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In early November 1948, black police officers began patrolling the Beale Street area of Memphis, Tennessee. The nine men hired to be black police officers in Memphis in the fall of 1948 were a surprising sight in a city that operated on racial segregation and maintained, often violently, a strict racial hierarchy. This dissertation examines the conditions that created the opportunity for black men to police the segregated streets of the South. Emerging during the years surrounding World War II, the trend among southern cities to hire black police officers was the result of the economic, political, and social changes brought to the American South by the war. Taking Memphis, Tennessee, as a case study, this dissertation looks at the ways in which black and white leaders in the South navigated these changes and the ways in which southern urban race relations evolved during the World War II era.

This dissertation seeks to answer the question of why the campaign for black police officers succeeded in Memphis, and what that campaign tells us about black activism and efforts towards greater black equality during the waning years of the Jim Crow era. Black police officers do not fit into a southern narrative of racial progress, despite the claims of white Southerners in the late 1940s. Nor do they fit into a post-Civil Rights narrative of progress seeking to negate a nadir of black activism. Instead, white officials' decision to hire black police officers was more directly the result of black reactions to white police brutality.

Black Memphians used the language of the World War II era to demand greater protection for their community. However, the increase in police brutality was the result of white officers' perceived need to maintain their control in the face of the changes to southern society brought on by World War II. Thus, white officials hired black officers to alleviate this tension by separating policing between white and black and expected black officers to enforce segregation and white conceptions of appropriate black behavior. Thus, the campaign for and the experience of black police officers in the first years after hiring did not achieve black hopes to bettering black lives, but rather merely perpetuated segregation.

Although it was not until 1948 that black officers became a permanent fixture on the Memphis police force, the city of Memphis has a long history of using black men to police the city's streets in moments of crisis. While this study is focused on the 1948 campaign for black police officers, it begins with a look back at those moments of crisis, placing the 1948 campaign in the long history of Memphis's black community and the community's demand for an equal place in the city.

SEGREGATING THE POLICE: NEGOTIATING EQUALITY  
IN POSTWAR MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

by

Margaret Keeton Williams

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Margaret Keeton Williams has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

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## CHAPTER I

### SEGREGATING THE POLICE: AN INTRODUCTION

On a late Sunday afternoon in June 1948, police officers responded to a disturbance call at the Jefferson Food Shop on Jefferson Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee. According to the café owner, a black woman, thirty-five-year-old Viola Moore, was cursing and abusing his staff and the other customers after getting into an argument with a waitress over her food order. The police took Viola Moore into custody around 4:15 in the afternoon. By the next morning, Moore was in the hospital, where she would spend more than a week recovering from her injuries.

Accounts of what transpired between Viola Moore and police on that Sunday afternoon vary. Two Memphis police officers arrived at the café, and eyewitnesses reported the officers behaved courteously as they took Moore into custody, loading her in the police car without incident. It seems the trouble began in route to the police station. Moore claims that as she tried to light a cigarette, one of the officers smacked the cigarette out of her mouth yelling at her: “Don’t smoke in this car.... You look like one of those smart black--- [sic].” According to Moore, the officer then proceeded to beat her with his blackjack before finally hitting her over the head with the butt of his gun. The officers, however, claimed that on the way to the station Moore began kicking the back of

the driver's seat, pushing the officer driving the vehicle into the steering wheel, forcing him to slam on the brakes to avoid crashing.<sup>1</sup>

Three witnesses sitting on their front porch saw the police car stop. They then witnessed one officer, who was sitting in the back seat of the patrol car, beat Moore as she lay on the floor of the vehicle kicking and screaming. When the officer in the back seat was unable to "subdue" her, the officer driving the car reached back and struck Moore with a blackjack until she gave up fighting. According to the city's police commissioner, these were only three of the seven total eyewitnesses who claimed to have seen Moore "resisting arrest" on the way to the police station. Moore, however, vigorously denied this charge of resisting arrest; she claimed that "resisting arrest would have been the last thing she'd try doing," knowing, as she did, of the other police beatings that had taken place in the weeks leading up to her arrest.<sup>2</sup>

While Moore was in the hospital, news headlines questioned the nature of the force used in her apprehension by police. Headlines such as "Charges Police With Brutality" and "Officers Suspended After Beating Negro: Protection? Brutality?" called into question the amount of force used by the police to apprehend the suspect. However, within two days of the incident, the two officers involved were exonerated of any

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<sup>1</sup> The previous account is gathered from the following articles; "Woman, Attacked By Police, Fined \$78 in City Court," *Memphis World*, July 9, 1948; "Charges Police With Brutality: Woman Prisoner In Hospital," *Press-Scimitar*, June 21, 1948; and "Officers Suspended After Beating Negro," *Commercial Appeal*, June 22, 1948. In the article published in the black newspaper the *Memphis World*, the conclusion of the statement "You look like one of those smart black—" is blanked out. Earlier in the article, Moore accused the officers of calling her profane names, leading to the assumption that the blank replaces a profane word the paper chose to remove for publication.

<sup>2</sup> "Officers Suspended After Beating Negro"; "Police Accuser to Face Court," *Press-Scimitar*, July 2, 1948; and "Woman, Attacked By Police, Fined \$78 in City Court."

wrongdoing. According to the Memphis police commissioner, the officers had acted in the line of duty and “did not use unnecessary force in subduing an unruly prisoner.” Following her release from the hospital, Viola Moore was charged with and fined for disorderly conduct and resisting arrest.<sup>3</sup>

Accounts of the brutal beating of Viola Moore highlight the white officers’ perception of the threats to white supremacy. The officers identified Moore as looking “smart.” This comment speaks to white Memphians’ perception that a large influx of northern blacks had migrated to their city bringing with them ideas about black equality. These ideas were a natural threat to a southern society built on black inferiority. The beating was an effort to reassert white control over black bodies and black ideas about their place in southern society. For blacks in Memphis, and elsewhere in the South, police brutality was a reminder of their vulnerability, both their physical vulnerability and vulnerability to systematic white supremacy. Reports of Moore’s beating in the city’s black newspaper, the *Memphis World*, also recounted the string of recent police beatings of black Memphians. Heading the article “Woman Attacked” emphasized Moore’s victimization. Black citizens’ anger over the continuation of police brutality and the justice system’s failures to punish these officers led to increasing calls for protection of the black citizens.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Woman, Attacked By Police, Fined \$78 in City Court”; “Woman Victim of Police Beating Still Confined to Hospital With Charges,” *Memphis World*, June 29, 1948; and “Blackjack Victim Back in Hospital,” *Press-Scimitar*, June 24, 1948.

<sup>4</sup> “Charges Police With Brutality: Woman Prisoner in Hospital”; and “Woman Attacked,” *Memphis World*, July 9, 1948.

The violence that dominated black citizens interactions with white police only worsened already heightened racial tensions in the postwar city. As cases of blatant police brutality against blacks – whether they were suspects in a crime or just a citizen seeking police assistance – became more highly publicized, it became apparent to black Memphians that they would “not receive fair-play and justice when they are left solely in the hands of white officers.” An editorial issued by the *Memphis World* on the same day as Moore’s beating was published pointed out, “Not only Negroes but fair-minded white citizens have become alarmed over the situation.” Racial tensions in the years surrounding World War II instigated multiple forms of violence. Southern cities experienced eruptions of racial violence from citywide riots to trouble on city busses. The cases of police brutality in Memphis in 1948 were one manifestation of the racial tensions that gripped southern cities in the late 1940s. These large and small-scale acts of violence led many Southerners, both white and black, to seek out alternative ways to ease rising tensions. It was out of this effort to ease racial tensions that southern urban police departments began to hire black police officers.<sup>5</sup>

American involvement in World War II in the 1940s brought many changes to the South. Preexisting urban and industrial areas in northern states also experienced increases in industry and population. The South, however, saw dramatic industrial growth where it had not existed before. Industrialization combined with rapid population growth put a particular strain on southern cities and their municipal governments. Many

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<sup>5</sup> “Another Argument For Negro Policemen,” *Memphis World*, June 1, 1948; and “Police Brutality,” *Memphis World*, July 9, 1948.

new migrants to the urban South were black Southerners looking to take advantage of the new opportunities this economic growth offered. This large influx of black migrants, a national wartime rhetoric of freedom, equality, and democracy, and a federal government more open to a discussion of black civil rights all posed a challenge to the traditional southern system of racial segregation and white supremacy. Even as blacks across the country, and in the South, increasingly advocated for ways to better their lives and advance their place in American society, white Southerners became more vigilant in clinging to the traditional segregationist social order in the South.<sup>6</sup>

Taking Memphis, Tennessee, as a case study, this dissertation looks at one particular way that blacks and whites in the South navigated these changes. The American experience in World War II caused an evolution in urban race relations in the South. One manifestation of this evolution was the debate over hiring black police officers. Citizens in postwar Memphis struggled to control these changing race relations. White citizens strove to maintain supremacy and racial segregation while black citizens sought ways to protect their community from police brutality.

Many blacks in Memphis, Tennessee, came to see black police officers as the answer to the problem of increased instances of police brutality in the late 1940s. As the city changed after the war and blacks in the city increasingly agitated for their place in

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<sup>66</sup> David Goldfield, *Promised Land: The South Since 1945* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc. , 1987), 5; Robert Sigafos, *Cotton Row to Beale Street* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1979), 208; and David. R. Goldfield, "The Urban South: A Regional Framework," *The American Historical Review* 86, no. 5 (December 1981): 1020-1025. See also Glenda E. Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008); and Jason Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

the new urban landscape, white police officers continued to enforce, often violently, a system of laws that required black deference to white authority. By the summer of 1948, police violence against black Memphians had become one of the most pressing local issues for blacks citizens. For many black Memphians, black police officers were symbols of protection and a chance for a more equal justice system.<sup>7</sup> This study offers insight into how concepts of control and protection impacted race relations in the immediate postwar period. Using newspaper articles, oral interviews, organizational records, and the papers of city leaders, this study examines how black and white Memphians reacted to local events and how those reactions impacted black Memphians' efforts to improve their lives within the confines of segregation and postwar race relations more generally. Memphis's decision to hire black police officers was the result of the negotiations between a black community trying to protect black citizens and white officials trying to maintain the southern racial hierarchy.

Memphis had a rich history of strict adherence to racial segregation and white supremacy, from the race riot in 1866 through the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. during the sanitation strike of 1968. Memphis offers a unique case study because of this history. How does a city with this history end up hiring black police officers in the late 1940s? This dissertation seeks to answer this question by examining the context in which calls for black police officers emerged and the actions that ultimately led to the hiring of black police officers. The story of how black police officers were hired in Memphis in 1948 and the experience of those officers in the immediate years following

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<sup>7</sup> "Another Argument For Negro Policemen."

their hiring offers insights into the negotiation between creating space for greater black equality while also maintaining racial segregation in the waning years of the Jim Crow era.

In the early 1960s, historian Elliott Rudwick argued that southern cities' hiring of black police officers in the 1940s was a direct result of the changes in the American South that allowed black citizens greater political and economic power. According to Rudwick, "As a result of wartime democratic propaganda, improved economic conditions, and the increase in urbanization...the number of registered Negroes in twelve southern states grew to about 650,000 in 1947 and an estimated one million by 1950."<sup>8</sup> For example, in Greensboro, North Carolina, journalist Robert Fleming concluded as early as 1947 that the increase in the number of black voters in that city "more than any other one thing... assured the proposal [for black police officers] a fair hearing and a serious consideration by city authorities."<sup>9</sup> Black political mobilization in the form of electoral politics was a significant factor in getting black police officers hired. As Rudwick argued, the increased number of black votes over the course of the 1940s put new pressure on southern white city leaders to appease black demands.

In her study of black politics in Memphis, historian Elizabeth Gritter found that during the Jim Crow era, black Memphians used electoral politics to fight injustice and advance the long Civil Rights struggle into the 1950s and 1960s. Focusing her study on

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<sup>8</sup> Elliott M. Rudwick, "The Negro Policeman in the South," *The Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science*, 51.2 (July-August: 1960): 273.

<sup>9</sup> Rudwick, 274; and Fleming, "How Negro Police Worked Out in One Southern City," *New South* 2.10 (1947): 4. The Southern Regional Council and its journal, *New South*, were the successors to the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, which dissolved in 1943.

electoral politics and Memphis's key black political leaders, Gritter traced the ways in which black political activity changed over the course of the first hundred years following the Civil War and offers an in-depth examination of the role of electoral politics in black political mobilization. Gritter's work connects political activity throughout the Jim Crow era to the ultimate dismantling of segregation.<sup>10</sup>

Examining black political activity, her work narrates the steady march towards civil rights progress for black Americans. According to Gritter, the hiring of black police officers in 1948 was just one example of the success of black political mobilization, particularly during the political upheaval in the Democratic Party during the election of 1948. However, a closer examination of the black community's campaign for black police officers reveals a more complicated story about the negotiations over control of the city's changing race relations. Rather than being an outright challenge to segregation and white supremacy, the black community's effort to get black police officers hired was an effort to promote change that bettered black lives within segregation.

While Gritter's focus on black politics demonstrates how black Memphians were able to use their vote to influence city officials, the fact that white leaders allowed the police department to hire black police officers also offers insight into white southern politics in postwar Memphis. The white southern racial militancy that had dominated politics in the South and fueled racially motivated violence during the years immediately following World War II hindered southern progress. This racial violence brought

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Gritter, *River of Hope: Black Politics and The Memphis Freedom Movement, 1865-1954* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2014), 1 and 12.

national and federal attention to the southern race issue while also hampering the argument of those southern white leaders who “promoted segregation as the guarantor of interracial harmony and order.” According to historian Jason Morgan Ward, in the wake of World War II, southern white leaders tried to find alternative strategies to balance economic growth and southern progress with maintaining the racial status quo. Out of this desire to maintain white supremacy while promoting growth developed “a compelling agenda of economic modernization and racial retrenchment.”<sup>11</sup> The desire to promote the South economically and the need to limit racial tension and violence created space for white officials to appease those black demands that did not pose an outright challenge to segregation. While Ward focuses his study on the national and regional political agendas that developed out of this southern balancing act, this study offers an example of how one local southern city negotiated this balance in the everyday functioning of their city and how the hiring of black police officers in Memphis shaped the larger context of changing race relations in the postwar South.

Other Memphis-specific studies, like Gritter’s, also examine a large swath of time to demonstrate how long-term activism worked to eventually dismantle segregation. Labor historian Michael Honey studied black involvement in the labor movement in Memphis from the 1930s through the 1950s. Honey looks at the importance of race in labor organizing and how black labor activism “unsettled the segregation system.”<sup>12</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> Ward, 93-95.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 7.

labor struggles in Memphis focused on equal pay, access to jobs, and ultimately the integration of the labor force. The campaign for black police officers focused on equal protection and the separation of policing, rather than integration. So while Honey's study focuses on black activism for greater economic rights, this study focuses on black reactions to police brutality and efforts to protect their community and achieve more equal judicial rights. The campaign for black police officers was one front in the battle for black rights being fought parallel to the longer history of black union activism laid out by Honey.

Memphis historian Laurie Green takes an even broader view of working-class black activism in Memphis in her study covering the period between the New Deal and the 1968 sanitation workers' strike. According to Green, Memphis was a city rooted in a "plantation mentality" that encompassed both white paternalistic attitudes and the perception of black fear and dependence. Thus, for Green, the struggle for black equality was in essence about changing attitudes. Taking a broad look at culture, consciousness, and politics, Green examines how blacks in Memphis asserted their own definitions of freedom and democracy to challenge racist ideology in the city. Green traced a long history of how black Memphians challenged ideas and perceptions and worked to dismantle the plantation mentality.<sup>13</sup> However, the reality of the experience of black police officers did more to reinforce ideas about black inferiority as the officers were

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<sup>13</sup> Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 2-7.

controlled by the white power structure as they worked to control black community behavior.

The specific story of the campaigns for black police officers and their experience in the 1940s urban South is one that has received little attention from historians. The majority of the work focused on black police officers is rooted in sociological studies. For example, William Kephart's 1957 study of the integration of urban police departments, primarily in the North, argues that black police were underrepresented on police departments because of inequalities within the hiring process. Because blacks lacked the education equivalency of whites and the culturally inequalities of the written civil service exams, black police were hired in fewer numbers than white officers. After the Civil Rights Movement moved many in the academy to reexamine the black experience, sociologists picked up where Kephart left off. The studies that followed focused primarily on the discrimination against black officers in the North. Sociologist Nicholas Alex found in his 1969 study *Black in Blue* that black officers in New York experienced a double marginality. Stereotyped as inferior by their fellow officers and rejected by black residents as a symbol of white law, the black officers encountered tensions both at work and in their communities. Focusing specifically on northern cities, sociological studies, such as Alex's, highlighted the problems of discrimination and offered solutions for dissolving racial tensions in a post-Civil Rights Act North.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> William Kephart, "The Integration of Negroes into the Urban Police Force," *The Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science* 45.3 (September-October 1954): 325-333; and Nicholas Alex, *Black in Blue: A Study of Negro Policemen* (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1969). Kephart looks specifically at Philadelphia and finds that the lack of black police officers was due primarily to cultural inequalities that hindered black advancement. For examples of the studies that followed Alex's, see Robert

It was not until 1996 that historian Marvin Dulaney examined the role of black police officers in the South. Dulaney's work is a broad comparative study analyzed the black experience in the entire United States. Moving through time and across locations, Dulaney gives a broad overview of the push to hire black police officers. Adding to Rudwick's argument, Dulaney shows how political power could translate into policing power.<sup>15</sup> While political power was essential to the hiring of black police officers, the exclusive focus on politics excludes a discussion of the motivations behind black efforts to better black life in the postwar period and how those efforts intersected with white efforts to maintain Jim Crow prior to the modern Civil Rights Movement.

As many historians have argued, the post-World War II years were a moment of increased black activism that worked to whittle away at the foundations of Jim Crow. The political organizing outlined in Gritter's work and Michael Honey's discussion of union activity in Memphis both demonstrate how black activism in the decades leading up to the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision worked to erode the Jim Crow system. In earlier interpretations, black police officers were seen as one of the many advantages blacks were able to gain in the march towards integration.<sup>16</sup> Historians have demonstrated a long history of black activism within the Jim Crow system;

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Wintersmith, *Police and the Black Community* (Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1974); James B. Jacobs and Jay Cohen, "The Impact of Racial Integration on the Police," *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 6.7 (1978): 168-183; and Donald Walker, "Black Police Values and the Black Community," *Police Studies* 5.4 (Winter 1983): 20-28.

<sup>15</sup> Marvin Dulaney, *Black Police in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> For more on Memphis and black activism during Jim Crow see Gritter, *River of Hope*, Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*, and Laurie Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*.

however, this study seeks to complicate that narrative by exploring a moment when black efforts for change fit within the existing system of segregation.<sup>17</sup>

An examination of the campaign for black police officers in Memphis, brings to life how varying elements of Memphis's black and white communities negotiated the changing postwar racial landscape to meet local circumstances. Armed with a national rhetoric of freedom and democracy and new efforts by the federal government to expand black civil rights, but living within the confines of legalized Jim Crow segregation, black Memphians looked for ways to expand their rights within segregation. White southern officials on the other hand tried to advocate for southern progress but maintain the racial hierarchy. While the majority of historical studies of black activism look at how black activism broke the chains of segregation, this study examines how blacks reacted to the circumstances they faced in their everyday lives in the late 1940s and worked within the confines of southern legal segregation to better that life.

Black police officers do not fit into a southern narrative of racial progress, despite the claims of white Southerners in the late 1940s. Nor do they fit into a post-Civil Rights narrative of progress seeking to negate a nadir of black activism.<sup>18</sup> Instead, white

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<sup>17</sup> The Long Civil Rights Movement is an idea that argues that the Civil Rights Movement did not begin in 1955 with the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Rather, blacks had been advocating for their rights for decades. See Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91 no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1264; Richard Dalfiume, "The "Forgotten Years of the Negro Revolution," *Journal of American History* 55, no. 1 (June 1968): 90-106; Gilmore, Chapter 8; and Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> For more on the development of a post World War II New South, see Jason Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965*; Kevin Kruse *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic*

officials' decision to hire black police officers was more directly the result of black reactions to white police brutality. Black Memphians used the language of the World War II era to demand greater protection for their community. However, the increase in police brutality was the result of white officers' perceived need to maintain their control in the face of the changes to southern society brought on by World War II. Thus, white officials hired black officers to alleviate this tension by separating policing between white and black and expected black officers to enforce segregation and white conceptions of appropriate black behavior. Thus, the campaign for and the experience of black police officers in the first years after hiring did not achieve black hopes to bettering black lives, but rather merely perpetuated segregation.

Memphis's location on the Mississippi River, surrounded by rural agricultural areas spanning three states, made it an important southern distribution center and a mid-South urban hub. As more people moved into the city in the 1940s to take advantage of the expansion of industry, black neighborhoods necessarily expanded. In their study of Memphis housing patterns, historians Christopher Silver and John Moser discovered a "natural zoning of the races," in which black neighborhoods developed in patches around the city. The majority of black Memphians lived north of Jackson Avenue, east of Overton Park, or south of Poplar Avenue, positioned in proximity to the central business district and white residential neighborhoods. Black neighborhoods in North Memphis,

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Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For more works discussing black activism in the years prior to the modern Civil Rights Movement, see Richard Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years of the Negro Revolution.'" *Journal of American History* 55, no. 1 (June 1968): 90-106; and Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1264.

such as Klondyke, developed into more affluent black neighborhoods in which homeownership rates often exceeded 53 percent by 1950. The historically black neighborhood of Binghampton sat just east of East Parkway, which had once served as the city's boundary and was home to primarily black working-class residents.

Through the city's use of federal housing funds, black neighborhoods in South Memphis grew steadily after the 1940s. Starting in the late 1930s, the Memphis Housing Authority began to build the majority of black designated public housing in South Memphis. The result was that even as the population grew in this area of the city, black homeownership in South Memphis declined over the decade, dropping to 29 percent by 1950 compared to 53 percent or higher rates of homeownership in the more affluent black neighborhoods of North Memphis.<sup>19</sup> But even as city planners used public housing to encourage black residence in South Memphis, black neighborhoods remained dispersed within the city of Memphis throughout the postwar period.

A city run by the paternalistic Democratic political boss E.H. Crump, Memphis was a place that operated on racial segregation and aggressively maintained a strict racial hierarchy. But at the same time, it was also a city that offered benefits for its black citizens. Black Memphians always retained the right to vote, black Memphians had access to John Gaston Hospital, there were parks within the city designated for black use, and the city boasted a vibrant black business and entertainment district. With a black population hovering around 40 percent of the total city population since the turn of the

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher Silver and John V Moeser, *Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1960* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 33 and 39.

twentieth century, black Memphians had long been active participants in city life, and a tradition of cooperation between the city's black political and economic elite and the Crump political machine existed since the early decades of the century.<sup>20</sup> Over the years, this cadre of black leaders were able to negotiate for services such as parks and schools in exchange for continued black electoral support of the Crump machine.

However, by the summer of 1948, some segments of the city's black community began to question the system of accommodation and cooperation between black elites and the white leadership. The campaign to hire black police officers crossed class lines within Memphis's black community. During this period, black ministers, journalists, and black students from the local black college, LeMoyne College, emerged as voices for more radical action to enact change. The traditional black leadership's accommodation to the Crump machine that had dominated efforts for black uplift throughout the first half of the twentieth century was called into question as police brutality continued. The leaders that emerged during the campaign for black police officers represented a shift away from Memphis's traditional black leadership class made up of the economic and political elite. And although the city's hiring of black police officers was ultimately the result of city's leaders efforts to appease black demands in exchange for continued support, the emergence of more radical voices from below set the stage for later activism.

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<sup>20</sup> For population figures in Memphis since 1900, see Silver and Moeser, 32. For more on the rise of the Crump political machine and his relationship to black Memphis's political and economic elite, see Wayne G. Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don't Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis* (Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 2006); Elizabeth Gritter, *River of Hope: Black Politics and The Memphis Freedom Movement, 1865-1954* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2014); David M. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971); and Lester Lamon, *Black Tennesseans, 1900-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977).

The building blocks for later black activism can also be seen elsewhere in the campaign for black police officers. The endeavor for black police officers itself was an example of a black community coming together to develop and advocate for a strategy of racial uplift directly related to the community's concerns. Black electoral politics also played a role in the effort to have black police officers hired, as supporters called on black voters to use their vote to impose change. Questions over the meaning of black manhood, black leadership, black equality, and American democracy were negotiated as black Memphians struggled to improve their lives and solidify their place in postwar Memphis.

Although it was not until 1948 that black police officers became a fixture on the Memphis police force, black men had patrolled the streets of Memphis at three key moments in the city's history between the Civil War and World War II. Chapter II examines how black Memphians took advantage of these moments of crisis in Memphis's history to advocate for greater black rights, protect their community, and reinforce the place of the black community in Memphis society. The chapter begins immediately following the Civil War when white police clashed with black Union soldiers in the days immediately following the end of the war. In what has come to be called a race riot, the racially motivated violence that swept the black area of Memphis in the spring of 1866 set the tone for Memphis race relations in the years to come, as the newly established black community in the city refused to be pushed out, clinging to the promise of freedom and equality that came with Union victory. In an effort to protect their families and community, black soldiers policed black community events during and immediately after

the Civil War. Their experience set the foundation for the experiences and relationships to both the black and white communities that the black police officers who would come later would have.<sup>21</sup>

Just over a decade after the violence following the Civil War, black Memphians reaffirmed their commitment to Memphis when a series of yellow fever epidemics devastated the city in the 1870s and created a manpower crisis. As white Memphians succumbed to the disease at exponentially higher rates than blacks, most white citizens who did not die fled the city by the thousands. Black community leaders seized the opportunity created by the epidemic to demand black rights as citizens and greater black civic involvement. Blacks represented 70 percent of the city's total population at the height of the epidemic in 1878, giving them a strong majority. Hiring black police officers became the obvious answer to solving this manpower crisis. However, when the epidemics ended and whites returned to the city, traditional white supremacist attitudes prevailed. By the 1890s blacks had lost the power their population majority had allowed them, and thus, black police power also ceased.<sup>22</sup>

In the aftermath of World War I city leaders faced a political crisis as blacks pushed for greater political participation. As black Republican leaders worked to organize the black community in a push for greater political and social rights, they challenged the city's traditional political leadership. In an effort to maintain the support

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen V. Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot That Shook The Nation One Year After the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Dennis C. Rousey, "Yellow Fever and Black Policemen in Memphis: A Post-Reconstruction Anomaly," *The Journal of Southern History* 51, no. 3 (August 1985): 357-374.

of the city's black community and thus maintain control over city politics, city leaders conceded to black demands for black police officers. Although traditional racial prejudice and the strength of white supremacy prevailed in limiting the ability of black officers to become a permanent fixture on the police force, these three moments demonstrate a history in Memphis of white leaders negotiating times of crisis in order to maintain racial peace and white supremacy. These instances also set the precedent for a black community working to gain greater rights as Memphis citizens while protecting their individual communities and the broader Memphis community.

Chapter III explores the context of American involvement in World War II and the ways in which that impacted race relations in the city of Memphis. The 1940s were a decade of change in the city. The demographic and economic changes resulting from the depression and World War II challenged the traditional social and political structures in the southern city. A growing black population and an increase in black opposition to racial inequality meant that white city leaders had to find alternative ways to control the city's black population. Chapter III examines how city leaders navigated the changing racial landscape while also clinging to the traditional southern racial hierarchy. The chapter briefly outlines how the city's white leaders asserted social, economic, and political control over blacks during the 1940s in order to maintain the racially segregated duality of the city of Memphis. It looks at how fear and control shaped the definition of community protection and black equality over the course of the decade.

By the second half of the 1940s, white Memphians' anxiety over the changing demographics of the city and what that would mean for white supremacy and racial

segregation had heightened racial tensions in the city. These tensions were exacerbated by Memphis police officers' violent interactions with the black community that appeared to be less about enforcing the law and more about enforcing black deference to white supremacy. Chapter IV examines four specific cases of police brutality in Memphis and the reactions to these attacks. The four cases of police brutality discussed in this chapter became symbols of black inequality, bringing to light the failures of traditional black leaders to protect the community and reminding black Memphians of the continued disregard for black life by white authorities. As police brutality continued, outrage grew in the black working-class neighborhoods most affected by this brutality and among those expecting changes in southern race relations in the wake of World War II. Black Memphians worked to find alternative ways to protect themselves and win justice for their community. It was out of this search for a way to combat the violence of black inequality that the call for black police officers reemerged as a way to protect black Memphians from the violence of white control.

Chapter V takes an in-depth look at black Memphians' campaign for black police officers. Utilizing editorials and community petitions, this chapter draws on the voice of black Memphians as they challenged the traditional system of racial accommodation that had ruled Memphis for decades. The chapter begins with a brief history of black activism throughout the 1940s to demonstrate how a tradition of black activism in Memphis impacted the efforts to get the city to hire black police officers in 1948. The campaign for black police officers that emerged in 1947 and 1948 was about protecting black Memphians from the continuation of police brutality. For black Memphians, these

instances of police brutality represented the historical injustice of white supremacy and the immediate need for black Memphians to take control of community protection. Out of this campaign for black police officers came a solution that represented local circumstances and connected community protection with justice and equality. Drawing on a tradition of black electoral participation in Memphis politics, black Memphians used their voting power to force city leaders to respond to efforts to create positive change in the lives of the city's black citizens.

While the campaign was ultimately successful, in that by the fall of 1948 the city hired nine black police officers, the reality of having those officers on the streets of Memphis did not live up to community expectations. From the outset, black and white Memphians had varying and often conflicting expectations about the functioning of these black officers. Chapter VI explores both the expectations of black officers and the reality of being a black police officer in Memphis in the years immediately following the 1948 hiring. The black police officers hired in 1948 were defined by their race. Being defined first as black and second as police officers shaped the experience of the black officers hired in 1948. The restrictions placed on these officers because of their race limited their ability to promote equal justice and equality more generally. The presence of black police officers in the Memphis Police Department worked to further segregate Memphis and reinforced the racial status quo.

However, even as these black officers were segregated in their own substation, worked only in black neighborhoods, and were prohibited from arresting white offenders, black police officers became a fixture in the Memphis Police Department after 1948.

While the main focus of this study is the campaign for the initial hiring of black police officers in 1948, the epilogue traces the role black police officers came to play in the Memphis Police Department. Although black hiring stagnated in the early 1950s and did not pick up again until the 1960s, the presence of black police officers from 1948 on laid the foundation for continued employment and advancement of black police officers in the decades to come. According to R.J. Turner, one of the original nine officers hired in 1948 who stayed on the force until he retired, “I stuck it out because I wanted to prove they couldn’t run me off.”<sup>23</sup> By remaining on the force, Turner and fellow officer Wendell Robinson represented black Memphians’ persistence in demanding a place for themselves within the city.

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<sup>23</sup> Menno Duerksen, “Abused at First, Negro Policemen Now in Demand, Greatly Respected,” *Press-Scimitar*, February 14, 1969.

## CHAPTER II

### MEMPHIS IN CRISIS: A HISTORY OF BLACKS ON PATROL

While black officers did not become a permanent fixture in the Memphis police department until 1948, the city of Memphis had a history of black men patrolling the city's streets dating back nearly a century. During the Union occupation of Memphis beginning in 1862, black soldiers helped to maintain Union control over the Confederate river town. Then again in the late 1870s black men were hired to help keep order in the city when a series of yellow fever epidemics decimated the city's white population. And finally, in 1919, in order to secure black political support, mayoral candidate Frank Monteverde delivered on his promise to hire black police officers. However, in all three instances, the presence of black men policing the streets of Memphis was short-lived. As the immediate circumstances shifted and more conservative, white supremacist attitudes prevailed, uniformed black men patrolling the city's streets disappeared.

Black men in uniform meant to patrol the city appeared in Memphis in moments that necessitated action to maintain order within the city. In the case of black Union soldiers, the crisis of war and the necessity to maintain military order prevailed as racial boundaries, particularly in the South, were shifting. The yellow fever epidemics created a manpower crisis, and the hiring of black men as police officers became necessary to maintain civil order. Again, in the aftermath of World War I and amid the growing push by blacks for greater black political participation, circumstances were such that it became

a political necessity to maintain the support of the black community with the promise of hiring black police officers. Since the Civil War, Memphis's black community played an integral role in the structure of city life, consistently demanding an acknowledgement of the black community's place in Memphis. And black police officers were one persistent manifestation of these demands. Throughout the city's history, black men patrolling the city's streets, even on a limited basis, offered black Memphians a symbol of their place in the city. Simultaneously, they offered white officials a way to appease black demands for more control over their lives while also maintaining the social and political order that was defined by white supremacy and racial segregation.

### **Black Union Soldiers in Memphis**

Black soldiers in Memphis were a direct result of the national crisis of the Civil War, but the race riot of 1866 was a local crisis directly resulting from the presence of black soldiers in the city. These black uniformed men symbolized Union victory and the potential for black equality with whites and were a direct threat to the old white supremacist guard in Memphis. The black soldiers were part of an autonomous black community that was developing in Memphis during the Civil War. This community took pride in the black soldiers and looked to them for protection. During the Civil War years and immediately following, black soldiers performed de facto policing functions for the black community developing in Memphis. Their position as soldiers meant they represented moves towards freedom and equality for this black community.

The white community also saw black soldiers as representing freedom and equality, but for white Memphians these ideas of black freedom and equality were a

threat to their traditional understanding of the social order. For them, black soldiers were not protectors but a threat. Although the black soldiers of the Union army were not patrolling the streets of Memphis and policing the civilian population, their experiences and relationship to both the white and black communities of the city parallel those of the black police who would come after them. These black soldiers revealed the power of having black men in uniform and what that meant to the black community, the white community, and the city as a whole.<sup>24</sup>

Prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, Memphis was a booming Mississippi River business center. Memphis's location on the river and its railroad connections made the city a major trade center for cotton moving from the plantations of the Deep South up river to industries in the North. This trade allowed Memphis to become the sixth largest city in the South. The city's rising prominence as a trade center attracted many businesses. Similar to other growing southern cities in the 1850s, by 1860 30 percent of Memphis's population was made up of immigrants, primarily German Jews and Irish. Within the total population the number of blacks was only 3,822, less than 200 of whom were free.<sup>25</sup> Thus, prior to the war, the city had a diverse ethnic population, but a primarily white one.

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<sup>24</sup> For more on the relationship between whites and blacks in Memphis during the Civil War, see Stephen V. Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot That Shook The Nation One Year After the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013); Joseph H. Parks, "A Confederate Trade Center Under Federal Occupation: Memphis, 1862 to 1865," *The Journal of Southern History* 7.3 (August 1941): 289-314; and Kevin R. Hardwick, "'Your Old Father Abe Lincoln Is Dead and Damned': Black Soldiers and the Memphis Race Riot of 1866," *Journal of Social History* 27.1 (Autumn 1993): 109-128.

<sup>25</sup> Kathleen Berkley, "'Like a Plague of Locust': Immigration and Social Change in Memphis, Tennessee" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1980), 4.

The Union army captured Memphis in 1862, causing many of the native-born white Confederate supporters to flee across the state line into Confederate-controlled Mississippi. Historian Kathleen Berkley argues that Union occupation brought social, political, and economic changes to the city that were the result of the irreversible demographic changes that occurred as migrants from across the South as well as the North began flocking to the city. Jewish businessmen and northern social workers, such as preachers and teachers, came to Memphis to take advantage of the reopening of the city under Union occupation.<sup>26</sup> As time would show, these new groups would cause tension within the city's white community, as they worked to impose both a free labor economic system and a more inclusive political system on the city while the native white population tried to cling to their traditional structures of power.

Black migrants, however, caused an equally significant demographic change. Memphis's proximity to the Confederate slave state of Mississippi made it a mecca for slaves looking to run away from their masters in the confusion of war. By July of 1862 there were so many former slaves and free blacks living in and around Memphis that the Union army legalized the employment of these contraband slaves, who worked for provisions, rather than money, in order to keep the growing refugee community from starving. By not paying these former slaves with money, the Union also retained a semblance of the slave system, in case these contraband slaves had to be returned to their owners and their lives as slaves. By February of 1863, the growing number of runaway

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<sup>26</sup> Berkley, 125.

slaves following the Union army had grown to such an extent that, in order to ease the burden of caring for them, the army decided to centralize the location of the contraband camps, choosing Memphis as one of these locations. This centralization of contraband camps in Memphis meant that by March there were an additional 1,236 black people living in the city's contraband camp.<sup>27</sup>

Along with the contraband camp was a refugee camp that was housing twenty-five hundred freedmen, three quarters of whom were women and children. This number further increased in September of 1863 when Memphis became a collection point for black troops after the army ordered "all able-bodied draftable 'colored men of the west' be sent to Memphis" to join the Union army. With these men came their wives and children, who moved to the city to be close to the fort where their husbands, fathers, and brothers were stationed. This influx created a population of free blacks, which, because of their numbers, would shift the social and political makeup of the city. As the newly arrived black citizens made their homes in the city, the black population of Memphis reached 31 percent of the total population by 1865.<sup>28</sup>

The primary black unit at Fort Pickering just outside Memphis was the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, which formed in Memphis in June of 1863. As this unit was primarily recruited locally, the soldiers were intimately connected to the local

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<sup>27</sup> While the contraband status was a Federal policy, in Memphis, General William T. Sherman did not believe it was a declaration ending slavery or that it was his place to disrupt the relationship between master and slave. Thus, he worked to comply with the law in such a way that accounts of wages earned and provisions provided for individual slaves were kept in good order in case the courts decided that these slaves and the wages they had accrued while working for the Union army would be returned to their masters. See Berkley, 145.

<sup>28</sup> Berkley, 146.

community, and many of them would remain in Memphis after the war. Although these men never saw combat, they did receive access to training with guns, which historian Kevin Hardwick argues was an “inversion of social norms.” Prior to the war blacks had been excluded from access to firearms by the very nature of the social order. Through the military, these men experienced a new type of equality with whites, the right to bear arms and protect one’s self, community, and family. Black soldiers’ ability to serve in the military also gave these black men a stake in protecting their communities and the nation, empowering black soldiers as they gained experiences that were previously exclusive to whites.<sup>29</sup>

Even as black soldiers gained greater equality and access to the privileges formerly reserved for whites in some ways, neither the Union army nor the Federal government always treated them as equal to whites. Black soldiers received both less and inferior provisions than white soldiers. As the 3<sup>rd</sup> Artillery’s commander Colonel Ignatz G. Kappner complained, his troops did not receive fresh bread and only got half the amount of rice and beef, which was “inferior in quality, badly butchered and the necks and shanks not excluded, and in some instances almost unfit to eat.” Along with bad provisions, officials reported that the black soldiers “have not been paid during the last six months, and cannot provide for their families who [are] destitute.” The Union army, as these white commanders pointed out, did not care for its black soldiers as it did the white soldiers. This was not just the case in Memphis; the U.S. Army as a whole practiced discrimination against black troops. The War Department provoked

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<sup>29</sup> Hardwick, 110.

considerable resentment when it went back on its promise to pay black troops a bounty upon mustering out, claiming a legal technicality.<sup>30</sup> So, although black soldiers were given the opportunity to participate in the fight against the Confederacy, they were not treated as equal participants, even by the Federal government.

But while the military did not treat these men as equals, Memphis's growing black community, made up of black migrants and soldiers' families settling in the city in the mid-1860s, took pride in the black soldiers who came from within their ranks. This pride developed out of a vision of freedom that rested on the elevation of black men to the role of male protectors of the community. As one black Memphian noted, "We are highly gratified by the appellation by which the colored soldiers are addressed by their officers, viz.: *men*; and we urge the colored men in all places, at all times and under all circumstances to cease using the vulgar phrase, 'nigger.'" This sentiment, expressed at a mass meeting in Memphis on the first anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, conveyed the feeling that soldiering represented a new way of being for black men in the South, one that qualified them as men rather than property. The army's use of the term "men" versus "boy" or "nigger" further removed these black men from the condition of property by using terms to address the black soldiers that were in direct opposition to the terms used to address them when they were slaves. Blacks needed to own this new understanding of themselves and separate themselves from the perceptions of black

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<sup>30</sup> I.G. Kappner to W.W. Cameron, 13 December 1865, Regimental Letterbook, 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, Records of the Adjutant General's Office (U.S.), 1780-1917, RG94, National Archives and Records, Washington, D.C.; John Smith to William Whipple, 21 December 1865, Folder 6, Box 12, Adjutant General's Office (Tennessee) Records, 1796-1900 RG 21, Tennessee State Library and Archive, Nashville; and Ash, 86.

inferiority that had accompanied slavery. This terminology called on black men to embrace equal manhood even in the language they used to describe themselves. As Hardwick points out, “The social role of soldier, carrying with them the authority and prestige of the Union army, in itself enhanced the power and self-image of black soldiers” and the black community as a whole, because it proved their abilities and disproved their inferiority.<sup>31</sup>

These black soldiers were not simply representatives of the possibility of a better life after slavery for the community; these black soldiers were actively working to better the position of their families and the other blacks who had migrated to make homes in the city. Many of the soldiers had families living within the city’s developing black neighborhood who were unable to provide for themselves. Soldiers would steal supplies and even uniforms to take home to their families to supplement what little the family was able to gather on their own. This theft became such a common practice that eventually the Army ruled that it would recognize legal marriages between black soldiers and women living in the developing black community, thus entitling the family to extra rations.<sup>32</sup>

Black soldiers not only worked to provide for their families but also to protect them from the military and Federal agencies’ efforts to control their lives. When the

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<sup>31</sup> Hardwick, 110.

