lucy Maynard Solomon, a history teacher at Vassar College in New York, established a clear link between a low level of education and domestic service. One servant interviewed for the survey recalled that "I went into housework because I was

¹⁹⁶ "A Washerwoman," *Independent* LVII (November 10, 1904), 1074.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

not educated enough for other work. I haven't education enough to do anything else," she said. "I would change my occupation if I knew enough to do anything else," she added.¹⁹⁸

Fresh out of slavery, the black women who worked as domestics and nursemaids in Asheville and other places in the South had little to offer or hope for if education was a prerequisite for better job opportunities. As slaves they had received no formal education and, as Katzman notes, very little education "beyond the basic rudiments" in the years following their emancipation. Even though schools were established for blacks throughout the South in the years after the Civil War, the quality of the education that many of these schools offered "was of very poor quality."¹⁹⁹

For most blacks, both male and female, a higher level of education was no guarantee that other fields of employment would be open to them. Race and racism were insurmountable barriers to other areas of employment. This was especially the case in the South, where like many other forms of service related work, domestic labor was defined primarily as "Negro work." As W.E.B. DuBois, one of the leading black intellectuals of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries noted that from the time of Emancipation to the beginning of the First World War, there were certain forms of labor that whites would not do. It was commonly known, DuBois wrote that "a Southern white man will curry a mule but he will not brush a gentleman's coat. He will drive an ox wagon, but he will not act as a coachman."²⁰⁰ Because of this, blacks were able to monopolize certain service related jobs in

¹⁹⁸ Lucy Maynard Salmon, *Domestic Service*, (New York, New York: Arno Press, 1972 [c1897]), 23.

¹⁹⁹ David Katzman, *Seven Days A Week*, 232.

²⁰⁰ W.E.B. DuBois, *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, and Addresses, 1887-1961*, Herbert Aptheker ed., (Amherst, Massachusetts,: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 124.

the post-Civil War South. In the eyes of many whites, DuBois noted, “these so-called Negro jobs were the jobs of servants and laborers,” and for whites to do such work would be tantamount to accepting social equality with blacks and this was something to be avoided at all cost.²⁰¹

The idea of social equality with blacks was a source of great concern to Southern whites after the war, and remained a major concern throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. While visiting Asheville in 1888, Charles D. Warner, a writer who co-authored the 1873 book, *The Gilded Age*, with Mark Twain, recalled a conversation in which local whites argued that social equality between blacks and whites was a dangerous idea. If the races were to live in harmony, the group was reported as saying, then blacks had to accept a lower station in life.²⁰²

Warner noted that although there was general agreement that slavery’s demise was good, whites remained steadfast in their belief that “the negro should never have the social or political upper hand.”²⁰³ Some even believed that it was impossible for blacks to ever gain “social or political equality” with whites.²⁰⁴ Warner recorded one member of the group saying that most white Southerners “misapprehend and make a scarecrow of ‘social equality’”. When, during the war, it was a question at the North of giving the colored people of the Northern states the ballot the argument against it used to be stated in the form of a

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² Charles D. Warner, *On Horseback: A tour in Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. With notes of travel in Mexico and California.* (Boston And New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1889), 37.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

question, ‘do you want your daughters to marry a negro?’ Well, the negro has his political rights in the North, and there has come no change in social conditions whatever. And there is no doubt that social conditions would remain exactly as they are at the South if the negro enjoyed all the civil rights which the Constitution tries to give him.”²⁰⁵ In short, whites believed the social inferiority of blacks was fixed by nature and no man made laws could change that fact.

As Asheville and western North Carolina’s health resort industry grew, so too did the region’s tourism industry. In fact, as the Victorian era consumer culture, which emphasized leisurely travel, expanded during the late nineteenth century, general tourism eventually supplanted the health resort industry as Asheville’s leading industry. The post-Civil War tourism industry also generated service related jobs that were largely filled by black workers. The tourism industry began to experience tremendous growth after 1880. In addition to the railroad, the construction of new hotel facilities, especially the Battery Park Hotel in 1888, was a major factor in this growth. Built and financed by Franklin Coxe, the scion of a wealthy Pennsylvania family that had business ties to Asheville, the Battery Park Hotel helped to propel Asheville’s tourism industry to new heights. According to Coxe’s grandson, the elder Coxe had always believed that Asheville had the potential to be “one of the greatest resort areas in the country,” and this belief led him to build the Battery Park Hotel.²⁰⁶

While the Battery Park Hotel was not the only hotel in the city, it was by far the most opulent. The hotel was specifically designed to cater to the taste of the nation’s wealthy class. It included such amenities as private bathrooms with hot and cold running water,

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Interview of Frank by Dr. Bruce S. Greenawalt, Oral History Collections, 2001, D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville, NC.

electric light bulbs, steam radiators, and fireplaces in every bathroom. In addition to this, guests could choose from not just one, but multiple dining rooms. And, if they so desired, they could unwind by using the hotel's bowling alley, or its numerous billiard rooms. As Coxie hoped, after it opened, hosted some of the country's most prominent and wealthy citizens, including George Vanderbilt, Jay Gould, and according to one long time black employee, Presidents Grover Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, and Woodrow Wilson.²⁰⁷ Seeing the success of the Battery Park Hotel, other hoteliers initiated hotel construction projects in the city. By 1890, the city had 47 hotels, up from the six that could be found in Asheville just 10 years earlier.

The construction of hotels and resorts in and around Asheville ensured the continued expansion of the city's service sector. When the Battery Park Hotel opened in 1888, Charles Sisney, a black man, was hired as a waiter. Known affectionately as "Chief Sisney," Sisney worked at the hotel until his death in 1945. According to the local newspaper, Sisney had "attracted attention throughout the hotel world for his long record of service..."²⁰⁸ The paper also noted that as a member of the hotel's staff, Sisney had the distinct honor of serving four presidents. Sisney recalled that while he and other service employees had worked long and grueling hours, he remembered his time as a "hotel service man" fondly. "He was," the paper reported, "fond of reminiscences and often told how Woodrow Wilson

²⁰⁷ Asheville Citizen, January 15, 1945.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

once tipped him with a \$5 bill, Jay Gould gave him \$10 once and George Vanderbilt overwhelmed him with \$20.”²⁰⁹

Most of the members of Asheville’s hotel service staff did not have the exposure that Sisney recalled. Instead, they performed their duties in obscurity and with little reward. Despite their importance to the industry, service employees were usually employed on the cheapest of terms. In his study of the growth of western North Carolina’s post-Civil War tourism industry, Richard Starnes observes that while the industry proved “profitable for business owners, it was not for the average service worker, whether white or black”²¹⁰ In many cases, Starnes writes, service employees barely made “a subsistence wage.”²¹¹ The more financially rewarding jobs were in management. Such jobs included bookkeepers, clerks, and hotel and resort managers, but as with other industries racial discrimination ensured that blacks did not have access to these jobs. In other words, blacks were generally relegated to the more menial service related jobs. In the case of the railroad industry, for instance, there were no blacks working as conductors, engineers, or flagmen. These jobs, as the United States Census and the Asheville city directories show, were filled exclusively by white males, a pattern that was common throughout the South during this period.

As important as the tourism and health resort industries were to the creation of jobs for many blacks in Asheville, some blacks in the city earned their living as independent business owners. As in other Southern towns, blacks monopolized the barbering profession in post-Civil War Asheville. This is not surprising since even during the antebellum period

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ Richard D. Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina*, 186.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 188

this particular trade was seen as work suited only for blacks. According to historian Ira Berlin, the servile nature of this particular work generally kept whites out of the profession.²¹² Consequently, for a time, as city directories in Asheville and other southern cities show, blacks continued to dominate this particular trade. This offered many of them the chance to be successful economically.

While studies of other cities have shown that whites began to challenge the dominance of blacks in the barbering profession in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, there is no evidence that this ever occurred in Asheville. In fact, the evidence suggests the opposite. Unlike Louisville, Kentucky, where historian George Wright found that by 1890 the number of white barbers exceeded the number of black barbers, white barbers never eclipsed blacks in Asheville during the late nineteenth century. The number of white barbers reached its zenith in Asheville in 1896. That year the city directory listed seven whites as barbers and sixteen blacks.²¹³ In the years that followed, the number of white barbers declined. By 1900, for example, the city directory listed only five white barbers and fourteen blacks.²¹⁴

Some of the blacks who worked as barbers in Asheville were among the city's most economically successful blacks. As the proprietor of the American Barbershop, where he employed six people, William Conley was one of these people. In addition to his barbershop, Conley also owned the Pine Apple Cottage, a boardinghouse that was located on Grove

²¹² Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*, (New York, New York: Pantheon, 1974; the New Press Paperback Edition, 1992), 235.

²¹³ Asheville City Directory 1896.

²¹⁴ Asheville City Directory 1906.

Street on the west side of town.²¹⁵ Census data suggests that Conley did quite well. In addition to owning two businesses, he also owned his own home, which was valued at more than \$1,000 in 1900.²¹⁶ Another successful black barbershop owner was William Brooks. At his barbershop on Eagle Street, Brooks offered his patrons haircuts, and hot and cold baths.²¹⁷ Although most of Asheville's black barbers did not own their own barbershops or offer the kinds of services that Brooks offered, many did well financially as property ownership indicates. Of the 12 blacks identified as barbers in the Asheville City Directory in 1887, nine owned their homes according to the census of 1900,²¹⁸ The others either rented homes, or lived in one of the city's many boardinghouses.

Another enterprise where Asheville's blacks sought to earn a living as independent business owners, was as restaurateurs. The 1892 city directory lists the names and locations of more than 12 black-owned restaurants.²¹⁹ Some, like the restaurant run by Ben Collins, were operated in private homes.²²⁰ Others, like the one that Louise Grimes opened in 1896, were located in what became the city's black business district along Eagle and Market Streets just south of the city's public square. Dividing her time between Asheville and Charleston, Grimes had the good fortune of having her restaurant in a building that was commissioned by

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Scheduled, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and history, Raleigh).

²¹⁷ Asheville City Directory, 1916.

²¹⁸ Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Scheduled, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and history, Raleigh).

²¹⁹ Asheville City Directory, 1892.

²²⁰ Asheville City Directory, 1892.

George Vanderbilt in 1892. The building was known as the YMI building because it was built to house an organization called the Young Men's Institute, a nonsectarian organization whose mission, as we shall see, was to support the economic, social, and cultural uplift of the city's black residents.

Throughout its long history, many of the city's black entrepreneurs operated restaurants, and other business enterprises in the YMI building. Nevertheless, despite its central location, many of the restaurants that were opened there did not enjoy longevity. Shortly after renting space for her restaurant in 1896, Grimes struggled to pay rent, and was forced to close the business in early 1897.²²¹ Owning and operating a restaurant was no easy feat. Aside from the cost and long hours, competition was always intense. At the same time that Grimes operated her restaurant, there were at least seven other black-owned restaurants nearby.

In the case of those blacks who did not own their own businesses or work in the service sector of either the tourism or health resort industries, work was found in the city's construction industry. Asheville's growing popularity stimulated a construction boom. As Nan Chase notes, the late nineteenth century in Asheville was in many respects the "era of tycoons...a time when one could find at least twelve to fifteen millionaires" residing in the city throughout the year.²²² With this prosperity came the need to modernize; and as money flowed into the city, efforts to improve city services and amenities picked up pace. Writing about these efforts Architectural historians David Black and James Summers note that:

²²¹ Louisa Grimes to Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 18, April, 1897, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina: Collection 2.2/1.G24. Box 12 Folder 1.

²²² Nan Chase, *Asheville: A History*, 98.

The 1870s saw street lighting and telegraph services come into town. The first telegraph line reached the city in July of 1877. In 1879 the main street was macadamized . . . the first public hospital was opened in 1883, the first telephone lines were installed in 1885, and a public school system was established in the 1880s. South Main Street to Sycamore, North Main to Walnut and Pack Square [formally Public Square] developed into a bustling district of stores, saloons, and hotels. Surpassing Main Street, Patton Avenue grew in the 1890s to be the commercial hub of downtown, lined with multi-story stores and office buildings of considerable quality.”²²³

With economic development Asheville experienced in the late nineteenth century, it was a city on the move, and people who were interested in finding work in the construction industry were generally successful.

With the construction of hotels, homes, office buildings and the initiation of city improvement projects came jobs, and many blacks were employed not only as regular crew members on building projects, but also as independent contractors. During this period, James Vester Miller, a black carpenter who was born and raised in nearby Rutherford County, built a reputation as one of the best building contractors in Asheville. After first working for other contractors Miller, along with his sons Johnnie, Thomas, and James, formed the Miller and Sons Construction Company in the early 1900s. Miller was so well skilled in his craft that he was commissioned to construct such prominent edifices as the black community’s Mount Zion Baptist Church on Eagle Street, and St. Matthias Episcopal Church on Dundee Street. He was also hired years later to build a new Municipal building for the city’s fire and police

²²³ David Black and James Summers, eds., *Historic Architectural Resources of Downtown Asheville, North Carolina*, (Asheville, North Carolina: City of Asheville, Raleigh North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1979), 44.

departments.²²⁴ In addition to these structures, Miller also constructed a number of buildings for the Coxe family in Asheville.

Another successful black building contractor in Asheville was Matthew Baxter, a former slave who was trained as a carpenter by his master. Although written records do not exist, oral tradition suggests that Baxter inherited his construction company from his master. Though he was not a native of Asheville, Baxter was living and working in the city by the 1880s. While there were other black building artisans in Asheville during the late nineteenth century, the majority of them were not independent contractors or business owners. Most worked alongside white workers on construction projects throughout the city. A significant number worked as members of the construction crews that helped to construct the massive 250 room chateau that George Vanderbilt commissioned as his country estate just south of downtown Asheville in 1896.

George Vanderbilt, the youngest son of William Henry Vanderbilt the wealthy owner of the New York Central Railroad, first came to Asheville in 1888. Captivated by the scenic beauty of the mountains and the fresh and relaxing nature of the region's climate, Vanderbilt decided to build a second home in the area, thus dividing his time between New York and Asheville when he was not traveling in Europe. Construction of Vanderbilt's Asheville residence, which was situated on more than 100,000 acres of land and named Biltmore Estate, began in earnest in 1889. At the height of its construction, Vanderbilt employed more than 500 construction workers and craftsmen. While some of the craftsmen, like the famed Austrian-born sculptor Karl Bitter, were from other parts of the world, many local people,

²²⁴ Chase, Asheville: A History, 142.

both blacks and whites, were employed on the estate as well. During the period that Biltmore Estate was under construction, local blacks like William Logan, were responsible for supervising some of the estate's black work crews. Estate records show that initially Logan, who was paid \$50 a month, was responsible for overseeing a team of workmen who helped to clear debris from the construction site. After the house was completed in 1896, Logan and a number of other blacks from the area, found a permanent place in the estate's forestry department. Logan oversaw a team of black workers who helped maintain the vast forest on the estate.

In addition to being employed as members of the estate's grounds and construction crews, other blacks—especially women—were employed as members of the estate's domestic team. Once the home was completed, a permanent staff of more than 30 people worked to keep the mansion running smoothly. According to one source, the staff included housekeepers, parlor maids, chambermaids, ladies maids, laundresses, kitchen maids, butlers and under butlers, valets, houseboys, a chef, cooks, a coachman, and stable hands.²²⁵ The kitchen staff alone totaled more than a dozen people. So many people were needed to maintain the estate that Vanderbilt quickly became one of the city's largest employers. How much Vanderbilt paid the majority of his employees is not known, but estate records do show that black supervisors like William Logan and George Payne, were paid \$50 a month in the early years. As for the men who worked on their crews, they were paid anywhere from \$30 to \$40 a month, which was a decent wage for the time period.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

Additional records reveal that for some employees, working for the estate had benefits that went beyond a regular wage. Shortly after Vanderbilt began spending extended periods of time in Asheville, Harvey Higgins, a young black boy from the area, was hired as one of Vanderbilt's personal waiters. Over time, Higgins was promoted to the position of butler and later served as a supervisor at the estate's brick house. During his years of service, Higgins successfully completed his college education at Livingston College in Salisbury, with the personal help of Vanderbilt and the estate's manager, Charles McNamee. Letters between Higgins and McNamee, show that Vanderbilt and McNamee made special efforts to ensure that Higgins had a job on the estate during his breaks from college. Vanderbilt and McNamee even went as far as to pay some of Higgins' expenses while he was away at school. In a telegram dated April 4, 1893, Higgins confirmed to McNamee that he had received an unspecified amount of money and would be traveling back to Asheville within a few days.²²⁶ This relationship continued for a number of years, ending only after Higgins had successfully completed medical school at Long Island College in New York in 1904.

Higgins was not the only employee to receive special consideration and assistance. Similar assistance was extended to John Walker, another black student who attended Livingston College. When George Payne, one of the estates supervisors, asked for assistance to attend a Sunday School conference for his church, the estate's business manager provided the requested support. Most employees on the estate, however, were regular day-to-day employees. Some, like Samuel Barnes, a local black resident who worked on the estate in 1899, used the skills they gained while working there to start their own businesses. After

²²⁶ Harvey Higgins to George Vanderbilt and Charles McNamee, Salisbury, North Carolina, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, Collection 1.1/1. H34, Box 10 Folder 2.

working on the grounds crew at Biltmore from 1889 to 1895, Barnes started his own landscaping business and was later hired to help landscape the golf course that opened at the Biltmore Forest Country Club in 1920.²²⁷ Similarly, Louis Waters, who helped remove debris from the estate when the chateau was being build, later purchased and successfully ran a large apple farm in neighboring Henderson County.

Vanderbilt's decision to build a home in Asheville did much to enhance the city's appeal to outsiders and to improve the lives of many of city and region's residents simply by providing employment. Local and national newspapers recognized the importance of Vanderbilt's presence in Asheville. The *Asheville News and Hotel Reporter*, which promoted tourism in the region, noted that the estate's presence in Asheville had greatly increased outside interest in the city. "The fame of Asheville grows, but much of the widely spread knowledge of the beauties and attractions of the place is due," the paper reported, "to the interesting work which is being carried on by Mr. George W. Vanderbilt."²²⁸

While Vanderbilt's relationship with his employees and the city's natives has been characterized as distant and paternalistic by some, he appears to have been a fair employer. At one point the continuous hiring of black workers became a source of irritation to some whites. In what appears to have been the only hint of labor unrest in Asheville, one white employee threatened to call in the Ku Klux Klan if the estate did not stop hiring blacks in 1896. In an unsigned letter, (the writer was later identified as Tom Porter), Vanderbilt and McNamee were warned that "there are about 25 or 30 men who have worked on your estate

²²⁷ The Asheville African-American News, 28, July 1971, Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection, D.H Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville.

²²⁸ Asheville News and Hotel Reporter, March 16, 1895, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, North Carolina.

who have been discharged and their places have been filled with negroes. If you do not give the white men a show,” the letter warned, “we will call the Ku Kluck [sic] and blow you to hell.”²²⁹

How Vanderbilt and McNamee responded to this threat is not known, but throughout the period under consideration in this study, the estate continued to employ blacks, and, as we shall see, remained actively engaged in the affairs of the city’s black community. When possible the estate even made an effort to do business with at least one of the city’s local black business owners. Even though there were other stores that could have provided the estate with some of the supplies it needed, Thomas Leatherwood, a local black businessmen who opened the city’s only black pharmacy in 1893, was specifically asked by the estate’s managers if he could supply some of the items the estate purchased on a regular basis. In a memo listing the items that were needed, Edward Harding, the assistant to Biltmore Estate’s manager, asked Leatherwood if he believed he could supply the items at a competitive price. “The following articles,” Harding wrote, “I assume can be purchased more cheaply from Dr. Smith. If however, you think you can compete with him, please let me hear from you.”²³⁰

The ability to compete with other businesses, especially white-owned businesses, was a major challenge for Asheville’s black business owners. Black entrepreneurs often found it difficult to attract both black and white customers, primarily because white-owned businesses

²²⁹ Tom Peters, to George Vanderbilt and Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 6, August, 1896, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, Collection 2.2/3. M23, Box 5 Folder 3.

²³⁰ Edward Harding to Thomas Leatherwood, 29, June, 1893, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, Collection 1.1/2T14, Box 4 Folder 4.

could offer goods at much lower prices.²³¹ In her study of the development of Winston-Salem's black community during the last decades of the nineteenth century, historian Bertha Miller notes that as a strategy to attract black customers, white business owners sometimes "employed blacks to bring in black customers. Black customers," Miller writes, "frequently complained that Negro merchants rarely hold sales or marked down prices on old goods, that their stores were not properly stocked, did not advertise, and did not try to find out what the customer wanted."²³² Miller, as did other earlier historians like Carter G. Woodson, John Harmon, and Arnett Lindsey, found that the complaints that black business owners faced were due largely to the fact that "wholesalers rarely extended credit to blacks, and charged them higher prices for goods."²³³ Because of this, black merchants were often forced to sell at higher prices and that usually drove their potential and regular customers to white competitors.

Perhaps this was the problem that caused the difficulties that Leatherwood faced with his business. Despite the efforts that the Biltmore Estate made to do business with him, Leatherwood found it hard to keep his business open. The challenges started from the very beginning. Originally from Haywood County, Leatherwood, and his brother Arthur, had relocated to Asheville in the late 1880s. By 1893 Leatherwood opened the Asheville Steam and Dye Works Company on South Court Square.²³⁴ Hoping to expand his business interest,

²³¹ Carter G. Woodson and John Henry Harmon, *The Negro as Businessman*, (Washington, DC: Association of the Study of Negro Life and History, 1929), 23.

²³² Bertha Miller, "Blacks in Winston-Salem, North Carolina", 1895-1920, (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1981), 99.

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ Asheville City Directory, 1893.

he entered negotiations with Biltmore Estate's manager, to open a pharmacy in one of the vacant stores in the newly completed YMI building. In a letter that he wrote to Charles McNamee on August 9, 1893, Leatherwood stated that he was "anxious to get my drugstore enterprise on foot, and would be glad to know the best you will do in fitting up and renting me the store."²³⁵

At the time that Leatherwood entered discussions about renting a store in the YMI building, there were no black-owned pharmacies in Asheville. According to Leatherwood, many in the city's black residents were anxious to see the store open. He stated that he believed the pharmacy would be successful, and that its presence in the YMI building would contribute to the success of that organization. In his communication with McNamee, Leatherwood stated that he truly "believed that the establishment of the drugstore would prove beneficial to the Institute and the surrounding businesses."²³⁶ Pointing out that there were now two black doctors with practices in the city (both had offices in the YMI), Leatherwood informed McNamee that both men were "very anxious to have me open, besides a lot of the best thinking people of the city and the surrounding community."²³⁷ Leatherwood told McNamee that he was determined "to open somewhere in the city, if I have to do so at a great sacrifice, but," he added, "I would rather open in the Institute building if agreeable, and if not, I should look out for another location."²³⁸

²³⁵ Thomas Leatherwood to Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 9 August, 1893, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina: Collection 1.1/2.L24, Box 5 Folder 6.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

While the exact terms of Leatherwood's arrangements with Biltmore are not known, he did secure the location, and by January 1894, he opened for business. Continued correspondence with the estate's manager reveals that the pharmacy struggled to remain financially solvent. As the manager of the estate and the YMI building, McNamee was forced to send repeated letters reminding Leatherwood of his overdue rent. At one point Leatherwood, in response to McNamee's inquiries, wrote a letter specifically detailing how difficult business had become. "Owing to my business being dull," he wrote, "I have been unable to pay over to Mr. Love the amount due to you for the rent of the store...."²³⁹ Leatherwood explained that "I write this letter that you may judge as to whether I am honest about the matter or not. I wish to give you a statement of my daily receipts for [October] the 1st through the present date."²⁴⁰ Based on the information that Leatherwood supplied, the pharmacy from October 1 to October 27, had taken in little more than \$90. With expenses totaling more than \$65 each month, he was finding it difficult to remain open. "Unless I can reduce clerk hire and rents by the first of the month," he wrote, "I will be forced to close up business."²⁴¹ Perhaps this was the reason the estate attempted to do business with Leatherwood, hoping that by doing so his business might have a chance to succeed. Whatever the estate's motive, business never improved, and on January 18, 1895, Leatherwood was forced to inform McNamee that he had decided to close the pharmacy.²⁴²

²³⁹Thomas Leatherwood to Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 27, October 1894, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina: Collection 1.1/2.L24, Box 5 Folder 9.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² *Ibid.*

Other black-owned businesses struggled to remain open in Asheville. Additional records from Biltmore Estate reveal that like Leatherwood, Dr. James Bryan and Dr. Marcus Alston, who rented space in the YMI building, struggled to not only collect payments from their patients, but also struggled to meet their rental obligations. McNamee's correspondence shows that Alston was constantly behind on his rent. Although his patients' inability to pay their bills contributed to his difficulties, the purchase of a new home was also a factor. In response to one of McNamee's letters about his rent, Alston stated that the purchase of his new home had made his financial circumstance difficult. However, he wrote that he was confident that this situation would quickly improve. On November 10, 1894, Alston informed McNamee that "earlier in the year I purchased a home in the city. To pay for the same I borrowed half of the money from a Building and Loan Association and contracted to pay several hundred dollars of balance before receiving title. The transfer of title was made last week," he wrote, "and the monthly payments will be easier, and besides I have bargained to sell to my brother one lot at my old home from which sale I shall receive monthly payments that will enable me to better meet my obligations."²⁴³ Despite his optimism Alston's practice continued to struggle, and ultimately he was forced to close his office in 1896.²⁴⁴

Not all black entrepreneurs struggled. In fact, if the continuous ability to advertise in the city's yearly city directories is an indicator, individuals like Fred Martin, who owned Martin's Tailor Shop, did well. Established in 1914, and centrally located on the east side of

²⁴³ Marcus Alston to Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 10, November, 1894, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina: Collection 1.1/2.A2, Box 5 Folder 3.

²⁴⁴ John Love to Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 5, January, 1895, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina: Collection 1.1/2.L24, Box 3 Folder 2.

Public Square, Martin's shop was prominently listed in the pages of each of Asheville's city directories until 1926. Like him, Columbus Lipscombe, who also owned a tailor and dye works shop on College Street, did well enough to purchase prominent advertising space in the city directories from 1896 to 1924. In an advertisement that he placed on the cover of the 1916 city directory, Lipscombe, who unlike most other black owned businesses at the time had a telephone, highlighted the fact that at his company "special attention is given to Ladies Goods."²⁴⁵

In addition to being the proprietor of the College Street Dye Works Shop, Lipscombe was also an agent for the People's Benevolent and Relief Association. In fact, his work with the People's Benevolent and Relief Association appears to have been where he focused most of his time. The tailor and dye works shop was run primarily by his employee Emanuel Bass. Little is known about the People's Benevolent and Relief Association, but like other black benevolent associations, the People's Benevolent and Relief Association probably operated much like an insurance company. Writing about the emergence of these associations and the roles they played in black communities in the post-Civil War period, historian John Hope Franklin noted that along with the black church, benevolent associations represented an important "manifestation of the struggle of African Americans to become socially self-sufficient..."²⁴⁶ Through these associations, blacks sought to provide their

²⁴⁵ Asheville City directory, 1916.

²⁴⁶ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 315.

members with insurance against sickness and death. They also aided, as Franklin observed, “widows and orphans of deceased members.”²⁴⁷

Although there is no direct proof, it is quite possible that the People’s Benevolent and Relief Association was the organization from which the Mountain City Mutual Insurance Company emerged. Like the People’s Benevolent and Relief Association, little is known about the Mountain City Mutual Insurance Company, which began operating in the city at the turn of the twentieth century. While there are no records to indicate the principal owners of this insurance company, the company was managed by Thomas Oglesby, a black man who moved to Asheville in the late 1890s. The company continued to operate as an independent company until 1915. Later that year it was purchased by the Winston Industrial Association, which eventually became the Winston Life Insurance Company.²⁴⁸

Isaac Dickson was one of Asheville’s most successful black entrepreneurs in the late nineteenth century. A former slave, Dickson was born in Shelby, North Carolina in 1839, and migrated to Asheville in 1870.²⁴⁹ By 1886, he was working as a janitor at the Battery Park Hotel.²⁵⁰ At the same time, Dickson operating a coal and kindling business and a small grocery store on Valley Street just south of town.²⁵¹ With the money that he earned from his various businesses, Dickson purchased significant parcels of land in Asheville. Buncombe

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 316.

²⁴⁸ Bertha Miller, *Blacks In Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1895-1920*, 102.

