Before the Ghetto: The Making of the Black Community in Savannah, Georgia, 1865-1880

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The urbanization of American blacks has been second only to slavery in the impact it has had on their lives. Urbanization created the preconditions for the emergence of an intelligent leadership class, a sense of unity and the will and the economic means to fight against white oppression. The city's diverse occupations gave urbanites an independence unmatched by black ruralites trapped in an unending cycle of poverty, crop liens and tenantry. The concentration of numbers in the city freed urban blacks more quickly from the ante-bellum customs perpetuated in the countryside and gave them a large arena to develop a variety of social, intellectual and creative talents and to build the community infrastructure denied to them as slaves and as quasifree men. Although historians have obscured many of these factors by emphasizing the pathology of the "enduring ghetto," they were clearly present in many nineteenth-century Southern cities. In few places was this more apparent than in the old city of Savannah, located in Chatham County on the Georgia seacoast.[1]

While the city of Savannah itself was old, the black community did not emerge with its full complement of social institutions and articulate leaders until after General W.T. Sherman's troops marched into the city and liberated the slaves on December 21, 1864. Emancipation led immediately to an increase in the black population. Thousands of slaves from the interior of Georgia and South Carolina, attracted by the rations issued by the army and the charms of the city life, or repelled by masters who refused to

accept the abolition of slavery, flocked to Savannah in the winter of 1865.[2] Later, in the 1870s, a series of crop failures, the poverty of white plantation owners and the freedmen's ignorance, improvidence, indolence and inability to purchase land led hundreds of other blacks to flee from the disappointments of the plantation to the city. As a result of the post-war migration, the black population of Savannah increased from 8,417 in 1860 to 15,654 in 1880, in other words 51 percent of the total population of the city.

Table 1. Population, 1850-1880

| | Chatham County | | | Savannah | | |
Year	Whites	Negroes	% Negroes	Whites	Negroes	% Negroes
1850	9,152	14,749	62	8,395	6,917	45
1860	15,511	15,532	50	13,875	8,417	38
1870	16,760	24,518	60	15,166	13,068	46
1880	17,494	27,515	61	15,041	15,654	51

Population, Civil Divisions of Chatham County

| | 1860 | | 1870 | |
	Whites	Negroes	Whites	Negroes
Savannah	13,875	8,417	15,166	13,068
1. Militia District I	4,333	1,700	3,889	4,113
2. Militia District II	2,300	1,655	2,259	2,064
3. Militia District III	3,399	3,106	5,275	2,735
4. Militia District IV	3,843	1,956	3,743	4,156
5. Thunderbolt	—	—	405	1,839
6. White Bluff	783	2,118	490	1,839
7. Ogeechee	413	2,435	411	4,201
8. Cherokee Hill	440	2,962	288	2,279

Compiled from U.S. Census Bureau, *Ninth Census of U.S., Statistics on Population* (2 vols., Wash., 1872), I, 20-22, 100; Census Bureau, *Compendium of the Tenth Census* (2 vols., Wash., 1883), I, 342, 382-83.

The addition of more than 7,000 migrants to the city's population in less than twenty years heightened racial tensions and initially increased the economic problems confronting blacks. Feeling that they were being engulfed by a black horde, Savannah whites viewed the rapid influx of the freedmen with apprehension. Reluctantly accepting the abolition of slavery, whites vowed never to accept blacks on equal terms. The spectre of social equality was omnipresent in the minds of whites. One young white asserted in

1865 that he would leave the country before he would "live in a city where I have got to mix with free niggers."[4] A white woman declared: "My old mama who nursed me is just like a mother to me; but there is one thing that I will never submit to, that the Negro is our equal. He belongs to an inferior race."[5] Acting on the premise of black inferiority, white officials of Savannah repeatedly excluded blacks from the jury box and for several years from the school house. Since whites regarded Negroes as children, they punished them severely in order, they said, to teach them respect for the law. For example, in 1876 a county court sentenced a black woman to ten years in the penitentiary for allegedly stealing five dollars.

Given the extent of white prejudices, the blacks crowding into Savannah faced an uphill struggle to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Fortunately, however, native Savannah blacks had built a relatively strong economic foundation during the ante-bellum period. For example, many blacks were skilled artisans in 1865 because of the training they had received as slaves. Before the war, owners taught their slaves skilled trades to make it easier and more profitable to hire them out. Many Savannah slaves worked for drayage firms, in rice mills, on construction sites and at various municipal tasks. Slaves were members of four Negro fire companies in the city. Some of the slaves also gained business experience while working as butchers, fishmongers and vendors of fruits, vegetables, candy and flowers in the Savannah market. The free Negroes of the city, although few in number (705 in 1860), contributed to the black man's business acumen and occupational skills.[6]

Generally, blacks maintained their corner on the Savannah labor market when slavery ended. At the same time, there was a greater occupational differentiation in the Negro labor force. While black men were working at 58 different occupations in 1870, they were working at 92 different occupations in 1880. And, although Negroes made up only 50 percent of the population, more than 50 percent of all draymen, porters, bricklayers, coopers and cotton samplers in Savannah from 1870 to 1880 were black. The apprenticeship of young Negroes to skilled black artisans led to an increase in the percentage of Negroes in the total number of shoemakers (38% to 66%), butchers (38% to 66%), barbers, (43%

to 82%) and blacksmiths (17% to 31%) from 1870 to 1880. At the same time, however, the organization of large construction companies led to a decline in the percentage of black carpenters (40% to 32%), plasterers (73% to 44%) and painters (32% to 23%).

