

TERA HUNTER, *TO 'JOY MY FREEDOM: SOUTHERN BLACK WOMEN'S LIVES AND LABOR AFTER THE CIVIL WAR* (CAMBRIDGE: HARVARD UP, 1997)

CHURCHES played a critical role in the development of black community life immediately after emancipation. They had humble beginnings, often arising out of makeshift tabernacles such as abandoned railroad cars. Eight black churches were organized by 1870 and fourteen more by 1880, all within the four largest settlements.⁸⁶ They served as magnets for newcomers and facilitated the expansion of neighborhoods. Members of established churches created links across the city among parishioners by helping to start new churches in different settlements. Wheat Street Baptist Church was founded by members of Friendship Church who lived in Shermantown and wanted to build a sanctuary closer to their homes on the east side. Thus churches tended to beget more churches, and the relationship between different black institutions was reciprocal. Bethel AME Church was the first home of Storrs School and the midwife of Storrs Chapel, which became known as the First Congregational Church.⁸⁷

African-American churches served a multitude of spiritual, social, and political functions. Sunday, of course, was dedicated to religious activities, as individuals attended Sunday school and worship service, sometimes crisscrossing between programs at several institutions on the same day. During the week, converts attended prayer gatherings and meetings of various organizations. Periodic revivals, most frequent during the summer, played especially important functions in spiritual rejuvenation, adding new members, reinvigorating the commitments of the long-lasting, and unifying different congregations. The seriousness of African Americans' commitment to these religious activities was demonstrated by their willingness to sacrifice time from remunerative labor, if necessary, to participate. Household workers provoked the ire of employers by abandoning secular toil for what some scorned as "fetish follies."

In the summer of 1878, a two-week-long revival held at Wheat Street Baptist Church occupied the days and nights of many African Americans, including domestic workers. One employer complained that a cook spent four days at the revival, forcing her to hire a replacement. Another noted a washerwoman who had "gone crazy with the prospects of getting religion," making it impossible to rely on her to wash clothes the entire duration of the sacred jubilee. These grievances led the newspaper to editorialize: "Revivals may be a very good thing in their way, but when our cooks and washerwomen throw down their work and hurry off to the

church to spend the week, they get to be a nuisance.”⁸⁸

Churches provided outlets of collective self-help, fostered leadership development, sanctioned group morals, and promoted public and private education. On special occasions, fairs were organized both as festive public events and as opportunities to raise money. The churches were sanctuaries for important secular and associational meetings, and they also provided settings for organizing ward clubs and political rallies, plotting electoral strategies, and coalescing votes.⁸⁹

Religious institutions enhanced their power and position within the community not only by their individual acts but also by uniting in Sunday school and church associations that linked members of the same denomination within a city-wide and state network. These groups operated as umbrella organizations that carried out the same spiritual and social functions on a larger scale: they were involved in social reform movements like temperance, raised funds for black educational institutions, and allotted missionary funds. Their conventions promoted leadership development, skills in governance, and religious education, and also provided an arena for applauding the most dedicated religious converts. Those persons selected to represent their home churches as delegates, for example, were honored simply by their selection and obtained opportunities to partake in the widening of social networks.⁹⁰

Although women composed the large majority of church members, their status and power were disproportionately small. Their leadership was significant and vital but usually subordinated to the most prestigious positions held by men, especially pastors. Toward the end of the century, some religious organizations devised rules for church governance that explicitly forbade women from voting and participating in official debates. A controversy over women's proper roles came to a head in the Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia in 1893. Those who favored a stronger role for women split from the old order to form the General State Baptist Convention of Georgia. The dispute at the local level mirrored similar controversies at the national level, as Baptist women's outspoken advocacy of missionary roles and spiritual leadership was rebuked by male ministers.⁹¹ The church could be stifling in other ways. Its commitment to governing the totality of people's lives addressed many of the needs of poor people beyond their spirituality, but it could also bring down the wrath of fire and brimstone against those who violated church rules or religious covenants, excommunicating or harshly punishing those who were judged as miscreants.⁹²

Mutual aid and benevolent associations, also called secret societies, with antebellum roots in

many Southern cities, rivaled churches in their popularity. They provided benefits for widows, orphans, and ill or unemployed members, as well as outlets for education, trade association, and political and social expression. Yet these were not always mutually exclusive institutions; some of these benevolent associations were organized through churches. Regardless of their origins, many exhibited religious influences. Names such as the Daughters of Samaria, Daughters of Bethel, Sisters of Friendship, and Sisters of Love demonstrated reverence for biblical figures and principles that meshed with their organizational purposes. It was not by accident that one group identified itself as the Daughters of Zion—the place of refuge, especially for the poor.⁹³ Church-affiliated organizations tended to emphasize raising funds for the church and aiding people outside of their organizations. The Daughters of Samaria, for example, started out as a small group in 1875 and grew to a membership of 500 by 1880. As in Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan who helped the traveler when he needed it most, the Daughters of Samaria identified themselves as latter-day missionaries to their people. When a yellow fever epidemic broke out in Savannah and Memphis in the 1870s, the Order sent charitable objects. Likewise, they aided the poor, sick, disabled, and survivors of the dead within their own city. By pooling their resources, they became the first black secret order in Atlanta to purchase property. Most secret societies did not achieve the material prosperity of the Samaritans, but dozens formed tributaries throughout the city that operated on a far more modest scale.⁹⁴

The religious, secular, social, and political purposes of these organizations sometimes overlapped. For example, in its twelfth annual anniversary celebration in 1888, the Morning Star Lodge of the Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria staged a parade from their hall on Peachtree Street toward Bethel AME Church in preparation for a special sermon delivered in their honor. On the next night the group sponsored a social event at the Odd Fellows Hall that it billed as “*the* entertainment of the season.”⁹⁵

At least a few of these associations were organized as labor unions or political leagues (and sometimes a combination of both). William Finch founded the Mechanics and Laborers’ Union in 1868, which bridged labor issues and Republican Party concerns. Laundry workers formed Washing Societies in the 1870s and 1880s.⁹⁶ Another group known as the Union Benevolent Society may also have focused on work-related concerns. Disfranchised women exercised their influence in electoral politics through organizations like the Rising Daughters of Liberty Society—counterpart to the Sons by the same name usually affiliated with the Republican Party.