²⁴⁹ Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

²⁵⁰ Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection, 1888-1972, D. Hiden Ramsey Library, University of North Carolina at Asheville.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

County tax records show that he owned almost all of the property that surrounded his home on the east side of town. With the exception of the lot that was occupied by the YMI, Dickson purchased what amounted to an entire city block. Records show that Dickson's property holdings fell almost squarely within the boundaries of Eagle, South Market, Sycamore, and Valley Streets. Dickson's holdings were so substantial that that particular section of town was commonly known by its residents as Dickson town.²⁵²

In addition to his coal, kindling, and grocery businesses, Dickson, along with his nephew James Wilson, also operated a funeral parlor. As with the grocery store, which remained in business from 1891 to 1924, Dickson and his nephew faced stiff competition as funeral directors. During the same period there were at least two other black-owned funeral parlors in the city. One was owned by John McCathey and Thomas Latta and operated out of the YMI building. The other was owned by William Colley. Of these two, the one that was run by Dickson and his nephew remained in business the longest. Records maintained by Charles McNamee and his staff at Biltmore Estate show that McCathey and Latta, who were the first blacks to open a funeral parlor in Asheville, closed their business in 1898.²⁵³ McCathey, who was also a cabinet maker, moved to Philadelphia, and Latta went to work as a driver and porter at a local hotel.²⁵⁴ Despite the failure of McCathey and Latta's business, the establishment of black-owned funeral parlors represented a major landmark for economic activity and progress not just in Asheville, but in all black communities. One historian notes

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ John McCathey to Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 28, August, 1898, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina: Collection 1.1/1 M10, Box 5 Folder 1.

²⁵⁴ Thomas Owens to Edward Harding, Asheville, North Carolina, 9, October, 1899, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina: Collection 1.1/2.O7, Box 8 Folder4.

that, out of all the businesses that blacks created, funeral parlors, benevolent associations, and insurance companies had the greatest longevity.²⁵⁵ Moreover, the owners of these companies were some of the most respected and civically active members of their communities.

As with business in general, the creation and failure of black businesses in Asheville continued throughout the period. In the years following the collapse of Thomas Leatherwood's pharmacy, three additional attempts to operate a black pharmacy were launched, each at the same location. The first attempt was made by Jesse Alston in 1895, and the second by Harvey James in 1897.²⁵⁶ The third, which was a joint effort led by William Trent, the general secretary of the YMI, and a number of other prominent blacks in the city, was the most successful and remained in business until the early 1930s.

One of the biggest challenges facing black businesses in Asheville was access to capital. Throughout the period, blacks found it practically impossible to secure business loans from white owned banks. In response, black business owners in some cities, like Durham and Winston-Salem, established their own banks. For example, the leaders of the Winston Mutual Insurance Company establish a black-owned bank in 1907. Similar actions were taken in Durham where the leaders of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company used a significant amount of the company's capital to establish a bank, two drug stores, a hospital, and a real estate company.²⁵⁷ In Asheville, The People's Bank and Loan

²⁵⁵ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 218.

²⁵⁶ Asheville City Directory, 1895, 1897.

²⁵⁷ Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South: A Social History of the North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company*, (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1973) 48.

Association of Asheville was established by James Matthew Baxter and a few other black business leaders in 1898.

Although little is known about the People's Bank and Loan Association of Asheville, it was created at a time when there were a growing number of privately owned banks in North Carolina. Historian Thomas Gatton writes that these banks filled an important need in North Carolina's then struggling economy. He notes that because of the financial debacle that followed the South's defeat in the Civil War, all of the state's banks were forced to liquidate their assets. To make matters worse the Federal government would not permit a state to create new banks unless the proposed bank had at least \$50,000 in capital. This requirement, as Gatton points out, made it virtually impossible for North Carolina's towns to open new banks. To deal with these problems, private citizens and companies opened and operated their own "private, unchartered, and unregulated banks" during the late nineteenth century.²⁵⁸

How active the People's Bank and Loan Association of Asheville was is unclear. It ceased to operate by 1906, falling victim to new laws that made it difficult for private banks to remain in business. However, during its existence, it—like other black-owned banks—undoubtedly made it possible for many blacks in Asheville to start their own businesses and purchase property. As important as this was, the real significance of black-owned banks, as Franklin observed "lies in the fact that they represented an effort on the part of African

²⁵⁸ Thomas Gatton, *Banking in North Carolinian: A Narrative History*, (Raleigh, North Carolina, The North Carolina Bankers Association, 1987), 62.

Americans to adopt the business values and social values of the rest of America and thus helped to assimilate themselves more completely.”²⁵⁹

Finding ways to successfully assimilate into the economic mainstream of Asheville was clearly on the minds of blacks as they looked for jobs and established businesses. With the knowledge that much of the city’s economy was based on the success of the tourism industry, both white and black leaders looked for ways to ensure that tourists would continue to come to the city. Thus, aside from ensuring that hotel and resort services were provided at the highest possible standards, there was also a concerted effort to guarantee that the city had and maintained a clean, peaceful, and progressive image. Concerns about how the city was perceived forced the city’s leaders to look for ways to improve and modernize city services. Consequently, even before the turn of the twentieth century, Asheville’s leaders had modernized the city’s water system and through the use of municipal bonds, brought gas, electric, and telephone service to the city. Moreover, with the continued interest and investment of wealthy outsiders, the city was able to construct and successfully operate one of the world’s first electric streetcar lines in 1888. After the arrival of the railroad in 1880, progress became the central goal of Asheville’s leaders.

As important as these developments were, public tranquility was an equally important component to ensuring a good image for the city. Throughout the late nineteenth century and even into the early twentieth century there was a real concern that the city not be seen as a place where racial problems could erupt at any moment. The view of the city’s leaders and promoters was that few people would want to spend their leisure time in a place that was

²⁵⁹ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 313.

fraught with racial problems. Thus, from the moment that the city's leaders began to promote the city as a place for tourists to visit and spend their leisure time, presenting an image that was progressive and peaceful was paramount. Nevertheless, as black employment and business activity shows blacks were not fully integrated into the city's economy, rather they were pushed to the margins and confined to a second-class status that, as we shall see, was even more apparent when it came to the political life of the city and region. In short, lacking political power, blacks were unable to challenge their economic and political marginalization in the years and decades that followed the Civil War.

Despite the role that blacks played in helping to open Asheville and western North Carolina to the wider world after the Civil War, they were locked out of the city's economic mainstream. Although employed in the city's different industries, especially its most significant industry of tourism, racial discrimination kept them out of the managerial jobs that tourism and other industries generated. Positions like clerks, bookkeepers at local hotels, or engineers in the railroad industry were closed to blacks. This was also the case in the city's other industries like textiles and tobacco. When blacks were employed in any of these industries, they worked in service-related jobs that offered little in the way of compensation. This ensured that most of the city and region's blacks remained a poor underemployed underclass.

To have the opportunity to work in positions that would be considered managerial or white collar, blacks had to create these opportunities for themselves. They did this by creating their own businesses, but even here, as we have seen, there were challenges that impeded their success. On the whole, the vast majority of blacks in Asheville earned their

livelihoods in the service sector of the city's most important industry, tourism. While these jobs were lowly in nature, their availability continued to draw blacks to the city. As they came, blacks used what resources they had to build and support the social and cultural institutions that they saw as important to the enrichment and stability of their individual and corporate lives.

Chapter Three

Saving Souls and Enlightening Minds: Religion and Education in the Development of Asheville's Black Community

Establishing religious and educational institutions was as important as finding jobs to blacks in post-Civil War Asheville. During slavery, their access to an education had been strictly forbidden, but religious instruction was sometimes allowed under the careful supervision of whites, who attempted to use religion as a means of social control. Despite this fact, however, blacks still found ways to shape religion to their own purposes, making its message of spiritual liberty a source of encouragement and inspiration. After the Civil War, religion and religious institutions retained their importance to blacks. In Asheville, blacks used their religious institutions not only to improve their spiritual lives, but also to lay the foundations for a much broader program of nonsectarian education in the city and surrounding region. These institutions proved to be important to the efforts that blacks made to strengthen their freedom and independence after slavery.

On a Sunday morning in 1868, a group of Asheville's black residents gathered on Church Street in front of the city's white Central Methodist Church and walked a few short miles east to hold church services under a shady grove of trees at the foot of Beaucatcher Mountain. While there was nothing unusual about worshipers holding religious services outdoors, this particular service was different. Until that time, this particular group had worshiped with the white members of Central Methodist. Before the Civil War, many blacks and whites had worshiped in the same churches, though blacks would have preferred their

own churches. For many whites, especially slaveowners, the idea of allowing blacks to be exposed to religious teaching without white supervision was risky. They intuitively knew that without their control over the message the slaves heard, religion could potentially threaten the institution of slavery.

Despite their best efforts, whites were never able to stifle independent religious expression by blacks or to persuade them that God had ordained their status. Thus, after their emancipation, blacks began to overtly reject the religious message and restrictions that they had endured during slavery. For some, that rejection was demonstrated by leaving white churches and establishing their own. Thus, much like their decision to leave the plantation and countryside, blacks throughout the South used whatever resources they could muster to create their own religious institutions.

The growth of black churches after the Civil War was nothing short of phenomenal. By the end of Reconstruction in 1877, “the vast majority of black southerners,” as Eric Foner notes, “had withdrawn from churches dominated by whites.”²⁶⁰ The African Methodist Episcopal Church is a case in point. Founded in 1816 by Richard Allen, a former slave from Delaware, the African Methodist Episcopal Church was comprised of several black Methodists congregations, most of which were in the North. In 1856, the A.M.E. Church had about 20,000 members, within a year after the Civil War that number increased to more than 70,000 members as black churches in the South chose to affiliate with the denomination. By 1876, just one year before the end of Reconstruction, this number exceeded 200,000. Baptists’ growth among blacks was even more striking, rising from

²⁶⁰ Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*, (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 87.

150,000 in 1865 to roughly 500,000 by 1870.²⁶¹ In North Carolina, the growth in the number of black Baptist churches was so substantial that by 1866, the denomination was able to successfully organize the state's first convention of black Baptists churches.

In addition to a desire for independence, the exodus of blacks from white churches was also precipitated by a yearning for a more active voice in church affairs. While there is no doubt that many white churches were anxious to retain their black members after emancipation, many continued to deny blacks the "full dignity and privileges common to white members."²⁶² Even before the end of the Civil War, blacks signaled that they had no intentions of suffering these indignities. If they could not gain a more active voice in church affairs, they were ready and willing, historian Eric Lincoln writes, to accept "the challenge of establishing and administering their own churches."²⁶³ More than anything, this is what induced the black members of Asheville's Central Methodist Church to hold separate services on that Sunday morning in 1868. A week earlier, their request to have a black minister speak to them at the church was denied by Central's white leaders. In protest blacks decided to hold their own separate services the following week.

In addition to their disappointment that Central denied their request for a black speaker, Central's black members also felt that they could no longer tolerate what they believed to be the "unkindness" and "disrespect" that they received at the church.²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 958.

²⁶² C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1990), 125.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ "A Short History of Hopkins Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church," *Black Highlanders Collections*, D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville, NC.

Subsequent reports reveal that Central's black members complained that they could not "countenance inferior treatment, which included having to receive Holy Communion in the galleries or the extreme back pews of the church."²⁶⁵ Moreover, they said that they found it intolerable that Sunday school lessons were taught to their children on what they referred to as the "black pews" at the rear of the church or on bench outside the church building.²⁶⁶ They also expressed displeasure at the fact that "when a black person wanted to join the church they could only do so after new white members had been received."²⁶⁷ While such practices had been the norm during the antebellum period, Central's black members, like blacks elsewhere, believed that the post-Civil War period, had ushered in a new state affairs. They expected better treatment now that they were free, and in their eyes, the actions of Central's white leaders flew in the face of those expectations.

While stories of blacks leaving white churches in protest were common in the post-Civil War South, some of Asheville's first independent black churches were formed with the support of local whites. Immediately after the war ended in 1865, Asheville resident and former Confederate Army General James G. Martin and his wife Hattie, who were members of Asheville's Trinity Episcopal Church, established a small church for former slaves called Freedmen's Chapel. Their goal was to provide spiritual uplift for the newly freed slaves. As John Preston Arthur, an attorney and amateur historian who wrote one of the earliest histories of western North Carolina, the Martins action grew out of a concern that if the former slaves were without any spiritual guidance they "would retrograde to a more primitive

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

condition.”²⁶⁸ This concern was especially great with Mrs. Martin who exerted significant influence on her husband to support the establishment of a church for the freedpeople. By providing a place for worship and spiritual instruction, the Martins hoped to give the area’s newly freed slaves the resources necessary for their positive mental and spiritual growth.

As members of Trinity Episcopal Church, the Martins were able to secure the use of space at their church as a temporary site for the members of Freedmen’s Chapel. According to the recollections of some of Trinity’s white members, every Sunday afternoon after regular church services had been held, a crowd of the town’s black residents gathered at Trinity for religious teaching. Early participants recalled that each week’s services were conducted with much excitement and celebration. Thomas Patton, another prominent white member of Trinity’s congregation, remembered how wholeheartedly the black participants said “their chants, hymns, responses and repeated the church’s catechisms Sunday after Sunday.”²⁶⁹ After two years of gathering at Trinity, a separate building was constructed for the members of Freedmen’s Chapel, which was later renamed St. Matthias Episcopal Church in 1896.

The Baptists saw the most significant growth among blacks in Asheville. From 1865 to 1900, eight independent black Baptist churches were established in the city. The first congregation was Nazareth First Baptist Church, founded in 1867. Although Nazareth’s founding members had not been members or congregants at Asheville’s white First Baptist Church, they were allowed to hold their weekly services in the basement of that church.

Mary Patton, who had initially organized the members of this congregation as a small

²⁶⁸ John Preston Arthur, *Western North Carolina: A History from 1730 to 1913*, (Asheville, North Carolina: the Edward Buncombe Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 1914), 620.

²⁶⁹ “A History of St. Matthias Episcopal Church,” *Black Highlanders Collections*, D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville, NC.

Sunday school group on the plantation of her father, Thomas Patton, helped to secure this early meeting location. In 1868, the members of Nazareth moved into their own church building which had been constructed on property that was donated to them by Thomas Patton.

Nazareth's first pastor was John Cabel, a black minister who moved to Asheville after the Civil War, but the leadership of Robert Rumley, the congregation's second pastor, is most remembered. While little is known about his background, when he was born, or where he was from, most recollections of Rumley reveal that he was a well respected figure, both in and outside of Asheville's black community. Under his leadership, Nazareth increased its membership, planned a larger building, and emerged as one of the leading black churches in Asheville. During his tenure, the church's membership not only increased, but plans for a larger building to accommodate its growth were also formulated. Rumley did not see the church's expansion, however. For reasons that are unclear, Rumley abruptly resigned as pastor in 1880.²⁷⁰

From Nazareth, Rumley and a few of the members who left Nazareth with him, organized what later became Mount Zion Baptist Church. As at Nazareth, Rumley's leadership at Mount Zion reached well beyond the church walls. Remembered as a powerful and engaging speaker, Rumley used his skills as a communicator and organizer to help meet both the spiritual and physical needs of his parishioners. An early church history reveals that in 1882, just two years after the church was established, the church's trustees set up collection boxes to provide clothing for the poor. Through this program the church

²⁷⁰ "A History of Nazareth First Baptist Church History," Heritage of Black Highlanders Collections, D.H Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville, NC.

undoubtedly hoped to not only attract new members, but also to meet the growing physical needs of the city's poorer black residents. Such programs helped to broaden the church's appeal among blacks throughout the community, and undoubtedly added to the church's steady growth in members.

Even more appealing than Mount Zion's outreach efforts was Rumley's personality. According to Rosa Patterson, who moved to Asheville with her family in 1880, Rumley was a man of impressive stature. As a speaker, he delivered mesmerizing sermons, the most famous of which was "The Dry Bones in the Valley." This particular sermon was so popular that the local newspaper reprinted the complete text of the sermon in 1893. In it Rumley spoke of the need for individual rejuvenation. Those who did not have religion, Rumley said, were like "dry bones in the valley,"²⁷¹ and the only thing that could bring life to those dry bones was repentance from sin. "O, ye dry bones; be ye newly born again," Rumley said to his audience. "The judgment day is coming; and you'll cry to the rocks and mountains to fall on you. I hear the angels playing on their harps, I'm going home to sin no more," he said in conclusion. The newspaper reported that the number of people, both black and white, who came to hear Rumley's message was so great that "it seemed that every inch of space in the large hall was occupied...."²⁷²

Unfortunately for Patterson, the year that she moved to Asheville was the same year that Rumley resigned as the pastor of Nazareth. In her recollections, Patterson recalled the disappointment she felt when she heard that Rumley was resigning. "My first thought," she said, "was that I wanted to be able to join his church. I was let down by his resignation," she

²⁷¹ *The Asheville Citizen*, March 23, 1893.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

recalled. “[T]here was something about this man of God as he stood in that pulpit that made my heart burn. I wanted to belong to the church he pastured [sic].”²⁷³ People came from miles away to attend Rumley’s services, and often overran the streets outside his church. Patterson recalled that it was not unusual for the city’s police to be called to manage the flow of traffic outside the church on Sundays.²⁷⁴

Charles Dunsenbury was another prominent and highly effective minister during the post-Civil War period in Asheville.. Unlike Rumley, Dusenbury was not known for powerful oratory, but his work as pastor of Asheville’s only black Presbyterian church was no less remarkable. The Presbyterians did not attract as many blacks members as Baptists and Methodists. While North Carolina’s Baptist denomination claimed nearly 92,000 black members in 1880, fewer than 5,000 identified themselves as Presbyterian.²⁷⁵ One reason the small number of black Presbyterians was the lack of black Presbyterian ministers in the state. As late as 1882, there were no black Presbyterian ministers in North Carolina, and the two black churches that were a part of the state’s Presbyterian Synod were pastored by whites.

To remedy this deficiency, the leaders of the United Presbyterian Church, which represented northern, but not southern Presbyterian churches, began to reevaluate their missionary activities in North Carolina. Unlike the Methodists and the Baptists, who had done missionary work among blacks during the antebellum period, the Presbyterians had never made any real attempts to proselytize blacks before the war. After concluding that

²⁷³ “A History of Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church History,” Heritage of Black Highlanders Collections, D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville, NC.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁵ Frenise Logan, *The Negro in North Carolina, 1876-1894*, 166.

their post-Civil War activity in North Carolina was insufficient, the Board of Freedmen of the United Presbyterian Church began considering ways to expand their influence in the state, especially among blacks. This led to the establishment of two schools of higher education for black in the state: Biddle Memorial Institute in Charlotte in 1867: and Scotia Seminary in Concord in 1870. Although this did increase the number of black Presbyterian ministers in the state, it was not until 1881 that the Presbyterians established a presence among blacks in Asheville.

Charles Dusenbury was born and raised in Lexington, North Carolina. He received most of his education in a small parochial school established by the Presbyterians in Lexington. After completing his bachelor's degree at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, Dusenbury returned to North Carolina to complete additional training at Scotia Seminary. During this period, he gained the attention of white Presbyterian leaders who eventually asked him to consider organizing a church in Asheville. Perhaps trying to make the assignment more appealing, Presbyterian leaders informed him that much of the groundwork for the ministry in Asheville had already been laid by a group of white citizens who were fully committed to helping him make the work a success.²⁷⁶

Upon his arrival in Asheville, local residents immediately noted that unlike other black ministers, Dunsenbury was not given to much emotion. His rhetorical style was much more sedate and intellectual in nature. In a 1920 publication honoring his work, the Women's Department of the Presbyterian Board of Mission for the Freedmen, recalled that in the beginning, Dusenbury's style increased the difficulty of his task. "It was an uphill work

²⁷⁶ Frances L. Goodrich, *A Devoted Life and Its Results: The Life and Ministry of Charles Dusenbury*, (Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, Women's Department Board of Missions for Freedmen, 1901), 2.

to present to his race the gospel without undue excitement.”²⁷⁷ According to Frances Goodrich, who worked as a teacher for the Presbyterian Board of Mission, Dusenbury’s methods were a source of much comment among other black ministers in Asheville. “There was much surprise among Asheville’s ministerial brethren at Dusenbury’s new ways,” she recalled. Chief among these “new ways” was his practice of allowing all religious denominations to participate in services at his church. “It was often said,” Goodrich wrote, “that the religion that was preached at his church was given without any warmth.”²⁷⁸

Dusenbury’s reputation and ministry in Asheville grew despite this criticism. Goodrich noted that his “ardent piety and good judgment, his persistent work for his people and his gift for winning souls gradually gained not only many to Christ’s cause, but the good will and respect of his fellow Christians of whatever name.”²⁷⁹ In addition to a growing ministry, Dusenbury—with the support of the Presbyterian Board of Missions for Freedmen—opened a parochial school at Calvary in 1884, four years before the city opened a public school system.²⁸⁰ Along with his wife Ann, who was also a graduate of Scotia Seminary, Dusenbury taught more than 70 students. At the school, students learned reading, writing, and rudimentary mathematics. The school’s program included training in the basic teaching of the Presbyterian Church. Commenting on the overall mission of the school in 1886, Dusenbury stated that “at Calvary School pupils are taught to be honest and truthful, to be pure in their thoughts and habits to be kind and considerate, and also to be cleanly in their

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

persons, for we believe,” he said, “in a soap and water gospel as well as the other kind and our effort is to impress the values of each.”²⁸¹

Calvary was not the only black church in Asheville to offer nonreligious educational programs. Even before Calvary established its school in 1884, a similar school was developed at St. Matthias Episcopal Church in 1870.²⁸² Two years later in 1872, the pastor and trustees of the Shiloh A.M.E. Zion Church, which was founded by members of a small black community just south of Asheville, began providing basic educational training for the members of their congregation. Like the educational program offered at Calvary, the schools at St. Matthias and Shiloh A.M.E. Zion were designed to provide students with both a religious and secular education.

Throughout the South, especially right after the Civil War, black churches were in the forefront of the effort to provide both religious and nonreligious education to blacks. Eric Foner notes that even before northern benevolent societies and federal relief agents who worked for The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, the federal agency charged with the responsibility of aiding distressed freedmen began operating in the South, black churches were expanding their roles to include educational training for blacks. “By the end of April 1865,” Foner writes, “over 1,000 black children and [75] adults attended schools established by Richmond’s black churches....”²⁸³

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸³ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*, 97.

Many blacks—especially ministers—believed strongly that freedom meant little if it was not accompanied with at least the basic rudiments of an education. They felt that without an education it would be difficult for blacks to advance in society. Believing that ministers were the primary leaders of their communities, many leading blacks argued that it was important that these men be properly educated. “The pulpit is demanding prepared men for its occupancy,” the leaders of the National A.M.E. Zion Church declared. “The pew demands talent that can lead and instruct it in the truths of the gospel. Thought, well presented, must,” they insisted, “take the place of sound and noise, and senseless harangue and twaddle. These will not do in this enlightened time. We must study,” they concluded, “we must arouse and we must do so by reason, and not merely by exciting fear and dismay.”²⁸⁴

Recognizing the need for educated leaders, religious denominations throughout the state established schools to ensure the development of those leaders. Even before the Presbyterians established their schools in Concord and Charlotte, the Baptists established Shaw University in Raleigh in 1865. Eight years later, in 1873, the Episcopalians established St. Augustine’s College. Although Asheville did not host any of the institutions of higher education organized for blacks, the city’s black community did benefit from their work. Many of the city’s leading black citizens received an education from one of these institutions. As noted, both Charles Dusenbury and his wife Ann received degrees from Scotia Seminary in Concord, and the Reverend Jacob Walls, who was a member of Hopkins Chapel, the church established by the former black members of the city’s white Central Methodist Church, was educated at Livingston College and later became a Bishop in the A.M.E. Zion

²⁸⁴ *AME Zion Church Quarterly*, II (July, 1892), 418.

Church. Additionally, both Edward H. Lipscombe and Leonora Jackson, who were among the city's first black teachers, received their education at Shaw University.

As important as these institutions were to the development of effective leaders for the state's black communities, the demand for educational opportunities at the elementary and secondary level was more than Asheville's black churches and parochial schools could handle alone. As the city's school age population grew, it was inevitable that additional educational programs and institutions would be needed. Not long after Dusenbury opened a school at Calvary, the number of students far exceeded the school's capacity. A similar situation prevailed at the school at St. Matthias. Within the first year of its founding, there were more students than the school could truly accommodate.²⁸⁵ The rapid growth of Asheville black parochial schools is a testament to the importance of education to blacks, a fact that, as historian Heather Williams notes, had deep roots among blacks.

Even before their emancipation, many blacks sought to at least learn to read and write, despite laws that strictly prohibited them from doing so. By learning to read and write, slaves felt that they were able to mentally escape their bondage. As Williams points out, many slaves who learned to read and write discovered that "access to the written word, whether scriptural or political, revealed a world beyond bondage in which African Americans could imagine themselves free to think and behave as they chose."²⁸⁶ After slavery, blacks saw education as key to their upward mobility and zealously supported any efforts that would educate them and their children. As one black member of a post-Civil War education society

²⁸⁵ "A History of St. Matthias Episcopal Church," *Black Highlanders Collections*, D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville, NC.

²⁸⁶ Heather Williams, *Self-taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7.

in North Carolina told John Richard Dennett, a traveling journalist and correspondent for the *Nation* magazine in 1866, blacks believed that the “school-house would be the first proof of their *independence*.”²⁸⁷

Because securing a livelihood was the most important concern for black adults had after the war, many were unable to attend school. Nonetheless, they found time to learn while working on their jobs. An agent for the Freedmen’s Bureau recalled that there was rarely a day that he did not encounter groups of freedpeople with books in hand, working and learning simultaneously. “A man riding a loaded wagon, or sitting on a hack waiting for a train, or by the cabin door,” he reported, “is often seen with book in hand delving after the rudiments of knowledge. A group on the platform of a depot, after carefully examining an old spelling book usually resolves itself into a class,” he noted.²⁸⁸ When the demands of work made learning impossible, some adults had their children teach them at night. In other words, the children taught their parents the lessons they had learned while attending school during the day. Whatever the method, gaining an education was vitally important, not only to black leaders, but to blacks in general.

While Asheville’s black churches did all they could to address some of the educational needs of the town’s black residents, their ability to do so was limited. Seeing the continued need for additional educational programs for the city’s blacks residents, some civic-minded whites, like Reverend L.W. Pease and his wife Ann, attempted to fill the void by opening schools for blacks. After retiring to Asheville from New York, where they had

²⁸⁷ John Richard Dennett, *The South as it is: 1865-1866*, (City, State: Publisher, Year), 210.

²⁸⁸ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*, (New York, New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 97.

also worked with underprivileged children, the Peases decided to start a school to provide educational opportunities for Asheville's growing number of black youth in 1875. Using their own funds, they purchased land near the center of town and converted an old livery stable into a small boarding and day school for blacks. Though the exact number of students who enrolled at the school—initially called the Colored Industrial School—is not known, it was a welcome addition to the black community's educational efforts.

Unlike the schools established at Calvary Presbyterian and St. Matthias, the Colored Industrial School focused primarily on industrial education. Students studied vocational subjects such as horticulture, agriculture, mechanical arts, and domestic labor. This was a curriculum that closely modeled the program that Booker T. Washington advocated and later instituted at his Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. A former slave himself, Washington, who became the most influential black leader of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, argued that the educational training that blacks needed most was one that helped them to master the vocational arts with the aim of becoming skilled wage earners. Instead of programs that focused on teaching the liberal arts, industrial education was designed to train women in cooking, sewing, and nursing, and to teach men to be better farmers, craftsmen, and artisans.²⁸⁹ Undoubtedly recognizing that the greatest employment opportunities for blacks in Asheville were in the service sector of the tourism and health resort industries, the curriculum at the Colored Industrial School placed significant attention on training students in the domestic arts.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Domestic arts remained an important part of the curriculum at the Colored Industrial School. Even after the Peases' turned the school over to the Women's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1887, efforts to raise money to support the domestic school continued. In an 1892 letter to the manager of Biltmore Estate, Mrs. Pease, who remained an active fundraiser and booster for the school, asked Charles McNamee if the school might secure one of the estates' architects to design a new building to house an enlarged domestic department. She advised McNamee that the school had raised \$5,000 and would be grateful for any support or assistance he could offer. "I remember that Mr. Richard Sharp Smith of the Vanderbilt estate planned and supervised the Lindley Training School without charge," she wrote in reference to a school for the city's white girls.²⁹⁰ "Do you think he would do as much for the benefit of the Colored girls? If you think he will do so will you kindly ask him?"²⁹¹ Mrs. Pease went on to remind McNamee that the building would be developed for the school that she and her husband had established 10 years earlier, and that they continued to be "gratified by the good work done there."²⁹²

It is unclear why the Peases turned their school over to the Women's Home Missionary Society, but the school's primary mission of providing educational opportunities for the city's black residents was never compromised. One of the main goals of the Women's Home Missionary Society was to provide spiritual, moral, and social uplift to minority groups throughout the nation. After taking over the school in Asheville, the

²⁹⁰ Mrs. Annie Pease to Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 17, August 1892, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, Collection 2.2/1. P4, Box 6 Folder 2.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² Mrs. Annie Pease to Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 17, August 1892, Biltmore Estate Archives. Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, Collection 2.2/1. P4, Box 6 Folder 2.