<sup>32</sup> Berkeley, 150-151. During slavery, it had been illegal for slaves to marry. Although many slaves did create family units amongst themselves, slave marriages were not legally recognized. After slaves were liberated, one of their first priorities was to legalize marriages and gather lost family members in order to build and rebuild families as free citizens. For more on former slaves and family building, see Leon Litwack, *Been In the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

Army tried to relocate black women and children from the city to President's Island in the Mississippi River to work on abandoned plantations, black soldiers refused to move the women and children and "a near 'riot' occurred." Black soldiers resisted the efforts of the Freedman's Bureau to force the blacks living in Memphis into labor contracts. In August of 1865, Commander General Davis Tillson complained that "the [white] soldiers employed to visit the Freed people in and about Memphis and inform them that none but those having sufficient means or so permanently employed as to be able to take care of themselves will be allowed to remain" had reported back that "colored soldiers interfere with their labors and tell the freed people that the statements made to them...are false, thereby embarrassing the operations of the Bureau."<sup>33</sup> Black soldiers purposefully undermined the efforts of the Freedman's Bureau to control the labor of the new black citizens now living in Memphis. These soldiers did not see themselves as simply agents of the U.S. Army obeying the commands of their superiors, but as agents for the community of freed blacks and their families who had come to Memphis to find lives as freedmen and women. Soldiers used their position as U.S. military men to protect this emerging black community from infringements on their new freedoms.

While black soldiers and their families were trying to act on and protect their new freedoms, the city's white southern residents, new and returning, continued to resist the idea of black freedom, especially the implications towards black equality. As early as the fall of 1862 General Sherman had ordered that "runaway slaves must be treated as free, and people encouraged to give them employment as such." Whites within Memphis saw

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<sup>33</sup> Berkeley, 151; and quoted in Hardwick, 116.

the large influx of blacks to their city as disruptive and even dangerous. The Democratic-leaning press was particularly vocal about the dangers of such a large free black population and spread rumors that fueled white anxiety. For instance, in April of 1866, the Memphis *Public Ledger* reported that “south Memphis had become notorious for negro outrages,” referring to a robbery by a group of black men who remained at large. According to the *Ledger*, these criminals “will get so bold that there will be no safety, either for life or property, for any place these marauders feel like plundering,” which reinforced the image of the “blood thirsty spirit of the black population.” Black soldiers were seen as particularly dangerous. As Hardwick argues, white citizens of Memphis continued to commit themselves to a pre-war racial order in which blacks were subordinate to whites. Black soldiers, “whose uniform conferred upon them the authority of the victorious Union Army,” reminded whites of the defeat of the South and “were deeply threatening to those whites committed to the old order.” According to one commander in Memphis, “The prejudice of the southern people against the negro troops, seem to be insurmountable.”<sup>34</sup>

This tensions between Memphis’s white southern community and the black soldiers often played out in the streets. Outside of their role as soldiers, these black men lived in and were a part of the activities of the black community developing in the city. Most came from within that community and remained tied to it through familial connections. On occasion, black soldiers were detailed to police community events such

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Ashe, 42; Hardwick, 110; and John Smith to William Whipple, 21 December 1865, Box 12, Folder 6, Adjutant General’s Office (Tennessee) 1796-1900 RG 21.

as dances or festivals, thus functioning as the de facto police within the black community. Their job was to protect these events from any trouble. As the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Artillery put it, "I have never received any orders to stop Negro dances, but have been ordered many times to furnish guards for such to prevent disturbances by citizens." Thus, the soldiers attended these events in order to provide protection for their fellow black citizens and ensure conflict and disturbances were avoided. In contrast, when white police got involved, they disrupted black community events. At a ball in February of 1866, white city police broke in, arrested the wives of several soldiers, and charged them with prostitution. By one account the white soldiers "behaved in a very rough and boisterous manner crying 'Shoot the damned niggers.'"<sup>35</sup> In terms of the activities of this new black community, black soldiers came to protect, while white police came to disrupt. These two approaches to black community activity reflect two different visions of the place of blacks in the city. While blacks were trying to build a community for themselves in Memphis, whites tried to prohibit this community from becoming a permanent fixture.

White efforts to control and black attempts to protect themselves and their community resulted in physical confrontation. In the case of the ball broken up by white police, black soldiers responded by firing their guns towards the police to drive them away. On other occasions black soldiers and white police collided as black soldiers attempted to assert their newfound expectation of equal respect for their position as soldiers and white police attempted to maintain the pre-war social hierarchy that gave

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Hardwick, 117.

them power over blacks. For example, when black soldiers refused to move off the sidewalk for white police officers, white officers often responded with force, pushing and elbowing black soldiers out of their way. This kind of behavior on the part of black soldiers was an expression of the expectation of the equal rights and the privileges that came with their new freedom. Even though the soldiers' actions were unruly and disorderly, they were also a fundamental challenge to "the expectations of black public behavior under slavery."<sup>36</sup> Black soldiers were a reminder to whites that the war had meant Union victory, and thus, a promise of social and political equality for black Americans.

These tensions between black soldiers and white police eventually escalated to the point of explosion in the spring of 1866. As one Memphis newspaper noted at the time: "It is only with the negro soldiers that trouble has ever existed... With their departure, will come order, confidence, and the good will of old days. Had we had [white troops] instead of negro troops, neither this riot, nor the many lawless acts preceding it during the past six months, would have occurred." These comments from the white *Daily Avalanche* emphasize the resentment that had built up within the white community against black soldiers. The immediate cause of the riot was a clash between newly mustered-out black soldiers and white police in early May 1866. But this small skirmish soon escalated into an all out riot in which bands of whites, police and citizens, tore through south Memphis, the predominately black neighborhood. These bands

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<sup>36</sup> Hardwick, 119; This is not to say that there were not criminals among black soldiers, for the regiment did have its share of criminals, and their uniforms made them particularly conspicuous. See Ashe, 82-83; and Hardwick, 118.

specifically targeted black soldiers, “vowing to kill everyone one of ‘the God Damned nigger soldiers.’”<sup>37</sup>

The actions of the mob made it clear that this riot was about subjugating the city’s new black community. The mob targeted not only men in uniform but also any women associated with military men. Attacking black soldier’s families had an emasculating effect, as it negated black soldiers claims to manhood through protecting their families and community. Whites used these attacks to reassert white dominance over black bodies. Francis Thompson and Lucy Smith were raped at gun point during the riot, and as Smith explained, “There were some pictures in the room: we had General Hooker and some other Union officers, and they said they would not have hurt us so bad if it had not been for those pictures.”<sup>38</sup> While these images may not have been the only motivation for the men to violate these women, the fact that the men pointed out the photos that associated the women with the Union army emphasizes the larger motivation behind the violence, which was to reassert white dominance over the black community and black soldiers particularly. The raping of women in the community and more specifically women associated with the military was a direct affront to black soldiers’ efforts to use their newly acquired freedom to protect their community. These attacks were a reminder of the conditions of slavery, which included women’s particular vulnerability and black men’s inability to stop the violation of black women.

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<sup>37</sup> Memphis *Daily Avalanche*, May 12, 1866; and Ashe, 107.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Hardwick, 122.

Even though in its aftermath the riot was blamed on the “lawless aggression on the part of the vicious negroes infesting South Memphis,” and the black soldiers living there, black Memphians refused to be driven from the city. The black soldiers were disbanded when they had been mustered out of the military at the end of April, but many of them remained in the city, not only because they were waiting for back pay, but also because that was where their families had made homes there. And although they had given up their uniforms, many became leaders within the community and helped to continue the fight for greater rights and equality. Fraternal organizations, such as the Memphis Sons of Ham, planned large picnics to celebrate the fourth anniversary of the Union capturing the city and the Fourth of July. Black-owned and operated businesses, schools and churches worked to rebuild and reopen. Black stevedores even went on strike for higher wages. Although the strike was unsuccessful, it, along with other rebuilding efforts, demonstrated that Memphis’s new black community would not be intimidated into submission but would continue to strive for the opportunities to live out their freedom. Brian Page has described how blacks in Memphis celebrated the Fourth of July as a holiday, using it as a way to prove their American citizenship and therefore their worthiness of complete equality because of their commitment to the nation and its principles. Former black soldiers even participated in the celebrations, often leading parades. These parades frequently went beyond the bounds of established black neighborhoods and into white sections of the city. As Page points out, however, although “the parades were not radical demonstrations... they sometimes reminded whites that local African Americans had power and that they were willing to go beyond their

traditional neighborhood boundaries.” The black community celebrated in public spaces as an assertion of their rights as American citizens, reminding whites that they not only were free, but were also citizens.<sup>39</sup>

Black soldiers’ presence on the streets of Memphis during the Civil War was the result of the crisis of the war, but their presence also created a different type of crisis; the riot of 1866. White resentment and resistance to black equality fueled this later crisis. But when the riot was over, so was the presence of active black soldiers. Although their time in the city was short-lived, these soldiers proved to be a symbol of what black freedom could mean. In the aftermath of the riot, Memphis’s new black community refused to be subjugated by the white mob, but rather, continued to build and push for greater equality. Even though black freedom efforts would be stunted with the onset of Jim Crow laws and an era of intensified segregation and racial violence around the turn of the century, Memphis’s black community continued to be a force in the city. In many ways the Civil War created the foundations for Memphis’s substantial black community, in terms of numbers of black citizens and their commitment to having a place in the city. From this point on, black Americans would represent a significant portion of the population in Memphis, who would be a factor in the social and political order of the city in the century to come.

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<sup>39</sup> *Appeal*, May 2, 1866; Ashe, 183-184; *Memphis Daily Post*, February 27, 1867; and Brian D. Page, “‘Stand By the Flag’: Nationalism and African-American Celebrations of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July in Memphis, 1866-1887,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 58 (1999): 292-293.

## **Yellow Fever and Black Police**

During the 1870s, Memphis was racked by a series of yellow fever epidemics in 1873, 1878, and 1879, with the epidemic in 1878 being the most deadly. By the end of the decade, the city's total population had dropped from forty thousand to thirty-four thousand residents. Some seven thousand people died as a result of the disease and nineteen thousand Memphians suffered from nonfatal attacks of yellow fever. From the outset it became clear that the city's white citizens were exponentially more susceptible to the disease than its black citizens. By the end of the 1873 epidemic, 1,377 whites had succumbed to the disease while only 144 blacks had died. Naturally the city suffered as the economy stagnated, and managing the city became increasingly difficult as white citizens fled and those that stayed were stricken with fever. Of the city's fifty police officers in 1873, only two remained on duty at the end of the year. The rest had become ill, died, or fled the city.<sup>40</sup>

Initially, city leaders hired replacement officers in accordance with a quota based on the city's ethnic makeup - ten Italian, twenty Irish, and twenty German - but the plan did not take into account the city's black population. Policing continued to be exclusively a white man's job, as many of the white supremacist attitudes that fueled the riot less than a decade before persisted. The failure to consider the black population when fulfilling police quotas also reflected white inability to consider blacks as full citizens. By the end of the second and most deadly strike of yellow fever in the city, in

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<sup>40</sup> Dennis C. Rousey, "Yellow Fever and Black Policemen in Memphis: A Post-Reconstruction Anomaly," *The Journal of Southern History* 51.3 (1985): 363.

1878, only twelve of the thirty-one recently hired police officers who had remained in the city survived. City leaders faced a civic crisis as the city's population continued to dwindle. During this 1878 outbreak, twenty-five thousand people fled Memphis. While the majority of the black population stayed in the city, only about six thousand whites stayed and of those 70 percent succumbed to the disease. As one of the remaining white officers described it, "This city is almost depopulated. The death rate is over one hundred every day. The undertakers can't bury them fast enough. We find a lot that have been dead three and four days. My God it is fearful. There are very few white people left in this city."<sup>41</sup> City officials were left with not only a manpower crisis but also a racial crisis as the city's black population approached a majority.

As these numbers show, white flight along with black resistance to the disease meant that there were more blacks than whites left in the city. Historian Dennis Rousey argues that this situation created a crisis in terms of the ability of the remaining white manpower to maintain control in the city. As a result of this manpower crisis, city officials were forced to lower the racial barriers that had restricted blacks from positions in city management, even during Radical Republican Reconstruction. Thus Memphis became an anomaly among southern cities, the majority of which had begun, by 1870, to move away from the racial integration that had occurred during Reconstruction and

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<sup>41</sup> Rousey, 364-365.

toward racial exclusion, as southern whites resentful of black political involvement regained control over southern politics.<sup>42</sup>

During the first yellow fever epidemic of 1874, a coalition of black and white leaders led by the city's mayor, John Loague, and including the remaining black councilmen, had pushed for the city government to integrate the city's police force. It was not inconceivable in 1874 that a southern city would hire black police officers. Other southern cities with sizable black populations had hired black police officers during Reconstruction, including New Orleans, Louisiana; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Montgomery, Alabama. But this had not occurred in Memphis. As one conservative Memphis newspaper noted, the "political dodging, for the purpose of securing the negro vote, won't do in these times," as the political climate had shifted away from the black and white coalitions that had dominated Republican politics during the Reconstruction years prior to 1874.<sup>43</sup>

However, the circumstances were very different in 1878 when the city finally did hire black police officers. One reason was the demographic shift that the epidemic caused. In the 1870s, black Memphians still had the right to vote, and by 1880, they would represent 44 percent of the population as compared to 17 percent in 1860, meaning

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<sup>42</sup> Rousey, 361. Southern white Democrats saw the black and white Republican coalition in southern politics as destroying the South. This destruction of the southern economy, politics, and society was brought on by Union victory in the Civil War and Republican-dominated Reconstruction policies. In the more than three decades between the end of the war and the turn of the century, white southern Democrats worked to regain control of politics in the South. For more, see Michael Perman, *Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869-1879* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) and Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Farrar, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Rousey, 366; and For a chart outlining the southern cities with black police officers and their percentage in the force and as part of the total population, see Rousey, 359.

that the black percentage of the population nearly tripled during the twenty-year period. In the county, black men outnumbered whites by 467 and represented just over half of the population. During the 1870s, at least twelve blacks were elected to the Memphis city council, and of the twelve black men in the state legislature, nine were from West Tennessee. So while blacks did not have political sway in 1874, by 1878, at the height of the epidemic, the black population was 70 percent of the city's total population, giving them a clear majority and greater political influence. In the face of such an overwhelming majority of black citizens, combined with the fact that, as one white survivor remembers it, "not more than 200 white people escaped the fever, and the most of these had been victims of it in previous epidemics," white citizens feared the potential dangers of a discontented and rebellious black community, which resulted in a willingness to give in to black demands for greater civic involvement.<sup>44</sup>

Members of the black community seemed less discontented and rebellious and more insistent on their right to a place in the city. Black Memphians demanded to be treated as equal citizens by way of inclusion in city government. When white Memphians tried to encourage the black citizens to leave the city for the refugee camps in the country during one of the epidemics, the black pastor of Beale Street Baptist Church, R. N. Countee, declared that black Memphians "would just as soon die in Memphis as anywhere else. We are here in her prosperity and do not care to forsake her in the time of

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Rousey, 367; and Gloria Brown-Melton, "Blacks in Memphis, Tennessee, 1920-1955: A Historical Study," (Ph.D. diss., Washington State University, 1982), 6-9. Memphis blacks would in fact never lose the right to vote. For more, see Elizabeth Gritter, *River of Hope: Black Politics and The Memphis Freedom Movement, 1865-1954* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2014).

adversity.” Countee’s declaration was one of ownership and emphasized not only black citizenship but also black Memphians’ feeling of responsibility for the fate of the city. And with the extraordinary circumstances of the epidemic, in August of 1878, Memphis white leaders began to acknowledge the black population remaining in the city, or at the very least the reality of their numbers, by integrating the city government.<sup>45</sup>

On August 17, the Citizen’s Relief Committee integrated, adding one black member for each ward. Two days later, city leaders authorized the Chief of Police Phillip R. Athy to hire more police officers. Chief Athy selected fourteen whites and thirteen blacks to join the ranks of Memphis police officers. According to the *Daily Avalanche*, “The colored men are picked for good character, muscle, and pluck, and Chief Athy believes that every one of them will make good and efficient officers.” As Rousey argues, the integration of the police department was the direct result of the crisis created by the yellow fever epidemic: “Nothing but the impact of yellow fever can explain the breakthrough for black Memphians.”<sup>46</sup> The epidemic created the critical circumstances necessitating that white leaders reevaluate the color line within city government.

The black community took advantage of the situation to demand their rights as citizens and a place in city management. In the days after the announcement of the hiring of black police officers, black citizens continued to reiterate their commitment to the city and their desire to be a part of its future. Some four to five hundred black Memphians held a mass meeting four days after the announcement to reinforce their intention to stay

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Memphis *Daily Avalanche*, August 5, 1879.

<sup>46</sup> Memphis *Daily Avalanche*, August 20, 1878; and Rousey, 368.

in the city and show their support, “to come to the front in this hour of trial and do their whole duty in protecting life and property in the city of Memphis,” as full and deserving citizens. The group present at the meeting also passed a resolution expressing their gratitude for these changes and declaring “unqualified confidence” in the police chief, “who merits our gratitude for his recognition of our race, in selecting from among the colored people an equal number of special policemen.”<sup>47</sup> This show of support for the city and its government, especially a government willing to include black citizens, demonstrates the black community’s claiming of their place within the city and their effort to force white Memphians to acknowledge that place and black Memphians’ equal rights and responsibilities to the city’s management.

Because of the black community’s efforts to prove their commitment to the city, white city leaders’ acknowledged the black community’s role in the successes and failures of the city. In a speech, the city’s mayor acknowledged, “they [the black community] were in the same boat, on the same stream, and common suffering should weld them together, even long after this unfortunate dispensation of Providence has passed.”<sup>48</sup> In this statement the mayor spoke about the shared experience of all Memphians, black and white, in the face of the epidemics. The mayor was attempting to justify the inclusion of black police officers on the Memphis police force even though it violated the tradition of white control and domination of city management. The hiring of black police officers in Memphis in 1878 was the explicit result of the crisis created by

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<sup>47</sup> Memphis, *Evening Herald*, August 24, 1878.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

the epidemics, but the implicit result was the affirmation of black Memphians as citizens deserving of a role in the management of the city and a flexing of the color line in order to accommodate the city's immediate needs.

The hiring of black police officers also had another purpose: it gave white city leaders a political tool to help them garner black support. As the black officers remained on the force into the early 1880s, white leaders were able to use the officers as “visible tokens to gain and hold political support from the black community.” For white politicians, these officers became political tools to maintain their control over the city with the support of the black community. So, even as the epidemics ended and the city's white population began to rebound, black officers remained on the police force. For the black community, these men were not just tokens or political tools but had proven themselves to be “ready and willing to patrol the streets of our city day and night to preserve order and defend public and private property.” As a result, the black officers proved they were not simply token appointees of a magnanimous city government but deserved their place on the police force as protectors of the city wide community.<sup>49</sup>

But this fluidity in the color line and the inclusion of the city's black community in city government was short-lived. The epidemics that came to an end in 1879 allowed for the creation of a “new city,” as Memphis historian Gloria Brown-Melton describes it. In 1860, 38 percent of the city's population had been foreign-born whites. By 1900, that number had dropped to just 15 percent. The people that came back to Memphis after the epidemics were more rural and more conservative in their social and political thinking.

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<sup>49</sup> Rousey, 361; and Memphis, *Daily Avalanche*, August 3, 1879.

According to southern historian David Goldfield, these “rural migrants brought their distinct cultural baggage to the city” and made a rural ideology the defining feature of the urban South, Memphis included.<sup>50</sup> These rural white migrants to the city brought with them rural ideology and values that altered the social and cultural landscape of southern cities like Memphis.

In the decades following the epidemics of the 1870s, these rural migrants with their rural values helped to remake Memphis culture and society. Memphis, by 1900, was the most rural of the urban southern cities, as 80 percent of the population had migrated from the Mississippi and Tennessee countryside. A belief in family was at the core of this rural value system; honor, vengeance, and pride, especially where women were concerned, governed behavior inside and outside the home. According to historian Gerald M. Capers, Southerners believed in and practiced “the right of private vengeance,” as exemplified by southern murder rates. In the first half of the twentieth century the national homicide rate was 7.2 per 1,000 inhabitants while the murder rate in Memphis was 47.1 homicides per 1,000 inhabitants, which made it the nation’s murder capital.<sup>51</sup>

This violence was connected to “the deep religiosity of the rural migrants.” The evangelical Protestantism that rural migrants brought with them to the cities encouraged this focus on family values and protection of tradition. For these evangelical Protestants,

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<sup>50</sup> Brown-Melton, 4; and David R. Goldfield, “The Urban South: A Regional Framework,” *The American Historical Review* 86, no. 5 (December 1981): 1020.

<sup>51</sup> Goldfield, 1020.

the essence of their religious culture was “purification, antipathy to change and a sharp distinction between ‘we’ and ‘them.’” But as this traditional rural religious culture tried to regulate and separate the urban landscape, with its booming population and increasingly shared public spaces, urban whites became “as vigilant, if not more vigilant than, their rural counterparts in maintaining the biracial society.”<sup>52</sup> This vigilance towards maintaining the color line made its way into the state legislature as well. In 1881, the Tennessee State Legislature mandated segregated rail cars and in 1889 they passed the poll tax aimed at disenfranchising black voters. The restructuring of city government after the city lost its charter in 1879 as a result of the epidemics eliminated many of the city’s electoral positions, thus eliminating much of the opportunity for black office holding. As a result of these and other measures, throughout the 1880s, the number of black elected officials declined as white conservatives regained power in the city.<sup>53</sup>

As white conservatives regained control of the city and the manpower crisis subsided, black police officers were pushed out of city employment just as they were pushed out of politics. In 1882 when officer Charles Wilson was fired, he argued that it was the result of prejudice on the part of his bosses. Five years later, another officer was fired for supposed inappropriate advances towards a white woman, a blatant violation of the color line. By 1892, only officer Dallas Lee remained, but he too left the force soon

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<sup>52</sup> Goldfield, 1021; 1024-1025.

<sup>53</sup> Gritter, 20.

after.<sup>54</sup> The tenets of white supremacy would not allow for black men to hold positions of power especially policing power, thus no more black police were hired in this period of white supremacist backlash. Thus, by the turn of the century, with the return of the white population to the city, blacks in Memphis had lost both their manpower advantage and the opportunity for advancing their position in the city provided. Although blacks continued to represent a significant portion of the population in Memphis, the necessity of using black police officers to maintain civil order had passed and so too did the time of having black policemen patrol the streets of Memphis.

### **1919 Election: Maintaining Political Order**

Even with the rise of conservative white Democratic politicians in the South, who ushered in the era of legal racial segregation known as Jim Crow, black Tennesseans retained the legal right to vote. Tennessee suffrage restriction did not include multiple ballot boxes, literacy tests, property requirements, “grandfather clauses,” or the other kinds of legal restrictions to voting put in place by other southern states in order to restrict the black vote. In 1906, when the state legislature did work to restrict the black vote, by allowing the state’s counties to opt for a white primary, Shelby County did not institute one. Thus, black citizens living in and around Memphis retained at least the right to vote throughout the early twentieth century, even if they did not have the political power to overturn white Democratic control over Memphis politics.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Rousey, 373.

<sup>55</sup> Brown-Melton, 9.

Even with the poll tax, black political activity was not eliminated in Memphis during the first half of the twentieth century and became one factor in the ability of black Memphians to force the white power structure to negotiate over black police officers. As outlined by historian Elizabeth Gritter, during the Jim Crow period, formal black political organizing made up a significant part of the black community's struggle for freedom and ultimately helped to end legal segregation. In the lead up to the 1919 election, black political organizing in Memphis helped to push city leaders to negotiate over black demands for greater equality. The ability to vote allowed black Memphians to assert their desire for greater community protection, a more equal justice system, and an acknowledgement of their rights as citizens. The hiring of black police officers in 1919 set the precedent for both the motivations behind and the means by which black Memphians would push for black police officers three decades later.<sup>56</sup>

At the time of the 1919 election, the most prominent black Memphian was Robert R. Church, Jr., son of Robert Church, Sr., the first black millionaire in the South. Born in 1885, Robert R. Church, Jr. remembered a time of black political power and office holding. The increasing restrictions on black rights that appeared during his youth were a clear memory for Robert R. Church, Jr. Robert R. Church, Sr. had attempted to shield his family from the indignities of the Jim Crow system. He refused to ride in segregated streetcars or trains and avoided segregated restaurants by having the family's meals at home. "We would eat and drink before we left home and go hungry or thirsty until we

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<sup>56</sup> Gritter, 1.

returned if necessary,” Robert R. Church Jr. later recalled.<sup>57</sup> These memories of black degradation and his father’s attempts to resist being subordinate guided Robert Church, Jr.’s political activity as an adult.

Robert R. Church, Sr.’s belief in the indignity and unfairness of the Jim Crow system was instilled in his son, who worked to organize Memphis’s black community politically in order to expand their rights. To this end, Church and his supporters instituted a massive voter registration drive during the 1916 election. Church registered some 10,612 black voters, representing one third of the total county voters, solidifying his role as a leader among black Memphians. Then, these voters nominated a separate all-black ticket for the national and state ballots, in order to draw white politicians’ attention to the fact that the black community was both willing and able to participate politically. The following year, Church founded the Lincoln League, a black Republican political advocacy group. The Lincoln League was founded on the premise that in order to break down the Jim Crow system, the black community had to vote as a block and use their numbers as a way to encourage white politicians to make concessions to black Memphians.<sup>58</sup>

Memphis’s white Democratic political boss, E.H. Crump, encouraged this idea of the black voting block and further black political activity. Born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, Crump came to Memphis in 1894 and built up a business empire that extended from agriculture to insurance underwriting. But Crump’s real passion was his

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<sup>57</sup> Gritter, 29-30.

<sup>58</sup> Brown-Melton, 40-41; and Gritter, 42.

political aspirations. Crump was first elected mayor of Memphis in 1909. Crump recognized the value in gaining the support of the black community in order to boost and maintain his political power. Throughout his political career, Crump developed a relationship with black leaders like Church, Jr. by demonstrating a willingness to negotiate on certain issues important to the city's black community in exchange for black support.<sup>59</sup>

For example, in 1914, Crump appealed directly to the Citizens Committee of Colored Voters in order to convince its members to support his candidate for sheriff. He sent the group a summary of his candidate's accomplishments in the black community, such as the creation of a branch of the juvenile court for black youth as well as Crump's appointment of black doctors and nurses in public schools. As Crump informed one black man who had complained of rudeness by a city employee, "It has always been the policy of this...administration to treat everyone with uniform courtesy, regardless of their station or mission." In this way, Crump reinforced his image as a friend of black Memphians, an image he continued to cultivate because he recognized both the power black votes could have as a block and the importance of maintaining peaceful relations through token concessions.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of Crump's rise to power as a political boss in Memphis and his relationship to the black community, see Wayne G. Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don't Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2006). For more on the relationship between Crump and black leaders, see David M. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971); and Gritter, *River of Hope*.

<sup>60</sup> E.H. Crump to E.W. Irving, July 27, 1914, Series 1, Box 26, Folder "Politics 'N' 1914," E.H. Crump Collection, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee.

Crump saw himself as a paternal figure for his city's black people. Crump's relationship with black Memphis may have been reciprocal, but it was in no way equal. Historians have found many ways to characterize Crump and his relationship to the black community. Memphis historian Laurie Green found that black Memphians used the term "plantation mentality" in their everyday vernacular, "compar[ing] and contrast[ing] the racial parameters of city life to cultural memories of the plantation." And Crump's attitude and actions toward the black community in Memphis did echo life on the plantation. For him, black Memphians were "children to be managed rather than as enemies to be exterminated." This attitude allowed him to justify his concessions to the black community in the form of schools, healthcare, and recreation, while also stamping out any opposition or threats to his power with an iron hand. According to historian Allen Kitchens, Crump "was a combination of showman, dictator, humanitarian, progressive, and hard-as nails, ruthless administrator." Although he was ousted from office for violating liquor laws in 1916, he was elected six months later to the powerful position of county trustee, which operated as the county's treasurer. Crump then spent the next decade consolidating his political power into a political machine that ran the city of Memphis from 1930 through his death in 1954. While he was not on the ticket in the 1919 election, Crump used his political prowess to influence the election and his ties to the black community to further his own agenda. Specifically, he paid the poll taxes of working-class blacks and hosted barbeques to swing working-class black votes for the candidates he backed.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel

Robert R. Church, Jr. and his organization the Lincoln League also worked to harness the power of the black voters in the lead-up to the election of 1916. The Lincoln League led a massive campaign to register black voters in which Church himself paid for black voter education schools that some one thousand black Memphians attended, and he opened his auditorium on Beale Street for weekly rallies in the months leading up to the election. Church and the Lincoln League attempted to empower all of Memphis's black citizens, not just the middle-class. True to its founding tenets of using black political power to improve the lives of the community, the Lincoln League worked to politically educate and empower ordinary black Memphians because Church "knew that their support and their grassroots mobilization were crucial to the success of the league" and to the success of black political power to institute change. By election day the League had registered nearly ten thousand voters, representing a third of the total county electorate.<sup>62</sup>

White Memphians, however, feared this growing black political activity. The white daily, the *Commercial Appeal*, urged its readers to all vote Democratic in order to "write (*sic*) the brand of shame across the hideous plot" of the Lincoln League.<sup>63</sup> The fear was that if whites voted for both the Democratic ticket and the all-white branch of the Republican party, it would split the white vote and open the door for black elected officials. In response, the League took out a full-page advertisement in the white dailies

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Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 5, 22; Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 48; Allen H. Kitchens, "Ouster of Mayor Edward H. Crump, 1915-1916," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 19 (1965): 18; and Gritter, 59.

<sup>62</sup> Gritter, 46, 48; and Brown-Melton, 40-41.

<sup>63</sup> Kelly, 29.

in the days leading up to the election in an effort to assuage white fears by declaring the black community's loyalty to the city and the South. In many ways the League's ad was a precursor to the sentiment of white business leaders who would become concerned about blacks leaving the city in the wake of World War I, reminding white Memphians that the city's continued success depended on cooperation between the races.<sup>64</sup> Racial tensions and the fear of blacks "getting out of their place" were part of the political narrative in Memphis.

League voters helped the Republican presidential nominee Charles Evans Hughes carry Shelby County, but he did not win in the state over all, nor did the Republican gubernatorial or senatorial candidates. But even without these larger wins, the election of 1916 in Shelby County had demonstrated the power black votes could have in influencing the outcome of elections. And true to its mission of using black votes to increase black quality of life, the Lincoln League, realizing that local Republicans did not have enough support to win over a Democratic candidate, began to work with those local Democrats they saw as the most likely to treat blacks fairly.<sup>65</sup> Three years before the 1919 election, the Lincoln League had proved that black votes could sway an election.

As America went to war to protect freedom abroad, black Americans worked to draw attention to the lack of freedom for black Americans at home. Even as national black leaders such as W.E.B Du Bois called for African Americans to "forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens"

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<sup>64</sup> Gritter, 47.

<sup>65</sup> Gritter, 54.

in an effort to use black support of the war effort as a means to get white America to recognize black equality, instances of violence against blacks began to rise. The summer of 1917 saw racially motivated violence in Houston, Texas; East St. Louis, Illinois; Chester, Pennsylvania; and Newark, New Jersey. The violence in East St. Louis left some forty-seven people dead and six thousand, mostly African Americans, were left homeless. Following the outbreak of violence, the NAACP held a “Silent Parade” in which upwards of ten thousand people marched in protest of the violence and carried signs reading, “Though Shalt Not Kill” and “Mr. President, Why Not Make America Safe for Democracy,” which explicitly pointed out the disparities between the country’s war aims and the reality of life for black Americans in America.<sup>66</sup>

Members of Memphis’s black community also fell victim to the violence that swept the nation in the summer of 1917. Ell Persons, a black Memphian, was lynched by a white mob after being accused of raping and murdering a white girl. Persons was turned over to a mob almost a week before his trial date and taken to the location of the supposed crime, where hundreds of spectators watched Persons burn alive. His body was then transported back to the city where it was dumped in the midst of a crowd on Beale Street. James Weldon Johnson of the national NAACP office came to Memphis to investigate but could find no evidence of Persons’s guilt. This incident “inflamed public opinion” among the city’s black citizens and contributed directly to the founding of the

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<sup>66</sup> W.E.B Dubois, “Close Ranks,” *The Crisis*, July 1918, in Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, ed., *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal; An African American Anthology* (New York: Bowman and Littlefield, 2000); and John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 9<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2011), 363.

city's own chapter of the NAACP that same year. By the end of the war in 1919, the Memphis chapter had over one thousand members.<sup>67</sup>

Racial tensions continued to fester throughout the country during the war years and exploded into outright violence in the summer of 1919, which came to be known as Red Summer, with racial violence erupting in more than twenty-six American cities from Longview, Texas, to Washington, D.C, with the worst violence occurring in Chicago in July. Although Memphis avoided outright racial violence that summer, it was not free of racial tensions, which boiled just below the surface. In mid-May, the city avoided violence by "sheer luck," according to one local daily. A black man allegedly killed a streetcar conductor, which angered the some of the city's more vigilant white supremacists, who threatened to retaliate against the city's black citizens. Church and other leaders assured city officials that the black Memphians would not seek out trouble, but they also warned that blacks would not stand by idly if they were attacked.<sup>68</sup>

Tensions continued to run high through the summer of 1919, and white officials were ready to act. Following the violence in Washington, D.C., the *Memphis Press* faulted D.C.'s police force for failing to "round up all negroes and disarm them, as would have been done in any southern city or most any place." After racial violence in Omaha, Nebraska, later that summer, the police in Memphis did attempt to disarm black Memphians by seizing guns from the pawnshops, sporting goods stores, and hardware stores frequented by black customers. According to Gloria Brown-Melton, this move

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<sup>67</sup> Brown-Melton, 46.

<sup>68</sup> Lester C. Lamon, *Black Tennesseans, 1900-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 242.

represented Memphis's white community's impulse "to constrain and to control blacks," as they had done in previous periods of racial tension.<sup>69</sup> However, in the face of a growing community of black activists and the very real possibility that white aggression could result in racial violence, Memphis's city leaders had to find an alternate way to both appease and maintain control over those black Memphians who were calling for change.

This need was further exacerbated by the increased migration of black workers out of the city to take advantage of the economic opportunities offered by war industries in the North. So many of Memphis's black workers, whom the city relied on as its primary source of cheap non-union labor, were leaving that a serious labor shortage occurred. In reaction, the Chamber of Commerce created the Industrial Welfare Committee "to keep its Negroes in Memphis." As the chairman of the Committee warned, "Business interests would languish, large and small property owners alike would suffer, and the city would disintegrate" if racial tensions were allowed to escalate. Thus, city leaders were urged to do anything "that will make our colored people more contented and happy," and "the business men of Memphis should help make Memphis the best town in this country for our Negro population, make it so much better for them to live in that they will not want to migrate to better places."<sup>70</sup> Even as racial tensions on the whole were on the rise, Memphis's city and business leaders realized the importance of maintaining the support of all segments of the city's black population in order to continue

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<sup>69</sup> Brown-Melton, 51.

<sup>70</sup> *Commerical Appeal*, October 6, 1919; and Tucker, 46.

to take advantage of the cheap supply of labor that working-class black Memphians, who made up the majority of the city's black population, offered.

Robert R. Church, Jr. and his Lincoln League saw an opportunity to take advantage of the atmosphere of uncertainty and tension that World War I had created in order to try and advance the position of blacks within the city in the 1919 election. Thus, the 1919 election results were influenced not only by the Crump political machine's grassroots campaigning style but also by the tensions brought on by the war, both of which necessitated that white leaders take into account the place of blacks in the city and the need to garner black support in order to win elections. Frank Monteverde was both the candidate endorsed by Crump and an acquaintance of Robert R. Church, Jr.'s. So, while Crump used his political machine to encourage working-class black voters to vote the Monteverde ticket, Church secured a promise from the candidate to hire black police officers in exchange for the support of the Lincoln League, and thus, the majority of the black vote.<sup>71</sup>

Matthew Thornton Sr., F.M. Mercer, and "Sweetie" Williams were hired to the police department following Monteverde's win. The three men were originally hired to patrol the streets of the city's black neighborhoods, but after only a few months on the job, the three got into a scuffle with some white men that resulted in one of the black officers being killed and the other two being dismissed from the department. The black officers' tenure, lasting only seven months, was much shorter than for those black officers who were hired during the yellow fever epidemics. As Gritter argues, the hiring

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<sup>71</sup> Gritter, 55.

of these officers in 1919 was a victory for black political leaders, such as Church, who were attempting to make inroads for their community into the management of the city, but it also revealed the limits of the reciprocal relationship black political leaders were trying to create with white city leaders. In reality, the hiring was politically expedient for white city officials who were facing the threat of violent upheavals against growing black demands for political rights sweeping the nation. And locally, the city's black electorate had demonstrated its ability to wield its political power to shape the outcomes of elections. The promise of hiring black police officers, even if their term proved to be short-lived, allowed white city leaders a way to maintain control over the black vote and the outcome of elections. As historian David Tucker describes it, by the election of 1919, "the local white movement for social control had clearly advanced beyond the shotgun and the lynch rope. Its new weapons were those of psychological and group manipulation," which provided a hint of black advancement to stave off increased black activism for greater equality.<sup>72</sup> So while the hiring of black police officers in 1919 can be seen as a victory of black political organizing, the motivations of white leaders to concede to that demand and the resulting short tenure of the officers demonstrated the way in which white leaders used black police officers as a means of social control, much as they would in 1948.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.; Tucker, 46. See also *Commercial Appeal*, September 10, 1948, for an interview with Matthew Thornton concerning his time as a police officer in 1919. Thornton claims the officers' firing was the result of white resentment over black officers making arrests in a gambling dive operated by a white man. White friends of the owner, according to Thornton, started the scuffle that was the immediate cause of the firing.

As the hiring and subsequent firing of black police officers in 1919 proved, persistent racial prejudice and the strength of white supremacy continued to dominate Memphis society and politics and left little room for the continued presence of black men in uniform patrolling the city's streets. Even though calls for black police officers continued to resurface in the 1920s and 1930s, the strength of white supremacy and the lack of a significant race-related crisis for city government meant that these efforts did not gain significant traction. In the mayoral election of 1927, the Crump-backed candidate promised to consider a reform program outlined by black leaders in order to secure black votes. The program included the hiring of black police officers along with access to the city zoo and higher salaries for black teachers. However, when the incumbent Mayor Rowlett Paine heard of this agreement, he publicly declared that Crump and his candidate, Watkins Overton, were "the greatest menace to white supremacy in this city since reconstruction days."<sup>73</sup>

According to Crump biographer, Wayne Dowdy, Paine's declaration caused "alarm [to] spread within the Crump organization that white voters would close ranks with Paine to bolster white supremacy and doom Overton's candidacy." Thus, the Overton campaign publicly retracted its promise to black leaders, assuring white voters, that the candidate was committed to avoiding racial friction and was thus opposed to admitting blacks to community parks designated for white use and the idea of black police. But in an effort to balance white racial fears of black equality and retain black support, Overton's campaign pledged to increase the number of community recreational

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Dowdy, 50.

facilities for black Memphians. Thus, black calls for black police officers were stymied by white leaders' promises of more equal distribution of municipal services but continued commitment to maintaining racial separation.<sup>74</sup>

Through the 1927 election, Crump was able to unify support for his political machine across racial and class lines. Thus, by the onset of the Depression Crump had solidified his political power. Crump's support of the New Deal and President Franklin D. Roosevelt only continued to bolster his political power on the state and national levels. As the city dealt with the effects of the Depression, the Crump machine "appeared racially progressive." After being elected to Congress in 1930, Crump used his position to secure federal New Deal funds for Tennessee and Memphis specifically. Although these New Deal relief efforts were distributed on a racist basis, black Memphians did experience increased employment opportunities along with improved living conditions. The number of parks and the number of paved streets in black neighborhoods increased, and the city also began construction on John Gaston Hospital, a hospital designated for blacks.<sup>75</sup>

These benefits were primarily felt by working-class black Memphians and shifted their political allegiance to the Democratic Party. The once strong oppositional political power of the city's black economic elite dwindled with "collapse of the city's black-owned business economy" during the Depression. As the city's black Republican

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Dowdy, 50.

<sup>75</sup> Dowdy, 71; Gritter, 95. Over the course of the 1930s, \$15 million federal dollars were spent on welfare and relief and an additional \$6.4 million on construction. See Dowdy, 71; and Gritter, 111-112.

leadership suffered, historian Laurie Green argues, “The political gap between Memphis’s black leaders and working-class African Americans” increased. And although the nation and the city had suffered an economic crisis, Memphis’s white leadership had maintained control over its power and the city’s racial hierarchy. So, even when police killed black postal worker George W. Brooks in early 1938, and the black community protested, calling for black police officers, no significant opposition to Crump’s control over the city surfaced. The police officer involved was fired and the city opened a new swimming pool for blacks in the primarily black area of South Memphis. While more black voters than in previous elections stayed away from the polls in the primary later that year, Crump’s candidate won the election handily. The crises of earlier decades were avoided, and throughout the 1920s and 1930s, limited accommodations that coincided with the continuation of the racially segregated social and political system in Memphis continued to be the dominant policy.<sup>76</sup>

Prior to 1948, the hiring of black law officers came at moments when the white power structure of the city needed the support of the black community. Whether it was a crisis brought on by war, epidemic, or political changes, in moments when a combination of changes to the city’s demographic, social, or economic situation collided, white Memphians sought to appease the demands of the city’s black population in order to maintain racial peace and continued white dominance. However, through the city’s post-Civil War history, the black community in Memphis continued to be a force with which city officials had to deal. The continued voting power and political activism of the black

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<sup>76</sup> Green, 37; Gritter, 134; and Dowdy, 98.

community meant that black Memphians could not be ignored. And when the city again faced a shifting demographic, economic, and political landscape in the mid-1940s with the onset of World War II, the question of black police officers gained greater traction.

