SOUL POWER: THE BLACK CHURCH AND THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT IN CAIRO, ILLINOIS, 1969-74

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DISSEPTION
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ABSTRACT

While scholarship on the modern Civil Rights Movement has emphasized the centrality of the Black church, popular and scholarly accounts of Black Power portray a movement marked by a profound de-Christianization. *Soul Power* upends this prevailing narrative, arguing that the Black church played a sustained and pivotal role in the Black Power Movement at its central flashpoint, Cairo, Illinois, a city identified by contemporaries as the site of the nation’s “longest protracted struggle” for racial justice. This dissertation explores how activists working within Cairo’s leading Black Power organization, the United Front, reworked the religious discourses and institutions that had anchored earlier civil rights struggles and provided access to the Black church’s tremendous organizational resources. Seizing upon emergent trends in Black Theology, the United Front developed a distinctive spiritual philosophy that legitimized the organization’s political program and unified movement participants. In turn, prominent Black clergy assisted the United Front in leveraging much needed resources from mainline denominations and ecumenical organizations operating at the state and national level. As support for traditional civil rights organizations waned and faith in the War on Poverty dwindled, this dissertation shows that churches became a significant, albeit overlooked, source of coalitional support for the Black Power Movement. However, as conservative political agendas established their dominance in the early 1970s, this heavy reliance upon church revenues, particularly that of predominantly white denominations, left Black Power organizations acutely vulnerable to state repression and shifting sentiments within the church itself.
To friends and allies.
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INTRODUCTION

On March 13, 1971, the United Front (UF) – a nationally renowned Black Power organization based in Cairo, Illinois – published an article written by 16 year-old Oklahoman Karen Rice in its weekly paper the United Front News. In the article, entitled “The Movement, God and Me,” Rice testified to her political “awakening” while attending a Lutheran conference in Chicago. During the conference, attendees were encouraged to “get together with others of [their] own race and discover themselves as a group of people.” African American students joined together in forming a Black caucus called Black Youth Unlimited and, according to Rice, were “completely de-brainwashed” and “blackenized” by the experience. However, upon returning home to Tulsa, Rice struggled to find practical outlets for her heightened sense of racial consciousness. She joined a gospel troupe called the Ghetto Choir and began performing for embattled communities across the country but continued to have doubts about her role in the movement and, increasingly, doubts about the relevance of her Christian faith to the Black liberation struggle. “I knew that the choir was working through the hands of Jesus Christ,” she explained, “but I just was not sure if this was my role in the movement.” In particular, Rice struggled to reconcile her emergent sense of Black consciousness with popular conceptions of Christianity as the “white man’s religion.” “How can we believe in something that was taught to us by the white man?” Rice asked. “It seemed [as] though our oppressor had given us this religion called Christianity so that he could control us.” This, Rice explained, is probably “why black people have been a non-violent people for so long.”
However, in November 1970 Rice travelled with the Ghetto Choir to Cairo, Illinois, where her understanding of the relationship between African American Christianity and the Black Power Movement would be radically transformed. In Cairo, Rice experienced firsthand local Black Power activists proclaiming a reconstructed and relevant Black theology centered on the Black experience and committed to Black liberation. “After we visited this city,” Rice wrote, “I finally had found the answer that I have been looking for for over a year.” Far from abandoning the faith, Rice explained, local activists demonstrated “that the way to win this battle was by living the gospel preached in the Holy Bible.”

Penned at the height of the Black Power Movement (BPM), Karen Rice’s articulation of one African American girl’s personal struggle to reconcile her faith with the cause of Black liberation resonates with a set of broader concerns that emerged in movement circles during the course of the 1960s. Frustrated with the pace of change and critical of the notion that love, nonviolence, and redemptive suffering were viable strategies in the liberation of Black people, a new generation of Black Power activists questioned the Christian political philosophy that had underpinned the modern Civil Rights Movement, bringing to light longstanding fissures just beneath the surface of the fragile civil rights coalition.

While major civil rights organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) linked immediate demands for integration to longer-term spiritual visions of a “Beloved Community,” many activists who worked within or alongside these organizations had a more pragmatic interest in integration and grew increasingly skeptical of the reconciliationist rhetoric deployed by civil rights leaders. As SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael (a.k.a. Kwame Ture) put it, “I never saw my responsibility to be the moral and spiritual reclamation of some racist thug. I would settle for

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changing his behavior period.”

SNCC worker Cleveland Sellers agreed: “[W]e did not believe that we were fighting to create a morally straight America. We were essentially concerned with power. Integration was never seen as anything more than a means to an end.” For those who initially embraced reconciliationist thought, the steady specter of racial violence and the absence of state protection eventually came to undermine the Beloved Community’s realization and brought into question the utility of nonviolent strategies that had presumed the existence of a moral conscience to which the sins of white America could be appealed. In the wake of the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Anne Moody, who had participated in the sit-ins, recalled vowing to God that she would “never be beaten by a white man again.”

“Nonviolence is out,” Moody said, and if God heard from Martin Luther King any time soon he could go ahead and “tell him that nonviolence has served its purpose.”

While civil rights workers in the Deep South were losing the faith, poet and activist Amiri Baraka (a.k.a., LeRoi Jones) gave voice to Black youth growing up in the nation’s urban ghettos, a world in which civil rights’ emphasis on the power of nonviolence and moral suasion simply did not register. “[W]e younger Blacks,” Baraka explained, “out of school or the service or in the factories and warehouses and docks knew being ‘righteous’ or ‘good’ had never worked, except if you could fight.” Thus, he argued, “the Christian essence of ‘the movement’ was lost to us.” During the late 1960s, youthful activists across the nation often echoed these frustrations, casting aside the Christian underpinnings of earlier civil rights struggles in favor of

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2 Wesley C. Hogan, Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007), 36.
4 Scholars of the Civil Rights Movement have long acknowledged that nonviolent strategies could operate both through appeals to the conscience and through the application of social or economic pressure in the form of boycotts. I am emphasizing the moral appeal here not to obscure the diversity of positions held by civil rights activists but rather to reflect how critics of nonviolence often flattened these debates during the mid-1960s.
greater tactical flexibility and what Black Panther Party (BPP) leader Huey P. Newton called “a more concrete understanding of social conditions,” rooted less in the Bible than in the works of political radicals like Karl Marx, Mao Tse-Tung, Frantz Fanon, and Malcolm X.⁷

As movement participants questioned whether strategies rooted in Christian discourses could facilitate Black liberation, others audaciously contended that Christianity was in fact the primary instrument of African Americans oppression. Strident critiques of Christianity came from the Nation of Islam (NOI), an organization that had garnered considerable support among working-class African Americans in northern cities. The organization’s leader, Elijah Muhammad, a former Baptist minister, spoke directly to African Americans like Rice, who had come of age in the Black church.⁸ Christianity, according to Muhammad, was a religion “organized and backed by the devils [white people] for the purpose of making slaves of black mankind.” Muhammad explained how Christianity enslaved Blacks by offering an “otherworldly” faith that promoted love for the enemy over love and protection of self and community.⁹

In the early 1960s, Elijah Muhammad’s teachings on Christianity were translated to a national audience by his best-known student, Malcolm X (a.k.a, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz). In a 1963 interview Malcolm spoke to the sea change in consciousness he saw taking place in many urban communities: “The black masses that are waking up don’t believe in Christianity anymore. All it’s done for black men is help to keep them slaves.” “Intelligent black men today,” Malcolm asserted, “are interested in a religious doctrine that offers a solution to their problems right now,

⁸ The term “Black Church” can be deployed in several different ways. In this dissertation, I use the term to reference Black Christians and predominantly black congregations whether they belong to a historically Black or predominantly white denomination.
right here on this earth, while they are alive.” Although only a relative handful of African Americans would follow Malcolm X into the NOI, theologian Gayraud Wilmore contends that many “believed he spoke the truth about Christianity being a religion for White people” and turned their backs on the Black church.

This broader historical context has led Black Freedom Studies scholars such as historian Judson L. Jeffries to claim that Christianity simply “did not figure as prominently in the Black Power Movement as it did in the Civil Rights Movement.” While local Black Power activists may have been churchgoers, Jeffries insists that “[n]one of the commonly known leaders of the movement manifested a positive view of Christianity.” Indeed, while scholarship on the modern Civil Rights Movement’s “heroic phase” has emphasized the centrality of African-American religious institutions and beliefs to effective movement mobilization, popular and scholarly accounts of Black Power often portray a movement marked by a profound de-Christianization. As the dominant ideologies, strategies, and tactics of Black liberation struggles shifted from integration to Black nationalism, interracial cooperation to self-

11 Wilmore quote taken from, Chapman, Christianity on Trial, 70.
determination, and nonviolence to armed self-defense, scholars contend that the legitimacy of Christian discourses and the organizational significance of the Black church was undermined, particularly among the young, working-class populations whose frustrations reverberated in a series of urban rebellions that swept the country between 1963 and 1968. Some have gone so far as to suggest that Black Power’s abandonment of its spiritual moorings contributed to the movement’s declension by “jettisoning… the moral and social anchors that had helped regulate relationships among activists” and alienating important coalitional allies.¹⁵

Black Power, the Black Church, and African American Christianity

Karen Rice’s story – like those of many lesser-known Black Power activists – raises important questions about Black Power’s de-Christianization and bolsters recent calls from scholars in the emergent subfield of Black Power Studies to probe more deeply the relationship between the Black church, African American Christianity, and the Black Power Movement.¹⁶ While studies of Black Power struggles in cities like Baltimore and Detroit have tended to note the continued participation of Black churches, clergy, and laypersons, there has been little sustained analysis of the character, extent, or significance of the Black church’s involvement or the broader influence, if any, of African American Christian discourses to movement mobilization.¹⁷

This neglect is particularly surprising considering that scholars in the field of African American Religious Studies have consistently acknowledged the transformative effects of Black Power on the Black church and African American theological traditions.\textsuperscript{18} While many in church circles disavowed Black Power as a betrayal of the Christian principles that had underpinned earlier civil rights struggles, others saw the movement’s call for racial unity, cooperation, and the establishment of autonomous institutions as offering valuable lessons that demanded the attention of urban ministers and Black theologians alike. The widespread interest of African American clergy in Black power was manifest in the explosion of Black caucuses established within predominantly white denominations during this period. Through caucuses, African American ministers were able to secure a more significant role in denominational decision-making as well as gain control of committees devoted to addressing issues of race and poverty.\textsuperscript{19} In 1966, efforts to solidify Black clergy’s power culminated in the formation of the National Conference of Black Churchmen (NCBC), an ecumenical body that, according to theologian Gayraud Wilmore, was committed to mobilizing “the increasing number of radical black ministers in the northern cities as a more strategic and aggressive leadership for the next phase of the struggle.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18} I am going to reserve my discussion here to the immediate impact of the Black Power Movement on the Black Church during the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, the longer-term impact of the Black Power Movement on the Black Church has been assessed in C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, The Black Church in the African American Experience (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).
(IFCO), an ecumenical funding agency, was established to extend financial aid to social movement organizations working to address poverty and racism in communities across the country. Through these bodies, African American clergy and laypeople endeavored to render the church relevant to the struggles of Black communities by leveraging the tremendous organizational resources of their denominations and developing a systematic Black theology centered on the Black experience and committed to Black liberation. The latter would be the Black church movement’s most prominent legacy of the 1960s and early 1970s.

While a number of studies have demonstrated the transformative effect of Black Power on the Black church and African American theological traditions, what is less clear is the impact these emergent Black caucuses, ecumenical bodies, and theologies had upon local Black Power struggles. Religious studies scholars have generally downplayed the influence of these new developments in the Black church, arguing that Black caucuses and ecumenical bodies lacked the necessary coordination and support to sustain Black Power struggles in the manner that SCLC had during the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, scholars contend that despite its radical potential, Black Theology’s influence was largely confined to seminaries and universities. “Ironically,” Gayraud Wilmore explains, “the first Black Church movement that was able to sponsor and propagate an authentic black theology was unable to concretize and activate that theology in the places where it would have made a palpable difference.” However, the legitimacy

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*For more on the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), see Lecky and Wright, Black Manifesto, 7-11; Wilmore, Pragmatic Spirituality, 195, 296; Sawyer, Black Ecumenism, 84-86.*

*For early works in Black Theology, see Albert B. Cleage, Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church (New York: W. Morrow, 1972); Albert B. Cleage, The Black Messiah (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968); James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).*

*Wilmore, Pragmatic Spirituality, 193-194.*

of such claims is undercut by the paucity of studies addressing the impact of these emergent Black caucuses, ecumenical bodies, and theologies at the local level during the Black Power Movement.  

Accordingly, in *Soul Power*, I combine the approaches of Black Power Studies with the findings of African American Religious Studies to probe the changing role and relationship of African American Christian institutions, beliefs, and rituals to the Black Freedom Movement in Cairo, Illinois. Central to this study are four research questions: (1) How and why was the dominant Civil Rights discourse of racial reconciliation and nonviolence in Cairo affected by the urban rebellions and shift to Black Power approaches during the late 1960s? (2) How did local Black Power activists in the city transform existing theologies to meet the changing social and political realities of their historical moment? (3) What role did this transformed vision of the Black church and African American Christianity play in the local Black Power Movement? (4) How did local Cairo activists translate the new Black Theology into an ideology to guide their movement? 

In the process of addressing these questions, *Soul Power* makes several claims about the relationship between Black Power, the Black Church, and African American Christianity. At the broadest level, *Soul Power* troubles dominant conceptions of Black Power’s de-Christianization by demonstrating the sustained and pivotal role played by the Black church and African American Christian discourses to movement mobilization in Cairo. While the changing political and economic realities of the Black Power era were disruptive to the dominant Civil Rights ideology and coalition, *Soul Power* demonstrates that Black religious discourses and institutions continued to provide the basis for a coherent movement culture, unifying ideology, and renewed access to the Black church’s tremendous organizational resources.

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More specifically, *Soul Power* shows that in their efforts to construct a viable Black Power Movement, activists in the Cairo United Front forged important connections with nationally prominent Black theologians, urban ministers, and their affiliated organizations. Taking advantage of the political opportunity provided by the urban rebellions, the United Front partnered with Black church executives in exerting pressure on predominantly white denominations to render the church relevant to Black liberation by extending their tremendous organizational resources to local Black power organizations. Between 1969 and 1974, these efforts were remarkably successful, resulting in the transfer of more than $500,000 in grants to the United Front as well as extensive lobbying, consultancy, and legal support. Grant awarding bodies, including the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations (IFCO), the Episcopal Church’s General Convention Special Program, and the Presbyterian Church’s National Committee on the Self-Development of People, extended critical resources that sustained the United Front’s daily operations and political programming. In contrast to federal or corporate support, church-based grants were malleable and extended with relatively few strings, making them particularly attractive to Black Power activists. As a result, churches made critical contributions to those components of the United Front’s operations that a governmental or corporate agency would not support, including, staff salaries, office space, travel expenses, and bail bond. Further, church-based organizations extended seed-money for the initiation of the United Front’s community development programs, increasing the likelihood that such initiatives would eventually receive state and federal governmental awards. As financial support for major civil rights organizations declined during the 1960s, these new resources proved invaluable and ensured that churches would be the United Front’s primary source of funding.
In a period of conservative re-ascendancy, however, this heavy reliance upon predominantly white denominations left the United Front acutely vulnerable to shifting political sentiments. An upsurge of opposition among white lay people; the emergence of an organized conservative opposition within denominational hierarchies; and the growing popularity of evangelical and fundamentalist alternatives, all contributed to a significant decline in mainline denominational support for the United Front after 1972. Internal opposition to Black clergy’s social justice activities was compounded by pressure from state actors including, most significantly, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and the FBI, which quickly mobilized to cut off funding for Black Power struggles. Thus, Soul Power demonstrates the overlooked role that churches played in both the rise and decline of Black Power struggles.

In the transition from Civil Rights to Black Power, local activists called upon the Black church movement not only to provide important organizational resources, but also to help rework the movement’s dominant ideologies, strategies and tactics. Far from being disconnected from the emergent Black Theology, United Front leaders engaged the latest theological literature, invited Black theologians to speak at their weekly rallies, and sent potential local leaders for training in Black Theology at seminaries and universities across the country. From this dynamic interaction with a national movement, local activists in Cairo were able to develop a distinctive grassroots Black theology, that served to legitimate their conception of white America as a hopelessly corrupt and immoral society that valued capitalist accumulation over Black lives. Poplarly referred to as “Soulism” or “Soul Power,”26 this grassroots theology solidified support

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for the United Front’s strategic and tactical focus on armed self-defense and the development of autonomous parallel institutions grounded in an alternative Black value system of cooperation and collectivity. The dynamic relationship between Black Theology and the United Front’s political programming was far from unique and challenges scholars’ assumption that Black Theology was primarily an academic pursuit that failed to influence local Black churches and communities. For a brief period at the end of the 1960s and the start of the 1970s, the interaction of local struggles with Black Theology produced a plurality of popular grassroots theologies that facilitated and legitimized church involvement in the Black Power Movement while providing the ideational framework for movement mobilization. In this manner, Black Theology in the United States may have had more in common with its Latin American counterpart, Liberation Theology, than has been previously assumed.

Implicit in these claims is Soul Power’s contention that the involvement of the Black church and African American Christian discourses in movement mobilization was neither inevitable nor complete, but rather was contingent upon the discursive labor and organizational pressures applied by activists with feet in both the church and social movement organizations. In staking this claim, Soul Power challenges traditional portrayals of the Black church as an “otherworldly” distraction or a liberatory organic source of social protest by situating the Black church as a complex and heterogeneous institution capable of sustaining multiple and divergent ideological traditions simultaneously. As historian Charles Payne argues, “there is nothing as a spiritual alternative to “Black Power” that was flexible enough to incorporate poor people irrespective of race and ethnicity. See “Poor People Vow Last Peaceful March in Plea for Aid From Congress,” Jet, July 4, 1968. The term was later immortalized by James Brown on his live album Revolution of the Mind: Recorded Live at the Apollo, Polydor, 1971.

inherently conservative about the Church… its message can as easily be packaged in order-threatening as in order-serving ways.”

Accordingly, securing the participation of Black churches in movement mobilization required that activists work within the parameters of these existing traditions, re-packaging dominant ideologies or recovering subjugated ones. Acknowledging this important but often obscured labor is particularly important in light of the tendency to both exaggerate and romanticize the involvement of the Black church in popular and scholarly accounts of the Civil Rights Movement. The assumption that connections between the Black church and the modern Civil Rights Movement were obvious and essential has been challenged by studies showing that the majority of African American clergy failed to participate and, in fact, often opposed the idea of Black church involvement in social protest. Historian Allison Calhoun-Brown offers an important corrective when she states that “the movement did not rise from the church” but that “the resources and ministers of the church had to be actively recruited into the movement.”