Women's Home Missionary Society renamed the school the Allen Industrial School and gradually began to focus on educating black women. This policy continued until the school closed in 1974. After the Women's Home Missionary Society took over, enrollment jumped from 32 to 103 students in the first month. The school's administrators reported that there were "three generations of one family, two preachers and over 20 married men and women attending classes at the school in the first few weeks."²⁹³

Interest in education was so great in North Carolina that some members of the state's legislature sought a more substantial plan to reconstitute the state's pre-war public school system, expanding it to include blacks as well as whites. Post-war financial difficulties had paralyzed the system, and while some politicians were willing to institute school taxes, conservatives, who controlled the state after the war, were not. After the state's Conservative Party defeated the short-lived post-Civil War provisional government of William Woods Holden in 1865, they refused to appropriate funds for public schools and even abolished the state office of Superintendent of Common Schools.²⁹⁴ Post-war economic conditions and an aversion to taxes likewise prevented localities from supporting their own public school systems. This stalemate over public education began to ease somewhat after the adoption of a new state constitution in 1868. The state adopted the new constitution because the federal Reconstruction Acts of 1867 required it as one of the conditions for all the former Confederate states to be readmitted to the Union. Under the provisions included in Article Nine, Section Two of North Carolina's new Constitution in 1868 the General Assembly was ordered in the "first session under this Constitution [to] provide by taxation and otherwise for a

²⁹³ Nan Chase, *Asheville: A History*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2007), 157.

²⁹⁴ William S. Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 418.

general and uniform system of Public Schools, wherein,” the provision stipulated, “tuition shall be free of charge to all the children of the State between the ages of six and twenty-one years.”²⁹⁵ Although the Reconstruction Acts did not specifically require North Carolina or any other former Confederate state to establish and fund a public education system, the Acts did mandate black male suffrage. This made it possible for politicians who were supportive of public education to be elected.

Despite the state’s constitutional mandate for public education in North Carolina, another decade lapsed before anything resembling a reputable system was created. Political disagreements over how to fund the system, along with charges that blacks would attend the same schools as whites, hampered the development of a smoothly functioning system. As late as 1877, politicians were still arguing over whether or not schools would be segregated according to race, and if they should be funded at the same levels. In his annual message to the General Assembly, Zebulon Vance, who had been re-elected governor in 1876, advised the state’s lawmakers that it was in keeping with their constitutional duty to establish a state department of Normal Instruction. Teachers were badly needed, Vance informed the lawmakers, and none were more badly needed than black teachers. He urged the General Assembly that it was their “plain duty to make no discrimination in the matter of public education.”²⁹⁶ The same training that white teachers and students received, he argued, should be extended to the state’s black residents as well. Blacks “should not,” he stated, “have to

²⁹⁵ 1868 North Carolina Constitution, Article Nine, Section Two.

²⁹⁶ Frontis W. Johnston, ed., *The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance*, vol. 2., (Raleigh, North Carolina: State Department of Archives and History, 1963), 46.

look to sources and teachers outside the state”²⁹⁷ for educational opportunities. The education that blacks received in North Carolina, he said, should be in keeping with North Carolina values.

The General Assembly later adopted a plan that allowed county school districts to divide their public school taxes along racial lines. The law stipulated “that a written petition signed by a county’s white voters would entitle the County Commissioners to order an election to be held” on the issue of public school taxes.²⁹⁸ If the majority of the county’s voters approved of the measure, then the taxes collected to support the local school system could then be divided along racial lines. In other words, white taxes would go to support white schools, and the taxes paid by blacks would go to support black schools. Many people recognized the overall impact of this law was negative for blacks, especially since whites paid a more significant percentage of taxes than blacks.

The school tax measure angered and dismayed blacks. Speaking on behalf of blacks throughout the state, Representative E. H. Sutton, a black member of the General Assembly from Edenton, stressed that it would be impossible for blacks “to educate their children from taxes derived from Negro property holders alone, especially since they had little to tax.”²⁹⁹ A more equitable plan needed to be developed, he stressed. Echoing these sentiments in the state senate, Robert Gray, who was one of three blacks serving in the State Senate at that time, called the legislation a disgrace. To illustrate just how unfair the legislation was, Gray asserted that if the counties and local school boards chose to divide taxes according to race

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ Logan, *The Negro in North Carolina, 1876-1894*, 156.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

they should adopt a plan that provided that “in all cases where the father of any child shall be white, the tax levied on such father shall go to the white school. However, if such a father had children of both races, the tax shall be divided between the white and colored schools prorated according to the number of each race.”³⁰⁰

How Asheville’s black and white residents reacted to the school tax legislation is not known. Local newspapers were surprisingly silent on the issue, but subsequent actions by Asheville leaders suggest that a more cooperative spirit prevailed. In 1888, when the city finally began to develop a local school system, blacks were allowed to participate in the process. After a close vote of 722 to 718 approving a local tax to establish and support a public school system, the city’s leaders appointed Isaac Dickson, one of the city’s leading local black business owners, to the school board. On the face of it this appears to have been a bold move. Asheville’s white leaders could have easily rejected any black participation in governing the schools, but Dickson’s appointment may have ensured that blacks would support the tax increases that were necessary to support the school system.

While there are no records to determine how many black and whites voted for and against the creation of the local public school system, the close vote suggests that there was significant resistance. Given the eagerness that blacks had for an education, it is unlikely that many of them opposed the measure, but whites may have been more divided. As historian William Powell notes, popular indifference, and a persistent aversion to high taxes were major impediments to efforts to create a sustainable school system. More than anything, Asheville’s white leaders may have believed that the promise that blacks would be given a

³⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 157.

voice on the school board would guarantee the black community's support on a matter that sharply divided the white population. Unlike the white members of the city's school board, Dickson only served for one year. He was the only member of the original board who was not reappointed by the city's Board of Aldermen the following year.

Whatever the reason behind Dickson's appointment to the school board, blacks enthusiastically welcomed the creation of Asheville's public school system. When the first school term began later that year, the city's white students attended classes in a newly constructed building on Acadia Street, while the blacks students attended classes in a previously used building on Beaumont Street. After more than 600 black students attempted to enroll on the opening day, the building proved to be inadequate. Only half of the aspiring students could be admitted to class. The local newspaper reported that disappointment prevailed as many children were "turned away crying."³⁰¹ This overwhelming demand forced the city's school board to immediately begin looking for additional space for black students. They later purchased another building on the corner of Valley Street and Catholic Avenue. Because the building had been previously occupied by the city's only Catholic Church, the school became known as the Catholic Hill School. Although the new building allowed the city to provide space for an additional 200 students, it still fell short of the need. In 1890, there were at least 1,100 school-aged children living in and around Asheville.

Finding the right administrator and teachers was an even more pressing matter. The school board hired Edward Stephens, a native of the West Indies, as the chief administrator of the black schools. Before coming to Asheville, Stephens had been a teacher and

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

community organizer in St. Louis, Missouri. The *Asheville Citizen* reported in 1890, that Stephens had attended Oxford, as well as schools in Paris and Switzerland, and spoke “French, German, and Portuguese fluently.”³⁰² The paper also reported that he also spoke some Spanish, Dutch, and Italian, and talked “with a slight French accent.”³⁰³ With such an extensive educational background, there can be little doubt that Stephens brought a high level of expertise, discipline, and commitment to his work. Stephens informed the newspaper that “it had been his fortune to enjoy advantages which are denied to many of his people, and if he could do any good to his race he would be satisfied.”³⁰⁴

The school board also hired three black teachers—D.C. Sugg, Edward H. Lipscombe, and Leonora Jackson. While little is known about Sugg, Lipscombe and Jackson were both college-trained educators. Even before Stephens was hired to administer Asheville’s two black schools, Lipscombe was teaching in Asheville. Educated at Shaw University, Lipscombe had started his teaching career in Dallas, North Carolina, a small town in Gaston County. There he had served as the principal of Dallas Academy, a private religious school. For reasons that are not clear, the school was renamed The Western Union Institute and moved to Asheville in 1886. There is no record of the school’s activities in Asheville, but it reportedly attracted students from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Writing about the work that Lipscombe did as the head of the Western Union Institute, William Simmons, President of the State University in Louisville, Kentucky, said

³⁰² “A well Informed Negro: A Brief History of the New Principal of the Colored Schools,” *The Asheville Citizen Times*, 30, August, 1890.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

that Lipscombe's work in western North Carolina was nothing short of extraordinary. According to Simmons, who followed and chronicled the careers of a number of black leaders after 1865, few people believed that Lipscombe's efforts to create a "school in the poor, wild, and ignorant part of western North Carolina would succeed." However, Lipscombe's dedication to the work ultimately led to the creation of "a school whose property was estimated to be worth six thousand or eight thousand dollars."³⁰⁵ While the extent of the Western Union Institute's operations in Asheville is not known, Lipscombe's presence in the town was clearly felt. Lipscombe openly expressed his ideas about the need to further the educational opportunities of black students, and argued passionately that a good education would go a long way to strengthen the moral fiber of the students and community at large.

Leonora Jackson was also a vocal advocate for expanding the educational opportunities of Asheville's black youth. In addition to calling for greater public funding for the city's school system, she sought support from private sources. Jackson asked George Vanderbilt to support the educational efforts of blacks in Asheville and throughout the state. In a letter to Charles McNamee, Jackson stated that she was proud to be a part of efforts "to develop and inoculate the principals of manhood," into the city's black youth.³⁰⁶ Besides the schools in Asheville, Jackson also asked McNamee to consider the work being done at Shaw University, her alma mater. In an 1894 letter, she told McNamee that she had recently heard that he would be in Raleigh and hoped he would take the time to visit Shaw while he was

³⁰⁵ William Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising*, (Cleveland, Ohio: Geo. M. Rewell & Company, 1887), 162.

³⁰⁶ Leonora Jackson to Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 4 January, 1894, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina: Collection 3.1/2. J10, box 4 Folder 1.

there. “I am certain,” Jackson wrote, “that not only the faculty will be delighted to have you honor them by your presence, but your kind words will be a stimulus to the students as well.”³⁰⁷ Undoubtedly, Jackson hoped that a visit by McNamee to the University’s campus would generate a greater interest in supporting the institution financially.

The number of black teachers increased in the years that followed the opening of Asheville’s black public schools. By the turn of the twentieth century, the city—now with a black population of just over 2,000—had added to its roster of black schools: Victoria Academy, Hill Street School, Mountain Street School, and Livingston Street School. With the exception of the Mountain Street School, which was initially founded by a group of northern missionaries, each of these schools was supported with public funds. Such funds were always limited, however, and the black schools were never funded at the same level as white schools.³⁰⁸ As typical throughout the state in this period, the records of the Asheville city school board show that from 1888 to the early 1900s, there was at least a 20 percent per pupil funding gap between black and white schools.³⁰⁹

The racial funding gap appeared clearly in teacher’s salaries. When the city launched its public school system in 1888, white teachers received \$30 a month and black teachers received \$25 dollars a month; white principals were paid \$45 a month and black principals were paid \$40.³¹⁰ Asheville’s black teachers and community leaders frequently petitioned the school board for additional resources, but their requests were often denied. Stephens,

³⁰⁷*Ibid.*

³⁰⁸ Superintendents Record Book, 9, August, 1888, Asheville City school Board, Asheville North Carolina.

³⁰⁹ Superintendents Record Book, 9, August, 1888, Asheville City school Board, Asheville North Carolina.

³¹⁰ Superintendents Record Book, August, 1888, Asheville City School Board, Asheville, North Carolina

administrator of the black schools, developed a close relationship with Charles McNamee, the manager of George Vanderbilt's estate—a relationship that proved to be beneficial to all of Asheville's black residents.. Stephens complained to McNamee that the city's white school officials were indifferent to the needs of the black schools. He told McNamee that after approaching school officials about deficiencies in the black schools, he was unceremoniously dismissed without any consideration of his request. Stephens stated that the chairman of the school board “spoke to us most unkindly, rudely, in a way that his chivalry would not allow him to talk to the lowest white woman.”³¹¹ The same situation prevailed statewide. In his study of the post-emancipation experiences of blacks in North Carolina, Frenise Logan found that black teachers “received less money per capita than white teachers.”³¹² In the 1880s, for example, when towns and counties were launching their public school systems, “the average salary paid to Negro teachers was \$20.00 a month, for white teachers, \$24.00 a month.”³¹³ Asheville paid its teachers more than average but still unequally.

Black leaders often sought private funds to remedy the inadequacy of public sources. One donor was New Yorker George W. Pack, who had amassed a sizeable fortune in the lumber industry before moving to Asheville in 1884. Once in Asheville, Pack began using his money to enhance the appeal and economic prospects of Asheville and its citizens. Convinced that education was an important component to the development of solid citizens,

³¹¹ Edward Stephens to George Vanderbilt and Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 6 March, 1892, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, Collection 1.1/1. S2, Box 2 Folder 1.

³¹² Frenise Logan, *The Negro in North Carolina 1876-1894*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 165.

³¹³ *Ibid.*

Pack reportedly paid the salaries of some of the city's black teachers himself.³¹⁴ Pack's commitment to Asheville was stimulated by what he believed to be the less than ideal living conditions of many in the city. He believed that greater investments in infrastructure and educational programs were necessary for Asheville to prosper. Thus, at the request of the town's leaders, Pack financially supported black and white schools, opened libraries, and privately funded environmental improvements in and around the city.³¹⁵

Pack's attitudes about education and social welfare were no doubt influenced by the progressive ideas that were becoming an important part of the national political and social landscape in the late nineteenth century. During this period, which historians generally date from the early 1890s to the 1920s, Americans who were concerned about the impact of industrialization on the social fabric of the nation, began promoting reforms that were intended to address and reduce the poverty, despair, and disorder caused by industrialization—especially in urban areas. For Progressives, industrialization was not the only reason for these problems, additional reasons could be found in the impact that immigration, migration, and urbanization were having on the nation as well. Thus, those who identified themselves as progressives sought political, economic, and social reforms to the problems that these issues caused, and many placed great faith in education.

By supporting education—especially public education—and other social welfare programs, Pack displayed a progressive attitude toward what he believed to be Asheville's most pressing problems. Like progressives throughout the country, Pack was not just

³¹⁴ Milton Ready, *Asheville: Land of the Sky: An Illustrated History* (Northridge, California: Windsor Publication, 1986), 77.

³¹⁵ Nan Chase, *Asheville: A History*, 47

concerned but offended by the “depravity” that urbanization was causing in Asheville—especially in the area around the city’s public square in the center of town.³¹⁶ After he had established himself as a member of Asheville’s community, Pack initiated a campaign to support the city’s educational efforts and to clean up the city’s public spaces, all with the goal of improving the city’s image and appeal to outsiders. As author Nan Chase notes, his efforts resulted in the closing of brothels and gaming houses in town. It also led to the construction of a new farmers market that operated on the city’s public square, a new city hall and courthouse, on land “where garbage had once created a nuisance.”³¹⁷ All these were programs and initiatives that blacks as well as whites welcomed.

George Vanderbilt also gave support to local educational efforts. After a group of leading white women formed the Free Kindergarten Association in 1894, Vanderbilt became a major financial supporter. When Mrs. Annie Martin, a white resident who had a special interest in assuring that black children were not overlooked, pointed out that the city could benefit from the creation of a kindergarten for the city’s black children, Vanderbilt provided both funding and space for the program in the YMI building that he had commissioned for the black community’s downtown use. In a letter that she sent to Charles McNamee in 1894, Martin stressed that she and the other members of the Kindergarten Association were convinced the creation of a black kindergarten would have a strong “moral influence on the city’s colored children.”³¹⁸ The positive influence of a kindergarten program had already been demonstrated among the white children of the city, she wrote, and that other prominent

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ Annie D. Martin to Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 4, May, 1894, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, 2.3/3. M1, Box 4 Folder 1.

supporters, such as George Pack, and Franklin Coxe, were pleased with the association's work. They supported the efforts to expand the kindergarten program to the black community.³¹⁹ By providing funding and space, Vanderbilt showed that he needed little convincing to see the value of the association's work and the benefit that a black kindergarten might provide. Just a few short weeks after opening, more than 30 black children had enrolled in the kindergarten program. On April 17, 1895, Martin informed Vanderbilt's estate manager that at the most recent meeting of the Free Kindergarten Association, "we heard a very satisfactory report about the Institute kindergarten."³²⁰ Reporting that there were now 39 children enrolled in the program, Martin stated that, "everywhere this colored school is mentioned it seems to excite much interest. I sincerely hope," she said, "that the good influence from the school will continue to be seen."³²¹

As a further demonstration of his commitment to the education of blacks, Vanderbilt also gave indirect assistance to the school that was established by the residents of Shiloh, a small black community just south of downtown Asheville. Established by former slaves just after the Civil War, Shiloh was originally located on the property that became part of Vanderbilt's estate, but relocated after Vanderbilt purchased it. Despite suggestions that Vanderbilt's agent pressured the residents to sell their property, the community's leaders appear to have been fully aware of their actions and felt no undue pressure to sell.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ Annie D. Martin to Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 17, April, 1895, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, 2.3/3. M1 Box 4 Folder 2.

³²¹ *Ibid.*

After the community was relocated, Shiloh's leaders wrote to thank Vanderbilt for the assistance, which included a new church building and support for their school. "You have our heartfelt thanks" they wrote, "for the new Shiloh church and school which you have given us for our former Shiloh which we sold to you. We feel that by selling out to you we have not only bettered the condition of the community, but we believe that the spirituality of our new Shiloh is and will be better more so in the future."³²²

Vanderbilt's support of the Shiloh community, which included employing some of the community's residents on the estate, continued after the move was completed. That support was directed toward the school that met in the basement of the Shiloh A.M.E. Methodist Church and came through a program that allowed his workers who lived in the community to have part of their salaries directed to the school. For those who did not opt for automatic withdrawals from their pay, Vanderbilt's estate manager sent monthly reminders to their supervisors asking them to remember to support the school. In an 1897 memorandum to William Logan, a Shiloh resident who worked as a foreman on the estate, McNamee asked him to remind the men on his crew to support the school financially.³²³ He told Logan that while he and Mr. Vanderbilt were proud of the school's accomplishments, it was "important for the residents to show that they recognized the need to continue supporting the school themselves."³²⁴ In addition to supporting the school, the estate also provided funding for the community's band. In a short note to his assistant, Edward Harding, McNamee ordered that

³²² A. G. Kesler, Elder E. J. Carter, Rev. D. J. Young, Hardin Mallery, Boston Jenkins, William Logan, to Charles McNamee, Asheville, North Carolina, 23, May, 1890, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, 3.1/2 S21, Box 2 Folder 2.

³²³ Charles McNamee to William Logan, Asheville, North Carolina, 24, February, 1897, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, 1.1/2. L25, Box 5 Folder 1.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

the Shiloh band be given “ten dollars to help them along in their studies.” They should be told he went on to say, that the support “comes from Mr. Vanderbilt.”³²⁵

Despite the support of Pack and Vanderbilt, Asheville’s black schools still faced inadequate funding, poor buildings, few teachers, and overcrowding, problems that were common to black schools throughout the South. Such challenges notwithstanding, the growing number of black children attending school throughout the period suggests progress. Out of 600 families with school-aged children in and around Asheville in 1880, only 23 percent reported that their children attended school.³²⁶ By 1900 this number had grown to 43 percent.³²⁷

Inequalities continued to exist, but considering the time period, which witnessed a significant rise in the ideology of white supremacy and the enactment of Jim Crow segregation, imbalances between whites and blacks in education and other areas are not surprising. What is surprising is that in Asheville at least, a progressive attitude about education for blacks continued to prevail. Indeed, at a time when some state leaders like Congressman Alfred Waddell argued that black education should be abandoned, Asheville’s leaders continued to do whatever they could to expand the educational opportunities that were available to blacks

³²⁵ Charles McNamee, to Edward Harding, Asheville, North Carolina, 15, September, 1897, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, 7.2/3. M3, Box 6 Folder 12.

³²⁶ Tenth Census of the United States, 1890, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

³²⁷ Ninth Census of the United States, 1890, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh). Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Buncombe County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm, State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

With the prevalence of views like those of Alfred Waddell, who went as far as to argue that the idea that education was “the panacea for all the social and political evils” that society faced was a fallacy, what accounts for the more liberal attitude that appears to have prevailed in Asheville? The importance of this question becomes clear when one considers that according to Waddell and other conservative-minded politicians at that time, many of the nation’s best citizens were beginning to reject the idea that education could fix the ills that society faced, especially the problem of racism. They no longer “believed it,” Waddell asserted in a speech at Newbury College in South Carolina.³²⁸ Although Asheville’s leaders did not say so specifically, they undoubtedly saw more value in the arguments of Charles Aycock, the Wayne County Democrat, who was elected governor in 1901. While Aycock advocated many white supremacist ideas and policies—including disfranchisement—he continued to argue that funding educational programs for blacks was necessary for the state’s social, political, and economic stability.

Aycock threatened to resign as governor when members of the General Assembly again considered passing legislation that would divide all appropriations for public education by race. As historian James Leloudis notes, Aycock believed that if such an effort were successful, it would be the equivalent of whites “looking the other way while the next generation of black children were trained ‘out of harmony and in enmity to the people among whom they lived.’”³²⁹ Instead, Aycock advocated the continued funding of education for blacks, but that education would nevertheless serve to reinforce their racial inequality. The

³²⁸ James Leloudis, *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 179.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

education that black received under Aycock's plan would in no way mirror that of whites. Blacks needed to accept their social, economic, and political status in North Carolina, and the education that they received from the state would ensure this. In a speech to black parents and teachers at the Negro State Fair in Raleigh in 1901, Aycock made his position clear. He told his audience that the social separation of the races was a settled matter, and that blacks should work to excel as high as they possible could, but within their own community. "No thoughtful, conservative and upright Southerner has aught but the kindest feelings, and we are all willing, and anxious," Aycock said, "to see you grow into the highest citizenship to which you are capable...."³³⁰ Thus, blacks could expect Aycock's support for their educational efforts, but only on the terms that were first established by whites.

By continuing to fund black schools at unequal levels, Asheville's white leaders demonstrated that they shared the sentiments that Aycock expressed. Despite inadequate funding, however, blacks tried to maximize the resources that were available to them. As was the case throughout the South, black educators in Asheville used whatever latitude they could find to mold their segregated schools and programs to the specific needs of their students and communities. As historian Melton Ready writes, "in an era when blacks were denied access to most public facilities, schools substituted as neighborhood centers. Schoolyards became outdoor gyms and playgrounds, day care centers, meeting places for civic groups, centers for adult education, public libraries, and places where music and entertainment were available."³³¹ Following a pattern that can be seen in other parts of the

³³⁰ R. D. W. Connor, *The Life and Speeches of Charles Brantley Aycock*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1912), 250.

³³¹ Milton Ready, "A History of Pride, Black Asheville A Blend of Traditions: Schools, Church, Community Involvement," *The Asheville Citizen Times*, 13, February, 1983.

state and south at the turn of the twentieth century, blacks in Asheville turned inward, eschewing politics and focusing their attention on strengthening the institutions where they believed they had more influence and control. Pragmatically, blacks used what resources they could get from white leaders in Asheville in creative ways.

The story of Stephens-Lee High School, Asheville's only black public high school, is a perfect example of the ingenuity that blacks used in their approach to education and the limited resources they were given. Constructed to replace the old Catholic Hill School which was destroyed by a fire in 1917, Stephens-Lee emerged as the leading black public education center for all of western North Carolina, a status that it retained until it was closed in 1965. Building on a foundation established by the school system's first black teachers and administrators, Stephens-Lee, as Nan Chase notes, "gained distinction for its rigorous curriculum and high achievements."³³² In fact, with a curriculum that included courses in literature, history, music, and drama, which was a rejection of the idea that blacks should only focus on vocational or industrial education, Stephens-Lee became one of the most prestigious black schools in the entire southeast.

Stephens-Lee's most significant growth and influence as a leading center for black education occurred largely under the leadership of Walter Smith, who came to Asheville to serve as the principal of Catholic Hill School in the late 1890s. As he had done at Catholic Hill, Smith demanded high standards from his students and faculty. As principal, Smith helped to establish a college-level program that offered Asheville's black teachers the opportunity to earn their teaching certificates and even to work toward a college degree.

³³² Chase, *Asheville: A History*, 53.

According to one former teacher, Smith developed a program that invited some of the nation's top professors, mostly from New York's Columbia University, "to come to Asheville every week to teach the entire faculty."³³³ The result of this program was a faculty that was almost entirely composed of teachers with advanced degrees. "Teachers," recalled Lucy Mae Harrison, a former faculty member, "were given summers to get their masters or look for jobs elsewhere."³³⁴ As the region's and later Asheville's only black high school, Smith's and his faculty's goal was to ensure that the school's students would be competitive at the college and university level. In short, while they had been politically disenfranchised by the turn of the twentieth century, Asheville's educators and other black leaders continued to believe that education was an important part of the development of their people and community.

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, Asheville's black churches laid the foundation for the role that black public schools like Stephens-Lee played in the development of the city's black community. By creating programs or starting schools that went beyond the mere spiritual development of their parishioners, Asheville's black ministers demonstrated that they were just as forward looking in their thinking and outlook as their counterparts in other areas of the state. Nevertheless, the idea that education was important to the future of blacks was not missed by the city's white leaders. In many ways, this rather progressive attitude may have been a result of the increasing attraction that Asheville had for the outsiders—especially northerners who were coming to the city for rest and relaxation. As more people were drawn to the city, there were economic incentives to improve and maintain

³³³ Lucy Mae Harrison, interview, 26, September, 1976, *Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection, 1888-1972*, D. Hiden Ramsey Library, University of North Carolina at Asheville.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

good city services, and to have some semblance of good relations among the city's diverse population. If the city was to continue drawing tourists and their money, an uneducated, idle, and potentially disgruntled black population was not in the city's best interest. A semi-educated and well-trained pool of workers was also vital to the economic wellbeing of the city and region. For these reasons, leading white residents in Asheville actively supported the efforts to provide educational opportunities for the city's black residents.

Much like their counterparts in other areas of the South, Asheville's black residents accepted the support of local whites but did not allow whites to entirely dictate the shape and function of their institutions. Whenever and wherever possible, as the exodus of black members from Central Methodist Church in 1868 demonstrated, they worked to exert as much control as possible over the institutions that were created to serve them and their community. The history of Asheville's post-Civil War black churches shows that while whites frequently extended their moral and financial support, the city's black residents were earnest in their support of their institutions as well. Even though racial discrimination existed, the city's black residents did not allow that to prevent them from looking for ways to improve their future prospects. Though their employment opportunities were limited, they used what little money they earned to support their churches and schools. Through both their public and private institutions, Asheville's blacks hoped to improve their moral and material well-being. This effort was not left to the churches or the black public schools alone, however. Other organizations, like the Young Men's Institute, also played an important and vital role in the development of Asheville's post-Civil War and early twentieth century black community.

Chapter Four

A Place of Their Own: The Young Men's Institute and Black Social Uplift in Asheville after the Civil War

The growth of Asheville's post-Civil War black population was accompanied by an expansion in the needs of that population, especially in the area of social welfare. Initially, local and Northern religious organizations emerged as important players in the effort to address the social welfare needs of blacks after the war. As the most prominent institutions in their communities, black churches were critical in this respect. Over the course of the post-emancipation period, black churches not only met the spiritual needs of the black community, but also became an "agency for the improvement of the social and moral conditions of blacks."³³⁵ The resources of black churches were limited, however, necessitating additional mechanisms of support. As in the economic sphere, racism often impeded the effort to secure additional resources. As the last three decades of the nineteenth century wore on, the progressive outlook of whites from outside the region, particularly northern whites, made it possible for Asheville's black residents to look beyond their churches and schools for support in their efforts to enhance the quality of their lives.