While the percentage of the Negro labor force engaged in manufacturing, mechanical and building trades declined in the 1870s, the number of blacks working as common laborers, firemen and engineers, on the railroads, boats and in the factories increased. Many artisans, earning from $1.81 to $3.50 per day, refused to allow their wives to work. Even so, about 70 percent of the Negro women in 1870, and 60 percent in 1880, were gainfully employed. Generally, black women worked at less than twenty different occupations, most of them being laundresses, domestic workers and cooks. During epidemics in Savannah many of them, although untrained, worked as nurses.[7]

Prejudice and white competition forced a larger percentage of the black men to become common laborers (33% to 43%) and domestic workers (10% to 18%) by 1880 than had been the case in 1870. Condemnation to such casual labor had important consequences for black men. For example, the black unemployment rate was much higher than that of whites. Although unemployed for a shorter period (4.7 months for Negroes, 4.8 months for whites) than whites in 1880, blacks constituted 75 percent of the male unemployed. Of the 767 black unemployed, 57 percent were common laborers, 13 percent were servants and 4 percent were porters. Thus, 74 percent of the black unemployed were concentrated in those occupations containing 61 percent of the Negro labor force. To protect themselves from white prejudice, rapacious employers and to provide mutual aid and a richer social life, black working men organized 21 protective and benevolent associations and quasi unions. The only strikes on record are those of the Negro stevedores of 1869 and 1880.[8]

Negro businesses followed the same general path of growth and differentiation as the black labor force. In 1870, 66 Negroes operated 27 different kinds of businesses. Two hundred fifty-three blacks operated 41 different kinds of businesses in 1880. Some of them owned small manufacturing concerns. As the Negro population became more concentrated in the 1870s, the number of black businesses increased rapidly. Capitalizing on racial pride, black

Table 2. Occupations of Gainfully Employed
Negro Men in Savannah, Georgia, 1870, 1880

Occupations	1870	1880	Occupations	1870	1880
laborers	270	1404	fish sellers	—	9
carpenters	84	100	whitewashers	9	9
draymen	109	394	gardeners	1	8
porters	58	326	saloon owner	—	8
bricklayers	31	36	janitors	—	8
shoemakers	20	55	tailors	2	8
waiters	11	157	watchmen	—	7
butchers	19	49	sextons	—	7
coopers	16	37	barkeeper	—	7
barbers	13	74	clerks	6	6
blacksmiths	7	29	pilots	2	6
plasterers	8	8	fishermen	5	—
painters	12	21	engineers	3	6
ship-carpenters	6	6	teachers	2	6
cotton samplers	15	16	cabinet makers	1	5
railroad men	3	119	fruit sellers	—	5
cooks	7	43	grocers	2	7
firemen	—	37	tinners	1	5
farmers	9	28	upholsterers	2	4
sailors	7	17	plumbers	—	4
butlers	5	17	wheelwrights	2	4
traders	10	—	musicians	1	4
hucksters	—	18	foremen	—	4
bakers	1	15	lamplighters	—	4
ministers	5	14	paper carriers	—	3
sawyers	5	13	longshoremen	8	3
coachmen	—	12	sells vegetables	—	3
poultry dealers	—	11	pastry cooks	3	—
mailmen	—	10	pressmen	2	3
runs lunch counter	—	10	harness makers	1	3
carpet layers	—	2	wood dealers	2	—
custom inspectors	—	2	stewards	1	2
constables	1	2	shinglers	—	2
candy makers	—	2	machinists	2	1
cigar makers	—	2	saddlers	2	—
hack men	—	2	millers	2	1
			turners	—	2
			Totals	805	3275

1870 Lathers, servants, silversmiths, trimmers, sailmakers, brickmakers, bookbinders, ice-dealers, cotton-picking companies, stone cutters, mechanics—one each.

1880 Stevedores, caulkers, wharf builders, boilermakers, sellers of soda water, glaziers, feeders, morticians, collectors (IDS), carvers, jewelers, physicians, peddlers, marble-cutters, livery stable owners, laundry owners, justices of peace, restaurant owners, brick-makers, wharfman, music teachers, soda water manufacturing, owner of general store—one each.

Compiled from Savannah City Directories.

businessmen opened lunch counters, saloons, groceries, barber shops, hair dressing shops and one mortuary. Others invested small amounts of capital and became petty traders. Concentrated in service industries, Negro businesses were usually small, one-owner, marginal concerns. Only one black businessman, livery stable owner Daniel Button, had as much as $15,000 in property in 1870.

Many black businessmen and artisans in Chatham County accumulated property in the 15 years following the Civil War. A few of them had acquired property before the war: in 1860, the free Negroes had $92,280 in property and a per capita wealth of $130.89. Although the wealth of the leading blacks of Savannah in 1865 surprised some Northern observers, an overwhelming major- ity of the freedmen were penniless.[9]

Encouraged in the next few years by their success as artisans and businessmen, the freedmen began opening savings accounts, buy- ing land and accumulating personal property. By 1870, they had acquired more than $400,000 in property. From 1866 to 1874, thousands of Negroes deposited $153,000 in the Savannah branch of the Freedmen's Saving Bank. The number of Negro landholders increased steadily; while there were only 96 black landholders in Savannah in 1870, the number had increased to 648 by 1880. Although the value of property held by Negroes in Chatham County declined more than 50 percent in the 1870s, the amount of land they owned more than doubled (from 1,055 acres in 1874, to 2,687 acres in 1880). Primarily as a result of the general decline in property values, the aggregate value of land owned by Negroes decreased from $192,000 in 1870 to $79,000 in 1880. Similarly, the per capita wealth of blacks declined from $17.79 in 1870 to $7.31 in 1880.[10]