At root, therefore, *Soul Power* is concerned with how grassroots activists recruited and sustained Black church, clerical, and lay support for Black power struggles at the local, state, and national levels. In my examination of this labor, I rely heavily upon approaches developed by scholars of social movement theory. Social movement theorists have demonstrated that while grievances are ever-present they do not automatically lead to collective action. Thus, they have

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31 Allison Calhoun-Brown, “Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no.2 (Jun., 2000), 172.
pointed to the importance of political opportunities and organizational resources in facilitating movement mobilization. However, while expanded political opportunities and organizational strength provide the structural potential for a movement, they do not in themselves make a movement. As political scientist Doug McAdam argues, “Mediating between opportunity and action are people and the subjective meanings they attach to their situations.” Therefore, Calhoun-Brown argues, “much of the work done by a social movement organization involves, literally, making meanings and communicating the appropriate mobilizing messages to its constituents.” In sociological literature, this process of “making meaning” is called framing and it is one of the most important jobs performed by activists working within social movement organizations. Framing, more precisely defined, is the process by which a social movement organization links individual and group grievances to a broader interpretative framework that helps potential participants understand their experience, recognize that it is unjust, and envision specific ways in which they remedy it collectively. Scholars have indicated that the success of such movements often hinges on the ability of organizations to deploy frames that resonate with potential participants and coalitional bodies.

During the emergent stages of the modern Civil Rights Movement, developing frames that resonated with potential participants required engaging with widely held religious beliefs

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33 McAdam, Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 48.
34 Calhoun-Brown, “Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement,” 171.
and the centrality of the Black church to African American communities. According to McAdam, as expanded political opportunities and “indigenous” organizational strength converged during the postwar era they brought into question dominant “otherworldly” theologies that had served to inhibit political engagement. “It was a religion of containment,” sociologist Aldon Morris contends, “the opiate of the masses, a religion that soothed the pains of economic, political and social exploitation.”

The transformation of this dominant religious ideology—a process McAdam has called “cognitive liberation,” was vital to the emergence of the modern Civil Rights Movement. According to Morris, a new generation of “militant” ministers including Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., played pivotal roles in “refocusing the cultural content” of churches towards a Social Gospel tradition, thus rendering congregants ready for activism. In turn, major civil rights organizations like the SCLC and the SNCC capitalized on cognitive liberation by developing ideologies, strategies, and tactics that resonated with church people and had the capability of facilitating mass-mobilization. Civil rights organizations achieved this by linking liberal integrationist ideologies and direct-action strategies and tactics to Christian discourses of racial reconciliation and nonviolence. This discursive frame would prove remarkably successful in establishing a unifying movement culture and solidifying coalitional links with northern white liberals.

However, as the dominant ideologies, strategies, and tactics of the Black Freedom Movement shifted during the mid-1960s this civil rights frame lost resonance, jeopardizing church-based support and access to the organizational resources that had underpinned earlier civil rights struggles. In this context, Soul Power explores how grassroots activists looked to a changing Black church and Black Theology for help in refashioning dominant theological

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38 Ibid., 97
39 Calhoun-Brown, "Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement."
worldviews. Activists then used them to frame the ideological, strategic, and tactical agendas of new social movement organizations during the Black Power era. Though these efforts were cut short by narrowing political opportunities and state repression, their existence offers important lessons for future struggles and reminds us that the Black church’s involvement in social movement activity will not come without the ardent and creative labors of activists at the local level.

**Black Freedom Struggles in the Borderland**

_Soul Power’s_ focus on Cairo is timely in that it converges with a growing body of scholarship in the field of Black Freedom Studies that has challenged dominant spatial conceptions of the modern Civil Rights Movement as a distinctly southern struggle. By conducting studies that are attentive to the local dynamics of struggles in northern cities, a new generation of scholars has argued for a parallel northern movement that “inspired southern activists as much as they were inspired by them.”\(^4^0\) Within this broader spatial reconfiguration of the field, a smaller group of scholars has also begun to grapple with the unique patterns of racial oppression and resistance that characterize borderland communities occupying tenuous spatial

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locations at the intersection of North and South. Studies of Black freedom struggles in communities like St. Louis, Missouri; Cambridge, Maryland; and Louisville, Kentucky situate the borderland as an interstitial region in which North and South converge, producing a seemingly contradictory amalgamation of racial practices and customs. Chief among borderland communities’ unique characteristics, scholars contend, were the ability of African Americans to vote and hold political office; the presence of a fluid system of social segregation governed by a combination of custom and law; and, the comparative infrequency and social unacceptability of racial violence. According to scholars, these important regional distinctions in patterns of racial oppression allowed white civic leaders to draw points of contrast with their Deep South counterparts by situating borderland communities as “beacons of civility” and racial progress, a discourse that African American activists would regularly utilize to their own advantage. However, while the politics of civility ensured that borderland leaders would adopt, at least in public, less confrontational approaches to Black freedom struggles, scholars also contend that these discourses justified a gradualist approach to social change that for African American activists carried the risk of cooptation and incorporation. Thus, far from collapsing traditional boundaries between North and South, studies of the borderland demonstrate that regional distinctions mattered, because they powerfully shaped Black opportunities and freedom struggles.41

In focusing on Cairo, Illinois, *Soul Power* both contributes to and complicates our understanding of Black freedom struggles in the borderland. While the emergent scholarship

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focuses on urban places in the five traditional Civil War border states (Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and West Virginia), I adopt urban historian Henry Louis Taylor, Jr.’s more expansive conception of the borderland as encompassing states and cities positioned both immediately north and south of the Mason-Dixon Line. In Taylor’s analysis, the five traditional border states are defined as “southern borderland states,” while Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and New Jersey are incorporated as “northern borderland states.” In this context, Taylor distinguishes borderland cities as those “lying on both sides of the borderline separating the North and South” meaning that “Cincinnati and Cairo, Illinois would be borderland cities but not Cleveland and Chicago.” Taylor’s expanded definition of the borderland is particularly useful because it allows scholars to elucidate important but often overlooked regional distinctions that exist within states conventionally designated as northern and between those regions and their southern borderland counterparts. In Soul Power, therefore, I utilize the borderland concept to delineate Cairo’s regional particularity in Southern Illinois as well as to draw important lines of comparison and distinction between Cairo as a northern borderland city and its nearby southern counterparts.

This study also has relevance to trends in the field of Black Urban History. While earlier accounts focused on the Midwest and Northeast, Soul Power reflects the relatively recent growth of Black community studies rooted in the South, the West and at the intersection of each. According to urban historian George C. Wright, in order to attain a “full understanding of how white America dealt with its Negro problem it is extremely important to discuss the circumstances of blacks in border cities.” Located at the confluence of the Ohio and

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Mississippi rivers, Cairo was a frontier river city founded at the peak of westward expansion and the market revolution. With access to two of the nation’s largest river systems, Cairo appeared peculiarly situated to capitalize on the growing commercial and industrial opportunities of the early nineteenth century. As the Ohio Valley region emerged as a national center of commerce and industry in the 1830s and 1840s, Cairo took its place as an important transshipping hub, moving goods by steamboat East and West, North and South, and internationally via the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. Like other Ohio Valley river cities, Cairo’s labor force expanded during this period, incorporating skilled German mechanics and unskilled Irish laborers into its ranks. After a brief period of economic stagnation, the city’s position was solidified in 1851 when the Illinois State Legislature selected it as the southern terminal for the Illinois Central Railroad – a decision that further tied Cairo with Deep South communities all the way down to Mobile, Alabama. In 1859 alone, six million pounds of cotton and wool, seven thousand barrels of molasses, and fifteen thousand hogsheads of sugar were shipped through the city. Thus, Cairo, like other northern borderland cities, faced south - making its profits in light manufacturing and as a key transportation center for the southern slave economy. However, Cairo’s expansion, like that of most Ohio Valley river communities, was quickly outmatched by the growth of the great industrial cities to the north. Struggling to expand its manufacturing base and experiencing a precipitous decline in river and rail traffic, Cairo experienced the ravages of corporate relocation, unemployment, and population decline decades before they occurred in larger Ohio River Valley metropolises like Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, foreshadowing changes that would eventually take place across the Rust Belt.44

Sitting ninety latitudinal miles south of Richmond, Virginia, Cairo’s southern ties solidified the community’s identity as “the Deep South city of the North.” The city’s white native-born stock traced roots back to the Upland South states of Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee, a fact that distinguished white Cairoites from their counterparts in upstate Illinois and profoundly shaped the cultural and political context of the region. Like other parts of the northern borderland, southern Illinois’s allegiances were complicated by its recent history of bound labor. While the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 banned slavery in the territory, slaveholders in the southernmost parts of Illinois, referred to locally as “Little Egypt,” had been permitted to retain their slaves as indentured servants until the practice was finally outlawed in 1848. In fact, Cairo’s first African American residents had come as bonded laborers in 1818 when William Bird, a Missouri slaveholder, moved to the area and constructed the community’s first commercial properties. Therefore, a reliance on slave labor, though not widespread, was not uncommon in Southern Illinois during the early nineteenth century, with several hundred African Americans working in domestic, agricultural and industrial capacities mirroring practices across the northern borderland. Although not all native-born whites owned slaves or supported the

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practice, white Cairoites exhibited little sympathy for African Americans who crossed the Ohio River from the slave-rich Purchase region in search of a Promised Land. They exuberantly upheld the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and vigorously enforced the state’s Black Codes and, after 1853, its Black exclusion law. Accordingly, as sectional animosities increased during the 1850s and 1860s, tensions over slavery, Black migration, and southern roots were exacerbated, making decisions about Civil War allegiances in Cairo and across the northern borderland especially fraught. Fears that the fiercely Democratic partisans of Southern Illinois would defect to the Confederacy ran rampant farther north, and in April 1861 Union leaders moved to secure the area by establishing a military stronghold in Cairo that would serve as a key base in the western theater. However, Copperhead sentiment persisted and the region remained remarkably southern in its outlook.48

Until the Civil War, native born-whites’ vigorous enforcement of the Black codes and exclusion laws ensured that the African American population in Southern Illinois and across the northern borderland would remain extremely small. In 1860, the total Black population of Illinois sat at 7,600 with only 8 towns – all located outside of Southern Illinois – having 100 or more Black residents. Cairo was home to only 23 free Blacks in 1860, most of them consigned to marginal domestic and service labor. During the war, however, African Americans fled to northern borderland cities in droves, resulting in a demographic revolution as Black-white population ratios shifted to mirror those of the southern borderland. Cairo, with its Union

military base and growing “contraband” camp, experienced the largest proportional increase as
the Black population grew by 3,834 percent during the 1860s. Restricted by vehement anti-Black
sentiment in nearby rural counties, many of the new Black migrants, largely from Kentucky and
Tennessee, opted to stay in Cairo, building new lives and communities together. However, as in
other northern borderland communities, their efforts would be restricted by a distinctive pattern
of racial oppression.49

Cairo’s identity as a southern-city-in-a-northern-state produced patterns of racial
oppression that were distinct both from upstate Illinois and neighboring communities in the
southern borderland. While segregation in southern borderland cities like Louisville and St.
Louis was characterized by a fluidity and unevenness in comparison to the Deep South, the
separation of Blacks from whites in Cairo was almost complete by the turn-of-the-century.
African Americans were excluded from the use of certain public facilities, including the Cairo
Public Library and the city’s swimming pool, and faced segregation in others, including water
fountains, bus stations, and restrooms. The city’s hospital, St. Mary’s Infirmary, maintained
separate wards for Black patients. Black children, irrespective of residence, attended separate
and inferior schools at the elementary and senior levels. In the private sector, white-owned lunch
counters, movie theaters, and bars either refused to serve Blacks or provided separate and
inferior facilities. Thus, in many ways, life for Cairo’s Black residents was comparable to that of

Down in Egypt Land,” 174-194; Leslie A. Schwalm, “‘Overrun with Free Negroes’: Emancipation and Wartime
Sanitary Commission in the Valley of the Mississippi, During the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1866; Final Report of
Dr. J. S. Newberry,” (Cleveland: Fairbanks, Benedict, 1871); John Eaton and Ethel Osgood Mason, Grant, Lincoln,
and the Freedmen: Reminiscences of the Civil War, with Special Reference to the Work for the Contrabands and
Contraband Camp at Cairo, Illinois,” in Lysle E. Meyer ed., Selected Proceedings of the Sixth Northern Great
Press, 1968); Laura S. Haviland, A Woman’s Life-Work: Labors and Experiences of Laura S. Haviland (Salem,
the Deep South. Importantly, however, state laws prohibiting racial discrimination ensured that Cairo’s system of social segregation would hinge on custom as opposed to law so struggles to dismantle Jim Crow in the Land of Lincoln took an entirely different shape from the Deep South or the borderland South – a shape that both afforded and necessitated distinctive strategies and tactics. These unique political realities ensured that Cairo would become an important testing ground for the NAACP’s legal and direct action strategies in the years preceding the *Brown* decision as well as the site of SNCC’s first integration campaign north of the Ohio River in 1962.\(^5\)

Black Cairoites’ experience of racial segregation and exclusion was compounded by the extraordinarily marginalized position of the city’s Black working class and the attendant underdevelopment of a Black middle-class that in other borderland cities provided access to separate Black institutions. While African Americans across the borderland were largely confined to the lowest paid and unskilled positions in domestic and service work, the economic plight of Black Cairoites was particularly precarious. As river trade declined during the late nineteenth century, Cairo was unable to secure the large industrial and manufacturing contracts that ensured the survival of other larger river cities and, as a result, the city’s Black workers were forced into the most marginal day labor, seasonal, and service work. Historian Darrel Bigham identifies similar trends in his study of Evansville, Indiana, and contends that the absence of significant industrial opportunities in smaller Ohio River Valley communities prevented the proletarianization of Black workers and severely undercut the development of the Black middle-class. In Cairo, as in Evansville, a small Black professional class and an even smaller Black

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\(^{5}\) Scholars disagree as to how quickly segregation was established as practice in Cairo, Illinois. However, there is general agreement that by the turn-of-the-century an elaborate system of social segregation was in place. Wheeler, “Together in Egypt: A Pattern of Race Relations in Cairo, Illinois, 1865-1915,” 119-121; Hays, “The African American Struggle for Equality and Justice in Cairo, Illinois, 1865-1900,” 279-81; Hays, “Way Down in Egypt Land,” 238-246, 449-450.
business class endeavored to provide key services and facilities to Black Cairoites, but were never able to achieve the stability of their big-city counterparts. Therefore, Black Cairoites were increasingly subject to the practice of racial exclusion as opposed to racial segregation, lending a sense of urgency to struggles over discrimination in public accommodations and hiring practices. Furthermore, the absence of a well-established Black middle class also ensured that when those struggles did occur, Black workers would play a leading role and, in comparison to many of their borderland neighbors, would be relatively unimpeded by intraracial class struggles over goals and approaches. In this sense, Cairo provides a unique opportunity to explore Black worker struggles for freedom and empowerment.  

In their efforts to address segregation and other racially discriminatory practices, Black Cairoites, like African Americans across the borderland, were able to exercise their political rights by voting and running candidates who best represented their collective agendas. Scholars have shown that the distinctive demographic and political realities of borderland communities often afforded African Americans a significant role in local politics. In the wake of the Civil War, Cairo represented one of the most extreme examples of this, as its disproportionately large Black community held the balance between the Democratic and Republican parties. After 1870, Black Cairoites formed Republican clubs and forged a fragile alliance with local white Republicans, securing the Party’s first county majority after years of Democratic domination. For the next four decades, Black Cairoites exerted significant influence over the local Republican Party and secured access to government reforms, appointments and municipal jobs. However, sensing the threat posed by a Black electorate, white “progressives” passed a series of measures between 1909 and 1913 that undercut Black political power until the 1980s. These reforms

included tighter voter registration laws, poll taxes, and the replacement of the aldermanic form of municipal governance with a city commission model, overturning the ward-based political system that had afforded Black voters so much power. Cumulatively, these reforms began to exclude African Americans from local government and forestalled the politics of patronage and interracial negotiation that characterized other borderland cities. Although this limited the risk of cooptation and incorporation, it also effectively eliminated lines of communication between the city’s white civic leadership and the Black community, making political reform remarkably difficult without the support of the state and federal governments.52

For their part, Cairo’s white civic leadership emphatically rejected the discourse of racial civility that underpinned struggles across the southern borderland. While southern borderland cities cast themselves as “beacons of civility” and racial progress compared to the Deep South, Cairo’s white elite was largely uninterested in drawing such distinctions. In fact, as Black Cairoites launched concerted campaigns against segregation and discriminatory practices between 1949 and 1974, Cairo’s white civic leadership increasingly aligned itself with the militant segregationist stance of the Deep South, forging alliances with white supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, American Nazi Party and the White Citizens Council. Such tendencies were exacerbated by Cairo’s fragile economic base and the concomitant absence of northern corporate influences that many scholars have perceived as having a liberalizing effect on race relations in southern borderland communities.53 Facing economic collapse and mounting pressure for racial equality, Cairo’s Black and white communities were completely polarized by the late 1960s as the city’s white leadership sought to mobilize the full weight of the state to preserve the status quo.

53 K’Meyer, Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South, 7.
The religious culture of white Cairoites also distinguished them from their northern counterparts and solidified the city’s place within the borderland. A 1957 study of church membership in one hundred religious bodies and denominations performed by the National Council of Churches illuminates important regional distinctions in the religious beliefs and practices of Illinoisans. In 1957, church membership in Illinois sat at 53.6 percent of the state’s total population. Of that total, Roman Catholics held a slim majority at 50.1 percent, Protestants followed with 42.1 per cent, and 7.8 per cent identified as Jewish. This religious diversity, fueled in no small part by Chicago’s role as an industrial powerhouse and home to some of the nation’s largest immigrant communities, ran even deeper in some neighborhoods. In Cook County, for example, Protestants comprised only 22 per cent of all church members while Catholics and Jews constituted 64.9 and 13.1 per cent respectively. Furthermore, Cook County’s Protestant population was remarkably heterogeneous with over 59 different denominations represented.

In comparison, the sixteen southernmost counties of Illinois known as “Little Egypt” were overwhelmingly Protestant, representing 86 per cent of all church attenders. Moreover, the Protestant population in Southern Illinois exhibited much less heterogeneity with a total of twenty-six denominations operating in the sixteen counties and only thirteen with more than a thousand members. Fundamentalist and conservative religious traditions predominated. While the Methodist Church was the state’s largest denomination, in Southern Illinois it ranked second behind the Southern Baptist Convention, which constituted a staggering 47.3 per cent of all Protestant church members polled. Close to half of Illinois’ Southern Baptists resided in Little Egypt. In contrast, the influence of liberal mainline denominations was comparatively small.54

54 The data in this section comes from the National Council of Churches, *Churches and Church Membership in the United States: An Enumeration and Analysis by Counties, States, and Regions*, Series C, No. 14 - 15 (New York, 1957). Unfortunately, this study did not include data on churches or church membership from historically Black denominations including the “two large Negro Baptist bodies nor the three Negro Methodist bodies.”
The prominence of a comparatively homogenous conservative Protestant theological tradition ensured that Little Egypt’s religious culture was closer to that of the U.S. South than the Land of Lincoln. The ratio of Protestants to Roman Catholics in Southern Illinois was comparable with border states like Kentucky and West Virginia, where Protestants constituted 79.7 and 83.8 percent respectively of total church membership. Moreover, the size of the Southern Baptist Church’s influence was entirely consistent with trends in the state’s bordering it to the South and West. The Southern Baptists were the largest denomination in Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, and all of the Deep South states. This conservative religious culture provided the backdrop for Black Cairoites’ engagement in Black Liberation Theology.55

The exclusion of Black Cairoites from conventional political structures combined with the limited range of separate Black institutions, afforded the Black Church a particularly prominent role in Cairo’s African American community. Typical of Ohio River Valley communities, Methodist and Baptist churches predominated and became key institutions for leadership development, education, and the provision of much needed social services. In the absence of Black political officials and a significant Black business class, Black clergy also continued to operate as important community representatives and leaders alongside the small number of Black professionals. Furthermore, churches played an important political role, functioning, as urban historian Joe Trotter states, “as springboards for the formation of political clubs and civil rights organizations.”56 Black political ideologies were, thus, intimately connected to the ideational world of the Black church and struggles for Black freedom hinged intrinsically on the ability of local activists to mobilize them.