The social upheaval that occurred during the Civil War was not lost to people in both public and private positions of leadership. Even before the war was over, national leaders like Edward Stanton, the secretary of the United States War Department, were exploring ways to address the problems that the war had created. In 1863, Stanton ordered the creation of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, and charged it with the responsibility of

³³⁵ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 315.

investigating and recommending ways that the government might deal with the crisis. After completing its work, the Commission recommended that the government create a Bureau of Emancipation whose mission would be to “exercise a benevolent guardianship over the freedmen . . . not because these people are Negroes,” the report read, “but because they are men who have been, for generations, despoiled of their rights.”³³⁶ The report proposed that the bureau should not, then, be a permanent one, but should only exist long enough to “offer the freedmen temporary aid and counsel until they become a little accustomed to their new sphere in life.”³³⁷

Following the recommendations of the Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, Congress created The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, better known as the Freedmen’s Bureau, in 1865. In addition to distributing food, clothing, and providing housing for the former slaves, the Bureau functioned as an employment agency, labor negotiator, and in some instances, a land agent. Like the black church, the Bureau also played a leading role in creating and providing educational opportunities for blacks. In 1886, General Oliver O. Howard who led the Bureau until it ceased operations in 1868, recalled that while the Bureau had been given a difficult mission it had met its assignment well. Writing to his friend and former comrade, Colonel George Williams, Howard said that he was very pleased with the Bureau’s accomplishments. “My glory, if I ever have any,” he

³³⁶ Official Records of the War of the Rebellion, *Final Report of the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission to the Secretary of War*, (Office of the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, New York, New York, May 15, 1864).

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

wrote, “consists in results attained; and the results in the case of the Freedmen’s Bureau are, for me, more marked than those of war.”³³⁸

Despite its importance to blacks, the Bureau’s presence in Asheville and western North Carolina was tenuous at best, finding and keeping agents in the region was a major challenge. According to historian Steven Nash, the Bureau’s activities in the western North Carolina were hampered by the fact that it never had enough agents and resources to help all who needed assistance.³³⁹ When the Bureau began operations in North Carolina in 1865, Eliphalet Whittlesey, the assistant commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau in the state “hoped,” Nash writes, “to establish a Bureau office in every county to assist freedmen in entering labor contracts and to provide protection, but an insufficient budget and a lack of qualified personnel thwarted his scheme.”³⁴⁰ Thus, military commanders who reported that blacks “were suffering from hunger and homelessness in the region,” were often asked to provide assistance. Lacking the funds and the authority to function as a welfare agency, the military commanders were left hoping that charitable whites would provide assistance. They were not optimistic that such help would be coming, however, reporting instead that “the temper of both whites and blacks toward each other is not good” in western North Carolina.³⁴¹

While there was a significant degree of animus toward the former slaves in Asheville and western North Carolina after the war, some local whites did offer assistance to the

³³⁸ General Oliver O. Howard to Col. George W. Williams, November 25, 1886.

³³⁹ Steven E. Nash, “Aiding the Southern Mountain Republicans: The Freedmen’s Bureau in Buncombe County,” *The North Carolina Historical Review*, vol. LXXXIII (January 2006), 7.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

freedpeople, mostly in the form of early religious education for blacks. As important as this was for blacks, their needs were far greater and called for a much wider perspective about social welfare. Groups, like the northern-based American Missionary Association or the AMA, recognized this early on. Long before the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau, the AMA, which was founded in 1846, had missionaries working to provide relief to black refugees in the South. Supported by such wealthy antislavery activists as Lewis Tappen, Simeon S. Jocelyn, and George Whipple, the AMA was well positioned to play a leading role in providing social welfare relief. As historian Joe Richardson notes, the AMA had more than 300 missionaries administering relief programs to Southern blacks by the end of the war.³⁴² In addition to providing food, clothing, and shelter, AMA missionaries also "attempted to help blacks acquire land, demanded civil and political rights for former slaves, established schools and churches, and," as Richardson notes, "fought for a system of public education in the South."³⁴³ AMA missionaries were responsible for supporting at least one school and orphanage for blacks in western North Carolina in the 1880s.

Southern whites did not always welcome the work of outside organizations like the AMA. There were extensive reports of opposition to northern missionaries in the South, and that opposition made the work and lives of some missionaries difficult. Many AMA agents recalled that local opposition, which was fueled by sectionalism, often resulted in attempts to completely ostracize and isolate missionary agents. Some missionaries and relief workers said that they were constantly subjected to such derogatory insults and racial epithets as

³⁴² *Ibid.*

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

“nigger teachers.”³⁴⁴ Other missionaries reported that they were prevented from interacting with local whites, forcing them to spend all their time in isolation. One missionary recalled that for three years while working with freedpeople in one North Carolina town, none of the town’s white women would dare associate with her out of “fear of losing caste.”³⁴⁵ Similarly, another white missionary worker in North Carolina said that she simply resigned herself to accepting her isolation to point of “retreated into a shell of unconcern toward local whites” and avoided “going into the white section of town....”³⁴⁶

Opposition did not prevent relief efforts from continuing in the South after the war. Joining the efforts of private organizations were state and local governments whose leaders were anxious to reestablish and maintain order and stability. In Asheville, local leaders grew increasingly concerned about social instability as more people migrated to town. As late as 1867, local officials appealed to Major General E.R.S. Canby, the United States military commander appointed to oversee the state after the passage of the 1867 Reconstruction Acts, for permission to establish a police force for the town, arguing that it was needed to maintain order. After they were informed that any police force would to be placed under the authority of the Freedmen’s Bureau, however, local leaders withdrew their request. They had no desire to have their authority usurped by outsiders.³⁴⁷

Prior to the passage of the 1867 Reconstruction Acts, local officials had operated under laws that had been enacted by state officials in 1866. At that time state lawmakers,

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 218.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 218.

³⁴⁶ *Independent*, April 23, 1874.

³⁴⁷ Asheville Petition to E.R.S. Canby, December 20, 1867; Asheville Town Ordinance, December 27, 1867, Records of Military Reconstruction Districts, Records of the United States Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Record Group 393, National Archives, Washington D.C.

whose authority to enact laws for the state had not yet been suspended by the national government, adopted a body of laws that sought to rigidly control the former slaves. The laws were popularly known as “black codes” and gave the local officials the power to regulate practically every aspect of the freedpeople’s lives. In addition to laws regulating the movement of blacks, the black codes, prohibited the freedpeople from carrying weapons unless licensed by the state and included provisions against vagrancy, making it legal for local officials to imprison anyone who did not have visible evidence of gainful employment. Upon conviction, violators of the state’s vagrancy laws could be forced to work by having their labor hired out by local authorities. With the exception of provisions that validated the marriages of the blacks and extended to them “the same rights and privileges as whites in courts of law and equity,” the black codes were seen by many as an outright attempt to circumvent the citizenship rights of blacks.³⁴⁸ After reviewing the codes, Clinton Cilley said they revealed just how far white North Carolinians were willing to go “to impress it thoroughly on blacks that they are inferior and must be so kept by law.”³⁴⁹

The continued use of the apprenticeship system, which allowed local officials to apprentice the children of indigent blacks, was particularly troubling to many people, especially blacks. While supporters of this practice argued that it was a positive way to provide for the children of destitute families, it really became a way for unscrupulous landowners to secure the labor of black youth. As Eric Foner notes, the post-Civil War southern apprenticeship system “seized upon the consequences of slavery—the separation of

³⁴⁸ Theodore Brantner Wilson, *The Black Codes of the South*, (Tuscaloosa, Alabama:: University of Alabama Press 1965), 27.

³⁴⁹ Clinton A. Cilley to Eliphalet Whittlesey, May 9, 1866, N.C. Assistant Commissioner Records, Freedmen’s Bureau Records, Record Group 105 (M843, Roll 7), North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

families and the freedmen's poverty—as an excuse for providing planters with the unpaid labor of black minors.”³⁵⁰ Consequently, the system was widely abused in the South after the war. Foner points out that while “apprenticeships had a venerable history in Europe and America, the system that developed in the post-Civil War South bore little resemblance to the traditional notion of training youths in a skilled trade. In some areas,” Foner writes, “courts bound out individuals for uncompensated labor who could hardly be considered minors; one tenth of the apprentices in one North Carolina county,” he notes, “exceeded the age of sixteen, including an ‘orphan’ working at a turpentine mill and supporting his wife and child. To blacks, such apprenticeships represented nothing less than a continuation of slavery.”³⁵¹

In North Carolina, proponents of the apprentice system pointed out that the law did not discriminate between whites and blacks and specifically stipulated that in “all cases of apprenticeship of persons of color... the master shall be bound to discharge the same duties to them as to white apprentices.”³⁵² Critics noted, however, that this provision in the law was not applied equally to blacks and whites. They noted that unlike white apprentices who could only be held in apprenticeships until they were 18, black children were held until they were 21.³⁵³ It was also pointed out that unlike white parents, the wishes and economic conditions of black parents were given no consideration when apprenticing black children. Throughout the state, critics asserted, black children were being placed in apprenticeships

³⁵⁰ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, (New York, New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 201.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² Theodore Brantner Wilson, *The Black Codes of the South*, (Tuscaloosa, Alabama:: University of Alabama Press 1965), 27.

³⁵³ *Public Laws of the State of North Carolina, Passed by the General Assembly at the Session of 1865*, Raleigh, North Carolina: William E. Pell, 1866.

without the consent of their parents. At times, as historian Roberta Alexander writes, white landowners so manipulated the apprenticeship system that they were not only able to secure the labor of black children, but that of the parents as well.³⁵⁴

Many North Carolinians believed that the “black codes” were demeaning to the freedpeople. Evaluating the codes, the editors of the *Raleigh Standard* concluded that the codes would “look to the Northern mind like a disposition to cling to slavery,” and specifically stated that the apprenticeship law “deprived the freed colored child of the right of locomotion and places it in a condition in the eye of the law below that of the white child.”³⁵⁵ Agents of the Freedmen’s Bureau also voiced complaints about the state’s apprenticeship laws. Writing to Governor Jonathan Worth, elected in 1865, Whittlesey said that the apprenticeship laws should not discriminate between white and black children and informed the governor that he had ordered the Bureau’s agents “to rescind any apprenticeships that did discriminate between the two races. No child whose parents are able and willing to support it can be bound without the consent of the parents,” Whittlesey said.³⁵⁶

Black opposition to the “black codes,” especially the apprenticeship law, had significant influence on the swift action of the Freedmen’s Bureau against the law. Meeting as the Equal Rights League of Freedmen in Raleigh in 1866, blacks from across the state, including a delegate from Asheville, overwhelmingly passed a resolution that condemned the apprenticeship system. Charging that the system had allowed black children to be “ruthlessly

³⁵⁴ Roberta Alexander, *North Carolina Faces the Freedmen: Race Relations during Presidential Reconstruction, 1865-67*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1985) 114.

³⁵⁵ *The Sentinel*, August 8, 1864, p. 4.

³⁵⁶ E. Whittlesey to Jonathan Worth, July 13, 1866, NC. Assistant Commissioner Records, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, record Group 105, (National Archives, Washington D.C.) m844, Roll 3.

taken from their parents and bound out without their consent,” the freedmen called on state legislators to modify the apprenticeship laws and to take greater care to ensure the protection of the freedpeople’s rights. “In and throughout the counties of this State our children, the dearest ties of which binds us to domestic life and makes the ties of home enduring,” their resolution read, “are ruthlessly taken from us and bound out without our consent. Therefore, be it resolved that we earnestly protest against such violations, and will do all in our power to prevent its further continuation.”³⁵⁷

Asheville and Buncombe County officials used the apprenticeship system. From 1865 to 1869, the period when it was most widely used, at least eight children were placed in apprenticeships during each term of the county’s Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions. However, the court does not appear to have flagrantly or unjustly removed any black children from the care of their parents. Nonetheless, the terms of black apprentices were longer than those of whites. In 1868, a 12-year-old black boy named Zeb Vance was placed in an apprenticeship to J.G. Hardy until he “reached twenty-one years of age,”³⁵⁸ while Nathan Thomas, a white child, was placed in an apprenticeship that was to expire when he reached 18.³⁵⁹ This pattern occurred in each case concerning white and black apprentices in Buncombe County and continued until the system was abandoned.

³⁵⁷ Freedmen’s Convention (1866: Raleigh North Carolina), *Minutes of the Freedmen’s Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th of October 1866*, (Raleigh, North Carolina: Printed at the Standard Book and Job Office, 1866.) 28.

³⁵⁸ Apprenticeship Bond of Zeb Vance, *Buncombe County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions 1868*, vol. 3, State Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

³⁵⁹ Apprenticeship Bond of Nathan Thomas, *Buncombe County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions 1868*, vol. 3, State Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Despite the unequal application of the apprenticeship system in Buncombe County, the courts did expect apprentices to be well treated. The 1868, apprenticeship bond of the “colored boy” Zeb Vance explicitly spelled out this expectation, by stipulating that Hardy was to teach the apprentice a useful trade and “ensure that he learned to read and write.”³⁶⁰ Hardy was also expected to see to it that the apprentice learn “the art and mystery of arithmetic to that extent which will enable him to transact common business.”³⁶¹ Such knowledge would be useful in a world that was governed by contracts, leases, and store accounts. The court also ordered Hardy to make sure that his apprentice was given “two suits of good common clothing,” when the apprenticeship was concluded.³⁶²

Gaining and retaining control of their families was a major priority for blacks after their emancipation. Thus, ensuring the availability of employment, educational opportunities, and positive recreational activities was important. In Asheville, leaders like Charles Dunsbury and Edward Stephens made this clear. When speaking about the overall mission of the school that his church had established at Calvary Presbyterian Church in 1884, Dunsbury told supporters that through its program the school wanted to produce decent, productive, and honest citizens. As time passed and Asheville grew, some believed that this goal was becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. Citizens in both the white and black communities believed that as the city’s major industries grew, unsavory influences threatening their idea of proper community standards developed as well. While everyone

³⁶⁰ Apprenticeship bond of Zeb Vance, *Buncombe County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions 1868*, vol. 3, State Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² *Ibid.*

was interested in industrial growth, its expansion often led to developments that were contradictory to traditional ideas about public virtue and morality.

Over the course of the last three decades of the nineteenth century, building and maintaining a wholesome and progressive image of Asheville was important to the city's leaders. After 1880, when the railroad's arrival opened the city up to more visitors, the city's business leaders often found themselves advocating policies that would overturn conservative measures such as "blue laws," which made it illegal for businesses to open on Sundays, and policies that led to the opening of more saloons and gambling halls. Throughout the late nineteenth century some business leaders, especially those in the tourism industry, argued that while such liberal policies might "offend a certain class of visitor and resident, Asheville's further prosperity lay in making the city attractive to all, not just a select few."³⁶³ As Asheville's status as a major resort grew, the editors of one local tourism publication, *The Southern Hotel Journal*, said that "every resort has been compelled to adopt a liberal form of government, and if our city is to prosper in perpetuity we must relegate the teaching of our ancestors to the back numbers of our history and fall in line with the progressive ideas of the twentieth century."³⁶⁴

While blacks supported the efforts to broaden the city's appeal to tourists, they decried the rise of what they called baneful influences, like saloons, pool halls, and gambling establishments. Even though the local churches and schools believed it their duty to try and reduce the negative impact of such establishments, their ability to do so was limited. In an effort to buttress the work of local religious and educational institutions, black leaders like

³⁶³ *Southern Hotel Journal*, June 1, 1899, 7.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Edward Stephens, Isaac Dickson, and others, began an effort to establish a Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) for blacks in 1890. The city's whites had established such an association a few years earlier. As with their white counterparts Asheville's black leaders hoped a YMCA program for the city's blacks would offer a positive alternative to life in saloons, gambling halls and houses of prostitution, all of which were becoming a problem in Asheville.

In 1889, after Charles Blanton was elected mayor, officials were ordered to begin closing all vice establishments. As Starnes notes, the problems of gambling and prostitution were common in cities that emerged as rail centers, but "Asheville's reliance on tourism magnified the problem. Debauchery did not draw visitors to Asheville," Starnes writes, "but probably offered some tempting diversions after arrival." Blanton's efforts to clean up the city's red light district had limited success. Criminal records for the late 1890s show that in 1896, Asheville and Buncombe County had the third largest number of people charged with criminal activity in the state.³⁶⁵ Charges were filed against 306 people that year; only Mecklenburg and Forsyth Counties reported more charges. There was a small drop in this number the following year. With 278 people charged with crimes in 1897, the number was still higher than local officials and community leaders wished. The majority of the reported crimes were common for growing cities. In 1896, 22 people were charged with gambling, while others were charged with crimes such as trespassing, and carrying a concealed weapon.

³⁶⁵ *Report of the Attorney General of North Carolina, 1897-98* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Edwards and Broughton, 1899) 26-69.

Sixty-one people were charged with assault with a deadly weapon.³⁶⁶ As Starnes writes, Asheville could be a dangerous place, and black and white leaders knew this.³⁶⁷

The development and success of YMCA programs in cities experiencing the negative effects of industrialization had a long history, in not just the United States, but in Europe as well. In fact, the first YMCA program was instituted by George Williams in London, England, in 1841. The mission of the YMCA movement was to give the young men who migrated to the city for work a wholesome alternative to bars and saloons. The movement's advocates believed that by offering young men a place for bible study and other activities in keeping with the principles of Christianity, crime and poverty could be reduced. The success of the YMCA movement in England prompted American social reformers to establish a YMCA in Boston, Massachusetts in 1851. This first American YMCA was planted in fertile soil because as historian Howard Hopkins notes, reform movements that sought to assist local officials in their efforts to establish and maintain social stability were in full swing at that time. With industrialization rapidly taking hold in northern cities, reform-minded Americans believed that both public and private programs were needed to combat social instability. In short, while economic growth was greeted with enthusiasm by many, its negative impact on the lives of people was a source of great concern to others.

Although the first YMCAs were established for whites, there was nothing that precluded blacks from participating in the movement, albeit on a segregated basis. The first YMCA for blacks was established in Washington, D.C. in 1853, but the most significant growth of YMCA among blacks occurred after the Civil War. Besides emancipation, a

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁷ Starnes, *Creating The Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina*, 77.

renewed commitment among national and international leaders to expand of black YMCA programs was a major reason for this growth. At their 1867 convention in Montreal, Canada, leaders of the Confederation of North American YMCAs pledged their support to any efforts that enhanced the organization's work in black communities. Former Union Army General Charles Howard introduced and received unanimous support for a resolution that ordered the Confederation's committee on associations to report any "measures as in their judgment will best promote the formation of Y.M.C.A.'s among the colored brethren throughout the United States and British provinces."³⁶⁸ The Confederation subsequently hired a black coordinator to help promote and organize black YMCA programs throughout the United States and Canada.³⁶⁹

While the effort to organize a black YMCA in Asheville was not initiated until 1890, the commitment that the National Confederation made to expand their work among blacks was successful. Between 1867 and 1890, when Asheville's black leaders met to organize their YMCA, black associations were actively operating in such places as Richmond, Charleston, and St. Louis. The appeal of YMCA programs among blacks grew out of a desire among blacks to strengthen their communities and improve the negative and racist images that many whites held about blacks in general. Historian Nina Mjagkij observes that this was especially the case among the nation's black elite, who were growing increasingly frustrated at the failure of whites to recognize their status as full and equal citizens. Thus,

³⁶⁸ Jesse Moorland, "The Young Men's Christian Association among Negroes," *The Journal of Negro History*, 9 (April 1924), 128.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

they hoped that programs whose goal was to build and nourish respectability would help blacks gain the respect of whites.³⁷⁰

Building and nourishing the respectability of blacks was clearly on the minds of Asheville's black leaders when they met to organize their YMCA. The local newspaper reported that the meeting was "well attended and very promising."³⁷¹ Edward Stephens led the group and told an audience that included local pastors, business leaders, and at least 30 of the city's young men and women that the mission of the group was the "moral, intellectual, and social improvement of its members. Something," he added, "that was needed in every community."³⁷² He noted that because the Association did not have its own facility, "meetings would be held every Sunday afternoon at some one of the different black churches."³⁷³ Local ministers, the newspaper reported, pledged their commitment and "co-operation to make the movement a success."³⁷⁴

The initial effort to create a YMCA for blacks in Asheville was a failure, and a lack of financial resources was undoubtedly one of the reasons. Financial challenges were a common reason for the failure of YMCA programs. Raising the money necessary to support such organizations was difficult and consequently many YMCA programs, as Mjagkij notes,

³⁷⁰ Nina Mjagkij, *Light in the Darkness: African Americans and the YMCA, 1852-1946*, (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994) 1.

³⁷¹ "Colored YMCA: The first meeting well attended and very promising," *Asheville Daily Citizen* (Asheville) 1 September 1890, Pack Collection.

³⁷² *Ibid.*

³⁷³ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

“had only an ephemeral existence.”³⁷⁵ For blacks, this problem was often compounded by the fact that the resources of many black communities were limited and, moreover, by the “lack of any financial or administrative support from the national YMCA.”³⁷⁶ As a rule, the Confederation of North American YMCAs did not give financial support to local YMCA programs. More than anything, the national organization only functioned as an “umbrella organization to what were largely autonomous, self-supporting associations at the local level,” Mjagkij points out.³⁷⁷ Therefore, when a YMCA failed, it was largely because of local conditions and challenges.

Another problem for fledgling YMCA programs was competition from existing church organizations and programs. In Asheville, local churches like Mount Zion and Nazareth Baptist churches supported their own youth programs, and their time and resources were generally directed exclusively to their own programs. In addition to competing with church programs, black ministers were sometimes biased against any programs that were not directly affiliated with a church. When this occurred gaining broad community support was difficult. The influence that black minister had over the perceptions of the people who were a part of their communities and congregations was strong and sometime impossible to surmount. Consequently, any community initiative that failed to garner their full and consistent support stood little chance of success.

The bias that black ministers often exhibited towards nonsectarian programs became a matter of some concern to many black leaders. Some argued that the conservative stance

³⁷⁵ Nina Mjagkij, *Light in the Darkness: African Americans and the YMCA, 1852-1946*, 3.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

that black ministers took toward nonchurch-related activities such as dancing, card playing, and even sports, ultimately jeopardized the influence that the church had among younger blacks. As the late nineteenth century passed, black ministers were urged to rethink their opposition to nonsectarian programs and organizations like YMCAs. While churches and ministers were important to building and maintaining strong communities, one black educator argued, the task was not theirs alone. Since the early efforts to establish a black YMCA in Asheville were contingent on the support and use of local black churches, success was problematic.

Despite the failure of the first YMCA effort in Asheville, Stephens continued to believe that such an organization would be beneficial to Asheville's black residents. The answer to the financial challenges of creating a YMCA-like program were solved when Stephens, through the help of George Erdman, a New York minister who occasionally came to Asheville, was given the opportunity to present his idea to George Vanderbilt. After their meeting Vanderbilt, who was attracted to the idea of providing a wholesome social outlet for blacks in Asheville, agreed to support the black community's effort to establish a YMCA.

A few weeks later, Charles McNamee outlined the particulars of the partnership in a letter to the editor of the *Asheville Citizen*. Hoping to dispel some apparent misinformation about Vanderbilt's involvement in the project, McNamee explained that Vanderbilt had agreed to give the proposed project \$15,000.00, but not as a gift. Instead the money would be given as a loan. McNamee went on to clarify that the idea behind the creation "of what will probably be called the Christian Institute originated not with Mr. Vanderbilt, but

amongst the colored men themselves....”³⁷⁸ By making this particular point, McNamee revealed that Asheville’s black leaders were active players in the undertaking. This goes against the image that some scholars have presented of blacks in western North Carolina and southern Appalachia. As noted, scholars like John C. Campbell have suggested that the small size of the black population in southern Appalachia made their experience in the region more passive than active. The development of what black leaders in Asheville decided to call the Young Men’s Institute (YMI) suggests a slightly different experience for blacks in Asheville at least.

In addition to pointing out that blacks were the driving force behind the idea of creating the YMI, McNamee also spelled out the mission of the organization. He noted that because of their deep concern for the social and moral development of the people of their community, the city’s black leaders believed that with adequate funds, the YMI would “prove sufficiently attractive to many of the colored men” and be a positive alternative to the “baneful influences of liquor saloons and from other demoralizing associations.”³⁷⁹

McNamee explained that the black leaders had told Vanderbilt that they were interested in securing “an attractive building, containing a pleasant reading room equipped with standard books and current literature, a room for a night school... several bathrooms and a larger hall where social gatherings could be held. Such a place,” McNamee wrote, “would provide the

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁹ Charles McNamee to the Editor of the Asheville Daily Citizen, November 9, 1891, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina; Collection 2.1/1.A25-21, Box 25 Folder 1.

community with a center where their social, cultural, and economic interest could be developed and advanced.”³⁸⁰

Reflecting late nineteenth century views about gender and the different and specific roles of men and women, the primary group that the YMI targeted was young black men. The goal, as the name of the organization indicated, was to help develop the positive moral character of black men who were seen as the future leaders of their homes and community. In a letter thanking Vanderbilt and McNamee for their commitment to helping create the YMI, Stephens said that the organization’s goal was to ensure the development of the “manly, self-reliant, and Christian character of black men.”³⁸¹ At the time, and even more so at as the decade of the 1890s passed, there were growing concerns about what black leaders believed to be a decline in the moral character of young black men.

As the president of the North Carolina Baptist Sunday School Association, Nicolas Roberts expressed this concern well. In a speech to the members of the Association years after the YMI had opened its doors, Roberts asked rhetorically, “Is the young black male bad? Is he worse now than he was forty years ago? Has the boy changed?”³⁸² In response to his own questions, Roberts stated that it was not so much that boys were bad, but that the environments they often inhabited were bad. “A bad atmosphere,” he said, “makes bad

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁸¹ Edward S. Stephens to Charles McNamee, August 21, 1892, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville North Carolina, Collection 1.1/1.D23.072, Box 23, Folder 72.

³⁸² North Carolina Baptist Sunday School Convention records, 1909; John C. Dancy, “How to Save Our Youth,” in *The United Negro: His Problems and His Progress*, eds. Garland Perm and J.W. Bowen, (New York, 1902).

boys.”³⁸³ Roberts went on to argue that while there was a plethora of bad places in every community, the home itself was at times the most toxic. An indecisive spirit regarding the proper rearing of children was a growing problem in black communities, and Roberts argued that this had created an environment where “everything is harsh, snappish, and crabbed.”³⁸⁴ Such an environment, he went on to say, served to drive many young men to seek refuge in what they believed to be more congenial surroundings, and unfortunately that was usually places like saloons, pool halls, and gambling establishments.³⁸⁵

As positive a development as the creation of the YMI was, especially in the effort to enhance the character of young black men, Stephens informed McNamee that there were forces that did not wish to see them succeed. In reference to the racist hostility that blacks faced in the South, Stephens said that, “in no pagan land has the Christian missionary more despicable sufferings to endure than the persons who labor for the Negroes’ social elevation and moral improvement at the hands of many Southern Christians. Their displeasure at successful work is less that of the ‘elder brother’ on the welcome of the ‘prodigal son’ than of the malevolent rancor of the deposed angels in their meeting in Pandemonium,” he said.³⁸⁶ Stephens praised Vanderbilt and McNamee for not allowing themselves too fall victim to racial antipathy that had consumed so many whites in the South. He told McNamee that while many whites in Asheville might not see the immediate benefits of the YMI, he was confident that their opinion would change. “As Mr. Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

brought good to the masters as to the slaves,” he stated, “so will Mr. Vanderbilt’s loan be a source of blessing to these white people as to the black”³⁸⁷ The ultimate result of the YMI, Stephens stated, would be the “issuing of respectability and manhood and virtue, and the knowledge that in justice to the weak, beneficence, is better service to Almighty God than punctilious church attendance or outward decorum.”³⁸⁸

In reply to Stephens, McNamee agreed that blacks faced many difficulties in the South, but said that he was optimistic that in time things would improve. “You certainly have my sympathy in the many trials to which you are undoubtedly put by reason of your residence in the South” he wrote. “I sincerely trust as time rolls on you will find that your troubles will be mitigated by the gradual dissipation of the prejudice existing against your race in the minds of many of the Southern white population.”³⁸⁹ In a further expression of optimism, McNamee said that the day when race relations might be less circumscribed would not come without patience and hard work. “It will undoubtedly be a long and difficult struggle to which your race will be subjected but I think the ultimate outcome is not uncertain.”³⁹⁰ No doubt stressing the view of Vanderbilt himself, McNamee was hopeful that race relations would improve with the success of organizations like the YMI.

Despite the difficulties that racism created, black leaders remained hopeful that race relations would improve, and that blacks would eventually secure all the rights that the post-

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁹ Charles McNamee to Edward S. Stephens, August 26, 1892, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville North Carolina, Collection 1.1/1.D23.072, Bock 23, Folder 72.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

emancipation world promised. As the nineteenth century passed, however, this hope was shaken by the rise of Jim Crow segregation in the South. In the eyes of many whites, blacks were not fit for the responsibilities that citizenship required and, thus, needed to be separated from the larger body politic. On the other hand, black leaders hoped that their economic, political, and social segregation would only be temporary. They hoped that as blacks developed character that was more in line with white Americans, character traits that were reflective of the Victorian ethos of the late nineteenth century, whites would be more inclined to view them as worthy of their full rights as citizens.