CHAPTER III  
THE WAR AND MEMPHIS:  
MAINTAINING AND CONTROLLING RACIAL PEACE IN THE CITY

World War II transformed Memphis as it did many southern cities. The decade leading up to the hiring of black police officers in Memphis can be described as a decade of change. Demographic and economic changes spurred on by the Depression and World War II challenged social and political conventions in the city. These changes brought more jobs and more people to Memphis, and this new competition for jobs and physical space in the city increased tension between the races. This tension created a situation that necessitated white city officials take into account the needs of the city's black citizenry, thus creating opportunity for black Memphians to demand greater equality. This chapter explores the impact of the war experience on Memphis race relations. White officials tried to maintain racial control over a changing city. At the same time, black Memphians searched for ways to take advantage of the changes brought by the war to promote black equality and protect themselves and their communities. In navigating a changing city, black and white leaders were forced to negotiate with each other and the larger black community in order to maintain control over the city's segregated social and political order.

## **Mechanisms of Control Before the War**

Memphis's population boomed in the wake of the Great Depression and the onset of World War II. Between 1900 and 1940, the black population of the city went from 49,910 to 121,498, with an estimated 28,000 added between 1930 and 1940. The total population between 1930 and 1940 went from 253,153 to 292,942. Then between 1940 and 1948 the population grew by another 18 percent to 345,000, an estimated 34,000 of that growth occurring between the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 and 1943. Thus, by 1940, and throughout the following decade, blacks represented around 40 percent of the total population in Memphis.<sup>77</sup>

These changes in the city's demographics, specifically the large influx of population during World War II, came from the surrounding rural agricultural areas that had provided Memphis with the raw materials to develop into a booming Mississippi River trade center. While the city had been the cotton distribution center of the mid-South prior to World War II, Memphis drew other industries to the city during the war with promises of reduced taxes and a low-wage, non-union labor force. In the period between December 1941 and 1943, the city added nineteen thousand new manufacturing jobs, doubling the city's industrial labor force. These job increases came primarily through naval and military installations. Fisher Aircraft converted its factories over to make wings and fuselages for bombers. Quaker Oats, which came to the city in 1943, switched over to produce furfural alcohol for synthetic rubber. The war brought more

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<sup>77</sup> Robert Sigafos, *Cotton Row to Beale Street* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1979), 208; and Christopher Silver and John V Moeser, *Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1960* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 33.

jobs to the city for blacks and whites, and for men and women. As the war continued and industry in Memphis grew, an increasing number of people migrated to the city to take advantage of these new war industry jobs.<sup>78</sup>

But this massive influx of people in such a short amount of time put a strain on city government and city services. By 1942, there was virtually no housing for non-war workers. The Chamber of Commerce formed a rent bureau to control rising rents; the mayor appointed a citizens housing committee; and in 1944, the mayor founded the Emergency Housing Committee. According to Mayor Chandler, the city's number one problem was housing, a problem felt more acutely by the city's growing black population. Most housing built during this period was designated for sale or rent to white workers. Many black workers coming to the city were forced to "double up" with family or friends, most of whom were already living in substandard housing. Memphis Housing Authority director J.A. Fowler warned city leaders that as a result of this overcrowding, "maintaining health standards for negro workers is a recognized impossibility. The absentee records of negro employees in local war production due to illness are becoming an alarming problem." These health problems were only exacerbated by the inability of the city to keep up with providing basic services such as sewer maintenance and street construction, as all available materials were going to the war effort and what the city could obtain was not keeping pace with the demands of a rising population.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 178; and Sigafos, 207.

<sup>79</sup> J.A. Fowler to Mayor Walter Chandler, October 24, 1942, Box 8, Folder: "Health Department, 1941," The Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public

As the population continued to grow, so too did the problem of maintaining racial separation. In many ways, by the 1940s, Memphis was two separate cities, one black and one white. This separation can first and foremost be characterized by the spatial separation the city worked to maintain. Because of the continued growth of the black population between 1900 and 1940, and with the population boom in the 1930s, black neighborhoods were scattered around the city, clustered around business districts and white residential areas, primarily in the northern and southern parts of the city. With a continually expanding black population, city officials, as early as the 1920s, recognized the need for new black housing units. City planners began to use federal housing and slum clearance funds, given to cities as part of the New Deal recovery programs, in order to confine black neighborhoods to specific areas within the city.<sup>80</sup>

During the Depression, a Works Progress Administration study found that Memphis was in desperate need of new housing. According to the study, one half of all residents lived in substandard housing, 77 percent of which were black residents. As a result, three housing projects for blacks were built in the city, Dixie Homes (1938), William H. Foot Homes (1940), and LeMoyne Gardens (1941). All three were built in what could be considered “grey zones” or mixed neighborhoods, which essentially turned

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Library. In 1947, the Shelby County Welfare Commission Director reported to Mayor Polk that up to eight thousand homes were still awaiting connection to Memphis Light, Gas and Water services. See Box 32, Folder 7, “Welfare Commission 1947,” James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library. For civic club petitions for improved and new infrastructure, see Box 23, Folder 4, “Petitions 1947,” and Box 23, Folder 5, “Petitions 1948,” James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers.

<sup>80</sup> Silver and Moeser, 33; and Sigafos, 184.

these neighborhoods into black areas within the city.<sup>81</sup> The goal of this expanded housing for the city's blacks was to confine them to the margins of the city.

All of these projects were part of federal New Deal relief programs. According to Memphis business historian, Robert Sigafos, Memphis was the "first major FHA city." Federal housing dollars came to Memphis to help save homes through refinancing and insurance and to help fund new home construction in the growing city. The Federal Housing Authority (FHA) also helped to fund the Memphis Housing Authority, which became a major force in slum clearance on the eve of World War II. But in some cases these "blighted areas" slated for slum clearance were in fact stable black neighborhoods torn down in order to encourage residence in the newly built black housing projects in northern Memphis or South Memphis. Black homeowners on the east side of Mississippi Avenue between Willington Street and Georgia Avenue argued that theirs was "one of the best streets for Negroes in the city," a location where many of the black residents owned their own homes. Thus, a stable black community would be destroyed when the neighborhood was dismantled in the name of slum clearance.<sup>82</sup> Essentially, federally funded slum clearance projects worked to solidify physical separation between the races within the city's residential neighborhoods.

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<sup>81</sup> Sigafos, 182.

<sup>82</sup> Sigafos, 181; and Gloria Brown-Melton, "Blacks in Memphis, 1920-1955: A Historical Study" (Ph.D. diss., Washington State University, 1982), 158-166. Brown-Melton outlines arguments from white and black Memphis residents for and against the slum clearance projects. As more black families moved into the new housing projects and surrounding areas, whites fled these areas because, they argued, blacks "would not desire white presence in the new reconstituted neighborhoods." Thus, pre-war slum clearance projects accelerated the residential segregation of Memphis.

Other southern cities experienced the same issues concerning housing. The primary concern of southern cities was how to expand black housing while maintaining racial separation in the years following the war. Housing in Memphis followed a similar pattern to that in Richmond, Virginia. Planning consultant Harland Bartholomew prepared a master plan for both Memphis and Richmond in which he advocated for “vigorous slum clearance, rebuilding of neighborhoods, careful site selection for new low-income housing, and preservation of established middle-income neighborhoods.”<sup>83</sup> Bartholomew argued that these measures would allow southern cities to adapt to changing demographics. These measures would maintain the status quo of racialized spatial separation by expanding existing black areas to both accommodate and confine growing black populations. Atlanta, Georgia, also followed a similar pattern. Like Memphis, Atlanta experienced a housing shortage in the years following World War II. This shortage necessitated an expansion of black housing, but Atlanta officials made every effort to control this expansion through zoning laws and slum clearance. In one instance of slum clearance, black residents were vacated in order to build a whites-only park, thus cleaning up the white neighborhood while pushing blacks into the preexisting black neighborhoods. Even when the Atlanta Urban League (AUL) tried to resist the confinement of black Atlantians, they did not challenge racial separation. In an effort to take expansion into their own hands, the AUL convinced black professionals, real estate agents, and sympathetic whites to buy up land on the west side of the city, which allowed blacks to “leapfrog” over white neighborhoods to establish new black neighborhoods.

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<sup>83</sup> Silver and Moeser, 126.

Thus, Atlanta's black leaders were able to take hold of controlling future expansion in the city's black neighborhoods without challenging the status quo.<sup>84</sup>

Yet even as residential areas were becoming more segregated in urban areas like Memphis, growing populations led to increased instances of racial interactions. This greater contact resulted in growing tensions over how public space would be divided between black and white. Basic city services such as transportation became more crowded as whites and blacks moved around the city. The population boom, combined with gas rationing, meant that in Memphis as well as other southern cities more people rode the bus. In 1941, Memphis had 60 million bus riders. By 1946, that number had grown to 127 million riders. While black and white Memphians tried to share this public space but maintain the strict separation of the races, tensions arose. White women workers complained to the mayor in 1942 that black riders on the bus "make you wait till they all get on; and they take up all the seats on the car and you [stand] up; and as they pass you they RUB and STOMP all over you."<sup>85</sup> Whether or not the rubbing and stomping was intentional or even occurred, the complaint emphasizes the fact that Memphis whites still expected deference from blacks and were clearly agitated by the influx of black people to the city.

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<sup>84</sup> Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 58 and 60. For more information on urban planning based on racial separation in Atlanta and the impact of racial housing policy on later political movements, see Kevin Kruse *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>85</sup> "Sigafos, 209; and Several Women of the City to Mayor Walter Chandler, September 20, 1942, Box 9, Folder "Negroes, 1942," The Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler. For more on racial tensions on buses, see Robin D.G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *The Journal of American History*, 80 (June 1993): 75-112.

That these women deemed the behavior of their fellow black riders as offensive and disrespectful demonstrates the building tensions between the races, particularly the tensions over the sharing of public spaces. While white women in Memphis complained to the mayor of pushing and shoving by black passengers, other white bus passengers took more violent action against what they saw as an encroaching black ridership. In one instance, a white student struck a black schoolteacher on the school bus for not giving up her seat. The bus driver did not make the woman give up her seat, nor did he make any effort to protect her. Both student and teacher were arrested, but the case was dismissed in court.<sup>86</sup>

White officials and black business leaders alike tried to help alleviate the growing tensions on public transportation. In 1943, the Negro Junior Chamber of Commerce issued a set of “rules” for black bus passengers. These “rules” were primarily concerned with black behavior on public transit, behavior that would be deemed courteous and deferential. Black riders were urged to “be glad to obey the laws of the land and follow the rules of good conduct.” Not only were black passengers to behave properly and in accordance with the law, presumably segregation laws, but also “be neat and clean. Leave your work clothes where you work. If this is not possible, be careful in entering and leaving crowded busses and coaches [so as] not to soil the clothes of others.” Many of the rules related compliance directly back to the cause of the war and racial uplift: “Peace and good will among the races will do much toward winning the War.” And

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<sup>86</sup> Walter Chandler to Rev. Arthur Womack, November 14, 1942, Box 39, Folder “Negroes-1942,” Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler.

black riders were reminded that if this good will were maintained, “the progress of our race is certain.”<sup>87</sup> Through these rules, black business leaders linked racial progress, victory, and black behavior. By encouraging black passengers to exhibit the kind of deference expected by white Memphians, the chamber hoped to limit racial tensions on public transportation and promote black progress.

Trouble on city buses was not limited to Memphis during the war years. All across the urban South, population increases and gas rationing meant that on public transportation, it was “physically impossible to separate the races as the law requires.” In Durham, North Carolina, after a black soldier argued with a white bus driver, he called the driver a “lousy 4-fer” as he exited the bus, whereupon the driver shot him to death. In Montgomery, Alabama, a black GI sat down in the front seat of a bus while he was home on leave. The driver threw the black soldier off the bus and shot him in the leg.<sup>88</sup> All across the South, as more people moved into the cities, it became increasingly difficult to maintain strict racial separation, and white Southerners and city officials had to find alternative ways to maintain the color line. In terms of public services, the use of vigilante violence in order to maintain segregation became a threat of real concern for city officials.

On the national scene during the war years, many blacks were increasingly calling on the federal government to protect and advance the civil rights of black Americans. In

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<sup>87</sup> “Attention Colored Passengers,” Box 52 Folder “Negroes, 1943,” The Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler.

<sup>88</sup> Glenda E. Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008), 376. The tensions over public transportation were prevalent throughout the South during this period. Also, see Robin D.G. Kelly’s article, ““We Are Not What We Seem.””

1941, A. Phillip Randolph's March on Washington Movement had successfully bargained with President Roosevelt for Executive Order (EO) 8802, which banned discrimination in government-funded defense industries and created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to review complaints of violations of EO 8802. In Memphis, thousands of black workers appealed to the FEPC to help combat racialized hiring practices in the city's industries. Even though racial tensions in southern cities, particularly between black workers and white unions, made elimination of discrimination in the workplace nearly impossible, the fact that black workers took the chance to appeal to the federal government in the hopes of increasing their opportunities demonstrates the willingness of black citizens to challenge the status quo even in the face of intimidation.<sup>89</sup>

Southern labor historian Michael Honey found in his study of labor activism in Memphis that the city's black workers had been agitating for their rights for almost a decade before the FEPC. In order to attract industry to the city, Memphis had sold itself as a place of low-wage, unorganized labor. The Firestone Tire and Rubber Company brought a mass-production subsidiary plant to Memphis in 1937 after the city allowed the company to build outside the city limits, thus avoiding taxes, while the city still provided the plant with water, police, and fire protection at minimal cost. Firestone had left Akron, Ohio, in order to avoid organizing drives of industrial unions, and Memphis officials guaranteed Firestone that in their city the company would be free from industrial union organizing. As early as 1929, the Memphis Chamber of Commerce was assuring

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<sup>89</sup> See Honey, 192-193; and Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 47-49.

potential investors that unions were unlikely in the southern city “because of Anglo-Saxon stock and the negro...[who] is not prone to organizing in matters of wages and working conditions,” a statement that emphasized both the lack of immigrants, who were imagined as agitators for socialism and unionism, and the presence of a docile black labor force, who would not stand in the way of industrial profits.<sup>90</sup>

But, as Honey argues, the New Deal’s support of labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations’ (CIO) support of black workers destabilized Memphis labor relations, which resulted in the need for the city government to reinforce its control over labor, more specifically black labor. The Depression and subsequent New Deal policies exacerbated racial discrimination in the workplace. For example, with the rise in unemployment, white workers encouraged employers to hire white workers for jobs traditionally held by blacks. The Loewe’s Theatre in Memphis responded by replacing black ushers with white ones, who were paid the same low wage as the former black ushers. But in some cases the push by whites to take black jobs turned violent. In one instance, white vigilantes killed ten black railroad workers in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Louisiana, because they refused to give their jobs to whites. The multiple appeals by the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen, founded in Memphis, to the federal government to protect blacks and more specifically their jobs, failed.<sup>91</sup> Even in the midst of the Depression, when all workers were suffering, the racial divide continued to put white worker’s rights above those of blacks.

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<sup>90</sup> Honey, 28.

<sup>91</sup> Honey, 58-59.

By the late 1930s, CIO opposition to racial discrimination had encouraged black workers to organize as part of the CIO. Specifically, black dockworkers in Memphis began organizing under the CIO, and in 1939, as part of a larger regional strike against the Federal Barge Line, Memphis's black dockworkers also went on strike. The strike pitted black workers against the white dockworker's union, business leaders, and police. But the black-led union local refused to back down even in the face of police intimidation. Finally, the U.S. Justice Department got involved and an agreement was reached, but not before black labor leader, Thomas Watkins, was run out of town.<sup>92</sup>

City officials also made other moves to keep black citizens in their proper place both socially and economically. Within the city, the federal government maintained separate United States Employment Services (USES) offices for whites and blacks, one downtown for whites and one on Beale Street for blacks. Those blacks that found jobs through these agencies found themselves placed into segregated jobs. According to Memphis historian Laurie Green, black workers "toiled as unskilled laborers in mass production plants, or in cotton compresses, cottonseed oil mills, hardwood processing plants, laundries or private domestic service." Black worker Altha Sims went to the Memphis USES to try and do her part for the war effort but was told "there was no defense work for Negro women." Sims persisted, writing to the mayor that "I want a job but I don't [want] no cook job," but she was informed that there was "no job for [her] but a skillet an[d] pan." Mayor Walter Chandler responded, "I know of no positions for

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<sup>92</sup> For a complete breakdown of the riverboat strike, see Honey, 103-110.

unskilled colored women other than domestic work.”<sup>93</sup> Black men and women, like Sims, were forced into jobs that fit the traditional understanding of black workers as unskilled, low-wage workers. Federal and local offices, such as the USES and the mayor’s office, used their resources during the war years to maintain the tradition of racialized labor organization.

The National Urban League (NUL) was particularly concerned with black employment in the years immediately following the war. In Atlanta, Georgia, the AUL had been instrumental in the campaign to open up industrial jobs for blacks during the war. With the help of the FEPC, the AUL was able to secure the promise of an aircraft training school for blacks in 1942.<sup>94</sup> But after the war, black workers, and veterans in particular, faced increased job discrimination. Even after running employment advertisements stating that linemen “were badly needed,” Southern Bell refused to hire qualified black workers. The company’s president explained that the company would hire black employees “within the framework of the customs of the communities in which we operate.” This stance translated into black workers continually being relegated into domestic and service jobs, those jobs traditionally seen as black jobs.

The NUL office criticized the Memphis Urban League (MUL) for what appeared to be the primary focus of its employment programs, the “training and place[ing] of

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<sup>93</sup> Green, 89; Altha Sims to Mayor Walter Chandler, September 1, 1942; and Chandler to Sims, September 2, 1942, both in Box 11, Folder: “Correspondence S, 1942,” The Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler.

<sup>94</sup> Bayor, 107. Black workers were barred from the training school for the Bell Aircraft factory outside of the city. Black AUL leaders had been advocating for a change in this policy, but it was not until they took their complaints to the FEPC that a separate training school for blacks was promised, although few black workers were ever hired.

domestic workers.” Upon returning from a field visit, George Edwards, the Assistant Director of the Southern Field Division of the NUL, noted that MUL Executive Director J. A. McDaniel appeared “unfamiliar with the League’s program” of helping veterans find skilled jobs outside of traditional service jobs. Although the NUL encouraged McDaniel to focus on black employment in a broader range of jobs, the MUL’s jobs program continued to echo white city leaders’ definition of black jobs.<sup>95</sup> Even with a positive outlook on new employment, the result of new industries coming to the city, black Memphians continued to face obstacles when seeking industrial employment in the city, whether skilled or unskilled.

The actions of Memphis city officials and white citizens made it clear that Memphis was a city entrenched in the ideology of white supremacy and racial segregation, and it was this ideology that informed city leaders’ justification for their efforts to maintain economic, social, and political control over the city’s black population. Even before the war began to impact race relations in Memphis, the Crump political machine used police intimidation to silence oppositional black political voices and bring the black political and economic elite in line with the machine and its policies.

The harassment of black political leaders in the lead up to the 1940 election demonstrated the limits of the Crump machine’s toleration of black political power in Memphis in the early 1940s and the extent of white efforts to suppress and control black opposition. The harassment of black Memphians during the 1940 election exemplifies

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<sup>95</sup> Bayor, 108; and George L. Edwards, “Field Trip-Memphis, Tennessee February 27-March 1, 1947,” Part I, Box 1, Folder A74, National Urban League Papers, Library of Congress.

the relationship between white police and the city's black citizens and begins to explain why black Memphians became concerned about issues of community protection and equal justice over the course of the 1940s. It also sets the stage for the divisions within the black community that would emerge in the later years of the decade.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the black economic and social elite played a role in city politics, sponsoring political and social gatherings for black Memphians and building relations with the Crump political machine. As a result, these men came to represent the primary black leaders in Memphis. Men like Robert R. Church, Jr. translated their economic position into political organization and action, ultimately coming to operate as the conduit between the Crump political machine and the mass of the black community in Memphis. For two decades after the 1919 election, the black Republican leader had used his relationship with the city's political boss to increase his own political and economic power within the city, often bargaining black political support for Crump's candidates in exchange for concessions for the city's larger black community, such as parks and educational facilities, or even black police officers, as seen in the 1919 election. However, although Church was willing to work with the Crump machine to advance the opportunities for black Memphians, he remained a staunch Republican and continued to believe in the power of black support for the Republican party to create real change in the lives of black Americans and black Memphians more specifically. For Church, black participation in the Republican party would ultimately work "to arouse the masses of colored Americans to a consciousness of the potency of

the ballot, and to use it most effectively.”<sup>96</sup> It was this belief in the idea that the path to black advancement was through political action under the Republican party that ultimately led Church afoul of Crump, a staunch Democrat.

In the months prior to the 1940 national elections, Church boosted his organizing efforts among black Memphians in support of the Republican candidate rather than the candidate backed by the political boss. In response, Crump used his powers within the city government to silence Church. Crump began by seizing and selling at public auction some twenty parcels of Church family land for back taxes that had previously been overlooked during the Depression. Then, the police department began harassing other black Republican leaders within Church’s organization. Dr. J.B. Martin and Elmer Atkinson, both black business owners, found their stores under constant police surveillance, and their customers faced random police searches, all under the pretext of investigating and cracking down on illegal narcotics activity. The Republicans ultimately lost the election in 1940, but police surveillance continued, and Martin and Atkinson both eventually fled the city. Church also never returned to Memphis.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Elizabeth Gritter, *River of Hope: Black Politics and The Memphis Freedom Movement, 1865-1954* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2014), 127. For more on Church’s political leanings and activities during the 1930s in which he both worked with the Crump machine but retained his political identity, see Gritter, chapter 3. In another example, black votes were instrumental in defeating a Ku Klux Klan candidate in the election of 1924. And again in 1927, 80 percent of black voters voted against the incumbent Mayor Rowlett Paine to replace him with Crump’s candidate Watkins Overton after Paine had failed to deliver on his campaign promises to the black community. For more, see Honey, 45.

<sup>97</sup> The story of Crump using police harassment to squelch political opposition and solidify control over the city politics in 1940 is a prime example of the kind of tactics used by Crump to build and maintain his power. This story is recounted in great detail in many other works on Memphis during this period. For more, see Honey, 165-170; Green, 38-40; Gritter, 146-151; and Brown-Melton, 188-190.

This harassment of black Republicans during the election of 1940 ushered in what came to be called the “reign of terror,” a name given to Crump’s continued efforts to maintain control over the city through intimidation tactics. The phrase “reign of terror” was coined by national civil liberties and civil rights organizations that learned of what was happening in the city through national media attention. The “reign of terror” was primarily about maintaining white control over the city’s black population, control over political activity, control over labor, and more generally, social control over blacks. The suppression of independent black political voices during the 1940 election sent a clear message as to the limits of Crump’s toleration of independent black political activity. Other black Republicans, such as former Church supporter Lieutenant George Washington Lee, fell in line with the Crump machine as a result of the harassment. In order to get back in the good graces of Crump, Lee, having “admit[ed] that Mr. Crump’s great contribution to the colored people may not have been properly publicized to the masses,” organized a parade of black city employees and a speech by Crump to go along with the annual black charity football game, the Blues Bowl.<sup>98</sup> Lee took the opportunity to prove his support to Crump and thus avoided the same fate as Martin, Atkinson, and Church.

Black Democratic leaders also worked to demonstrate their support of the Crump political machine. The leading black Democrat, Dr. Joseph E. Walker, had been a Republican in Mississippi before coming to Memphis. But his experiences in Memphis led Walker to believe that an alliance with white Democratic leaders was the way to

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<sup>98</sup> David M. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), 131.

greater opportunity for the black community. Founder of the Universal Life Insurance Company in 1923, Walker quickly created a place for himself among the city's black elite as his company grew to be one of the country's largest insurance companies for blacks. By the election of 1932, Walker was president of the Community Welfare League, a conservative civic organization linked to the city's dominant white civic and political groups. The League worked to develop programs to provide relief to the city's poor black citizens. In the lead up to the election of 1936, Walker became the chairman of the newly formed Negro Democratic Club. Walker's political argument focused on the idea that an alliance with white leadership would allow opportunities for community uplift. Walker, along with Lt. Lee, saw economic opportunity, above political action, as the key to black community uplift. And in Memphis, this could only be achieved through cooperation with the Crump machine.<sup>99</sup>

As the Memphis police were harassing black Republicans during the 1940 election, the Colored Democratic Organization circulated a list of benefits that black citizens had received from Democrats, both locally and nationally. The list included the three federal housing projects, the \$175,000 in Public Works Administration funds used to build four new black schools, the nine hundred free lunches to school children each day, employment assistance, and other health and educational benefits. According to the Colored Democratic Organization, black Memphians were among some of the most fortunate in the South. By the end of 1940, there was clearly a move by black leaders to fall in line with the Crump machine and take a more conservative approach to black

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<sup>99</sup> Brown-Melton, 136; 170-173; Gritter, 117; and 118.

advancement in the city. As Universal Life Insurance executive and Walker's Democratic lieutenant M.S. Stuart noted, "Radicals get in the limelight of popularity. Conservatives get things done...They want the same thing...a conservative Negro is a radical who has grown ripe – and practical. Both are at heart for the full, legal rights of the race. Age and experience makes people more matter-of-fact. More inclined to getting results."<sup>100</sup> After the harassment of the 1940 election, black leaders, regardless of political affiliation, chose to take the more conservative route in the hopes that alliance with the Crump machine would help at the very least to protect the opportunities the city's black residents had gained during the New Deal.

Crump's intimidation of black opposition went beyond black political leaders. In a letter to the black ministers of Memphis, Mayor Chandler, on behalf of Crump reminded the ministers "Mr. E.H. Crump has for years encouraged helpful things for the colored people." Chandler went on to warn ministers to avoid politics in their role as religious leaders since "he [Crump] has never requested a Minister to talk politics in his pulpit – that is no place to carry on a political discussion... it isn't right and fair for just a few – a hand full of self-appointed leaders to misguide" their congregations of "good, hard-working, well meaning colored men and women." Written in the fall of 1940, Mayor Chandler's letter reminded of the city's black ministers of their place. Deriding those the machine saw as "self-appointed" leaders, presumably those that spoke out against the machine, the letter reminded the ministers of Crump's good will towards the

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<sup>100</sup> Colored Democratic Organization Flyer, Box 179, Folder 2 "Negroes Election Data 1940," E.H. Crump Collection, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library; Brown-Melton, 190-191; and *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 3, 1943.

city's black citizens. The message being that black ministers should stay out of politics and any political action, especially organizing efforts in opposition to the Crump political machine.<sup>101</sup> As a result of these types of intimidation tactics, most historians have come to see the 1940s as a decade of accommodation and cooperation with the Crump machine by Memphis's black leaders.

But Crump's continued efforts to maintain a strict racially segregated system caused some among his black allies to worry about how these efforts would impact continued support for the machine among the mass of black Memphians. As harassment of black storeowners and black patrons continued after the 1940 election, M.S. Stuart tried to use his position and connection to the machine to stop police harassment of black business owners and their black patrons. Stuart wrote to the mayor emphasizing the pride black Memphians felt for black businesses and the impact on black sentiment and racial harmony continued harassment might have. According to Stuart, "It is one of the show-places for colored visitors who come to Memphis; and the spectacle of a successful Negro business enterprise being crushed and closed by a powerful organization...I'm sure that the memory of it will rankle with bitterness for a long time in the hearts of thousands of Negroes."<sup>102</sup> Stuart was warning Mayor Chandler that Memphis blacks took

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<sup>101</sup> Undated form letter to pastors of Memphis, Box 179, Folder 2: "Negroes Election Data 1940," E.H. Crump Collection. The date of this letter appears to be late October, early November 1940 and thus in the midst of the final weeks of the national campaign. This estimation of the date is based on a letter from the pastor of Beale Avenue Baptist that references what appears to be this letter found in the Crump collection. See G.A. Long to Mr. Chandler, November 4, 1940, Box 14, Folder "Race Relations 1940," The Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler.

<sup>102</sup> Merah Stuart to Walter Chandler, November 1, 1940, Box 13, Folder "Public Safety-Police," The Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler.

pride in their community's successes and would not soon forget how the city had treated one of its own.

The mayor's response reinforced the machine's commitment to cracking down on those that opposed its power. The mayor assured Stuart that the police were performing "earnest and impartial law enforcement" and that "there should be no compromise" of police action for the sake of black community pride. In a statement to the press, police commissioner Joseph Boyle made it clear that the department would continue to arrest any one suspected of "racial trouble," regardless of black opposition. Boyle went on to emphasize the administration's commitment to the racial order, stating that city officials would continue to appreciate and support "honest, contented, and law abiding" black citizens but would remain suspicious of and vigilant against the "fanatical, unappreciative group seeking a social equality that will never come about in this community."<sup>103</sup>

To Boyle's hard-line segregationist attitude, Crump appeared as the paternalistic politician appealing to the city's longtime black and white residents in an effort to reaffirm his control over the management of the city and its citizens and yet also appease tensions. Crump claimed: "We have known the negroes always- known their problems, and are going to defend the right thinking, working, honest negro and they are ninety-five percent in majority; and at the same time we want to keep their race worth defending. We want to live together in peace, faith and confidence." Both Boyle and Crump made a distinction between the majority among the city's black population and the "fanatical,

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<sup>103</sup> Chandler to Stuart, November 19, 1940 Box 13, Folder "Public Safety-Police," The Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler; and Commissioner Joseph Boyle to Rev. S.E. Howie, president of Memphis Commission on Interracial Cooperation, reprinted in the *Commercial Appeal*, December 5, 1940.

unappreciative,” who Crump saw as outliers among black Memphians and thus an external threat to peace in the city that had to be eradicated in order to defend the “right thinking” black citizens. Crump couched police harassment in term of community protection.

Crump saw the benefit of working with those black leaders who knew their place and were willing to work with the machine to maintain the status quo, men like Joseph Walker. As Dr. Walker’s son commented years later, Crump “didn’t do anything to stop black success,” so long as that success didn’t infringe on segregation. “He didn’t care how successful that you were...as long as you kept it all black.”<sup>104</sup> For Crump, “right thinking” black Memphians were those who found economic success within the confines of segregation and were thus less likely to challenge the status quo of strict racial segregation and racial inequality in all aspects of city life. By the end of the decade, the accommodation by black leaders, like Lt. Lee and Dr. Walker, to the Crump machine over the course of the 1940s would result in a divide between the black political and economic elite and the mass of the black community. As race relations in Memphis deteriorated throughout the 1940s, many within Memphis’s black community came to see this accommodationism by black leaders as hindering the safety of the city’s black citizens specifically and black advancement more generally.

The city’s message continued to be that they knew what was best for black Memphians. In 1948, NUL employee Isobel Chisholm noted, “He (Crump) wants to see

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<sup>104</sup> Crump to *Press-Scimitar*, January 9, 1941, Box 6, Folder 21, Edward Meeman Papers, McWherter Library Special Collections, University of Memphis; and Oral Interview with A. Maceo Walker by George McDaniel, 1982, transcript, The Walker-Ish Papers, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University.

Negroes ‘in nice houses, clean and healthy, then they’ll be happy.’” The implication was that if the city’s black population was “happy,” they would not challenge the status quo of racial segregation. In a meeting Chisholm attended, Crump expressed a concern for black citizens’ well being while in the same breath he reminded the attendees that he was against black equality and integration.<sup>105</sup> Crump’s concessions to the city’s blacks were rooted in his desire to maintain the racial status quo. Crump realized that in order to maintain racial segregation and white supremacy, he also had to work to maintain racial harmony. The city even went so far as to publish a pamphlet in 1943, titled “Benefits and Opportunities for Colored Citizens of Memphis,” which outlined services offered by the city, such as health services and educational services, as well as housing and recreational facilities, all for the “benefit” of black Memphians.<sup>106</sup> The pamphlet was meant to influence black attitudes about city leadership by reminding them of all the city had done for black Memphians.

In Mayor Chandler’s opening address of the 1943 pamphlet, he quoted Abraham Lincoln, drawing on the historical memory of the “great emancipator” to appeal to black sentiment, and reminded the citizens of Memphis that the government could only go so far in helping the people and that the community must also work to better itself.

Chandler acknowledged that black citizens represented 40 percent of the population. But he also emphasized that black Memphians paid only 5 percent of the city’s taxes, a fact

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<sup>105</sup> Isobel J. Chisholm to Nelson Jackson, April 7, 1948, Part I, Box 1, A106, National Urban League Papers.

<sup>106</sup> “Benefits and Opportunities for Colored Citizens of Memphis” (1943), Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library.

meant to highlight the generosity of the city in providing benefits to its black citizens.

The goal of the pamphlet was to “challenge and arouse the colored people of Memphis to the exceptional opportunities offered to them for the promotion of their health, education and general welfare and to impress upon them their duty to take the fullest advantage of those opportunities, benefits and privileges. The city can provide these exceptional opportunities and benefits, but the colored people themselves must make use of them, if they are to enjoy the best health, if their children are to be educated, and if progress is to be made by the colored people of Memphis.” By emphasizing black Memphians “duty” to take advantage of what the city had to offer them, the pamphlet placed the burden of creating a better life for blacks on the shoulders of the city’s black residents.

The city government was not only trying to sway black citizens by pointing to strategic health and education benefits in the city but also trying to impress upon them the importance of supporting the city government in order to continue to enjoy the benefits outlined in the pamphlet. While the “reign of terror” that had dominated black interactions with the city’s government in the first years of the decade had swayed black leaders to fall in line with the Crump machine, it had angered averaged black citizens. Propaganda pieces, such as the 1943 pamphlet which directly addressed the advantages for blacks in Memphis, suggests that Crump feared he was losing control of the mass of the city’s black population and had to make every effort to maintain that control.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> “Benefits and Opportunities for Colored Citizens of Memphis” (1943), Memphis and Shelby County Room; and Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation was the first step towards freeing slaves during the Civil War. In the years following the war and into the twentieth century, the Republican party, of which Lincoln was a member, was the dominant party of African Americans because it was seen as the party most closely associated with black rights.

## Maintaining Postwar Control

The vote was one of Crump's primary tools for controlling working-class black Memphians long before the war. Although black Memphians never lost the right to vote, they were still required to pay poll taxes. Crump used poll taxes as a way to secure votes among poor and working-class blacks by paying off or forgiving black voter's taxes. Early in his career, Crump realized the power of the black vote if used effectively to his advantage. In 1928 when the *Commercial Appeal* launched a crusade against Crump and his political machine, it did so by trying to institute an all-white Democratic Primary in order to diminish the influence of black voters on elections. Crump was able to stop calls for an all-white primary, presumably by cutting a deal in which Crump supported Governor Henry Horton, whom he had previously opposed, and thus help to ensure the Governor's reelection. This move to block the all-white primary in 1928 was indicative of Crump's career-long strategy when it came to dealing with black people. What appeared to be a progressive maneuver against white supremacy was in fact a move to shore up Crump's control over city politics. Throughout his career Crump became a master at balancing what he called a progressive southern agenda with maintaining the racial status quo.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Tucker, 97-100. The Democratic party dominated in Memphis, as it did in the majority of the South in the 1940s. By instituting an all-white primary, lawmakers essentially stripped black voters of the ability to choose the Democratic candidates for office and thus weakened their voice in city politics. I use the term progressive here as meaning the economic and political progress of the South and the city of Memphis more specifically, such as courting new industry to the area through tax incentives and promises of unorganized cheap labor. I am not using the phrase in terms of the progressive political agenda focused on social and political reforms such as suffrage reform and racial equality.

While locally the black vote had long been a factor in city politics, nationally, the 1940s was a decade of expanding black voting rights. The NAACP's legal campaign against voting discrimination made headway in 1944 with the Supreme Court decision in *Smith v. Allwright*, which outlawed the all-white Democratic primary in Texas. The Supreme Court's decision eventually led to the end of white primaries across the South. By the end of World War II, the number of black voters nationally and in the South particularly was expanding.

In Georgia, the 1946 state Supreme Court case *Chapman v. King* ended the white primary in that state. The previous year, Georgia Governor Ellis Arnall had abolished the poll tax, opening the way for black registrants. The number of registered black voters in Atlanta rose by nearly 70 percent between 1945 and May of 1946.<sup>109</sup> Whereas Atlanta's mayor Bill Hartsfield had previously ignored the city's black residents by telling black leaders "come back to see me when you have 10,000 votes" when asked about hiring black police officers in the city, by 1947, when approached with the same request, Hartsfield only asked "How many do you want?"<sup>110</sup> This shift in tone demonstrates what many southern city leaders were experiencing in the late 1940s as Supreme Court decisions and massive voter registration drives across the country increased black political participation. The result was that southern cities were learning what Crump and

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<sup>109</sup> In 1945 only 4 percent of eligible black voters were registered, but by May of 1946, 27.2 percent were registered. See Bayor, 20.

<sup>110</sup> Bayor, 24; and Kruse, 34.

Memphis's white politicians already knew, that black votes could make a difference in local elections, particularly in those southern cities with significant black populations.

But even as the black voter rolls increased and politicians began courting the black vote, white politicians' approach to the black community was still paternalistic and segregationist. As one Atlanta leader stated, "I'm a true friend of the Negro and will be as long as he keeps his place," implying that opportunity for black advancement rested on black willingness to abide by racial segregation. Hollis Price, the first black president of LeMoyne College, the black college in Memphis, noted in the late 1940s that white city officials in Memphis did things "for" but not "with Negroes," intimating that although there were benefits for the blacks who lived in Memphis, these were not the result of interracial cooperation but of the actions of whites officials who assumed they knew what was best for the city's black citizens. After her meeting with Crump in the spring of 1947, NUL employee Isobel Chisholm noted that Crump "regards Negroes as a group to be tolerated because they have to be 'here' and in large numbers...the best way to maintain peace with them is to do whatever necessary to keep them 'getting along' with whites."<sup>111</sup>

In Memphis, city officials continued to see racial separation as the answer to maintaining peaceful race relations. After the war, the American Heritage Foundation sponsored the Freedom Train, a train carrying the nation's founding historical documents usually held at the National Archives and other institutions, which toured around the

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<sup>111</sup> Bayor, 27; and Isobel J. Chisholm to Nelson Jackson, April 7, 1948, Part I, Box 1, A106, National Urban League Papers.

country for citizens to view. The Freedom Train, as it was heralded because of its focus on American democratic beginnings, was scheduled to stop in 322 cities across the country between September 1947 and January 1949. The train's focus on uniting Americans through a shared history of democracy included desegregated viewing. Memphis mayor, James Pleasants, argued that having blacks and whites together on the Freedom Train "would surely lead to trouble and perhaps bloodshed, which we are ever alert to prevent."<sup>112</sup> Pleasant further argued that it was only by continued vigilance in upholding the laws of segregation that Memphis had supposedly experienced "less trouble between the races than in any other American city." According to Pleasant, separation of the races was key to Memphis's success in maintaining peace within the city, and that "every thinking negro agrees with our position."<sup>113</sup> City leaders justified their continued adherence to racial segregation by claiming approval from the black citizens. In the end, even with opposition to the mayor's stance on segregated viewing from both black and white Memphians, the train bypassed the city on its way across the South. The Freedom Train debate in Memphis demonstrated that city policy continued to rely on the enforcement of segregation in all aspects of city life as the best way to maintain racial peace.

For decades, Crump used intimidation to control Memphis's black population.

Backed by a police department ruled by the racial hardliner, Joseph Boyle, Crump used

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<sup>112</sup> Mayor James Pleasants, typescript of Radio Address, November 23, 1947, Box 13, Folder "Freedom Train," James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers. Pleasant was most likely referring to the racially motivated violence that had swept the country in the post-war periods of both World War I and World War II. There had been no outright violent racial unrest in Memphis during these periods.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

the strict enforcement of racial segregation to keep blacks in their place. The fear of losing control over the city's black citizens was only exacerbated by the increase in population and the influx of military personnel from outside the city. In one police brutality complaint, two black army sergeants claimed that two white patrolmen confronted them on Beale Street declaring they were going to "learn this smart Northerner how to act." The police beat up one of the black officers while sparing the other because he was from the South and supposedly knew how to act.<sup>114</sup> Reminiscent of the 1940 "reign of terror," in the aftermath of the war and in response to the changes it brought to the city, Crump again made efforts to assert his control. Returning veterans and the national moves toward greater rights for black citizens were a threat to the southern system of segregation.