55 The report defined the U.S. South as including Delaware, Maryland, District of Columbia, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas.
56 Trotter, River Jordan, 82.
I explore the changing relationship of the Black church and African American Christianity to Cairo Black freedom struggles over five chapters. Chapter One provides an historical account of Black community formation in the borderland city, with a particular emphasis on the foundation of Cairo’s Black churches and their contribution to earlier Black freedom struggles. Chapter Two traces the mobilization of Black churches and African American Christian discourses by local activists during the Civil Rights Movement. Through an examination of postwar struggles to desegregate public schools and accommodations, I demonstrate how the dominant civil rights discourses of racial reconciliation and nonviolence facilitated mass participation and access to the resources of local Black churches. However, the urban rebellions of the mid-1960s powerfully symbolized the alienation of a new generation of working-class youth from this dominant reconciliationist and nonviolent framework.

Accordingly, Chapter Three explores how Black Power activists constructed a “relevant” Christianity by re-working the dominant civil rights discourse through a critical engagement with formal Black Theology and grassroots religious traditions, while Chapter Three tracks Black Power activists’ mobilization of this new discourse to secure important organizational resources and coalitional support from local, state, and national Black church organizations. Finally, Chapter Four examines the closing stages of the Cairo Black Power struggle, situating state repression of activist church agencies and the revival of conservative political agendas within congregations as fundamental but overlooked causes of the movement’s demise.
CHAPTER 1

ON JORDAN’S BANKS:

THE ORIGINS OF COMMUNITY, FAITH AND STRUGGLE IN CAIRO, ILLINOIS

The Black church has historically served as a key staging ground for Black freedom struggles in Cairo, Illinois. At crucial junctures throughout the city’s history, social movement organizations have relied upon Black churches for their extensive organizational and ideational resources. In turn, local congregations opened their doors and extended their hands in support of struggles for rights, respect, and empowerment. By the late 1960s, the city’s Black churches had a strong legacy of protest and occupied a position of social and cultural preeminence that grassroots activists were forced to navigate in their attempts to build effective movements for racial change and social justice. However, the Black church’s centrality to local protest traditions was neither inevitable nor complete but rather contingent upon three interrelated factors: the distinctive social and political conditions of Black life in the northern borderland; the relative homogeneity of Black religious traditions; and the agency and skill of activists responsible for recruiting congregations into the movement.

In this chapter, I trace the broad contours of Black life and community in Cairo, Illinois, over four overlapping historical periods showing how the city’s economic instability and distinctive blend of northern and southern racial practices combined to ensure the Black church’s emergence as the central institution in Black community building and protest traditions. More specifically, I argue that the consignment of Black Cairoites to the lowest rungs of the river city’s declining economy hindered the development of a proletarianized Black working-class and
attendant Black middle-class capable of sustaining autonomous institutions that might have rivaled the church’s role in the Black community. Further, political reforms passed during the early twentieth century undercut the ward-based electoral power of Black voters, putting an end to an era of Black office holding and patronage. Pushed to the margins of formal political institutions, Black Cairoites increasingly looked to the church as a site of political protest and social movement activity. In turn, I demonstrate that the rise of Cairo’s Black churches to a position of political and cultural preeminence was also facilitated by the specific quality of the religious tradition they harbored. In contrast to many larger cosmopolitan Midwestern cities, Cairo was bypassed by the new waves of migration and industrial expansion that elsewhere contributed to a diversification of faith traditions as well secularization among segments of the Black population during the first half of the twentieth century. In contrast, Cairo, like other borderland cities, maintained a comparatively strong and homogenous religious culture rooted firmly in the evangelical Methodist and Baptist traditions. This unifying religious culture provided an important institutional basis for racial solidarity and ecumenical organizing upon which local activists would capitalize in their efforts to build viable Black freedom struggles.¹

**Black Life and Community in Antebellum Cairo (1818-1860)**

African American life in Cairo had its beginnings in the antebellum settlement of the cypress filled swampland that many contemporaries believed presented unparalleled geographical and commercial opportunities. Located at the confluence of the nation’s two largest

¹ My work here is influenced by political scientist Adolph Reed’s insistence that links between the Black church and political protest not be essentialized but rather grounded in a systematic study of their specific “developmental context” and “the trajectory of actions and choices dictated by this context.” See Reed, *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon*, 46.
river systems in the Ohio and the Mississippi, Cairo captured the interest of westward expeditionary forces and eventually eastern capitalists seeking to profit from the river traffic that was central to the growing market economy of the early nineteenth century. Profiteers were aided in their endeavors by the encroachment of Euro-American migrants from the upland South as well as treaties signed with the five tribes of the Illinois confederacy in 1803 and 1818, which resulted in the ceding of the tribes’ remaining land rights in southern Illinois. However, efforts to capitalize on the site’s position at the confluence were punctuated by a series of failures. In 1818, Baltimore merchant John Comegy made the first of several attempts to develop the area for commercial purposes, forming the City and Bank Company of Cairo and petitioning European financiers for sponsorship. However, within a few short months the project collapsed and the site remained little more than a lumber depot for passing ships. The task of erecting Cairo’s first physical structures fell to enslaved African Americans who, at the direction of Missouri planters John and Thompson Bird, built a tavern and a store on the Ohio waterfront in 1828 but it would take another decade and the rise of the railroads to reignite the interest of investors in the site. In 1837 Boston merchant Darius Holbrook secured a charter to establish a port and a railroad and under his leadership the Cairo City and Canal Company oversaw the construction of levees and the clearing of land. However, Holbrook’s Company failed during the depression of the late 1830s and workers abandoned the town once again. When British writer Charles Dickens visited the site upon which Cairo now stands in 1842 during a journey down the Mississippi he described it as little more than “a dismal swamp,” “a detestable morass,” and “an ugly sepulcher… uncheered by any gleam of promise.” However, desperate to recoup their losses, investors formed the Cairo Property Trust and in 1852 secured Cairo’s bid to become the
southern terminal for the Illinois Central Railroad (ICR), marking a key juncture in the community’s development.²

In the decade that followed, Cairo would emerge as Southern Illinois’s largest city and an important Midwestern transshipment hub focused on the storage, processing, and transportation of commodities such as flour, timber and cotton. In 1854, the number of boats landing in Cairo totaled 3,798 surpassing nearby St. Louis, which received 3,006 vessels that same year. After the completion of the ICR in 1854, cargo could be loaded by dockworkers directly from large riverboats onto railroad cars to be sent north to St. Louis and Chicago. In 1859, Cairo received 6,902 barrels of molasses, 15,152 hogsheads of sugar, and more than 6 million pounds of wool and cotton. In addition to the burgeoning river and rail trade, antebellum Cairo maintained a number of small industries including lumber, iron works, brick making, and flourmills. The city’s commercial expansion also resulted in renewed migration, growing the population from 242 in 1850 to 2,188 just ten years later. Initially populated by rural white migrants from the upland South, Cairo began to attract northeastern artisanal families as well as significant numbers of German and Irish immigrants. By 1860, Cairo had greater ethnic diversity than the surrounding rural communities, with Irish immigrants representing 24 per cent of the city’s population and German immigrants 10 per cent. Recent immigrants transformed the social and cultural landscape, establishing their own institutions at the forefront of which was the Roman Catholic Church. Initially, the city’s Catholic population attended St. Patrick’s Church,

which was founded in 1838. However, in 1872 the construction of St. Joseph’s Church afforded German immigrants their own edifice. Parochial schooling was also established along ethnic lines with Irish immigrants attending St. Patrick’s parochial school and German immigrants St. Joseph’s.³

In contrast, the African American population in Cairo remained comparatively small, primarily because of the state’s Black exclusion law of 1853 and rigorous enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act. As Table 1 shows, only forty-seven African Americans lived in Cairo in 1860 constituting 2 per cent of the city’s population. While the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 banned slavery in the territory, Black indentured servitude persisted in southern Illinois until it was outlawed in 1848. In addition, the state government permitted a limited number of slaves to be imported to work in the region’s salt refineries at Valmeyer, Brownsville, and Equality. As a result, many Black Cairoites were from Illinois while others were former slaves from the upland South states of Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee. The opposition of white Southern Illinoisans to Black migration made the small free Black population vulnerable to acts of racial violence as well as capture and sale into slavery prompting most to move to urban areas for protection. Black Cairoites lived in close proximity to each other in several large augmented households reflective of what historian Sundiata Cha-Jua describes as the “adaptive extended kinship networks” of Black Illinoisans during this period. Augmented households reflected the distinctive cultural heritage of Black Cairoites, but they also served important economic purposes for men and women who found themselves consigned to the lowest rungs of the city’s job market as unskilled

laborers, porters, and domestic servants. As a result, Black Cairoites possessed little real or personal property and by 1860 the city’s wealthiest Black households were those headed by William Freeman and James Renfrow, who amassed fortunes totaling only two hundred dollars.4

Black Cairoites also found themselves excluded from civic life through a combination of custom and law. The Illinois black codes barred Black residents from voting, assembling in large numbers, and serving on the state militia, while local customs excluded them from the city’s schools and the Catholic parishes. With the limited resources they possessed, Black Cairoites strove to develop their own institutions including a small private school charging a fee of $1 per month to the city’s wealthier Black families.5 However, broader efforts in community and institution building were limited by the small size of Cairo’s Black population compared to their counterparts in other parts of the Ohio River Valley. As early as 1850, the Black communities of larger river cities such as Pittsburgh and Cincinnati eclipsed Cairo totaling 1,959 and 3,237 respectively. Having a larger population as well as higher levels of personal and real property ownership allowed African Americans in these river communities to develop a much broader range of institutions during the antebellum period including schools, businesses, fraternal orders, and churches. In Cairo, these endeavors in community and institution building would await the Civil War and the vast migration of African American men, women, and children across the Ohio River.6

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5 Lloyd W. Owens, “The Beginning, 1853-1900,” IWP, box 14, folder 5.

6 On the formation of Black communities in the Ohio River Valley, see Joe William Trotter, River Jordan; Bigham, We Ask Only a Fair Trial; Bigham, On Jordan’s Banks.
Table 1: Population of Cairo by Race, 1850-1970

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Civil War, Migration, and Proletarianization in Cairo (1861-1890)

The arrival of the Civil War transformed Cairo irrevocably. Cairo’s strong cultural and economic ties to the South ensured that support for the Union would be muted and in certain quarters greeted by outright opposition. “Little Egypt,” as Southern Illinois was popularly known, was a beachhead of Democratic Party politics where white residents had vigorously opposed Lincoln’s bid for the presidency by a margin of four to one. Democratic politicians from Southern Illinois had also sponsored a series of anti-Black legislative measures including proposals to legalize slavery in 1827 and restrict Black migration in the 1840s and 1850s. Populated by white migrants from the upland South as well as Irish immigrants who often viewed African Americans as a direct threat to their own racial and economic status, Cairo’s ethnically diverse white citizenry was united by anti-Black sentiment and a shared opposition to abolition, Black migration, and racial equality. During the war, the majority of white Cairoites fought for the Union or adopted a position of neutrality consistent with that of other parts of the borderland. However, a few hundred men from across Southern Illinois, did join Confederate units in Tennessee, one-third of them from the Cairo area. By May 1861, rumors of disunion combined with Cairo’s strategic location at the confluence prompted Illinois Governor Richard Yates to order the state militia to occupy the town and Union forces to establish Fort Defiance as a key army and naval post on the western front.?

During the war, Cairo underwent a demographic revolution as more than forty thousand refugees from the south descended upon the city in search of aid and protection. As Table 1 shows, those who opted to stay once the war had ended contributed to the city’s exponential growth from 2,188 in 1860 to 6,267 in 1870. The refugee population included a large number of poor whites who had been dispossessed by the conflict. However, as the site of the nation’s only “contraband camp” north of the Mason-Dixon line, it was Cairo’s Black community that witnessed the largest gains as the population grew from 47 in 1860 to 1,849 in 1870, an increase of nearly 4,000 per cent. The wartime influx of Black migrants also transformed the city’s racial demography as African Americans expanded from 2 per cent of the city’s population in 1860 to 30 per cent in 1870. Most of the newcomers had absconded from plantations and households in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi though significant numbers also came from Virginia, Maryland, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Upon arrival they were housed at an abandoned army barracks in the southwestern corner of the city on Cedar Street and fed at the Freedmen’s Mess House on Commercial Avenue near the Ohio River (See, Figure 1). After the camp reached capacity, hundreds more were forced to take shelter in abandoned buildings or in makeshift lean-tos scattered on the periphery and in the woods nearby.

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Governmental efforts to relieve the burden by relocating African American refugees to work in other parts of the state were stymied by a rising tide of white opposition. In the fall of 1862, shortly after Secretary of War Edwin Stanton ordered the dispersal of the refugees, white citizens across Illinois held mass meetings denouncing the move as a violation of the constitutional ban on Black migration and a threat to white labor. During a rally at Breadwell in Logan County in October, white citizens demanded that the constitution be “enforced to the very letter, - peaceably if possible, forcibly if necessary.” Similar threats were made at Pittsfield in Pike County where members of the crowd promised to uphold the Black laws “at the point of the bayonet.” Over the coming months, white vigilantes would make good on those threats ushering
in a wave of anti-Black terrorism in communities across the state. In turn, white Cairoites registered their opposition to Black migration at the polls as the Democrats swept Alexander County in the elections of 1862 running on a virulently racist platform. Under mounting pressure, officials abandoned the relocation plan making Cairo the final port of call for African Americans entering Illinois from the south. By April 1863, a total of 1,530 people occupied the temporary barracks, mostly women and children. Having survived the dangerous journey out of slavery, they now struggled to survive in filthy, overcrowded, and disease-ridden accommodations that the renowned Quaker and abolitionist Levi Coffin described as having “none of the comforts and few of the necessities of life.” In the aftermath, many would leave Cairo following the ICR northward, forming communities across the state. However, many others would stay and lay the foundations of Black community life in Cairo.9

Industrial and Commercial Expansion after the Civil War

Cairo emerged from the civil war a larger and more robust city. The next twenty-five years were boom years as the city underwent a period of commercial and industrial growth paralleling that of other Ohio River Valley communities. As Table I shows, the city’s economic growth also spurred a precipitous increase in population that would not be stemmed until WWI. The heart of Cairo’s economy continued to be its expanding transshipment business and the wide range of related industries that sprang from it. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, seven railroads terminated in Cairo, including the Illinois Central; Cairo and Vincennes; Cairo and St. Louis; New Orleans, Jackson and Great Northern; Mobile and Ohio; and the Cairo, 9

Arkansas, and Texas. River traffic also thrived with Cairo functioning as an important transfer point for cargo from packet lines conducting regular services between Paducah, Memphis, and ports further south. As Figure 2 illustrates, the Ohio River waterfront bustled with activity as longshoremen loaded goods from river to rail and back again.

Manufacturing also grew, with the lumber industry taking center stage. By the 1890s, Cairo was one of the largest hardwood centers in the West with a total of thirty-two manufacturing establishments and a workforce of more than a thousand. Next to lumber, iron was the largest industry, followed by grain with commercial interests operated by local titans, the Halliday Bros’ Egyptian Mills and Bennett’s and Albert Galigher’s Corn Meal Mills. Cairo also attracted larger national corporations like the Singer Manufacturing Company, which selected Cairo as the site for its sewing machine cabinet factory in 1882. Located on the edge of the Ohio River, the Singer plant utilized modern machinery and management techniques to turn out hundreds of cabinets a day. As capitalists invested in new technologies and production methods they radically transformed the labor process, undercutting the autonomy and specialized skill of artisans and deepening the division of labor giving rise to proletarianization and increased class stratification. By the 1880s, Cairo’s new elite had solidified its political and economic influence and developed a distinctive cultural world separate from that of the growing working-class constituted by native-born whites, Irish and German immigrants, and African Americans. The city’s workers increasingly lacked control over the means of production and survived by selling their labor power to the highest bidder.10

Race, Class, and Labor after the Civil War

For the growing numbers of African Americans migrating to Cairo during the late nineteenth century, wage-work offered a degree of economic and social independence denied by slavery and its offshoot, the sharecropping system. However, Black Cairoites continued to be subjected to a racialized division of labor that consigned them to the lowest paid, unskilled jobs. In 1880, more than three-quarters of all Black household heads in the workforce (75.2%) held unskilled positions in domestic and personal services or as common laborers. The first group included a substantial number of Black women who were employed as “housemaids” or “laundresses” by white families earning between $2 and $3 per week. Black men often held the most dangerous and backbreaking laboring positions on the docks and the railroads, and in the city’s growing number of factories. At the Singer plant, for example, African Americans worked exclusively as janitors or on the loading docks moving freight and lumber. Black workers on the
waterfront did the heavy lifting as stevedores and roustabouts. Occupational mobility was restricted and the few men obtaining work in the skilled trades achieved this by catering to a Black clientele, providing services in masonry, painting, plastering, shoemaking, and tailoring. In 1866, Black craftsmen were introduced into the workforce at the Cairo Dry Docks and local lumber mills but were quickly driven out by white workers who responded with violence and industrial action. Accordingly, white workers and employers both contributed to the construction of a racially segmented labor force that locked African Americans out of entire sections of the city’s growing industrial and commercial economy.11

Despite the limited occupational opportunities available to Black workers in the late nineteenth century, a large number of low-paid menial jobs did exist, distinguishing this period from those that followed. Indeed, if Black proletarianization ever took place in Cairo, it was during the final decades of the nineteenth century as a growing number of Black migrants moved out of agricultural and domestic work and into wage-earning jobs. As a river city, Cairo’s experience of Black proletarianization differed from that of larger Midwestern cities, with its most potent effects taking place earlier and in nonindustrial forms of employment. With an economy centered on the transshipment business as opposed to large-scale industry, Cairo did not witness the emergence of a large Black industrial proletariat that typified cities like Milwaukee, Chicago, and Detroit.12 Nonetheless, African Americans arriving in Cairo during the

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12 My analysis of Black proletarianization in Cairo builds upon the seminal work of urban historian Joe William Trotter, Jr., Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45, 2nd ed., (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007). Trotter situates proletarianization as a hallmark of the Black urban experience and central to the development of Black urban communities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Trotter, it was the rise of a Black industrial proletariat that facilitated the formation of a new Black middle-class and community institutions after WWI. Further, by examining proletarianization through the lens of the Black working-
late nineteenth century transitioned from agrarian labor to wage-work, producing a substantial and politically active Black working class. In turn, Cairo’s Black working class provided the demographic and financial basis for the formation of a small Black middle class, predominantly small business owners and professionals. Between 1865 and 1890, a growing number of African American entrepreneurs established saloons, restaurants, hotels, dance halls, grocery stores, laundries, theaters, and an opera house catering almost exclusively to a Black clientele. In addition, Black schoolteachers, lawyers, dentists, newspaper editors and ministers catered to the physical, intellectual, and spiritual needs of the growing populace.13

_African American Community Building after the Civil War_

The expansion of Cairo’s Black working and middle classes underpinned a new wave of community and institution building spurred on by widespread practices of racial discrimination. During the late nineteenth century, African Americans were barred from Cairo’s public schools, public library, and poor house, as well as subjected to an uneven system of racial segregation in railroad cars, hospitals, street cars, steamboats, parks, churches, white-owned businesses.14 In