This hope and strategy was, as historian Kevin Gaines observes, a derivative of the “so called self help ideology of racial uplift” that developed among blacks after the end of Reconstruction in 1877.³⁹¹ This ideology was especially prominent among more educated and elite blacks and became even more pronounced in the 1890s. According to Gaines, racial uplift ideology developed against the backdrop of “the post-Reconstruction assault by whites on black citizenship and humanity,” and was promoted by men like Stephens as a way to refute the view that blacks were biologically inferior and could not be assimilated as full citizens of the United States.³⁹² Through this ideology, blacks argued “that the improvement of African Americans’ material and moral condition through self-help would diminish white racism.”³⁹³ In essence, racial uplift ideology “sought to rehabilitate” the image of blacks by adopting programs whose chief goal was the development of respectable manhood; a principal aim of the YMI.

³⁹¹ Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black leadership, politics, and culture in the twentieth century*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 5.

³⁹² *Ibid.*

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 14.

By adopting the Victorian ethos of self-sacrifice, moral rectitude, and thrift, as a means by which to measure the progress of blacks, black leaders were able to seek and gain the cooperation of whites who shared their vision. Vanderbilt and McNamee clearly fell into this category. When McNamee wrote to the *Asheville Citizen* to explain and clarify Vanderbilt's involvement in the YMI, he observed that the organization was to be completely managed by its black leaders. In a statement that was in keeping with the racial views of that time period, McNamee went on to say that by allowing the YMI to be "entirely managed by themselves the colored men of the city are being given the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to learn the art of self-government and their capacity for social, intellectual, moral and religious improvement or the reverse."³⁹⁴ In other words, the social, political, and intellectual environment of the late nineteenth century was demanding that blacks prove their worth by demonstrating that they were capable of learning to live according to the same standards of self-discipline that white men lived by.

While some suggest that Vanderbilt's motivation for financing the YMI grew out of a paternalistic attitude toward blacks, McNamee's further comments about the organization's creation tempers this view. McNamee noted that although Vanderbilt's pledge to fund the YMI would give the organizers the opportunity to display their capacity for "self-government," this support was not being given on a "charitable basis."³⁹⁵ Instead, McNamee stated that the agreement between the organizers and Vanderbilt was that of a "simple business transaction, the fruits of which, if they succeed," he wrote, "will be all the results of

³⁹⁴ Charles McNamee to the Editor of the *Asheville Daily Citizen*, November 9, 1891, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina; Collection 2.1/1.A25-21, Box 25 Folder 1.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

their own exertions.”³⁹⁶ In purely paternalistic relationships there was generally some form of a quid pro quo where something was given in order to secure the loyalty and good behavior of the recipient. Moreover, such relationships normally saw the provider manipulating the power that their position afforded them to limit or take away the recipient’s right to self-determination. As one of the nation’s wealthiest citizens, Vanderbilt no doubt saw himself as something of a benevolent provider for those who were not members of his class. But in this relationship with Asheville’s black leaders, Vanderbilt was not denying them the right of self-determination, if anything he was hoping to enhance that right.

As the building that Vanderbilt commissioned to house the YMI was being constructed, the organization’s leaders were given an active role in the building’s design. After attending a meeting of national YMCA leaders in Philadelphia in 1892, Stephens, who would serve as the YMI’s first general secretary, returned with many ideas about the design of the building’s interior. Writing to McNamee, who was responsible for managing the funds that Vanderbilt allocated to the project, Stephens said that there was significant enthusiasm for what was being developed in Asheville. He told McNamee that many YMCA leaders had advised that significant attention be given to the size of the building’s gymnasium. Stephens stated that he was told that the gymnasium should not be seen as a “mere adjunct but as a leading feature.”³⁹⁷ In addition to a recreational space, the gymnasium, Stephens informed McNamee, could also be “used by artisans, mechanics and the like, I was strongly urged,” he wrote, “that the building’s design emphasize what it was likely to be most used for. Most

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁷ Edward Stephens to Charles McNamee, June 25, 1892; Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville North Carolina, Collection 1.1/1.D23.072, Box 23, Folder 73.

young men are attracted to YMCAs less by reading rooms than by classes and the gymnasium is the greatest attraction.”³⁹⁸

When not offering suggestions about the design of the building, Stephens worked on developing the programs that the YMI would offer. In addition to meeting space and reading rooms, the building, as Stephens’ own notes reveal was to offer classes in physical education. He specifically requested that the gymnasium be equipped with “light weight apparatuses, dumb bells, Indian clubs, and pulleys. It was,” he said, “important for the body to be strengthened along with the mind.”³⁹⁹ He also developed academic programs. His curriculum included both a normal and industrial school, kindergarten, night school, and a domestic arts school. In both the day and night schools, courses included reading, spelling, grammar, arithmetic, geography, history, science, and writing. By the second year of study, students in the normal school were to be offered courses in algebra, geometry, natural philosophy and chemistry. The inclusion of an industrial school program at the YMI is evidence of Stephens' belief that a good educational program should emphasize both the liberal arts and the practical skills that industrial education offered. Stephens was a faithful follower of Booker T. Washington’s educational philosophy and even extended an invitation for Washington to come and visit the YMI once it opened.

Through its programs, the YMI hoped to expose Asheville’s black community to the wider world. In the library and reading room, for example, patrons found books and periodicals on just about every interest and subject. Of particular interest were books on

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

American and world history. In his monthly report to the YMI's board of directors and board of trustees, Benjamin Baker, who would serve as the organization's general secretary for two years beginning in 1895, reported that the reading room was very popular. He wrote that during the previous month, an average of more than 20 people had visited the reading room daily. He stated that over the course of the year, the room had used by more than 2,000 people.⁴⁰⁰ In 1897, Thomas Owens, who served as the organization's general secretary until 1900, asked the board of trustees, which included McNamee and Vanderbilt, for ideas as to how additional funds could be secured to enlarge the YMI's library. Owens, who was a graduate of Brown University, stated that the members had expressed a specific interest in securing a subscription to *The New Century Magazine*, a periodical that focused on literary, political, and intellectual subjects.⁴⁰¹

Ensuring that the YMI's members were offered an array of opportunities to better their lives and broaden their social, economic, and cultural horizons was important to the organization's leaders. From the time that the organization opened its doors it offered an annual lecture series. Early on, the YMI's leaders actively sought to attract some of the nation's most prominent black leaders as speakers. Booker T. Washington was invited to speak. Stephens informed McNamee in early 1894 that an invitation had been extended Washington. "It is my hope that Professor Washington will deliver a lecture at the Institute this year. We have sent word to him and anticipate a response at some point in the near

⁴⁰⁰ B. H. Baker to Charles McNamee, *Monthly Activities Report to the Board of Directors and Board of Trustee of the Young Men's Institute*, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina; Collection 1.1/.B08-080, Box 8, Folder 79.

⁴⁰¹ T. E. Owens to Charles McNamee, November 10, 1897, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, Collection 1.1/1.O59-071, Box 59, Folder 82.

further,” he said.⁴⁰² There is no evidence that Washington ever visited the YMI, and the organization’s leaders usually relied on local speakers to fill out its yearly roster of lecturers. McNamee was frequently asked to give lectures to YMI’s members. After a previously scheduled speaker was forced to cancel because of a family emergence, McNamee was asked to fill in. Other Biltmore Estate employees, and at times city officials were asked to give lectures at the Institute. On May 5, 1896, Gifford Pinchot, who was the first American to be trained in the field of scientific forestry and later elected governor of Pennsylvania, provided what organizers described as a very insightful and well received lecture on botany.⁴⁰³

YMI audiences also had the privilege of hearing lectures from individuals like Dr. Leon Jackson, who delivered a well-attended presentation on Africa during the 1896 lecture series. In his monthly report to the Institute’s board of directors and board trustees, the YMI’s general secretary stated that Jackson’s lecture titled, “Darkest Africa,” was informative and entertaining. He noted that the entire audience was pleased with the lecture, which was enhanced by the fact that Jackson had spent a good deal of time on the continent. The secretary’s report went on to say that “we had more people out than there were chairs in the entire building....”⁴⁰⁴ Writing that the increased attendance was evidence of the success of the lecture series, the general secretary expressed confidence that the series could be expanded, and asked for input as to who he might invite to participate in the program.

⁴⁰² Edward S. Stephens to Charles McNamee, March 10, 1894, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, Collection 1.1/2. S59-053, Box 42, Folder 3.

⁴⁰³ B. H. Baker to Charles McNamee, *Monthly Activities Report to the Board of Directors and Board of Trustee of the Young Men’s Institute*, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina; Collection 1.1/.B08-080, Box 8, Folder 79.

⁴⁰⁴ B. H. Baker to Charles McNamee, *Monthly Activities Report to the Board of Directors and Board of Trustee of the Young Men’s Institute*, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina; Collection 1.1/.B08-080, Box 8, Folder 82.

Once opened, the YMI emerged as a leading cultural institution for local blacks by offering musical and dramatic performances as part of its programming. As the 1890 news report about the efforts to establish a black YMCA reveals, the cultural arts were expected to be a part of the organization's program from the beginning. At that initial meeting, Ms. Hattie High, a local music teacher, was elected to serve as music director. Once the YMI opened, a musical chorus was formed and gave monthly performances. Just two short months after the YMI began operating, Stephens wrote to inform McNamee that on the instructions of his board of directors, he was writing to invite him and Mr. Vanderbilt to attend the chorus' second concert. "Our second entertainment, a Jubilee Concert," Stephens said, "will be given in the Assembly Hall of the Young Men's Institute, next Monday Evening, 22nd curt. and promises to be very well attended."⁴⁰⁵ Stephens stated that, while he understood that Vanderbilt spent a significant amount of time traveling, he had been informed that he would be in town when the second concert was held and the YMI's board of directors "had asked some friends to give this particular concert of old slave and plantation songs, for Vanderbilt's benefit...."⁴⁰⁶ This invitation, Stephen's wrote, was being made in part because of Vanderbilt's "generous support of the Institute."⁴⁰⁷

By 1895, YMI officials added a band to its arts programs. The effort was led by Benjamin Baker who was appointed general secretary that year. When he submitted his monthly report in January 1896, Baker, a trained musician from Howard University in Washington, D.C., advised the board of directors the he was pleased with the band's progress

⁴⁰⁵ Edward S. Stephens to Charles McNamee, May 15, 1893, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, Collection 1.1/2. S59-053, Box 39, Folder 5.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

and was hoping to secure some additional instruments. Later that month, he enthusiastically reported that he had acquired a new piano. A local dealer had offered to allow the institute to use the piano—free of charge—for two months. If they were pleased with the instrument, he informed McNamee, the Institute could purchase it at a cost of \$10 a month until the full price was paid. Writing that the piano was “badly needed,” Baker said that he believed the arrangement was “a good one” and would enhance the institute’s music program.⁴⁰⁸ By the end of 1895, he was eagerly awaiting the opportunity for the band to play at the Vanderbilt estate. The band had recently given two well-attended performances at the YMI, and he told McNamee that he was certain that Vanderbilt would be pleased to hear the band perform.⁴⁰⁹

Exposing Asheville’s black community to the work of local performers was not the only cultural programming that the YMI offered. In addition to the chorus and band, performances were also given by artists from outside the region and state. With the ability to provide a large auditorium, the YMI leaders were successful in attracting other artists like Elizabeth Davis, who gave a dramatic reading in 1894, and a violin performance by Frederick Douglass’ grandson, Joseph Douglass. One of the biggest performances was given by the famous black songstress, Flora Batson. Also known as the “Queen of Song,” Baston was billed as “The Greatest Colored Singer in the World.” By the time she came to Asheville, she had already given performances in Russia and England, where she had performed for Queen Victoria. In 1895, the YMI successfully arranged for the singer to give a performance in Asheville at the YMI. After a well-attended concert on February 10, 1895,

⁴⁰⁸ B.H. Baker to Charles McNamee, January 19, 1896, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, Collection 1.1/1. B08-053, Box 42, Folder 3.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

the YMI's general secretary proudly reported that an additional performance had to be added. In a preliminary report to the board of directors and the board of trustees, the general secretary stated that receipts from the performance were better than expected and promised a full accounting of the money collected in a later report.⁴¹⁰

Beyond its role as a place where blacks were able to obtain and cultivate their social and cultural interests, the YMI was also the place where many of the city's first black entrepreneurs started and developed their businesses. One of the most unique features about the YMI building was that the outside ground floor was designed for use as retail and business space. In other words, while part of the building was exclusively used for social, cultural, and educational purposes another section of the building was used to house black owned businesses. It is not clear where this concept originated, but as it was noted when the building was being constructed the YMI's organizers hoped that the businesses that occupied that space would provide the organization with an ongoing source of income through the rents that were paid by the business owners. This money, as McNamee observed, would help to "defray current expenses and provide a sinking fund for the payment of the loan that had paid for the construction of the building." The goal was to make the YMI self sustaining.⁴¹¹

By reserving part of the YMI building for entrepreneurial activity, the founders of the YMI ensured that the organization would be more than just an average YMCA. While the YMI was certainly modeled on the YMCA concept, the decision to not associate with the Confederation of North American YMCAs directly, undoubtedly gave the YMI's leaders

⁴¹⁰ B.H. Baker to Charles McNamee, February 11, 1895, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, Collection 1.1/2. S59-053, Box 42, Folder 5.

⁴¹¹ Charles McNamee to the Editor of the Asheville Daily Citizen, November 9, 1891, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina; Collection 2.1/1.A25-21, Box 25 Folder 1.

more flexibility over how the organization developed. Instead of just a place where the city's black men could gather for social and moral edification, the YMI became a social, cultural, and economic incubator for the entire black community. Unlike other places in the city, the YMI belonged to the city's entire black community, not to just one religious group or denomination. At the YMI, Asheville's black residents were able to interact, think, and create more freely than they might have been in other places.

That the YMI and its central location near the heart of downtown, was viewed as attractive to aspiring black businessmen is clear from the swift efforts that were made to secure space in the building. Shortly after the building opened, the business and retail space was occupied by black business owners like Thomas Leatherwood, who as noted earlier, opened a drugstore in the building. The city's only black physicians, Dr. Marcus Alston and Dr. Reuben Bryant had their offices at the YMI. Both men, who were natives of Durham, North Carolina, had come to Asheville in the late 1880s to set up their medical practices. After the YMI opened in 1893, they opened offices and saw patients in the building, making the YMI more than just a social and cultural center. The YMI was the place where members of the city's growing black population came for medical care, did their shopping, and with the opening of a restaurant and ice cream parlor in later years, dined as well. It became the heart of the city's black business district, the place where blacks temporarily escaped the discrimination that they experience elsewhere.

In the years that followed the opening of the YMI, black-owned businesses of all kinds, some of which served a white, as well as a black clientele emerged around the YMI. In many ways the area around the YMI, which was commonly known by locals as "the

block,” became something of a self-contained community for Asheville’s black residents. Largely prohibited from conducting business, or interacting socially in other areas of the city, Asheville’s black residents came to see the area around the YMI as a haven. In an interview conducted many years after the YMI was founded, one resident stated that everything you needed was found on “the block” around the YMI building.⁴¹² In addition to a doctor’s office, which by 1906 included a dentist office as well, there was a real estate agency, a black-owned employment agency, the offices of the Winston Mutual Life Insurance Company, and buildings that housed a black Masonic lounge and other benevolent and social clubs.

While the YMI played an important role in the development of black identity, the creation of economic opportunity, and the maintenance of social stability, blacks still faced significant challenges in Asheville, especially economically. One of the most persistent concerns that YMI administrator raised in his reports to the organization’s board of directors and board of trustees, was the lack of economic opportunities for blacks in the city. For example, in 1898, Thomas Owens wrote that membership and support for the YMI and its programs would be greater if not for the limited earning capacity of most blacks.⁴¹³

John Love, who had served as the organization’s general secretary from 1894 to 1896, stressed the same point in a letter that he sent to Charles McNamee two years after he had resigned his post at the YMI. Love told McNamee that the lack of economic opportunities for black in Asheville made the YMI’s work difficult because few people had

⁴¹² Lacy and Harriet Haith, Oral History, *Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection, 1888-1972*, D. Hiden Ramsey Library, University of North Carolina at Asheville.

⁴¹³ Thomas Owens to Charles McNamee, 14 May, 1898, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina; Collection 2.1/1.O10, Box 3 Folder 2.

the financial resources to pay monthly membership dues. Love stressed that while serving as the organization's leader he had been well aware of the expense the estate incurred to keep the organization opened. He said that this had been a source of concern to him, leading him to fear that the expense might cause Vanderbilt to abandon the effort. "I am perfectly aware of the expense the conduct of the work involves and certainly felt it very keenly when I was connected with it. There were times when the thought forces itself upon one, do the results justify the outlay and the effort?"⁴¹⁴ Love believed they did and told McNamee that "the present need of the people for whom the work exists, for those influences and forces that make for elevation is so great as to justify almost any human endeavor to obtain them."⁴¹⁵

From 1892 to 1906, Vanderbilt remained a significant source of financial support to the YMI. This continued support, which is impossible to quantify, was critical to allowing the YMI to operate. The economic position of blacks in Asheville made it difficult for them to give anymore than tacit support to the organization. Exact figures regarding what blacks earned in Asheville and Buncombe County's different industries is impossible to determine, but city and county tax records reveal that white economic activity was much greater than that of blacks. For example, figures released by the tax assessor's office in the late 1920s shows that while blacks made up at least a quarter of Asheville's population, whites owned nearly 30 times more parcels of property than blacks. Whites owned 49,753 parcels of property, while blacks owned a meager 1,779 parcels. Translated into real dollars, whites owned property that was valued at more than \$10 million against a little more than \$50,000 dollars owned by blacks. Although blacks, with the help of progressive-minded whites like

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*

George Vanderbilt and George Pack, were able to create institutions that sought to stabilize and enhance their communities, they still lagged behind.

It cannot be denied that the YMI helped to provide Asheville's black residents with social camaraderie and economic and cultural stimulus, but racial discrimination continued to ensure that opportunities for blacks were limited. If not for the support of outsiders like Vanderbilt, the opportunities that blacks had to develop socially, culturally, and economically may have been nonexistent. By attracting people like Vanderbilt and George Pack to the region, Asheville leaders, perhaps unknowingly made it possible for the city's blacks to come into contact with a broader world, and this enhanced their incentive to look for ways to better themselves and their community. Given the supposedly isolated nature of life in western North Carolina in particular, and southern Appalachia in general, the creation of the YMI stands as a remarkable achievement for a group whose small population figures made it easy for the white power structure to ignore them. Despite the significance of the creation of the YMI, real progress for blacks in Asheville, as elsewhere, had to be coupled with political power. Unfortunately this did not occur in post-Civil War Asheville.

Chapter 5

Barely Seen and Rarely Heard: The Political Invisibility of Asheville's Black Community, 1865-1900

The question of whether black men should be granted political rights was one of the most hotly debated and controversial issues of the post-Civil War period. Many people, including proponents of abolition found the idea of former slaves voting and holding public office inconceivable. In 1864, William Lloyd Garrison questioned the wisdom of extending voting rights to the freedmen in a letter to one of the readers of his pro-abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*. “When was it ever known that liberation from bondage was accompanied by a recognition of political equality?” he asked. “Chattels personal may be instantly translated from the auction block into freemen; but when were they ever take at the same time to the ballot-box and vested with all political rights and immunities?”⁴¹⁶ Ultimately the contentious issue of voting rights for black males would be resolved in the affirmative when Congress passed the 1867 Reconstructions Acts.

Of the requirements that the 1867 Reconstruction Acts imposed on the former Confederate states, the mandate of black manhood suffrage was the most difficult for whites to accept. But while whites viewed this requirement as political sacrilege, blacks saw it as sacrosanct. Blacks observed that freedom meant little if it was not accompanied by political rights. Consequently, the right to vote was greeted with much enthusiasm by blacks in

⁴¹⁶ Walter M. Merrill, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison: Let the Oppressed Go Free, 1861-1867*, William Lloyd Garrison to Francis W. Newman, July 22, 1864, Vol. 5 (Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 228.

Asheville and was vividly displayed by their active participation in the electoral process the following year. Despite being granted voting rights, however, blacks never became major players in the political life of Asheville after the Civil War. The lack of any real or lasting support from local white Republicans ensured that this would be the case. Moreover, the fact that blacks only constituted no more than 14 percent of the city and county's population made blacks less important politically to Republicans. This became more evident as the last three decades of the nineteenth century passed. Initially, after the formation of the state's Republican Party in 1867, local Republican leaders in Asheville and western North Carolina defended the political and civil rights of blacks, but the need and desire to attract more whites to the party eventually eclipsed this commitment. Thus, blacks were no more than passive actors in the political, and by the default, economic, and social life of post-Civil War Asheville.

Unlike whites, blacks had no uncertainty about whether they would have political rights after emancipation. They recognized that some measure of political power was needed if their status as free citizens was to be secure. To articulate this position to whites they convened Freedmen's Conventions in towns and cities throughout the South and petitioned their respective state governments to grant them their political rights. In North Carolina, the effort to at least begin a dialogue about black political rights was initiated in 1865. Meeting in Raleigh at the same time that the state's white leaders were meeting to draft a new state constitution, freedmen from across the state discussed how they might compel the state's white leaders to recognize and respect their rights as free men.

Felix Grimes, a resident of Asheville, represented Buncombe County. Along with the other delegates, Grimes listened to overtures of friendship from whites but heard no commitment to granting blacks their political rights. Instead, the freedmen were encouraged to leave political matters to whites. Speaking to the Freedmen's Convention on its final day, William Woods Holden, the state's provisional governor, advised the delegates that the "first care of the black people should be to procure homes, no matter how cheap or small. To do this," he said, "they must be industrious, temperate and economical."⁴¹⁷ Holden told them that while he thought it was good that they had gathered to discuss their future, they would do well to encourage their people to focus more on the need to find and maintain employment. "Labor was the first consideration. They had no time," he asserted, "to waste at public gatherings—they should not congregate in the towns in greater numbers than might be necessary for business; and they should avoid the temptation of idleness and dissipation."⁴¹⁸

As to the freedmen's political and civil rights, "they were entitled to their civil rights and would have them," Holden said.⁴¹⁹ But at the same time he informed them that this should not be their main purpose. Understanding that they desired political and civil rights, Holden expressed confidence that the national government would see that their civil rights were protected. Nevertheless, he urged them that at present they should "keep out of politics. It was a 'weariness to the flesh' among the white people," Holden said.⁴²⁰ In other words,

⁴¹⁷ *Convention of the Freedmen of North Carolina, Official Proceedings* (Raleigh, North Carolina, 1865), 7.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

white North Carolinians were already tired of the continuous clamoring for political rights among blacks. Without giving any particulars, Holden advised the freedmen that at that the present stage blacks “had not yet demonstrated their capacity for self-government....”⁴²¹

Holden’s arguments against black political activity did nothing to stop blacks from demanding that their political rights be granted. On the same day that he spoke to their convention, they drafted and unanimously voted to send a memorial to the delegates of the state’s Constitutional Convention saying that their lack of political rights was the primary reason for their present economic and social disabilities. They acknowledged that the affairs of the post-Civil War world were complex and that public sentiment toward them was not always favorable, but said they still deemed it their “duty to present to you [the people of the State] our grievances, our sufferings and the outrages heaped upon us....”⁴²² They told the delegates to the Constitutional Convention that their “long and unjust political disfranchisement” had placed them in “a helpless and disqualified position.”⁴²³ Surveying this situation they asked, “Is taxation without representation just? History and conscience,” they asserted, “answer no!”⁴²⁴ They concluded their memorial by saying that an honest assessment of history showed that they and their ancestors had been faithful supporters of the ideas that made the state and nation strong, and therefore, claimed “by merit the right of suffrage, and ask it at your hand.”⁴²⁵

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*

The call for black political rights was not just a call for voting rights, it was also a demand for the right to serve on juries and testify in court. Some freedmen even believed that the latter concerns were of greater value. John Dennett reported that during the Freedmen's Convention, he had the opportunity to speak with one delegate who told him that although the right to vote was important, the right to give testimony in court was absolutely paramount. Many blacks, the delegate told Dennett, were somewhat indifferent on the matter of voting rights. Aside from black leaders, he said, "most blacks care little or nothing about it at all, and many are perfectly willing to wait a few years, thinking," he said, "that they will not have long to wait."⁴²⁶ Dennett was informed that some even believed that the right to testify in court was a prerequisite to the right to vote. "If a black man could testify in court, and in all respects enjoy equality before the law," the delegate said, "he would soon begin to educate himself and acquire property, and otherwise make himself respectable, and so prepare the way for his admission to the polls."⁴²⁷

At the time that the North Carolina freedmen were meeting in Raleigh, there was an ongoing debate about the requirements that the former Confederate states should meet before they were readmitted to the Union. President Johnson, who became president after Lincoln's assassination in 1865, had implemented a reconstruction process that leading Republican members of Congress found too lenient. Johnson's plan merely required the southern states to rewrite their constitutions, ratify the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution ending slavery, repeal their ordinances of secession, repudiate their war debts, and pledge loyalty to the Union. Critics complained that one of the most glaring flaws in

⁴²⁶ John Richard Dennett, *The South as it is: 1865-1866*, (City, State: Publisher, Year), 210.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*

Johnson's policy was that the former confederate states were not required to do anything to ensure the civil, and more important, political rights of the freedmen.

While attending the Freedmen's Convention in Raleigh, Dennett asked one delegate if Congress should allow the state back into the Union under Johnson's plan. The delegate responded by saying that he "hoped that Congress would admit no [s]tate which had not granted" the freedmen the right to at least give testimony in court. He admitted that without federal pressure, the state's lawmakers would not grant this privilege to blacks. "If North Carolina's legislature were to meet today," he told Dennett, "it would probably exclude the evidence of colored men; hardly a [white] man could be found at present to say a word in favor of it," he declared. A year or two would probably change popular opinion," he believed, "but for now he hoped that Congress would "declare that no State had a republican form of government if every free man in it was not equal before the law...."⁴²⁸

The subsequent passage of the "black codes" by North Carolina's General Assembly showed that white North Carolinians were not inclined to extend any political rights and very few civil rights to blacks. As the codes were being debated and passed, Sydney Andrews, another northern journalist observed that the passage of "the 'Black Codes' revealed that whites were wholly unable to comprehend that freedom for the negro means the same thing as freedom for them. They readily enough admit," Andrews wrote, "that the government has made him free, but appear to believe that they had the right to exercise the old control."⁴²⁹ Congressional Republicans did not miss this, and the "black codes," which were also enacted

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁴²⁹ Sydney Andrews, *The South Since the War: as shown by fourteen weeks of travel and observation in Georgia and the Carolinas*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 95.

by the other former Confederate states, gave critics of Johnson's reconstruction policies even more reason to challenge the president's right to control the reconstruction process.

Passage of the "black codes" in North Carolina might have been averted had the delegates to the state's Constitutional Convention been more favorably disposed toward the freedmen and their calls for the state's constitution to recognize their political and civil rights. However, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention passed the responsibility off to the state legislature and set the tone for what would follow by telling the freedmen that while they recognized the new status of blacks, they did not see them as their political or social equals. As they debated their response to the memorial that the freedmen had sent to them, Andrews reported that "a sort of petrified Hunkerism" dominated the attitude of the delegates at the Constitutional Convention. "The best men in the Convention," Andrews wrote, "stand unblushingly in their places and repeat, one after another, the short creed of the Hunkers; 'I believe in the white man only. I believe that this country was made for white men only. I believe this is the white man's government, and no negro should have any part in it.'"⁴³⁰

In their response to the freedmen's memorial, the delegates at the state's Constitutional Convention expressed doubts about the ability of blacks to govern themselves, and stated that since "the former relations of masters and slaves have ceased in North Carolina, new and mutual rights and duties have supervened, which require corresponding legislation. A large class of the population, ignorant and poor has been released from the stringent restraints of its late social and political position," they said, "and from its

⁴³⁰ *Ibid*,

dependence upon the individual obligations for another class for its support, government, and protection.”⁴³¹ Now that this private support was no longer available, the delegates asserted, it was the “duty of the State to assume their charge, and enact such laws as right and justice may require....”⁴³² In short, blacks were not yet ready for self-government and thus, constitutional guarantees of political rights was premature.