By the primary election of 1948, Crump's political control over the city began to crack under the growing local and national pressure for change. A war for democracy, the Supreme Court's recent decisions in favor of greater black voting rights, as well as President Truman's expanding rhetoric on the issues of civil rights, meant that the rights of black Americans had become a national issue by 1948. NAACP voter registration drives, black migration to the North, and the *Smith v. Allwright* decision meant an expanded black electorate that could have a greater impact on local and national elections. Thus, as the election approached in 1948, these new national political realities meant that the national Democratic party had to appeal to this growing black electorate even at the expense of alienating those southern white Democrats committed to strict

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<sup>114</sup> Green, 91.

racial segregation and white supremacy. This led to states' rights Democrats breaking with Truman and the national Democratic party in the lead up to the 1948 election to form the Dixiecrat party, a party built on a platform of white supremacy and stopping federal moves toward civil rights legislation.<sup>115</sup>

According to historian Kari Frederickson, the Dixiecrats were a reactionary group that wanted to hold on to the positive economic changes that New Deal legislation and war production had brought to the region but maintain the racial and political stability, built on white supremacy and racial segregation, that had existed in the South since the early twentieth century. New Deal programs such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act, which used subsidies to control agricultural production, the Works Progress Administration, federal housing programs, and other federal New Deal programs helped to spur economic recovery in the South. When the war broke out, the South was able to draw industry to the region, further stimulating the southern economy. But the 1930s and 1940s were also decades in which black Southerners increasingly agitated for greater rights in terms of jobs and the law. This activism coupled with federal action “threatened to erase or considerably alter the color line in the South,” and it was out of this fear of losing their control over southern politics that the Dixiecrat party was born.<sup>116</sup>

While each southern state was unique in its break from the national party, the southern abandonment of the national Democratic party would eventually redraw the

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<sup>115</sup> Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>116</sup> Frederickson, 9.

political lines in the South. Mississippi was the most forthright in putting race as the main political issue, most likely because the state had a majority black population and thus had the most to lose to a growing agitation for black political rights. The majority of states used some kind of gendered language to justify their departure from the national party. In the Dixiecrat party's support of their national candidate for President, Strom Thurmond, the focus was on his physical strength and sexual prowess, highlighting his masculinity as a key piece of his character.<sup>117</sup> For Southerners, Strom Thurmond represented a strong white man who could protect the South, and southern women, from the threat of black equality. Thurmond's candidacy, and the Dixiecrat party platform in general, was rooted in white southern cultural identity and an appeal to white Southerners committed to maintaining the southern traditions of racial segregation and white supremacy. The Dixiecrat party represented the interconnection between southern politics and southern culture. Although Thurmond did not secure the presidency in 1948, the southern split within the Democratic party helped to create a two-party South and marked the beginning of the transition of the South from a Democratic to a Republican stronghold.

Crump's support of the Dixiecrat candidate Strom Thurman for president over President Truman and Crump's handling of the 1948 election demonstrated that, in Memphis, southern society and politics were very much interconnected. According to the Shelby County Democratic Executive Committee, an arm of the Crump machine, the national Democratic party was trying "to force upon people of Tennessee and the South a

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<sup>117</sup> Frederickson, 70-71; 96.

deplorable social condition repugnant to our ideas, principles and traditions.”<sup>118</sup> For Crump and other white southern Democrats, Truman and his civil rights agenda represented a direct attack on southern life and southern culture. The Dixiecrat bolt from the Democratic party and its ability to carry four southern states in the national election demonstrates how intertwined southern ideas about race and racism were with southern politics.

In Memphis, Crump’s support of the Dixiecrat ticket in 1948 marked the beginning of his decline. In supporting Thurmond, Crump reinforced in the minds of the black advocates for change in the city and white moderates his commitment to white supremacy and thus fueled the growing opposition to his political machine. Like other southern states, the Democratic primary in Tennessee amounted to the deciding election for political candidates. Because of the power and reach of the Crump political machine, Crump’s candidates had nearly always been guaranteed victory. But in the 1948 August primary, Senatorial candidate Estes Kefauver and gubernatorial candidate Gordon Browning ran against the Crump-supported candidates. Browning ran primarily on an anti-Crump, anti- machine corruption platform. While both Crump’s senatorial candidate John Mitchell and Kefauver were against a permanent FEPC and anti-lynching legislation, Kefauver leaned further left than most Democratic candidates by being both union-friendly and in support of anti-poll tax legislation. Kefauver’s platform made him the natural candidate for unions and black unions specifically. Kefauver’s open

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<sup>118</sup> Shelby County Democratic Executive Committee, “Resolution against Truman and His Civil Rights Program,” 1948, Box 9, Folder 27. The Papers of Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee.

challenge to the Crump machine won him support from a wide variety of Tennesseans, from municipal reformers to union organizations, women's groups, and blacks.<sup>119</sup>

Kefauver's anti-Crump stance quickly gained him the support of several prominent black leaders in Memphis. Rev. James McDaniel, director of the MUL campaigned for Kefauver along with former Crump supporter Dr. J.E. Walker, the head of the Memphis Democratic Club. Kefauver, although moderate on issues concerning black rights, offered black Memphians a more independent political voice at a moment when they found themselves frustrated by the lack of progress their alliance with the Crump machine had offered. McDaniel as the director of the MUL and Walker as the head of the Memphis Democratic Club used their organizations not only to campaign for the anti-Crump candidates but also to register black voters. One black union member remembered how "our union was really playing an active role in telling the people what they had to do if they wanted to change the conditions of the city — that you must...get out the vote."<sup>120</sup> The recent memory of the Freedom Train incident and a growing number of highly publicized instances of police brutality all fueled black opposition to Crump and the desire for change in Memphis.

Even though the Crump-backed candidates carried Shelby County, enough black votes went against the machine in the primary elections of 1948 to crack Crump's control over black political activity. Both Kefauver and Browning won the election at the state

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<sup>119</sup> Gritter, 179; and Green, 135.

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Michael Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 129. Walker broke with the Crump Machine over Crump's refusal to allow for the integrated viewing of a Marion Anderson concert.

level and carried three predominately black wards in Memphis, demonstrating a growing black political independence in the face of Crump's continued commitment to a strict racial hierarchy. Long-time Crump supporter and black Republican, Lt. George Washington Lee, recalled later that the defeat was "the beginning of the gradual deterioration of the great Crump organization." The defeat of the Crump ticket solidified in the minds of both black Memphians and the Crump machine the power of the black electorate in Memphis. "[t] was like a new Memphis," one black unionist remembered. "People began to see that they could protest what was happening, and they weren't afraid." Although within the confines of a segregated southern legal and social system these protests were limited, the political activities of black Memphians in the primary election of 1948 demonstrated the increased leverage the black community had gained through their political activity. Crump too recognized this reality and took steps to regain control. Following the elections, Crump replaced James Pleasants as mayor with Watkins Overton, the former Memphis mayor who had positive reputation among black Memphians. At the same time, Crump began to listen to black cries for black police officers in the city.<sup>121</sup>

Many white Southerners, Crump included, perceived the growing racial tensions as a threat to the racial order to which they were accustomed. The increasing racial tensions and city officials' desperation to maintain control over the city's black citizens socially, economically, and politically created an opportunity for black leaders to negotiate for greater protections for the city's black residents. Part of the increase in

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<sup>121</sup> Quoted in Gitter, 182; and Honey, 155-156.

racial tensions was the continued harassment, and in some instances outright brutality, of blacks by white police officers. As a letter from the Memphis CIO Council to Mayor Pleasant pointed out, “The police are to protect lives and not to take them,” which voiced the feeling among Memphis’s working-class blacks, those most susceptible to police violence, that the police were not there to protect black Memphians, but rather, represented official white control over black citizens.<sup>122</sup> It was out of this feeling that a growing number within the city’s black community began to call for the hiring of black police officers.

Within the context of a growing black electorate beginning to demonstrate greater political independence, Crump could no longer ignore black demands. Black citizen’s call for black police officers was instigated by the continued lack of respect for black rights and the increase in instances of police brutality in the years surrounding World War II. The social, political, and economic context created by the war gave black Memphians greater leverage. In order to maintain the system of racial segregation, Crump and other city leaders were forced to negotiate with the segments of the black community who were growing increasingly vocal about the injustices of this system. The hiring of black police officers worked to both appease black demands for greater protection and equality and give city leaders another tool to control a growing black population. In October of 1948, when police commissioner Boyle announced the hiring of black police officers, he made sure to put the decision in context by acknowledging the

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<sup>122</sup> Letter to Mayor James Pleasants from the Memphis Council of Industrial Unions, September 2, 1948, Box 23, Folder 8, James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers.

growing black population and all the city had done for black Memphians, such as the opening of parks, schools, and more housing.<sup>123</sup> The hiring of black officers would serve as a way to curb racial tensions and reduce crime in the black neighborhoods. These men were the answer to a building crisis in Memphis over the changing racial boundaries of a growing city. Crump, the mayor, and police commissioner Boyle saw having black officers patrolling black neighborhoods as a way to maintain control over the city's black population. By giving in to the black citizens' demands for black officers, the Crump political machine could again leverage black votes for the upcoming election, while also using black men to maintain order in black neighborhoods. As Memphis's white community became increasingly vigilant in their efforts to maintain the system of racial segregation, black Memphians worked to find ways to both protect themselves and solidify their right to a place in the city.

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<sup>123</sup> "Commissioner Boyle Address on Black Police Officers," Box 23 Folder 8, James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers.

CHAPTER IV  
PROTECTING BLACK BODIES:  
POLICE BRUTALITY AND THE MECHANISMS FOR CONTROL

On the hot and muggy afternoon of August 3, 1947, Adelaide Hudson, her sister, and three friends lounged in the living room of Hudson's home in the Foote Homes Housing development in Memphis's Binghampton neighborhood. Trying to beat the Memphis heat, Hudson wore nothing but shorts with a halter and brassiere. Without warning, two Memphis police officers stormed into the house. The officers demanded to know the whereabouts of Hudson's nephew and the air rifle the parents of a neighborhood girl had accused him of firing at her. When Hudson responded that her nephew had gone out swimming, one of the officers, a Patrolman W.L. Williams, barked, "Can't you say 'yes sir' and 'no sir' to white people?"

"I am sorry, sir," Hudson replied.

But Patrolman Williams continued to berate Hudson, "You try to be one of those smart goddamn northern niggers, I'll knock your goddamn teeth down your throat and don't think I won't." Williams then declared Hudson under arrest.

As Hudson made her way upstairs to put on more clothing, the officers found the air rifle. "This is dangerous, will put somebody's eye out."

“I told him to be careful....Usually when the children do anything around here the families are called and the matter is adjusted,” Hudson responded.<sup>124</sup>

“They are not supposed to call you, you are not the law,” Patrolman Williams declared, slapping Hudson in the face. Williams then grabbed Hudson and dragged her from the house.

According to eyewitnesses, the officer continued to beat Hudson in the yard in front of the house for nearly ten minutes. All the while, the neighbors stood looking on and crying. Some of them likely knew that Hudson was pregnant.

Finally, the officers put Hudson into the patrol car and carried her to the station. From here she was immediately sent to John Gaston Hospital. Upon her release, Hudson appeared in city court, where she was fined \$102 for resisting arrest and disorderly conduct.

Hudson gave her account of the beating to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) legal department three days after the incident. In her testimony Hudson claimed that she did not resist the officer but only tried to protect herself. Hudson even told Williams she was pregnant, to which he had responded, “that he didn’t care if I had had ten bitches” and continued to strike her in the side and stomach. Officer Williams mocked the neighborhood women who looked on crying, saying, “Cry all you black sons of bitches, I wish one of you would say something, I would shoot you down like god damn rabbits.” Essentially Williams dared

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<sup>124</sup> This story is taken from, “Statement of Adelaide Hudson,” August 6, 1947, Part 8, Series B, Reel 19 (microfilm), Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Duke University Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

the members of this all-black housing development to challenge the authority of the white police officers who had stormed into their neighborhood. As Hudson described it, the beating resulted from Williams's need to assert his authority. Beating Hudson in public was his response to what he perceived as a lack of respect for that authority. "We will take you down here and beat you until you learn to say yes sir and no sir to white people," Hudson recalled Williams telling her as he put her in the squad car.

Memphis Police Chief Carroll Seabrook reiterated the perceived lack of respect for authority in his statement about the events surrounding Hudson's beating. "It was simply the case of a smart aleck from up North," Chief Seabrook noted as he denied that the officers mistreated Hudson in any way. According to the police account, Hudson had thrown the discovered air rifle on the floor and refused to answer any of the officer's questions because she said she was from Detroit and "it was none of our business."<sup>125</sup> In the eyes of the Memphis Police Department, Hudson had not only disrespected the officers but also challenged the southern system of white supremacy. As an outsider now living in the city, Hudson had to be taught how to show the kind of deference to white authorities that was expected of black people living in Memphis.

The perception of Adelaide Hudson as a "smart aleck from up North" was less about the reality of Hudson's experiences or attitude and more about the anxiety of white Southerners, like Seabrook and Williams, over the changing demographics of Memphis's black community, as more and more black Americans migrated to the city to take advantage of wartime industries. In fact, Hudson, was not an outsider or a Northerner.

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<sup>125</sup> "Beaten by Police, Woman Charges," *Press-Scimitar*, August 5, 1947.

The twenty-three-year-old had been born in Moscow, Tennessee, and moved to Memphis at age three or four. She moved to Detroit at age nineteen, four years before the incident with the police. When her sister died in the summer of 1946 leaving five children, Hudson had returned to Memphis to care for the children.<sup>126</sup>

Hudson's case was one of many cases of police brutality against blacks in Memphis during the latter part of the 1940s. Just the week before, Cornell Thorton was shot in the back and killed by police. Officers shot Thorton as they pursued him in connection with a stolen car. However, it was never confirmed that he had been involved with the theft.<sup>127</sup> Tensions were building in the city as white residents became increasingly anxious about black migration. These tensions, as evidenced by both Hudson's and Seabrook's accounts, were particularly felt in the interactions between black residents and white police officers. Out of this anxiety came an increased effort to assert white authority over blacks living in the city and to reinforce the social system of black deference. White Memphians were accustomed to and expected black deference, and the Memphis Police Department was their chief enforcer.

Despite the attempts of white authorities to maintain southern social norms in the face of a changing city, black Memphians bore witness to and testified against the brutal treatment of one of their own. Over the course of the late 1940s, publicity of police brutality increased, Hudson's neighbors and others within the city's larger black community became increasingly more vocal about the injustices of police violence.

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<sup>126</sup> "Statement of Adelaide Hudson," August 6, 1947, Papers of the NAACP.

<sup>127</sup> "Binghampton Youth Killed By Officer," *Memphis World*, August 5, 1947.

Although threatened with harm if they interfered at the time of the beating, Hudson's neighbors testified on her behalf in court after the fact. However, the officers involved in Hudson's beating continued to go unpunished. A number of black citizens, including the editor of Memphis's black newspaper, the *Memphis World*, asked questions about the necessity of the amount of force being used by the police against black Memphians and pointed out disparities in police behavior when dealing with blacks.<sup>128</sup>

As black outrage over police brutality grew, newsman L.O. Swinger, local ministers alliances, and civic groups reignited a call for black police officers. By 1947, stories of southern cities hiring black police officers began to appear with more frequency in the Memphis newspapers. "Georgia Police Do Excellent Job," "Sentiment Mount For Negro Police," and "Appoints First Race Policeman" headlined news articles that outlined the success of other southern cities' efforts to include black officers on their police forces, fueling interest in Memphis doing the same. Reports declared, "Top-ranking civic leaders and agencies have cited the role of Negro policemen in crime prevention as well as applauding the role they have played in alleviating racial tensions." Sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, in his study of American race relations in the 1940s, commented that black officers lowered crime rates in the black community, and they did not have to use as much force because they "know their way around the community" and were "personally respected." These articles and reports argued that the presence of black police officers in southern departments alleviated several issues facing southern cities in

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<sup>128</sup> "Testimony of Eyewitnesses Refute Police Denials of Beating Expectant Mother," *Memphis World*, August 8, 1947.

the 1940s. Black police officers eased racial tensions caused by white officers' interactions with the black residents and reduced black crime.<sup>129</sup>

In Memphis, black ministers, black college students, and the editor of the black newspaper united with working-class black Memphians to push for black police officers. This call for black officers reemerged out of the outrage many working-class blacks felt over the alarming number of instances of overt police brutality against residents in black working-class neighborhoods in the late 1940s. The driving purpose of this effort was to find a way to protect black neighborhoods from what black residents saw as a violent, unchecked white police force with little regard for black life or rights. The violence against black Memphians was born out of white anxiety over a growing black population increasingly unwilling to abide by the traditional southern system of racial segregation and white dominance. As white authorities used violence to try to maintain control over the city's black population, black Memphians worked to find new ways to protect themselves and win justice for their fellow black citizens.

This chapter examines several cases of police brutality and their impact on the differing elements of Memphis's black community. In all four cases of police brutality examined in this chapter, including Hudson's case, the victims of police brutality were working-class blacks. However, even as white police were a more physical threat to working-class blacks, the white supremacist ideology reflected in the accounts of these

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<sup>129</sup> "Georgia Police Do Excellent Job, Community Says," *Memphis World*, July 4, 1947; "Sentiment Mounts for Negro Police," *Memphis World*, July 29, 1947; "Appoints First Race Policemen," *Memphis World*, August 12, 1947; and Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), 543.

incidents demonstrated an overt disrespect for black life and black rights that brought into question the safety of all black Memphians regardless of their position in the community. As black Memphians, from those living in working-class neighborhoods to the black economic and political elite, reacted to these cases and began to demand change, tensions developed among these varying groups over how to best resolve the problem of police brutality. These tensions were intertwined with expectations of traditional leadership, notions of black manhood, and a growing demand for equal justice for black citizens.

The city of Memphis was changing and the social, economic, and political tactics the Crump machine, city employees, and the police had employed to control the city's black population were no longer sufficient. The Memphis Police Department and these cases of police brutality became symbols of continued black inequality, disrespect of black lives, and rights. The persistence of police brutality and the punishment of black victims by the legal system demonstrated for many average black Memphians the traditional black leadership's (those black men associated with Crump) failure to protect the entirety of Memphis's black community. By the fall of 1948, these tensions had led to a call for greater protection that would quickly become a call for black police officers. Black ministers, students, civic organizations, and the black media led this effort, as they searched for ways to protect their families and communities from the degradation of police brutality.

### **White Police and the Black Community: A History of Brutality**

The beating of the pregnant Adelaide Hudson and other acts of police brutality against black women during this period were part of a larger history of white men

dominating the black female body. While the physical acts of sexual dominance were perpetuated against black women, these acts of sexual violence were implicitly an act of dominance over black men. Scholars have traced white supremacy's reliance on sexual domination back to the system of slavery. Enslavement put control of black women's physical bodies in the hands of white men. As slaves, women's bodies literally belonged to their master. A master's property rights perpetuated a culture of raping black women that further reinforced ownership of women's bodies, as any child born of a slave woman became a slave to the mother's master. This system also denied black men "both the ability to protect black women and any other claims of conventional notions of masculinity."<sup>130</sup> Thus, sexual domination of black women and suppression of black masculinity became intertwined with notions of white superiority.

The interconnection between sexual and racial domination carried over into the twentieth century and the Jim Crow era. Even without the legal right to domination that came with slavery, white men and women continued to use sex and the language of sex to reinforce white masculinity and emasculate black men. Almost immediately after losing their legal right to dominate the black body in slavery, white Southerners turned to violence to reinforce their dominance. As discussed earlier, the perceived threat that black soldiers posed to white supremacy in the Deep South city of Memphis instigated the riot in 1866. The white men perpetuating the violence focused their atrocities on

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<sup>130</sup> Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 8. Also, see Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997); and Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

soldiers and their families, raping women with direct ties to the army. These acts of sexual violence also worked to reinforce white male power by essentially stripping away both black women's control over their bodies and the black soldier's ability to protect his wife and family, particularly his ability to protect the sexuality of the women in the family, a pillar of traditional manhood.<sup>131</sup>

Even as white men were emasculating black men by attacking black women and families, the idea of protecting white womanhood and the white family became the central argument behind white supremacy in the early part of the twentieth century. Memphian and early twentieth century black activist Ida B. Wells spoke out against the rape of black women, emphasizing the hypocrisy of white men's own definition of masculinity, which glorified chivalry and the protection of white womanhood, while also allowing for the violation of black women. While Wells's primary goal was to campaign against the rampant use of the vigilante terror tactic of lynching by white men against primarily black men, her discussion of rape emphasized the link between white supremacy and sexual violence. Even as white men were claiming chivalry when they lynched black men accused of rape, white men who raped black women and girls went unpunished.<sup>132</sup>

Ida B. Wells argued that real men valued all womanhood, not just the women of their own race. But it was difficult to convince Americans, especially white Southerners,

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<sup>131</sup> Kevin R. Hardwick, "'Your Old Father Abe Lincoln Is Dead and Damned': Black Soldiers and the Memphis Race Riot of 1866," *Journal of Social History* 27:1 (1993): 122.

<sup>132</sup> For more on Ida B. Wells's arguments about the connection between the protection of womanhood and definitions of manhood, see Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

of this idea at that moment in history. Attitudes such as, “It is not the same thing for a white man to assault a colored woman as for a colored man to assault a white woman, because the colored woman had no finer feelings nor virtue to be outraged!” prevailed.<sup>133</sup> This argument, articulated in a leading South Carolina journal of the late nineteenth century, exemplified prevailing assumptions about black inferiority and the conceptions of black female sexuality these attitudes fostered. The author negated black women’s femininity while reinforcing her sexual objectivity. This statement argued that a black woman was less of a woman because she lacked feminine virtue. A black woman was a sexual *object* but not a sexual *being*. A white woman had emotions and virtues that needed to be protected. But because black women did not have these same female traits, they were not entitled to the same protections.

Thus, rape was intimately intertwined with racial violence and intimidation in the years following slavery. White men used rape and accusations of rape as the primary excuse for lynching black men. The rape of white women and the image of the black rapist were used to justify lynching black men. Lynching was the physical acting out of white manhood. Lynching was imagined as the primary tool in white men’s protection of white womanhood. It became a way to reinforce white superiority and dominance over the black community primarily through the threat of violence.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Quoted in Ida B. Wells, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894* (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, 1895), 67.

<sup>134</sup> For more on the connection between rape and lynching, see Feimster; Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'The Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Barr Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson, 328-349 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983); Jonathan Markovitz,

White women also used the language of sex to justify white supremacy. Even though the women's rights advocate Rebecca Latimer Felton would argue that "the sexual exploitation of black women and girls not only revealed a violent disregard for black womanhood but also exposed a profound disrespect for white womanhood and the supremacy of the race," her argument was rooted in an attempt to bolster white supremacy through an appeal to protection of the sanctity of white womanhood.<sup>135</sup> Felton and other female white supremacists made the argument that any interracial sexual relations violated the laws of white superiority by denigrating the purity of white sexual behavior and potentially the white race through pregnancy. White women's arguments against the rape of black women and girls were an attempt to control white men's sexual behavior. In the early twentieth century, white women co-opted the language of sexuality and sexual violence to bolster their own racial superiority, which further entrenched the connection between sex and white supremacy in the white mind.<sup>136</sup>

The tensions over the connections between race and sex persisted well into the mid-twentieth century. According to sociologist Gunnar Myrdal's 1941 study of American race relations, sex was "the principle around which the whole structure of segregation...[was] organized." Eruptions of racial violence throughout the first half of the twentieth century can often be traced back to instances of or rumors of inappropriate

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*Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); and Michael Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

<sup>135</sup> Feimster, 71.

<sup>136</sup> For more on white women's political activities and the connection to white supremacy during the early years of the Jim Crow era, see Feimster and Gilmore.

interracial sexual behavior. In June of 1943, hundreds of black men took to the streets of Detroit to protect black womanhood. The violence erupted after rumors spread that a white Southerner had thrown a black mother and her baby off of the popular beachfront Bell Isle Bridge. After three days of rioting, thirty-four people were dead and millions of dollars worth of property was damaged.<sup>137</sup> Detroit and other similar riots that began with rumors of the mistreatment of black women demonstrated the frustration building within black communities over the lack of respect for black womanhood, and more important, the continued subordination of blacks to white authority.

Several years before Adelaide Hudson was dragged from her home, another case of police brutality in Memphis reinforced the system of white domination of black bodies, particularly black female bodies, and caused an uproar among working-class blacks who quickly gained support from local ministers and union leaders. In the late summer of 1945, two white police officers raped two young black women as they made their way home in the middle of the night from their job as waitresses. This case created a wedge between traditional black leaders of the business and political elite and those black working-class Memphians fed up with the token concessions and accommodationism that defined the relationship between men like George Washington Lee and Joseph E. Walker and Crump, who embodied the city's power structure. The

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<sup>137</sup> Myrdal, 587; In particular, the Houston Race Riot in 1919 was set off by a confrontation between a black soldier and white police officers as police officers were arresting a black woman pulled from her home barely dressed, for what appeared to be only the crime of questioning officers why they were searching her home. For more on the Houston Riot and other violence surrounding World War I, see Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Danielle M. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance: A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 27.

failure of these traditional black leaders to live up to the expectations that they would use their political connections to protect and bring justice to the working-class black women of the city led many black Memphians to question this black elite and their commitment to the city's black citizens. These concerns not only questioned elites' roles as community leaders but also their manhood.

According to the young women's statements to the NAACP, the officers picked them up in front of the café on Popular Avenue where they had just gotten off of work. "Mr. Police, I thought you didn't pick up girls that were working?" one of the young women asked, alluding to the idea that their jobs should have demonstrated that they were law-abiding, respectable young women, not the kind of women who dealt in illicit activities that warranted police action. "How do we know you ain't loafing... we had to get this month's number somehow, just as well start with you two. We are going to fill this car up with girls," the officer responded.<sup>138</sup>

The officers taunted the young women as they drove through town. "What are you sitting so close together for? You can't fuck one another." The lewd remarks and questions about the women's sexual past continued as the officers drove for an hour. The officers did not take the women to headquarters nor did they pick up any more women. They drove to an empty field on the edge of town. The officers made the young women

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<sup>138</sup> "Statement of Gladys Carr," August 15, 1945, Part 8, Series B, Reel 25, (microfilm), Papers of the NAACP.

get out of the car and each of them forced themselves on one of the young women. When they were finished, the officers drove the young women home and dropped them off.<sup>139</sup>

Upon hearing what had happened from their daughters, the young women's mothers went to the café owner, who accompanied the women to the police station. The two victims were taken into a room away from their mothers to be questioned by Police Chief Seabrook. After he took the young women's statements he allowed them the opportunity to identify the officers who had picked them up. However, he warned them that if they were to identify the wrong men, they would be sent to the workhouse. The young women did not positively identify the two officers at the police station. As one of them noted later, "I was scared to say at Police Station they were same men." The police then kept the young women in custody over the weekend. When they were finally released, one of the young women's mothers was told by the police to take her daughter home and talk to no one about what had happened. The other young woman was sent to West Tennessee Medical Center, where she was quarantined for eleven days and received shots of penicillin, presumably to prevent contracting a sexually transmitted disease.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> "Letter to Ullius Phillips from Drury Crawley August 24, 1945, Part 8, Series B, Reel 25, (microfilm), Papers of the NAACP; and "Statement of Gladys Carr," August 15, 1945, Part 8, Series B, Reel 25, (microfilm), Papers of the NAACP. During the war years, city officials in Memphis, and across the country, launched campaigns to end the spread of syphilis. As part of these campaigns, police officers could force women to be tested for syphilis. According to Laurie Green, the rape of the two black girls highlights the particular vulnerability of black working-class women to police sexual harassment. See Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 93-95. For more on the history of campaigns to end venereal diseases in the United States, see Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Within two weeks, the NAACP was involved. Although the officers were dismissed from the force a few days after the incident, following the discovery of physical evidence that corroborated the young women's story, no charges were brought against them. In a letter to the Memphis NAACP branch president, U.B. Phillips, Roy Wilkins, president of the NAACP, wrote, "Personally I feel that despite the 'terror' in Memphis, our association should do everything possible to see that these men are brought up on charges and convicted." Wilkins urged Phillips not to be intimidated by the power of the Crump machine and to use the resources and power of the national NAACP to support an effort to get justice for these young women. Phillips responded by hiring Memphis attorney Drury Crawley to investigate the women's charges against the officers.<sup>141</sup>

Crawley's investigation, combined with petitions from black civic groups, put enough pressure on the city that charges of "criminal attack" against the two men were finally considered by a grand jury on August 28, 1945. That the grand jury decided to bring charges against the two white officers was a significant acknowledgement of the city's black citizens' right to seek justice. And, initially, black Memphians saw the trial as an advancement towards equal justice in a white supremacist legal system. Police officers standing trial for a crime against a black person, especially the crime of

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<sup>141</sup> Roy Wilkins to Uthellus B. Phillips August 18, 1945, Part 8, Series B, Reel 25, (microfilm), Papers of the NAACP; The handkerchief one of the officers had used to wipe himself was found in the field along with the ripped-up pieces of one of the girl's health cards that she had dropped in the back seat of the squad car.

“violating the honor and person of a Negro woman,” was a rare occurrence.<sup>142</sup> The idea that the state would use its powers to prosecute white citizens for crimes against blacks seemed like a significant evolution in black citizens’ struggle for equal justice. Thus, at first, black Memphians saw the indictment of the two former police officers as a success. The trial, however, proved to be a disappointment. After months of delays, the trial finally began in January of 1946 but was quickly concluded with the acquittal of the two officers.

Just a year before the rape of the two young women in Memphis, another young woman, Recy Taylor, was raped in Abbeville, Alabama, drawing national attention to the lack of justice for black women in the South. Upon hearing about the case, the NAACP asked a young investigator, Rosa Parks, to determine what had happened to Taylor. However, Alabama justice continued to be “blind, deaf, and mute,” as the *New York Daily Worker* reporter Eugene Gordon put it. Gordon went on to highlight the hypocrisy of the white southern press that had “played up the rape of the unnamed wife of a white soldier in Florida” while remaining mute about the gang rape of Recy Taylor. The attention that interracial advocacy groups for justice such as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the National Council of Negro Woman, the YWCA, and the NAACP brought to the Recy Taylor case forced the Alabama governor to take action and

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<sup>142</sup> “Two ex-cops Held on Bonds of \$5000,” *Press-Scimitar*, August 27, 1945; and Quoted in Gloria Brown-Melton, “Blacks in Memphis Tennessee, 1920-1955: A Historical Study” (Ph.D. diss, Washington State University, 1982), 257.

launch an investigation. However, persisting attitudes of white supremacy ruled the day, and although the perpetrators were finally charged, an all white jury acquitted them all.<sup>143</sup>

Recy Taylor and the two young women from Memphis were just three of many women who were physically assaulted by white men, especially during the years surrounding World War II. These stories and events had what historian Danielle McGuire describes as “symbolic power and political potency.”<sup>144</sup> They symbolized generations of abuse and degradation of black womanhood, the inability of black men to protect black women, and the continuation of white male supremacy. Their political potency came from white men’s attempts to use their cultural and social superiority to maintain control over the political sphere. These events also spurred on the rising tide of black political action. Black Americans used their increased political power, gained through increased political activity, to try to obtain equal justice for their local communities and black women specifically. Political action in the form of calls for equal justice offered a way for black men to try to protect black women.

As cases of white men’s sexual violence against black women continued to go unpunished, black men and women began to make louder and more aggressive calls for protection and equal justice. Even though neither Taylor nor the young women from Memphis saw justice done, the mere fact that their cases were brought to trial demonstrated that white officials could not ignore black voices when raised loud enough.

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<sup>143</sup> Eugene Gordon, “Alabama Authorities Ignore White Gang’s Rape of Negro Mother,” *New York Daily Worker*, November 19, 1944; For the entire story of Recy Taylor and its impact on women’s advocacy groups for equal justice as well as its impact on the career of activist Rosa Parks, see McGuire.

<sup>144</sup> McGuire, 28.

While those women willing to speak out and the trials themselves brought “attention to the issue of sexual violence and often ignited local campaigns for equal justice and civil rights,” the failure of the courts and continued intimidation represented the obstacles facing blacks seeking more equal justice.<sup>145</sup> The primary obstacle being the continuation of a white supremacist ideology that devalued black bodies and the right to protection, both physical and judicial.

The black women survivors of rape by white men in the 1940s who had the courage to speak out were able to use their voices as weapons against white supremacy. But while Recy Taylor’s story “inspire[d] a nationwide campaign to defend black womanhood,” in Memphis the rape of the two young women and the campaign for justice it inspired became less about black womanhood and more about black manhood. The demographic and economic changes the war brought to Memphis, blacks’ increased political activism, and black Memphian’s continued frustrations with the lack of justice brought to the forefront tensions within Memphis’s larger black community. These tensions focused on the failure of traditional black leaders’ ability to protect black citizen’s rights to justice and protection of their physical bodies.

In the mid 1930s, Robert R. Church Jr.’s connection to Crump saved him from police harassment. After being arrested for reckless driving, Church reportedly declared himself “as good as” the arresting officer. But rather than being beaten, Church was released and charges were dropped. At the time, Church was in good standing with Crump. Church and his political organizing efforts among black Memphians was crucial

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<sup>145</sup> McGuire, 36.

to Crump's political success and in return Crump "made a point of being friendly with Bob Church and his associates." The relationship between Crump and Church would deteriorate by the end of the decade when Church organized against Crump's political candidates. However, this episode demonstrated that connection to the Crump machine could be translated into physical protection, even for a black man who reportedly disrespected a white police officer.<sup>146</sup>

In the aftermath of the 1945 rape case, black Memphians were outraged at what they saw as the failure of the justice system and the failure of the city's traditional black leadership to protect all black citizens. Many black Memphians expected that the black elites' long standing political connections with the white leadership of the city would have resulted in some justice for the young women and black citizens more broadly. The city's claims that it offered blacks benefits and opportunities while allowing young black women to be "bestially outraged" by white police officers highlighted the hypocrisy of Crump's paternalism.<sup>147</sup>

When traditional black elites failed, black religious and civic organizations along with the black media criticized black elites' standing as black men and thus their ability to stand as community leaders. One editorial in the *Memphis World* denounced "an

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<sup>146</sup> "Bob Church in doorway of Court Sees Reckless Driving Charges Dropped," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 9, 1933; David M. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), 100. For more on the role of Church's political organizing in Crump's political machine, see G. Wayne Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don't Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis* (Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 2006) and Elizabeth Gritter, *River of Hope: Black Politics and The Memphis Freedom Movement, 1865-1954* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2014).

<sup>147</sup> "Plans For Prosecution Of Rape Case Outlined by Many Civic Groups," *Memphis World*, August 21, 1945, Part 8, Series B, Reel 25, (microfilm), Papers of the NAACP

apparently totally demoralized, disorganized, program-less, fearful, ‘back-gate’ talking, ‘front-gate’ whispering, bewildered and supine Negro leadership.” Calling leaders demoralized and supine suggested that black leaders were simply pawns of the white leadership. Declaring the black elite disorganized and program-less suggested that their connection to the Crump machine had caused them to lose sight of what was best for the black community as a whole. This editorial challenged not only black elites’ ability to protect black citizens but also the system of racial accommodation that had developed in Memphis during the twentieth century.<sup>148</sup>

Further editorials called on black leaders to “be men” and do something to help defend the city’s middle and working-class blacks. The mass of black Memphians were frustrated with what appeared to be the city’s black elites’ unwillingness to challenge white leaders. As was said of the Crump appointed principle of the black Booker T. Washington high school, Blair T. Hunt, he was “nothing more than an errand boy.” Many among the city’s black residents saw this unwillingness as traditional black leaders subordinating themselves to the white leadership, which negated their power as men and as black men specifically.<sup>149</sup>

The church-based organization, Deacons and Trustees Union, issued a statement declaring that it would work to “make Memphis safe” and that “the Deacons and Trustees Union faces this challenge like men.” The members of the Union declared their manhood

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid; and Edward Smith, “Writer Stressed Need to Consider State of the City for Negroes,” *Memphis World*, August 10, 1945.

<sup>149</sup> Tucker, 145.

through their role as both the physical and moral protectors of the community. The “supine” leadership’s association with the Crump political machine had emasculated them by limiting their ability to “be men” and call for greater protection for their fellow black Memphians.<sup>150</sup> In a letter to Thurgood Marshall at the NAACP, one local minister associated with the organization defended leaders inaction, “I need not tell you that in this City most of our influential persons hands are tied.” The letter seemed to call on the national office of the NAACP to take a more active stance in the city as its local leaders, men like U.B. Phillips, president of the Memphis branch, were “being criticized and unless something is done through this organization, it will be a hard matter to influence members to join again.” Thus, it would be up to other groups to come forward to lead. As the outcry continued, more civic and church based groups joined together to pass resolutions denouncing police action.<sup>151</sup>

Black civic clubs had been active in civic affairs since before the 1930s. Organized by neighborhood, these clubs focused most often on specific neighborhood improvements, although they also conducted voter registration drives. Thus, by the mid 1940s, these clubs already had the organizational capacity to, along with ministerial alliances, begin collecting of fund to hire local lawyers to investigate the rape case. In 1945 and early 1946, in the wake of the rape case, black ministers and black neighborhood civic organizations posed a challenge to traditional black leadership in

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<sup>150</sup> Edward Smith, “Writer Stressed Need to Consider State of the City for Negroes,” *Memphis World*, August 10, 1945.

<sup>151</sup> A.J. Campbell to Thurgood Marshall, February 13, 1946 Part 8, Series B, Reel 25, (microfilm), Papers of the NAACP; and “Plans For Prosecution of Rape Case Outlined by Many Civic Groups,” *Memphis World*, August 21, 1945, Part 8, Series B, Reel 25, (microfilm), Papers of the NAACP.

Memphis as they responded to the immediate circumstances by advocating for black advancement on their own terms.<sup>152</sup>

In her study of Durham, North Carolina, another southern city in which there was a prominent and successful black political and business elite, Christina Greene found that the black elite negotiated with white leaders behind the scenes in order to secure gains for Durham's black citizens. This type of action was also true of Memphis's black business and political elite. However, this white generosity came with an "element of social control," in which white cooperation was dependent on continued racial peace and compliance to the system of segregation and white superiority. In other words, blacks were able to acquire limited benefits as long as they did not challenge the racial status quo. But at moments when racial justice and the system of white supremacy came head to head, such as in the 1945 rape case, black elites faced scrutiny from the larger black community if these efforts to negotiate with white leaders did not seem to be working in the best interest of the city's black population as a whole. Thus, the criticism of Memphis's black elite in 1945 referring to them as "back-gate talking" and "front-page whispering," associating them with the corruption of the political machine, not with broader black community uplift.<sup>153</sup>

As black leaders continued to be unwilling to openly defy the Crump political machine, black ministers' criticism began to remold a definition of black manhood to

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid; and Dowdy, 61. Evidence of black civic organizations petitioning city government for improvements to their communities can be found in the Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler and the James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee.

<sup>153</sup> Greene, 10; and Edward Smith, "Writer Stressed Need to Consider State of the City for Negroes."

better reflect the black working-class desire for a strong leadership focused on protecting black citizens and standing up to Crump. In 1946 when A. Phillip Randolph was in Memphis for a labor conference, the minister of Beale Avenue Baptist Church made reference to the lack of solid male leadership in Memphis when he told Randolph that “you are a man...in a man’s position, and perform a man-sized job. I wish to heaven we had just a few men like you in Memphis.” Randolph, as a powerful public figure, used his political sway to negotiate on behalf of black Americans and black workers to better their position in society. Randolph had time and again proved his willingness to stand up against white political leaders.<sup>154</sup> For black Memphians, Randolph and the kind of man he represented stood in stark contrast to the city’s traditional black leaders associated with the Crump Machine.

The majority of black Memphians were coming to expect more out of the men in their communities and especially those in leadership positions. For church and civic groups, expressions of manhood were rooted in the concept of black community protection and black community advancement. News editorials venerated labor leaders for doing “a man-sized job,” while also writing of the “creeping moral paralysis” of Memphis’s traditional black leadership. These criticisms offered an alternative expression of manliness for Memphis blacks. Manhood was expressed through moral

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<sup>154</sup> Quoted in Green, 97. For more on A. Phillip Randolph’s clashes with Memphis city leaders, see Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 205-206.

leadership and action that was rooted in a commitment to black uplift and economic and political justice for black Memphians.<sup>155</sup>

While the rape case of 1945 brought into the public consciousness black women's particular vulnerability and the implications that had on black manhood, it was only one of many cases of southern police brutality during the second half of the 1940s. After the war ended, many black veterans returned to the South expecting changes in the racial social order, while some returning white veterans expected the racial order to remain intact after the war. These varying expectations resulted in violent clashes. As discussed before, these clashes often took place in the now more crowded public spaces where the color line was much more difficult to control. News of violent clashes between veterans and white police poured in from across the South. The fact that southern policemen's function was to control blacks rather than protect them became increasingly obvious in the years following World War II as clashes between white police and black citizens, particularly black veterans, increased.

The war experience abroad and on the home front had changed black attitudes. Throughout the war, black servicemen and women had demonstrated their loyalty to the nation through their service. Black Americans on the home front and at war tried to use the country's war aims of freedom and democracy to "illustrate their country's hypocrisy" in fighting a war for goals it did not live up to at home. After the war had concluded, across the country, black activists continued to push for black rights. In early 1946, the student newspaper at LeMoyne College, *The LeMoyne Democrat*, ran a series

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<sup>155</sup> "We Must Act On This!" *Memphis World*, August 14, 1945.

of articles calling for greater student involvement in “combat[ing] prejudice and bigotry in every way we possible can.” In one editorial, the writer used the image of a dead black Union soldier who had come back from beyond the grave to remind black students “that southern reactionaries expect to continue the Jim Crow ideal.” Using the image of a dead black soldier, who could have come from any of the wars in American history, these students were reminding their readers that participation in the military did not guarantee the rights of citizenship, the fight for democracy continued even as the war was over. The student writer called on students, many of whom were veterans, to take on a larger role in leading the struggle for black equality. “As a segment of the intelligentsia of Memphis, we owe it to ourselves and our community.”<sup>156</sup> Through *The LeMoyne Democrat*, the voices of the student editors calling for their fellow students to take part in action for change echoed the sentiments of other black religious and civic organizations speaking out and advocating for action by those black citizens not traditionally associated with black leadership in Memphis.

The national rhetoric of freedom and democracy, the experience of serving in the military to protect their country, and greater economic opportunity for those at home had all led to a greater sense of what Gail O’Brien terms “entitlement and personal efficacy” among black Americans. In January of 1946, two white Memphis police officers had been beaten up after harassing four black veterans. The four veterans along with several

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<sup>156</sup> Glenda E. Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008), 358; and the following appear [not sure what this means?] in *The Democrat: LeMoyne College*, LeMoyne-Owen College Archive, Hollis T. Price Library, LeMoyne Owen College, Memphis, Tennessee, “There Are Things We Can Do,” April 5, 1946; and “In The Dead Past,” February 22, 1946.

other bystanders who entered the fray were all subsequently arrested. A young veteran writing to the newspaper acknowledged that white authorities had all the power in these situations, but he also warned that younger blacks in Memphis would speak out against the beatings and being “taken for a ride,” in other words being treated unfairly.<sup>157</sup> This episode was a warning that the younger generation of black Memphians returning from the war would stand up for themselves in the face of discrimination, a sentiment repeated by the LeMoyne College students.