The low per capita wealth of Savannah blacks exacerbated two serious social problems facing them: high dependency and mortal- ity rates. In the first two years after the war the rate of dependency (swelled by the emigrants) of blacks was much higher than that of whites. From September 1865 to September 1867, the Freedmen's Bureau issued rations to an average of 529 Negroes and 159 whites per month in Savannah. As Negro and white refugees began to find work, the monthly average declined; from March 1867 to September 1868, the Bureau issued rations to an average of 69 Negroes. Although no statistics are available before September 1865, undoubtedly the number of blacks and whites

depending on Bureau rations for their subsistence early in 1865 was much higher than the record indicates. For instance, there were 2,470 Negroes and 359 whites receiving rations from the Bureau in September 1865. On the other hand, the average for 1867 and 1868 appears to be a close approximation of dependency in the black community for most of this period.[11]

The black migrants not only added to the number of dependents, but increased the morbidity and mortality rates among blacks. Unaccustomed to city living, the black migrants crowded into ill-ventilated huts on the outskirts of the city of Savannah or lived in unhealthy basements in the badly-drained areas of the city. As a result of these conditions and ignorance of hygiene, proper childcare and diets (which included an insufficient supply of milk and vegetables), fatal diseases took a heavy toll in the black community. Between 1865 and 1880 the black death rate fluctuated between 33 and 75 per thousand. Because blacks were less likely to go to doctors until diseases had advanced too far to be checked, were less able to afford proper medical attention and believed more in untrained "medicine men" than whites, the death rate for Negroes was generally .05 to 38.0 per thousand higher than that of whites from 1865 to 1880.[12]

Table 3. Property Owned by Negroes in Chatham County, 1870-1880

Year	No. paying poll tax Whites	Negroes	Acres of Land	Value of Land	City Property	Livestock and Household Goods
1870	–	–	–	$192,480	$ –	$ –
1874	5,013	5,225	1,055	–	262,620	–
1876	3,984	4,813	1,739	66,728	137,965	–
1877	3,681	4,271	1,933	68,944	139,285	4,990
1878	3,430	4,392	2,644	74,408	113,555	10,132
1879	3,063	4,120	2,362	75,293	102,297	7,229
1880	3,129	4,030	2,687	79,740	110,566	9,077

Year	Money	Other Property	Aggregate Value of Property	Per Capita Wealth
1870	–	$232,553	$425,013	$17.79
1874	$153,425	19,300	435,345	16.73
1876	100	12,703	217,811	8.27
1877	–	7,370	220,689	8.29
1878	12,257	1,490	211,852	7.87
1879	–	10	184,829	6.79
1880	2,092	765	202,240	7.31

Source: See note under table 4.

Table 4. Value of Real Estate Owned by Negros
by Classified Values, 1870, 1880

Classified Values	Chatham County, 1870		Savannah, 1870	
	No. of owners	Total values	No. of owners	Total values
$100-250	53	$10,380	26	$ 5,230
300-500	77	32,700	24	10,450
600-900	24	16,600	10	7,000
1,000-2,000	45	49,400	20	26,900
2,500-15,000	20	85,400	16	70,000
Totals	219	192,480	96	119,580

Classified Values	Savannah, 1880		Classified values	No. of owners	Total values
	No. of owners	Total values			
$ 1-199	335	$30,379	$1,500-1,999	3	$ 4,933
200-399	167	44,811	2,000-2,499	4	8,500
400-749	101	51,188	3,000-4,500	3	10,850
750-1,249	32	29,233			
1,250-1,499	3	3,990			
Totals				648	183,844

Tables 3. and 4., compiled from Comptroller General of Georgia, *Reports*, 1874-1880. "Population Schedules, Chatham County, Georgia, 1870," R.G. 29, N.A.; W.E.B. DuBois, *The Negro Landholder in Georgia* (Washington, 1901); W.L. Fleming, *The Freedmen's Savings Bank* (Chapel Hill, 1927), pp. 142-43; W.E.B. DuBois, ed., *Economic Cooperation Among Negro Americans* (Atlanta, 1907), p. 136; *Freedmen's Record, III* (February 1868), W.L. Fleming, ed., *Documentary History of Reconstruction* (2 vols., Cleveland, 1906), I, 385.

White prejudices, economic dislocation, large scale migration, high dependency and mortality rates, and the accumulation of wealth and property all affected the development of a viable community among blacks in Savannah. One of the first, and most enduring problems blacks encountered in trying to build a community infrastructure was that they were an overwhelmingly illiterate group living among whites who were highly literate. Although a few of the Savannah slaves and free Negroes had been educated before the war, they were almost inundated by the sea of black migrants who rushed into the city.[13] The first prerequisite, then, for building a viable community was to diffuse knowledge more widely among the blacks. Savannah blacks were anxious to lift the veil of ignorance clouding their future. John W. Alvord, Secretary of the American Tract Society, for instance, wrote on

January 11, 1865, that the Negroes in Savannah had "a passionate desire for education."[14] On March 25, 1865, the Savannah *Republican* noted the "earnestness and avidity [with which] these liberated people seek information. All manifest a desire to learn."[15] Similarly, war correspondent Charles Coffin wrote that freedmen in Savannah were "eager to obtain knowledge."[16]

Various black groups in the city moved quickly to translate their desires into action and made strenuous efforts to educate black youths. These efforts were all the more important because the Chatham County Board of Education refused to establish schools for blacks until 1872. The blacks could not wait; a few days after their liberation, the Negroes organized the Savannah Educational Association. In January 1865 Alvord, James Lynch, Agent of the American Missionary Association and later Mississippi Secretary of State, and Reverend Mansfield French examined dozens of applicants and found ten Negroes competent to instruct students in the Association's schools. Acquiring the use of Bryan's slave mart and Oglethorpe Hospital from General John W. Geary, the Association opened two schools on January 10, 1865, with about 500 students. Supported entirely by the freedmen, the Association collected and expended $900 for educational purposes in its first year of operation.[17]