Although the state’s white leaders tried to encapsulate any actions the General Assembly would take concerning the status of blacks within the terms of “right and justice,” the freedmen’s understanding of these terms was much different from those of whites. In the minds of whites, as one historian wrote, blacks were “ignorant of the operation of civil government, improvident of the future, careless of the restraints of public opinion, and without any appreciation of the duties and obligations imposed by the change in his relations to society.”⁴³³

In Asheville and western North Carolina, the attitudes of white leaders largely matched those of the delegates to the state’s Constitutional Convention. They also approved of the subsequent passage of the “black codes” by the state General Assembly. Some, like Alexander Jones, the editor of the *Asheville Pioneer*, believed—at least early on—that the state’s lawmakers had not gone far enough and felt that the colonization of blacks should be the ultimate goal. In a letter to the editor of the *Daily Progress*, a Raleigh newspaper, Jones urged the General Assembly to support two resolutions that the Buncombe and Transylvania

⁴³¹ J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina*, (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1914), 45.

⁴³² *Ibid.*

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 46.

County grand juries had sent to that body calling for the colonization of blacks. Jones urged the adoption of such a plan “at the earliest possible period.”⁴³⁴ Like so many, Jones simply did not believe that blacks and whites could live together without the constraint of slavery.

Strong pro-Confederate sentiments of whites in Asheville ensured the continuation of anti-black attitudes after the war. Lt. P.E. Murphy, a former Union Officer who was assigned to be the Freedmen’s Bureau’s agent in Asheville, observed that the pro-Confederate feelings of whites in the city and surrounding region seemed to have intensified after the war. He informed his superiors that the resistance of pro-Confederate sympathizers in the city significantly hampered the work of the Bureau. In one report Murphy, described his work environment as hostile and warned that without military support he could not execute his duties effectively.⁴³⁵ Despite the challenges that the attitudes that white pro-Confederates posed to the efforts of the Bureau, however, Murphy believed that the interest of blacks and white Unionists, who also experienced reprisals after the war, needed to be protected as much as possible.

While serving as the Bureau’s agent, Murphy did all he could to aid the people that the Bureau was established to assist. Initially he concentrated on helping blacks to establish labor contracts with strict guarantees that their wages would be paid. When conflict arose over the refusal of one employer to pay the wages to a black man, Murphy wrote to seek advice from the district’s superintendent, Clinton Cilley. He told Cilley that he needed help for the affected worker’s wife, Adelaide Walker, because her husband had been run out of

⁴³⁴ *Daily Progress*, (Raleigh, North Carolina), October 21, 1865.

⁴³⁵ P.E. Murphy to Clinton A. Cilley, May 2, 1866, Records of the Field Offices for the State of North Carolina, Freedmen’s Bureau Records, National Archives, RG 105 (M1909), roll 4).

the county by angry whites who had accused him of providing assistance to Union soldiers during the war. In addition to forcing the man to leave the area, the perpetrators had refused to pay the man's wages. Making matters worse, Murphy reported, was a refusal by local whites to hire his wife, and now the family was very near destitution.⁴³⁶ During his first few weeks in Asheville, Murphy was forced to involve himself in at least 15 labor and wage disputes.⁴³⁷

As historians have noted, blacks throughout the South placed great hope in the Freedmen's Bureau's efforts to help them after the war. Eric Foner writes that black faith in the Bureau was made clear when many blacks responded to inquiries that James Steedmen and Joseph Fullerton, two federal officials that President Johnson had appointed to investigate the Bureau, made into the Bureau's activities in 1866. Johnson, Foner notes, had hoped to find evidence that might discredit the Bureau, but blacks throughout the South voiced strong support for the agency. In North Carolina, a group of blacks told the investigators, "If the Freedmen's Bureau was removed a Colored man would have better sense than to speak a word in behalf of the Colored man's rights for fear of his life."⁴³⁸ In western North Carolina, the Bureau's work continued to be severely impeded by both the hostility of whites and the small size of the city and region's black population. As Stephen Nash writes, the small size of the black population in western North Carolina meant that they had no political clout and this made it impossible for them to help the Bureau to uphold its

⁴³⁶ P. E. Murphy to Clinton A. Cilley, May 19, 23, 25, 1866, all in Field Office Records, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, National Archives (M1909, roll 4).

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁸ Samuel S. Ashley to George Whipple, May 16, 1866, American Missionary Association Archives; 39th Congress, 1st Sessions, House Executive Document 120, 39-43.

actions and policies.⁴³⁹ Because of this, Murphy often refrained from interfering in local affairs too often.

The limitations that Murphy experienced in the region was evident when he was forced to admit that there was little he could do to assist a group of white women who had sought his protection from the threats of former Confederate soldiers. The women reported that they were being harassed because their husbands and sons had supported the Union during the war. In his report to the district office, Murphy explained that the women's lives had been threatened and that their homes had been burned. He told his superiors that while he had identified the men involved, his authority in the area was so weak that all he could do was to send them letters reprimanding them for their actions and to tell them to refrain from such actions in the future. A later report reveals that his admonishments did little; local opponents to Murphy and the Bureau intuitively knew that without military support, Murphy's words meant nothing. Increasing the animosity of local whites was the most that Murphy accomplished while serving as the Bureau agent. He reported that hostility toward him was so great that besides curses, he had to endure daily threats "to whip him."⁴⁴⁰ With no sizable black population to help buttress his authority, Murphy's position in the region was tenuous.

The political climate of the region heightened Murphy's difficulties and added to the precarious position occupied by blacks in the area. Even though the war was over, the political battle lines that existed between pro-Confederate Conservatives, Unionists, and anti-

⁴³⁹ Steven Nash, "Aiding the Southern Mountain Republicans: The Freedmen's Bureau in Buncombe County," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 93, (January 2006), 8.

⁴⁴⁰ P. E. Murphy to Clinton A. Cilley, May 19, 23, 25, 1866, all in Field Office Records, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, National Archives (M1909, roll 4).

Confederates—who were not necessarily Unionists, but more anti-conservative—remained firmly in place after the war. While Unionists and anti-Confederate and anti-Conservatives hoped that postwar conditions would give them the opportunity to dislodge Conservatives from power, conservatives were able to consolidate their dominant political position after the war was over. Navigating this political terrain was difficult for Murphy, especially since the one place that conservatives and anti-Confederates agreed was that local and state authority needed to remain in the hands of local whites.

Post-Civil War Conservatives proved to be as uncompromising in their power as they were before the war. This became clear to the state's anti-Confederate and anti-Conservatives forces, but they were not quite ready to support the idea of blacks voting when the war ended. Conservatives were able to defeat the provisional government of William Holden in late 1865, and they once again set the state on a political course that suggested a return to the state's pre-war power structure, which meant that political power was concentrated in the hands of the state's elite. Unable to countenance a return to the politics of old, anti-Confederate and anti-Conservatives and pro-Unionist forces began to realize that the only way to effectively challenge the Conservative's hold on power was to unite. This coalition united men from such diverse backgrounds as former war-time peace advocates, elite whites, who, as Nash notes, "believed that the South must abide by Northern terms in the wake of the Confederate defeat," racial moderates, and free labor proponents.⁴⁴¹ While there were clear political differences within the coalition, there was general agreement about

⁴⁴¹ Steven Nash, "Aiding the Southern Mountain Republicans: The Freedmen's Bureau in Buncombe County," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 93, (January 2006), 8.

the Conservatives' hold on power, and agreement that compliance with federal demands, whatever those might be, "offered the quickest path to reunion,"⁴⁴²

The views of the anti-Conservative coalition regarding how the state would re-join the Union may have been the most pragmatic approach after the war. The terms and conditions that Johnson offered the former Confederate states were, as noted earlier, much less burdensome than those imposed by Congress through the Reconstruction Acts of 1867. In addition to placing the South under a military regime and extending voting rights to blacks, the 1867 Reconstruction Acts also required the southern states to re-write their constitutions, and ratify the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. That amendment, which was passed by Congress and sent to the states for ratification in 1866, was drafted with the hope of better securing the political and civil rights of all American citizens—especially black men. Until the passage of the Reconstruction Acts, only Tennessee had been willing to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment, the other former Confederate states believed that the amendment openly violated the principles of state's rights. In addition to requiring black male suffrage, the amendment also disfranchised many former Confederate leaders. Governor Worth called the amendment "truly humiliating," and denounced anyone who believed "that there should be any white man in the State in favor of placing a [N]egro and a white man side by side in a jury box, and making ineligible to office nearly all her representative men."⁴⁴³

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁴³ Jonathan Worth to Benjamin S. Hedrick, December 30, 1866, Benjamin S. Hedrick Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina .

The reaction of southern Conservatives to the passage of the Reconstruction Acts and the requirement that the former Confederate states ratify the Fourteenth Amendment was mixed with “despair and resignation.”⁴⁴⁴ In North Carolina, there was even talk of resisting the implementation of the Acts with the hope that the United States Supreme Court would declare them unconstitutional. Blacks along with many whites within the anti-Conservative coalition felt that the Reconstruction Acts had ushered in a new political era. Once the Acts took effect, blacks eagerly moved to take advantage of the political rights the Acts granted. When General Edward S. Canby, the commander of the Second Military District, which included North Carolina and South Carolina, gave orders for the state to hold elections for delegates to another state Constitutional Convention, more than 73, 000 black men registered to vote. Not surprisingly, most blacks who registered voted for members of the state’s newly formed Republican Party and helped the party win a majority of the seats at the Convention. In fact, out of the 107 Republicans who were elected 15, all from the eastern part of the state, were black.

The emergence of the Republican Party in North Carolina and the South was surprising to many, especially given the party’s direct connection with the South’s military defeat and the ending of slavery. As efforts were being made to create the party in 1867, Conservative newspapers bitterly criticized the party’s organizers and predicted that the party would ultimately fail. The editor of the *Raleigh Sentinel* wrote that the convention that met to organize the party would be of little significance and refused to send a reporter to even cover it. The paper went on to say that one only needed to look at the convention’s

⁴⁴⁴ William Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 385.

participants to see that it would have little impact on politics in North Carolina. The paper described the party's leaders as nothing more than "old party hacks, broken down, spavined demagogues, and mere seekers of office."⁴⁴⁵ The editors of the *Greensboro Union* referred to the party's organizers as "Shams and perfect political mushrooms."⁴⁴⁶ They went on to write that while many of the party's participants were "honest [and] genuine men," the party's leaders had "bamboozled them into the affair to give it e'clat."⁴⁴⁷

In Asheville the conservative *Asheville News and Farmer* was silent about the character of the Republican Party's leaders, but expressed concern about what the party's success could mean for the state's white citizens. According to paper's editor R.M. Stokes, a victorious Republican Party would see an increase in the power of "the radicals" and the defeat of any hope of "placing the state back into the union on the old constitutional basis."⁴⁴⁸ This sentiment was shared across the state. The *Weldon State* newspaper in Halifax County, for example, called the Republican leaders "cowards" and told its readers that the party's leaders "will go down to posterity with the finger of scorn pointing at them as the wretches who gave the last stab to the hopes of the State."⁴⁴⁹ As with the Asheville paper, the issue that was so troubling for the editors of the Weldon newspaper was the support that North Carolina's Republican leaders had given to the radical Republicans in Congress as they had worked to pass the 1867 Reconstruction Acts. For the editors of North

⁴⁴⁵ *Raleigh Sentinel*, March 28, 1867.

⁴⁴⁶ *Greensboro Union*, March 29, 1867.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁸ *Asheville News and Farmer*, 1, April, 1867.

⁴⁴⁹ Reprinted in the *Raleigh Standard*, 3 April 1867.

Carolina's Conservative newspapers, the state's Republican Party and its potential victory in coming elections would basically guaranteed that North Carolinians would not be able to govern their own affairs.

The objections that conservatives raised against the state's Republican Party did not prevent the party from winning 107 of the 120 seats at the state's second post-Civil War Constitutional Convention. This victory was followed by another in the general election for seats in the state's legislature, giving the Republicans complete control of the state's government in 1868. For Conservatives, internal divisions played a major role in their defeat. During the campaign, Conservatives, who were adamantly opposed to blacks voting, were unable to agree on whether they should seek the votes of blacks. On the one hand, some believed that they should, especially if it meant the retention of their hold on power. However, the idea of appealing for black votes was anathema to many Conservatives and was rejected.

During the general election in 1868, Conservatives, still divided on the issue of black voters, campaigned on three major issues—opposition to ratification of the new state constitution, the unfitness of Holden, who was leading the state's Republican Party and running for governor, “and the doubtful character of other Republican candidates.”⁴⁵⁰ They also made race a central theme of their campaign, hoping that by doing so they would bring most of the state's white voters to their side. In their campaign literature the Conservatives asked, “shall the [N]egroes or whites rule in North Carolina? All other issues,” they asserted,

⁴⁵⁰ Horace W. Raper, *William W. Holden: North Carolina's Political Enigma*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 100.

“are secondary and subordinate, and should be kept so.”⁴⁵¹ They went on to ask, “shall white children be compelled to go to the same schools with [N]egroes? Shall marriage between [N]egroes and whites—amalgamation—be allowed? Shall [N]egro guardians be appointed for white wards?”⁴⁵² They argued that all these things were possible because the state’s new constitution, which was ratified by a majority of the state’s voters in 1868, did not explicitly prohibit them.

The Conservatives were unable to prevent a Republican sweep in the general elections. Throughout the state, blacks voted in large numbers, and in eastern North Carolina where blacks constituted a majority in some counties, black candidates were even elected to seats in both houses of the General Assembly. Twenty blacks were elected to the General Assembly, 17 to the House of Representatives and three to the State Senate. Although no blacks were elected to office in Asheville or Buncombe County, the Republican Party did well there. Election returns show that Holden, who was elected governor, received 1,049 votes while his Conservative challenger, Thomas Ashe, who was nominated after Zebulon Vance declined the nomination, received 875 votes.⁴⁵³ In addition to Holden, Asheville and Buncombe County’s voters also cast the majority of their votes for William Candler, the Republican candidate for a seat in the lower house of the General Assembly.⁴⁵⁴

Republicans in Asheville and Buncombe County secured a majority vote for their candidates through careful party organizing and discipline. A primary tool in this effort was

⁴⁵¹ *The Raleigh Sentinel*, 9 March, 1868.

⁴⁵² *The Raleigh Sentinel*, 1 April, 1868.

⁴⁵³ John L. Cheney, Jr., ed., *North Carolina Government 1585-1979: A Narrative and Statistical History*, (Raleigh, North Carolina: North Carolina Department of the Secretary of State, 1981), 1402.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1070.

the Union League. Originally founded by northern businessmen to support Lincoln's war policies, the League, which had chapters in cities throughout the northern and border states, became a major political force after the war. The passage of the 1867 Reconstruction Acts and the granting of voting rights to black males resulted in the expansion of the League's influence in the South. Through the League, black voters were educated on the details of the political process, and instructed on the important political issues of the day. The Union League's activities did not go unnoticed by white Conservatives in Asheville and western North Carolina, and they were quite vocal in their opposition to the organization. The editors of Asheville's leading Conservative newspaper, *The Asheville News and Farmer*, went as far as to suggest that the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist organization that made its appearance in the region in 1866, could be a viable counterweigh to the Union League.

In an 1868 article, the newspaper reported that while most people had not yet determined just "what the Ku Klux Klan can be," the organization's influence was sure to grow. "Already it is one of the sensations of the day," and would prove to be "a powerful and lasting instrument of good," the paper said.⁴⁵⁵ The article described the Klan as "a secret organization, conservative in its character and breathing destruction to Radicalism. As such," the paper informed its readers, "we say: Three cheers for the Ku Klux Klan!"⁴⁵⁶ The Klan was well positioned, the paper said further, "to be an offset to the Radical Union Leagues which have for a year or more wrought such dire mischief throughout the length and breadth of the land."⁴⁵⁷ The Union League, the paper said, was "ineffably dirty and vile," but

⁴⁵⁵ *The Asheville News and Farmer*, 4, December, 1868.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

the Ku Klux Klan “was elevated and chivalrous.”⁴⁵⁸ The paper concluded its praise of the Klan by warning the members of the local Union League to “Beware ...[y]our machinations are to be no longer unopposed or tamely suffered.”⁴⁵⁹

The success of the Union League was a direct threat to the efforts of Conservatives to regain their power in the state. Some even argued that the League’s activities, especially their interracial meetings and political rallies, were evidence of the League’s efforts to force social and political equality on the South. Because of this, Conservatives opposed the League with much determination throughout Asheville and western North Carolina. In 1867, local whites physically assaulted members of Asheville’s Union League. According to Alexander Jones, who reported the incident in his Republican leaning newspaper, the *Hendersonville Pioneer*, (later renamed the *Asheville Pioneer*), two of the victims nearly died from the attack that he said was the work of local Conservatives. Jones asserted that the incident, which involved the victims being struck with rocks as they left a League meeting, “revealed a premeditated conspiracy that was carried out by a number of men who had been lying in wait throughout the city to carry out the attack.”⁴⁶⁰ He went on to write that because no effort was made to punish the guilty parties, local leaders were clearly “in cahoots” with the attackers.⁴⁶¹

Jones’ condemnation of Asheville’s Conservative leaders and his support of local blacks and the Union League is interesting in that in the immediate aftermath of the war he

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁰ *The Henderson Pioneer*, 9, July, 1867.

⁴⁶¹ *The Henderson Pioneer*, 9, July, 1867.

had opposed political or civil rights for blacks and he had even advocated their colonization. Jones changed his position when, along with other anti-Conservatives, he realized that the political support of thousands of black voters could help challenge the Conservatives' hold on power in North Carolina. After the passage of the 1867 Reconstruction Acts, and the implementation of the constitutional mandate of black male suffrage, Jones and his white allies eagerly embraced the state's newly enfranchised black voters. This support was seen not only in their efforts to protect black voters, but also to their support of the local Freedmen's Bureau.

After struggling in his role as the Bureau's agent in western North Carolina, Murphy quit the job in 1867 and turned the position over to Oscar Eastmond, a former Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army. Through his newspaper, Jones continued to vigorously report and denounce any attempts by local Conservatives to intimidate black voters or impede Eastmond in his duties. On August twentieth of that year, Jones reported that white Conservative had tried to "intimidate a black man into betraying the membership signs of the Union League."⁴⁶² In the end, Jones said, it was the Conservative who was fooled because the victim refused to be manipulated into betraying his oath to the League. This evidence, Jones concluded, demonstrated that despite the Conservative Party's attempts to prove otherwise, "Sambo was qualified to vote after all."⁴⁶³ Through his paper, Jones and other local Republicans pledged their support for Eastmond's efforts to protect blacks. They warned Conservative employers, who sometimes fired any black employees who dared to have their own political views, to refrain from such behavior. Conservatives were told that if

⁴⁶² *The Asheville Pioneer*, 20, August, 1867.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

anyone discharged a former slave “for exercising the rights of freemen...they will be reported to the Bureau and strictly dealt with.”⁴⁶⁴ Blacks were encouraged not to allow themselves to be cowed by whites. Further, if they felt that they were being pressured to support their employer’s candidates, “they should join the Union League, register, and vote Republican.”⁴⁶⁵

By supporting the efforts of the Freedmen’s Bureau, Asheville’s Republican leaders knew they were gaining an important political ally. Under the Eastmond’s leadership, a more aggressive effort was made to protect the interest of blacks who were now key members in the Republican Party. Eastmond’s efforts included a direct attempt to loosen the grip that Conservatives had on the local government. Unlike Murphy, Eastmond refused to back down when Conservatives challenged him. His more uncompromising approach to the Bureau’s work in Asheville and western North Carolina was undoubtedly a result of his experiences in eastern North Carolina. While serving with the First North Carolina Union Infantry Regiment, Eastmond had witnessed firsthand the contentious nature of race relations in North Carolina. These experiences had convinced him, as he said in a communiqué to his commanders, “reconstructing the South required drastic action.”⁴⁶⁶ He also told his commanders that while it was obvious that steps needed to be taken to protect the interests of blacks, the interests of white southern Unionists needed to be protected as well.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁶ Oscar Eastmond to Lt. Col. J. A. Campbell, A.A.G., June 10, 1865, First North Carolina Infantry Regimental Letter and Endorsement Book, Records of Movements and Activities of Volunteer Union Organizations, Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, Record Group 94, National Archives; First Infantry, North Carolina, Index of Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers who served in Organizations from the State of North Carolina, National Archives (microfilm 401-3, State Archives, Raleigh, North Carolina).

When his unit, composed of white southern Unionists, was mustering out of service in 1865, Eastmond asked his commanders to allow his men to keep their weapons. He told his commanders that he believed that the men might need their weapons to protect themselves and their property from Confederate sympathizers. Eastmond believed that the federal government had a duty to do all that it could to help these men regain their normal lives and to not “leave them to the mercy of those from whom both themselves and their families have suffered taunts, and violence during the rebellion—men who have burned their homes, desolated their plantations and simply left what they could not destroy, the land.”⁴⁶⁷ Eastmond told his superiors that he was certain that “secret plots of midnight violence and highway murder” would follow, especially if they were unprepared to meet the challenge.⁴⁶⁸

For Eastmond the assault against members of the Asheville’s Union League confirmed his concerns. After local officials refused to make any arrest in the case, Eastmond informed his superiors that Asheville’s leaders were not just ignoring orders, but that “they were openly resisting federal authority.”⁴⁶⁹ He pointed out that despite federal orders, local judges had defiantly declared that they would not obey the Bureau’s orders to allow blacks to testify in court. Their reasoning, he said, was that to do so would be a violation of state laws. Eastmond said that local officials had been told that federal laws superseded state law in such matters, but his words were ignored. Along with local Republican leaders, Eastmond concluded that “the Conservatives’ disregard of federal

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁹ Oscar Eastmond to Jacob F. Chur, 15 July, 1867, Field Office Records, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, (M1909, roll 4).

authority and their approbation to political violence” made it necessary for him to challenge such intransigence.⁴⁷⁰

Eastmond made his initial move against Asheville’s Conservative leaders when he came to the defense of a local black man named Camy Spears. Spears had been convicted of assault and horse theft. Eastmond did not believe that Spears had been given a fair trial and asked federal military authorities to overturn the conviction. Eastmond informed his superiors that Spears’ testimony that three white men had “threatened to kill him if he did not reveal the whereabouts of his employer’s livestock,” had not been heard in court.⁴⁷¹ In response, local leaders, mainly the city’s Conservative prosecutor, David Coleman, and Conservative Superior Court Judge Augustus Merrimon, argued that Eastmond was overstepping his authority by seeking to have the conviction overturned. According to Coleman, who had suspended Spears’ conviction on the grounds that blacks “were ignorant and easily misled,” Eastmond’s decision “to act on the ex-parte testimony of a black convict and his comrades,” was foolhardy. Moreover, Coleman argued that any attempt to interfere with the business of local courts would “inspire local Unionists, blacks, and Republicans to challenge [C]onservative authority in the city.”⁴⁷²

Judge Merrimon, who had presided over the case, and then later resigned his judgeship in protest of Eastmond's interference, shared Coleman’s sentiments. In response to federal inquiries about the case, Merrimon argued that the Bureau’s meddling “showed

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷² David Coleman to Jonathan Worth, 9 August, 1867, *The Correspondence of Jonathan Worth*, (Raleigh, North Carolina: North Carolina Historical Commission, 1909), 9.

Buncombe County's black population and 'worst men' that they could disregard civil authority with impunity."⁴⁷³ Other Conservative leaders predicted that Eastmond's actions and the potential reversal of Spears' conviction "would create wild and unlawful thoughts" among the city and county's black population.⁴⁷⁴ Some argued that federal intrusion would have a negative impact on local labor needs. In his continued protest against Eastmond's actions, Coleman argued that because of Spears' indigent status, a local white attorney named Natt Atkinson had decided, "to act as security in return for Spears' bound labor."⁴⁷⁵ This arrangement, Coleman went on to say, was good for both parties because Spears was able to avoid incarceration, and Atkinson, who was in need of workers, had part of his labor needs filled. Coleman argued that any further intervention by federal military authorities would "deprive men like Atkinson of the freedpeople's labor, for which the out-of-court deal demonstrated was in demand."⁴⁷⁶

The resistance that Eastmond received from local Conservative leaders did not deter him. Even when they tried to have him removed from office, he remained steadfast in his determination to protect the interests of local blacks and white Unionists. When questions arose about how he executed his duties, he argued that his detractors should not be allowed to succeed in the efforts to thwart the authority of the federal government. "Are officers and Agents of the Bureau to be intimidated, their hands tied, and mouths closed, for fear of

⁴⁷³ Augustus Merrimon to Jonathan Worth, 9 August, 1867, *The Correspondence of Jonathan Worth*, (Raleigh, North Carolina; North Carolina Historical Commission, 1909), 10.

⁴⁷⁴ Elizabeth Gregorpy McPherson, "Letters from North Carolina to Andrew Johnson," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 28, (October 1951), 514.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

inciting the displeasure of men, who are ever ready to thwart the designs of Government?” he asked. “As one who fought from the commencement to the end of the War, for *Liberty*,” he wrote, “I answer God *forbid!*”⁴⁷⁷ Surveying the political landscape in Asheville and western North Carolina, Eastmond stated that his “mountain district ranked among the most rebellious regions in the State.”⁴⁷⁸ He argued that instead of weakening or restricting the Bureau activities, his superiors needed to give him their firm support. “If there is a place in North Carolina where Military power is needed it is west of the Blue Ridge,” he told his superiors.⁴⁷⁹

Local Republicans rallied around Eastmond. In his newspaper, Jones stated that it was no surprise “that in consequence of some of his official acts” local Conservatives would want Eastmond removed from office. “Nevertheless,” Jones wrote, “the agent was among the most faithful servants of the government.”⁴⁸⁰ No doubt voicing the opinion of his Republican comrades, Jones stated that federal officials needed to be upheld. Throughout the summer months of 1867, Jones printed stories that supported the efforts of the local Bureau agent. In return, Eastmond staunchly defended local Republicans, and, as Nash points out, “the mountain party’s acceptance of black political participation allowed the agent to become an important part of the county’s Republican organization.”⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁷ Oscar Eastmond to Jacob F. Chur, August 27, 1867, Second Military District Records, 1867-1868, United States Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Record Group 393, National Archives, Washington D.C.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁰ *Asheville Pioneer*, 5 September, 1867.

⁴⁸¹ Steven Nash, “Aiding the Southern Mountain Republicans: The Freedmen’s Bureau in Buncombe County,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 93 (January 2006), 19.

Although Asheville and western North Carolina's white Republicans were willing to accept blacks as voters, they were not willing to give blacks an active or public voice in the party. At the Raleigh meeting that was held to organize the party in 1867, there was serious opposition to any black participation in the party. Benjamin Hedrick, the former University of North Carolina professor who was dismissed for voicing pro-Union sentiments in 1856, vigorously protested black membership in the party. Hedrick and others argued that any reliance on blacks would ultimately jeopardize the party's standing among whites who might be inclined to support the party. This was not a momentary concern either. As time passed, this sentiment became even more pronounced among white Republican leaders, especially in Asheville and western North Carolina.

Another troubling issue for whites regarding black participation in the Party was that trying to convince blacks to be a silent partner in the party was difficult because state wide their numbers were significant enough for them to be a major force in the Party. If, for instance, all black males 21 years of age and older registered to vote in North Carolina in 1868, then the Republicans potentially had more than 68,000 voters, assuming of course that they voted Republican, which most blacks did. This numerical strength translated into even greater political strength when the number of blacks was combined with the number of white Northerners who had relocated to the state and joined the Republican Party. Together these two groups had the ability to out vote native southern white Republicans. When the Republicans held their second party convention in Raleigh in late 1867, northern white Republicans and blacks were able to exert significant influence over the development of the Party's political platform. Over the objections of native white Republicans, blacks and

northern white delegates were successful in their efforts to have the party's platform include a provision that called for "the confiscation of the property of former Confederates."⁴⁸²

Native white southern Republicans found the radical nature of the Party's platform disturbing. Some like Daniel Goodloe, a Unionist from Henderson County, went as far as to call for all Unionists to withdraw their support from the Republicans and to create their own Constitutional Union Party. Although Goodloe's plan never came to fruition, many native white Republicans, especially in the mountain counties did voice their displeasure at the direction of the party. In a letter to his friend David Carter, John Pool expressed the frustration of many white Republicans when he said that the radical path of the Party threatened the political future of the leading men of the state. "Such men as you, Dick, Settle, Fowle, Warren, and Barnes, and myself," he wrote, "are threatened with political ruin."⁴⁸³ As a participant in the Party's convention, Pool stated that he did all he "could to get some justice for us [and] some prudence in our counsels. But to no purpose. We are badly treated," he said, "and that for the purpose of accomplishing the personal ends of men who have come among us under the hope of controlling the [N]egro vote as to dominate the whole government of the State. Those who assist to put our government in the hands of strangers will," he asserted in frustration, "be odious forever."⁴⁸⁴

The "odious" nature of the Republican Party's policies and structure, especially the active participation of blacks may have contributed to the party's inability to maintain its

⁴⁸² Gordon B. McKinney, *Southern Mountain Republicans 1865-1900: Politics and the Appalachian Community*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 45.