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14 Scholars have not yet reached a consensus as to the nature of race relations in Cairo during the late nineteenth century. Historian Joanne Wheeler contends that Cairo was “a racially integrated society” after the Civil War and that practices of racial segregation only solidified during the second decade of the twentieth century. Wheeler explains this high degree of integration as a product of the city’s unpreparedness for the influx of black residents. Unlike other communities, Cairo did not have a longstanding Black community or well-established practices of race relations according to Wheeler. See Wheeler, “Together in Egypt: A Pattern of Race Relations in Cairo, Illinois, 1865-1915,” 104, 110. In contrast, historians Shirley Portwood and Christopher Hays argue that Jim Crow practices and patterns of racial discrimination were clearly visible in public and private accommodations during the late nineteenth century. See Portwood, “African American Politics and Community in Cairo and Vicinity, 1863-1900,”
response, African Americans mounted a vigorous campaign for full citizenship and civil rights while simultaneously creating independent institutions capable of meeting the needs of a growing populace. By the end of the nineteenth century, Black Cairoites had established a wide-range of institutions including churches, labor organizations, and fraternal orders. The absence of a well-established Black community prior to the Civil War meant that African Americans in Cairo would have to build these institutions virtually from scratch. The Black church stood at the forefront of these efforts, functioning as a *springboard* for the formation of other Black institutions including schools, benevolent groups, and political organizations.¹⁵

Churches were among the first institutions established by African Americans in Cairo. During the Civil War, occupants of the contraband camp organized religious services while better-situated Black Cairoites initiated the first wave of church planting from their homes. Patterns of denominational affiliation were relatively homogenous and mirrored those of other communities in the Ohio River Valley with the Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denominations predominating. By 1890, Cairo had seven Black churches, including six Baptist and one AME congregation. The city’s first Black congregation was Ward Chapel AME Church, formed in 1863 in the home of Cairo resident Maria Renfrow. After beginning with only eight members, Ward Chapel quickly outgrew Renfrow’s home as wartime migrants joined the church seeking forms of worship independent from white control. In the following decades, Ward Chapel became one of the city’s largest Black congregations and the institutional hub of Methodist activities in the city. The hierarchical structure of the AME Church and its insistence

on an educated ministry provided Ward Chapel with institutional and financial stability. However, the denomination’s strict enforcement of the itinerancy system of pastoral leadership meant that the church’s clergy often lacked the deep community ties of their Baptist counterparts. In contrast, Cairo’s Baptist churches exhibited greater local autonomy, allowing congregations to multiply and charismatic preachers to lead for generations. Immediately after the war, Black Cairoites founded three Baptist congregations – New Hope Free Baptist Church (1867), First Missionary Baptist Church (1867), and Antioch Baptist Church (1860s). A second wave of church planting occurred during the last two decades of the nineteenth century as African Americans fled white terrorism and economic exploitation in the post-Reconstruction South. During this period, three additional Baptist congregations were established – Mt. Moriah Missionary Baptist Church (1881), Mt. Carmel Missionary Baptist Church (1880s), and Morningstar Free Will Baptist Church (1898). By the end of the century, Black Cairoites had successfully built their own houses of worship and solidified a religious culture rooted in both the evangelical Baptist and Methodist traditions.16

In addition to meeting the spiritual needs of Black Cairoites, Black churches also provided an extensive array of social services for their members in the context of broader practices racial exclusion. Outside of the family, churches were African Americans’ most powerful social network during this period, allowing members to quickly identify needs and organize collectively around them. Prior to the formation of segregated Black public schools during the 1870s, churches played a key role in meeting the educational needs of their

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congregants, operating their own daily schools that taught reading, writing, and arithmetic. In September 1867, Reverend Thomas J. Shores, pastor of the First Missionary Baptist Church, established the Union Free School, which served approximately three hundred students, relying on a combination of offerings from Black congregants and donations from white patrons. Since African Americans were also barred from using many of the city’s existing benevolent and welfare institutions, Black churches also played a vital role in raising funds for the sick and needy by hosting pot lucks, organizing clothing drives, and taking special offerings. Beyond these practical functions, churches were also the central social institution of many Black Cairoites’ lives, providing them with relationships, entertainment, and support. In this way, churches fostered a culture of mutuality that bound community members’ together lending value and meaning to their lives in the midst of racial oppression.\textsuperscript{17}

Despite these shared traditions, Black congregations also reflected Cairo’s deep intraracial fissures rooted in social class, color and region. The absence of a well-established Black community prior to the Civil War meant that divisions between older and newer residents were not as potent in Cairo as in other Black urban communities during this period. However, in a city constituted almost entirely by recent migrants, origins mattered and African Americans tended to join churches reflecting their own regional and cultural backgrounds.\textsuperscript{18} Members of Ward Chapel AME, for example, were almost exclusively from the Midwest and Upper South states of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. The Methodists’ promotion of an educated


\textsuperscript{18} The importance of class and color in congregational affiliation in the post-Civil War era has been explored by a number of scholars. See Frazier, \textit{The Negro Church in America}, 36-37. On African American migrants and their selection of churches based on kinship and origins, see Kimberley L. Phillips, \textit{AlabamaNorth: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-45} (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1999), 142.
ministry, more subdued forms of worship, and a theology that advocated personal frugality, temperance and industry as keys to racial advancement provided Ward Chapel with an air of urbane respectability that attracted disproportionate numbers of Black middle class professionals, business owners, and skilled craftsmen. In contrast, rural migrants from the Deep South tended to join the city’s Baptist churches. Alabamians built New Hope Free Baptist Church while families from the Louisiana and Mississippi Delta built Mt. Moriah Missionary Baptist Church after fleeing what they described as “the reign of the Ku Klux Klan” during the 1870s and 1880s. In these congregations, migrants maintained the ecstatic forms of religious expression that had prevailed in the rural south, drawing criticism from segments of Cairo’s Black middle class. These tensions quickly extended into the political realm as Baptist ministers representing working class southern migrant congregations blurred the boundaries between sacred and secular by running for public office, campaigning for civil rights, and leading citywide direct action protests much to the chagrin of many of their middle class counterparts.19

The Black Church at the Zenith of Black Political Power

The late nineteenth century marked the zenith of Black political power in Cairo, as the city experienced its own “social and political reconstruction.” The ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 combined with the passage of other state and federal civil rights legislation situated African Americans as citizens who legally possessed all of the rights previously held by

whites. Black Cairoites swiftly put those rights into action, fostering a dynamic political culture centered on Black Republican clubs, voting in local elections, and running candidates for office. Prior to the Civil War, contemporaries described Cairo’s electorate as “diabolically Democratic.” However, between 1870 and 1890, African Americans facilitated a political realignment that secured Republican Party dominance in local elections into the early twentieth century. Representing approximately a third of the city’s electorate, Black voters held the balance of power, forcing the Democrats to forgo past virulently racist platforms and ensuring that white Republicans incorporated African Americans into party leadership as well as adopted more progressive positions on civil rights. From this tactical alliance emerged a generation of Black Republican office holders who utilized their positions within municipal and county government to advocate racial equality and the integration of public accommodations.20

The Black church was an integral part of this vibrant political culture, functioning as a key space for political education and mobilization. Many Black congregations opened their doors to Black Republican clubs, allowing them to hold their meetings in church buildings and involve laity in debates about public policy. Several Baptist ministers, including Reverend Thomas Shores, Reverend Thomas Strother, and Reverend Nelson Ricks, were key leaders in the club movement and its efforts to enforce civil rights legislation in the city. Viewing the struggle for racial justice as inseparable from Christian mission, these ministers used their pulpits to encourage Black political participation and educate parishioners on local and national political affairs. Baptist ministers were peculiarly situated to take up leadership roles during this period. In contrast to their Methodist counterparts, they often served lengthy tenures, allowing them to

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put down roots and establish strong community ties. In turn, Baptist ministers were expected to be charismatic leaders who gave voice to the spiritual and physical yearnings of their followers. Those who aligned themselves with the radical wing of the Republican Party tended to be pastors of predominantly rural south migrant congregations. While their members were far from wealthy, working class churches were able to sustain autonomous institutions through regular tithes and offerings, providing radical ministers with a degree of insulation from white control. This “economic autonomy,” historian Shirley Portwood argues, enabled Cairo’s Black political elites to “pursue their own political goals and to engage in political advocacy for blacks with little fear of… economic retaliation.”

While pastors of Black working class congregations often led the way, middle class churches constituted by migrants from the upper south and Midwest tended to adopt a more accommodationist stance. For example, Reverend Henry Brown, pastor of Ward Chapel from 1871 to 1873, maintained a position of strict political neutrality during his tenure. While some speculated that the Methodist minister had been influenced by recent donations made by prominent white benefactors toward the church edifice, Brown’s refusal to associate with the political protest of the Black working class also reflected deep-seated tensions within the Methodist Church over the appropriate means of achieving equality. In the Reconstruction South, the A.M.E. Church functioned as a vital staging ground for political mobilization, its ministers and lay leaders often running for political office. However, northern church leaders were critical of this approach viewing frugality, temperance, and industry as the keys to racial advancement. Opposition to the involvement of clergy in political affairs was so strong at the 1872 General

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Convention that Bishop David Payne supported a motion that, if successful, would have barred ministers from holding elected office entirely. However, despite Brown’s neutrality and occasional criticism of radical clergymen, active participation in Republican politics included Ward Chapel members, including John Gadney who served as Cairo’s first Black elected police constable and John J. Bird who became the city’s first Black police magistrate in 1877. Reverend Jacob Bradley of Antioch Baptist Church was an even more vocal critic of the movement’s radical wing, particularly Shores whom he considered a “phoney” and criticized for trying to “excite the colored people” by convincing them that “the good people of Cairo were unwashed rebels.” Bradley’s political conservatism reflected that of many of his congregants who were middle class migrants from the Midwest and upper south, underscoring the important political differences among Black Cairoites of different class and regional backgrounds.22

Despite these obstacles to racial and ecumenical solidarity, Black Cairoites continued to build upon their growing demographic, economic, and institutional strength, achieving a number of political victories by the end of the nineteenth century. Black Cairoites came to serve in a number of elected and appointed positions including as assemblymen, county coroner, postmaster, jailor, and police constables. Moreover, by forging a tactical alliance with white Republicans, Black political elites were able to broker access to patronage and municipal jobs for African Americans, expanding the ranks of the middle class and upper working class. It appeared that Black political power would only continue to expand, particularly in ward-based elections where Black majorities could ensure the election of African American candidates. However, this

optimism proved to be short lived as the city’s declining economic opportunities fueled white animosity, leading to racial violence, Black disenfranchisement, and economic exclusion.23

African Americans during the Nadir in Cairo (1890-1928)

The 1890s represented a watershed for Cairo, as the city struggled under the effects of a global financial crisis and its hopes of becoming a great industrial and commercial metropolis were dashed. The depression of 1893-97 hit the river city particularly hard, resulting in business failures, a decline in river and rail traffic, escalating unemployment, and eroding expectations. In many economic sectors the effects lingered, causing disillusionment among the city’s elite and prompting capital flight. However, while the depression escalated the pace of decline, the city’s economic problems were also tied to broader transformations within the national economy. Cairo’s heavy reliance upon the transshipment business made it extremely vulnerable to the precipitous decline of river traffic caused by the surge in rail transportation. Trade on the Mississippi River plummeted during this period from 1,244,175 tons in 1896 to 365,920 tons in 1908. This collapse in river trade also had a devastating impact on the small industries that had grown up around the transshipment business. As Cairo’s bustling waterfronts quieted, efforts to enlarge the city’s portion of rail trade were hampered by the late development of railroad bridges crossing the Mississippi River (1888) and the Ohio River (1938). Even when the Illinois Central Bridge was finally opened, rail traffic tended to travel straight through, bringing little commercial advantage to the city. The biggest obstacle to economic restructuring, however, was

Cairo’s failure to attract large-scale industry. While river cities like Pittsburgh and Cincinnati became hubs for heavy industries in steel, meatpacking, textiles, and chemicals, Cairo was unable to expand upon its limited industrial base. Lumber and cottonseed oil remained the primary industries and despite the best efforts of the city boosters, most corporations bypassed Cairo in favor of larger urban centers. The only perceptible signs of growth were in the underground economy of liquor and vice which, according to one scholar, became “the most stable and predictable source of revenue in Cairo.”

Financial crises recurred throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, cementing perceptions that Cairo’s economic woes might be permanent. As hopes of recovery faltered, social fractures intensified giving rise to class and racial conflict. Organizing drives were initiated in some of the city’s largest factories as workers struggled to defend themselves against layoffs, dangerous working conditions, and wage cuts. In October 1901, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) organized the Singer factory, and workers the following year engaged in a sympathy strike with the company’s plant in South Bend, Indiana. In 1907, employers slashed wages in response to another financial downturn prompting a strike wave that affected the city’s key industries. Economic insecurities also fueled underlying racial tensions. Often the last hired and first fired, Black workers bore the brunt of the city’s financial crises but were viewed by their white counterparts as competitors instead of allies in a period of dwindling opportunities. White civic leaders reinforced these fears by casting African Americans as scapegoats for Cairo’s declining prospects, alleging that rampant immorality and criminal

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behavior had deterred investment and prosperity. Progressive era reformers pointed to the growth of Black-owned taverns, brothels, and gambling houses such as the “Bucket of Blood” located at 13th and Poplar and “The Nation” on 32nd and Commercial as having attracted a criminal element to the city that fostered a culture of corruption and depravity. Black politicians were singled out for colluding with vice bosses and contributing to the industry’s stranglehold on the city. In reality, the vice industry had been a visible and influential presence in the city since the Civil War with considerable support from white proprietors and politicians. However, between 1890 and 1920 – a period historian Rayford Logan has described as “the nadir of American race relations” – white residents would utilize these anxieties about crime and immorality as a thinly-veiled justification for reasserting their control over the city’s social and political institutions and stripping African Americans of many of their post-Civil War gains.25

The Rise of Jim Crow Segregation during the Nadir

As anti-Black sentiment increased, practices of racial segregation and exclusion were further entrenched, solidifying Cairo’s identity as a southern town in a northern state. Segregation persisted in the school system and was extended into other public accommodations such as bus stations, restrooms, water fountains, cemeteries, and hospital wards. The new leisure and mass entertainment venues of the early twentieth century also imposed color bars. White owned movie theaters consigned African Americans to the balcony; the city’s parks designated separate areas for the races; lunch counters served Black patrons through a hatch or a back door; and the Rotary Club swimming pool and municipal sports leagues excluded Blacks entirely. The

city’s two Catholic parishes – St. Joseph’s and St. Patrick’s – also reinforced their strict color line. In 1889, the Sisters of Loretto provided began offering segregated classes to African American boys in St. Patrick’s Parish. Two years later, however, even these separate and unequal services had been abandoned and the city’s Catholic community returned to excluding Black Cairoites from parochial schooling.

Residential patterns mirrored the shift toward a rigidly segregated community. As late as 1880, African Americans had been relatively evenly distributed across all five wards in the city (See Figure 3). However, as housing development gradually caught up with population growth, residential segregation hardened, with wealthier whites purchasing homes in more desirable communities “up town” while African Americans were left to occupy neighborhoods close to vice districts or low lying, flood-prone areas. One such community was Future City, a large unincorporated Black enclave located in the flood plains just north of the city. Here, African Americans lived without access to municipal services such as running water, emergency services, and power. In the city proper, residential segregation also intensified, with only one in ten white households living next door to a Black household in 1915 compared to one in three in 1880. Efforts to maintain residential segregation were aided by local government, which mandated that Black households in the Cairo city directory be clearly marked with an asterisk. Like other border cities, Cairo’s system of racial segregation continued to be upheld by custom as opposed to law. For all intents and purposes, however, Cairo increasingly resembled the rigidity of the Deep South as opposed to the flexibility and unevenness of other border cities.26

The Resurgence of Racial Violence during the Nadir

The emergence of a rigid system of social segregation in Cairo was accompanied by an upsurge of racial violence. In the absence of legal mechanisms, terror and mob violence functioned as key tools in the preservation of racial boundaries. During the nadir, anxieties about racial order received added fuel from the growth of white supremacist organizations, including the Ku Klux Klan, as well as middle class reform movements aimed at moral and civic improvement. White Cairoites increasingly connected isolated allegations of Black lawlessness and disorder with the city’s deteriorating conditions, resulting in outrage and clamor for action.

On at least three occasions between 1904 and 1910, white vigilantes employed a combination of terror and violence to intimidate Black Cairoites and punish suspected lawbreakers. In July 1904, violence was narrowly averted after Black community members assembled at the city jail to protect A. S. Mason, a forty-year-old Black resident of Future City, from local vigilantes. However, full-scale mob violence broke out in October 1909 when Black laborer William “Froggy” James was accused of the murder of a local shop clerk. A lynch mob constituted by whites from across southern Illinois and neighboring parts of Kentucky and Missouri seized James from police custody and took him to the center of town where he was hung, shot, mutilated, and set on fire before an audience of more than ten thousand people. Following James’ murder, the crowd headed to the jail where Henry Saltzner, a white Cairoite accused of killing his wife, was dragged from his cell and hung from a nearby tree. The following year, mob violence erupted again when armed vigilantes led a failed attempt to lynch John Pratt and Lincoln Wilson for stealing a woman’s purse. In the aftermath, local vigilantes threatened to “make a good job of our next holiday and lynch enough to scare the rest of the negroes out of town.” Writing that same year, Cairo politician and historian John McMurray Landsen reflected the views of many white Cairoites when he rationalized the periodic outbreaks of violence as a product of the “large number of worthless and debased negroes in our population” insisting that few white citizens had “regretted the mob’s disposition of James.”

The upsurge of racial violence in Cairo during the first decade of the twentieth century was strongly correlated to the gains of Black Cairoites, particularly in the political sphere.