The Rising Daughters of Liberty promoted political education among members and the wider community, raised funds, and stimulated enthusiasm for the campaigns of candidates or issues of their choices.⁹⁷

Some associations were made up entirely of one sex or combined both women and men. But occasionally one finds the presence of a male officer, usually the secretary, in organizations where working-class women predominated and illiteracy prevailed. Though some female groups acted as subordinates to male groups, a striking feature of the Gospel Aid Society is the seemingly conscious effort to balance the power and positions of men and women. The president and secretary were men, the vice-president and treasurer were women, and an equal number of each sex served on the finance committee. Similarly, the Order of Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria, which operated separately as well as in a unified group, elected nearly equal numbers of men and women upon its founding.⁹⁸

Whatever the makeup of their organizations, working-class women were active and visible members and leaders in these societies in Atlanta. Household laborers such as Amanda Bradbury, Rachel Oliver, Nancy Wilson, and Lizzie Ford helped to found the Daughters of Samaria. Rebecca Thomas not only served as president of the Rising Daughters of Liberty Society, but at various points she also headed the Daughters of Bethlehem and served on the bank committee of the Star of Bethlehem. Elizabeth Russell and Mildred Fane, president and vice-president of the Daughters of Bethlehem, were both washerwomen. The True Sisters of Honor elected Harriet Tolliver, a washerwoman, as vice-president, and her daughter Keziah Wood as a member of the finance committee.

It is not just a coincidence that working-class women were involved in mutual aid and benevolent associations. The groups proved indispensable within the panoply of institutions designed for the purposes of urban survival, race advancement, and personal enrichment. Paying in small, regularly assessed fees, individuals pooled their resources and reserved them for emergencies. Blacks in Georgia paid \$16.5 million to the lodges between 1870 and 1920, confirming that these fraternal orders were the most popular insuring agents in the state.¹⁰⁰ By their willingness to share their resources with others, they provided insurance for themselves, Secret societies in New Orleans, for example, contributed the largest share of health care services to African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁰¹ Societies contracted for physicians or pharmacists upon whom members could rely for treatment or medicines.

Perhaps most important, laypersons from the order visited the sick, in cases of serious illnesses they would move in with the patient to help with general household cares. The fervent spirit with which associations undertook these responsibilities is shown by the commitment to members who failed to carry out their duties diligently.¹⁰²

Death benefits were critical to the very existence of these associations. The desire to ensure financial relief for surviving family members and to secure a respectable burial were among the most important reasons for joining. Secret societies facilitated the incorporation of community into the funeral as a public event. Mourners gathered special fees, collected food for wakes, dressed themselves and the deceased in the appropriate reverent apparel, and planned associational services in conjunction with the religious ceremony. They led elaborate processions and laid the physical body to rest, stressing a spirit of life embarking on a new stage in the world beyond, rather than the finality of death.¹⁰³

Other rituals added to the secret societies' appeal for personal; group enhancement. Initiation, oath-taking, and self-improvement ceremonies with all manner of regalia, tides, and parades inspired a sense of collective objectives, and brought prestige and status to who belonged. Elaborate rites taught members the secrets of symbols and instructed them to aid their fellow sisters and brothers and to live uprightly, according to principles such as love, charity, purity, and justice. Through the complex body of procedures and rules that regulated the conduct of meetings, rituals, and standards of membership, these groups promoted self-governance and discipline of a high order.¹⁰⁴

The scant existing records do not permit a precise calculation of the number of societies in Atlanta during the late nineteenth century, but the general consensus among contemporary observers was that they were numerous throughout the South. In Richmond, there were four hundred secret societies organized by the early 1870s.¹⁰⁵ The well-established antebellum slave and free black community in Richmond, of course, gave that city a head start. But the promptness of these groups' appearance at the commencement of emancipation in a relatively new city such as Atlanta, enabling a major infrastructure for weaving together individuals and extended families, is testimony to the fact that they embodied and drew on preexisting values that stretched back over many generations, across time and space.

Critics were fond of disparaging the "natural proclivities" of African-American people toward congregating and socializing, but it was hard work rather than nature that cemented the

ties in mutual aid societies, churches, and neighborhoods, all of which were crucial to meeting the challenges of urban life. Employers disdained this rich associational life that they perceived as upstart imitations of whites. Mutual aid societies were mocked as organizations with “funny names.” “They have the society of the ‘Immaculate Doves,’ and the society of the ‘Sisteren,’ and the society of the ‘Beloved Disciples,’” one employer remarked. Though the depth of meaning of African Americans’ mutual aid groups may have escaped some employers, they undoubtedly understood the subversive implications of the collective culture that sustained domestic workers. The existence of secret societies, one employer admitted, “makes them perfectly independent and relieves them from all fear of being discharged, because when they are discharged they go right straight to some of these ‘sisters.’”¹⁰⁶

African-American women did indeed look to their sisters and brothers for mutual support. They responded to the growing pressures of exploitation in everyday life by pooling their resources through informal organizing in their neighborhoods and, increasingly, formed institutions that extended the boundaries of community across the growing metropolis. They pursued the line of least resistance when feasible, but took aggressive collective actions when necessary to secure their rights as workers and human beings.