Confronted by white indifference from 1865 to 1872, the freedmen maintained their schools with difficulty. There was a chronic shortage of books, supplies, school rooms and funds. In addition to obtaining supplies for the schools, the freedmen had to pay monthly salaries ranging from $15 to $35 to 38 teachers in 1865, 21 in 1868 and 17 in 1870. The monthly tuition ($1.00 to $2.50) charged by most of the schools placed a heavy financial burden on Negro parents. For example, in 1868 the freedmen paid from $275 to $550 per month to educate 1,400 students for nine months. Because of the expense, the educational campaign would probably have failed or been sharply curtailed if sympathetic Northern whites had not supported it. Answering appeals from Lynch and Alvord, Northern aid societies sent teachers and supplies to Savannah. The American Tract Society sent a supply of books and by the end of 1865 the American Missionary Association was financing five schools, the New York Society of Friends and the National Freedmen's Aid Society two, and the New

England Freedmen's Aid Society one school in Chatham County. More importantly, in 1867 the American Missionary Association built a $13,000 secondary school, Beach Institute, on a bequest left by Alfred E. Beach, prolific inventor and editor of the *Scientific American.* [18]

Unfortunately, Northern financial support of the black schools quickly decreased: by 1871 the only societies which maintained schools in Chatham County were the American Missionary Association and the St. Joseph's Sisters. As a result of the financial problems, the number of Negro schools in Chatham County declined from 13 in 1865 to five in 1870. Similarly, the number of black students declined from 1,877 in 1865 to 672 in 1870. More than 8,000 Negroes over ten years of age were illiterate in 1870.

With the decline in Northern support for their private schools, blacks began to put political pressure on the Chatham County Board of Education to organize public schools. Complaining that they received nothing for poll taxes they paid ($5,225 in 1874), early in the 1870s blacks held several mass meetings and vowed not to vote for candidates for city office who opposed public schooling for Negroes. Coincidentally, there was a change in the opinion of whites toward the education of blacks. One reason for the development of a more favorable attitude toward the education of Negroes was the fact that throughout the 1870s blacks paid more poll taxes (used to support schools) than whites—212 more in 1874 and 901 more in 1880.

As a result of the political pressure and the change in public opinion, in 1872 the Board of Education began to consider the establishment of public schools for blacks. On August 15, 1872, Board members met with prominent Savannah blacks and decided to try to convince the American Missionary Association to transfer Beach Institute to the Board. Because of the Association's reluctance to allow the Board to control the hiring of its teachers, it did not transfer the Institute until 1875. After failing to obtain Beach Institute, the Board of Education opened two schools for Negroes in December 1872. By 1875, there were 2,070 black and 2,502 white students in the public schools. In the same year, there were more than 3,600 Negroes and 1,800 whites of school age who were not attending public schools. While most of these white children were in private schools, most of the black children had no

school to attend. Consequently, blacks continued to petition the Board to establish more schools for Negro children.

Although the Board of Education was unsuccessful in supplying all of the schools needed in Savannah, the shift to publicly-supported schools improved the chances of black children being educated. Financial support, although small in amount, was consistent. The schools were better equipped and more efficiently operated than they had been from 1865 to 1872. On the other hand, the teachers were only a little more competent.[19]

The campaign to stamp out illiteracy, despite its limited success, contributed significantly to the growing sense of community among blacks. For the first time blacks worked in concert to solve common problems: organizing their own schools, opening churches to black scholars and attending mass meetings to obtain public schools. Such actions created among blacks the feeling that they were in some way independent and had some control over their destiny.

The movement for independence reached its apogee in the churches. Almost from the beginning of slavery Negroes in the city had received some religious instruction either in the churches of their masters or in separate congregations. By 1865 whites and blacks had established five Negro churches with about 4,000 members and an aggregate value of $63,000. Whites, however, controlled all of these churches: they served as trustees and frequently as Sunday School teachers.[20] After the abolition of slavery, the freedmen fled from the churches of their former masters and rapidly established their own churches. Between 1865 and 1880, Negroes organized ten new churches and began to join new denominations. In 1865, Negroes were attending three Baptist churches, one Methodist and one Episcopal church. Fifteen years later, they communed at five Baptist and five Methodist churches, one Presbyterian, one Catholic, one Congregational and one Episcopal church.[21]

While the increase in Negro churches expanded the number of institutions solely controlled by blacks, they also helped to uplift them and create a sense of solidarity among diverse groups in a variety of ways. The ministers sought to make Negroes more religious through their Sunday sermons, Sabbath schools and week-night lecture and prayer meetings. Some of the larger

churches tried to keep in contact with members who could not attend regularly by establishing "prayer-houses" in different areas of Savannah and the county. Most of the ministers stressed the importance of education, racial pride, living a Christian life and having self-respect. In this regard, the churches were important agents of social control. They consistently expelled members who did not abide by the rules of the church and castigated them for drunkenness, lawlessness and immorality.

The churches were also important centers of communal recreation. They frequently gave fairs, suppers, concerts, picnics, spelling bees and Sunday School programs. Perhaps the most notable church event of this period was the memorial service for Charles Sumner at St. Phillips A.M.E. Church in 1874 which was attended by four thousand Negroes. The highlight of the service came when the audience heard songs by Elizabeth Greenfield, the Negro Quaker from Philadelphia who had sung in London in 1853 and was known as the "Black Swan."[2][2]