⁴⁸³ John Pool to David M. Carter, 31 September, 1867, David Miller Carter Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

political dominance in Asheville and much of western North Carolina after 1868. Although Republicans won approximately 53 percent of the vote in western North Carolina in 1868, that margin dropped to 40 percent two years later. In 1868, the party won large majorities in 12 of the 24 counties, including Buncombe, that comprised the mountains of western North Carolina. Four years later, in 1872, the party, while winning at the state level only won majorities in four of the 24 mountain counties. By this time, voters in Buncombe County were casting the majority of their votes for the Conservative Democratic Party.⁴⁸⁵

The decline of the Republican Party's political fortunes in Asheville and western North Carolina continued in the years that followed. In the 1872 gubernatorial race, for example, Tod Caldwell, the Burke County native who had assumed the governor's office after Holden was impeached in 1871, only carried six of the 24 mountain counties of western North Carolina. In addition to failing to win a majority of the votes in his own home county, Caldwell, who ultimately defeated his Democratic challenger and Asheville native Augustus Merrimon, also failed to obtain a majority of the votes in Buncombe County. It was not until 1896 that a Republican gubernatorial candidate was able to once again gain a majority vote in Buncombe County. This result that was largely due to the political alliance the Republicans had formed that year with the Populist Party, a third political party that made its appearance in the state in the late 1880s.

In addition to the Republican Party's declining political fortunes at the state and local level, the Party's candidates for national political offices also failed to win the majority of either Asheville or Buncombe County's voters in most elections after 1870. After 1868,

⁴⁸⁵ John L. Cheney, Jr., ed., *North Carolina Government 1585-1979: A Narrative and Statistical History*, (Raleigh, North Carolina: North Carolina Department of the Secretary of State, 1981), 1402.

Asheville and Buncombe County's voters consistently voted for Democratic candidates, as did the majority of western North Carolina's voters. Much like state and local elections, this trend was rather consistent, being broken only twice: once in 1888, when Hamilton Ewart of Hendersonville was elected to the United States House of Representatives; and in 1894, when Richard Pearson of Asheville was elected to represent the region in Congress. Two years later, in 1896, Asheville and Buncombe County voters would once again cast the majority of their votes for Republican candidates in both state and national election. That year Pearson was re-elected to a second term in Congress, and Daniel Russell, a Republican from Wilmington, was elected governor.

Race was a major factor in the failure of the Republican Party in Asheville and Buncombe County after 1872. As Gordon McKinney notes, the issue of blacks and their participation in Republican politics plagued the Party's development in western North Carolina throughout the late nineteenth century. Even in 1868, a small riot driven largely by racial problems erupted at one of the polling places in Asheville. Although this riot, which resulted in the death of one black man, centered on black opposition to one of their own voting for a Conservative candidate, the incident reminded whites that with the blessings of Republicans, blacks were now participating in politics as their equals. Moreover, as McKinney observes, on the mind of many whites that day was the fact that while blacks now had the right to vote, the 1867 Reconstruction Acts had disfranchised many leading whites. This fact was a source of irritation for many Conservative whites, especially since it was a Republican Congress that had created this state of affairs. The end result of this for the Republicans was that in western North Carolina in general and Asheville and Buncombe

County in particular, the party remained splintered between two groups: “native [white] Unionists on the one side and carpetbaggers and blacks on the other.”⁴⁸⁶

Throughout the mountain South, white Republicans were willing to have blacks vote for their candidates but they did not want them to have an active voice in the Party. As McKinney shows, this arrangement proved workable in the initial phases of the Party’s development. Mountain blacks, as the communiqué of one group of black Republicans in Buncombe County indicates, showed no early signs of either challenging or demanding a role in the local party’s leadership. In a letter to William Scott, a white Republican who was running for Congress in North Carolina’s western district, Alexander Gates, who said he was speaking on behalf of the county’s black Republicans, told Scott that “we wish to express to you our grateful thanks for the gratifying and praiseworthy way in which you spoke to us. Having so lately escaped slavery we know our state and condition are backward, yet we are not so far back as to be ungrateful for kindness.”⁴⁸⁷ In words that seemed to accept that for the present blacks needed to follow the lead of whites, Gates wrote that he hoped that “ere long we may rise upward and testify to the friends of the colored man that we are and have improved sufficiently to merit their praise.”⁴⁸⁸ In short, Gates recognized that he and his fellow black Republicans needed to take a back seat on the Republican train, and that was exactly what local white Republicans wanted and expected.

⁴⁸⁶ Gordon B. McKinney, *Southern Mountain Republicans 1865-1900, Politics and the Appalachian Community*, (Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1978), 47.

⁴⁸⁷ Alexander Gates to William Lafayette Scott, 31 May, 1871, William Lafayette Scott Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Another problem that black membership in the Republican Party created for local white party leaders was the national party's continued commitment to black political and civil rights. Throughout the later nineteenth century national Republican leaders in Congress introduced legislation that sought to expand and protect the rights of blacks in the South. In 1870 and 1871 Congress passed bills that were directed against the activities of the Ku Klux Klan and similar organizations like the Redshirts and the Knights of the White Camelia. After numerous Congressional investigations into the activities of these groups, Congress concluded that these organizations were nothing more than political terror groups whose mission was to impede the political rights of blacks through extra-legal means. Under the leadership of the Republican Party, Congress enacted the Force Law of 1870. Directed specifically against the Klan, the law stipulated that it was a "punishable crime for any person to prevent another from voting by bribery, force, or intimidation."⁴⁸⁹ The president was given the authority to use the United States military to enforce the provisions of the law. To further strengthen the law, Congress passed a second bill, called the Ku Klux Klan Bill in 1871. It re-affirmed the president's authority to use the military against the Klan and similar groups, and allowed the president to suspend the writ of habeas corpus to suppress these groups if necessary.⁴⁹⁰

Northern congressional Republicans also called for and introduced additional civil rights laws. Concerned about what they believed to be discrimination against blacks in southern courts and public accommodations, Congress passed a new Civil Rights Bill in 1875. The Bill, which was an effort to expand the provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment,

⁴⁸⁹ John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, Eighth Edition, (New York, New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2000), 276.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

made it illegal to deny blacks the right to serve on juries and to withhold from them “full and equal” treatment in public accommodations. The law, which was later declared unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court in 1883, made it a federal crime for anyone to deny a citizen “the full enjoyment” of accommodations in inns, public transportation, theaters, and other places of amusements.⁴⁹¹ The legislation greatly expanded the reach of the national government in that it did not just concern itself with acts of state governments but extended to the acts and conduct of private individuals. While some southern Republicans supported the Bill, primarily out of deference to their large black constituencies, their more conservative southern counterparts did not. Many southern conservative Republicans believed the Bill would ultimately threaten their party’s ability to attract more southern whites to the Party.

Federal civil rights legislation did increase the difficulties that Republicans had in attracting white voters in places like Asheville and western North Carolina. From the beginning, the conservative racial attitudes of whites in the region forced the Party’s leaders to try and steer clear of the actions and policies of their national Party leaders. While the Party’s history showed that it owed its existence to federal intervention in the South, local Party leaders knew that they had to find ways to maintain the Party’s viability once that federal intervention came to an end. Consequently, Republican leaders in Asheville and the surrounding mountain region always sought to divert white voters’ attention away from the more liberal racial policies of the Party’s national leaders. They tried instead to focus on issues that appealed to local conditions and concerns, issues that include improving education

⁴⁹¹ Civil Rights Act of 1875. Pub L. 18 Stat. 335. 1, March, 1875. Print.

and enhancing the state's support for the development and extension of the region's railroad system.

In 1889, Hamilton Ewart, whose election to Congress in 1888 gave mountain Republicans a brief respite from their political defeats in western North Carolina, explicitly stated that the racial policies of national Republican Party, threatened the Party's viability locally. At the time, national Republicans were concerned that southern Democratic governments were manipulating the election process so as to weaken the votes of blacks. To deal with the problem, congressional Republicans introduced legislation in 1890 that called for federal supervision of state and local election procedures. The proposed legislation, which was called the Force Bill of 1890, was introduced by Massachusetts Congressman Henry Cabot Lodge, and specifically called for federal oversight of all congressional and presidential elections. The Bill sought to empower federal circuit courts and not, as was traditionally the case, state and local officials with the responsibility of monitoring local election procedures. According to McKinney, the Bill, which ultimately failed to overcome a filibuster in the United States Senate, placed southern mountain Republicans in a difficult position. On the one hand, some were interested in ensuring that the votes of blacks were counted; but on the other hand, they recognized that any effort by the federal government to assist them would be seen by many local whites as the unnecessary intrusion of outsiders. In fact, most white southerners were appalled by the Bill and argued that its passage would be tantamount to the reinstitution of Reconstruction which had ended in 1877.

When the Force Bill was introduced in 1890, there were eight southern mountain Republicans in Congress. Of the eight, only Hamilton Ewart opposed the bill. At first

glance, Ewart's opposition to the Bill is hard to understand, but his arguments against it show that the early concerns that Republicans had about an over-reliance on black voters remained. As the Force Bill was being debated, Ewart told his Republican colleagues that the Republican strategy of depending on black voters was unwise. "Every year," he stated, "the Republican party in the [s]tates of Tennessee, North Carolina, and the two Virginias is becoming stronger and more aggressive. It is not acquiring this strength by making morbid appeals to the [N]egro and by exciting the passions and prejudices, but by appealing to the sober judgment of white voters of the South on the great issue of protection to the home industries and home labor."⁴⁹² In other words, Ewart believed that southern white voters were more concerned about economic policies than in social or racial issues, especially policies that seemed to advanced equality between blacks and whites.

When Ewart was elected to Congress in 1888, the nation was beginning to experience an economic downturn that greatly affected farmers in the South and West. In response, farmers who found themselves struggling with mounting debt started organizing politically as the Farmers Alliance and began advocating political solutions to their problems. As historian James Beeby notes, Ewart, who was a member of the southern wing of the Farmers Alliance, felt that the Alliance's emergence caused major political divisions within the Southern Democratic Party, and thus provided the Republican Party with an opportunity to expand its influence among southern white voters. In Ewart's mind the passage of the Force

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*

Bill would do nothing but “stymie any chance that Republicans had at electoral growth in the South.”⁴⁹³

At the local level, Ewart’s position made sense because out of nearly 40,000 voters who made up his district, only 3,672 were black. While Ewart was no doubt glad to have the black vote, it is clear from these figures that his and the Republican Party’s future in western North Carolina was more dependent on how whites voted. However, while drawing more white voters to the Republican Party was paramount in western North Carolina, his Republican colleagues in other areas of the state knew that the retention of black voters was important to the Party as well and could not be summarily dismissed. At the state level, for example, the continued support of blacks in the eastern part of the state, where the majority of the state’s blacks lived, allowed the Republicans to be competitive in state-wide elections. The only problem with this was that unlike western North Carolina, the much larger black population in eastern North Carolina also meant that in that region, blacks demanded a more active voice in the Party’s leadership. Moreover, unlike the more docile voter that Alexander Gates represented in Buncombe County, blacks in eastern North Carolina also demanded that the Party support black candidates. The political boldness of blacks in eastern North Carolina proved problematic, however, for one key reason: it made it difficult for the Party’s white leaders to resist the charge that it was the “Black Party.”

The political activity of blacks in the eastern port city of Wilmington is a perfect example of the more active political involvement of blacks in the Republican Party in eastern North Carolina. From the time that blacks were granted the right to vote, blacks in

⁴⁹³ James M. Beeby, *Revolt of the Tar Heels: The North Carolina Populist Movement, 1890-1901*, (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 19.

Wilmington cast the wide majority of their votes for Republican candidates, held leadership positions, and stood as candidates for the Party. In 1868, Wilmington resident Abraham Galloway, a former slave who had escape from bondage in 1857, was elected to the General Assembly.⁴⁹⁴ James Dudley, who was elected to the office of Register of Deeds in 1891, and Elijah Green and Andrew Walker, who both served on Wilmington's Board of Alderman, were frequently elected to political offices in Wilmington.⁴⁹⁵ During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, Wilmington and New Hanover County voters elected a total of 15 blacks to the state's General Assembly.⁴⁹⁶

Wilmington was not the only eastern North Carolina city where blacks played a more active role in Republican politics. As historian Helen Edmonds notes, from 1867 to 1900, blacks were frequently elected to public office in eastern North Carolina towns and counties. Among those counties were Craven, Edgecombe, Warren, and Halifax Counties. From 1868 to 1899, Craven County voters elected 14 blacks to represent them in the General Assembly. In 1895, when along with the state's Populist Party, the Republicans gained control of the General Assembly, more than 300 blacks were elected or appointed to public offices throughout eastern North Carolina.

While there can be little doubt that the political success of blacks in other parts of the state was viewed with a sense of pride by blacks in Asheville and Buncombe County, they had little first-hand experience of this locally. Although they continued to participate in the

⁴⁹⁴ LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *A Day of Blood: The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot*, (Raleigh, North Carolina: North Carolina Office of Archives and History Raleigh, 2009), 11.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid* , 29.

⁴⁹⁶ William S. Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries*, 431.

electoral process after 1868, their participation did not translate into their being elected or appointed to public office with any frequency, nor did it mean that they had a voice in the Party to which they gave their loyalty. During the period from 1868 to 1900, only one black resident, Newton Shepard, ever served on the city's Board of Alderman. Born a slave in 1841, Shepard, who worked for the city as a street foreman, served as a member of the city's Board of Alderman in 1882. During his tenure, the city, which also elected a Republican mayor that year, appointed another black resident, Henry Saxton, to serve a one-year term on the city's three-man police force. With the exception of the appointment of Isaac Dickson to the city's school board in 1888, no other blacks were elected or appointed to public office in Asheville in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁹⁷

In a city where blacks never constituted more than 14 percent of the population, Shepard's election to the Board of Aldermen is difficult to explain. Voting records for most of the late nineteenth century are nonexistent and shed no light on the matter. Moreover, apart from noting that Shepard was a member of the city's Board of Alderman, local newspapers did not even mention his race. It was not until 1924, the year that Shepard died, that the local paper pointed out that Shepard was black and had served on the city's Board of Aldermen "in the early days."⁴⁹⁸ This notwithstanding, understanding Shepard's election is further complicated by the fact that blacks did not compose a decisive majority in any of Asheville's four city wards in 1882. Unlike other cities where blacks often constituted a majority in at least one ward, blacks in Asheville, as an examination of the 1870, 1880, and 1890 censuses show, were dispersed throughout the city, forming small neighborhoods in

⁴⁹⁷ *Minutes and Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen of the City of Asheville, North Carolina*, 1882.

⁴⁹⁸ *Asheville Citizen*, 27, September, 1924.

each of the city's four wards. Thus, Shepard would have needed the support of a significant number of white voters to be elected.

According to Asheville's 1872 city's charter, which called for the election rather than the appointment of the city's Board of Alderman, Shepard lived in the city's fourth ward on Hill Street. While blacks did not constitute a majority in that ward, a good turnout among black and white Republicans who were willing to support a black candidate must have ensured Shepard's election. Considering that Asheville's voters also elected the local Republican leader and former Confederate Colonel Virgil Lusk as mayor, Republicans did better than usual in local elections that year. Once in office, Lusk, who no doubt had Shepard's support, succeeded in securing the unanimous appointment of Henry Saxton to the city's police force.

Despite his previous service as a Colonel in the Confederate Army, Lusk's likely support of not only Shepard's election to the Board of Aldermen, but also Saxton's appointment to the city's police force is not surprising. Lusk served as the U.S. District Attorney for the western district of North Carolina in 1870 and emerged as an active defender of black political and civil rights after the war. He even took on the local Ku Klux Klan by sending a bill of indictment against its members for "Ku-Kluxing some local [N]egroes" in 1869.⁴⁹⁹ Although the indictment was later thrown out by Buncombe County's grand jury, Lusk's bold and controversial actions did not go unnoticed by the city's most prominent Klansman, Randolph Shotwell. A native of Rutherford County, Shotwell had

⁴⁹⁹ Gordon B. McKinney, ed., "The Klan in the Southern Mountains: The Lusk-Shotwell Controversy," *Appalachian Journal* 5 (Winter 1981): 93.

moved to Asheville in 1869, and as the publisher of the local newspaper, the *Asheville Citizen*, he denounced Lusk for his actions against the Klan.

Although Klan violence in western North Carolina never reached the levels that it did in the piedmont and coastal regions of the state, Shotwell, as Inscoe and McKinney note, was effective in organizing efforts to impede local law enforcement against the Klan. In fact, his actions eventually led to a direct confrontation with Lusk in 1870. Meeting Lusk on the grounds of the city's public square, Shotwell physically assaulted the prosecutor, knocking him to the ground. In response, Lusk drew a gun and wounded Shotwell in both legs. Although Shotwell was later convicted of assaulting a public official, the sentence, according to the local newspapers, was suspended at Lusk's request. Shortly thereafter, Shotwell sold his newspaper and returned to Rutherford County.

By and large, 1882, the year that Shepard served on the city's Board of Aldermen, was the high water mark for direct political activity for blacks in Asheville. Besides Isaac Dickson's one-year appointment to the city's school board in 1888, a move that may have been motivated by the fact that black support was needed to pass the tax increases necessary to operate the school system, no other blacks were elected or appointed to public office in Asheville during the late nineteenth century. Shepard's tenure as an Alderman only lasted one year. During this time, Shepard's effectiveness, especially where the interests of blacks were concerned, is unclear. While it is hard to imagine that he would not have used his position to try and represent the interest of the city's black residents, the records of the Board of Aldermen's meetings reveal no particular action in this respect. On the whole, the business that came before the Aldermen during Shepard's term was standard, dealing mainly

with continuing city improvements, especially around the public square. More than anything, from the time that Shepard was elected until the end of the century, Asheville's leaders focused on improving the city's infrastructure and amenities, which included building additional hotels.

When Shepard died in 1924 the local newspaper stated that he had spent his last years working as a janitor at a local school, and that he had never become a "modern man."⁵⁰⁰ While the paper failed to explain what it meant by this statement, the implication is that he may have never shed the subservient mentality that slavery was meant to instill. This may explain why white leaders tolerated his presence on the city's Board of Aldermen. If the paper's description is true, Shepard may have represented the more passive type of black who would not make unreasonable demands on the city's white and racially conservative leadership. Moreover, since the number of tourists who came to the city continued to grow, the need for the city's black voters to support the tax increases that were necessary to finance city improvements might have entered the minds of the city's white leaders as well. They may have surmised that having someone from the city's black community on the Board of Aldermen, especially during a time of expansion, might have ensured black support for local taxation policies that might have garnered less support from whites.

Although it is not entirely clear why the city's white leaders were willing to countenance Shepard's presence on the Board of Alderman, his tenure did not translate into greater attention or city resources to local black neighborhoods. When it came to city improvements the board's attention remained on the public areas of town, places that were

⁵⁰⁰ *Asheville Citizen Times*, 28 September, 1924.

most likely to be frequented by tourists. At their meetings, the Aldermen gave little attention to the areas where blacks lived. Throughout the late nineteenth century, from 1868 to 1900, blacks rarely appeared before the Board. When they did, as when members of the city's colored hook and ladder company requested that the city's old fire truck be given to their company, their requests were usually deferred to a committee or to a subsequent meeting. Often times no action was taken at all. After a decision on the request of the colored hook and ladder company was postponed for consideration at a later meeting, for example, the request was never considered again.

At times, members of the city's black community did appear before the Board to request greater police protection, especially when special events were being held at their local institutions, such as churches. In response, the Aldermen would order that a special police officer be appointed to provide the requested protection. At their monthly meeting in December 1873, the Aldermen approved the appointment of George Morris, a member of the city's black community, to be a "special policeman at the African Zion Church and ordered that he be allowed fifty cents for each arrest and conviction."⁵⁰¹ Similar instructions were given in 1874 and 1876, when the Aldermen gave the Mayor the authority "to appoint special Colored policemen for Colored Churches" and to pay them "half of all the fines imposed and no more."⁵⁰² Just why such protection was needed was never specified, but whenever such requests were made the Aldermen usually approved.

⁵⁰¹ *Minutes and the Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen of the City of Asheville, North Carolina*, 7 June, 1874, *Minutes and the Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen of the City of Asheville, North Carolina*, 9 September, 1876.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*

Occasionally, blacks appeared before the Board to request improvements to the streets of their neighborhoods, or at times to complain about the presence of unsavory characters or unlawful activities. In 1888, Isaac Dickson, Charles Lane, and a number of other blacks residents appeared to “ask the Board, that if it could do so, it would be a great convenience, if Sycamore Street could be improved and a sidewalk built thereon and also to have a sidewalk constructed on Valley Street from Sycamore Street Northward....”⁵⁰³ They went on to ask the Board to consider “having some lights placed in that part of the city.”⁵⁰⁴ In response to the requests, the Aldermen promised to do all they could “to give the relief asked for...,” and then referred the matter to the Street Committee for examination. At a subsequent meeting the Street Committee proposed “a plank sidewalk be constructed on Sycamore Street from near the corner of Ray’s Stable of Valley Street to Eagle Street.”⁵⁰⁵

Although the Street Committee’s report was received and entered into the official record, no action was taken on the matter. Years later, residents from that particular neighborhood were still complaining about the condition of the streets. At a meeting of the Aldermen in 1898, Dr. Ruben Bryant, one of only two black doctors in the city, appeared before the Board and complained that the streets in the area, especially along Eagle and Market Streets, the location of the city’s black business district, were in poor condition.⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰³ *Minutes and the Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen of the City of Asheville, North Carolina*, 5 May, 1888.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁶ *Minutes and the Proceeding of the Board of Aldermen of the city of Asheville, North Carolina*, 8 October, 1898.

As on previous occasions, the Board referred the matter to the Street Committee, which never addressed these concerns.

Based on these continuous complaints, the condition of the city's most central black community appears to have been in the process of developing the conditions that Thomas Wolfe later described in his autobiographical novel, *Look Homeward Angel*. Wolfe recalled that his mother had often asked him to go into that neighborhood to find servants to work in her boardinghouse, and stated that his excursions into what he always called "Niggertown" required him to "enter a 'city of rickets,' where he was obliged to poke 'into their fetid shacks, past the slow stench of little rills of mire and sewage, in fetid cellars, through all the rank labyrinth of the hill-sprawled settlement.'"⁵⁰⁷ Although Wolfe's assessment of the conditions of what was really only one of Asheville's scattered black communities was colored by his culturally racist views, the community, as the minutes of the city's Board of Aldermen meetings suggest, was often neglected by the city's leaders. Consequently, the conditions that Wolfe remembered from his youth in the 1920s did not develop overnight. Instead, those conditions were the result of an extended period of ignoring the community's needs.

The neglect that blacks experienced in Asheville during the late nineteenth century was a result of their lack of political power, which was itself a by-product of their negligible political value to the local Republican Party. As time passed, any political value that blacks may have had early on, became more of a political liability. It was in the local Republican Party's interest to keep their connection with blacks hidden from view. This may explain

⁵⁰⁷ David Herbert Donald, *Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), 19.

why black Republicans were asked to not hold any political meetings at the YMI in 1895. Undoubtedly, in an effort to remain politically active, some of the leading black men in Asheville formed the “Colored Republican Club” and began holding their meetings in the YMI building. When Charles McNamee discovered that the club was meeting at the YMI, he promptly told the YMI’s general secretary that he did not think it was wise to allow the club to hold their meetings there. “I have your report of April 30th before me and I do not know whether or not the matter was arranged through me but I am inclined to think it is a mistake to let the Republican Club hold its meetings in the Institute, as I understand they are now doing,” he wrote.⁵⁰⁸ “I think,” McNamee went on to say, “that we should keep all political matters out of the building, or our usefulness and influence will be gone.”⁵⁰⁹ One cannot help but wonder just whom McNamee believed the club’s meeting at the YMI would offend. Since most blacks were Republican voters, it is unlikely that they would have found the fact that the club held its meetings at the YMI offensive.

On the one hand, McNamee’s opposition to the club meeting in the YMI building is understandable. From its inception, the YMI had presented itself as a nonsectarian organization whose mission was the moral, social, and economic betterment of its members. While providing a political forum for blacks was not an explicit part of the organization mission, McNamee, who functioned as a trustee for the building, had never restricted who used the building. In fact, on one occasion, he had backed off a suggestion that tickets to an event at the YMI include a statement that the building would have separate sections for whites and blacks. However, he did not change his position about not allowing the Colored

⁵⁰⁸ Charles McNamee to Benjamin Baker, 25 May, 1895, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina: Collection 1.1/1.B25-21, Box 25 Folder 1.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Republican Club to hold its meetings in the building, and this suggests that for some reason, overt political activity by blacks was different.

Although McNamee never gave any further explanation for his opposition to allowing political meetings at the YMI, the growing intensity and vitriolic nature of North Carolina's political climate in 1895 may have been a factor. By this time the state's Republican Party, which had been the minority Party in the state's General Assembly since 1870, had through its alliance with the Populist Party, ousted the Conservative Democratic Party from power in the General Assembly. This success had placed the Republicans, who remained keenly interested in attracting whites to their party, in a tenuous position, however. With the presence of so many black Republicans in public offices in North Carolina, the Party became more vulnerable to the charge that it was the black Party. This charge was further exacerbated by the fact that the Democratic Party's main strategy against Republicans and their Populist allies was to remind whites that the success of the Republican and Populist coalition placed the state under the control of blacks.

Although the result of the Republican and Populist coalition was the enactment of a series of positive democratic reforms in North Carolina, the active participation and election of blacks in the alliance was problematic for its continued success. Throughout the period of the alliance's ascendancy, the leaders of the state's Democratic Party continuously charged that Republican and Populist success meant "Negro Rule" in North Carolina. In 1892, when the Republicans and Populists first began working together, the state's Democratic leaders tried to use this issue to divide and defeat the alliance. "The success of the Democratic Party

should not be endangered,” one newspaper wrote.⁵¹⁰ “All good citizens should oppose any effort to divide the white voters of this State on the grounds that it might result in a Republican victory and a return to the rule of the [N]egro.”⁵¹¹ The state’s Democratic leader, Furnifold Simmons, told the state’s Democrats that if the Republicans and Populists won that year’s elections, the state would be placed back under the “conditions that prevailed during the days of reconstruction.”⁵¹² “White men,” the Democratic leader argued, “had to stand together for white supremacy.”⁵¹³

As part of their campaign against the Republicans and Populists, the Democrats ran ads in newspapers throughout the state that made exaggerated charges about black office holders. In one advertisement, the Democrats asserted that because of the electoral success of Republicans and Populists the state had been burdened with “NEGRO CONGRESSMEN, NEGRO SOLICITORS, NEGRO REVENUE OFFICERS, NEGRO COLLECTORS OF CUSTOMS, [and] NEGROES in charge of inquest over white dead.”⁵¹⁴ They asked the state’s white voters to remember that under these conditions, blacks were now in charge of the finances of the state’s great cities, and that their power extended to control over the sanitation and police forces of those cities. The Democrats attempted to further poison the minds of whites against the Republicans and Populists, by suggesting that their continued hold on power meant that “NEGRO CONSTABLES” now had the power to arrest white

⁵¹⁰ Jeffrey J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, and Flora J. Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, (Raleigh, North Carolina: Office of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources Raleigh, 1992), 113.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁴ Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina 1850-1900*, 255.

women and men, and that black magistrates were now empowered to preside over the trials of whites. Equally offensive, the Democrats added, “was that under the present state of things even white convicts were now forced to be chained to black convicts, forcing them,” they argued, into a position of “social equality” with black criminals.⁵¹⁵

Race remained a major problem for the Populists and the Republicans coalition. Despite their success, Republicans remained convinced that the party had to reduce its reliance on black voters. One of the most prominent advocates of this in the 1890s was Daniel Russell, the former Superior Court judge and congressman from Wilmington. In fact, when the Republicans nominated Russell as its gubernatorial candidate in 1896, black Republicans protested vigorously. At issue for blacks, was Russell’s advocacy of reducing the role of blacks in the Party and his reported statement that blacks “were savages who stole all week and prayed it off on Sunday, and that they were no more fit to govern than their brethren in the swamps of Africa.”⁵¹⁶ While there was some dispute as to whether Russell had actually made these remarks, the statement was widely circulated and drew much comment from black leaders in North Carolina. After hearing that the Republicans had nominated Russell for governor, Dr. James Shepard, the state’s leading black educator and founder of the North Carolina College for Negroes in Durham, stated that “no self-respecting Negro would ever vote for him.”⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁶ *Winston Union Republican*, July 26, 1888.