Just one month after the episode involving black veterans and Memphis police, black veterans clashed with local police and the highway patrol in Columbia, Tennessee, in what official investigators called the Columbia Race Riot. This case, which received national attention, highlighted the growing postwar racial tensions in the South. The clash between Columbia’s black residents and city’s white police officers and Highway Patrol demonstrated both the increase in black self-determination and white vigilance to maintain the racial status quo.<sup>158</sup>

After an altercation between a white and black veteran outside a downtown department store, armed civilians gathered in the streets of Columbia. A group of armed white civilians, mostly young veterans, gathered in the main square, at the same time, blacks armed themselves and gathered in the black area of town known as the Bottom. While the local sheriff attempted to disperse the armed white mob, black men armed

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<sup>157</sup> Gail Williams O’Brien, *The Color of the Law: Race Violence, and Justice in the Post-World War II South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 90; and Brown-Melton, 271.

<sup>158</sup> O’Brien, 3, 166.

themselves and posted up around the black business district, guarding their neighborhood overnight. In an effort to protect themselves and their community these men fired on four white officers who attempted to enter the area. At dawn, the Highway Patrol raided the Bottom. By the end of the raid, one hundred men, most of whom were black, had been arrested and the majority of black businesses in the town had been ransacked.<sup>159</sup>

As blacks demonstrated a growing sense of self-esteem and entitlement in the postwar years, white police officers acted as the front line of a white community desperate to maintain the status quo. What happened in Columbia was a police raid, not a race riot. In the aftermath, all law enforcement officers were exonerated. A grand jury deemed their actions “not unreasonable.” However, twenty-five black Columbians were tried for murder. Only two were convicted. Several of the men who stood trial were prominent black business-owners whose places of business had been ransacked by the Highway Patrolmen. These officers made no distinctions between the elements of Columbia’s black community as they rampaged. The officers saw all black Columbians as criminal and in need of subduing. As in cases in Memphis, the root of white officers’ aggression towards the black citizens was the perceived lack of respect blacks had for white authority. The testimony given by one officer in the trial emphasized that for him “the biggest thing” was the way that black citizens showed “disrespect.” When pressed

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<sup>159</sup> The “Bottom” was the common name used by black Columbians to describe the black business district. Whites often referred to the same area as “Mink Slide,” but blacks understood this term to be a derogatory one. For more on this incident, see O’Brien, 151. In the black-owned soda fountain, what ice cream patrolmen had not eaten was laced with rat poison. At the funeral parlor, furniture was ripped, embalming fluid poured everywhere, and the letters “KKK” were scrawled across the top of a casket. For more on the devastation, see O’Brien, 27-30.

by the attorney, he continued that “they were using a loud tone and [speaking] the way a ‘nigger’ wouldn’t be talking to a white man.”<sup>160</sup> This testimony demonstrated a sense that white Southerners felt they were losing control of changing as the country’s racial attitudes shifted in the wake of World War II.

### **Protecting Black Bodies: Memphis Police Brutality in 1948**

The stories of the black servicemen beating on white police officers and the black Columbians’ attempts to protect their community through armed resistance demonstrate a growing pushback from within black communities against white police brutality. However, these episodes also demonstrate that white officials backed by a racist judiciary system continued to hold the power. In Memphis, the city’s black residents continued to be victimized by white police officers. As these incidents became more publicized in the years following the war, frustration over the continued lack of justice in their city caused some black Memphians to become more overt in their pushback against white authority. Black Memphian Eli Blaine was beaten by police when he tried to stand up and protest officers’ attempts to “take him for a ride” and ultimately lost his right eye. Just two years after the rape case, the case of Eli Blaine fueled the call for justice for blacks in the face of police violence.<sup>161</sup>

In the eight months between the Adelaide Hudson case and the Eli Blaine case, the Memphis Police Department had begun to change, as it faced growing public

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<sup>160</sup> O’Brien, 38, 148.

<sup>161</sup> Brown-Melton, 271. For the full account of the Eli Blain story, see “Eye is Lost From Beating: 2 Policemen Are Jailed,” *Press-Scimitar*, May 18, 1948.

scrutiny. Increasingly vocal black criticism of Memphis officials focused on the mounting number of police brutality incidents and the lack of justice for black victims. These cases and the black response heightened racial tension and black resistance to white authority. The case of Eli Blaine and police officials' response to it demonstrated a more conscientious administration within the Memphis Police Department, one becoming more aware of the need to be perceived as equal and just in order to maintain racial peace and the system of racial segregation, even as patrolmen continued to abuse black citizens.

In the early hours of Sunday May 16, 1948, two white beat cops responded to a disturbance call at the apartment of Eli Blaine. After the officers left without making any arrests or facing any kind of resistance, Blaine realized that he was missing ten dollars. Blaine, an employee at the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, reported the incident to his boss, a white man, who encouraged Blaine to make a report with the police at the station. After Blaine recounted his story to the beat cops' superior officer, the officers who had made the call to his apartment were called in. Upon hearing Blaine's accusation, one of the officers punched Blaine in the face, causing a gash above Blaine's left eye.<sup>162</sup>

The superior officer ordered this same officer and the other accused officer to take Blaine to the hospital. However, when Blaine arrived at the hospital, he was so badly injured that he was immediately sent to surgery to have his right eye removed. Upon questioning by their superior about how Blaine received the extensive wounds between the police station and the hospital, the officers claimed that Blaine had attempted to

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<sup>162</sup> "Eye is Lost From Beating: 2 Policemen Are Jailed."

escape from the moving vehicle, and his new injuries were from his fall out of the vehicle. Doctors later testified that a blunt object caused the beating, not a fall.<sup>163</sup>

As in the cases of police brutality before, there was evidence of a blatant disregard for black humanity in the Blaine case. The fact that the officer hit Blaine at the police station demonstrates that there was no question in the officer's mind regarding how to properly handle a black accuser. As Blaine recounted later, the officer even told him on the way to the hospital, "I ought to kill you."<sup>164</sup> In the officer's mind, Blaine, as a black man, was worthless. Blaine's body was not his own but subject to the whims of white police officers.

In subsequent reports of the Blaine incident by police and in the newspaper, Blaine was further relegated to a subordinate position. Several articles referred to Blaine as "the prisoner." However, Blaine was never a prisoner. He was never put under arrest. He had gone to the police station of his own accord in order to bring a complaint against an officer. It was as if the newspapers had no other word to describe a black man in the care of the police. As in the other cases involving blacks interacting with the police, black bodies were to be beaten, and if need be, arrested without regard to proper cause. Referring to Blaine as "the prisoner" bestowed on Blaine undo association with criminality. Blaine as a prisoner struck by police reoriented the primary conflict of the story from Blaine as an innocent citizen seeking justice to another black criminal manhandled by police. Because of these descriptions, the incident became less about the

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<sup>163</sup> "Jury Sleeps on Fate of Two Ex-Policemen," *Commercial Appeal*, July 1, 1948.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

unjust blatant police brutality and more about how police handled criminals in their care, thus removing an element of Blaine's victimization in the situation.<sup>165</sup>

The public outrage generated by this case was very similar to the outrage over the rape of the two young women and the beating of Adelaide Hudson. In July of 1948, the *Memphis World* ran an editorial titled, "The Tragic Case of Eli Blaine," accompanied by a photo of Blaine's beaten and bandaged face. This image of Blaine was a visual reminder of the danger of being black in Memphis. The editorial referenced several other cases of police brutality, including the 1945 rape case, in order to emphasize the continued lack of justice for Memphis's black citizens: "Blaine had forgotten the color of his skin when he sought justice of white police officers." The editorial implied that Blaine was beaten simply because he was black in a city in which being black was always "criminal," a fact emphasized by the use of the term "prisoner" by the white newspapers when referring to Blaine and his case.<sup>166</sup> The "tragedy" of Blaine's case was that blacks in Memphis lived under an unjust, racially discriminatory justice system, in which white officers had gone unchecked in their treatment of blacks. The beating of Eli Blaine, for many black Memphians, was just another example of how little black life was valued in Memphis.

However, in the Blaine case there was a key difference in the way that the legal system handled the situation. The officers involved in Blaine's beating were fired right

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<sup>165</sup> "Gerber Will Demand New Mayhem Trials For Two Policemen," *Commercial Appeal*, July 2, 1948.

<sup>166</sup> Lewis O. Swingler, "The Tragic Case of Eli Blaine," *Memphis World*, July 6, 1948. and For a more expansive treatment of the ideological underpinnings of the association between black and criminal, see Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010).

away. As early as May 19, only a few days after the initial incident, Hollis Price, a Memphis NAACP official, noted that the police department “seems determined to prosecute this case to the limit,” even before a significant outcry from the black segments of the city. After the officers were acquitted of the assault to murder charges against them, Police Commissioner Joseph Boyle called the verdict a “miscarriage of justice. The attack on the negro Blaine was a terrible example of abuse of a prisoner by police officers.”<sup>167</sup> Even though Blaine was not a prisoner, the fact that Boyle admitted there was a problem of abusing prisoners in the police department and called it a miscarriage of justice that these two officers had gone unpunished for such a crime was a sign of changes underway in the Memphis Police Department, which was increasingly aware of the need to be perceived by the public as treating all citizens with respect.

Even the Attorney General promised to continue with the prosecution, albeit on lesser charges of mayhem. “The poor, and sometimes forgotten man is as much entitled to the protection of the law as any other citizen,” the Attorney General declared. Even though an all white jury did not agree with the Attorney General or Commissioner Boyle, the Attorney General’s statements demonstrate a move toward more equal justice and an acknowledgment of the difficulties facing poor Memphians, the majority of whom were black. By using the word “citizen,” the Attorney General also opened the door for a

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<sup>167</sup> “Hollis Price to Thurgood Marshall May 19, 1948,” Part 8, Series B, Reel 19, (microfilm), Papers of the NAACP; and “Gerber Will Demand New Mayhem Trials For Two Policemen.”

discussion about the rights that each citizen of Memphis should have, regardless of race.<sup>168</sup>

An editorial in the *Commercial Appeal* discussing the Blaine case emphasized citizenship rights as a key element of the case. For the editor, the violation of rights by the police department was the central issue. “The right to make a complaint...the right to expect decent treatment and a fair and honest examination of their charges...a right to be safe” were all the rights not afforded to Blaine that should be inherent in city citizenship. And, for this white editor, the root of the problem lay within the police department. Boyle made “at the very least, a grave error of judgment” when he had the very officer who struck Blaine escort him to the hospital.<sup>169</sup> Boyle essentially enabled the further beating of Blaine. The severity to which police officers beat Blaine shone a bright light on the police department’s disregard for black citizenship rights, particularly the right to protection.

The ultimate outcome of this case was similar to the others cases discussed, as the officers were found not guilty and only one was fined \$50 for punching Blaine at the station. However, the city administration was beginning to demonstrate a change in attitude regarding police interaction with the city’s black residents. There was no denying what had happened at the station, when the officer punched Blaine in the face unprovoked, and this act challenged people like Boyle and the Attorney General to think about the relationship of the police department to the city’s citizens, particularly the black

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> “Shocking Incident,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 19, 1948.

citizens of the city. The case opened the door for a discussion of rights, justice, and equal protection among black and white Memphians.<sup>170</sup>

This discussion of rights, justice, and equal protection was playing out across the South in the years surrounding World War II. Advocates for black police officers in Dallas, Texas made a direct connection between citizenship rights and the rights to protection. For Lynn Landrum, writing for *The Dallas News* the question of hiring black police officers was not about race. Hiring black police officers was a matter of protecting black rights. “The blackest Dallasite in town has just as much right to police protection as the whitest has.” Lyndrum connected physical protection of the city’s black community with their rights as citizens. “In the name of all that we call civilization and democracy, they have a right to just that.” Drawing on the language of democracy used during the war, the article argued that it was city’s duty to protect black citizens because it was their right and also because it reinforced “good relations between the races.”<sup>171</sup>

Continued cases of questionable police action reinforced the need for this discussion in Memphis. It was just a month after the Blaine beating that Viola Moore was hospitalized after an officer beat her while attempting to arrest her for disorderly conduct. Because Moore actively resisted arrest, the officer claimed that force was necessary for his own protection, and he was ultimately exonerated of charges of

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<sup>170</sup> “One Ex-Policeman Fined \$50: Another Acquitted in Famed Police Brutality Case Here,” *Memphis World*, July 2, 1948.

<sup>171</sup> Lynn W. Landrum, “The Case For Negro Police,” *The Dallas News*, reprinted in *New South*, 2.2 (February, 1947): 5-6.

brutality.<sup>172</sup> But even if force was necessary to subdue Moore during the arrest, the fact that she was hospitalized at the same time that two other officers faced trial for putting another black Memphian in the hospital, kept the discussion of white police officers' use of unnecessary force when interacting with blacks in the forefront of black and white Memphians' minds.

The call for black police officers reemerged out of this discussion about police brutality. In his editorial on the Eli Blaine case, *Memphis World* editor L.O. Swingler argued that this beating would not have happened had the officers dealing with Blaine been black. "Had the officer's skin matched Blain[e]'s [*sic*] in color, the good right eye would still be in place." Swingler acknowledged the work of the Attorney General and the statement by Boyle that the case had been a "miscarriage of justice" as a move in a positive direction, but, he argued, more needed to be done. "A white jury of 12 men can wipe out any such efforts anytime and under any condition of crime committed against the Negro." A justice system operating on traditional segregationist values and dominated by white men committed to white supremacy would never allow for black Memphians to receive justice. White supremacy was too ingrained in the justice system for it to serve all citizens equally. "But Negro police officers can be the means of mitigating such injustice in the future," Swingler argued. Fixing the injustice had to

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<sup>172</sup> The following appeared in the *Commercial Appeal*, "Officer Suspended After Beating Negro," June 22, 1948; and "Accuser of Officers Fined In Court Here" July 3, 1948.

begin with the police department and the physical interactions between the justice system and the black community.<sup>173</sup>

In August, the police killing of an unarmed black veteran escalated the protests of police brutality among blacks to the point that city leaders, black and white, were forced to make a change. Twenty-two year old James Mosby was killed outside his Binghampton home on August 20 during a scuffle with police. Mosby's killing occurred at the end of a summer full of instances of white police officers using excessive force against working-class black Memphians. In the wake of the Eli Blaine case and other police beatings, the Mosby killing solidified for black Memphians that white police officers held all the power, even within black neighborhoods. Not only could black Memphians not expect justice when dealing with the police and court system, they were also vulnerable in their own neighborhoods and homes. Even with the Attorney General's pledge to give equal justice to even the poorest in the city and Commissioner Boyle's admittance that changes needed to be made in the police department, white officers continued to wreak havoc in the black neighborhoods.<sup>174</sup>

On the afternoon of August 20, 1948, officers were called out to investigate a domestic disturbance in the Binghampton neighborhood. In an attempt to break up an argument between Mosby and his wife, officers put Mosby in the squad car. But as the *Press-Scimitar* reported, Mosby tried to escape, lunging at one of the officers. One

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<sup>173</sup> Lewis O. Swingler, "The Tragic Case of Eli Blaine."

<sup>174</sup> "Young Overseas Vet Shot to Death By Police Officers In His Yard: Binghampton Citizens Aroused," *Memphis World*, August 24, 1948.

officer hit Mosby, who then began to scuffle with the other officer on the scene. During this scuffle, the officer discharged his weapon, shooting Mosby twice in the stomach, killing him.<sup>175</sup>

Although the department launched an investigation, within three days the officer was exonerated of any wrongdoing. The police department report determined the officer acted in line-of-duty self-defense. Eyewitnesses from the neighborhood reported that it was in fact Mosby who was acting in self-defense. In an article titled, “Killing by Police Was Murder, Negroes Say,” the *Press-Scimitar* reported on a mass meeting held by black residents of the Binghampton neighborhood at which community members claimed that the shooting of Mosby was murder. Mosby’s shooting was another example of unwarranted force used by police. Those who attended the meeting felt that because of the “accumulation of acts” by police officers against residents of the Binghampton neighborhood and other blacks around the city, the city’s black residents, especially its working-class black citizens, needed protection from the police. For them, the Mosby killing demonstrated that any black citizen was susceptible to police brutality.<sup>176</sup>

A petition drafted at the meeting by the East Memphis Citizens Club of the Binghampton neighborhood, emphasized that police brutality was not merely directed against the criminal element of the black population, but, as with Eli Blaine, any black Memphian could fall victim to police brutality. This latest victim was not a criminal but

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<sup>175</sup> “22-Year Old Negro Killed By Memphis Policeman,” *Press-Scimitar* August 21, 1948.

<sup>176</sup> “Nolen Cleared In Fatal Shooting,” *Press-Scimitar*, August 23, 1948; These eye-witnesses were neighbors of Mosby’s who reported their accounts of events to Mosby’s father. Mosby’s father then reported these accounts to the *Memphis World*. See “Young Overseas Vet Shot to Death By Police Officers In His Yard: Binghampton Citizens Aroused”; and “Killing by Police Was Murder, Negroes Say.”

a valued member of his community and a family man. As historian Laurie Green argued, the East Memphis Citizen Club's petition reversed the traditional black savage narrative. The petitioner's description of the white police officers actions depicted them as the savages rather than Mosby. Mentioning Mosby's military service and employment with the city the petitioners emphasized that even though Mosby was a black man, he was a citizen who had worked to serve and protect both his country and his city.<sup>177</sup> This description of Mosby bestowed on him the virtues of manhood venerated previously by black ministers and the media. Mosby was a valued man among his neighbors, one struck down senselessly by white authorities. By highlighting his service record, family, and occupational status, the authors of the petition aimed to demonstrate the indiscriminate nature of police violence, thus emphasizing the need for black community protection.

Protection became the rallying cry among working-class black Memphians. The neighborhood group's petition called for "protection of the Negroes of the City of Memphis from the police brutality and police killings." The petition even referred to the rape of the two young women from this same neighborhood three years before to emphasize that this case was not an isolated incident, but one of many that, with the continued "violation of their Civil rights by policemen," had left the neighborhood and all

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<sup>177</sup> East Memphis Citizens Club to Mayor James Pleasant, August 25, 1948, Box 23, Folder 8, James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee; Green, 108; and for more on the association of black with criminality and savagery, see Mohammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*.

black Memphians living in fear and frustration.<sup>178</sup> At its base level, these were calls for physical protection, but black Memphians were also calling for the protection of their rights as citizens.

White officers' attempts to control the black population through intimidation and physical abuse had resulted in too many publicized cases of police brutality and police killings. As these cases piled up, the city's black residents became increasingly unwilling to continue to stand for the unequal justice doled out by the police department and justice system. The context of race relations in Memphis had changed because of the war. Memphis was a new city and black Memphians would no longer stand for the old ways of maintaining control over the city's black population. White police and instances of police brutality from white policemen became symbols of America's and Memphis's continued failure to recognize the citizenship rights of blacks. The two rape victims, Adelaide Hudson, Eli Blaine, and James Mosby were victims of the failures of the system of racial accommodation to protect black bodies and symbols of Memphis's failures as a progressive postwar city.

These instances of brutality also came to represent the traditional black leadership's inability to protect and institute changes in the city for the betterment of blacks. Traditional black elites' ties to the Crump political machine, which had helped to secure benefits for black Memphians in the past in exchange for peaceful race relations, had failed to protect blacks in their interactions with the law. Black reactions to this

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<sup>178</sup> East Memphis Citizens Club to Mayor James Pleasant, August 25, 1948, Box 23, Folder 8, James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers.

string of police brutality cases in the late 1940s challenged the traditional accommodationist style of leadership and pushed city officials to negotiate over black demands. Black police officers, black representatives within the very institution that had victimized black citizens, came to be seen as the solution to the lack of protection for black Memphians.

## CHAPTER V

### “IT’S BECOMING TRITE”: THE CAMPAIGN FOR BLACK POLICE OFFICERS AND JUSTICE FOR MEMPHIS’S BLACK COMMUNITY

When *Memphis World* editor L. O. Swingler titled his August 24, 1948, editorial “It’s Becoming Trite,” he put words to the frustration felt by many black Memphians over the lack of justice for blacks in the city. Swingler chose the word “trite,” meaning “something’s being overdone, being old-timey...being the much accepted answer,” to describe what he had come to view as the “trite” explanations for the beating and killing of black Memphians by white police officers. As Swingler was sure to point out, it was not the beatings or killings that had become trite, but the explanations of those beatings and killings used to exonerate the officers. ““He was resisting arrest...‘he seized my nightstick,’” or the most recent explanation, “he bit me,” had all been used to excuse white Memphis police officers’ use of force against black citizens, who ended up in the hospital or dead as a result of these encounters.

The killing of the twenty-three-year-old veteran and city employee James Mosby, in front of his home in the Binghampton neighborhood, prompted Swingler’s editorial decrying the continued devaluation of black life by Memphis police officers and the system that exonerated those officers based on “trite” explanations for the use of force. Written in late August 1948, this editorial was one of many written by Swingler in the spring and summer of 1948 that addressed the growing concern over police brutality and

the lack of justice for black Memphians. By the time James Mosby was killed in late August, black ministers and black students among other black and white Memphians had joined Swingler's call for black police officers. Supporters of black police officers believed that if black officers patrolled black neighborhoods incidents such as the Blaine beating or the Mosby killing would not have occurred. Supporters argued "there are upright honest negroes of integrity who would sacrifice better jobs to help render service to the peace and welfare of the Memphis Police Department and justice to their own people." As instances of police brutality against blacks continued to be highly publicized, black Memphians' call for black police officers became intertwined with notions of equality, community protection, and justice for black Memphians.<sup>179</sup>

During the years surrounding World War II, black Americans across the country demanded greater citizenship rights. Black labor organizations fought job discrimination in war industry, national civil rights organizations worked in the courts to end housing discrimination and to expand black voting power, and local black communities across the country protested against daily injustices.<sup>180</sup> In Memphis, blacks also reacted to the

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<sup>179</sup> L. O. Swingler, "It's Becoming Trite," *Memphis World*, August 24, 1948; and "Drive for Negro Police Officers," *Press-Scimitar*, July 10, 1948

<sup>180</sup> For more on labor activism, see Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Glenda E. Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008). The NAACP was instrumental in the April 1944 Supreme Court Case *Smith v. Allwright*, which ruled the all-white primary unconstitutional, and in the Supreme Court case *Shelley v. Kramer*, which declared restrictive covenants based on race unconstitutional. See Manfred Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005). For more on local civil rights struggles, see Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle For Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Lisa Levenstein, *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

changes brought on by the war, and throughout the World War II era, black Memphians pushed for greater rights and more equal justice through a variety of means from labor organizations to federal agencies. The campaign for black police officers was one front in the struggle to better black lives at this moment, but one that spoke directly to the immediate concerns over police brutality and black Memphians' understanding of justice and equality within the confines of segregation.

This chapter examines the black community's calls for black police officers in 1948. Calls for black police officers focused on immediate concerns over community protection. Through their calls for black police officers, average black Memphians reflected a definition of equal justice and equal protection that reinforced rather than challenged segregation. The central focus of the chapter is the campaign to hire black police officers. However, as seen in chapter one, throughout the city's history, blacks in Memphis advocated for their rights and a place in the city. Continuing this tradition, black Memphians fought against labor discrimination, racism, and the limits placed on their citizenship throughout the 1940s. Within this earlier activism the foundations for the campaign to hire black police officers were laid as black Memphians challenged traditional leadership, both black and white, and developed their own understandings of the World War II era rhetoric of freedom and democracy. But by 1948, as incidents of police brutality seemed to be increasing, the injustices of the judicial system against black citizens became a primary focal point of black action for change in Memphis. Black Memphians' efforts to push the city government to hire black police officers demonstrated the ways in which immediate local concerns impacted the variety of

strategies employed to create positive change in the lives of blacks within the confines of a segregated society.

Cities across the South addressed the question of whether or not to hire black police officers in the mid-1940s. With data collected beginning in 1943, the Southern Regional Council (SRC) published articles in its journal, *New South*, touting the success of black police officers across the region. The SRC, an interracial group geared toward improving southern race relations, hoped that these articles would encourage other southern cities to hire black officers. The central message in these articles was that black officers were successful in controlling growing black urban populations and maintaining the racial order by “decreas[ing] criminal activity among Negroes” and “contribut[ing] to maintaining reasonably good race relations.” According to the SRC, black officers helped to protect the status quo of the southern Jim Crow system of racial segregation.

Sixteen southern cities had black officers in 1943. In some cases this hiring of black officers to southern police forces meant only one token officer. These token officers often operated as a plain-clothes officer rather than with the authority of a full uniformed officer. However, over the course of a decade, cities across the South added divisions of black officers to their police forces. By 1954, 143 cities in 13 southern states employed at least one black officer. Between 1943 and 1954, the SRC kept track of the numbers and the duties of black officers in southern cities. A 1943 report argued that “Negro officers would greatly aid in the detection and prevention of crime since Negroes understand each other better” and that “Negro officers would be a substantial factor in reducing race frictions and improving race relations.” While the voices of the black

officers were absent from the journal's articles, statements by white officials outlined the success of having black officers on southern streets. Police chiefs across the South, from Newport News, Virginia, to San Antonio, Texas, reported, "colored police officers have been a great asset...crime in the districts to which they are assigned has dropped 25 percent.... They are loyal and efficient policemen and take pride in their work." The comments of police chiefs in the *New South* highlighted white officials and white officers' satisfaction with black police. Black officers, according to this interracial commission, would serve the dual purpose of reducing black crime and minimizing the interaction between residents of black neighborhoods and white police officers. Black police officers offered black citizens a way to separate themselves from the white police force.<sup>181</sup>

Drawing on the regional trend of hiring black police officers used in other southern cities, the Memphis campaign represented a push by average black Memphians to better their lives within the confines of segregation. Born out of the violence of police brutality followed by the lack of justice for blacks in the judicial system, black community calls for black police officers were intertwined with notions about power and

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<sup>181</sup> "Negro Police in A Southern City," *New South*, February 1955; "Negro Policemen are Needed in Southern Cities," *The Southern Frontier*, March 1943; "Negro Police Useful, Little Rock Reports," *Commercial Appeal*, August 31, 1948; "Louisville Took Lead in Hiring Negro Police For Limited Area," *Commercial Appeal*, August 28, 1948; and Margaret Price, "South Finding Negro Policemen Valuable, SRC Poll Shows," *New South*, October, 1947. The Commission on Interracial Cooperation was an interracial group begun in 1919 for the purpose of promoting good relations between the races in the South and gaining greater opportunities for blacks in America, such as education and jobs. The CIC was eventually absorbed into the Southern Regional Council in late 1943. Findings from the group's reports were frequently published in the Southern Regional Council's magazine, the *New South*. In Greensboro, North Carolina, for instance, the original two officers hired in 1944 operated as plainclothes officers for the first four months of their trial appointment. Eventually they became uniformed patrolmen and other black officers were added to the force;

citizenship. A close examination of these efforts offers insight into the ways in which black Memphians challenged the traditional system of racial accommodation without challenging racial segregation. Through the campaign for black officers, black newspaper editor L.O. Swinger along with other advocates for black police officers, including religious and civic organizations, articulated an expression of equality that reflected local circumstances and the immediate concerns of the city's black residents. The campaign for black police officers ultimately garnered what power blacks in Memphis did have in the vote and forced city leaders to respond to black demands for greater equality including the hiring of black police officers.

### **A Brief History of Black Activism in 1940s Memphis**

Although the 1940s began with the Crump machine suppressing oppositional black political voices, as war industry and the war rhetoric of freedom and democracy infiltrated the city, working-class blacks became more vocal in their protests against discrimination. These protests demonstrate a context of activism in the 1940s in which black protests of inequality were multi-faceted with a variety of aims. By 1948, one of these aims was black police officers. The "reign of terror" by Memphis police against black Republican leaders in 1940 set the precedent for the relationship between the city's black residents and white police officers throughout the decade. As a result of this intimidation, members of the city's black political and economic elite, such as Lt. George Washington Lee and Joseph E. Walker, fell in line with the Crump machine. Their interactions with the machine accommodated to Crump's vision of the city and the place

of blacks in that vision of the city's future.<sup>182</sup> But the experience of the war years created the space for blacks in Memphis to reimagine their place in the city. The rhetoric of a war for freedom and democracy called into question the white supremacist segregated social system in the South. As the 1940s progressed, black Memphians, working-class black Memphians specifically, increased their protests against job discrimination, racism, and the limits placed on their citizenship rights in order to protect their community and assert their right to a place in the city.

As war industry ramped up, so too did labor organizing and federal involvement in the labor market. In his study of labor organization in Memphis during the war period, Michael Honey argued that the importance of war industry to the city of Memphis changed the way in which city officials approached labor organizations. The city actively courted new industry for the economic prosperity it would bring to the city. Many of these industries prospered from federal contracts issued during the war. Whereas the Crump machine had previously used police harassment to squelch labor union organizing, federal support of labor unions in war industry factories forced Crump to change his attitude. As one labor organizer explained, "It might give Crump and the city administration pause in their ruthless fight on the CIO" if industry access to federal contracts was dependent on accepting labor organizing. Thus, Crump acquiesced to some

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<sup>182</sup> Laurie Green argues in her work *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), that the city of Memphis operated with a "plantation mentality," with political Boss E.H. Crump as the city's great paternalist. As discussed in depth in Chapter 2, Crump and other city leaders believed in segregation and white supremacy but also that the black community needed to be "taken care of," so to speak, in order to maintain positive race relations.

labor organizing in Memphis in order to take advantage of wartime prosperity for the city as a whole.<sup>183</sup>

Black workers in Memphis, and around the country, also began to believe in their right to take advantage of wartime prosperity to create a better life. Black workers readily organized into industrial unions, primarily unions operating under the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which worked to create biracial labor organizations. Black workers became essential to CIO organizing, especially in industries that employed primarily black workers. However, black efforts to organize often caused tension as white workers and management worked to maintain the racial hierarchy among the industrial labor force. For example, in 1941, black workers at the Nickey Brothers hardwood flooring plant attempted to organize under the CIO. Management tried to break the CIO's organizing hold on the plant's workers by supporting an American Federation of Labor (AFL) affiliated union. This support of the AFL, which operated on a model of racial labor segregation, was an attempt to create a wedge between plant workers based on race. Nickey Brothers' goal was to gain white loyalty by supporting a white union. However, because the majority of workers were black, the CIO union affiliate won by a large majority and was able to go on to bargain for better pay, vacations, and seniority rights for Nickey Brothers' employees. With the CIO and

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<sup>183</sup> For more on Crump's brutal tactics against labor organization, see Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 178.

federal policy on their side, black workers readily took to labor activism to increase their economic opportunities during the war.<sup>184</sup>

Black workers, particularly women, also protested their job opportunities during the war directly to the federal government. Throughout the war years, the segregated United States Employment Services (USES) offices steered black workers, especially women workers, towards service industry jobs. Black women in Memphis protested the limits placed on their employment directly to the federal government. They connected their desire for a war industry job with economic prosperity and their involvement in the war effort. In a letter to President Roosevelt, Mrs. Ella Rose Dotson asked for help in securing a factory job rather than a house-cleaning job. Cleaning houses only paid five dollars a week, a wage so meager, Dotson wrote, she could not afford to support the war effort by buying a defense bond. Another Memphis woman, Margaret Jackson, lamented that industry jobs were reserved for white women only, “I cannot understand why our men should fight for a country that starves their womenfolks.”<sup>185</sup> Dotson and Jackson, along with many other black women in Memphis, connected their attempts to gain economic opportunity with their responsibilities and rights as citizens, particularly their responsibility to participate in the war effort and the rights that participation should afford them. Black protest in Memphis during the war years focused on working-class efforts to take advantage of the greater economic opportunity brought by the war.

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<sup>184</sup> Honey, 179, 203.

<sup>185</sup> Green, 59-60. For more on labor activism during the World War II era, see Korstad; Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Andrew Edmund Kersten, *Labor's Home Front: The American Federation of Labor During World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

The rhetoric of a war for freedom and democracy also worked to change black attitudes about public racism and the degradation of blacks that the racial hierarchy perpetuated. During the war years, black Memphians became increasingly unwilling to stand for public forms of black degradation. Busses continued to be a venue for confrontation over discrimination. While many incidents on busses involved black soldiers protesting discrimination laws, civilians also protested overt discrimination on busses, often connecting their defiance to the rhetoric of democracy and citizenship. “This is a damned democracy you all been talking about,” a black Memphis man declared when he refused to give up his seat to a white passenger.<sup>186</sup> This man’s frustration stemmed from the hypocrisy of a country claiming to operate as a democracy with equal opportunity and treatment for all citizens. Yet, a black man could be forced from his seat on public transportation to make room for a white passenger. This expectation of public acquiescence to whites that led to degrading experiences such as being forced to give up a seat on the bus prompted protest among working-class black Memphians, those most effected by segregation on public transportation. But other members of their community supported these individual protesters. When a black teacher was arrested for refusing to give her seat to a white passenger, two thousand members of her church, along with the minister, protested to the mayor.<sup>187</sup>

Black business owners and black workers also protested public images of blacks they deemed degrading. In 1942, the White Rose Laundry Cleaners erected a mechanical

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<sup>186</sup> Quoted in Honey, 172.

<sup>187</sup> Honey, 203.

sign that caused uproar among black workers, especially among black women, who perceived the sign's depiction of a black laundress as disrespectful. The mechanical sign showed a black woman, dressed in what Memphis historian Wayne Dowdy describes as "traditional mammy garb," bending over a washtub. But as the woman bent forward, her undergarments were exposed. Although the white owners of the laundry saw humor in the sign, a letter written to the owners by the Negro Chamber of Commerce argued that, for black citizens, the sign "appears to be unwarranted derision directed to what might otherwise have been to them a symbol of the hundreds of thousands of poor Negro mothers."<sup>188</sup> Domestic work was the primary occupation of black women, with a history dating back to slavery and the forced domestic labor black women performed. Thus, this image was not only a lewd depiction of a black woman, but it also mocked the image of laboring black women and the memory of hundreds of years of black women's work.

The Chamber's petition also connected black women's labor with citizenship. Black women, "with a prayer in their humble hearts and a song on their lips, toiled long hours daily to help support their families, to educate their children – and to make them worthy and respectable citizens of a great country."<sup>189</sup> At a moment when black Americans were making efforts to prove themselves respectable citizens and thus deserving of equal citizenship rights, many saw the White Rose Laundry sign as an effort to strip black women and black women's labor of its respectability. The protests against

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<sup>188</sup> "Wayne Dowdy, "The White Rose Mammy: Racial Culture and Politics in World War II Memphis," *The Journal of Negro History* 85, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 310; and Memphis Negro Chamber of Commerce to White Rose Laundry Cleaners," October 5, 1942, Box 39, Folder "Negroes 1942," The Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler Papers, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

the White Rose Laundry sign were primarily a protest against public degradation of black citizens.

The White Rose controversy also demonstrated an increased willingness by the black workers to unite with black business owners and other segments of the black community to organize in protest of discrimination. The Memphis branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) saw an increase in membership during this period, tripling between 1939 and 1943. Membership then more than doubled in the war years, rising from 1,500 in 1943 to 3,600 by 1946. The LeMoyne College chapter of the NAACP became particularly active in the years following the war as students returned from service. In 1946, the student chapter was involved in the successful campaign for the removal of Memphis Street Railway Company rail-coach operators accused of mistreating black riders. The chapter also put a great deal of energy into investigating possible cases of discrimination around the city, from taxi fares to service in local stores, working to ensure “that treatment of Negro customers be as for all other customers” in downtown businesses.<sup>190</sup>

Calls for greater participation and action were made by many of the groups operating in Memphis during the war years. According to the NAACP chapter at LeMoyne, “Today as never before, the world is in desperate need of capable leadership. Especially is this true of minority groups who must develop an awareness of changing

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<sup>190</sup> Green, 98; and "The College Chapter of the NAACP," *The Beacon* November 27, 1947, LeMoyne-Owen College Archive, Hollis T. Price Library, LeMoyne Owen College, Memphis, Tennessee. *The Beacon* was a publication of the LeMoyne College NAACP chapter. LeMoyne College has subsequently become LeMoyne-Owen College.

conditions as well as develop leaders to cope with these changes. As an American youth who must soon assume responsibility for leadership, you must begin now to plan your part in building a new world order.” These young Memphians were adopting the language of the expectation of opportunity and advancement in postwar America. They believed that their place in their city and the nation would be determined by the action taken by a new generation of strong leadership. Thus, part of the chapter’s plan for the upcoming year was to begin to organize youth chapters in all the local high schools in order to foster this attitude of action in the next generation.<sup>191</sup>

Implicit in the college chapter’s statement about new leadership was a critique of the traditional black leaders and the tradition of racial accommodation in the city. Less than a year since the black elite’s leadership was called into question after two young black women were raped, these students were also marking the need for a change in leadership. Black students were declaring their desire to be a part of a new generation of leaders who would offer new strategies to deal with changing circumstances. The students criticized “a religious leader in Memphis who thinks this is the ‘most wonderful city he has ever seen.’ Is the man blind or is he just oozing ‘soft-soap,’” trying to whitewash the reality of discrimination in the city. In the spring of 1946, a column in the student newspaper, *The LeMoyne Democrat*, declared it was “time for spring-cleaning.... Not only get rid of dead, dried branches from hedges, but dead dried ideas. Not only turn up the new earth for planting flowers, but turn up new ideas that will help others as well

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

as yourself.” The students called for black citizens, and their fellow students specifically, to take responsibility for bettering their lives.

Throughout the late 1940s, the college newspaper called for new ideas and new kinds of action against discrimination in the city and the country. Articles encouraging NAACP membership and veteran involvement with the city’s American Veterans Committee (AVC) chapter, alongside articles such as “Let’s Have Initiative,” “Less Talk-Act!,” and “NAACP Take Note,” demonstrated a growing activist spirit among the city’s younger generation of educated blacks, who were demonstrating a willingness to push back against traditional race relations in the city. As the students noted, “We can use all the get up and go we can muster in order to raise the stand of our present situations.”<sup>192</sup>

This call for a more determined leadership can also be seen on the Memphis labor front. Although labor leader A. Phillip Randolph’s initial 1943 speech had been canceled following the Crump machine’s intimidation of black leaders, Randolph returned to Memphis in the spring of 1944. In his speech, the labor leader railed against the Crump machine and black leaders’ accommodation to that machine. The *Memphis World* reported that Randolph “point[ed] to the establishment of schools and playground by the city for Negro citizens [as] no proper justification for denying them or anybody else freedom of speech....Negroes do not want to be well-kept slaves. Like white people they want to be free.” Randolph criticized the paternalistic attitude of white officials and the

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<sup>192</sup> The following appear in *The Democrat: LeMoyne College [LeMoyne Democrat?]*, LeMoyne-Owen College Archive: “There Are Things We Can Do,” April 5, 1946; “Something Worth Thinking About,” April 5, 1946; “Let’s Have Initiative,” March 1, 1946; “Less Talk-Act!,” December 6, 1946; and “NAACP Take Note,” December 13, 1946.

black leaders who used this attitude to their advantage but did not do enough to improve the condition of black life in Memphis. The labor leader also drew on the ideology of the war and the changes it would bring to demand that workers and leaders take responsibility for their own prosperity.<sup>193</sup> The war offered an opportunity, as the federal government's support of civil rights, as seen through their support of labor rights, opened up space for blacks to advocate for change.

The fact that over one thousand black and white Memphians came to hear Randolph speak demonstrated an increased willingness to participate in a dialogue about change among varying elements of Memphis's community, black and white. Throughout the war, labor leaders, especially in the CIO, made gains towards biracial labor coalitions. A small but integrated AVC chapter appeared in Memphis in the 1940s. The Memphis Community Relations Committee was formed in the fall of 1947 by a group of students and faculty from LeMoyne College and Southwestern (now Rhodes College). This biracial organization held integrated public meetings featuring scholarly lectures on issues of human rights locally and globally. While these groups ranged from working-class labor organizations to intellectual societies, their biracial make-up and bent towards questioning social norms and city leadership in the city demonstrated an increasingly active population of Memphians looking for change. The action by students, the development of the AVC chapter, and the work of labor leaders to organize black workers demonstrated that black Memphians from varying segments of the black

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<sup>193</sup> "Randolph Scores Attitude of Memphis Labor Leaders," *Memphis World*, April 1, 1944.

community were involved in organizations and activities to advance opportunities for black citizens in Memphis.<sup>194</sup>

As black men returned home to the South, and Memphis specifically, they expected that their sacrifices abroad in the name of freedom would justify greater freedoms at home. Thirty thousand veterans, black and white, returned to Memphis to face housing and job shortages. In 1946, two hundred barrack-type housing units were dismantled in Florida and brought to the city. Over thirty-nine thousand black and white veterans applied. Jobs too were limited. The USES office reported in February of 1946 that it had ten times more applications than it had jobs available. Blacks and women were laid off by the thousands as part of the “last hired, first fired” mentality. But the war, as Michael Honey argues, had profoundly altered the southern economy by bringing more workers and industry to the urban South. And with this economic change came the prospect of social change. Black and white veterans returned home with less tolerance for the undemocratic regimes that ruled southern politics and expected to take advantage of a better standard of living than they had experienced before the war.<sup>195</sup>

For example, returning veterans to Athens, Tennessee, overturned one of Crump’s “satellite” governments in a six-hour gun battle with local political leaders. Armed veterans nearly lynched the sheriff and his deputies for beating a white veteran and shooting a black voter. Athens was just one example of pro-democracy revolts in the

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<sup>194</sup>“Community Relations Group Improves Race Relations,” *Memphis World*, June 8, 1984; and “Interracial Meeting to be held,” *The Democrat: LeMoyne College [what is the actual name of the paper?]*, April, 1948. For more on these labor coalitions, see Honey, chapter 4.