Outside the church, there were several organized social activities which both contributed to and reflected the development of a sense of unity among blacks. Ante-bellum proscriptions had so restricted blacks from acting in concert that they had only established a small number of social organizations. After the war, however, centripetal forces outweighed the centrifugal ones: the general tendency was toward organized social activities. In fact, by 1880 Savannah blacks had organized more than 193 clubs and mutual aid societies. The Skidmore Club String Band and the Braham String Band furnished music for the balls given by the Social Club of Savannah, the Union Coterie, the Ladies and Gents Social Club and the Committee of Nine. The eight militia companies (one official) frequently drilled to the music of the Washington Cornet Band and held shooting matches and riding contests in the Forsyth Park parade grounds. The four Masonic and three Odd Fellow lodges had frequent meetings and suppers and paraded in full regalia through the streets of Savannah. During the summer, blacks went to picnics and to games between Negro baseball teams or on railroad and steamboat rides (excursions) to the resorts in Chatham County and to various places in Georgia and South Carolina. They also celebrated several special days: Liberian Independence, Emancipation Day, Lincoln's birthday and

anniversaries of the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment. Those blacks who enjoyed serious or light intellectual exercises attended the meetings of the Young Beginner's Literary and Social Society or the Young Men's Bible and Literary Association.[23]

As blacks gained a greater sense of unity, they began to grapple with the many serious social problems undermining their community. One of the most difficult of these problems was the weak family structure. There had been no legal marriage in slavery. Of necessity, fathers had little authority over or responsibility to their "families." Any connection between slaves had little permanence. There was no "illegitimacy." Their children cared for in plantation nurseries, many mothers learned little about childcare. However, in spite of the legacy of slavery, blacks had a strong sense of the sanctity of the family. Many of the blacks, seeking another badge of freedom, flocked to the Freedmen's Bureau offices in 1865 to obtain marriage certificates. Others went in search of loved ones from whom they had been separated by the vicissitudes of slavery.

The desire of the freedmen for regularized family relations was encouraged by black ministers and newspaper editors. Partially as a result of this campaign the family had become relatively stable by 1880: males headed 75 percent of the families and the number of non-working wives and one-family dwellings was relatively high.[24]

Blacks responded to the spectres of dependency and death by organizing several benevolent and mutual aid societies to aid the poor and sick, and by paying the burial expenses of indigent members. Practically all of the black churches did the same things on an informal basis, sometimes established burial associations and often raised money to support the short-lived Lincoln Freedmen's Hospital.[25]

The degree to which blacks were able to solve community social problems depended to a large extent on the quality of their leaders. The quality of the leaders and the way they emerged was in turn significantly affected by the low per capita wealth and high rate of illiteracy of blacks. Perhaps more important, however, was the fact that few of the black people had had an opportunity to act as leaders before the war. Although the ministers provided some leadership functions, they were so completely under the thumb of whites that they could rarely speak for their followers.

For the most part, ante-bellum "leaders" had little influence and less power because there were few formal procedures for legitimizing their positions.

The abolition of slavery created several bases for the emergence of a new leadership class. First, the relative scarcity of influential men guaranteed that many relatively young blacks would rise to leadership positions. Second, the formation of many community organizations created several power bases for those blacks ready to take advantage of them. Numerically, the most important of these bases were the 193 clubs and societies blacks established. From 1865 to 1880, more than 922 persons served as officers in these clubs. Seventy-two percent of these officers were men; 64 percent were born and raised in Savannah; 96 percent had been slaves and their average age was 37. An overwhelming majority of the leaders were skilled artisans and included 28 draymen, 24 porters, 22 carpenters, 15 laundresses and 8 brick-layers.

Forty-six prominent families were the social leaders of the black community. These families held 234 of the offices in clubs organized during this period. At the apex of the social pyramid were 15 families whose members held 100 of the offices. The socially prominent families had several characteristics in common. Generally they were stable, literate and relatively well off. Ninety percent of the women in these families did not have to work and the children were either at home, in school or serving as apprentices. The 84 socially prominent families listed as property holders in the 1870 census had a per capita wealth of $783. Still, only a small percentage of the 922 social leaders held property. Apparently literacy and a pleasing personality were surer guarantees of social prominence than wealth. The same was true of the color factor. Whatever was true of the relationship between mulattoes and blacks in other cities, in Savannah neither group was able to garner a disproportionate share of the leadership posts; whenever they did, education, and not color, appeared to be the deciding factor.[26]

There was an intimate relationship between the officers of social organizations and institutions and political leaders. In fact, the two groups were often interchangeable. Building on a solid base of influence and power in community institutions, many blacks were able to translate social preferment into political

power. For example, 90 percent of all the Negroes who served as clerks, justices of the peace, magistrates or constables in the county, as officers in the County and State Republican party or delegates to the national conventions, or who held patronage jobs in the U.S. Customs House or Post Office were also officers in several of the black social clubs in Savannah. Similarly, all of the Savannah blacks who served in the Georgia Legislature in 1870 and 1872, except Aaron Bradley, were officers in the clubs or prominent church officials. Ulysses L. Houston, Representative of Bryan County, served as pastor of the First Bryan Baptist Church from 1861 to 1880. James M. Simms, Representative of Chatham County, was an ordained minister who served as clerk and deacon of the First African Baptist Church from 1858 until he went to Boston in 1863. He returned to Savannah in 1865, ran successfully for the legislature in 1868 and received an appointment as State District Judge from Governor Bullock in 1871. (The Legislature abolished the Court before Simms ever held a session.) James Porter, Representative of Chatham County, was President of the Board of Wardens and Vestry of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church.[27]

Ideologically, the black leaders ranged from the far right (where such ministers as William J. Campbell abjured political participation and took an extremely obsequious attitude toward whites) to the far left (where Henry McNeal Turner, James M. Simms, and the peripatetic Aaron Alpeoria Bradley frequently advocated violent attacks on whites). Men such as John H. Deveaux, editor of the Savannah *Tribune* and member of the legislature in 1872, and most of the ministers were centrists, insisting on the necessity for racial pride, uplift, constant struggle to obtain civil rights and racial cooperation. Most of the attention, however, was focused on the far left.