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During the 1890s, African Americans had made some of their most significant strides in local politics, securing the election of four Black aldermen to the fourteen-member city council in 1895 and gaining nine additional county and city positions over the next two years. Critically, many of these victories were acquired democratically and not through party patronage, demonstrating that the Black electorate was now sizable and consolidated enough to exert independent influence upon the Republican Party. As Black Cairoites rose to positions of influence within municipal and county government, white anxieties about the willingness of local officials to protect their own property, power, and privilege intensified. Increasingly, citizens of all social classes looked to extralegal methods to reinforce white supremacy because they felt they were losing control over the existing legal and political mechanisms. In turn, the decline of racial violence during the following decade coincided neatly with a series of Republican-backed political reforms carefully designed to undercut the power of the Black electorate and return the city council and local law enforcement into white hands.\textsuperscript{28}

\textit{The Destruction of Formal Black Political Power}

The tactical alliance between Black and white Republicans was always a fragile one. Black Republicans frequently questioned the commitment of their white counterparts to racial equality and willingness to appoint Black candidates to key positions of party leadership. In turn, many white Republicans resented outspoken Black political leaders and their increasing demands on the party machine. These tensions escalated during the 1890s as heightened residential segregation led to the consolidation of Black voting power, particularly in Ward’s III and V, expanding the influence of Black political elites. After witnessing Black politicians secure a

series of landmark victories in the 1895 and 1897 elections, white Republicans refused to support African American candidates for county office in 1898. In response, Black politicians encouraged voters to protest by supporting the Democrats or the Negro Protective Party producing a defeat for the Republicans and marking the end of a longstanding political alliance. Over the next decade, white Republicans led by Mayor John Lansden worked to shift the balance of power in the city by building support for a series of progressive era reforms under the banner of eliminating corruption and cleaning up government. The election reforms included a new voter registration act passed in 1909 that required extensive proof of length and place of residency and the substitution in 1913 of an at-large city commission form of government for the ward-based system that had afforded Black politicians their recent victories. The enactment of the latter coincided with the Illinois State Legislature’s passage of women’s suffrage in 1913, a decision that transformed Cairo’s electorate incorporating thousands of new Black women voters. Taken collectively, these reforms undercut Black women’s new political power, disenfranchised several hundred Black voters in the unincorporated suburb of Future City, actively discouraged Black voting within the city proper, and practically eliminated the possibility of Black candidates securing election in at-large city commission races. Between 1885 and 1901, the city had always had at least one Black city councilmember. After 1913, however, no Blacks were elected to city office for almost seventy years. Furthermore, Black Cairoites were cut off from channels of party patronage that had previously afforded them access to municipal jobs.29

African American Community Building During the Nadir

On the eve of WWI, Black Cairoites found themselves in a declining river city that was increasingly hostile to their presence. The cumulative effect of diminishing economic opportunities, social segregation, racial violence, and political marginalization proved devastating, and between 1910 and 1920 the Black population plummeted by 8 per cent while the white population increased by 12 per cent. Among those leaving the city were a number of prominent community leaders, including the pastors of the two largest Black Baptist congregations – Reverend Nelson Ricks of the New Hope Free Baptist Church and Reverend J.R. Bennett of the First Missionary Baptist Church. Having served their congregations for several decades, both men decided to leave the city immediately after the lynching of William James in 1909. In 1912 and 1913, Black Cairoites faced new challenges as floodwaters inundated Future City and almost breached the city’s levees forcing the closure of the Sycamore Street floodgates. Despite narrowly averting catastrophe, the flooding put five railroads out of business and resulted in the closure of several industrial plants. With the outbreak of WWI, the exodus continued as hundreds of Black and white workers relocated to larger urban communities in search of better paying jobs in wartime industries. Meanwhile, Cairo’s economy continued to stagnate as civic leaders failed to attract federal war contracts and several large businesses closed in rapid succession including the Singer Factory in 1916.30

In the context of declining opportunities, Black Cairoites struggled to build upon the limited economic gains they had made during the late nineteenth century. The vast majority

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30 Lantz, A Community in Search of Itself, 47, 114; “Notes on New Hope Free Baptist Church in Cairo,” IWP, box 17, folder 6; Draft manuscript by Kathryn Ward, Kendrick-Brooks Family Papers, LOC, box 22, folder 2; Interview with John Clarke and C.W. Halliday performed by Matt Conroy, June 22, 1976, SCC-OHP, 9; Interview with Allen Davis performed by Edward Whitaker, August 17, 1975, SCC-OHP, 1.
continued to occupy a small number of increasingly tenuous positions in domestic and personal service or as unskilled laborers on the railroads, waterfront, and in the city’s workshops and factories. Cairo’s Black middle class, constituted primarily by professionals and business owners, remained comparatively small and fragile. However, the consolidation of Jim Crow segregation did contribute to a small expansion in the city’s Black-owned businesses. African American entrepreneurs responded to discrimination by establishing the first Black-owned undertaking parlor (1901), movie theater (1905), drug store (1909), shoe store, and baseball team. African Americans also maintained a number of grocery stores during this period and Black barbers and beauty shops continued to proliferate. However, the growing instability of Cairo’s Black working class ensured that most Black-owned businesses relied heavily on credit sales and were vulnerable to bankruptcy and closure, a problem that would have devastating effects during the Great Depression of the thirties.  

Black Cairoites responded to worsening economic and social conditions by deepening their community building activities. At the forefront of these efforts were the city’s Black churches, which continued to play a central role in the civic and political life of Black Cairoites. Renewed migration during the nadir spurred the formation of several new congregations. Baptist churches continued to predominate with the founding of St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church in 1915 as well as the Everdale Missionary Baptist Church and First Central Baptist Church in 1919. However, Cairo, like many Ohio River Valley communities during this period, also witnessed a growth in Pentecostal traditions marked by the formation of the Cairo Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.) in 1912. These new Baptist and Pentecostal congregations were populated predominantly by Black laborers from the Deep South and played a critical role in meeting the needs of a migrant population. First Central Baptist, for example, was founded by

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migrants from Mississippi and over the coming years became a hub for seasonal workers that traveled to Cairo every autumn to pick cotton in the farming areas surrounding the city. In the absence of effective municipal social services, congregations like First Central Baptist connected migrant workers and extended much needed resources.32

The growth in Black migration also attracted the attention of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1928, the Belleville Diocese and the Society of African Missions joined in founding St. Columba’s Catholic mission to cater to the spiritual and material needs of Black Cairoites. Since the city’s existing parishes – St. Patrick’s and St. Joseph’s – were rigidly segregated, the diocese purchased a disused church and a two-story school building and began offering pastoral services to African American residents. The parish also operated a grade school that provided free classes to an average of eighty Black students that were excluded from the city’s other parochial schools. Graduates were expected to enter the city’s public high schools upon completion of the eighth grade. Within four years of St. Columba’s formation, the local Black Catholic population grew from six in 1928 to over one hundred in 1932. Annual reports show that many of St. Columba’s students also worked in the cotton fields just north of the city and, as a result, they would start classes late in September and finish early in May to correspond with harvest season. When the school opened in 1928 none of the students were identified as Catholics. Ten years later, however, approximately seventy five per cent of St. Columba’s pupils had converted to the faith. The school mandated that all pupils attend Sunday Mass at St. Columba’s as well as take religious studies classes. Thus, efforts to meet the spiritual and material needs of migrants during

the nadir contributed to a diversification of Black faith traditions illustrated by the rise of Pentecostalism and Catholicism.33

Despite the emergence of new religious traditions, the influence of Cairo’s leading Baptist and Methodist congregations remained unmatched. By 1925, Ward Chapel A.M.E. boasted a membership of four hundred and the church’s imposing new edifice on 17th Street continued to welcome leading members of the city’s professional and business classes. Rivaling Ward Chapel in size and influence was the First Missionary Baptist Church and Mt. Moriah Baptist Church, both of which attracted members of the city’s small Black middle-class as well as skilled and unskilled workers. The preeminence of the city’s Black Baptist and Methodist churches continued unchallenged during the decades of migration that followed. While the processes of industrialization and urbanization in larger northern cities resulted in an exponential growth in storefront Holiness and Spiritualist congregations as well as other non-Christian traditions, religious affiliations in Cairo would remain relatively static. A 1957 study of the city’s religious patterns identified more than three-quarters of Black respondents as church members and of those indicating a denominational preference 70.4 per cent identified as Baptist and 13.5 per cent as Methodist.34

During the nadir, Cairo’s large Baptist and Methodist congregations became important hubs of denominational activity as local clergy took up leadership positions in national church


conventions and publishing ventures. The formation of the National Baptist Convention of the United States of America in 1895 and the Baptist General State Convention of Illinois in 1902 provided the institutional context for the work of Cairo’s Black Baptists. In 1919, the annual conference of the Illinois Baptist Convention was held in Cairo at the First Missionary Baptist Church and four years later the church’s minister, Rev. J. J. Olive, was elected as the organization’s president. Rev. Olive forged strong ties with other local Baptist ministers, particularly Rev. Hockenhull and Rev. J. T. Brown of Mt. Moriah Missionary Baptist Church with whom he co-managed the Baptist publication, *Illinois Messenger*, from 1925 to 1933. Rev. J. T. Brown also served as editor-in-chief of the publishing house of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A, located in Nashville, Tennessee. In total, Cairo was home to three major Black church publications during this period – *The Baptist Truth* (1899-1926); the *Illinois Messenger* (1925-1933); and, the *International Evangelical Herald* (1919-1934), the official organ of the International Evangelical Bureau.35

*The Black Church in the Aftermath of Political Reform*

In addition to building denominational power and influence, Cairo’s Black churches also stepped into the vacuum of political leadership created by the electoral reforms of 1909 and 1913. Locked out of formal political channels, Black Cairoites increasingly looked to Black churches as an alternative site for the development of Black political leadership and authority.

While churches could refocus political activities inward to the building of denominational and congregational power, they also had the capacity to extend outward providing the leadership and resources necessary to sustain campaigns for civil rights and racial uplift. During the nadir, Black middle-class church members working in both secular and religious organizations were critical in mobilizing this support.36

During the nadir, Black middle-class congregations became beacons of racial uplift and advancement. Black churchwomen including Florence Sprague Fields and Alice Titus Beatty were particularly prominent, blurring the boundary between secular and sacred work through their active participation in the national club movement and formation of the Yates Woman’s Club, an affiliate of the Cairo City Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, in 1905. The fundraising efforts of clubwomen culminated in December 1916 with the opening of Yates Memorial Hospital, the city’s first Black-owned and operated hospital targeted at meeting the medical needs of Black Cairoites. In 1920, Fields and Beatty joined other middle- and working-class Black residents in founding the Cairo branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Under the leadership of Rev. C. C. Wilson, pastor of the First Missionary Baptist Church and publisher of The Baptist Truth, the NAACP mounted an unsuccessful legal campaign aimed at integrating the Cairo Public Library as well as fought for better educational and employment opportunities.

NAACP members were drawn from the ranks of the city’s leading Black congregations, particularly Ward Chapel (17th and Washington), Mt. Moriah Baptist Church (26th and Poplar),

36 Most of the seminal works on the Black community of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century argue that the Black Church’s preeminence in political and social affairs was a product of disenfranchisement and the absence of competing institutions. For example, see Benjamin Mays, The Negro’s Church (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933), 8-9; Frazier, The Negro Church in America, 48-49. For a more recent articulation of this position, see Barbara Dianne Savage, Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 9-10, 67. Some scholars maintain that the Black Church’s emergence as an alternative political sphere refocused Black political activity inward to denominational activities and, ultimately, accommodation. See, Frazier, The Negro Church in America, 49-51; and Reed, The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon.
and the First Missionary Baptist Church. During the twenties, ministers from these congregations became active members in the NAACP, often propagating the organization’s message of liberal integrationism from the pulpit. At Ward Chapel, Rev. Henry Jamison frequently “gave lessons in race relations” and preached a message of racial reconciliation. Hattie Kendrick, an African American schoolteacher who relocated to Cairo from Mississippi in 1924, recalled Jamison hosting a number of revivals that were so “electric” that they attracted a number of local whites. Concerned about the blurring of the color line, a white minister contacted Jamison asking if he would be willing to reserve a section of the church for his congregants, a query to which the pastor responded “Hell no,” according to Kendrick. Jamison also met with members of Cairo’s segregated ministerial alliance and rebuked them for failing to incorporate Black members.

**African Americans in a Declining River City (1929-1945)**

Cairo was already experiencing a period of prolonged economic decline when the stock market crashed in the autumn of 1929. Just two years prior, rising river levels had threatened the city once again and seep water encroached, prompting renewed outward migration. Between 1920 and 1930, the population plummeted by 11 per cent from 15,203 to 13,532. In this context, the Great Depression was the last in a series of ongoing crises for the city, forcing many already struggling businesses to close, banks to fail, and large numbers of workers into unemployment. The city’s longstanding economic problems ensured that the effects of the Depression would be

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more potent and enduring in Cairo than elsewhere in the state. As late as May 1934, the Chicago Tribune reported that 50.4 per cent of Alexander County’s residents were still on the relief rolls compared to 14 per cent statewide. In this context, public emergency work programs sponsored by President Roosevelt’s New Deal administrations were essential to the city’s survival providing jobs and facilitating extensive municipal projects. In 1940, almost a quarter of Cairo’s workforce (21.6 per cent) held temporary jobs on federal public works projects, while another 8.4 per cent were unemployed, figures that vastly exceeded state averages. Per capita incomes in the sixteen southernmost counties also lagged behind the rest of the state averaging $324 in 1939 compared to $678 for Illinois as a whole. Entrenched practices of employment discrimination ensured that Black workers were disproportionately impacted by the effects of the long depression. In 1940, 37.8 per cent of the Black workforce was hired on public work programs while an additional 12.2 per cent were unemployed. 38

Despite Cairo’s ongoing economic troubles, Black migration to the city surged during the depression as landlords throughout the Mississippi Delta pushed sharecroppers off their farms and floodwaters returned again in 1937 to devastate the region. Between 1930 and 1940, Cairo’s Black population grew by 20 per cent while the white population dropped by 5.8 per cent. Lewis Jones and his family arrived in Cairo in 1938 by way of Mississippi and Missouri where they had worked as sharecroppers and day laborers in the cotton fields. Jones recalled few job prospects in the city, though he eventually found low-paid work as a handyman at the Cairo Hotel. Poor

employment opportunities and ongoing racial discrimination in all areas of community life ensured that for many newcomers Cairo would serve as only a temporary stop on their journey north. Cairo native Anne Winters recalled “a pretty good exodus leaving Cairo” during the thirties. “They would come here and get a toe hold and get enough to go to St. Louis or Chicago and then go on. They didn’t stay.” Jazz singer Bessie Smith captured Cairo’s transitional identity for a new generation of seemingly rootless wanderers in her celebrated rendition of W. C. Handy’s classic number, *St. Louis Blues*, singing, “Help me to Cairo, make St. Louis by myself.”

Indeed, for many of those who stayed behind, Cairo would come to epitomize the spirit of the blues – a dying city that offered little in the way of hope or opportunity. During the thirties and forties, a vast network of blues performers including Cairo native Henry Townsend, Lonnie Johnson, Pinetop Perkins, and Earl Hooker, and songs like Cannon Jug Stomper’s “Cairo Rag” (1928) and Henry Spaulding’s “Cairo Blues” (1929) solidified Cairo’s identity as a hard but entertaining river town that understood what it meant to be both Black and blue.

*Race, Class, and Labor during the Long Depression*

After the Great Depression, Cairo’s economy never recovered, and demand for Black labor declined transforming the city’s Black working class into a permanently expendable surplus labor force. The river, rail, and factory jobs that had laid the foundation for Black proletarianization during the late nineteenth continued to leave the city, forcing a large segment of the Black population into unstable forms of day labor, seasonal work, and unemployment.

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Black workers fought back, organizing unions in key industries and initiating a series of strikes and protests at the Federal Barge Lines in 1933, on the docks and at the Alexander County Relief Office in 1937, and at the Valley Steel Company, Roberts Cotton Oil Company and Cairo Meal and Cake Company in 1939. However, in a pattern that would become all too familiar over the coming decades, city leaders repressed Black protests, calling in the National Guard and deputizing local white citizens. WWII brought little relief, as city officials were once again unable to secure federal defense contracts. Capital flight continued apace resulting in a series of plant closures including the Federal Barge Lines in 1940, the Big Four Railroad in 1941, and the Mississippi Valley Barge Line in 1947, all of which had been major employers of Black workers. Most of these jobs did not return after the war and when combined with the end of federal job creation programs the impact was devastating upon the Black working class. During a period of so-called national prosperity, Cairo witnessed its Black unemployment rate skyrocket from 12.2 per cent in 1940 to 22.7 per cent by 1950. That same year, only 15.1 per cent of Cairo’s workforce held positions in manufacturing jobs compared to 32 per cent in the rest of the state, reflecting the migration of capital to northern cities and, increasingly, the south and west. A study performed in 1952 showed that Cairo now maintained only three establishments hiring more than a hundred workers and none exceeding two hundred. Thus, Cairo experienced the ravages of corporate relocation, deindustrialization, and deproletarianization decades before their full effects were felt in larger Midwestern and Rust Belt cities.40

Everyone in the city felt the effect of economic restructuring, but because of ongoing practices of discrimination in both public and private sector employment Black workers were disproportionately impacted. A 1948 study performed by the newly established Illinois Interracial Commission found that Black Cairoites employed in the private sector were now almost universally consigned to “unskilled and service jobs with low wage scales” and their prospects for advancement were “blocked pretty effectively by the discriminatory practices of employing concerns.” The report failed to mention the contributions of local trade unions, which almost universally excluded Black workers from membership. Conditions in the public sector were even worse according to the Commission, which found widespread discrimination in both municipal and federal employment. African Americans went unrepresented on all city commissions, councils, and boards. They were excluded from the ranks of the fire and police departments, with the exception of a single Black police officer charged with patrolling African American neighborhoods. Black doctors and nurses were barred from serving in St. Mary’s Hospital and the T.B. sanitarium, even in the segregated wards and annexes. While some of these discriminatory employment practices had been implemented during the nadir, others were more recent. The post office, for example, had hired a number of African Americans as mail carriers throughout the early twentieth century. However, as job prospects declined in the private sector, mail carrier jobs were increasingly reserved for whites while African Americans were relegated

to janitorial positions. Fearing competition for jobs, white Cairoites closed ranks further, delimiting Black employment opportunities.⁴¹

The instability of Black working-class employment had a corollary effect upon Cairo’s small Black middle class. Reliant almost exclusively upon a Black clientele, African American business owners were particularly vulnerable to the effect that de-proletarianization had on consumer spending. During the city’s long depression, a large number of Black-owned businesses failed, particularly those that had relied heavily on credit based sales. By the 1950s, businesses that provided anything but the most essential and personal services, such as funeral parlors and barbershops, simply could not survive in Cairo. The age of Black movie theaters, grocery stores, and opera houses had passed and Black proprietors numbered no more than twenty by the decade’s end. Tightening restrictions in public and private employment also prevented African Americans from securing jobs in the clerical sector. By 1960, only 1.3 per cent of Black workers in Alexander County held clerical jobs, a number that compared poorly with other Illinois counties with large Black urban populations such as Champaign County (7.6 per cent) and Cook County (12.9 per cent). Black professionals were the largest group within the Black middle class, constituting 8 per cent of the city’s Black workers by 1960. The devastating impact of deproletarianization upon Black owned-businesses prompted large numbers of middle class African Americans to leave the city during the long depression along with many of the political and economic institutions they had forged, including the NAACP, which fell into inactivity during the thirties. This out migration of the Black middle-class was further

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\textit{Black Churches and “Union Spirit” during the Long Depression}

The impact of the Long Depression was also felt by the city’s Black churches, which were charged with the unenviable task of meeting both the spiritual and material needs of their congregations in a time of financial drought. While a number of Black-owned businesses and community organizations failed during the thirties, Black churches remained vital hubs of Black political and social activity. A number of congregations maintained large memberships during the depression despite facing enormous financial challenges. At the peak of the crisis, First Central Baptist Church had over three hundred members and 250 regular attendees, many of them migrant workers. By the early 1940s, First Missionary Baptist Church maintained a membership of 650 and a regular attendance of nearly three hundred. Mirroring the union spirit that pervaded Black working-class politics during this period, Cairo’s Black congregations insisted that the best way to survive the effects of the depression was to collectively organize. Rather than continue their work separately, church leaders fostered “a city wide union spirit” by encouraging church choirs, boards, and clubs to consolidate their resources and energies. According to investigators employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), “the Usher
boards of the city were first to unionize, then followed the gospel Choruses, the Pastors Aids, and Missionary [Society], which meets once per month from church to church.” Congregations also worked together to plan “union revivals” featuring outside speakers and choirs.43