<sup>195</sup> Sigafos, 214; and Honey, 221.

South during the 1946 elections. This kind of veteran militancy seemed to indicate the seeds of change in the South, as a new generation of veterans worked to overthrow the old political leaders and their rigid adherence to a democracy defined by color.

After the war ended, black Memphians continued to draw on the democratic rhetoric of the war and the expectations of citizenship rights for blacks in postwar America. The most prominent example of blacks protesting the limits placed on their rights as citizens occurred in the fall of 1947 when the American Heritage Foundation (AHF) announced the Freedom Train tour. While the AHF-sponsored Freedom Train tour carried with it national implications about the nature of American democracy, the fight against communism, and the state of postwar America, in Memphis the controversy over the Freedom Train became representative of the limits white city leaders imposed on black citizenship rights.

City officials refused to abide by the AHF's policy of desegregated viewing. As a result, the train bypassed Memphis on its journey south. As mentioned previously, Mayor James Pleasants argued that desegregated viewing would cause racial tension that would lead to racial violence. He continued to argue that it was Memphis's strict adherence to segregation laws that had kept the city from experiencing any racial trouble in the recent past. For Memphis officials, the Freedom Train represented a challenge to the city's social and political system, not a celebration of America's founding principles.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Mayor James Pleasants Jr., Typescript of Radio Address, November 23, 1947, Box 13, Folder: "Freedom Train," James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers..

When Mayor Pleasants voiced his decision not to allow the Freedom Train in Memphis because the desegregated viewing would cause racial unrest in the city, there was uproar among the city's black citizens, particularly student and veteran groups. The city's chapter of the AVC questioned the mayor's logic behind barring the train from visiting Memphis. Particularly they called into question his assertions about racial harmony in Memphis: "The mayor assures us there is less race trouble here than in any other American city. Why then should he feel that this particular train — guarded by an able contingent of American Marines — would bring violence and bloodshed to Memphis?" Black Memphians criticized the mayor's insistence on making the issue of the Freedom Train a racial issue. "We regret to see a public official attempt to exploit personal, political, and racial animosity for the obvious purpose of clouding a clear issue." For the AVC, the issue of the Freedom Train was an issue of the freedom and the right to celebrate American democracy. Viewing the founding documents was seen as a way to act out those rights, especially in the wake of World War II in which Americans had fought for the cause of democracy. The AVC along with black students criticized city officials for bringing race to the forefront of the debate and using the threat of racial tension to justify denying black citizens the freedom to see the country's founding documents.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Richard Wallace, "'Mayor Is Clouding The Freedom Train Issue,' Says AVC" *Press-Scimitar*, November 24, 1947. In a series of articles in the *Press-Scimitar* between November 20 and November 24, 1947, Memphis groups such as the American Veterans Committee and the Junior Chamber of Commerce and community ministers criticized the actions of the city leaders and continued to call for having the Freedom Train stop in Memphis.

Critics of the city's decision lambasted officials for their adherence to this white supremacist state of mind, criticizing their hardline stance on maintaining segregation as counter to the principles of the freedom and democracy the Freedom Train hoped to foster. In their petition advocating for the Freedom Train, the AVC linked the right to see the Freedom Train with the war effort, saying the city's decision to let the Freedom Train bypass Memphis was "a callous denial of a privilege to which thousands are entitled by virtue of their wartime sacrifices at home and abroad." One Memphis citizen writing in the *Press-Scimitar* likened viewing the Freedom Train to a "civic exercise" in the same vein as "voting and paying taxes." For this reader, the act of visiting the Freedom Train was similar to the other ways in which people acted out their citizenship. Denying a visit from the Freedom Train was a denial of the right of Memphians, black and white, to demonstrate their American citizenship. The AME Ministers Council went so far as to call Mayor James Pleasants and his decision "un-American."<sup>198</sup>

Refusing to miss the opportunity to see the Freedom Train, students and faculty from LeMoyne College traveled to Jackson, Tennessee, to view the train. In an article for the *LeMoyne Democrat*, titled "A Glance at Freedom," one student visitor described the documents as "soul-stirring" and "dramatic." For another student, viewing the documents of the Freedom Train "served to stir a greater awareness of the advantages we enjoy as Americans and to incite greater future participation." For him, this was an

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<sup>198</sup> "Mayor Clouding the Freedom Train Issue' Says AVC" *Press-Scimitar*, November 24, 1947; "Veterans will Circulate Petition for Train," *Press-Scimitar*, November 21, 1947; "Memphians Have Right To See Freedom Train," *Press-Scimitar*, November 19, 1947; and "Cancellation of Freedom Train Trip to City Scored by AME Ministers' Council," *Memphis World*, December 12, 1947.

experience “that every loyal American regardless of race, creed or color, should be proud to enjoy.” The Freedom Train and its clear connection to the rights and privileges of American citizenship became a readily identifiable symbol to many black Memphians of the limitations placed on their rights because of the city’s strict adherence to racial segregation. As an editorial about the Freedom Train’s bypass of Memphis in the *Tupelo Mississippi Journal* argued, city leaders were not afraid of racial mixing but of what the Freedom Train would inspire in the city’s citizens: “somebody might get the idea that American Freedom should also apply to Memphis and Shelby County.” The Freedom Train incident put in stark light the absence of citizenship rights for Memphis blacks.<sup>199</sup>

This fear of disrupting the white supremacist segregated social and political system in Memphis was implicit in official responses to the growing activism of the latter half of the 1940s. Many of the city’s arguments in response to black activism against discrimination blamed the protests on the ubiquitous “outsiders” causing trouble in a city that otherwise, white leaders claimed, had peaceful race relations. In response to the AME Ministers’ Council petition calling for desegregated viewing of the Freedom Train, Mayor James Pleasants accused the ministers of being pawns of “some low-down white man or some imported negro.”<sup>200</sup> Pleasants was negating the ministers’ ability to develop their own opinions about citizenship rights. Pleasants’ reference to “some imported negro” echoed the sentiments verbalized by police officers in their encounters with black

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<sup>199</sup> Quoted in Green, 130; F.D. “A Glance At Freedom,” *The Democrat: LeMoyne College*, January 1948; and *Tupelo Journal* editorial reprinted in “Memphis Officials Fear Freedom Train will Inspire Citizens,” *Press-Scimitar*, November 20, 1947.

<sup>200</sup> Quoted in Green, 127.

citizens, both of which shifted the blame for any opposition to the city's governance and social order onto outsiders. This denial of dissent from within Memphis's own black citizenry worked to reinforce Crump and his officials' view of a docile and content black population.

As historian Wayne Dowdy argued in his study of the White Rose Laundry controversy, just as protests demonstrated a willingness to push against the city's racial order, they also revealed that there were limits to black power to enact change. Even while protesting, blacks struggled to break from Memphis's long history of black deference and accommodation to Crump and city officials under his control. Even as the Negro Chamber of Commerce asked the machine to help them do away with the offensive White Rose Laundry sign, they did so using the language of deference, "respectfully ask[ing]" rather than demanding the sign be brought down. The exile of Robert R. Church, Jr. and his fellow Republican leaders in 1940, for their efforts to campaign against the Crump machine, was still fresh in the minds of black leaders and reminded them of the limits on independent black political thought.<sup>201</sup>

The episode with Church, Jr. was not the only time during the 1940s that Crump moved to silence a black leader he viewed as too radical. After the death of Lucien J. Searcy in 1943, the new executive secretary of the Memphis Urban League (MUL), the young activist Benjamin Bell turned the organization in a more radical direction. Searcy had believed in working with white leaders to achieve the League's goals, adding white

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<sup>201</sup> Wayne Dowdy, "The White Rose Mammy: Racial Culture and Politics in World War II Memphis:" 308-314.

Members to the Board of Directors in 1940. Searcy took a conservative approach to the League's activities, especially when racial issues were involved. He wanted to keep "local Negro problems from becoming quagmires in which our social gains might become bogged down." Searcy was unwilling to challenge the racial status quo; rather, he made efforts to work within the system to create change, even though those changes would necessarily be limited. Bell, on the other hand, envisioned a more activist organization.<sup>202</sup>

Benjamin Bell was a Chicago native who, after receiving his masters in social work from Atlanta University, moved south to work on Gunnar Myrdal's study and became involved in labor and social work projects in Missouri, Virginia, and Texas. And when he arrived in Memphis, Bell quickly became involved in the MUL's labor activities. Bell's focus on labor relations caused the MUL's executive directors, white and black, to worry that his work would exacerbate racial tensions. Coinciding with the controversy over A. Phillip Randolph's speech in Memphis, the *Chicago Defender* published two articles written by Bell criticizing Memphis's black leadership for being afraid of the Crump machine and thus unresponsive to the real troubles of Memphis's black workers.<sup>203</sup>

By early 1944, Bell's criticism of the black elite and their relationship to Crump caused him to lose the support of the MUL's executive board. A *Chicago Defender*

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<sup>202</sup> Gloria Brown-Melton, "Blacks in Memphis, 1920-1955: A Historical Study," (Ph.D. diss., Washington State University, 1982), 215.

<sup>203</sup> Brown-Melton, 216; and Benjamin F. Bell Jr., "Dixie Ways Rule Memphis; Skilled Jobs for White Only," *Chicago Defender*, January 22, 1944.

article claimed that Crump had threatened to cut off funding for the League if Bell remained as executive secretary. Thus, Crump was able to oust the radical leader. In a NUL report on the problems in Memphis, Bell was described as “a man of considerable courage, but appears to be lacking in the experience, tact, patience, and administrative ability essential...for meeting the complex problems that Memphis presents.” According to Hollis Price, Bell lacked “knowledge of the Southern situation,” essentially admonishing Bell for acting too aggressively against the system of accommodation and deference to the Crump machine and strict racial segregation.<sup>204</sup>

The more conservative Reverend James A. McDaniel replaced Bell that year. McDaniel was Pastor of the Bethel Presbyterian Church and a member of the Negro Chamber of Commerce. McDaniel took a more conservative approach to the MUL’s activities, in particular helping the black USES office advertise domestic labor jobs for blacks. McDaniel emphasized the need for black workers to have jobs rather than fighting for better paying war industry jobs for black workers. “No one can afford to dissipate his or her energies in idleness,” McDaniel wrote, reinforcing the importance of black employment over securing better opportunities for black workers. The replacement of the more activist Bell as the MUL executive secretary with the more conservative Reverend James McDaniel emphasized what Memphis historian Gloria Brown-Melton described as “the recalcitrance of white leaders when labor and minority groups threatened to disrupt the community tranquility.” As NUL secretary Isobel Chisholm

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<sup>204</sup> “Crump Wrath May Oust Urban League Leader in Memphis,” *Chicago Defender*, January 29, 1944; and “Report on Memphis,” November 1943, Part I, Box I, Folder A106, National Urban League Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

noted after a field visit in the spring of 1948, “It is doubtful that a more dynamic and more energetic or progressive Executive could survive in this politically dominated, strictly segregated community.” McDaniel was “conscientious” of the situation in Memphis and although often criticized by the NUL for being weak, “carrie[d] on a program in line with the basic survival of its operations” within Memphis.<sup>205</sup>

The critiques of black leadership continued, resurfacing during the Freedom Train controversy. In his address to the public about the city’s decision to let the Freedom Train by-pass Memphis, Mayor Pleasants informed black Memphians in particular that “every thinking negro agrees with our position.” This phrase “thinking negro” became a magnet for criticism. An editorial in the *Memphis World* challenged the “thinking” black who would give in to pressure from the machine, arguing that he would “find himself as far out of line with the more advanced thinking of the people on racial matters” as those in city government. Whereas the city argued that the thoughtful among black citizens saw the value of the city’s position, the *Memphis World* editorial argued that these black leaders were not thinking for the rest of black Memphians but rather deferring their thinking to the machine. By the end of 1947, the *Memphis World* was setting itself up as a mouthpiece for opposition to the old guard of leadership and the system of black accommodation to the Crump machine.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>205</sup>“Good Domestic Jobs Are Now Available,” *Memphis World*, June 15, 1945; Brown-Melton, 218; and Memorandum, April 7, 1948, Part I, Box VI, Folder A97, National Urban League Papers; and “Letter, Lester Granger to Nelson Jackson, February 25, 1948, Part I, Box I, Folder A73, National Urban League Papers.

<sup>206</sup> Mayor James Pleasants Jr., Typescript of Radio Address, November 23, 1947, Box 13, Folder: “Freedom Train,” James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers; and “‘Checkin’ on the Freedom Train,” *Memphis World*, November 25, 1947.

The silencing of activist black political voices by the Crump machine limited black activism in Memphis in the 1940s. However, it did not silence calls from within the black citizenry demanding the city acknowledge their rights as citizens. Throughout the 1940s, as the fervor of wartime activism developed in Memphis, Memphis blacks pushed for greater acknowledgement of their right to a place in the city. But while these were moves to create greater equality, rarely were they moves to disrupt the social order through integration. Although the Freedom Train controversy was centered on desegregated viewing of the exhibit, this desegregation was to be limited to a single day at a single venue. Other instances, such as the struggles over jobs and the White Rose Laundry sign, were primarily concerned with the lack of equal opportunity and respect for black workers. Even the Freedom Train was at its roots about citizenship rights more so than desegregation. However, even these limited challenges to the racial status quo were seen as a threat to the Crump machine and his vision for Memphis.

Crump's iron-fisted control over city governance and the fear of black leaders that led to a culture of accommodation limited the ability of activist voices to create a larger movement for change. But black Memphians were becoming exacerbated with the limits placed on their rights, and they did wield some political power in the form of voting. In the years after the war, as blacks in Memphis were continually denied the promises of greater rights and greater opportunity that many expected in the aftermath of war, they became increasingly willing to search for ways to enact change to bring about greater equality within the segregated system. The black action against discrimination and limitations placed on their efforts at labor organization and their citizenship rights met

with both successes and failures depending on the extent to which they challenged the system of racial segregation. It was within this context of activism for acknowledgement of black rights that black community calls for black police officers gained momentum.

### **The Campaign for Black Police Officers**

This frustration over limits on black rights came to a head in the summer of 1948. The combination of two years of increasingly publicized instances of white police brutality against blacks and the failure of the justice system to bring black citizens justice in these cases created a feeling of dissatisfaction among black Memphians. Black Memphians, particularly working-class blacks who represented those most affected by the strictures of the southern racial hierarchy, were fed up with a system that continued to devalue black life. As other cities across the South touted the success of using black officers to patrol black neighborhoods, others active among the city's black population, including students, veterans, and civic and religious groups, joined *Memphis World* editor L.O. Swingler's two-year-old campaign for black police officers. Memphis blacks saw black police officers as a way to increase protection of black neighborhoods and create a more equal justice system. The push for black police officers in the city's black neighborhoods became a symbol of black power to create positive change within segregation. Having black police officers was seen as a manifestation of an expression of black equality rooted in the World War II rhetoric of freedom and democracy.

Calls for the city to employ black police officers emerged in the aftermath of the 1945 rape of the two young black women. The incident evoked feelings of physical and social vulnerability among Memphis's black working-class residents. Two weeks after

the attack on the young women, the *Press-Scimitar* ran an expose that demanded the arrest and prosecution of the police officers and the hiring of black police officers. The *Press-Scimitar* admonished white Memphians and black leaders for their lack of action towards justice after having two weeks “to quiver, shake heads, bemoan, deplore, wax indignant, express disgust and otherwise castigate” the white supremacist racial justice system that allowed the heinous crime not only to happen but to go unpunished. As the article implied, neither the city’s white officials, white police officers, nor black leaders were working to protect the black citizens. Thus, it was up to these black residents to demand protection.<sup>207</sup>

The need for black Memphians to take control of demanding protection of their physical bodies and citizenship rights continued. The failures of the city’s justice system to protect black citizens continued. In August 1947, Frederick Jackson lost the final appeal to commute his death sentence. Fred Jackson was a mentally handicapped seventeen-year-old black boy from Memphis accused of raping and murdering a white woman and her children. Jackson was convicted and sentenced to death by electrocution. Although a psychiatric examination of Jackson determined he had only the mental capacity of an eight-year-old, the governor refused to commute his sentence. The Jackson case reinforced in the minds of black Memphians that the justice system was stacked against them. In an outline of the existing system of justice, a black LeMoyne College student wrote, “Jail – For black by white...Defense – White against black for supremacy...Verdict – white for white.” This evaluation of the system of justice in

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<sup>207</sup> *Press-Scimitar* article reprinted in “We Must Act on This!” *Memphis World*, August 14, 1945.

Memphis emphasized the understanding among blacks that the justice system worked for whites against blacks. After he was executed, thousands of black Memphians visited the funeral home to “view Jackson’s body and show their dismay.” In the same month, Adelaide Hudson was beaten in the yard in front of her home and another young Binghampton resident, Cornell Thorton, was shot in the back and killed by police.<sup>208</sup>

By the end of 1947, the actions of police and other city officials had made it clear that black life was of little value to officials or the traditional black leadership. Instances of police brutality, the Freedom Train controversy, the continued denial of full citizenship rights, and black leaders failure to negotiate for justice or advancement led many black Memphians to begin looking for their own ways to make a change. The idea for that change was drawn from the trend among other southern cities in the mid-to-late 1940s to hire black police officers.

While the immediate circumstances for hiring black police officers varied from city-to-city, in Memphis when black calls for black police officers reached their height in the summer of 1948, it was the result of the continued lack of justice for black Memphians and the inability of the current system of accommodation to protect the black citizens from police brutality.<sup>209</sup> The series of instances of police brutality in 1947 and

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<sup>208</sup> “Final Fred Jackson Appeal Rejected,” *Press-Scimitar*, August 6, 1947; “An American Patter of Freedom and Justice in Black and White,” *The Democrat: Lemoyne College*, May 30, 1947; Green, 104; and “Binghampton Youth Killed by Officer,” *Memphis World*, August 5, 1947.

<sup>209</sup> In Greensboro in 1944, black police officers were hired as the result of an increase in black registered voters combined with the city manager, Henry Yancey, being an advocate of the plan after he had overseen the hiring black police officers in Durham, North Carolina. In Charleston in 1950, the hiring of black police officers was the result of a multi-year effort by an interracial group operating within the city, the mayor, and other community groups to convince the city council of the value of black police officers. It was not until evidence of the success of black officers in other southern cities was presented that the city

1948 had escalated racial tension in that city and spurred black protest that resulted in political action. As the August primary election approached, this memory of injustice combined with a growing demand for full black citizenship rights resulted in broad support for black police officers to patrol black neighborhoods. During the campaign, black police officers were seen as the physical representation of black equality, citizenship, and black citizens ability to protect their own communities.

“The Beale Street memory is pretty long,” Memphis educator and syndicated columnist Nat D. Williams commented early in 1948. Editorials, petitions, and other public statements appealing for greater justice in Memphis made frequent references to the rape case in 1945; the Columbia, Tennessee, race riot; and the names Frederick Jackson and Adelaide Hudson. As Swingler made his appeals for equal justice, he reminded officials and the larger Memphis community that this “is not a single isolated instance which has involved miss-treatment of citizens and violation of their Civil rights.” Swingler, Williams, and other black supporters drew on historical memory of a past filled with injustice.<sup>210</sup>

The case of Eli Blaine became a prime example of the inability of white police to treat black Memphians as equal citizens. The beating of Blaine by two police officers in the police station “serve[d] to strengthen the conviction that Negroes will not receive fair-

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council agreed. See Harold Fleming, “How Negro Police Worked Out In One Southern City,” *New South*, October, 1974; and John A. Harris, “How Charleston Got Negro Policemen,” *New South*, September-October 1950.

<sup>210</sup> Nat D. Williams “Down on Beale Ave,” *Memphis World*, January 9, 1948; and “Another Argument for Negro Policemen,” *Memphis World*, June 1, 1948. See also petitions from the local NAACP and the MIUC in the James J. Pleasants Papers, Memphis and Shelby Country Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee.

play and justice when they are left solely in the hands of white officers.” Blaine had gone to the station to confront the officers who had searched his home earlier in the evening about money gone missing. But, as one editorial put it, “Blaine had forgotten the color of his skin when he sought justice of white police officers.” The fact that the white daily, the *Commercial Appeal*, referred to Blaine, who had gone to the station on his own volition, as “the negro prisoner” further degraded Blaine and his position as a citizen seeking justice and reinforced the system of racial injustice black Memphians experienced when interacting with police.<sup>211</sup>

For whites, placing Blaine in the category of prisoner reinforced the notion of black criminality and offered justification for the force used against him by police. In a statement to the *Memphis World*, MUL executive secretary Reverend James McDaniel argued that this continued case of police brutality was “evidence that white officers alone are inadequate to cope with the problems of law enforcement where Negroes are concerned justly.” For McDaniel, the issue was one of police training, a systemic problem within law enforcement and thus in need of a systemic change. The Memphis Industrial Union Council (MIUC), a CIO affiliate in Memphis, asserted their disapproval of the Memphis Police Department in a letter to the Mayor in early September, “Our policemen apparently are ‘too quick on the trigger.’” The council was “concerned over what does appear to be irresponsibility on the part of certain police officers.” The MIUC framed the issue of police violence not in terms of race, but rather in terms of “risking the

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<sup>211</sup> L. O. Swingler, "The Tragic Case of Eli Blaine," *Memphis World*, July 6, 1948; and “Gerber Will Demand New Mayhem Trials For Two Policemen,” *Commercial Appeal*, July 2, 1948.

lives of Memphians” more broadly. Although they did not frame their condemnation of the police department in racial terms, the MIUC still saw the system of policing in Memphis as an issue that needed to be addressed.<sup>212</sup>

Swingler also articulated this understanding of the problem as systemic. For Swingler, there was a culture among police officers that encouraged the brutal treatment in police interactions with the black citizens. According to Swingler, “These rookie officers are out to make a reputation and they think the way to do so is to start using blackjacks on the heads of Negroes.” Further, the white officer “believes he is upholding white supremacy...feels that he is elevating his own social position...by maltreating and ‘showing out’ with the killing of some Negro.”<sup>213</sup> The lack of justice for the black community, primarily where police officers were concerned, was rooted in a system of white supremacy upheld by violence.

The systemic problems of racial prejudice and injustice that blacks faced extended beyond black encounters with police. The link between black and criminal was an image perpetuated by other white officials as well. In June of 1948, the city held a children’s day in which white children “managed” the city, acting as mayor, commissioners, judges, etc. The day was designed to give children a glimpse at the job of city leadership. Memphis’s black children were excluded from children’s day, except to play the role of

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<sup>212</sup> Memphis Industrial Union Council to Mayor James Pleasants, September 2, 1948, Box 23, Folder 8 “Police Department,” James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers.

<sup>213</sup> “Local Minister Urges Negro Police For Memphis As Curb On Unfair Treatment, Bias,” *Memphis World*, July 13, 1948; L.O. Swingler, “Police Brutality,” *Memphis World*, July 9, 1948; and L. O. Swingler, “It’s Becoming Trite.”

criminal in the mock courtroom.<sup>214</sup> This relegation of black children to the role of criminal when they were excluded from all other positions reinforced the image of blacks as criminals in another generation of white Memphians.

The example of the children's day role-playing demonstrated that the system of justice had been built on the premise of white superiority and black inherent criminality and was thus inherently unequal. The same prejudice that festered in white police officers was present in the court system as well. "It has become apparent that the courts under the present jury system are not adequate to cope with the situation" of prosecuting white police officers for brutality against blacks, Swingler argued. While waiting for the results of the prosecution of the two officers who brutality beat Eli Blaine, the *Memphis World* editor wondered "whether the trial will result in another fiasco and horrible miscarriage of justice such as resulted when two other officers were tried for misusing two Negro girls." Swingler both reminded readers of the brutal treatment of black citizens by the Memphis police and of the failures to bring justice for the victims.<sup>215</sup>

Just as in the 1945 case when both officers were acquitted of violating the two young women, the court system left the officers in the Blaine case essentially unpunished, only imposing a minor fine of \$51 on the officer who hit Blaine in the station. Adelaide Hudson was fined \$102 for resisting arrest and disorderly conduct after police beat her. A woman beaten so badly by police in June of 1948 that she fell into a comma for a week was fined \$78 for resisting arrest. The byline, "Beaten By Police –

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<sup>214</sup> Nat D. Williams "Down on Beale Ave," *Memphis World*, June 22, 1948.

<sup>215</sup> L. O. Swingler, "It's Becoming Trite"; and "Another Argument for Negro Policemen."

Then Fined,” summed up the frustration many blacks felt towards the imbalance of the justice system in Memphis. Another article in the *Memphis World* pointed out this disparity in fining white officers versus black defendants, noting that the fine given to the woman was higher than the one given to the officer who struck Eli Blaine.<sup>216</sup>

As the campaign for black police officers gained momentum, the developing activist voices within the black community drew not only on their memories of a history of injustice but also reacted to their frustration with black leaders associated with the Crump machine and the system of political accommodation those traditional leaders relied on when dealing with city politics. Swingler had criticized these leaders during the rape case of 1945. During the Freedom Train controversy, students called for the younger generation to stand as an alternative to traditional leadership. Memphis historian Laurie Green argues that the students at LeMoyne worked to distinguish themselves from the established leaders. Articles in the LeMoyne College student newspaper, *The LeMoyne Democrat*, encouraged students to be a part of the “‘intelligentsia’ and to challenge ‘prejudice and bigotry with sound, common sense and logic’ rather than cooperating with the machine’s racial paternalism.” Students were trying to forge a more independent type of leadership and activism. They imagined a black leadership that did

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<sup>216</sup> “Gerber Will Demand New Mayhem Trials For Two Policemen”; “Two Patrolmen Sued,” *Commercial Appeal* August 22, 1947; “Woman Victim of Police Beating Still Confined to Hospital with Charges,” *Memphis World*, June 29, 1948; and “Woman, Attacked by Police, Fined \$78 in City Court,” *Memphis World*, July 9, 1948.

not exclude working with whites, but that did not accommodate at the expense of black rights.<sup>217</sup>

Residents of black working-class neighborhoods who experienced the majority of police harassment were also becoming increasingly frustrated with and resentful of traditional elite leaders. At a meeting in the Binghampton neighborhood in April 1948, one black minister was inflamed by the news of a mass meeting to be held at the Masonic Temple in which a section for white supporters would be reserved. “Can you imagine forming a mass meeting in our Negro Church and reserving a special section for whites when they will lynch our brothers and fathers and rape our sisters and mothers.” What angered the minister was the continued accommodation to supposed white supporters, who were guilty at the very least of a failure to punish the continued crimes against blacks. According to one speaker, “That’s what our ‘Big Shots’ will do for you, Our paid City Snitches – Our Crump Men – They will gamble on your life and mine to be a ‘Big Shot.’” Connection to the Crump machine and accommodation to the white supremacist system were of more importance to black leaders than the lives of average black citizens, according to the speaker. Held in the working-class neighborhood of Binghampton, this meeting and its speakers objected directly to the failures of black leaders to protect working-class black Memphians and the need for unity and to “vote this lynching and

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<sup>217</sup> Quoted in Green, 132. LeMoyné faculty and students worked with white faculty and students at Southwestern (now Rhodes) to form the Memphis Community Relations Committee and create an open forum for the discussion of human relations. See Green, 135.

raping set out.” In a clear reference to the 1945 rape case, the speaker calls on the attendees to take control of creating change in their community.<sup>218</sup>

In the lead-up to the August 1948 primary elections, one editorial warned black Memphians to be wary of campaign promises, especially from traditional city and black leaders. The author declared, “Negro leaders have settled for parks and pleasure spots while the Negro in coveralls, with one eye, fumbled to eke out a livelihood.” In referencing Eli Blaine the editorial emphasized the argument that working-class blacks suffered while the economic and political black elite had used their position to garner favors that did little to create opportunity for a better life for the mass of black Memphians. “Injustice, brutality, and exploitation have become an issue.... Minorities feel they have been betrayed” by traditional black leaders.<sup>219</sup>

The AME Ministers’ Council came out in support of Swingler and the campaign to hire black police officers in late July 1948. Ministers rejected the actions of “certain so-called leaders” who had approved token concessions while the rest of the city “had been repeatedly shocked by the unbridled brutality of the police upon the colored citizenry of the city.” The Ministers’ Council cited police brutality directly as their motivation for supporting the campaign for black police officers. The ministers believed that “all the citizens be given the protection that is due them regardless of color or nationality” and noted that the recent cases of police brutality were both “anti-Christian”

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<sup>218</sup> Handwritten note dated April 11, 1948, Box 255, Folder 7: “Negro File 1948,” E.H. Crump Collection, Memphis Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee.

<sup>219</sup> “Beware of Campaign Promises,” *Memphis World*, July 20, 1948; and B. Dewitt, “World War Vet Speaks Out For Negro Policemen Here,” *Memphis World*, August 3, 1948.

and “anti-democratic.” The ministers connected police brutality and the hiring of black police officers directly to community protection and black citizenship rights.<sup>220</sup>

The support of the AME ministers made apparent the lack of support from Baptist ministers. The Baptist Ministers Alliance, representing the “rank and file” of the majority of black churchgoers, was “strangely silent.” An article in the *Memphis World* commented that this “rank and file” wondered, “how their leaders can remain so quiet to the ‘Stormy Present.’” The article also connected the push for greater justice with citizenship rights and further criticized the Baptist leadership for not showing its support: “No citizen can afford not to stand up and be counted during these times... certainly not our leaders. We hope that the Baptist ministers and our leaders in all other circles will live up to what they confess to be.”<sup>221</sup> As they were criticizing black leaders, members of the black ministry called on their fellow religious leaders to step forward and lead black Memphians in social and political change.

In the midst of growing resentment against traditional Memphis leaders, more blacks began to look to Swingler as the voice of change for black Memphians. “He has been consistent, persistent and determined” in working to create change for blacks in Memphis, particularly in finding an alternative solution to the old problem of injustice. Working-class black Memphians had been lamenting the lack of black leadership, a

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<sup>220</sup> “Negro Policemen Are Requested,” news clip dated July 1948, Box 255, Folder 7: “Negro File 1948,” E.H. Crump Collection; and “AME Ministers’ Council In Strong Endorsements For Negro Police Here,” *Memphis World*, July 23, 1948.

<sup>221</sup> “What About the Baptist Ministers?” *Memphis World*, July 30, 1948.

leadership that would work for them and help to create changes that would bring more equal treatment to black citizens.<sup>222</sup>

In the wake of the Eli Blaine case and Swingler's editorials connecting the lack of justice received by Blaine with the need for black police officers, more and more Memphians were beginning to see black police officers as the way to achieve greater justice for black Memphians. Joining Swingler's campaign for black police officers would be the way of justice, a veteran and graduate of LeMoyne College declared in an editorial in early August. For two years, Swingler had been pushing for black police officers, and by early August 1948, his campaign had gained a significant amount of support from among black Memphians. In a letter to the regional office of the NUL, MUL director McDaniel asked for more information on the hiring of black police officers in the South noting that community action and public opinion had "the iron hot and a little information from your office might help stimulate the cause," by informing other Memphians and officials of the success of black officers in other southern cities.<sup>223</sup>

Much of this support from Memphis's black civic and religious organizations for Swingler's campaign for black police officers came after the court failed to prosecute the officers in the Eli Blaine case. As with the AME Ministers' Council, the majority of these groups connected the campaign for black officers with black citizenship rights and the need for a more equal justice system. McDaniel connected the campaign for black

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<sup>222</sup> Referenced in Nat D. Williams column, "Down on Beale Ave," *Memphis World* July 13, 1948; and again in B. Dewitt, "World War Vet Speaks Out For Negro Policemen Here."

<sup>223</sup> "World War Vet Speaks Out For Negro Policemen Here"; and "J.A McDaniel to Nelson Jackson, July 20, 1948," Part I, Box VI, Folder A97, National Urban League Papers, Library of Congress.

officers directly with the war effort: “Negroes served their country in the time of war, why not let them serve in the time of peace? Let’s make America and Memphis safe for everybody.” Hiring black police officers would be a direct way of demonstrating how service in the war could be translated into greater justice and equality at home. At a moment when nationally black Americans were arguing that their support of the war effort justified greater equality at home, McDaniel tapped into this sentiment by supporting more equal protection for the black community in Memphis through the hiring of black police officers. McDaniel was also offering proof of the validity of having black men serve the community because “men with good character, men with college degrees and veterans who served honorably their country...will make themselves available now for war against all crimes committed in our communities.” Through his references of the need to make America and Memphis safe for everyone, McDaniel put the hiring of black police officers in a larger context. Rather than making the issue of black police officers a race issue, McDaniel made it an issue of bettering the larger community. “Justice and truth demands a change in our present condition,” McDaniel argued in mid-July.<sup>224</sup>

The conservative MUL director worked to balance the needs of the community with what others described as the “complexity” of Memphis power relations. Isobel Chisholm noted that the MUL and its director were doing what they could in order to

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<sup>224</sup> “Local Minister Urges Negro Police For Memphis As Curb on Unfair Treatment, Bias”; and For more on black activism during the World War II see Charles Chamberlain, *Victory at Home: Manpower and Race in the American South During World War II* (Athen: University of Georgia Press, 2003); Glenda E. Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008), chapter 8; and Kevin Michael Kruse and Stephen G Tuck, *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

survive. As had been demonstrated in the ousting of Bell from the MUL, Crump's acceptance of the MUL's continued work in the city was tenuous. Crump's support could be withdrawn if they were to go "all out." Thus, McDaniel framed the hiring of black police officers as a move to "increase morale, devotion, and loyalty to the city" rather than a challenge to the system of accommodation and racial segregation.<sup>225</sup>

This idea of more equal protection leading to increased community stability was one reiterated by many supporters of employing black police. Advocates of black police officers made the case that these officers, although they would be physically present in black neighborhoods, would serve the larger Memphis community. Supporters like McDaniels imagined that black officers would create a more equal justice system and foster a greater respect for the law. Articles describing the success of black officers in other southern cities emphasized the reduction of crime in black neighborhoods, a fact that Memphis supporters, particularly those addressing the white community, were sure to highlight. As part of their series profiling southern police departments with black officers, the white daily *Commercial Appeal* noted "police officials of the cities including Miami, Louisville, and Dallas, report negro crime greatly reduced in the negro areas patrolled by the negro officers."<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> "George Edwards to J.A. McDaniel, March 22, 1947," Part I, Box VI, Folder A 86, National Urban League Papers, Library of Congress; and "Memorandum April 7, 1948," Part I, Box VI, Folder A97, National Urban League Papers, Library of Congress; and "Memphis Urban League, 1948," Part I, Box I, Folder N16, National Urban League Papers, Library of Congress. Underlining part of original text.

<sup>226</sup> "CME District Conference Endorses Negro Policemen," *Memphis World*, August 3, 1948; The following appear in the *Commercial Appeal*, "Negro Police Proven Success in Nashville," August 30, 1948; "Negro Police Praised by Dubious Richmond," September 2, 1948; and "Negro Police Useful Little Rock Reports."

But black police advocates in Memphis also focused on the way black police officers would impact the relationship between the people and the law. AVC chairman Leon Springfield noted after a review of the experience of other southern cities with black police officers that the presence of black officers had “increased the dignity and justice of their police departments, obtain[ing] wider respect for their officers by all groups.” The public, especially the black public, had lambasted the Memphis Police Department in the wake of the police brutality cases. “White officers alone are inadequate,” one local minister argued. Swingler criticized the department, “Sending the young ‘hotheads’ now on the force to police Negro areas is just bad police business.” Not only were white police officers brutal in their treatment of blacks, but also they were also corrupt. “White officers were making a good profit” by allowing criminal activity to continue for the right price. White officers were known to take a bribe rather than arresting small time offenders.<sup>227</sup> The Memphis Police Department enforced the law arbitrarily and often brutally, so there was little respect for the police among black Memphians.

Advocates for black police officers argued that black officers would give black Memphians a greater stake in the law and thus create a more peaceful city community. As a *Commercial Appeal* editorial argued, “It would give all negro citizens an increased feeling of sharing in community objectives...It would make every thinking negro a supporter of law and order.” Black representation on the police force would allow black

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<sup>227</sup> “Want Negroes As Policemen: The AVC Adopts Resolution,” *Press-Scimitar*, July 16, 1948; “Local Minister Urges Negro Police For Memphis As Curb on Unfair Treatment, Bias”; L.O. Swingler, “Police Brutality”; and Arthur L. Webb, “Beale St. Can Talk,” *Memphis Downtowner Magazine*, November, 1997.

Memphians to feel as if the law was working for them, “it is his policeman, his laws” that were being enforced. A black war veteran who advocated for black officers believed that one of the major benefits of black police would be the “psychological effect” their appointment would have on young black Memphians. Black police would give the youth in the community something to be proud of and give them greater respect for their own race.<sup>228</sup> These men would be representative of a more positive future for blacks in Memphis, a future where blacks would have equal representation in the city and black men would uphold the law, thus allowing for more equal justice.

The immediate benefit of having the black population respect the law would be a reduction in crime as well as a reduction in racial tension. With racial violence erupting across the country in the years following the war, racial tension was a concern for Memphis leaders. The NAACP in their condemnation of the Mosby killing echoed this sentiment. “Brutality does not uphold the good name of this fair city,” nor did it help race relations. In their letter, the NAACP was tapping into city leaders’ desire to maintain peaceful race relations in order to maintain a positive image of their city to the rest of the nation. Black advocates were sure to remind white officials that if police brutality against blacks continued “the ultimate result is always race trouble. And that’s just what is brewing in Memphis,” in the summer of 1948. Thus, employing black police officers would be a move to maintain the peaceful race relations and enhance Memphis’s image as a progressive southern city.

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<sup>228</sup> “Time For Negro Police,” *Commercial Appeal*, September 7, 1948; “Carpenters Union Local 1986 Backs Drive For Negro Police,” *Memphis World*, September 3, 1948; and “World War Vet Speaks Out For Negro Policemen Here.”

Advocates acknowledged that black officers would not solve all of the racial problems in the city, nor did they believe that black officers would be easier on black criminals. However, advocates did believe that black officers would help create a more equal justice system. According to Swingler, “The presence of Negro officers on local forces is a symbol of at least a modicum of fair-play and justice at the hands of law enforcement.”<sup>229</sup> While black police officers would only have a direct impact on one area of black life in Memphis, the campaign for their hiring took on larger meanings of justice and equality for black citizens. Because advocates drew connections between citizenship rights, equality, and the presence of black officers in black neighborhoods, the question over the city employing black police to solve the problem of racial inequality came to the foreground of the debate over inequality in Memphis in 1948. Advocates imagined black police officers as symbols of black advancement and a way to protect black citizenship rights.

As the primary election in August of 1948 approached, other black rights advocates for equality, including black unionists, intertwined reactions to police brutality and the upcoming election with the community’s calls for black police officers. The hiring of black police officers became associated with black political power and the ability of black Memphians to use that power to enact change for the betterment of black citizens. The black media and civic and religious organizations made the issue of black police officers an issue in the 1948 election and used black political power as a way to

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<sup>229</sup> U.T. Phillips to Mayor James Pleasants, September 1, 1948, Box 23, Folder 8: “Police Department,” James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers; L.O. Swingler, “Police Brutality”; and L.O. Swingler, “Another Argument For Negro Policemen.”

force city leaders to address local concerns over black equality and community protection.

The year 1948 began with several calls for black citizens to take a greater interest in civic engagement. The civic club in the primarily black neighborhood of Orange Mound encouraged its residents and black Memphians as a whole to show the broader Memphis community that they “have accepted the challenge of civic responsibility” and would continue to work to better their community through action. Nat D. Williams called for Memphis blacks to “achieve a higher civic status” in 1948 in his weekly column, “Down on Beale Ave.” Williams advocated that Memphis blacks work harder to make Memphis a better place to live, not only in their immediate neighborhoods with activities such as taking part in charity work, opening businesses, and taking a greater interest in schools, but also in the larger Memphis community by paying their taxes and voting.<sup>230</sup>

With an election approaching, voting became the primary form of civic engagement and action called for by the new group of emerging leaders among black Memphians, including students, ministers, and civic organizations. Creating change in black Memphians’ position and the vote went hand-in-hand in 1948. The “appointment of negro police officers would be a prime mover in getting out the negro vote” for machine candidates, a group of black citizens informed the mayor in July. The thirty traditional black elite, including Blair Hunt, principal at the local black high school, and Dr. J. E. Walker, who attended the meeting, attempted to use their usual approach to

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<sup>230</sup> “Bob Wright Tells of Civic Progress in Orange Mound,” *Memphis World*, January 13, 1948; and Nat D. Williams, “Down on Beale Ave.,” *Memphis World*, January 2, 1948.

garnering benefits for black Memphians. These men used the promise of black votes to try to bargain for benefits for the city's black population. Although the mayor made no promises at the meeting, in a statement afterwards, he announced that those who attended the meeting had pledged their support to the machine candidates in the upcoming primary.<sup>231</sup>

This meeting was a response by the traditional black elite to the growing criticism of their inability to enact real change within the city for blacks and their subservience to the Crump machine. The fact that the mayor refused to make any promises along with his release of the names of attendees and their support for machine candidates reinforced the perception that these black elites were pawns of the machine. Their failure to secure any promises from the machine highlighted the lack of any real power these men had to provide black Memphians with the protection they called for and needed. Two days after the meeting, attendee Dr. S.A. Owens came out against the use of his name in connection with the machine candidates. In an attempt to separate himself from the political wrangling of machine politics and appeal to the growing black demand for black police officers, Owens declared, "I can be counted on to cast a ballot for the persons I think will serve the best interest of the people." Owens spoke of the "desire to enjoy all of the rights and privileges of a good citizen of our city, state and nation," the "regrets expressed concerning the police brutality," and the "much needed negro police officers,"

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<sup>231</sup> "Negro Citizens Request Negro Policemen: As Administration Angles for Support," *Press-Scimitar*, July 13, 1948.

and connected the upcoming election and black citizenship rights with the campaign for black police officers.<sup>232</sup>

Owens was not the only one to highlight the link between the campaign for black officers and political participation. “We cannot urge too strongly upon our people the importance and necessity of voting intelligently...as a means of improving our status in a democratic form of government and furthering the assurance of our civil and constitutional rights,” the CME District Conference declared in its endorsement of black police officers. Black civic and religious organizations were calling on black citizens to use their voting rights to enact change. After the meeting in which the mayor had refused to take a stand on the issue of black police officers even as black leaders promised black votes in return, it was clear that traditional strategies of negotiation were not going to create the change a growing number of black Memphians desired.<sup>233</sup>

Throughout the month of July, in the lead-up to the primary election, Swingler and the *Memphis World* reminded black Memphians of the injustices of the past. Reminding readers of recent judicial failures and voter suppression, Swingler argued the importance of using the vote to voice black desires for change. Although blacks had retained the right to vote in Memphis, the Crump political machine was known to use “‘intimidation’ and such practices as ‘coaching’ the ballot,” in order to secure victory for machine-backed candidates. The corruption of the Crump political machine had kept

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<sup>232</sup> “Negro Leader Issues a Statement About a Meeting at City Hall,” *Press-Scimitar*, July 15, 1948.