⁵¹⁷ James E. Shepard to Thomas Settle, III, 19 May, 1896, Thomas Settle, Jr., and Thomas Settle, III, Papers, The Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Although Russell denied the charges that he was anti-black, some white Republicans saw the suggestion that he was as beneficial to the long-term interest of the Party. This sentiment was especially true among mountain Republicans. Since one of the Party's strategies was to try to mask any connection with blacks, black opposition to Russell's nomination played into this strategy well. Russell recognized this himself and privately touted that his reported opposition to black political involvement would make it difficult for the Democrats to attack him as the black man's candidate. The ultimate benefit of all this, he believed, would be to strengthen Party's ability to appeal to white voters. Writing to a political supporter during the campaign, Russell said that the "Democrats will try the old dodge of trying the 'color line' but it worries them to discover just how to do it. They have been preaching that Russell is dead against the Negroes, that he favors white supremacy, and that he is opposed to even the mildest form of Negro government. Now they will proceed to prove that he is for compelling every white woman to marry a Negro and that he himself is a mulatto. This is a rather heavy job for them," he wrote, "but not too big for them to attempt."⁵¹⁸

Perhaps there was no direct connection between McNamee's opposition to black Republicans meeting at the YMI and the attempt by leading white Republicans to mask the role of blacks in the Party, but in a year when the political participation of blacks was being hotly debated it is unlikely to have escaped his attention. Occasionally McNamee had been asked for his opinion about the charge that Republican victories equaled "Negro domination." In a March 8, 1896 letter thanking McNamee for taking the time to meet with

⁵¹⁸ Daniel Russell to J. H. Ramsay, 27 May, 1896, James Graham Ramsay Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

him, Houston Harper, a freelance writer, reminded McNamee that they had discussed the issue. At the time Harper was preparing an article on the role of blacks in politics. During their meeting, Harper reminded McNamee that “we discussed ‘[N]egro domination’ etc, and agreed that it was a bugaboo.”⁵¹⁹ While Harper did not go into any details about his and McNamee’s conversation, it is clear that both men believed the suggestion that Republican and Populist victories placed the state under “Negro domination” was an attempt to scare white voters into supporting the Democratic Party.

Unfortunately, as McNamee and other mountain Republican leaders knew, such scare tactics worked. Although he never discussed the issue in the letters that he wrote to others, it is clear that McNamee frequently offered his verbal comments on the matter of race and how it affected Southern white voters. In a letter that McNamee received from Miles Hazzard, a writer and supporter of William McKinley, who was running for president in 1896, McNamee was thanked for the insight that he had shared about the political mentality of southern white voters. According to Hazzard, McNamee’s assessment of the attitudes of what he called “lower class whites” in the South was correct.⁵²⁰ “What you have observed in your eight years experience in the South is in every respect absolute fact,” Hazzard wrote.⁵²¹ “The trouble is with the lower class whites, who are in the majority and can easily be reached by unscrupulous politicians....”⁵²² Recognizing that this particular class of voters was

⁵¹⁹ Houston Harper to Charles McNamee, 8 March, 1896, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina; Collection 2.1/1.A25-21, Box 22 Folder 3.

⁵²⁰ Miles Hazzard to Charles McNamee, 10 October, 1896, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina; Collection 2.1/1.A 25-21, Box 22, Folder 4.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*

⁵²² *Ibid.*

important and could not be summarily dismissed, Hazzard, as no doubt McNamee and other Republican leaders knew, said that the chief question confronting McKinley's supporters was how to reach these voters.

One of the primary issues in the 1896 campaign, as Hazzard noted, was national monetary policy and not, as Southern Democrats tried to suggest the issue of race and "Negro Rule." Hazzard told McNamee that as a McKinley supporter, he was convinced that "the country has been changed from free silver and democratic to sound money protection and will give McKinley a majority."⁵²³ Interestingly, the issue of "free silver," a policy that would have expanded the national money supply, was an issue that was widely supported by the Populist Party, and one of the primary areas where Populists and Republicans disagreed. Consequently, in an effort to initially prevent a Populist bolt from their Party, national Democrats had adopted this issue and made it part of their Party's platform. The Democrats had hoped that this would draw Populist Party members back to the Democratic Party. While this move had worked for the Democrats at the national level, it was not, as the 1894 election results in North Carolina revealed, successful at the state level. At the state level, the Populists were more concerned about the highly centralized and undemocratic structure of North Carolina's government under the Democrats.

Once the Republican and Populist alliance gained control of North Carolina's General Assembly they passed laws that helped to widen the democratic experience for all North Carolinians. Besides returning the state to a system of elective local government, the Republican and Populist majority also passed legislation that loosened the restrictions that

⁵²³ *Ibid.*

Democrats had placed on voting rights, a matter that greatly concerned Republicans nationally. Although the federal Constitution prevented any overt denial of a citizen's right to vote, the state's Democratic leaders had created clever ways to restrict the voting rights of blacks. This included redrawing districts to ensure white majorities, disfranchising voters for—in many cases—minor infractions of the law, or by stipulating that all ballots be printed on white paper and contain no distinguishing marks or emblems to indicate which political Party a ballot represented. This latter provision was specifically designed to diminish the votes of illiterate voters who depended on colored ballots to ensure that they were voting for the right Party's candidates. In response to these political manipulations the Republicans and Populists passed a new election law in 1894 repealing the requirement that all ballots be on white paper and bear no Party emblem. On the whole, the new law, as Helen Edmonds notes, made the election process more democratic and increased the number of blacks who could participate in the electoral process.⁵²⁴

In 1896, Russell was elected governor, which was a testament to the continued success of the Republican and Populist alliance. In response the Democratic Party hit the alliance more forcefully where it was weakest, on the issue of race and “Negro Rule.” As individuals like McNamee and Hazzard knew, white voters in Asheville and western North Carolina were susceptible to being influenced by the racial matters. Their voting patterns, as Gordon McKinney found in a study of the rise of the Republican Party in the mountain South, proved this to be the case. In his study, McKinney pointed out that there was a clear correlation between the number of whites voting Republican and the size of local black

⁵²⁴ Helen Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1894-1901*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 128.

populations. When the percentage of blacks in mountain communities rose, “the percentage of whites voting Republican decreased,” he wrote.⁵²⁵ The reverse was true when the number of blacks in the population decreased. By the examining voting patterns of white mountaineers in 1876, McKinney found that when blacks made up more than 30 percent of any particular town or county’s population, Republicans mustered less than 10 percent of the white vote. On the reverse side, when blacks made up 10 percent or less of a particular area’s population in the mountains the number of whites voting Republican exceeded 50 percent.⁵²⁶ In other words, mountain Republicans stood a greater chance of winning the votes of whites when the black population was small not publically active in the Party.

Whether or not the presence and active participation of blacks in the Republican Party in Asheville had an impact on the Party’s political fortunes, especially its ability to attract and retain white voters is not clear. Voting records, which would give a more vivid picture, have not been preserved. What is known is that as far as national, state, and local elections are concerned, the majority of Asheville and Buncombe County’s voters, voted to elect Democrats in most of the years after 1870. Even during the years of the successful alliance between Republicans and Populists, Asheville and Buncombe County voters, in gubernatorial elections at least, voted for the Democratic candidate. The only exception was in 1896 when

⁵²⁵ Gordon McKinney, *Southern Mountain Republicans 1865-1900: Politics and the Appalachia Community*, 134.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

the majority of the county's voters voted for Daniel Russell; but even here the vote was close, with Russell winning the county by less than 400 votes.⁵²⁷

For it to appear that blacks were becoming more politically active and vocal in Asheville was risky for local Republicans, especially in an important election year. This is not to say that Charles McNamee was opposed to the political activism of blacks. Nevertheless, the increasing risk involved with overt black political activism and the need to attract as many white voters as possible in western North Carolina is unlikely to have escaped his attention. Thus, while he may not have been opposed in principal to the idea of blacks forming a Colored Republican Club, the idea of them meeting in such a public place as the YMI, an organization that everyone knew to be closely associated with Biltmore Estate, could potentially jeopardize the Republicans efforts to attract local whites to the their Party.

In the end, because blacks in Asheville and Buncombe County made up such a small percentage of the population, they were unable to exert any real political influence. This fact became even more pronounced when Reconstruction ended and local Republicans no longer saw the benefit of having them as active political allies. Adding to what amounted to the black community's political invisibility was the fact that after 1868, more whites began participating in the electoral process. One of the challenges that Conservatives had faced in 1868, the first election in which blacks had voted, was that many whites could not vote and many others chose, out of frustration, not to vote at all.

⁵²⁷ John L. Cheney, Jr., ed., *North Carolina Government 1585-1979: A Narrative and Statistical History*, (Raleigh, North Carolina: North Carolina Department of the Secretary of State, 1981), 1406.

The apathy that whites felt in 1868 did not last long. Each year thereafter more white voters returned to the polls, not willing to allow the state to be overtaken by what they were told was “Negro Rule.” The result of this was that in Asheville and western North Carolina, blacks, while allowed to vote in elections, were really nonfactors in the region politically. Thus, even before the Democrats succeeded in defeating the Republican and Populist in 1898 and launched their campaign to completely disfranchise black voters by amending the North Carolina Constitution in 1901, black voters in Asheville were already experiencing de jure political disfranchisement. They needed their Party far more than the Party needed them.

In the end, since blacks were without any real or significant political power in Asheville or Buncombe County they lacked the tools necessary to challenge their political, economic and social marginalization. Had things been different and had they found themselves in at least the position of holding the balance of power between white Democrats and Republicans, blacks might have been effective in persuading the city’s leaders to extend greater improvements to their communities, and perhaps been able to more forcefully advocate for wider economic opportunities in the city. As it was, however, their invisibility in the city’s political life placed them a position where they had to make the best of what resources and opportunities they were given.

In many ways, the black experience in Asheville was not unlike that of blacks in other urban areas. The only difference it would seem is that the process of turning inward, of giving the majority of one’s time and energy to their own communities, was initiated much earlier for blacks in Asheville than it was for blacks in other parts of North Carolina. In other words, because of the greater number of blacks in places like Wilmington, Durham, and

Raleigh allowed them to demand greater political status among Republicans, their ability to advance themselves politically and economically were greater than those of blacks in Asheville. This can be seen in the fact that in those communities blacks were elected to local and state political offices throughout the late nineteenth century. Such opportunities helped, for a time at least, to produce greater opportunities for blacks in those communities. From the time the Civil War ended in 1865 to the turn of the twentieth century, when most of the states' blacks were politically disfranchised by the passage of the new election laws in 1900, Asheville's black community was already marginalized politically, economically, and socially. Thus, while Asheville's white leaders continued to promote an image of the city as progressive and cosmopolitan in its outlook, the reality for blacks was social, political, and economic isolation.

Conclusion

From the time that Asheville was incorporated, first as Morristown in 1793, blacks were present and played a role in the township's development. During the antebellum period the majority of Asheville and Buncombe County's black residents were slaves. In this respect, they were not unlike the majority of blacks who lived in other parts of the region, state, and South. Unlike blacks in eastern North Carolina, however, the labor of male slaves in Asheville and western North Carolina was not tied exclusively to agricultural production; instead the use of slaves in the region was more diversified. In Asheville and Buncombe County, some slaves worked in local business establishments—manufacturing hats, selling and delivering goods—while others worked in hotels and boardinghouses, as waiters, chambermaids, cooks, and in some cases, as tour and hunting guides. Some of the region's slaves did work on local farms and plantations, but since the mountains were never dominated by the plantation system, western North Carolina's black population was significantly smaller than in other areas of the South. This condition may have contributed to highland slaves enjoying more autonomy than slaves elsewhere.

The small size of Asheville and western North Carolina's antebellum black population did not ameliorate the sentiments of whites against them. The attitudes of whites in Asheville and western North Carolina were just as racist as they were in other parts of the South. As Frederick Law Olmsted found when he traveled through the region in the 1850s, white highlanders believed firmly that blacks were inferior to whites and that their

enslavement was the only way that blacks could live among them. One white highlander in western North Carolina told Olmsted that he “wouldn’t want to live where niggers are free, they are bad enough when they are slaves...if they were to think themselves equal to we, I don’t think white folks could abide it...”⁵²⁸ Thus, small numbers, economic diversity and greater autonomy did not translate to greater acceptance of blacks in Asheville and western North Carolina.

Anti-black sentiments in western North Carolina did not dissipate after the Civil War. As blacks responded to the opportunities that the post-Civil War world offered, highland whites expressed feelings of shock and disgust, and even called for the colonization of blacks. Moreover, much as the case had been before the war, Asheville’s leading white citizens asked for restrictive legislation against the activities and movement of blacks after the war. If no national program of colonization could be developed, whites in Asheville and the surrounding region ask the state’s lawmakers to adopt “stringent laws...for their government.”⁵²⁹ The idea of living with blacks as free and equal citizens remained an anathema to whites in Asheville and the surrounding region.

Despite the sentiments against them, Asheville and Buncombe County’s black residents set about the daily business of life after the war. For many, this included leaving not just the homes of their former owners, but the region altogether. For those who remained in the Asheville area, finding ways to earn a living was a top priority. Finding employment was hampered in the immediate aftermath of the war, however, because the war had left the

⁵²⁸ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, (New York, New York: Dix and Edwards Publishers, 1856), 50.

⁵²⁹ Otto H. Olsen and Ellen Z. McGrew, “Prelude to Reconstruction: The Correspondence of State Senator Leander Sam Gash, 1866-1867, Part I,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 60 (July 1983), 365.

economy in shambles. As the region's economy recovered, a key component to Asheville's post-war economic growth was railroad development. Prior to the war, the efforts of the city and region's leaders to complete construction of the Western North Carolina Railroad was hampered by political wrangling, labor difficulties, and the Civil War. Although it took another 15 years for the railroad to reach Asheville after the War, the period of construction did provide employment for many local people. Nevertheless, the labor of blacks, the majority of whom worked on the state's convict labor crews, ensured the railroad's completion. Without their labor, Asheville's post-war economic recovery would have been slowed.

Before the arrival of the railroad in Asheville, some blacks found work as farmers or farm laborers. However, the number of blacks working in agriculture declined once rail service reached the city in 1880. As the railroad was being constructed, Asheville and regional leaders, lead primarily by Edward Aston, were actively promoting the city and region as a national health resort. Before the war the region's climate had attracted members of the Southern elite, who spent the summer months vacationing in the region. By promoting the health benefits of the mountains climate, Aston successfully convinced some of the nation's leading health care professionals to come to Asheville, and many of them opened sanitariums to treat patients for illnesses such as tuberculosis. As the health resort and medical industries grew and more sanitariums were opened in the region, blacks found jobs in the industry's service sector, working as chambermaids, bellmen, waiters, janitors, and nursemaids.

Blacks filled similar positions in the city and region's post-war tourism industry. Like the health resort industry, tourism experienced a major boost after the arrival of the Western North Carolina Railroad in 1880 and then the Asheville and Spartanburg Railroad in 1885. The region had always attracted the interest of leisure travelers, but as the consumer culture of the Victorian era took hold the region's popularity as a place for rest and relaxation grew. Businessmen who recognized this began investing in the area and some constructed elaborate hotel and resorts, where blacks were employed as service employees. Non-service related jobs—such as managerial positions like clerks, bookkeepers, and hotel managers—were not opened to blacks. Racism and discrimination were insurmountable barriers to such jobs.

For blacks who hoped for opportunities beyond the service sector of Asheville's two leading industries, those opportunities were largely found in private enterprise. There were the black teachers, ministers, and two black doctors, but for those blacks who were able to amass any significant amount of money, those opportunities came as private business owners. In the early period, individuals such as Isaac Dickson, James Vester Miller, and William Conley, emerged as a few of the city's most successful black businessmen. In some instances, black business owners catered not only to blacks, but to white customers as well. A primary impetus behind the creation of black businesses in Asheville and other places during this period was discrimination. As was the case throughout the South, blacks in Asheville could not always obtain the services they needed or desired in white business establishments. Thus, black entrepreneurs like Thomas Leatherwood, who opened a pharmacy in the YMI building in 1883, stepped in to fill the need. By the turn of the century, Asheville's roster of black-owned businesses included barbershops, a bank, grocery stores,

two funeral homes, restaurants, and an insurance company. For a short period, Edward Stephens, the administrator of the city's black public schools and the principal organizer of the YMI, published a small black newspaper called *The Advance: The Colored People's Paper*.

In addition to their economic pursuits, Asheville blacks built and supported thriving spiritual, social, and educational institutions. The first institution of importance to blacks in post-Civil War Asheville was the church. By the end of the nineteenth century, Asheville's black population was supporting seven primary churches. The earliest of these churches, Nazareth First Baptist Church and St. Matthias Episcopal Church, were concerned about the spiritual development of blacks after emancipation. In time, blacks took complete control of their religious institutions and shaped them to their own purposes. As was the case in other post-Civil War black communities, Asheville's first black churches functioned as spiritual and educational institutions, and thus, helped fill a major need in the years before the creation of the city's public school system in 1888. Although the resources of Asheville's black churches were limited, they helped to make the daily existence of blacks better.

As Asheville's white leaders worked to rebuild the city's economy after the war, they took great care to present the city as progressive and cosmopolitan. This was especially the case after 1880, when the health resort and tourism industries began to grow and attract more outsiders to the area. City and regional leaders worked hard to construct an image of the region as peaceful and largely free of the problems that plagued other areas of the South. Tourists to the region often commented that it was hard to even believe you were in the South. Writing from Blowing Rock, a small town north of Asheville, William Few informed

his fiancée in 1890 that the region was comparable to “what one would expect to find in the city or popular seaside resorts.”⁵³⁰ Another visitor in Asheville observed that, “under ones breath you had to admit that the area looks Northern, and when you hear the Yankee brogue from the Rheumatics you wonder if you are in the Sunny South.”⁵³¹ Despite its northern and cosmopolitan feel, race relations in Asheville and the surrounding region were no less contentious than they were in other areas of the South. The only difference was that Asheville’s white leaders had carefully constructed a veneer that worked to mask such problems. From the early days after the war, the city’s leaders supported the black community’s efforts to establish organizations that helped to strengthen the community, but that support was not necessarily altruistic in nature. While it would be unfair to argue that whites did not have any concerns about the difficulties that blacks faced, the economic benefits that the city received from the perception of peaceful race relations, did not escape the attention of the city’s white leaders.

The emergence and dominance of the tourism industry in Asheville and western North Carolina played a significant role in the development of what appeared to be congenial relations between whites and blacks. Throughout the late nineteenth century, especially during the 1880s and 90s, the city’s white leaders and tourism boosters promoted an image of local blacks as peaceful, hardworking, and progressive. In keeping with this image the city’s leading tourism journal, *The Southern Hotel Journal*, called its readers’ attention to a peaceful black community by publishing a front page photograph of the one of the city’s

⁵³⁰ W. W. Faw to Mattie Kernan, September 1, 1890, Faw Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

⁵³¹ Winnie Faison to Mrs. Faison, June 22, 1898, Henry W. Faison Papers, Family Series, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

black neighborhoods. In the photo, which was accompanied by the caption, “The [N]egro Quarters, Asheville,” readers saw a pristine neighborhood of neatly framed houses, well-kept yards, and a church. It was a picture that was not so different from what one would expect to find in a white neighborhood. Interestingly, the magazine did not include a story about the community or its residents. Clearly, the primary purpose for publishing the picture was to suggest that in Asheville, blacks were positive, productive, and respected members of the community, and that the city was free of race problems.

As elsewhere in the South, the blacks who moved to Asheville after the Civil War did so with the expectation of being productive and respectable members of society. However, racism and racial discrimination ensured that between 1865 and 1900, their progress was limited. They were effectively denied access to much that the larger community had to offer, especially in the area of jobs and politics. Attitudes that saw blacks as subservient to whites meant that the employment opportunities of blacks were restricted, and the lack of political power among blacks guaranteed that they could not challenge their marginalization. Since whites were an overwhelming majority in Asheville and western North Carolina, black voters were of no real political value to either Democrats or Republicans. More than anything, the presence of blacks in the Republican Party became detrimental to the Party’s development as time passed. Thus, while blacks in other areas of the state found that their greater numerical strength enable them to be more politically vocal and active, the need for Republicans to appeal to white voters in western North Carolina meant that mountain blacks did not have the same experiences.

Given the minority status of blacks in Asheville and western North Carolina, white Republican leaders felt no need to give local blacks a more active voice in the Party. Coupled with a white Party leadership that was not truly sympathetic to their political concerns, blacks had no choice but to accept second class status, not only political, but economically, and socially. Had the political dynamics been different, with the local Republican Party more depended on the support of blacks for its success, blacks in Asheville would have been able to push for greater opportunities at all levels. In this way, the post-Civil War black experience in Asheville was no different from that of blacks in other areas of the South. The only difference was that the marginalization of blacks occurred much earlier in Asheville and western North Carolina. In short, there was never a possibility that mountain blacks would be little more than passive participants in the political, social, and economic life of Asheville and the surrounding region.

The tone for race relations in post-Civil War Asheville was set in 1867 when the editors of the conservative *Asheville News and Farmer* stated that there was nothing that could change the fact that blacks were inferior to whites, and the sooner this was accepted the better off everyone would be. “Editors may write, and people may talk as much as they please against a ‘white man’s party and the black man’s party,’” they said, “but they cannot change the nature of the two races. The white man feels that the [N]egro is his inferior, and he cannot divest himself of that feeling....The two,” the editors concluded, “never did, and never can act harmoniously....”⁵³² Twenty-three years later, this sentiment had not changed. In 1893, the year that the YMI opened its doors, an editorial in the *Asheville Citizen* newspaper stated “the thirty years that have elapsed since Lincoln’s emancipation

⁵³² “The Two Races,” *Asheville News and Farmer*, October 31, 1867.

proclamation have not availed to lessen the monstrosity of anything like social equality, and the sooner the mass of colored people in the South—whose hearts are in the right place, and who, in the main, appreciate their true condition—call a halt on the designs of dangerous leaders of their race, the better it will be for both white and blacks.”⁵³³ It was within the framework of these views that Asheville’s post-Civil War black community developed. Thus, the reality of life for blacks was much different from the veneer of progress, peace, and cosmopolitan sophistication that Asheville’s white leaders projected to the outside world.

⁵³³ “Social Equality,” *Asheville Daily Citizen*, January 23, 1893.

Appendix I

African American Population Figures for Western North Carolina in 1860⁵³⁴



County	Slave Pop.	Free Blks	Total Blk.	Total Pop.	% Blk Pop.
1. Alexander	611	24	635	6022	10.5%
2. Alleghany	206	33	239	3590	6.6%
3. Ashe	391	142	533	7956	6.7%
4. Buncombe	1,933	111	2,044	12,654	16.2%
5. Burke	2,371	221	2,592	9,237	28%
6. Caldwell	1,088	114	1,202	7,497	16%
7. Cherokee	519	38	557	9,140	6.0%
8. Haywood	313	14	327	5,801	5.6%
9. Henderson	1,382	85	1,467	10,448	14%
10. Jackson	268	6	274	4,453	6%
11. Macon	519	115	634	5,949	10.6%
12. Madison	213	17	230	5,908	3.8%
13. McDowell	1,305	273	1,578	7,120	22%
14. Polk	620	106	726	4,038	18%
15. Rutherford	2,391	123	2,514	11,573	21%
16. Watagua	104	81	185	4,957	3.7%
17. Wilkes	1,208	261	1,469	14,749	10%
18. Yancey	362	67	429	8,655	5%
Totals:	15,522	1,831	17,635	139,783	12.6%

⁵³⁴ Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, (*Eighth Census of the United States*), 1860, Prepared by the Bureau of the Census, Washington D.C.

Appendix II

1870 African American Population Figures for Western North Carolina⁵³⁵



County	Black Population	Total Population	% of the Blk Pop.
1. Alexander	834	6,868	12%
2. Alleghany	290	3,691	7.8%
3. Ashe	582	9,573	6%
4. Buncombe	2,303	15,412	15%
5. Burke	2,314	9,777	23.6%
6. Caldwell	1,380	8,476	16%
7. Cherokee	301	7,597	4%
8. Clay	142	2,461	5%
9. Haywood	515	7,921	6%
10. Henderson	1,208	7,706	16%
11. Jackson	274	5,972	4.5%
12. Macon	403	6,576	6%
13. Madison	334	8,192	4%
14. McDowell	1,772	7,592	23%
15. Mitchell	213	4,705	4.5%
16. Polk	978	4,319	22.6%
17. Rutherford	2,642	13,121	20%
18. Transylvania	309	3,536	9%
19. Watagua	226	5,287	4%
20. Wilkes	1,662	15,539	11%
21. Yancey	308	5,909	5%
Totals:	18,990	160,230	12%

⁵³⁵ Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (*Ninth Census of the United States*), 1870, Prepared by the Bureau of the Census, Washington D.C.

Appendix III

1880 African American Population Figures for Western North Carolina⁵³⁶



County	Black Population	Total County Pop.	% of Black Pop.
1. Alexander	897	8355	11%
2. Alleghany	519	5486	9%
3. Ashe	963	14,434	6.6%
4. Buncombe	3,476	21,898	16%
5. Burke	2,721	12,809	21%
6. Caldwell	1,599	10,290	15.5%
7. Cherokee	288	8084	3.5%
8. Clay	288	3463	8.3%
9. Graham	23	2146	1%
10. Haywood	484	10,271	4.7%
11. Henderson	1,388	10,281	13.5%
12. Jackson	375	6966	5%
13. Macon	656	8051	8%
14. Madison	459	12,810	3.5%
15. McDowell	1,897	9836	19%
16. Mitchell	503	9435	5%
17. Polk	1,144	5062	22%
18. Rutherford	3,255	15,165	21%
19. Swain	109	3343	3%
20. Transylvania	517	5340	9.6%
21. Wataqua	414	8160	5%
22. Wilkes	1,924	19,181	10%
23. Yancey	325	7694	4%
Totals	24,224	218,560	11%

⁵³⁶ Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, (*Tenth Census of the United States*), 1880, Prepared by the Bureau of the Census, Washington D.C.

Appendix IV

1890 African American Population Figures for Western North Carolina⁵³⁷



County	Black Population	Total County Pop.	% of Black Pop.
1. Alexander	842	9430	8.9%
2. Alleghany	460	6532	7%
3. Ashe	595	15,628	3.8%
4. Buncombe	6,626	35,266	18.7%
5. Burke	2,561	14,939	17%
6. Caldwell	1,554	12,298	12.6%
7. Cherokee	274	9976	2.7%
8. Clay	142	4197	3%
9. Graham	25	3313	0.7%
10. Haywood	517	13,346	3.8%
11. Henderson	1,378	12,589	10.9%
12. Jackson	518	9512	5.4%
13. Macon	665	10,102	6.5%
14. Madison	710	17,805	4%
15. McDowell	1,825	10,939	16.6%
16. Mitchell	553	12,807	4.3%
17. Polk	1,093	5902	18.5%
18. Rutherford	3,692	18,770	20%
19. Swain	225	6577	3.4%
20. Transylvania	513	5881	8.7%
21. Wataqua	431	10,611	4%
22. Wilkes	2,042	22,675	9%
23. Yancey	292	9490	3%
Totals	27,533	266,576	10.3%

⁵³⁷ Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, (*Eleventh Census of the United States*), 1890, Prepared by the Bureau of the Census, Washington D.C.

Appendix V

1900 African American Population Figures for Western North Carolina⁵³⁸



County	Black Population	Total County Pop.	% of Black Pop.
1. Alexander	856	10,960	7.8%
2. Alleghany	486	7759	6%
3. Ashe	684	18,581	3.6%
4. Buncombe	8,121	44,288	18%
5. Burke	2,676	17,699	15%
6. Caldwell	1,943	15,694	12%
7. Cherokee	469	11,860	3.9%
8. Clay	134	4532	2.9%
9. Graham	153	4343	3.5%
10. Haywood	613	16,222	3.7%
11. Henderson	1,759	14,104	12%
12. Jackson	931	11,853	7.8%
13. Macon	673	12,104	5.5%
14. Madison	558	20,644	2%
15. McDowell	1,894	12,567	15%
16. Mitchell	536	15,221	3.5%
17. Polk	1,207	7004	17%
18. Rutherford	4,442	25,101	17.6%
19. Swain	1,049	8401	12%
20. Transylvania	615	6620	9%
21. Wataqua	391	13,417	2.9%
22. Wilkes	2,437	26,872	9%
23. Yancey	283	11,464	2.4%
Totals	32,910	337,310	10%

⁵³⁸ Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, (*Twelfth Census of the United States*), 1900, Prepared by the Bureau of the Census, Washington D.C.

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