On one level, the ecumenical activities of the long depression were motivated by practical necessity. Pooling limited resources allowed struggling churches to ensure that their basic administrative and institutional functions continued unimpeded and that the needs of Black community members were met. However, the strengthening of ecumenical bonds also transformed church cultures and, ultimately served to further harmonize Black religious traditions in the city. The push for unionized boards and committees, for example, encouraged more congregations to adopt the kind of administrative structures supported by larger middle-class churches. By the 1940s, even the smallest congregations maintained a variety of clubs and societies, allowing for greater lay participation and institutional uniformity. Moreover, the rise of “union revivals” fostered a blending of worship styles and rituals that served to erode longstanding differences rooted in denominational affiliation and social class. This homogenization of worship styles was most apparent in the broad appeal of Gospel music – a tradition that blended secular and sacred traditions including the Blues sound that was sweeping the city’s bars and taverns. Initially performed by working class Pentecostal and Baptist congregations, gospel music in larger cities was often vehemently opposed by Black middle class congregations who preferred a more conventional liturgical model that incorporated European hymns and spirituals. In Cairo, however, Black congregations universally embraced the new musical style during the thirties, forming their own Gospel choirs and choruses. Increasingly,

43 “Notes on Morning Star Free Will Baptist and Ward Chapel A.M.E. Churches in Cairo, Illinois,” IWP, box, 17, folder 2; “Notes on New Hope Free Baptist Church in Cairo,” IWP, box 17, folder 6; “First Central Baptist Church of Cairo, Illinois,” IWP, box 45, folder 24; “Notes of First Missionary Baptist Church in Cairo, Illinois,” IWP, box 17, folder 7. A broader tendency toward union services during the Depression was noted by Mays in *The Negro’s Church*, 157.
Cairo’s Black churches irrespective of denomination, class, or migratory origins embraced a shared religious culture that centered on gospel music, call-and-response oratory, communal prayer, and charismatic sermonizing.44

The emergence of a popular Black religious culture in Cairo during this period also reflected the declining status and influence of the Black middle class. As large segments of the Black bourgeoisie left the city in search of opportunities elsewhere, the Methodist and Baptist congregations that had traditionally served as bastions of middle class respectability were forced to become more inclusive of working class participation and cultural practices. According to Hattie Kendrick, services at Ward Chapel underwent a significant transformation during the long depression, moving from “very formal” liturgies that featured classical recitals, hymns, and spirituals to the formation of a gospel choir and Junior Gospel chorus by the decade’s end. The changing demographics of Ward Chapel also produced frustration with ministers like Reverend A. Attaway whose Oxford-training and scholarly manner alienated him from the majority of church members who forced him to resign after a single year of service in 1933. In contrast, Reverend John A. Randolph who joined the congregation the following year was widely praised for his inclusive and down-to-earth approach to ministry. “Whatever else can be said of Rev. Randolph, he pastored,” Kendrick recalled. “The affluent, the poor, the young, the old, the influential, the unknown, the sick, the well were all sheep of his folk and he was loved.” While Ward Chapel remained a hub for middle class Methodists like Kendrick, these changes in

ministerial and worship style reflected the growing influence of the Black working class during the depression years.45

Figure 4: Street Map of Cairo (n.d.). Courtesy of John Willis Allen Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

After WWII, the shared religious culture and ecumenical networks between Cairo’s black congregations would function as both the backdrop and glue for the initiation of broad based civil rights struggles. During the thirties, Black workers had fought their own battles to improve

conditions through labor unions and unemployed worker’s associations. However, as factories closed and companies relocated to new sites across the country, the workplace moved with them breaking the power of local unions and stripping Black workers of the conventional tools for addressing injustice and inequality. Beyond the shop floor, Black Cairoites continued to face Jim Crow practices in all areas of community life, provoking many soldiers to ask why they were fighting for freedom abroad if they could not achieve it at home. This paradox was cast into further relief in 1943 when the city began moving working class residents from private slums into two federally funded public housing projects – Elmwood Courts for whites and Pyramid Courts for Blacks. As Figure 4 indicates, while the brick homes of Elmwood Courts were located in the more prosperous “up town” district, the wood-frame dwellings of the Pyramid Courts were located on the same low lying spot on which the Civil War contraband camp had been constructed eighty years prior. While Jim Crow was being established in public housing, the mass exodus of Black proprietors and professionals ensured that the experience of racial segregation was being supplanted by one of outright exclusion. “There was no place that… blacks could get accommodations,” Reverend John Cobb, minister of the nearby Pulaski COGIC congregation explained. “[N]aturally coming out of Texas, where we had our own restaurants, motels, hotels, hospitals, that was segregated too but ours was open to us. We had black doctors… and dentists that had their own practice, and I was used to all of that, but when we came here we didn’t have a lot of that.” The escalation of racial segregation and exclusion in the midst of the war against fascism fueled Black political protests, and while the war itself failed to reverse Cairo’s declining fortunes, Black veterans returned home determined to make lasting changes to the city’s racial order.46

CHAPTER 2

REDEMPTIVE LOVE, VIGILANTE TERROR AND REBELLION:
CAIRO IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS CAULDRON

By the mid-twentieth century, the social and cultural power of Black churches in Cairo was unrivaled. Sacred edifices served both religious and worldly purposes functioning as primary sites of Black worship, welfare, community, and protest. However, the Black church had arrived at this lofty position by default, its power gained as a paradoxical consequence of a broader decline in Black economic and political opportunities that hindered the development and survival of alternative institutions. Filling the vacuum that remained was an unenviable task that some argued detracted from the church’s primary mission of ministering to the spiritual needs of congregants. Despite these obstacles, churches emerged as a primary locus for Black freedom struggles during and immediately following WWII. Emboldened by the contradiction presented by a global war against fascism and racial discrimination at home, leading Black church members reinvigorated the local NAACP and mounted a series of punctuated battles aimed at overturning Jim Crow.

This chapter traces the contours of Cairo’s early Civil Rights struggles with a focus on the contested but invaluable contributions of Black churches. Beginning with the NAACP’s postwar campaign to eliminate school segregation, I demonstrate the centrality of Black churches and activist church leaders to mass direct action and the role of white violence in its derailment. In a preview of the “massive resistance” that would follow the Brown decision, white opposition forced the NAACP underground, frightening away supporters, and compelling activists to shift
to legal gradualism and accommodationism, largely as a matter of survival. In this context, tensions over the Black church’s involvement in protest activities resurfaced contributing to a decline in church support and the marginalization of activist clergy. The eventual resurgence of mass direct action during the early 1960s coincided with the southern movement’s “heroic phase” and the decision of higher authorities in the Illinois Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church to appoint a young militant clergyman, Reverend Blaine Ramsey, Jr., to serve in Cairo. Ramsey’s tenure at Ward Chapel provided the backdrop for the rise of a new generation of Black student activists to join with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in mounting the organization’s first integration campaign north of the Ohio River. Under the influence of SNCC activists from Nashville, student activists in Cairo adopted a distinctly religious conception of civil rights rooted in Black Christian discourses of racial reconciliation and a Ghandhian philosophy of nonviolence. By mobilizing this religious tradition, Black youth were able to recruit intergenerational and cross-class support through the city’s Black congregations ultimately succeeding in toppling segregation in public accommodations. However, in the concluding section, I show how this religiously motivated alliance fractured in 1967 as persistent barriers to economic advancement and allegations of police brutality combined to produce a potent urban rebellion.

Postwar Church Alliances and the Reinvigoration of the NAACP

With the onset of WWII, Cairo witnessed an upsurge in political activity emanating from the city’s Black churches. Ministers empowered by the ecumenical networks they had established during the long depression increasingly injected themselves into local politics under
the auspices of the Interdenominational Ministers’ Alliance, an organization representing African Americans from across the city. According to the *Chicago Defender*, the Ministers’ Alliance, under the “progressive and aggressive” leadership of Reverend F. K. Jefferson of Mt. Moriah Baptist Church, “vigorously guarded the rights of Negroes in Cairo.” Representatives of the organization frequently attended city council meetings to speak out against police brutality, inequality in public services, and the ongoing practice of racial segregation. Ministers and their families also championed the cause of educational equality forming their own organizations and calling for the integration of the city’s existing Parent Teacher Associations. In 1941, Reverend Jefferson became the first African American in more than a generation to run for an elected position on the Alexander County school board. That same year, an ecumenical group of church members led by local business owner Henry Dyson and schoolteacher Ommitress Sparks sought to revitalize the Cairo branch of the NAACP.¹

In January 1942, Hattie Kendrick found herself heading to Ward Chapel at the prompting of her mother Charlotte Swan Kendrick to attend a mass meeting aimed at reactivating the local branch of the NAACP. By the time Kendrick reached the church it was already packed. The brutal lynching of Cleo Wright that had taken place across the river in Sikeston, Missouri, a few days prior prompted outrage among Black Cairoites and spurred on the organizational efforts of local activists. As the meeting got underway, George Cross – a real estate agent and leading member of Graham Chapel AME Church in nearby Mounds, Illinois – called for a renewed

campaign for racial justice drawing parallels between tyranny and violence at home and abroad. “No, we shall not forget Pearl Harbor. Nor shall we forget Sikeston, Missouri,” he shouted to rapturous applause. After the meeting, Dyson and Sparks moved through the crowd signing up enough new members to the NAACP’s rolls to secure the organization’s charter. Over the next year, Kendrick reported that the NAACP grew significantly as Sparks and Dyson worked “with the lower strata of the Negro populace.” While many of the organization’s leaders were members of the city’s small Black middle class, Kendrick emphasized their own working class heritage and ties. Kendrick described branch President Dyson as “an uneducated auto mechanic” and Secretary Sparks as “the daughter of [a] poor wash woman” who had “not rubbed elbows with the upper tens white or black.” According to Kendrick, “Prof. [John C.] Lewis was the only upper class negro who belonged to the NAACP because,” as she sardonically explained, “no self-respecting member of the black constituency would done belong to that ‘mess’ with all those common niggers.” With members of Cairo’s Black working and middle-class at the forefront, the NAACP began holding regular meetings, corresponding with the national office, and hosting educational events featuring outside speakers.²

In 1943, branch leaders began planning their first campaign – the equalization of teachers’ salaries. Wage discrimination was a central feature of the separate-and-unequal educational system in Cairo as it was in many other border and southern communities. By the mid-1940s, Cairo maintained seven elementary schools, two junior high schools, and two high schools for approximately twelve thousand residents. The total number of schools in Cairo was more than double the average maintained by towns of comparable size across the state of Illinois.

African American students attended elementary school at either Washington, Bruce or Garrison elementary and then graduated on to Washington Junior High School and Sumner High School. White students attended Lincoln, Safford, Douglas, and Elmwood elementary and then graduated on to Cairo Junior High and Cairo High School. African American teenagers from smaller rural communities in Alexander County were bussed into Cairo to attend Sumner High as opposed to attending all-white high schools in their own communities. In this context, paying Black educators on average 61 percent of a white teachers salary allowed administrators to reduce the financial cost associated with operating a dual school system. During the late 1930s, however, the NAACP targeted wage discrimination as an indirect method for achieving its broader goal of toppling segregated schools. According to historians August Meier and John T. Bracey, “The rationale for this indirect approach was to make segregated public schooling so expensive that the choice would be desegregation or economic ruin.” By the early 1940s, the NAACP had achieved a number of landmark legal victories including *Mills v. Board of Education* (1939) and *Alston v. School Board of Norfolk* (1940), prompting branch leaders in Cairo to consider a salary equalization suit as the first step in their own campaign to overturn Jim Crow.3

During the second week of February 1944, the NAACP hosted another mass meeting at Ward Chapel and invited newly elected Black state legislator Corneal Davis to speak. The ties between Davis and the Cairo struggle were both political and religious. Affectionately known to his colleagues as “deacon,” Davis was the assistant pastor of Quinn Chapel AME Church in Chicago. Upon his arrival, Davis began asking Kendrick about the racial conditions in Cairo and her experiences as a schoolteacher. “Is it true,” he inquired, “that they do not pay equalized

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salaries to black and white teachers?” Kendrick responded by explaining that Black teachers like herself were paid less because they were “not as qualified” as their white counterparts, to which Davis asked whether Kendrick had her teaching certificate. “Oh yes,” Kendrick replied. “Then you are qualified,” he answered, “and Cairo cannot disqualify you. However, I will see you after the meeting.” At Ward Chapel later that evening Davis gave his typical election stump speech and followed up with a large group of teachers in attendance. Upon learning that many were earning as little as $86 per month compared to $200 for their white counterparts, Davis rescheduled his plans and committed to remain in Cairo overnight in order to discuss the situation with the county superintendent of schools, Leo Schultz, the following day.4

The following morning, Davis, Kendrick, and Dyson walked over to Schultz’s office at the all-white Cairo High School. Schultz, who had been notified about the mass meeting at Ward Chapel the previous evening, was waiting outside the high school for the group to arrive. Before Davis could introduce himself Schultz bellowed at the senator, “Oh, I know who you are… You that nigger that came down here and got these people all stirred up?” A stunned Davis retorted, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t stir up anybody. I came down to make a speech for the NAACP…. “Oh yes you did,” Schultz fired back. “You came down here about all these niggers.” Somewhat surprised by the tenor of the conversation, Davis maintained his formal tone explaining that he had come to the county superintendent’s office to locate copies of the schedule of the salaries for teachers in Alexander County. Schultz refused the request and proceeded to berate the esteemed senator. “If you know what’s good for you,” he threatened, “you’ll get on

Angered by his encounter with Schultz, Davis made a commitment to Kendrick and the rest of the teachers that he would fight obtain the records and pursue the case on their behalf. Upon returning to his office at the state capitol in Springfield, Davis reached out to rising star Thurgood Marshall at the NAACP headquarters in New York who encouraged him to collaborate with Z. Alexander Looby who was fighting a similar case in Nashville. Over the coming months, the two exchanged information and Davis began building the case that would champion equal pay for the city’s Black teachers.  

As Davis’s work became public knowledge white Cairoites responded angrily sending the senator hate mail filled with racial epithets. “I never got so many unsigned threatening letters in all my life,” Davis recalled. “One time they sent me a coffin right here in Springfield.” Undeterred, Davis returned to Cairo later in the year to file the legal suit at the courthouse. Upon his arrival, Davis learned from community members that more threats had been made on his life. “Hell has broke loose down here,” one man warned. “These white folks say they going to kill you down here. They going to lynch you!” Kendrick also recalled the fear that enveloped the community as “the usual claims” were made by members of “the master race” that “blood will run down the street like water.” Davis insisted that he would file the suit but suggested that local people not go with him for fear that their identities would be exposed. With that, Davis headed to courthouse where he was confronted by a mob of white men. “Boy,” one of them drawled with contempt, “where are you going?” Davis explained that he was in town to file a case with the federal courthouse. “Didn’t we tell you not to come down here?” one of the men retorted. At this point, the mob began to demand that Davis leave town. When he refused, one man asked Davis to turn around and look at the bridge that ran across the Ohio River and into Kentucky. “You

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5 Davis et al., *Corneal A. Davis*, 43-45
know where that goes?” the man asked. Davis replied that he didn’t know. “Kentucky,” the man responded. “We’re going to take you across that bridge and we’re going to teach you that when a white man tells you something, dammit, you’ll respect him.” Fearful but emboldened, Davis tried to appeal to reason. “Gentlemen,” he declared “I don’t have anything to protect me or to stop you from taking me over there. All I have here is your laws… I’m trying to try this case under your laws, not under the Russian law or the Communist laws.” He pulled off his overcoat to show the men that he carried no weapons. “See, I don’t have anything. Your laws protect me,” Davis shouted. “If this don’t protect me then, dammit take me over there. I’m tired of this stuff!” When the men failed to respond, Davis pushed his way through the crowd and into the courthouse whereupon he filed the suit.6

The filing of the lawsuit was met by a media blackout in Cairo prompting local NAACP leaders to purchase an advertisement in the Cairo Evening Citizen explaining the grounds for the complaint which charged the Cairo school board with paying Black teachers lower wages than their white counterparts in direct violation of the federal and state law. “This is not only undemocratic but un-Christian,” the NAACP stated. “Negroes are dying on foreign fronts for democracy, why not give them a chance to live for and with democracy at home.” In April 1945, Negro City Teachers Association of Cairo vs. Vernon L. Nickell, Superintendent of Public Instruction, et al., was finally heard before the Federal District Court for the Eastern District of Illinois with Thurgood Marshall, special counsel for the NAACP, representing the teachers alongside attorney’s William H. Temple, Senator Charles C. Wimbush of Chicago, and David Lansden chairman of the branch’s Legal Redress Committee. The latter was the grandson of former Cairo Mayor John Lansden whose administration had overseen the passage of a series of

6 Davis et al., Corneal A. Davis, 46-47; “Hattie Kendrick handwritten note, n.d., Kendrick-Brooks Family Papers, LOC, box 22, folder 4;
restrictive electoral reforms. States Attorney Peyton Berbling and local Attorney D. B. Reed were present on behalf of the city. Marshall successfully petitioned the court to release local records revealing the full extent of the city’s discriminatory pay scale and forcing Judge Wham of Centralia to find on behalf of the plaintiffs. In a landmark victory, the judge ordered a consent decree imposed on the city mandating equal pay for Black teachers. Inspired by the victory, members of the Interdenominational Ministers’ Alliance and the NAACP began to shift the battle to a direct assault on Jim Crow.⁷

**The NAACP and the Battle for Integrated Schools (1952)**

Shortly after winning the Cairo salary equalization suit, the NAACP’s legal director Thurgood Marshall announced that his office was embarking on a new campaign to overturn school segregation in the north. In the southernmost parts of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, racial practices tended to mirror those of the Deep South. However, as Marshall noted, important legal differences distinguished the regions from each other. Most importantly, while Deep South states tended to codify segregation through law, local segregationist practices in Southern Illinois were in direct violation of state legislation that banned segregation during the late nineteenth century. This unique context afforded NAACP strategists some valuable weapons in the battle for racial equality and ensured that the northern

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borderland would be an important testing ground for national civil rights organizations in the postwar era. Prior to the Brown decision of 1954, it was often northern border communities – where local customs ran up against state legislation – that provided the best targets for the NAACP to test the kinds of legal and direct-action strategies that would become so effective during the modern Civil Rights Movement. Therefore, struggles for desegregation often occurred earlier in the northern borderland and, accordingly, provided an important indicator for events to come.8

During the 1940s, longstanding practices of school segregation in Illinois came under growing fire from African American activists and their political allies. The twelve southernmost counties, popularly referred to as “Little Egypt,” were singled out for particular criticism. While African American children in many parts of the state attended majority or all-Black schools as a result of residential segregation, Little Egypt maintained a dual-system in which race was used as the sole basis for pupil assignments. Postwar studies performed by the Illinois Interracial Commission demonstrated that African American students in Cairo were confined to the poorest facilities with the most limited resources and that teacher-student ratios were disproportionately high. Investigators from the Commission visited Cairo in 1949 to discuss their concerns with local school authorities including Superintendent of Schools Leo Schultz. During their visits, members of the committee found little support for integration. In fact, some school leaders suggested that existing legislation prohibiting school segregation should be repealed. However, despite their findings the Illinois Interracial Commission adopted a gradualist approach placing the integration of Cairo schools on its “long-range program.” At the same time, Black legislators

in the Illinois General Assembly spoke out on the persistence of school segregation in the state and pushed a number of legislative initiatives aimed at overturning the practice. The first occurred in 1945 when earlier anti-segregation laws were amended to provide that “[n]o pupil shall be excluded from or segregated in any such school on account of his color, race, or nationality.” However, since the policy lacked any enforcement provision it had virtually no impact. During the 66th General Assembly of the Illinois legislature in 1949, Charles Jenkins of Chicago introduced an amendment to House Bill No.1066, the Distributive Fund Appropriation Bill, which would allow for the withholding of state-aid funds from school districts that practiced racial exclusion or segregation in public school facilities. “Let’s wipe out Jim Crowism in Illinois schools,” Jenkins declared, adding that while some downstate school districts might continue “their un-American philosophies” they shouldn’t be permitted to “do it at state expense.” The Jenkins Amendment passed adding another weapon to the activist arsenal.9