<sup>233</sup> “CME District Conference Endorses Negro Policemen”; and Typed note declaring city would make no promises in terms of black police officers before the election, July 13, 1948, Box 23, Folder 8: “Police Department,” James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers.

many black voters away from the polls. In one editorial in the lead-up to the election, the author recounted how “both parties ask for the Negro vote, but as he approaches the polling places he hears the same familiar growl – ‘hey you-nigger, get in line there!.... Get in your place, nigger!’ And he feels the same familiar whack over the head by the big stick that represents the law.” The author reminded readers that the law and the political machine that guided that law had not worked for black Memphians. The political machine and the votes it elicited from black voters had kept black citizens in an inferior “place.” The author intimated that times had changed. “If candidates want the Negro vote they will have to see to it that there are Negro police officers at the Negro polling places, to insure the voter he won’t have to trade an eye for his effort to cast a ballot.”<sup>234</sup> In yet another reference to the Blaine beating, the editorial drew a connection between the lack of black police officers and blacks’ inability to act out their rights at citizens. Advocates for black police officers worked to associate the campaign with larger political and citizenship rights, imploring black citizens to use their vote to enact change within the community that would bring immediate relief in the form of black police officers but also break black votes free from the Crump machine.

Crump and his candidates lost the primary election in early August 1948. In a headline reading, “Negro Voters Join with Liberal Whites to Lift ‘Iron Curtain,’” the *Memphis World* emphasized the importance of the black vote in defeating the machine. The black electorate voted with its memory of the 1945 rape case, the Fred Jackson case,

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<sup>234</sup>“Negro Citizens Request Negro Policemen: As Administration Angles for Support”; and “Beware of Campaign Promises.”

the Blaine case, and all of the other instances of injustice experienced by black Memphians in the recent past. Historian Laurie Green deems these votes cast by black Memphians in the 1948 primary as votes of protest, against not only the lack of equal justice but also Crump's continued adherence to a strict system of white supremacy. Crump's break with the Democratic Party over Truman's civil rights platform emphasized his commitment to white supremacy and the continued suppression of black rights. This move pushed not only black Memphians but also white moderates and labor organizers to mobilize voters against Crump candidates. This coalition dealt Crump his first electoral defeat in nearly two decades.<sup>235</sup>

Then, just two weeks after the primary elections, police shot James Mosby in front of his Binghampton home. The Mosby killing intensified calls for black police officers. A mass meeting was held in the neighborhood in which the East Memphis Citizens Council circulated a petition advocating for greater protection for the city's black residents. The Council delivered the petition to the mayor "appealing...for protection of the Negroes of the city of Memphis from police brutality and police killings." The petition reiterated the justifications previously laid out for black police, the need for more equal protection, justice for black citizens, and the end of continued

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<sup>235</sup> "Negro Voters Join with Liberal Whites to Lift 'Iron Curtain,'" *Memphis World*, August 10, 1948; For more on the specific dynamics of the campaign see Green, 138; Gritter, 178-186; and Brown-Melton, 263-265.

violations of black civil rights.<sup>236</sup> Similar petitions from the CME Pastor's Alliance and the Memphis CIO Council quickly followed the Binghamton petition.

By the time Swingler wrote his "It's Becoming Trite" editorial on August 24, 1948, after James Mosby was killed, the excuses used by white police officers to justify the beating of blacks had become far too familiar. The excuses of and absolution for officers guilty of wrongdoing had become "too much the accepted answer." Swingler chose the word "trite" in part because of its meaning of "being old-timey." Using excuses to absolve an officer of unjustified beatings of black citizens had become an unwanted relic of a time past in Memphis, and many black citizens were no longer willing to listen to the over-used excuses.<sup>237</sup> As Nat D. Williams had said, black Memphians had long memories, ones filled with instances of injustice. By the time Swingler wrote his August editorial, all Memphians were increasingly aware of black Memphians' demands for greater justice for black citizens in the form of black police officers.

Beginning on August 27 and running daily through September 5, the *Commercial Appeal* ran a series of articles examining the success of black police officers in other southern cities from Dallas, Texas, to Richmond, Virginia, and closer to home in Nashville, Tennessee. The goal of this series was to gain support for black officers among white Memphians. While black appeals had focused on the need for justice and

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<sup>236</sup> "Binghamton Ask for Negro Policemen in Wake of Latest Killing of Young War Veteran," *Memphis World*, August 31, 1948.

<sup>237</sup> L. O. Swingler, "It's Becoming Trite."

equality, the articles in the *Commercial Appeal* focused on the benefits to city management. In these other cities, black crime had been reduced, racial tensions had been reduced, and cities had ultimately saved money. Most of the articles mentioned that black officers were only used in black neighborhoods, dealt almost exclusively with blacks, and had separate white commanders.<sup>238</sup> All of the articles mentioned the success of black officers in easing racial friction in other southern cities.

In the wake of Crump's primary defeat, blacks in Memphis continued to see voting as their way to create change. Even before the Mosby killing, Swingler reminded Memphians that hiring black police officers was still an issue on the minds of many black citizens, and he linked the pre-election promise of consideration with the post-election political landscape. Throughout the month of September, as outrage over the Mosby killing grew and the campaign for black police officers garnered greater support both from black and white Memphians, advocates for black police continue to draw a link between black voting and the campaign for black officers. "Your and my problems are tied up in the ballot box," a Baptist minister told a group of prominent black Memphians.<sup>239</sup> The defeat of Crump in the primary had proved that the black vote could make a difference.

By helping to defeat the Crump candidates in the primary, black voters demonstrated a willingness to go against the machine. After a decade of injustice and in

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<sup>238</sup> For specific reference on the reduction of crime saving the city money see "Negro Policemen for Memphis? 51 Cities In South Have Them," *Commercial Appeal*, August 27, 1948; and "Lack of Qualified Applicants Limits Negro Police in Dallas," *Commercial Appeal*, August 29, 1948.

<sup>239</sup> "Baptist Ministers Come to Life on Voting Issue-Urge Citizens to Pay Poll Tax," *Memphis World*, September 3, 1948.

some cases outright brutality, black Memphians took hold of the activist spirit of the postwar years and used what little power they did have to demand greater equality. The loss of the election caused a crisis for Crump, and in its aftermath, he tried to win back black votes. By September Police Commissioner Joseph Boyle announced the city would begin looking into hiring black police officers. Swingler praised black Memphians' support of the campaign. "It was an effort to help ourselves," Swingler claimed.<sup>240</sup>

In the late 1940s, in a city run on racial segregation and steeped in a tradition of white supremacy, city officials' decision to hire black police officers was the result of black community efforts to demand acknowledgment of their citizenship rights. The success of black calls for black police officers demonstrated the ability of black Memphians to come together for a common cause, the ability to form biracial coalitions with liberal whites, and a willingness to push back against a white supremacist power structure. Black Memphians were no longer satisfied with token accommodation. They wanted greater equality and had developed alternative strategies for negotiating with the city's white power structure, strategies that forced city officials to take into account the wants and needs of the mass of the city's black citizens.

But while the campaign to hire black police officers was a success, there were limits to this success. As black Memphians demanded more equal justice, they were not demanding integration. Advocates for black police officers wanted these officers to replace white officers in black neighborhoods. Black Memphians wanted greater protection under the law through a more equal system of law. However, this protection

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<sup>240</sup> L.O. Swingler, "Negro Police in Memphis."

and any efforts to more equally enforce the law would still be operating within a system of legal segregation. As we will discover in the following chapter, the black officers who were hired in the fall of 1948 were not treated as equals of their white counterparts. So while the campaign to hire black police officers was a success, laying the groundwork for a shift in Memphis's political and racial landscape, the reality of having black officers did little to promote black equality.

CHAPTER VI  
RACE AND THE REALITY OF BEING A BLACK POLICE OFFICER IN  
POSTWAR MEMPHIS

We cleaned up Beale Street that was our job.  
Quoted in Chris Conley,  
~ *Commercial Appeal*, November 7, 1993.

Ain't no nigger gunna arrest me.  
Quoted in "Proud and Unbowed,"  
~ *Commercial Appeal*, February 18, 1989.

In the mid-1950s, Hernando Road became a one-way street. Located in south Memphis, the street was part of the city's black police officers' patrol area, so it was their responsibility to enforce the new traffic pattern. "Some superiors we had were on us to write tickets," Wendell Robinson, one of the original nine black police officers hired in 1948, remembered. So Robinson checked out ticket books and wrote up traffic tickets to anyone, black or white, violating the new one-way traffic pattern. But when he finished his shift, he was called into police headquarters. "The inspector of the shift asked us who gave us the authority to give white folks a ticket." The inspector reminded Robinson that even though he wore the uniform of the Memphis Police Department, he did not have the full authority of a police officer. According to Robinson's superior, the regulation restricting black officers from arresting white suspects extended to restrictions on black officers issuing traffic tickets to white offenders.

Robinson and the other black police officers had to walk a fine line when it came to acting on their authority. As Robinson remembered, "If a colored man turns a corner

and we give him a ticket, and then a white man turns the same corner – hundreds of Negroes are looking on to see if we'll pull him a ticket.” Black Memphians were watching to see if Robinson and his fellow black police officers treated blacks and whites equally. When the black community had campaigned for the hiring of black police officers, they did so with the expectation that black officers would foster a more equal justice system by enforcing the law equally, unlike their white counterparts.<sup>241</sup>

When Robinson asked the inspector what he should have done, the inspector replied, “Put that ticket book in your pocket and don't write the ticket.” The inspector did not expect the black officer to enforce the law equally. To the inspector, the authority of black police officers did not extend to white violators of the law. Even though they were police officers, Robinson and his fellow black officers were black men first and thus limited in their authority, regardless of the uniform they wore. So Robinson put his ticket book in his pocket and left it there until he retired, never again writing another traffic ticket to a black or a white citizen.<sup>242</sup>

This episode was a reminder that black police officers in Memphis in the late 1940s and 1950s were defined by their race before their position on the police force. Memphians of both races expected these black officers to act differently from their white counterparts. Blacks hoped for more equal justice while whites anticipated black officers would control those of their own race, thus reducing crime and easing racial tensions. Robinson's story about traffic tickets highlights the balancing act black police officers

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<sup>241</sup> John Beifuss, “Proud and Unbowed,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 18, 1989.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

had to perform in a segregated city, as both officers of the law and members of the black community.

The nine black men hired to the Memphis Police Force in 1948 came from within Memphis's own black community. Nothing is known about these men's specific involvement in the campaign to hire black police officers, but each, for their own reasons took advantage of the opportunity created by black Memphian's campaign. Out of the 150 applicants, Wendell Robinson, Rufus J. Turner, Ernest Withers, Marion Teague, Jewel Jubirt, Roscoe McWilliams, Claudius Phillips, James Pegues, and Daniel Evans were the nine men who were selected and completed the two-week training course. These men applied to be Memphis's first black police officers in three decades for a variety of reasons. Wendell Robinson applied because he was "curious."<sup>243</sup> Ernest Withers cited his ambition as the reason for his application. Withers imagined that being a police officer would offer good pay and a way to move up in the world. Claudius Phillips echoed this sentiment, "Following a police career is a good profession, especially for a negro." For Roscoe McWilliams the reasons were much more practical, as his wife had recently become pregnant and he needed to find a steady job. Whatever their reasons, these nine men became the black officers added to the Memphis Police Department in 1948.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Thirteen men were originally selected, however it was only these nine men who completed the two-week training course. Why the other four did not complete the training is unknown, see "They Are Policemen," *Commercial Appeal*, November 5, 1948; and Charles Holmes, "Negro Officers Travel Tough Road," *Commercial Appeal*, May 24, 1962.

<sup>244</sup> Ernest Withers, interviewed by Ed Frank, March 12, 1995, tape, Special Collections, Ned R. Library, University of Memphis; "Response Time: 1984," *Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 1999; and Robert Johnson, "A Historic Saturday Night on Beale Street," *Press-Scimitar*, November 8, 1948.

The nine men shared a common background. Natives to Memphis, all nine were graduates of the local black high schools. Marion Teague, Wendell Robinson, and Rufus J. Turner attended Booker T. Washington High School together. After high school, Wendell Robinson, along with Ernest Withers, Jewel Jubirt, Roscoe McWilliams, and James Pegues, left Memphis to serve in the armed forces during World War II. Thus, more than half of the nine officers were veterans who had worn a uniform, followed orders, and served their country, demonstrating their ability and willingness to serve the larger community. Upon returning from service in the war, Robinson attended the local black college, LeMoyne College, of which Claudius Phillips was also a graduate. Robinson never completed his degree, as he dropped out in his third year to take the job as police officer.<sup>245</sup> These nine men were representative of a certain generation of Memphians. They grew up during the Depression, managed to receive at least a high school education, and had gone to war to serve their country. The nine black officers hired in 1948 represented black Memphians' abilities to be productive members of society, and the officers' backgrounds seemed to offer them the tools to successfully protect black neighborhoods and help to bring greater equality to the Memphis justice system in terms of treatment of black citizens.

Both black and white Memphians had high, yet varying, expectations of these black police officers. "We were more or less in a fish bowl," Robinson remembered. From their first night on patrol in the Beale Street area of Memphis, these officers were

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<sup>245</sup> Ernest Withers, interviewed by Ed Frank, March 12, 1995; and Charles Holmes, "Negro Officers Travel Tough Road."

on display. The black community had advocated for their hiring because they expected that black police would protect black citizens and work to create a more equal justice system. White advocates for black officers expected that black police in Memphis would offer the same benefits black officers in other southern cities had: a reduction in crime, a lessening of racial tension, and the maintenance of the southern system of racial segregation. Thus, when black officers began their patrol duties on the night of November 5, 1948, Memphians, black and white, were watching to see if these black officers would live up to their different expectations.<sup>246</sup>

The idea that these black officers would “clean up” Beale Street, the primarily black business and entertainment district in Memphis often frequented by white revelers, was on the surface a common goal for black and white Memphians.<sup>247</sup> However, the varying expectations over how this task would be accomplished speak to the difficulties of being black police officers in a segregated city. This chapter examines those varying expectations of Memphis’s black police officers and how those expectations impacted the reality of being black and a police officer. Black expectations of protection and equal justice were not necessarily contradictory to white expectations of maintaining segregation and racial status quo. Hiring black police officers to enforce the law in black neighborhoods protected blacks from white police officers, reduced racial friction, and further reinforced the structure of segregation in Memphis society. For white officials,

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<sup>246</sup> John Beifuss, “Proud and Unbowed.”

<sup>247</sup> Chris Conley, “Robinson, One of City’s First Black Officers, Dies,” *Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1993.

black police officers represented a way to appease black citizens' demands while maintaining the racial status quo.

However, because of the segregation of the police department and the discrimination against and disrespect of black police officers that came with that segregation, black officers were unable to live up to the hopes of those black Memphians who had advocated for their hiring. The juxtaposition of the expectations blacks and whites had for these officers and the officers' actual experience as Memphis police officers demonstrates a disconnect between black anticipations of equality and southern white officials' continued commitment to segregation. The restrictions placed on their service meant that black officers did not stop police brutality or create a more equal justice system. Rather, those black officers hired in the postwar era became monitors of the black population, maintaining racial segregation and enforcing a system of law controlled by whites. The story of these black police officers, while on the face a triumph for black action for change, when examined more closely, brings into focus the limits of black negotiating power in the postwar South.

As seen in the previous chapter, the campaign to hire black police officers in Memphis was part of a trend among southern cities in the mid-to-late 1940s. While only sixteen southern cities had black officers in 1943, by 1954, 143 cities in 13 southern states employed at least one black officer. The number of black officers employed and the duties they were permitted to perform varied from city to city but common among them was the idea that the black officers' patrol areas were confined to the black neighborhoods in their respective cities. Published by the Southern Regional Council,

who kept track of the numbers and the duties of black officers in southern cities, reports indicate that the addition of black officers was not a move toward integration but a move toward maintaining peaceful segregation. This moderate interracial group used these reports to advocate for the hiring of black police officers across the South. Their conclusions about the value of black police officers echoed the sentiments of white advocates in Memphis.<sup>248</sup>

Hiring black officers offered a way for white officials and black leaders to show action towards accommodating the demands of a growing black population without forcing integration or equality. The result of the conflicting expectations of whites and blacks was an experience for black officers that was, on the one hand, a move towards uplifting the black community and, on the other, a reinforcement of the power and reach of segregation. An examination of the reality of implementing the expectations of the black Memphians who advocated for the hiring of black police officers reveals a complicated story about relations within Memphis's black community as a whole and between black Memphians and white city leaders.

### **Discovering Their Purpose: The Expectations of Black Police Officers in Memphis**

The black officers hired in 1948 entered a department known for its aggressive adherence to and enforcement of white supremacy in a segregated city determined to continue to maintain that separation. From the outset, black officers had to recognize the tensions between the potential extent of their authority and the limits to the practical

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<sup>248</sup> "Negro Policemen are Needed in Southern Cities," *The Southern Frontier*, March 1943. For more on limitations on black police officers, see "Negro Police in A Southern City," *New South*, February 1955.

application of that authority. For black and white Memphians, this potential authority was rooted in the idea of protection. This protection was both physical and ideological. The experience of World War II at home and abroad created a situation in the South in which black and white Southerners felt the need to increase their physical protection as well as protect their differing conceptions of the American social order.

The wave of racial violence that swept the country in the years surrounding World War II made the threat of racially motivated violence a reality for both black and white Memphians. In 1942, rumors of black unrest and the potential for racial violence spread among white Memphians. Congressman Clifford Davis reported “a few citizens have thoroughly worked themselves up” over rumors of “Eleanor Clubs,” supposedly clandestine organizations formed by black women in an effort to disrupt the racial order. In the same year, the Director of Social Services for the Memphis and Shelby County Welfare Commission also reported rumors of racial unrest to Mayor Walter Chandler: “There is going to be an uprising among the negroes on Tuesday night...the negro who told one of my case workers this, told her that it would be well for her and her family to stay off the street Tuesday night.” Although a black uprising did not occur in Memphis during the war years, these rumors expose the persistent white fear of black-instigated violence.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Clifford Davis to Walter Chandler, October 9, 1942, Box 39, Folder “Negroes,” The Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee. For more on the rumors of “Eleanor Clubs,” see David Goldfield, *Region, Race, and Cities: Interpreting the Urban South* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 257; and A.B. Clapp to Walter Chandler, October 3, 1942, Box 39, Folder “Negroes,” The Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler.

However, the racial violence of the period was primarily directed at black soldiers and civilians. It is estimated that some forty black men, mostly veterans, were lynched in the aftermath of the war. During the war, the shooting of a black soldier by police in 1943 instigated the outbreak of racially motivated violence centered in Harlem. In that same year, rumors of the killing of black women in Detroit, a city already fraught with tensions over jobs and housing, incited a wave of violence.<sup>250</sup> In Memphis, publicity of police brutality against blacks was on the rise in the immediate postwar years, making the threat of violence an everyday occurrence for black Memphians. These instances emphasized both the continued disregard for black life and the white pushback against growing black resistance to racial segregation and discrimination. Thus, physical protection was at the forefront of black and white Memphians' minds by 1948.

The series of articles discussing the experience of other southern cities with black officers that ran for two weeks in the fall of 1948 in the white Memphis paper, the *Commercial Appeal*, tried to inform the Memphis public about the potential benefits, especially for the white community, of having black officers. The articles described black police officers' primary function as monitoring and controlling black citizens, thus creating a safer city for whites. The first article in the series, "Negro police in Memphis?" noted that fifty-one cities in ten southern states were employing black police officers. In Miami, Florida, the hiring of black officers "was organized as a wartime

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<sup>250</sup> Joe William Trotter, *The African American Experience* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 502; and For more on white efforts to defend the white supremacist ideology, see Jason Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

emergency” in 1944 to deal with the immediate issues arising from an increased black population. But since that time, both crime and juvenile delinquency among blacks had greatly declined, a success the Miami Police Chief argued “couldn’t have been possible otherwise.”<sup>251</sup> The Miami Police Chief’s description of how black officers had served their community would have appealed to white Memphians also concerned with the growing black population and the rising racial tensions in their city.

The majority of the articles in the *Commercial Appeal* series mentioned the reduction of crime as well as the fact that there had been no confrontations between whites, officers or city residents, and the black police. In Nashville, the largest Tennessee city using black police in 1948, officials described the hiring black officers was an “experiment.” The assistant police chief, who trained the officers, had been wary of the plan to have black officers, but he admitted that the black officers had “done excellent work in apprehending negro law violators.” Tulsa officials praised black officers were praised for being able to speed up investigations involving black offenders. The Tulsa chief’s statement implied that black officers were better able to root out the criminal element among those of their race. Both articles emphasized the key function of these black officers as seen by white officials: controlling the black population by policing public behavior and apprehending the criminal elements to which black officers supposedly had greater access.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> “Negro Policemen For Memphis?: 51 Cities in South Have Them,” *Commercial Appeal*, August 27, 1948.

<sup>252</sup> The following articles appear in the *Commercial Appeal*: “Louisville Took Lead in Hiring Negro Police For Limited Area,” August 28, 1948; “Lack of Qualified Applicants Limits Negro Police in Dallas,”

Concerns over how to control the black community were also on the forefront of white officials' agenda as black challenges to the ideological underpinnings of southern society continued throughout the World War II era. In Birmingham, Alabama, in 1943, a black soldier sat down in the front seat of a bus, violating the Jim Crow law that relegated blacks to seats in the rear of buses. When he refused to move to the back of the bus, a white passenger carrying a knife attacked him. This white passenger believed he was protecting the racial order of the South. The rhetoric of the war and the increase in black activism during the war years posed a threat to white supremacy and the southern social hierarchy. Memphis's Commissioner of Public Safety, Joseph Boyle, blamed the national civil rights agenda for fueling black discontent in the South. A public statement in early September 1948 quoted Boyle as saying: "Negro police won't settle the negro problem by any means, when three candidates for the presidency of the United States are advocating FEPC and elimination of the 'Jim Crow' Law." For Boyle, the nature of the "Negro problem" was the anticipation of greater rights and equality that he had seen among the city's black residents. Particularly black working-class Memphians involved in union activity. Black willingness to advocate for and attempt to act on these rights posed a threat to the ideological foundations of Memphis's social order. In Boyle's interpretation of the situation, the presidential candidates were "all advocating complete social equality," an idea in direct violation of the white supremacist attitude that ruled Memphis. Boyle assured white Memphians that changes in the city's social structure

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August 29, 1948; "Tulsa's Negro Police Held 'Indispensable,'" September 1, 1948; "Negro Police Praised by Dubouis Richmond," September 2, 1948; and "Negro Police Proven Success in Nashville," August 30, 1948.

“will not happen in Memphis.”<sup>253</sup> Boyle had no intention of letting the advocates for black equality, and black police officers specifically, pose a challenge to the Jim Crow system of racial segregation. Rather, he believed that black officers would help to pacify black activism for equality and work to bolster segregation.

White and black proponents of the plan to hire black officers assumed that having black police would offer both physical protection, by easing racial tensions, and ideological protection. For the black advocates of hiring black police officers who connected the hiring with citizenship rights, black officers represented black advancement toward greater equality, while for white leaders, these officers reinforced racial separation and thus the southern social order. City leaders saw the black officers as a solution to the problem of maintaining segregation within a changing local and national context. What Commissioner Boyle called the “Negro problem” was, for white officials, the problem of a growing black population that increasingly demanded greater acknowledgement of their citizenship rights. As this problem continued to grow, the city needed an alternative means of maintaining white supremacy while simultaneously appeasing black demands. The *Commercial Appeal* pointed out that even the new black officers realized that “for modern Memphis, they are the principals in an entirely new undertaking.”<sup>254</sup> The press and police department assured white Memphians that this

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<sup>253</sup> “Boyle Announces City To Try Negro Police,” *Commercial Appeal*, September 10, 1948; Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York : The Free Press, 1994), 64. For more on the ways in which the ideology of World War II changed the South and union involvement in these changes, see Trotter, 502-516; and Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 217.

<sup>254</sup> “Boyle Announces City To Try Negro Police,” *Commercial Appeal*, September 10, 1948; and “They are Policemen.”

“new undertaking” would not undermine the traditional system but would work to maintain it.

The idea of having blacks work for the city for the purpose of dealing with members of their own race was not entirely new to Memphis. Eleven years earlier, the Memphis Housing Authority (MHA) hired black managers, engineers, and clerks to handle issues dealing with the housing projects in black neighborhoods. “By having negro employees to deal with negro tenants we have achieved excellent co-operation,” MHA director J.A. Fowler noted. Having black city employees deal with members of their own race had proven to reduce tensions and increase cooperation. Fowler went on to argue that the hiring of black police officers would also “prove a forward step in helping keep the peace of the city.”<sup>255</sup> City leaders believed that racial separation of government functions would ease the growing racial tensions and give the residents of black neighborhoods plagued by police harassment a stake in maintaining racial segregation.

Police officials emphasized that black police officers’ limited authority did not allow them to challenge the status quo of southern racial segregation. In cities across the South black officers helped to reinforce the separation of the races. The purpose of black officers in the cities investigated by the *Commercial Appeal* was to control the black population by using black men to police members of their own race. This purpose was further reinforced by the fact that black officers were hired from within the local black

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<sup>255</sup> “Success Seen For Negro Police If Care Marks Their Selection,” *Commercial Appeal*, September 11, 1948.

community, and once on duty, only patrolled in black neighborhoods. In Little Rock, Arkansas, white officers were initially opposed to having black police officers until they learned that this change would mean the white officers would no longer be patrolling black neighborhoods. Presumably, the opposition of Little Rock's white officers was rooted in the threat of having black police officers placed on equal standing with white officers. But having black officers only in black neighborhoods not only freed white officers from interactions with black residence but also limited the patrol areas and shifts of black officers, thus eliminating any threat of job equality between black and white officers. Overall, the message for white Memphians was that black police officers reinforced separation of the races, reduced the threat of racial tension, and protected the racialized social order.<sup>256</sup>

Hiring black officers was also seen as a way to improve the image of the Memphis Police Department and its relationship with black Memphians. The public perception of the Memphis Police Department in the wake of the Eli Blaine case had been greatly diminished. While commissioner Boyle continued to argue that the department worked to protect the ideology of white supremacy, the brutality with which his department did so had the unintended effect of fueling black resentment and black calls for the protection of their rights.<sup>257</sup> The Memphis Police Department, while trying to

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<sup>256</sup> "Negro Police Useful, Little Rock Reports," *Commercial Appeal*, August 31, 1948.

<sup>257</sup> See "Boyle Announces City To Try Negro Police"; "Statement of Adelaide Hudson," August 6, 1947, Part 8, Series B, Reel 19 (microfilm), Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Duke University Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; "Beaten by Police, Woman Charges" *Press-Scimitar*, August 5, 1947; and L. O. Swingler, "It's Becoming Trite," *Memphis World*, August 24, 1948.

protect the white supremacist values that predominated in Memphis, was in fact responsible for the majority of racial friction in Memphis in the late 1940s.

When the *Commercial Appeal* officially endorsed the idea of hiring black police officers on September 7, 1948, the paper argued that the move would give the city's black residents a stake in law enforcement. Having black police officers "would give all negro citizens an increased feeling of sharing in community objectives.... It would make every thinking negro a supporter of law and order." Having members of their own race involved in community law enforcement, officials believed, would make black Memphians more apt to support the police, and the law more generally. By labeling members of the city's black community as "thinking Negroes," white leaders implied that the majority of black Memphians wanted to support the police and obey the law but that continued police mistreatment of the city's black residents, primarily working-class citizens who made up the majority of the black population had simply eroded their faith in the justice system. Likewise, *Memphis World* editor L.O. Swingler argued that black officers would help to "render service to the peace and welfare of the Memphis Police Department and justice to their own people."<sup>258</sup> Swingler, however, expanded the argument of the *Commercial Appeal* to include the positive impact black officers would have on the functioning of the Memphis Police Department, which in turn would increase black cooperation with the law.

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<sup>258</sup> "Time for Negro Police," *Commercial Appeal*, September 7, 1948; and L.O. Swingler, "The Tragic Case of Eli Blaine," *Memphis World*, July 6, 1948.

The city's chapter of the American Veterans Committee (AVC) argued that hiring black officers in other cities had "increased the dignity and justice of their police departments, combined wider respect for their officers by all groups, and lowered crime rates." White proponents focused their arguments concerning bettering race relations on the reduction of black crime and the increased control over the black population. The AVC, an organization with a large number of black student veterans, shifted the focus onto the role black police officers would have on race relations through their impact on the functioning of the Memphis Police Department and the enforcement of law in the city.<sup>259</sup> Having black community representatives in law enforcement would allow Memphians to see the department as a more dignified and just organization, thus increasing the respect all city residents, black and white, had for police officers in general.

In hiring black police officers, white leaders hoped that these men would be visible symbols of improved race relations. According to their white superiors, those black officers who began training in October 1948 "have expressed a genuine desire to be of service to their people, to the cause of law and order and to all of Memphis. They have fully accepted the limitations placed on their power." Indeed, there would be limits on black officers' authority to ensure that they were doing the job of maintaining the status quo, not becoming symbols of change. Whites intended that these initial black officers would be first and foremost police officers committed to upholding the law as it stood, not posing a challenge to the southern legal system. Police chief Bill Rainey

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<sup>259</sup> "Want Negroes as Policemen: The AVC Adopts Resolution," *Press-Scimitar*, July 16, 1948.

warned the original officers that they would have to sell themselves and prove their value to the broader white community. Rainey realized these officers were in a precarious situation; they would have to satisfy the different expectations of whites, blacks, and other officers. One of the original nine officers, Ernest Withers, remembered feeling as though he and the other men were “good will ambassadors” from the city of Memphis to its citizens, not the symbols of authority with which police officers were generally associated.<sup>260</sup>

Like other southern cities, white leaders in Memphis saw hiring black police officers as an experiment: an alternative way to reinforce old values. Those leaders, like the editor of *Commercial Appeal*, who supported the idea of black officers, were trying to balance a demographically and economically changing city with the white expectation that the city government would continue to adhere to the traditional social system of segregation and white supremacy.

In his study of black police in the United States, Marvin Dulaney argued that the black officers hired in the South during this period were hired to be “reformers.” The idea was that officers would “set a good example for their race.” Memphis’s black officers would be reformers of black public behavior to better meet with white ideas about respectable black behavior and black deference to whites. Just three months after they began patrolling the Beale Street area, Commissioner Boyle praised the black officers for being “most effective in their main purpose of reducing the use of profanity in public

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<sup>260</sup> “They Are Policemen,” *Commercial Appeal*, November 5, 1948; “Police Department,” James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers; and Arthur Webb, “Beale Street Can Talk,” *Memphis Downtowner Magazine*, October 1997.

places among people of their own race.”<sup>261</sup> By identifying reducing profanity as the officers’ main purpose, Boyle deemphasized the officers’ role as law enforcement officers. His praise highlights the fact white leaders envisioned the officers as enforcers of respectability whose job was to control black residents’ public behavior.

White Memphians also made assumptions about the character of the men who would become black police officers. Petitions and news articles used words like “courteous,” “exceptionally honest,” “sober,” and “intelligent” to describe the ideal black police officer. These descriptions connote a certain amount of respectability. As Dulaney found in his study, across the South, black police officers represented the “best of the race.” These were men who fit middle-class notions of respectability. To white leaders and the broader white community, these men were safe in terms of their commitment to monitoring the behavior of black residents in black areas of the city, which presumably made the city safer for white residents.<sup>262</sup>

Hiring men who already appeared to meet standards of respectability was key to the success of these black officers. Many black advocates for the black police officers recognized the importance of having respectable black men serving as the city’s first black police officers in over twenty years. In his statement of support, Memphis Urban League (MUL) director, Rev. James McDaniel, argued, “a high type of Negro can be obtained.” McDaniel and others noted that the candidates for black police officers would

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<sup>261</sup> Marvin W. Dulaney, *Black Police in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 108; “Negro Police Praised by Dubouis Richmond”; and “Commissioner Boyle Lauds Negro Police” *Memphis World*, February 25, 1949.

<sup>262</sup> Untitled, *Press-Scimitar*, July 15, 1948; and Dulaney, 108.

be “men with college degrees, and veterans.” Black leaders recognized that these men needed to be positive representations of the black community in order to be successful. These men’s duties as officers would be limited when they dealt with white Memphians, thus black officers were trained and drilled on the “necessity for and value of a courteous approach.”<sup>263</sup> However, they also had to be fully committed officers of the law when dealing with black citizens. These men would have to rely on their intelligence and integrity in order to balance the differing notions about how black police officers would do their job.

The men hired as black police officers were men who had proven themselves, both in terms of their character and intelligence and also in their service to their country, demonstrating their ability to work within a hierarchical structure, taking and following orders. Advocates for the black officers, both black and white, were largely focused on the idea that these men would be representatives of the race. Unlike the average white police officer, who had very little education, the black police hired would be highly educated, especially for black men at that time. “We were no dummies,” one of the officers recalled, emphasizing the fact that several of the original officers had some college education.<sup>264</sup>

Some white Memphians predicted that black police officers would have negative consequences. Some, such as the members of the Fraternal Congress of Memphis, an

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<sup>263</sup> “Local Minister Urges Negro Police For Memphis As Curb on Unfair Treatment, Bias,” *Memphis World*, July 13, 1948; Lewis O. Swingler, “The Tragic Case of Eli Blaine.”; and “They are Policemen.”

<sup>264</sup> “Local Minister Urges Negro Police For Memphis As Curb on Unfair Treatment, Bias”; and Arthur Webb, “Beale Street Can Talk.”

umbrella organization composed of nineteen primarily fraternal insurance groups, feared the aggression and potential abuse of power black men would demonstrate when given positions of authority. The Fraternal Congress argued that as southern born men, they “know that it is unwise to place an armed negro in a position to dominate or have authority over any white man or women,” even though city leaders had made it clear that black officers would not have the authority to arrest whites. Using the term “domination” and mentioning white women in their statement of opposition, these white southern men drew on the traditional narrative of white supremacy and the protection of white womanhood to oppose the idea of having black men in any position of authority. In a letter to the mayor, another Memphian opposed the idea of hiring black police officers and cited examples from Chattanooga and Kansas City in which black officers had supposedly arrested whites and used excessive force.<sup>265</sup> Those opposing the idea of black police officers did so on the grounds that blacks were not as qualified to do the job as whites, and giving them authority would only lead to the officers overstepping the bounds of white supremacy. Although white officials had continually stated the limits on black police officers and therefore their inability to be a threat to white supremacy, these opponents, mostly white males, saw any authority, even limited authority over those of their own race, as a challenge to white supremacy.

Black proponents of the plan and the black officers themselves argued that black police would deal almost exclusively with blacks, working to protect black women and

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<sup>265</sup> “Opposition Is Voice To Negro Police Plan,” *Commercial Appeal*, September 17, 1948; and Troy Nunis to Mayor James Pleasants, September 22, 1948, Box 23, Folder 8, James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers.

children. Juxtaposing Ernest Withers's comment that "the only thing that was really wrong on Beale Street was the cursing, the disrespect of women" and Jerry Williams's pronouncement that the officers "cleaned up Beale Street, made it a safe place for women and children" demonstrated black men's understanding of their role as protectors. When discussing his role as a black officer, Williams, who was hired in 1949, a year after the first nine, connected his and the other officers hiring directly back to the rape of the two girls in 1945. Protection of women and children was central to Williams's understanding of himself as a police officer and as a black man. So even as the white opponents of the idea of having black officers used notions of masculine duty to protect as the foundation of their opposition, black men adopted the same language of protection to justify their hiring.<sup>266</sup> Thus, black supporters tapped into the same notions of masculine protection and respectability but applied them to the black community. Serving as black police officers would allow these men the opportunity to perform their masculine duty to protect their own community. The hope was that being in a position of authority, even within the confines of black neighborhoods, would elevate white perceptions of black men and offer proof of black men's equality to white men, at least in terms of their ability to police and protect their communities.

Supporters and the officers themselves imagined that black police had the potential to create change in the way the law was enforced in Memphis. On his first night of duty, Officer Jewel Jubirt told the *Press-Scimitar*, "We're going to make some

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<sup>266</sup> Gregg Gordon, "Beale Street Can Talk," *Memphis Downtowner Magazine*, April 1992; Chris Conley, "Robinson, One of the City's First Black Officers, Dies"; and Arthur Webb, "Beale Street Can Talk."

changes.” However the majority of black advocates and the officers themselves did not anticipate changes to the system, rather they expected changes to the way the law was enforced. Black Memphians wanted the function of policing in black neighborhoods to change. Many believed that black officers would treat all black Memphians equally under the law. Thus, black police officers would function primarily as protectors of black residents. In their petition to the mayor, the East Memphis Citizens Club, representing the primarily black neighborhood of Binghampton, reiterated their understanding that black police officers would reduce crime in the city’s black neighborhoods. The CME Pastors’ Alliance reiterated this hope in their petition to the mayor, believing that the black police officers would “result in a material savings of private and public property.”<sup>267</sup> This savings would come from black officers policing of black public behavior, thus reducing vandalism and physical altercations.

While the arguments of both black and white Memphians focused on the reduction of crime and the betterment of race relations, each group expected very different things from the black police officers in order to achieve these better relations. White Memphians expected black police officers to monitor and control the city’s growing black population. The fact that the Memphis Police Department elected to have black officers serve strictly in the Beale Street area of Memphis highlights white intentions for control. Many white Memphians frequented Beale Street for entertainment, particularly for the Midnight Ramble, when the black W.C. Handy theatre

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<sup>267</sup> “A Historic Saturday Night on Beale Street”; and East Memphis Citizens Club to Mayor James Pleasants, August 25, 1948, Box 23, Folder 8, James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers.

permitted white patrons in for a late show by that week's featured black musicians. Thus, black police officers on Beale Street would be visible reminders of the city government's attempts to control black behavior. Ernest Withers, long-time Beale Street area resident and one of the original nine black officers, remembered years later that the officers "were tactfully placed on Beale Street.... We were very delicately taught about the discipline of the Midnight Ramble and dealing with white people." Positioning black officers in the Beale Street area appeased black demands for black officers in black neighborhoods and made the job the black officers were doing visible to white Memphians as well. The implication of Withers's statement was that black officers were trained to treat white Memphians on Beale Street "delicately"; these officers were not policing whites. Their purpose was strictly to police blacks and make Beale Street a safe place for white visitors.<sup>268</sup>

Prior to the hiring of the black officers, Beale Street policing was a corrupt operation in which money was the true hand of the law. According to Withers, "If a guy got into a fight or anything, he would end up around the corner in a private court session between two officers, and a collection of a little fine, you know, not really a fine but a shakedown. Anything short of murder, they'd just settle it with the ward policeman."<sup>269</sup> White police officers used their positions to line their pockets, allowing for Beale Street

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<sup>268</sup> Earnestine Lovelle Jenkins, *African Americans in Memphis* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 78; "New Negro Officers Walking Their Beats," *Commercial Appeal*, November 6, 1948; and Gregg Gordon, "Beale Street Can Talk."

<sup>269</sup> Gregg Gordon, "Beale Street Can Talk."

to continue being home to criminal activity and furthering the police department's reputation for corruption.

Because so many white Memphians frequented Beale Street looking to take part in the area's entertainment offerings, the corruption and illicit behavior was highly visible to Memphis's white population. Ernest Withers described Beale Street as "a street of frolic, a street of loud hollering and boisterousness....It was a street of high vulgarity," where black Memphians went to forget the day-to-day drudgery of their lives. Beale Street, for white officials, had become synonymous with gambling, prostitution, and bootlegging. Because it was an area populated predominately by blacks but frequented by whites, the Beale Street area offered a place for black officers to be a visible symbol of how city officials were working to keep the growing black population in its place. Unlike other patrolmen who could be put on patrol in any part of the city, the black officers were confined to a 4-block radius surrounding Beale Street.<sup>270</sup> This confinement to the predominately black area of the city reinforced the specific function of black officers: to clean up this highly visible section of the city's black neighborhoods. The intention was that these officers would clean up Beale Street by putting an end to the vulgarity, crime, and corruption, a goal many believed could only be achieved by policing the behavior of black residents and black visitors of the Beale Street district.