Aaron Bradley, an irrepressible and fiery orator, won the undying hatred of most whites in Georgia and wholehearted support from the blacks in Chatham, Bryan and Effingham Counties who elected him as a Senator to the Georgia legislature in 1868. Escaping from slavery in Georgia when he was 19, Bradley went North and later became a lawyer. Returning to Savannah in 1865, he promptly began urging blacks in the area to seize abandoned plantations and to fight if the Freedmen's Bureau or the U.S. Army tried to dispossess them. Arrested and imprisoned

by military officials for his "insurrectionary language." Bradley was soon released and began organizing blacks in Chatham County into political cadres and insipient labor unions, and gathering petitions demanding the right to vote. Usually armed with a derringer and a bowie knife, Bradley often appeared at political rallies with an armed escort, led riots against white citizens and police and was probably arrested more times than any other politician in the nineteenth century. An advocate of what is today known as "black power," Bradley insisted that blacks should hold all of the offices in any district in which they were in a majority and often bolted the regular Republican Party when few blacks were nominated for important offices. Although mendacious and arrogant, Bradley won the support of Savannah Negroes with his showmanship, fearless attacks on whites, advocacy of an eight-hour day, an end to convict leases and chain gangs, the inclusion of Negroes in the state militia, his belief in women's suffrage and integration of public carriers, and his laudation of Negroes as the greatest of races.[28]

While no leader could match Bradley in his aggressiveness or physical assaults on whites, Henry McNeal Turner was a more honest, constructive and dependable man. The most influential Negro minister in Savannah, Turner was pastor of St. James A.M.E. Church. Born to free parents in South Carolina, in 1863 he was appointed Chaplain of the First U.S. Colored Troops. After the war Turner settled in Macon, Georgia, and represented Bibb County in the Georgia Legislature in 1868. The University of Pennsylvania (1872) and Wilberforce University (1873) conferred, respectively, the honorary degrees of Doctor of Laws and Doctor of Divinity upon him. In 1872, Turner became a customs inspector in Savannah. One of the leading Republicans in Georgia, Turner served on the party's State Central Committee and was one of the delegates to the Republican National Convention in 1876.

A shrewd man, Turner was initially much more conservative and conciliatory toward whites than Bradley. But after one of his cohorts was murdered and all blacks were illegally expelled from the Georgia Legislature in 1868, Turner became increasingly more radical. He immediately organized a State Civil and Political Rights Association and later led strikes of agricultural workers in middle Georgia, organized labor conventions and promised to kill whites

who threatened him. By the time he arrived in Savannah in 1872,
Turner was beginning to advocate emigration from the South.
Eventually he reached the point where he called the flag of the
United States "a dirty contemptible rag" and asserted that he
wished his native land nothing but ill-fortune.[29]

Although Turner, Bradley, Deveaux and Porter fought valiantly
for equal justice, an untramelled ballot box, fair wages for the
laborer and integrated transportation, they did not have a strong
enough power base to achieve all of their objectives. Outnumbered
by whites in the state, black voters had no consistent friends
among the motley crew of racist white Republican officeholders.
Blacks had little voice in governing the city of Savannah because
they were a minority of the voters. The quick "restoration" of
Georgia had ended whatever effective political power blacks had
by 1872. Consequently, the correspondent Edward King could
report in 1873 that in Savannah "the Negroes no longer have any
voice whatever in political matters, and are not represented in the
City Government."[30] Because they had a majority of the voters in
rural areas of Chatham County, however, blacks continued to win
county offices until the late 1870s. But even this power was
sharply curtailed by the machinations of Savannah's white officials
bent on disfranchising blacks.[31]

Although there were severe limits on their power, the emerg-
ence of black leaders was crucial in the fight Savannah Negroes
waged against white proscriptions and prejudices. In spite of white
fears of social equality, the white press's frequent use of "darkey"
and "coon" to describe blacks it considered obnoxious, and
physical altercations between the races, Negroes fought against
any obvious efforts to discriminate against them. Black leaders
complained consistently against the exclusion of Negroes from the
jury box and the harsh penalties meted out to them. On April 1,
1876, for example, the Savannah *Tribune* asserted that white
officials in Georgia displayed "the most wanton disregard for any
rights of the Negro, human, or divine." Because of the inequities
in law enforcement, James Simms and Porter introduced several
bills in the legislature in 1870 to reform the prison system and to
change the manner of selecting jurors.[32]

Porter was also one of the leaders in the campaign against Jim
Crow in Georgia. A bill he introduced in the legislature led to the