After the passage of the Jenkins Amendment, NAACP leaders encouraged grassroots activists across Southern Illinois to test the law by organizing local students to seek enrollment in white schools. Campaigns were organized in a number of downstate communities but were greeted by intransigence from school authorities prompting the NAACP to file legal suits forcing desegregation in East St. Louis, Alton, and Edwardsville in 1950 and Harrisburg in 1951. However, the campaign in Cairo and other communities in the southernmost parts of the state were much slower prompting legislators to strengthen the Jenkins Amendment in 1951 requiring

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that each District Superintendent of Schools requesting state funds provide a statement under oath that the district was in compliance with the bill’s non-segregation policy. The House also passed a resolution establishing a special legislative committee to investigate compliance in down state communities where school segregation was still practiced. The special committee, led by Corneal Davis and Charles Jenkins, visited Cairo. It confirmed once again the discriminatory nature of school facilities and the principled opposition of local school authorities to integration. In the committee’s final report, members concluded that Leo Schultz, Superintendent of Schools of Cairo, remained “the main obstacle to the elimination of school segregation in Alexander County,” and that Black parents “feared bodily violence for their children seeking to attend the school nearest their residence.” Emboldened by the support of their allies in the state legislature, NAACP leaders in Cairo requested support from the national office for an organizing drive focused on desegregating the city’s schools. In January 1952, Thurgood Marshall sent field workers June Shagaloff and Lester P. Bailey to Cairo to meet with city officials and aid parents in registering their children for transfer into white schools.10

The city’s Black churches became ground zero for the NAACP’s organizing drive. Mass meetings educating parents about the benefit of integrated schools and encouraging them to submit applications for transfer requests were held at Mt. Moriah Baptist Church and Ward Chapel. The use of these particular churches as meeting spaces was due in part to their size and independence from white control. However, the NAACP’s ability to access these specific churches also hinged on the support of their members, particularly clergy and lay leaders. Since

the success of the salary equalization suit, a number of Ward Chapel’s leading congregants had joined Hattie Kendrick at the NAACP. Two of the church’s trustees – Dr. W. A. Fingal and Dr. James Carroll Wallace, Jr., took up leadership positions in the organization, the former serving as the branch president and the latter as the chairman of both the Press and Publicity Committee and the Finance Committee. At the height of the desegregation campaign, Ward Chapel’s itinerant pastor Reverend Arthur Jelks replaced Fingal as president and played an active role in the integration campaign. The high profile role played by church leaders in the desegregation campaign was far from uncontroversial however. As Kendrick recalled, “A part of the church congregation was proud of the firm stand which was being made in civil rights, the other part seemed humiliated.” As the spiritual home of many of the city’s most prominent citizens, Ward Chapel’s use for civil rights meetings was also a source of debate. According to Kendrick, some congregants opposed the church’s use feeling that it was “too dangerous,” while others “felt if we could not have Civil Rights meetings in our own churches then our Civil Rights was a farce and needed strengthening.” Despite these underlying tensions, the support of Ward Chapel’s leaders ensured that it would play an integral part in the desegregation campaign and by the start of the spring semester the organization had recruited an unprecedented 200 new members and filed eighty-four transfer requests with the local school board.¹¹

As word spread that Black parents were planning to transfer their children on the first day of classes, white citizens engaged in an organized campaign of violence and intimidation. Parents that had signed transfer requests received menacing letters from anonymous senders; white drivers issued threats to young children playing in the streets; and, on the night before the first day of the semester, three crosses burned in Black neighborhoods across town. Field secretary June Shagaloff, who was subjected to near continual harassment, secured the services of two bodyguards and began carrying a weapon. Seeking to dispel parents’ fears, Shagaloff also had to address the opposition of leading members of Cairo’s Black middle-class, particularly schoolteachers who justifiably feared that desegregation would cost them their jobs. Before classes started principal Willie Mathews of Sumner High School visited every student who had applied for a transfer individually and falsely informed them that all of the other applicants had withdrawn their requests and that they would be the only one enrolling on the first day of classes. Others were visited by Reverend Mitchell Fisher of the Cairo COGIC congregation who warned parents that they would lose welfare payments and bank credit privileges if they pursued integration. Accordingly, some parents withdrew their transfer requests out of fear of reprisals. However, a larger group of undeterred parents prepared to enroll their children on the first day of classes.12

On January 28, 1952, Black parents – with children in tow – walked to the city’s historically white schools past large numbers of white men who were patrolling the area in cars.

and on foot. Upon their arrival, school officials determined to halt the integration drive informed the parents that their transfer requests had not been processed. Shortly after, violence broke out across the city. Armed vigilantes fired multiple shotgun blasts into the home of Dr. J. C. Wallace; unexploded dynamite was discovered at the tire shop owned by NAACP Vice President Henry Dyson; and Dr. W. A. Fingal received threats warning him to leave the city or “suffer the consequences.” Not all of those targeted were prominent civil rights activists. Dr. Urbane Bass, a local doctor who admitted that he had refused to participate in the transfer plan, narrowly averted death when vigilantes threw dynamite onto his property in the middle of the night, destroying part of his back porch. When local police failed to act quickly to halt the violence, Black war veterans distributed weapons and established barricades to protect their communities. While other southern Illinois communities had desegregated relatively peaceably, Cairo witnessed yet another upsurge in racial violence, prompting the deployment of the National Guard and foreshadowing events that would take place in the Deep South just a few years later.13

The response of city officials to the NAACP’s desegregation campaign also distinguished Cairo from other southern Illinois communities. In East St. Louis, for example, key civic leaders from the Board of Education, Chamber of Commerce, law enforcement, and the local press engaged in behind-the-scenes negotiations with activists in an effort to resolve the desegregation battle peaceably. Civic leaders in Cairo, however, had little interest in dialogue. The NAACP’s offer to collaborate with city council members on developing a desegregation plan was met with “stony silence.” School authorities, led by arch-segregationist Leo Schultz and a school board

that included representation from some of the city’s largest financial and industrial interests, opposed desegregation and in direct violation of state law continued to obstruct efforts to transfer Black students into white schools. Moreover, NAACP leaders alleged that Schultz was personally responsible for leaking the names and addresses of transfer applicants to known vigilantes. Schultz did little to deter such claims, insisting in a confidential memo to the State Superintendent of Schools that white citizens should be commended for “their recent action” which he contended had “called [the NAACP’s] hand.” “It is hoped,” Schultz stated bluntly, “that many of [the NAACP’s] tactics will be halted as a result of this action – not only checked in Cairo, but throughout the Nation.” The use of vigilante violence was also tacitly endorsed by local law enforcement agencies, which NAACP leaders accused of much foot dragging prior to the arrival of state and federal agents. All of this took place unchecked by the last watchdog of democratic governance as the editorial board at the Cairo Evening Citizen maintained a media blackout on the school desegregation campaign and refused to publish any NAACP press releases which might have dispelled rumors and lessened tensions in the city. As NAACP field secretaries June Shagaloff and Lester Bailey surmised, “It was the official white reaction to [desegregation]… that put Cairo in the hall of infamy.” Taken collectively, the actions of city officials presented a solid wall of opposition that distinguished Cairo from other northern communities facing desegregation campaigns during this period.14

Despite local opposition, NAACP leaders were aided by the arrival of state and federal investigators in February which resulted in the arrest of over twenty white citizens in relation to

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the bombings, shootings, and cross burnings. While some had initially attributed the violence to a “small minority group of hoodlums,” the arrests revealed that those most likely to be accused of vigilantism were well-established local business owners. Among those arrested were auto dealer Robert Hogan; Jack and Earl Bauer of the Bauer Bros. Oil Company; Elmer Cummings of the Cairo City Coal Company; and Kenneth Sullivan of Sullivan Electric Company. Angered by the arrests, fellow merchants William Lebo and Clifford Jones filed charges of disorderly conduct and endangering the life of a child against eight NAACP activists. Cairo police officers proceeded to Ward Chapel where they arrested David Lansden, Reverend Jelks, Dr. Fingal, Dr. Wallace, Dr. S. W. Madison, June Shagaloff and Lester Bailey. In a refrain popular with local segregationists, the plaintiffs claimed that NAACP leaders had jeopardized the safety of Black students by forcing them to enroll in all-white schools. Eager to appease white citizens, State’s Attorney Michael O’Shea upheld the charges and moved the case forward for prosecution. When the grand jury returned in February they found no grounds for indictment against NAACP activists, but in a lengthy statement foreman John Clarke chastised the organization for disrupting the “safety and moral conditions” of local schoolchildren and acting with an “arrogance, abusiveness and utter lack of cooperation, which could have very easily led to violence and upheaval.” Shortly after, in a move that outraged not only from activists but state officials, the grand jury also threw out the charges against the men accused of participating in the bombing of Dr. Bass’s home.¹⁵

By early March, twenty-one Black students had been successfully enrolled in the city’s formerly all-white schools. However, continued obstructionism prompted NAACP leaders to conclude that local authorities were permitting token enrollment to deflect criticism and avoid complete desegregation. Accordingly, local activists filed suit against the school district and began working with allies in the state legislature to cut off funding in accordance with the Jenkins Amendment. Under intense pressure Lucy Twente McPherson, the County Superintendent of Schools for Alexander County, withheld state funds for several months during the spring semester and by the fall the total number of Black students enrolled in formerly all-white schools had increased to sixty-two. The impact of the desegregation battle was also felt in the city’s parochial schools. Administrators at St. Joseph’s parochial high school reported in the spring of 1952 that the NAACP’s “unfortunate agitation” had prompted a flood of inquiries from white citizens as to whether Black children would be admitted and if the school would consider enrolling white Protestants if they “did not care to sit in the classroom with the Negroes in the public schools.” Fearing the consequences of a desegregation campaign at St. Joseph’s High School, administrators decided to permanently close the school during the summer of 1952 publicly citing financial difficulties as the cause.16

Encouraged by these strides, the NAACP reassigned Shagaloff and Bailey to more troublesome areas and journalists began to tout Cairo as a promising sign that even the most violent communities could be redeemed. “Jim Crow education is on its way out,” jubilant editors at the Chicago Defender stated in September. Local realities, however, offered little ground for optimism and complete integration would not be achieved until the Princeton Plan was implemented in 1967 resulting in the ultimate consolidation of the city’s schools just two years later. Until then, a “freedom of choice” model was followed by which a small number of African Americans elected to fill a small number of available spots in the city’s formerly all-white public schools while the majority continued to attend all-Black schools with no white students. The teaching staff remained rigidly segregated. Efforts to integrate the city’s parochial schools also continued at a slow pace. In 1954, Flora Chambliss, the wife of a local Black physician, applied to have her children transferred from St. Columba’s to St. Joseph’s Grade School but was encouraged to wait until a desegregation plan could be implemented by the diocese.\(^{17}\)

In September 1953, W. A. Fingal, president of the Cairo branch of the NAACP, wrote a desperate plea to Thurgood Marshall asking for field secretary June Shagaloff to be immediately

reassigned to Cairo. The Cairo branch, Fingal explained, was caught in the middle of “a life and death struggle.” The year following the desegregation campaign had witnessed an upsurge in organized white supremacist activity that effectively forced the Cairo branch underground. In June 1952, white Cairoites, led by a group of small-business owners, formed the Cairo Citizens Association, a forerunner to the White Citizen’s Councils that would spring up across the South in the wake of the Brown decision. Headed by local car dealers Walter Warden and Lee Stenzel and with William Lebo serving as its secretary, the Cairo Citizens Association worked to undermine the efforts of local civil rights activists through a combination of economic harassment and physical intimidation. The NAACP’s only white member, attorney David Lansden, became the target of considerable ire for his role in the pending legal suit against local school authorities. Garbage was strewn across Lansden’s property, his front steps were smeared with oil, and rocks were thrown through his windows. The prominent attorney also had the misfortune of living next door to a member of the Cairo Citizens Association, Connell Smith, a local leader in the Cairo branch of the American Federation of Labor’s Hod Carriers, Building and Common Laborers Union who erected what author Langston Hughes would describe as a four-foot “red arrow of bigotry” on his garage pointing toward his neighbor’s property. When asked by reporters from Life magazine to explain the purpose of the sign, Smith stated bluntly, “so I can see where the dynamite is going off.” City officials also engaged in economic reprisals against Black activists denying the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance’s requests for parade permits and preventing Black entrepreneurs from securing the appropriate licenses. As one of the few Black schoolteachers to support the desegregation campaign, Hattie Kendrick was particularly vulnerable to harassment and shortly after the protests she was dismissed her from her position at Washington Junior High by the school board.18

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18 W. A. Fingal to Thurgood Marshall, September 10, 1953, Papers of the NAACP, Part 3: The Campaign for
In his letter to NAACP executives, Dr. Fingal stressed the chilling effect this unchecked campaign of terror had had upon the branch’s efforts to organize Black Cairoites. “Negroes are 99.9 percent scared at all times of the white folks and NAACPers,” Fingal explained. “Any local Negro who dares defy the boundaries imposed by the white brethren is in danger of hell’s fire and damnation administered by his Negro fellowman.” In the face of strident opposition and pressure to accommodate, the NAACP’s membership plummeted and branch leaders were forced to alter their strategies. “The NAACP at that time,” former member Reverend J. I. Cobb explained, “was working what they call underground, because of the pressure, the intimidation and all types of violence that was directed toward the members of NAACP.” Branch leaders held “secret meetings” in their homes and encouraged concerned citizens to meet with them face-to-face due to fears that the organization’s mail was being tampered with. “We had to be very, very careful about what we were doing for our protection,” Rev. Cobb explained. Accordingly, the organization’s focus shifted away from high-profile acts of direct-action that required mass support to the filing of individual legal suits targeted at integrating the city’s movie theaters and protecting its members from economic reprisals.19

As the branch struggled under the effects of repression, many of the Black professional men that had served as the organization’s formal leaders left the city. Among the most visible community leaders, Black ministers, doctors and business owners were the primary targets of racial violence making their presence in the city particularly perilous. Some chose to use their limited mobility to relocate elsewhere. Others were compelled by economic or physical harassment. Even those, like Dr. J. C. Wallace, who insisted that they had “no intentions of leaving Cairo,” faced obstacles. In January 1953, Wallace found himself called to active duty from the army reserves and was deployed to Germany. In their absence, Black women increasingly accepted positions of formal leadership within the NAACP. The number of elected officer positions held by Black women increased from one in 1952 to a majority of eight in 1954. Black women officers included Carrie Dunn Jones (Secretary); Carmel Fowler (Membership Committee); Hattie Kendrick (Entertainment Committee and Press and Publicity Committee); Juanita Gholson (Education Committee), and Josephine Brown (Junior Work Committee). In an ironic twist, the escalation of repression during the mid-1950s had decimated the branch’s leadership and, in the process, opened up space for Black women’s elevation to officer positions. In this context, Black women played a critical role in sustaining the organization during the harshest of times.20

Concern about the declining involvement of the city’s Black churches was also prominent in Fingal’s report. As fear of reprisals escalated, longstanding disagreements regarding the appropriate role of Black churches and church leaders in the civil rights struggle reemerged at

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Ward Chapel threatening to divide the congregation in the summer of 1952. According to Kendrick, “Rev. Jelks, our pastor, called on trustee Dr. W. A. Fingal and asked him to go to the Bishop Baber and asked him to replace him at the end of the conference year.” Shortly after, Rev. Jelks was relocated to East St. Louis and replaced by Reverend R. S. Everett (1952-1954) and subsequently Reverend W. C. Coleman (1954-1959). Kendrick described the years immediately following Rev. Jelk’s departure as “a time of problems and stagnation for the church,” during which a majority of the membership refocused their energies inwards. As Fingal crafted his letter to NAACP executives in September 1953 a sense of fear gripped the city’s Black congregations, promoting a culture of widespread accommodation.

[Eighty] percent of the Negroes dare not attend an NAACP meeting or any other meeting setting forth their rights as citizens. They are taught through the pulpits and schools that this is just stirring up something… Only two churches, of nearly twenty, are available for mass assemblage. Ministers are afraid to come out to such meetings. Even when placed on program to pray they are afraid to come out and deny that they were asked.

Not all ministers opposed the NAACP’s work, but their involvement was often constrained by the sentiments of their congregants in ways that have been overlooked by scholars.21 According to Fingal, activist ministers risked alienating their own members who in some cases threatened to halt financial contributions if they disagreed with the church’s activities. Baptist and Pentecostal ministers were particularly vulnerable to forms of economic pressure as they lacked the financial independence that the Methodist’s hierarchical structure offered. However, as Rev. Jelk’s resignation illustrates, economic opposition was not the only obstacle ministers faced to activist

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21 Hattie Kendrick, Untitled History of Ward Chapel A.M.E. Church, March 18, 1976, Kendrick-Brooks Family Papers, LOC, box 21, folder 15; W. A. Fingal to Thurgood Marshall, September 10, 1953, Papers of the NAACP, Part 3: The Campaign for Educational Equality, Series C: Legal Department and Central Office Records, Reel 1, 0476-0479. Scholars of the Black Church have correctly identified the authoritarian and undemocratic characteristics of charismatic leadership. However, the extent of this power is often exaggerated, obscuring important denominational structures and the very real power that laity have over ministers. For example, see Reed, The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon, 56-57; Frazier, The Negro Church in America, 49. An alternative approach to understanding power relations within the Black church is offered by Eric L. McDaniel, Politics in the Pews: The Political Mobilization of Black Churches (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008).
ministries. In turn, the efforts of activist congregants to draw explicit connections between their church work and involvement in civil rights struggles was also constrained by the sentiments of their pastors and fellow church members. According to Kendrick, it was for this reason that activist lay leaders including herself were jubilant when the Bishop of the Illinois conference took what many “older and more conservative churchmen considered a long chance” by sending a youthful Blaine Ramsey, Jr. to serve as Ward Chapel’s pastor in 1959.22

**SNCC and the Integration of Public Accommodations (1962)**

Ramsey’s youth and inexperience made him a surprising choice for the pastorate of Ward Chapel. The young minister had led just one church and served in the Illinois AME Conference for only five years, a resume that hardly prepared him to lead an established congregation that had been plagued by internal conflict and financial difficulties. However, with the civil rights movement in full swing and a new generation of militant ministers taking the lead in cities across the South, leaders in the Illinois AME Conference opted to appoint Ramsey who had extensive training in the latest social outreach approaches as well as theology. In the highly centralized AME Church, this denominational support afforded Ramsey a strong mandate and the independence to act even in the face of local opposition. However, Ramsey’s quick intellect and passion for an engaged ministry quickly inspired the support of many of his congregants and set the stage for Ward Chapel’s reemergence at the forefront of civil rights struggles.23

23 Hattie Kendrick, Untitled History of Ward Chapel A.M.E. Church, March 18, 1976, Kendrick-Brooks Family Papers, LOC, box 21, folder 15. Ramsey’s emergence as a key movement leader coincided with the rise of southern Black clergy to leadership positions within the southern movement. See Adam Fairclough, “The Preachers and the
Though Ramsey concentrated exclusively on the needs of Ward Chapel - performing repairs, establishing a financial plan, and ministering to the membership – he gradually refocused his congregation outwards to conditions beyond the church’s walls. Ramsey demonstrated an uncanny ability to fuse religious thought and action. Like other so-called militant ministers of his generation, he embraced a prophetic theological tradition that emphasized Christ’s ministry of love and reconciliation and its contemporary import for the poor and oppressed. In his sermons, Ramsey seamlessly integrated scripture and protest carving space for civil rights activity at the heart of understandings of Christian mission. This philosophy of spiritual praxis allowed him to bridge the very real theological divides among congregants at Ward Chapel. As Kendrick explained, “In Blaine Ramsey’s church there were two [schools of thought] on community involvement. Number one, preach Christ in him crucified – that will settle everything. The other school cried preach us a practical gospel.” Ramsey’s skill, Kendrick argued, was in his ability to mobilize scripture to challenge this bifurcation of the sacred and the secular, thought and action, and “this-worldly” and “otherworldly” theologies.