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid.; This police corruption was most likely a carry over from prohibition, during which many of Memphis's bootleggers operated off of Beale Street where bribes to the Memphis Police and Boss Crump would allow for bootleggers to operate unimpeded. For more on Crump and his relationship to the vice trade in Memphis, see Wayne Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don't Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006).

Hiring black police officers to patrol Beale Street was a direct concession to black demands for black police officers. However, they also offered city officials an alternative way of controlling the growing black population that was increasingly pushing back against the city's racial hierarchy. The supporters of black officers all shared in the idea that these men would reduce crime and operate as a buffer between whites and blacks in the city in an effort to ease racial tensions. These black officers would thus allow for greater physical protection of both black and white Memphians. White supporters imagined this separation and physical control of blacks would serve to uphold racial segregation and white supremacy. For black supporters, however, this separation was seen as an opportunity for greater equality in law enforcement and a way for black citizens to advance their citizenship rights. As Wendell Robinson said, these black officers "had to be diplomats," negotiating the balance between being police officers and being black.<sup>271</sup>

### **The Limits of Separation: The Officers' Experience**

The original nine black police officers came on to the Memphis Police force as tokens of racial harmony. However, the reality of their experience proved that in fact black officers represented continued white control and the limits of black equality. As they began their tenure as black police officers for the Memphis Police Department, the black officers focused on their job as law enforcement officers. But when they took to the streets to do that job, they could not escape their race and the implications that fact would have on their role as police officers. White officials altered almost every aspect of

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<sup>271</sup> Charles Holmes, "Negro Officers Travel Tough Road."

being a Memphis police officer, from duties to dress, to separate these black officers from their white counterparts. The steps taken to isolate black officers undermined their power and authority. The differences between black and white officers identified black officers as unequal to their white counterparts. These differences were a constant reminder that although the city now had black police officers, their presence would not be a catalyst for creating racial equality, as racial separation perpetuated ideas of racial difference.

Black police officers were only police officers within the confines of the regulations put in place by the Memphis Police Department, making it difficult for the black officers to garner the kind of respect they deserved among black citizens. Black officers looked different from their white counterparts, wearing blue shirts under their blue uniforms rather than the white shirts worn by the rest of the department. This distinct uniform further physically differentiated black officers within the police department and relegated them to the status of “other” by their appearance. Black officers were required to change their clothes upon beginning and finishing their shifts, wearing their uniforms strictly when they were on patrol. This uniform regulation symbolized the limits of black policing. Black police officers were only police officers within the confines of their patrol shifts and their specified duty assignments.<sup>272</sup>

In Memphis, the restrictions on black officers’ authority were introduced in their training, as their training officer advised them on how to best balance the restrictions with their duties as officers of the law. The officers’ two-week training course was conducted

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<sup>272</sup> “New Negro Officers Walking Their Beats”; and Gloria Brown-Melton, “Blacks in Memphis, 1920-1955: A Historical Study,” (Ph.D. diss., Washington State University, 1982), 262.

entirely separate from any training of white officers. At the conclusion of their training, Inspector Bill Rainey assured them, “Look you are a police officer, you are a member of the Memphis Police Department.... You have a badge, you have a pistol, you have a club and you have authority. But, I would recommend you use some common sense.” His message to these officers was that although they technically had the authority of the Memphis Police Department behind them, there were limits to what the citizens of Memphis, especially whites, would accept. They would have to be constantly aware of the limits on acceptable black police behavior. Even as Rainey told the officers they had all the authority of a police officer, he also reminded them that they could not detain white offenders. They were limited to arresting black offenders only. Thus, the part of their training where they were “delicately taught about the discipline of a Midnight Ramble and dealing with white people as such.”<sup>273</sup> The message was that black officers’ only real authority lay in their ability to control the black population in order to make Beale Street safer for white visitors.

Cities across the South with black police officers on their forces used a variety of tactics to separate black officers from white officers. Only about one third of cities allowed officers to arrest any lawbreaker, regardless of color. Some cities allowed black officers to arrest whites only when the white offenders were in black neighborhoods. In other cities, when a black officer detained a suspect, he was expected to call white officers and monitor the suspect until the white officer arrived. These types of restrictions ensured that the black officer was “kept in his place.” The restrictions

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<sup>273</sup> Arthur Webb, “Beale Street Can Talk; and Gregg Gordon, “Beale Street Can Talk.”

reinforced subordination and ensured the black officers did not have authority beyond that deemed appropriate for their race. This type of “second-class officership” reminded the black officers of their second-class citizenship and was a constant reminder that although they were now police officers, white supremacy would continue to dominate their experience.<sup>274</sup>

Black officers were also physically isolated from their white counterparts. Black officers in Memphis met for roll call at a separate sub-station located on Beale Street, while all other police officers met for roll call at the main police station. This practice ensured that black officers did not intermingle with white officers and remained confined to their designated beat. In courtroom proceedings black officers’ physical separation and second-class officership were also clear. Even if they were the arresting officers, black officers were not permitted to be the official lead officer in court. Black officers had to sit on separate benches when they came to the courtroom. If these benches were filled by the white officers also present in court that day, then the court required the black officers to stand.<sup>275</sup> Thus, from arrest to trial, the department’s insistence on continuing to abide by social customs of white supremacy and black deference consistently undermined the authority of black officers.

Even with all of the restrictions on black officers, the nine black men first hired in 1948 had a job to do. When they began patrolling the streets of Memphis, they did so

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<sup>274</sup> Elliott M. Rudwick, “The Southern Negro Policeman and the White Offender,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 30.4 (Autumn 1961): 429-430.

<sup>275</sup> Interview of Ernest Withers by Ed Franks, March 12, 1995, tape.

with high hopes about the impact they would have on their community. “I am going to enforce the law to a T,” Roscoe McWilliams told a reporter for the *Press-Scimitar* his first night patrolling Beale Street. Officer Claudius Phillips articulated his first priority as a policemen that first night as well, “I’m going to enforce the law just like it should be, regardless of who it hurts.” These officers imagined that they would be first and foremost officers of the law, enforcing it equally and justly for all citizens. From the outset, these men wanted to be a positive influence on their communities. Just as their supporters wanted them to represent the best of the race, these men also wanted to “conduct ourselves so that our appointments will be a cause of pride.”<sup>276</sup>

The Noonday Lunch Club, an organization made up of prominent black business and community leaders, honored the black officers at a luncheon several months after the officers were first appointed to the force. Officer Wendell Robinson assured the group of black elites that “we know that our record will become a source of pride on the part of you here.” Robinson acknowledged that his success in the Memphis Police Department depended in large part on the support of the men in the room. His statement also reinforced the idea that these men would represent the best the race. The officers’ service to the city’s black communities would be a source of pride for the men associated with the Noonday Lunch Club because the officers would work to uphold the standards of respectability to which Club members ascribed. “We realize we are paid servants of the public,” Officer Wendell Robinson told the group, “and wish to assure you now that we

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<sup>276</sup> “A Historic Saturday Night on Beale Street- Negro Policemen.”

are desirous of being the best friends our citizens can look to.”<sup>277</sup> Working to uphold the expectations laid out for them by the business and political elite who envisioned the officers as ambassadors of the race, black officers worked to enforce a standard of respectability amongst Memphis’s black citizens, particularly the working-class men and women who frequented Beale Street.

Even in those first days on the force, black officer Jewel Jubirt described how the officers were “going to get rid of so many whisky bottles on this street. There’s not going to be all this public profanity.” Jubirt’s statement speaks to this idea of reforming the behavior of blacks on Beale Street to better meet expectations of respectability. The officers would simultaneously protect the black residents and visitors to the street from white authority and enforce respectability. Jubirt framed the officers’ job in terms of familial protection and a sense of community. Jubirt’s understanding of his job can be attributed to the context in which he became a police officer.<sup>278</sup> Jubirt and his fellow black officers became police officers in a city with a history of police brutality in which women, and even children, were subject to the threat of violence. Black officers were hired to the police force as a result of a grassroots community campaign calling for greater protection of the city’s black residents, particularly those living in the primarily working-class neighborhoods. The black police officers hired at this moment came onto the force believing their job was to protect black Memphians from abuse by white police. Thus, these officers worked to bring safety and respectability to their fellow black

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<sup>277</sup> “Police Officers Honored By Noonday Luncheon Club,” *Memphis World*, April 12, 1949.

<sup>278</sup> “A Historic Saturday Night on Beale Street.”

Memphians. These black officers saw their job of cleaning up Beale Street in both literal and figurative terms.

Their conception of their role as police officers who enforced the law and worked to end the corruption and vice on Beale Street informed the way black officers did their job. The officers' first arrests reflected the purpose of enforcing respectability and cleaning up Beale Street. After a black man slapped his wife, she went to the officers, asking them to arrest her husband. When they discovered that she had been cursing loudly in public, they also arrested her.<sup>279</sup> From their beats on Beale Street, black officers could control the black population and enforce respectability. In many ways, these actions translated into tighter control over black behavior on Beale Street.

While white officers saw Beale Street in terms of black inferiority and the opportunity to exploit the community, black officers imagined the Beale Street area as one belonging to the city's black residents, a source of pride for black Memphians that needed to be protected so it could continue to thrive. And from the outset black officers worked to change Beale Street from a center for vice to an area all blacks, including families, could enjoy. Almost a year after they began, the Y.W.C.A. praised the officers for making the streets around the center safer. For several years, the organization had been collecting money for the purpose of erecting a fence. "The fence was necessary due to the fact that hoodlums had been doing a great deal of damage," a member of the Y.W.C.A. board of directors told the *Commercial Appeal*. But after black officers took to the streets, "the need for the fence no longer existed because the hoodlums have been

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

dispersed ever since the negro police started patrolling.”<sup>280</sup> Their focus on enforcing the law distinguished the black officers from the white officers who previously had patrolled the Beale Street area. Black officers worked to clean up the area rather than profit from it.

The black officers’ actions in comparison to those of the white officers highlight the difference in the ways that these black officers envisioned their patrol area. Because the Beale Street area was the primary business and entertainment district geared toward Memphis blacks, it was the heart of the city’s black community. Officer Jerry Williams had fond memories of Beale Street in the 1940s: “It should have been named ‘Soul Street’ because that was the place people came to be renewed, refreshed – spiritually or whatever.” Williams “used to anticipate going to work every day because I knew you could have a good time down there.” As members of that larger black community, black officers had a stake in the continued success of Beale Street. Unlike white officers who saw the Beale area as a place to make a profit, the black officers were connected to the black business owners and Beale Street customers and therefore viewed it in terms of using their authority to better the area. “I had a pride in my heritage. I believed I could be a service to the community,” Officer Wendell Robinson told a reporter many years later.<sup>281</sup> The officers wanted to set themselves apart by not operating in their own self-interest or in the interest of the highest bidder, as was the previous practice of corrupt white police officers.

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid; and “Negro Police Praised.”

<sup>281</sup> Arthur L. Webb, “Beale Street Can Talk”; and John Beifuss, “Proud and Unbowed.”

From the outset, black officers tried to set themselves up in contrast to the white officers in carrying out their police work patrolling the Beale Street area. As Claudius Phillips had articulated that first night, his first priority as a policeman was “to enforce the law just like it should be regardless of who it hurts.” Officer Phillips and others in his cohort of black officers spoke of focusing their energies on being law enforcement officers above all else, working to uphold the law equally. As officer Robinson told a reporter that first night, “This is an honor. As long as people co-operate we’re going to get along fine. If they don’t, we’ll have to use other measures.”<sup>282</sup> These officers’ comments hint at the tension within the community over how black officers were going to do their job. The expectations that black officers would simultaneously protect the black community, enforce the law equally, and uphold racial segregation were potentially conflicting objectives, and in some cases caused mistrust among the black Beale Streeters.

In his column “Down on Beale Ave.,” the black writer, teacher, and disc jockey, Nat D. Williams, noted that “even with Technicolor policemen walking the Beale Street ‘beats,’” there was still a tendency for Beale Streeters to hide from the police. Some of the people on Beale Street continued to fear the police, even police of their own race. According to Officer Roscoe McWilliams, because this was the first time that many black citizens could remember there being black police officers, “a lot of people could not

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<sup>282</sup> In the same article, Officer Roscoe McWilliams also expresses a similar sentiment “I am going to enforce the law to a T,” in “A Historic Saturday Night on Beale Street”; and Quoted in Robert Johnson, “Good Evening: Officers Robinson and Turner Were ‘Footsteps in the Sand,’” *Press-Scimitar*, October 10, 1973.

adjust to that readily so there was more resisting arrest.”<sup>283</sup> These black officers had to prove to the average black Memphian, who frequented Beale Street for business and for pleasure that they were going to be different from the brutal and corrupt white police officers.

However, black officers’ attempts to uphold the law equally sometimes caused resentment towards them and the job they were trying to do. “Ain’t no nigger gonna arrest me,” one black woman told Officer Robinson as he attempted to detain her for public disturbance on Beale Street. This woman clearly did not concede any sort of authority to Robinson and his role as a police officer. The lack of respect shown to these black officers led several of them to feel as though “we had to be tougher” on black defenders. Because white officers had allowed blacks to cuss, beat up on each other, and partake in general vice activities unencumbered, when black officers began to crack down on such activity, some in the black community resented it and resisted the authority of the black officers. Even though newspaper editorials leading up to the hiring of black police officers had warned that black officers would not be “easier” on black offenders, the experience of black officers revealed that some in the black community expected otherwise. “Our people look for us to bend,” Ben Whitney commented, “They say ‘I’m a Negro just like you!’” Just as the police department defined these officers first by their

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<sup>283</sup> Nat D. Williams, “Down on Beale Ave,” *Memphis World*, March 11, 1949; and Arthur Webb, “Beale Street Can Talk.”

race, so too did members of their own community, even as the officers continued to assert, “We are policemen first.”<sup>284</sup>

This resistance to the job black police officers did persisted. One black Beale Street café owner told the *Press-Scimitar* that a black officer was a “bully” after he arrested an employee of the café for profanity, an arrest that was just one of several arrests of the café’s employees by the black police officer, according to the owner. One city court judge admonished the black defendants in a case before his court for not “giving proper respect to the Colored Officers” who arrested them. The case involved a resisting arrest charge against a black husband and wife, who had been arrested during a public quarrel with the wife’s sister. The judge reprimanded the defendants for their treatment of the officers. The judge then expanded his criticism to all black citizens for not showing proper respect for black officers and their authority. The judge insisted that black Memphians “must respect” black officers in order for them to be successful.<sup>285</sup> The obvious differences between black and white officers caused some among Memphis’s black residents to question the authority of black officers, thus making it more difficult for them to perform their duties.

Black officers’ approach to policing also caused tensions with their white counterparts. “There was the animosity we got from our own people and from the White police officers,” Jerry Williams remembered. These tensions were primarily due to black

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<sup>284</sup> John Beifuss, “Proud and Unbowed”; Robert Johnson, “Good Evening: Officers Robinson and Turner Were ‘Footsteps in the Sand’”; L. O. Swingler, “Another Argument For Negro Policemen,” *Memphis World*, June 1, 1948; and Charles Holmes, “Negro Officers Travel Tough Road.”

<sup>285</sup> “Negro Officer Called a Bully,” *Press-Scimitar*, December 26, 1951; and “‘Must Respect Colored Officers,’ Judge Sellers Tells Defendants,” *Memphis World*, November 15, 1949.

officers' unwillingness to operate in the same corrupt manner that white officers had. With black officers patrolling the Beale Street area, white officers were no longer collecting bribes and handouts from the criminal elements of Beale, who could no longer buy their way out of trouble. White officers had made a considerable profit, Williams recalled, "You're talking four or five hundred dollars a week that some of those people were making down there...so you can understand the hostility." Officer Ernest Withers contends that he was fired in 1951 because of this hostility. According to Withers, he was terminated in retaliation for the arrest of a known bootlegger whose operations were supposedly protected by a white police officer. "Some people are not able to live through transitions without maintain[ing] a sense of anger," Withers noted as he remembered the abuse he and other officers sometimes experienced from their white counterparts.<sup>286</sup>

White officers also did not treat black officers as equals in their professional positions or as men. Although Police Department officials quickly realized the regulation barring black officers from arresting white offenders was impractical and within the first few years stopped enforcing it, the regulation remained official, as notions about racial space and deference continued. In one instance, after arresting two white offenders, the black officers called in white officers to drive the perpetrators to the station. Because the black officers also had to go to fill out the arrest forms, all six people piled into the patrol car, black officers and white offenders in the back seat and white police officers up front.

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<sup>286</sup> Arthur Webb, "Beale Street Can Talk," *Memphis Downtowner Magazine*, November 1997; "Response Time: 1948"; and This story was also recounted in an interview of Withers by Ed Frank, March 12, 1995. Other black officers spoke of harsh treatment by white officers, see Charles Holmes, "Negro Officers Travel Tough Road."

When spotted by a fellow white officer, the officer outside the vehicle called out, “Goddamn what you got them two niggers back there with them white folks?” It is unclear whether he was noticing that the black officers were forced to ride in the back of the police car with the perpetrators as if they themselves were also criminals, or if the officer was commenting on the impropriety of having blacks and whites seated together in the vehicle. The use of the term “nigger” implied the racist attitude of the officer, making the latter observation the more probable explanation for his comments. The black officers would have been in uniform, clearly identified as police officers. That the white officer chose to refer to them as “niggers” emphasizes the lack of respect some white officers had for their black counterparts. The white officer’s comment degraded the black officers as police officers and as black men.<sup>287</sup>

Unlike some of the white officers, supporters of black officers, like the court judge cited above and other white officials, recognized the impact these officers could have on reducing black crime. The officers proved to be a valuable tool for white law enforcement, particularly when it came to major crimes, such as armed robbery or homicide, in black neighborhoods. Black officers were better able to communicate with community members to gain access to information. In one instance, R. J. Turner and Marion Teague went undercover to stop a string of armed robberies. By going

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<sup>287</sup> Story recounted in an interview with Ernest Withers by Ed Frank, March 12, 1995. The details of this story could not be confirmed, but the spirit of the story speaks to the white supremacist mentality that prevailed in the police department and colored black officers’ ability to perform their duties.

undercover, the officers were able to discern the identities of the robbers and thus make the arrest. In this instance, the officers were able to use their race to their advantage.<sup>288</sup>

The differences in the way the black officers enforced the law brought them praise from local leaders, both black and white. At the Noonday Lunch Club luncheon, Club member and MUL director Rev. J.A. McDaniel praised the officers for having “acquitted themselves above reproach, [having] been alert to duty, avoided temptations and offers of gratuities...and more important than all hav[ing] become our ambassadors of inter-racial goodwill.” McDaniel’s praise of the officers echoes the expectations of earlier advocates for hiring black police officers. The officers proved themselves to be valuable assets to the Memphis Police Department, enforcing the law and bringing respectability to black neighborhoods by reducing profanity, public drunkenness, and vice. Both white and black officials praised the black officers throughout the first years of their employment for their role in controlling the black population and acting as “goodwill ambassadors” between the races.<sup>289</sup>

For white leaders, these black officers lived up to expectations. They successfully limited black crime, reduced black complaints against the police, and were a useful tool for the Department in solving crimes involving blacks. In the annual report released by the Police Homicide Bureau for 1948, the homicide division praised black officers for helping the homicide unit to secure information about cases outside their patrol area but

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<sup>288</sup> “Race Officers Capture Armed Robber-Promoted,” *Memphis World*, October 3, 1950.

<sup>289</sup> “Police Officers Honored By Noonday Luncheon Club.” This phrase “good will ambassadors” was used a number of times by a number of different people publicly; and Arthur Webb, “Beale Street Can Talk,” *Memphis Downtowner Magazine*, November, 1997.

involving black suspects. In some cases, these black officers were even used to pick up suspects wanted by the homicide division.<sup>290</sup> Black officers proved to be a valuable tool for policing of black neighborhoods. Their presence offered a buffer between white police officers and black residents, alleviating some of the tensions over police treatment of black Memphians by white police officers.

However, for black Memphians living in black neighborhoods outside of the Beale Street area, black officers had not provided the kind of protection and equal justice originally imagined. As the East Memphis Citizens Club reminded the mayor, in the Binghampton neighborhood, “We are still without their protection.” Keeping black officers confined to Beale Street did not serve to protect black community members in other black neighborhoods, leaving them vulnerable to continued white police brutality. The success of black police officers in the eyes of white officials and black Memphians’ continued demands for black officers in other black neighborhoods led to the expansion of black officers’ duties in late 1948 to include a patrol car shift in the Orange Mound neighborhood. However, this new beat did not mean an expansion of authority. In the announcement of the patrol car unit, officials were sure to remind the public that black officers would only patrol this primarily black area of the city and would not arrest white offenders.<sup>291</sup> Even as their duties expanded, the black police officers in Memphis continued to be defined by their race.

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<sup>290</sup> “Negro Police Lauded by Homicide Report,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 18, 1949.

<sup>291</sup> “Binghampton Negroes Seeking Protection,” news clip undated Box 4, Folder 29, The Papers of Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton, Special Collections, Ned R. McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee; “A Petition to the Honorable Watkins Overton, Mayor of the City of

The black officers hired in 1948 “traveled a tough road,” Wendell Robinson noted when looking back. The reality of balancing the expectations of the white and black communities while facing continued segregation, discrimination, and disrespect proved a tall order for the nine black police officers hired in 1948. By the middle of the 1950s only two of these original nine remained on the force. The racial discrimination the original officers faced was cited as the reason for at least two of the officers leaving the force. Ernest Withers’s dismissal in 1951 for conduct unbecoming an officer was supposedly the result of his arresting the wrong bootlegger and putting a dent in the pocketbook of the white officer who protected the criminal. A year later, Roscoe McWilliams left the force because of the sporadic work schedule. According to McWilliams his schedule became more sporadic after his sister began working with the NAACP to register black Memphis voters. In both cases the officers were seemingly pushed out of the Police Department for overstepping the bounds of white supremacy. Clearly an attitude of racial suspicion surrounded the working lives of these officers, which further isolated them based on their race.<sup>292</sup>

Three of the officers were fired for reasons related to public drunkenness. In the spring of 1949, Claudius Phillips was suspended for being drunk in public. Then four months later he was fired after reporting for roll call inebriated. Marion Teague was fired in 1950 after being arrested for drunkenness and assault and battery while off duty.

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Memphis,” undated, Series II, Box 25: “Fire and Police, 1951,” The Papers of Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton, Memphis Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee; and “Negro Officers Earn Radio Squad Car Duty,” *Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1948.

<sup>292</sup> Interview of Ernest Withers by Ed Franks, March 12, 1995, tape; and Bill Dries, “Response Time: 1948.”

James Peques resigned from the force in 1955 after he “got in a little trouble. I had an accident and had a few drinks.” These alcohol-related dismissals hint at the pressure these officers experienced being black police officers. The fact that, while off duty, these men were drinking to excess points to the need they had to disconnect themselves from reality. Pegues, who spoke sparingly of his time on the force, simply described the experience as “difficult.”<sup>293</sup>

When they discussed their experience on the police force in those early years, many of the original officers spoke mainly of the difficulties. “There were times I just couldn’t take it any more and wanted to quit,” R.J. Turner remembered. Jerry Williams did quit, choosing to join the military and fight in Korea rather than remain a Memphis police officer. As he recalled, “Being a black police officer in a Southern city in 1948 was hell.” Even as police officers these men could not escape their race. Being a black police officer in 1948 meant you were first and foremost identified as black. Thus, these men faced continuous discrimination and disrespect from both white and black Memphians.<sup>294</sup>

Wendell Robinson and R. J. Turner stayed on with the Memphis Police Department, each serving more than thirty years before retiring. Both men believed they had to stick it out to prove black men were equally qualified to serve as police officers. Turner believed “the only reason I stuck it out was because I wanted to prove they

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<sup>293</sup> “Officer Phillips Fired,” *Memphis World*, October 21, 1949; “Former Memphian Shot,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 10, 1954; and Bill Dries, “Response Time: 1948.”

<sup>294</sup> Menno Duerksen, “Abused at First, Negro Policemen Now in Demand, Greatly Respect,” *Press-Scimitar*, February 14, 1969; and “Police Officer Williams Leaves for Army,” *Memphis World*, February 27, 1951.

couldn't run me off.... If we (Robinson and Turner) had quit too, it might have been a long time before there were more black police officers.” Robinson believed that the work he was doing was advancing the place of black Memphians. “The city might have said, ‘We gave them their chance, and they couldn't do it.’”<sup>295</sup> True to the original expectations of these black officers, Robinson and Turner believed they were serving the larger black community of Memphis in their role as police officers, serving not only to protect black citizens but also to advance the place of blacks in Memphis by proving black ability and thus justifying greater equality in all areas of life.

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<sup>295</sup> Menno Duerksen, “Abused at First, Negro Policemen Now in Demand, Greatly Respect”; and John Beifuss, “Proud and Unbowed.”

CHAPTER VII  
BLACK POLICE OFFICERS:  
REINFORCING SEGREGATION OR PAVING THE WAY FOR  
BLACK EQUALITY?

If there were heroes in this story of Memphis's first black police officers, they were Wendell Robinson and R.J. Turner. Robinson and Turner were the only two of the original nine officers hired in 1948 who remained on the force through retirement. These two men remained with the Memphis Police Department because they believed they had to prove their ability, and black ability more generally, to do the job of police officer. These two men believed they were not only police officers but also ambassadors of their race. Over the years, Robinson and Turner were able to move up in the ranks, paving the way for advancements by blacks in the police department. In 1973, Robinson became the first black head of a police bureau in Memphis when he was named head of the homicide division.

The hiring of black police officers in 1948, however, did not solve the problems of police brutality or an unequal justice system. An NAACP complaint against the Memphis Police Department in 1965 mirrored the attack on Adelaide Hudson some twenty years previous. In early December of 1965, police entered the home of Mrs. Barbara Garner, a black Memphis woman. A statement by the NAACP charged that the officers search Garner's home without a warrant and "pushed around" Garner and her

fourteen-year-old son. Both Garner and her son were arrested on charges of disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. This episode highlights white police officers continued disregard for the sanctity of a black person's home and black women and children's continued vulnerability at the hands of white officers. Even though by 1965 the white officer who "used a little bit more authority than necessary" was dismissed from the police department, challenges to that authority could still be met with brutality.<sup>296</sup>

The potential repercussions for excessive force in arresting a black person did not end police brutality either. Three years after the Garner incident the NAACP called for city council members to meet with civil rights leaders to discuss police brutality. The city of Memphis had been in an uproar in the days following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the local NAACP chapter received multiple complaints of police brutality. Maxine Smith, the executive secretary of the Memphis NAACP chapter and black civil rights activist, called for a special panel to be formed to hear these accusations of police brutality. "I have no faith in the Police Department's investigating itself," Smith declared, echoing the distrust in the Memphis Police Department heard two decades earlier. Tension continued to dominate race relations in Memphis, particularly in terms of black community and police interactions, as white police officers in Memphis continued to use violence to control the black community.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> John Beifuss, "Proud and Unbowed," *Commercial Appeal*, February 18, 1989; and Menno Duerksen, "Policeman Fired in Brutality Probe," *Press-Scimitar*, December 14, 1965.

<sup>297</sup> Jimmie Covington, "Council Agrees To Meet With Rights Chiefs To Air Police Brutality Charges," *Commercial Appeal*, April 17, 1968.

For black Memphians in 1948, black police officers were representative of equality. They were symbols of black authority and the hope of a fair deal for blacks in Memphis. However, as seen in the continuation of police brutality against blacks through the 1960s, their presence did not guarantee equality. Thus, if measured by the standard of the initial intention of equal justice and acknowledgement of black civil rights, the story of hiring black police officers was not one of success.

But black police officers continued to hold symbolic meaning for the black community. Looking back over forty years of service, Officer Wendell Robinson declared, “All my years and all the crap I took wasn’t in vain.” In Robinson’s estimation, the continued presence of black police officers on the Memphis police force starting in 1948 eventually led to black advancement and greater black equality. However, as Robinson’s comment suggests, the continued adherence to racial segregation by the Memphis Police Department, and the disrespect and degradation of black police officers that resulted, limited advancement for those black police officers hired in 1948. Both black officers’ own advancement within the police force and the opportunities for advancements for the black community as a whole were limited by continued racial segregation. In numbers alone, it was not until four decades later that black police officers represented one-third of the total number of police officers in Memphis, in a city where the black population was just under 50 percent.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid.; and Christopher Silver and John V Moeser, *Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1960* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 32.

In Memphis, the push for black officers emerged out of the contentious racial climate of the immediate postwar period. The rhetoric of black equality that captured national attention in the late 1940s and an increase in the number of brutal attacks by police on black citizens ignited the black community campaign to hire black police officers. In 1948, Memphis leaders imagined the hiring of black police officers as a new strategy for maintaining racial peace. For the black community, black police officers represented black equality and a more equal justice system. For whites, they represented control. Black officers were token concessions to the black community to ensure the continuation of the old racial hierarchy.<sup>299</sup>

Like other southern police departments that hired black officers during the 1940s, the Memphis Police Department was slow to hire additional black officers after the initial hiring in 1948. Four additional black officers were hired in 1951, but by the mid-1950s hiring of black police almost halted completely. No additional black officers were hired until the 1960s, by which time only two of the original nine officers remained on the force.<sup>300</sup>

By the mid-1950s, race relations in the urban South had shifted in the wake of the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision, which fundamentally altered the legal framework of the Jim Crow system of segregation. Historian Elliot Rudwick found that throughout the South the total number of black police officers serving on southern police

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<sup>299</sup> Charles Holmes, "Negro Officers Travel Tough Road," *Commercial Appeal*, May 24, 1962. For details on which of these original officers left the police force and the reasons for their departure, see previous chapter.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*

forces stagnated between 1954 and 1959. Rudwick wondered, “Had white opposition to the Supreme Court school desegregation decisions snuffed out newly-won gains of Negroes in the police field?” Although Rudwick did not find direct evidence of this connection, a review of the statistical data led Rudwick to the conclusion that post-*Brown* white backlash extended to the hiring of black police officers.<sup>301</sup> Rudwick’s conclusion is reflected in the hiring pattern in Memphis, where, although black officers continued to serve on the Memphis police force, they did so in small numbers and within a racially segregated system.

The hiring of black police officers in Memphis picked up again after 1960 when the department hired twelve more black officers. And by 1962 there were twenty-six black officers out of a total of 987 officers in the Memphis Police Department. It was not until 1964 that black officers joined white officers for roll call at police headquarters, and even then, the black and white officers lined up on opposite walls. But by 1969 there were seventy-eight black police officers on the Memphis police force; training was integrated as well as squad car patrols. As one black officer described it, “We are no

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<sup>301</sup> Elliot Rudwick, “Negro Police Employment in the Urban South,” *The Journal of Negro Education*, 30:2 (Spring 1961): 102. For more on how the *Brown v. Board* decision altered southern race relations, see Jason Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), chapter 5; Steve Estes, *I Am A Man!: Race, Manhood, And The Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), chapter 2; and Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), chapters 5-6.

longer flies in the buttermilk,” describing black officers as integrated into the force rather than undesirable pests.<sup>302</sup>

Officers Robinson, Turner, and the other black officers who followed them, believed that, as police officers, they were working to better their own black community in Memphis. As Robinson noted years later, he joined the police force because he “believed I could be a service to the community.” This belief in serving the black community was reflected in the work these two men did as police officers. R.J. Turner founded the Community Relations Squad in the late 1960s, a special unit within the police department charged with improving community relations between black Memphians and the police department. The attitude of those black officers who came into the department in the 1960s also reflected this focus on bettering the community. When Officer Thomas Bethany decided to join the force in 1968, his mother warned him that he could not be a good Christian and a police officer. But Bethany believed that he could. Bethany knew of the “police brutality and friction between the black community and police. I decided the only way to do anything about it was to become a part of it,” and work from within the system to improve it.<sup>303</sup> The black officers who joined the force between 1948 and the late 1960s came from within Memphis’s own black community. Reflective of the expectations of those who had originally campaigned for the hiring of

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<sup>302</sup> Charles Holmes, “Negro Officers Travel Tough Road”; John Beifuss, “Proud and Unbowed”; and Menno Duerksen, “Abused at First, Negro Policemen Now in Demand, Greatly Respect,” *Press-Scimitar*, February 14, 1969.

<sup>303</sup> John Beifuss, “Proud and Unbowed”; and Menno Duerksen, “Abused at First, Negro Policemen Now in Demand, Greatly Respected.”

black police officers in 1948, these later black officers imagined that helping to protect and better their community was part of their purpose as black police officers.

This emphasis on these officers being *black* police officers continued to define the experience of black officers in Memphis. Officers Robinson and Bethany understood their role as police officers in terms of the black community from which they came, as did their white counterparts. Even as black officers became more integrated within the Memphis Police Department during the 1960s, their duties as police officers continued to be specific to their race. In 1962, fourteen years after their initial hiring, black officers were still confined to patrolling black neighborhoods. When black officers were finally allowed to conduct business at headquarters in 1964, they continued to be separated from the white officers. A 1969 article in the *Commercial Appeal* profiling black officers noted the praise they received from their superiors. Several white officers declared that they preferred a black partner, especially when working crimes in black neighborhoods. They found that “Negro witnesses will talk more to a Negro detective. They help us overcome communication barriers.” So, even as black officers were seen as an asset to the department, white officers continued to identify race as black officers’ particular strength when performing their police duties.<sup>304</sup>

Black police officers in 1969 continued to act as a buffer between white police and the black community. In light of racial tensions at the time, black officers had become particularly valuable assets to the Memphis police force. The 1969 *Commercial*

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<sup>304</sup> Charles Holmes, “Negro Officers Travel Tough Road”; John Beifuss, “Proud and Unbowed”; and Menno Duerksen, “Abused at First, Negro Policemen Now in Demand, Greatly Respect.”

*Appeal* article was written less than a year after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis during a strike among the city's sanitation workers. In the wake of King's assassination, several days of rioting erupted in Memphis, and the continued disregard for black life and black civil rights was thrown into the national limelight. Thus in 1969, the article noted, "Many white detectives – especially since racial tension has increased in recent years – want a black partner." Just as had been the idea in 1948, black police officers would work to further segregate white from black. The idea that black officers communicated better with the black community reiterated the arguments made two decades before when those advocating for the hiring of black police officers in the 1940s argued that "Negro officers would greatly aid in the detection and prevention of crime since Negroes understand each other better."<sup>305</sup> Just as in 1948, black police officers continued to be black first and police officers second.

While the duties and perceptions of black police officers continued to reinforce racial segregation in the decades following the 1948 hiring, injustice and discrimination in police interactions with black Memphians also continued. In 1971, a case of police brutality again caused uproar within the black community. A mob of police officers beat seventeen-year-old Elton Hayes after a brief car chase that ended when Hayes crashed his pickup truck. While officers claimed that Hayes's injuries were sustained during the

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<sup>305</sup> Menno Duerksen, "Abused at First, Negro Policemen Now in Demand, Greatly Respect"; and "Negro Policemen are Needed in Southern Cities," *The Southern Frontier*, March, 1943. For more on the King assassination and its impact on the city, see Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), chapter 8; and Michael Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. , 2007), chapters 19-21.

crash, a medical examiner later testified that Hayes's death was the result of a severe beating. Black outrage over the killing of Elton Hayes turned violent, resulting in several days of rioting and the suspension of twenty-three white police officers. Two years later, the eight policemen and sheriff's deputies charged with Hayes's murder were acquitted.<sup>306</sup> Reminiscent of the police brutality cases almost three decades before, the Memphis justice system refused to hold white police officers accountable for the death of a black man. The presence of black police officers did not eradicate police brutality, nor, it would appear, did it help to secure greater justice for black Memphians.

In the late 1970s, Memphis NAACP leader Maxine Smith testified before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in Memphis. Her words reflected the continued lack of racial justice in Memphis. According to Smith's testimony, when white police officers came into the black community "the sanctity of the home is just completely ignored. Police just enter homes as if they owned them...without benefit of a warrant or anything else."<sup>307</sup> Smith's words brought to mind the invasion of Adelaide Hudson's or Eli Blaine's homes in 1947 and 1948. Then, the invasion of black homes was about white control and domination over the black community. The home invasions and subsequent beatings of Hudson and Blaine were a response to the perceived threat to white supremacy and the southern system of racial segregation. Those advocating for black police officers in 1948 argued that black police officers would bring more equal justice to

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<sup>306</sup> Honey, 500; "Memphis Police Concerned Over Racial Tension," *Lakeland Ledger*, October 14, 1974; and "8 Memphis Police Free in Homicide," *The Afro American*, December 15, 1973.

<sup>307</sup> United States Commission on Civil Rights, "Civic Crisis – Civic Challenge: Police – Community Relations in Memphis: A Report." Prepared by the Tennessee Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1978: 31-32.

black community interactions with police. However, according to Smith's testimony in the late 1970s, white police efforts to dominate and control the city's black community continued to lead to injustice.

This systematic injustice and the use of "trite" explanations, as L.O. Swingler termed them in 1948, for police brutality continued to be the norm in the Memphis Police Department. Making the same argument that *Memphis World* editor L.O. Swingler made three decades before, Maxine Smith argued that the injustices of police brutality were rooted in a racially biased policing system. The use of charges "such as 'disorderly conduct' and 'resisting arrest' were often used as 'license' for a police officer to physically and verbally abuse a citizen." The Memphis Police Department, as it tried to justify the actions of its officers, continued to make excuses for police brutality that put the onus of wrongdoing on the victims of the police brutality. The "trite" explanations for police brutality used in the 1970s, as in the 1940s, represented the lack of justice for blacks in their encounters with white police officers and reinforced black inequality. Further mirroring the past, Smith called for hiring even more black police officers to bring more "sensitivity to the needs and the desires of black people," by having more black voices on the city's police force, particular in policy-making positions.<sup>308</sup>

The words of Maxine Smith in the late 1970s reflected the ways in which the problems of the past had not been solved by the strategy of hiring black police officers. In her estimation, the justice system still discriminated against the black community.

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<sup>308</sup> L. O. Swingler, "It's Becoming Trite," *Memphis World*, August 24, 1948; and United States Commission on Civil Rights, "Civic Crisis - Civic Challenge: Police – Community Relations in Memphis: A Report," 32. By 1970, Memphis's total population was 623,530 of which blacks represented 38.9 %.

Smith argued that the city and its leaders had “done no more than it has been forced to do” in terms of addressing injustice towards black citizens and expanding black representation. As the black community discovered during the campaign for black officers in 1948, city leaders would not act in favor of greater black equality unless forced. Black Memphians used their voting power in 1948 in order to force change. By defeating the Crump political machine candidate in the August 1948 primary election, black Memphians were able to force the Crump machine to acknowledge the needs of black Memphians and take action to meet their demands for black police officers. What was clear in Maxine Smith’s testimony was that the onus of creating change continued to rest with the city’s black community.<sup>309</sup>

Maxine Smith’s words not only reflected the arguments for black police officers used in the 1948 campaign, but they also demonstrated that the same definitions of freedom and equality continued to dominate the discussion of black rights in Memphis. The definitions of freedom and equality were still intertwined with notions of physical protection. The police and the black community’s interactions with police still dominated the discussion of racial injustice and racial inequality. As Memphis Urban League director Herman Ewing reminded the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in the late 1970s, there were white officers “who were certainly very vigorous in enforcing the separate but equal doctrines of not many years ago,” at a time when the function of the police department to enforce racial segregation was not far removed from the Memphis

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<sup>309</sup> United States Commission on Civil Rights, “Civic Crisis - Civic Challenge: Police – Community Relations in Memphis: A Report,” 32. For more on the campaign for black police officers in 1948 and the use of black votes to defeat the Crump political machine in the 1948 primary election see Chapter IV.

of the 1970s.<sup>310</sup> The city continued to live with the legacy of racial inequality, and the police department continued to be the physical embodiment of racial justice (either the lack thereof or the hope of greater equality within the justice system). What was clear in the 1970s was that the black community continued to associate racial discrimination and racial injustice with police brutality.

Throughout the campaign for black police officers in 1948 and continuing through subsequent decades, black Memphians continued to push for positive change. Officers Wendell Robison and R.J. Turner were representative of this activist spirit among black Memphians, as they remained in the Memphis Police Department continuing to work to better their community and relations between police officers and the black community. This spirit of activism for change continued into the 1970s when, in 1973, black police officers in Memphis founded the Afro-American Police Association. This black police officers' organization was founded with the purpose of fighting against continued discrimination in the hiring and promotion of black police officers. Today, the organization's mission statement continues to reflect that focus on justice and the relationship between the black community and the Memphis Police Department.<sup>311</sup>

In 1948, in Memphis, surrounded by a national rhetoric of freedom and equality, black Memphians faced an entrenched system of white supremacy and a racial hierarchy

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<sup>310</sup> United States Commission on Civil Rights, "Civic Crisis - Civic Challenge: Police – Community Relations in Memphis: A Report," 32.

<sup>311</sup> United States Commission on Civil Rights, "Civic Crisis - Civic Challenge: Police – Community Relations in Memphis: A Report," 17; and Afro American Police Association of Memphis, "Mission Statement." <http://afroamericanpoliceassociation.com/AboutUs.html>.

enforced, often violently, by white police officers. This violence became the physical representation of black inequality and injustice. Thus, the local strategies for black community uplift in Memphis reflected this symbolism and were manifested in a campaign to hire black police officers. These officers were expected to represent and protect the black community in a more equal justice system. However, whites continued to dominate the city's power structure, and black officers were incorporated into a racially divided system in order to appease black demands and protect the racial hierarchy. Thus, within this story of black police officers we find a moment in history when black activism both laid the foundations for greater black uplift in the long term and simultaneously reinforced racial segregation.

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