passage of an act on August 24, 1870, which provided that "all common carriers of passengers for hire in the State of Georgia shall furnish like and equal accommodations for all persons without distinction of race, color or previous condition."[33] The law, however, remained a dead letter in Savannah until 1872 when blacks started "sitting in" street cars reserved for whites and fighting with the white passengers when they were pushed off the cars. On several occasions disgruntled blacks shot into the all-white passenger cars and had officials of the line arrested for refusing them seats.[34]
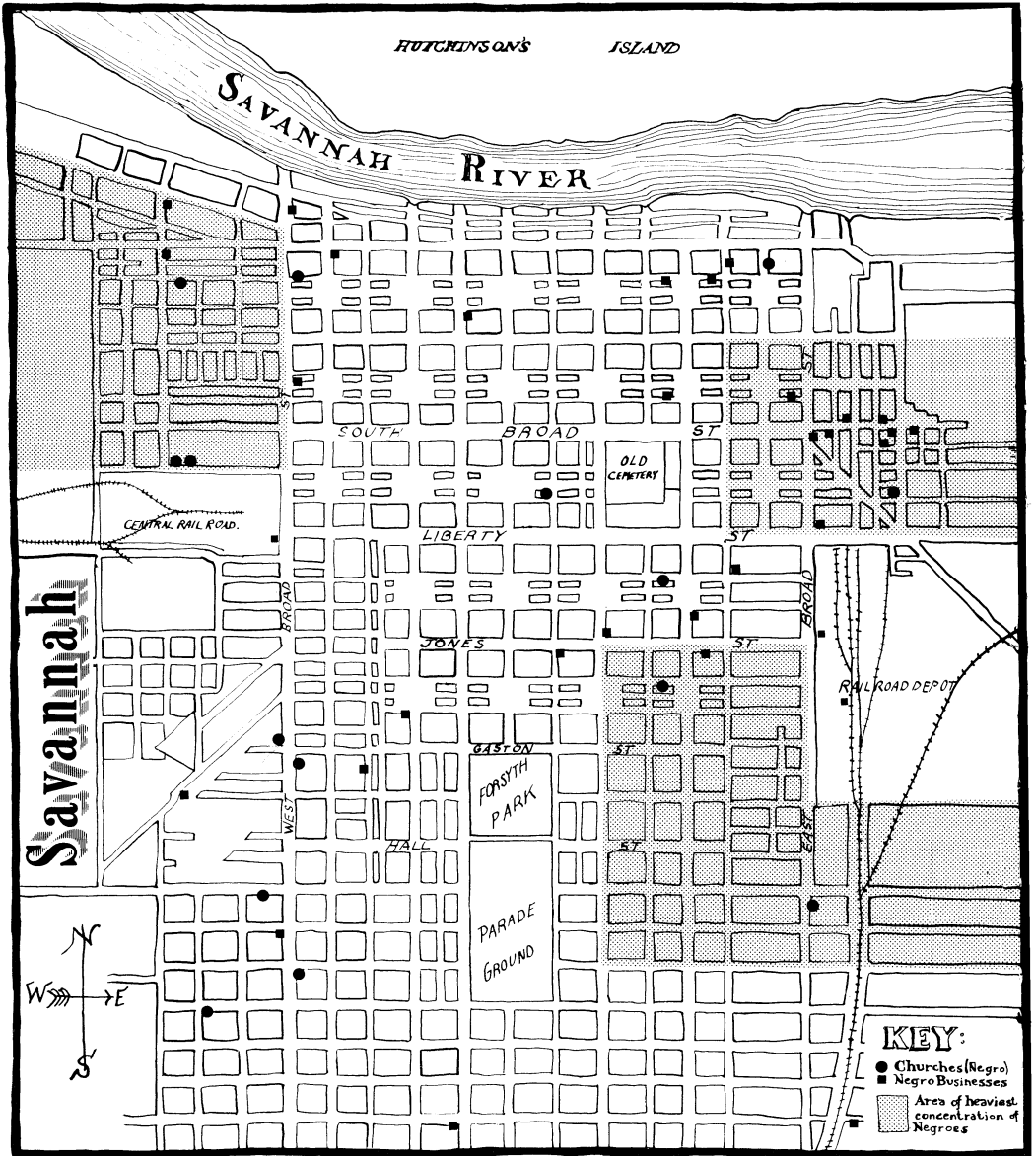
Negroes also fought discrimination on other fronts. When one of the express companies placed an "Exclusively for White People" sign over a water cooler, the *Tribune* declared on August 19, 1876: "Pshaw! boys, to the pump." The rush of Negroes to the pump caused the company to take the sign down. Apparently there was no standing rule about segregation in the theatres. When the all-Negro Braham Musical Club gave a concert in the Savannah theatre where the manager had forced Negroes to sit in the balcony, the *Tribune* was indignant. The performance of the club under these restrictions was all the more regrettable, the editor declared on April 29, 1876, because Negroes and whites sat in the same sections on street cars (until 1906) and because there was "no well bred gentleman in the city of Savannah who hesitates to ask a colored man to take a seat in his parlor, if he is decent in his person and respectful in his manner."

Although the *Tribune* obviously exaggerated the extent of racial harmony, there were many indications of cordial relations between blacks and whites. There was, for example, occasional fraternizing between white and Negro communicants. Whites invited blacks to attend the dedication of new churches and often visited Negro churches. Because of its central location, many white Catholics attended Mass with Negroes at St. Joseph's Catholic Church. Similarly, Negroes often attended white churches. For instance, when the First African expelled Deacon John H. Brown he "spent his time visiting the white churches" in the city from 1875 to 1877. While it is practically impossible to determine the extent of miscegenation, at least three interracial marriages had occurred by 1880. Two white men had married Negro women and one Negro man had a white wife.[35]

The most important factor in promoting interracial contacts in
the city was the continuation of the relatively integrated ante-
bellum housing pattern. Before the war Negroes had lived all over
the city in the small cabins behind the residences or in the homes
of their masters. In 1860, from 28 to 48 percent of the inhabitants
in each of Savannah's four militia districts were black. Ten years
later, they made up from 34 to 53 percent of the population in
each district. The residential pattern in 1870 reflected the large
number of Negroes who lived in the homes of their employers, a
significant number of black and white laborers inhabiting the same
houses and the large number of blacks and whites who lived next
to each other on practically all of the streets of Savannah. On few
of these streets did Negroes constitute more than 50 percent of
the inhabitants. Even when these streets appeared they were rarely
contiguous to each other.

In the late 1870s the color line became somewhat more rigid:
Three areas where more than 50 percent of the inhabitants were
Negroes had developed by 1880. The heaviest concentrations were
in "Yamacraw" and the areas bounded by Broughton, Price and
Liberty Streets. Blacks, however, were not restricted to these
areas. While the concentration of Negroes on the periphery of the
city had increased, blacks continued to reside on practically every
street in Savannah. In fact, throughout the 1860s and 1870s black
and white laborers tended to reside in the same areas, and more
prosperous Negroes and whites tended to live in the same areas.
The relatively open housing pattern is reflected in the fact that
even in 1880 nine of the 15 Negro churches and 19 of the 36
Negro businesses which appeared in the city directory were
located outside the areas with the heaviest concentrations of
blacks. Residential segregation during this period appears to have
been based as much on class and economic status as on race.[36]

When the general ignorance, widespread improvidence, con-
fusion, immorality, poverty and the weak and limited number of
social organizations and institutions of Savannah Negroes in 1865
is compared with their situation in 1880, it is obvious that they
had made great strides in building their community. Still, the
profile of Savannah blacks does not emerge in a clear outline.
While housing was relatively open, justice was not color blind.
Coincidental with riots between black and white voters, Negro and

HUTCHINSON'S ISLAND

SAVANNAH RIVER

Savannah

SOUTH BROAD ST

OLD CEMETERY

CENTRAL RAIL ROAD.

LIBERTY ST

BROAD

JONES ST

BROAD

RAILROAD DEPOT

GASTON ST

WEST

FORSYTH PARK

ST

HALL

ST

EAST

PARADE GROUND

N
W → E
S

KEY:
● Churches (Negro)
■ Negro Businesses
☐ Area of heaviest concentration of Negroes

SOURCE: *Savannah and Its Surroundings* by G. A. Gregory (Savannah 1890) frontispiece. Adapted by Nancy Stearns.

white church members enjoyed cordial relations. Integrated street cars and parks coexisted with Jim Crow theaters. The number of landholders increased steadily; but the Freedmen's Bank failed; property values and total wealth declined; and in 1880 the black 51 percent of Chatham County's population owned only 9.7 percent of the county's total wealth and had only 12 percent of the per capita wealth of whites. With the largest Negro population in the state, Chatham County Negroes ranked seventy-fifth in per capita and fourth in total wealth of the blacks in Georgia's 137 counties. Although there was an increase in occupational skills, Negroes were concentrated in unskilled, low paying, casual jobs. While education became more widespread, about 3,000 black children did not attend school. Even so, with native leaders, a rich social life, close cooperation, strong churches and a militant newspaper to sustain and defend them, during this period Savannah blacks built the foundation of a viable community.

Perhaps if scholars take the blinders off and resist the temptation to read allegations of the all-pervasive present day pathology of a Newark or Harlem back into the nineteenth century, we may find that Savannah was a typical black community. Although few cities have been analyzed, this examination of Savannah blacks should cause scholars to ponder anew the meaning of the black urban experience. Even when we concede the existence of endemic social problems, increasing political powerlessness and widespread illiteracy, the "enduring ghetto" of twentieth century Northern cities does not appear in Savannah. This suggests that the theoretical framework applied by Alan Spear to Chicago and Gilbert Osofsky to New York may be inapplicable to nineteenth-century Southern cities.

Given what we know (admittedly limited) of the experience of blacks in many nineteenth-century Southern cities, it may be fruitful for scholars to formulate new theoretical models to study black communities.[37] This is especially necessary because contemporary theories are based, it seems to me, on several questionable assumptions: (1) that certain economic, social, political and psychological benefits accrue to blacks from integrated housing patterns which automatically outweigh those benefits that come from living with persons of similar culture and identical racial origin; (2) that there was an inexorable retrogression of blacks

from the halcyon days of integrated housing immediately after the
Civil War to the pathology of ghettoes made in the 1890s; and (3)
that black intellectual, social and economic developments are tied
so closely to the actions of whites that we learn more about blacks
from the migration patterns of whites and the machinations of
white and black realtors than we do from studying the internal
dynamics of the black community.

Such assumptions seem entirely unwarranted when considering
Southern cities. Whatever problems nineteenth-century urban
blacks encountered in the South, they apparently had little to do
with either emerging or enduring ghettoes. In fact, contemporary
segregated housing patterns in Southern cities are the result of
twentieth-century legislation. Beginning in 1910 with Baltimore,
dozens of Southern cities passed a bizarre series of segregation
ordinances to reverse traditional integrated housing patterns. In
spite of integrated residential patterns in nineteenth-century
Savannah and other cities, Southern blacks faced many of the
same problems plaguing blacks locked in ghettoes. The common
problems and features of urban living begin to emerge, para-
doxically, when one recognizes the regional, economic and cul-
tural diversity of new and old, manufacturing and commercial,
inland and port, Northern and Southern cities. There is, for
instance, both a world of difference and many similarities in the
black community in post-bellum, war-ravaged Atlanta peopled
mainly by new migrants (black and white) and the New Orleans
community with its large ante-bellum black population. Rebuilt
quickly after the war, Atlanta immediately segregated blacks while
New Orleans continued its traditional pattern of integrated hous-
ing. Yet, as different as housing patterns were, there were many
similarities in occupational trends, racial ideology, institutional
developments and mortality rates among blacks in the two cities.

It is obvious that the character of black-white housing patterns
does not determine the nature of the black urban experience.
Housing patterns may be, in fact, ancillary rather than central to
that experience. When, however, scholars attempt to study the
black community from the inside, focus on people rather than
solely on real estate, analyze black hopes as well as black
frustrations, and the solutions blacks proposed as well as the
problems they faced, we will begin to understand the impact of

urbanization on blacks. We need to know as much about black dreams as we do about white fears of blacks, as much about black institutions as housing patterns, black occupations as unemployment and black successes as black failures. Viewing the blacks in Savannah from this perspective suggests that nineteenth-century urban blacks had visions of the future which included self-determination, solving their social problems, educating their children and working and playing in ways which had little to do with later historians spinning fanciful theories (based on the European experience of Jews) about them being locked in "enduring ghettoes." They were building "enduring communities."

FOOTNOTES

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7. Table II.

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