Blain [sic] Ramsey heard both of them and understood what they were saying better than they themselves. Did not they say with him every Sunday morning, [thou] shall love the Lord they God with all they heart and they neighbor as thyself. Blain looked around. He saw his people. God’s Black children, sick of poverty and deprivation; hungry for knowledge; thirsty for opportunity; imprisoned within walls of segregation and discrimination. Blain Ramsey heard their cry and like Elijah, answered, here I am Lord, send me, send me.

By grounding the call for civil rights in a gospel of love and reconciliation Ramsey legitimized the church’s involvement in civil rights work and encouraged his congregants to participate as part of their Christian duty.  

Ramsey’s distinctive approach resonated with Ward Chapel’s activist lay leaders, particularly Kendrick who was widely recognized for her own commitment to an engaged social ministry that fused religion and racial uplift. Studies by historians Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Bettye Collier-Thomas situate the Black church as a foundational space for Black women’s activism as well as a key vehicle and contested site in their struggles against racial and gender discrimination. Through missionary societies, women’s auxiliaries, and secular organizations, Black churchwomen became leaders in social service and racial self-help.  

Kendrick was a part of this longstanding Black feminist tradition and, like Ramsey, she saw her activism as an extension of her deep religious convictions. In addition to her work at the NAACP, Kendrick served as Chair of the Social Action Commission of the Fourth Episcopal District’s Women’s Missionary Society, taking Matthew 25:35-36 as her mandate: “For I was hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.” (King James Version) This mandate, Kendrick believed, would not be achieved “merely by sermons from the pulpit” but rather through the active contributions of Black churchwomen to local communities. In a set of guidelines distributed to local women’s missionary societies, Kendrick proposed that Black churchwomen actively engage their communities by tutoring school children, coordinating


meals and snacks, pooling clothing for community-wide distribution, and providing basic medical care in places where facilities were not provided. At Ward Chapel, Kendrick diligently worked to institutionalize this vision through her service as a Sunday school teacher, member of the Steward Board, and founder and president of the Charles A. Bolar Lyceum. Through the latter, Kendrick educated congregants – young and old - on Black history and culture as well as the responsibilities of Christian mission, service, and racial uplift.²⁶

Recognizing the parallels in their work, Ramsey collaborated with Kendrick in his efforts to promulgate a philosophy of spiritual praxis among congregants and fellow clergymen. Ramsey joined Kendrick on the executive board of the Cairo NAACP and began reaching out to the city’s Black ministers in an effort to reenergize the ecumenical relationships that had underpinned earlier struggles. He quickly gained the confidence of his peers in the Interdenominational Ministers’ Alliance, forming strong ties with Rev. E.G. Mayes of the First Missionary Baptist Church and Rev. J. I. Cobb of the Cairo COGIC congregation who were also members of the NAACP. Ramsey also partnered with Kendrick in 1960 in establishing the Ward Chapel Social Action Commission, a body charged with “coordinating activities in the areas of social, race, and economic relations as well as community cooperation.” Through the Social Action Commission, Ramsey and Kendrick were able to recruit and train a new generation of church-based activists that helped reignite the civil rights struggle in Cairo. Foremost among this group was sixteen-year old Charles Koen, a student at Sumner High who lived with his mother in

the Pyramid Courts. Koen’s extended family had deep ties to Ward Chapel. His great-grandfather, George Bondurant, had helped build the 17th Street edifice; his grandmother, Christine Bondurant, served as the church organist for more than twenty years; and several of his aunts and uncles were singers in the choir. Despite this lineage, Koen explains that his own involvement had been limited during the late 1950s because he felt “the church wasn’t doing enough to help the poor and the struggling people.” However, after Koen was sentenced to reformatory school for breaking a storefront window, his mother sent him to Rev. Ramsey who met with the judge and arranged to cover the fine and cost of repairs on Koen’s behalf. In return, Koen worked for the pastor, sparking a close relationship between the two.27

Growing up in the Pyramid Courts, Koen was acutely aware of the interlocking realities of racial and class oppression. His autobiography portrays a childhood beset by poverty and shaped by the heroism of his mother, Naomi Bondurant, who struggled to raise her children under the most trying of circumstances. Patent distinctions in the material worlds of Cairo’s Black and white residents, combined with the painful experience of racial exclusion, fostered feelings of intense anxiety, shame, and resentment during Koen’s boyhood. He describes the “dehumanizing” feeling of waiting in the commodity line with other Black families as white men unloaded “sacks full of dry foods, canned goods and potatoes” from trucks and his “longing” to enter local restaurants and “enjoy what the whites were enjoying – all the fine food, fine music, with the comfort of air-conditioning on hot nights.” For Koen, these tangible differences in rights and privileges seemed to extend into all areas of life in Cairo. “[I]t was the same with their nice

homes and fine cars,” he explained. “[Y]ou see blacks living in shacks while whites relax in their two-story homes surrounded by rose bushes.” Koen’s frustration was compounded by a gendered sense of responsibility as the eldest son to be “the father of the house” and provide for his mother.28

While Koen felt the sting of racial and class oppression from a young age he struggled to comprehend its cause. “I grew up recognizing the symptoms of racism in Cairo and yet not fully understanding what the sickness was all about,” he explains. However, at the age of sixteen – shortly before meeting Ramsey – Koen describes an “awakening period” in which his vision of racial and class inequalities was intensified. “I still didn’t really know what was going on, but from my observation I deduced that the oppression and racism we experience as blacks in Cairo controlled us psychologically.” To a teenage Koen, this psychological control appeared most visible in Black Cairoites’ accommodation to practices of racial exclusion.

For instance, if you check it out; whites were going to the Gem theatre and we had to go to the Lincoln, and the Gem structurally was a better theatre and then you check the whites swimming in a pool right in the center of town as well stroll past it on our way to the river to swim there. Or not having a skating rink and consequently not going skating. The only way they could get away with stuff like that was because they controlled our minds.

Perceiving the role that fear and accommodation played in upholding the status quo, Koen describes feeling even “more ashamed” and “depressed.” But after his arrest, Koen recalls, “Rev. Ramsey was very instrumental in putting me on the proper track and giving me guidance which was very helpful for me on one hand and keeping me out of reform school and trouble on the other…. Meeting him was probably the best thing that happened to me at that point of my life.” Ramsey “recruited and mentored” Koen, taking him “under his wing” and teaching him “how to do church work.” Koen’s relationships with Ramsey and other activist lay leaders at Ward

Chapel were transformative in that they legitimized previously unarticulated feelings of shame and frustration and provided an organizational context through which these sentiments could be directed into constructive forms of collective protest. “Around about then,” Koen states, “I started voicing my opinions on many injustices I saw.” Ramsey also became a spiritual mentor whose model of an activist ministry was an “inspiration” to Koen preparing him for his own “calling into the ministry” and helping him “to recognize the depth of the spirit.”

By the time Ramsey and Koen met in 1961, the young pastor was already testing racial barriers and contemplating a broader campaign to overturn Jim Crow in the city. In January, Ramsey met with city council members and proposed the formation of a Human Relations Council composed of Black and white residents in order to address ongoing practices of racial discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations. Council members acknowledged Rev. Ramsey’s request but failed to act upon it. He received a similar response from members of the city’s exclusively white Ministerial Alliance whom, according to Kendrick, “[he] chided… for allowing racial segregation to exist in the Christian family.” When petitions failed Ramsey and other local activists, inspired by recent integration campaigns led by students working for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), began to consider the use of nonviolent direct-action as an alternative tool to challenge Jim Crow. That same year, CORE had mounted campaigns in a number of borderland cities including nearby East St. Louis and St. Louis aimed at integrating recreational facilities such as swimming pools and bowling alleys. Nearby in Nashville, SNCC activists responsible for leading sit-ins at downtown restaurants and stores the year prior were preparing to embark on the Freedom Rides in an effort to test laws banning segregation on interstate travel.

In the spring of 1962, Ramsey reached out to SNCC organizers on behalf of the Cairo NAACP and invited them to come to Cairo to aid in a citywide campaign against segregation in the city. SNCC leaders agreed, making “Little Egypt” the site of the organizations’ first integration campaign north of the Ohio River.³⁰

Prior to SNCC’s arrival, the Cairo branch of the NAACP worked hard to generate mass support and an organizational structure capable of sustaining the upcoming campaign. Organizing the city’s youth was a vital component of this plan. Rev. Ramsey and Rev. Cobb approached Koen to ask him to take the lead in mobilizing students from Cairo and Sumner High Schools in preparation for possible direct-action campaigns. Koen embraced the role, organizing Black youth, particularly those from the Pyramid Courts, and forming the Cairo Nonviolent Freedom Committee (CNVFC), an organization modeled after SNCC. Ramsey encouraged the organization to use Ward Chapel as their headquarters. When SNCC fieldworkers John Lewis, Mary McCollum, James Peake, and Joy Reagon arrived from Nashville in June, they encountered approximately seventy-five high school children organized by Koen and additional support from student activists who had recently formed a SNCC chapter at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. The fieldworkers quickly accepted the role of advisors, helping local students plan the campaign and providing training in nonviolent direct-action.³¹


Many of the SNCC fieldworkers from Nashville had trained under Reverend James Lawson and subscribed to a Tolstoyan or Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence that resonated with Cairo’s church-based organizing traditions, becoming the ideological foundation of the local movement.\(^3\) The CNVFC’s newsletter invoked SNCC’s 1960 “Statement of Purpose,” which affirmed the redemptive quality of nonviolence to transform hate through love and to produce a reconciled community. The CNVFC’s publications and private correspondence show that this ideology was internalized by many of the organization’s members, becoming “a personal philosophy” as opposed to a pragmatic strategy or abstract “set of principles.” In contrast to the NAACP, which focused on legal suits to force integration, the CNVFC believed that segregation was a symptom of a deeper “moral sickness” that needed to be “confronted” at the individual level with redemptive love. “Through the demonstration,” activists argued, “we confront each man – the restaurant owner, hotel owner and the people in the street who support the businessman – with his responsibility.” CNVFC leaders claimed that the “creative interchange” that emerged from these confrontations would reinforce “the dignity of both groups,” and leave the door open for true racial reconciliation. Thus, while integration was the practical goal of CNVFC activists, many members also embraced a broader vision of nonviolent

direct action, producing a Beloved Community where brotherhood could be realized. “We shall continue,” local activists declared, “until love takes the place of hatred, until right drives out wrong, until freedom and equality replace slavery and injustice in our land.”

On June 17, CNVFC members with the support of SNCC activists began testing a small number of restaurants and hotels in the community. After initially being refused access to the Mark Twain Restaurant and the Cairo Hotel, an interracial group successfully obtained service at both locations later that week. On June 27, a group of Black patrons also obtained service without incident at Glenn’s Restaurant located a few miles north of Cairo. However, at Mack’s Barbecue on Sycamore a group of Black high school students refused to leave after they were grossly overcharged and served food that was inedible. Angered by their behavior, the restaurant’s owner, James Cox, assaulted one of the students and had to be restrained by other patrons. The group returned later that afternoon but the waitresses quickly locked the doors and continued serving white patrons inside. Shortly after, Cox appeared with a hose and began spraying water at the group as they waited outside. As word of the protest spread, a group of more than sixty white citizens assembled outside the restaurant. During the melee that followed, an unidentified white man pulled out a knife, slashing Mary McCollum. McCollum refused to press charges, stating that the group’s purpose was to change people’s attitudes and that they were “willing to suffer for that change.” Koen agreed: “No matter what they do or say, we will be able to accept it and forgive them for their cruelness. After they treat us cruel for so long, maybe it will get on their conscience and they’ll finally realize what they’re doing. I feel sorry

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for them in a way.” Over the coming days, Cox continued to refuse service to Black patrons prompting protestors to perform sit-ins and pickets in shifts.\textsuperscript{34}

Over the next two months, protests spread as the CNVFC launched “Operation Open City,” a citywide campaign aimed at overturning segregation in all areas of civic life. Also included in the Operation’s 11-point plan were other goals including the creation of a Human Relations Council, “de facto” integration of the city’s schools, decent housing for all, fair treatment by the police and other city officials, and fair employment opportunities and wages. In a press release, members of the CNVFC vowed to “continue their battle for human justice until all these aims have been achieved and brotherhood is a reality in this town.”\textsuperscript{35} Despite the wide-ranging nature of the CNVFC’s demands, the majority of the group’s direct-action activities focused on the integration of public accommodations. Protests were staged at local recreational facilities including the swimming pool,\textsuperscript{36} the Roller Bowl,\textsuperscript{37} and the Oriac Youth Center (aka.,


Teen Town), as well as at barbershops and churches. While students staged sit-ins, older members of the Interdenominational Ministers’ Alliance and the NAACP often worked behind the scenes to negotiate settlements with proprietors and city officials.

The responses of business owners varied, though few elected to integrate voluntarily. Typical methods of obstructionism included overcharging patrons, providing poor service, or closing temporarily. However, as the protests continued white citizens increasingly turned to the police and extralegal violence to halt the drive for integration. By the end of the second week of protests more than forty demonstrators had been arrested on charges ranging from trespassing to breach of the peace and mob action. Among those detained were CNVFC President Charles Koen, Vice President Frank Hollis, and SNCC fieldworker John Lewis, who along with the majority of the protestors refused bail. Inside the segregated jail, protestors held Bible studies, sang freedom songs, and staged a spontaneous hunger strike designed, according to Koen, “to purify our souls.” On July 20, twenty-one guilty verdicts were handed down to the student protestors as more than two hundred protesters rallied outside singing “The Truth Will Set Us Free,” “God Is On Our Side,” and “Black and White Together.” Speaking before the crowd, Rev. Ramsey declared, “We are fighting against an evil system, and we shall continue until that


“Cairo Trials to Be Delayed,” Southern Illinoisan, July 9, 1962.


system is defeated.” Shortly after, the CNVFC received a telegram from Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who was leading the campaign in Albany, Georgia extending prayers and support from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.\textsuperscript{42}

The use of arrests and criminal prosecutions to quell protestors, many of whom were the children of Black residents, sparked outrage and served as a catalyst for the mobilization of broader support, particularly from older community members who had chosen to stay on the sidelines up until that point. The density of Black communal networks in Cairo ensured that news of the children’s arrests traveled quickly, personally affecting a large cross-section of the community. Churches became the central hubs for the mobilization of this new support and sites for the development of important intergenerational alliances that would hold the movement together in the weeks that followed. Regular mass meetings were held at Ward Chapel and the First Missionary Baptist Church featuring speakers from the Interdenominational Ministers’ Alliance, the NAACP, SNCC, and the CNVFC. Student leaders used these meetings to appeal to older residents for solidarity and support. In early July, these efforts gave rise to the Adult Coordinating Committee, a group of five ministers and four laymen that would provide advice

and “counsel” to youth involved in the sit-ins. Mass meetings also strengthened these bonds between organizations, providing a central forum for the discussion of the movement’s tactics and goals. The students’ reliance upon Christian discourses of racial reconciliation and nonviolence provided a unifying basis for these dialogues capable of generating broader support for tactics that might otherwise have been opposed as too militant. Indeed, many older residents were provoked by the youth’s commitment to nonviolence in the face of threats and violence. Moreover, appeals to religious discourses also served as the foundation for limited interracial cooperation. However, with the exception of Reverend P. J. Fitzsimons of St. Columba’s parish, white support continued to come almost exclusively from the organization’s out-of-town allies.43

By August, students had successfully integrated all of the city’s restaurants, making recreational facilities the movement’s primary focus. Established by the Rotary Club during the twenties, the local swimming pool was now under the ownership of the Cairo Natatorium and Recreation Club whose management appealed to the organization’s status as a private members-only club in denying Black patrons admission. When sit-ins resulted in further arrests, some CNVFC activists, recognizing that moral suasion was not working, filed suit claiming that the swimming pool’s owners had refused to admit African Americans in defiance of state and federal law. A similar suit was filed against William Thistlewood, owner of the Roller Bowl, for denying Black patrons admission to the skating rink. Illinois Attorney General William Clark addressed the charges, issuing a legal opinion that both facilities were public places of accommodation or amusement and therefore subject to Section 13-1 of the Civil Rights Act. Empowered by the decision, Koen led a group of thirty-eight students to the Roller Bowl on August 17 to test the

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ruling. Upon their arrival, the group was viciously attacked by a mob of white men carrying baseball bats, chains, black jacks and lead pipes. Men of all ages participated in the beating of protesters across the head, face, and arms while police stood passively by. Some tried to flee to a nearby parking lot for protection but were confronted by a man pursuing them with a bicycle chain. Twelve-year old Deborah Flowers was struck about the legs and fell to the ground. Others were chased by passing vehicles and threatened at gunpoint before they were able to return to Ward Chapel for safety. Koen and several other activists were hospitalized.\textsuperscript{44}

In the aftermath of the violence, civil rights leaders from across the state demanded that Governor Otto Kerner act to restore law and order in the embattled downstate community. Leaders from the Illinois NAACP spearheaded a demonstration in Springfield calling upon state officials to deploy the National Guard to Cairo, appoint a special attorney general to investigate all criminal cases pertaining to the recent violence, and prosecute any proprietors that continued to discriminate against Black patrons. Shocked and embarrassed by the violence, Governor Otto Kerner agreed, assigning two special attorney generals to investigate the charges and committed to prosecute any cases of unlawful segregation in the city. The Governor’s decision angered Cairo city councilmembers who refused to form a Human Relations Commission and rather shifted their attention to the passage of a new parade ordinance designed to allow local police to crack down on Black protesters.\textsuperscript{45}


Despite the city council’s efforts, the violence and subsequent outcry signaled a turning point in the CNVFC’s campaign. Facing legal suits and mounting pressure from state officials, Cairo’s proprietors, including the owner of the Cairo Hotel and the Roller Bowl, finally relented admitting Black patrons for the first time in September 1962. The pressure of the combined protests also prompted the Belleville Diocese to launch a preemptive desegregation campaign of the city’s parochial schools. In September 1962, eleven African American students began attending St Joseph’s parochial grade school and the following year the school and church at St. Columba’s were closed. Shortly after, the sitting city council was replaced by a new slate of councilmembers committed to restoring calm to the city. Under Mayor Thomas Beadle’s leadership, the city council revoked the repressive parade ordinance and encouraged businesses to comply with state and federal law on racial integration.46

Rev. Ramsey’s efforts to break down racial barriers among the city’s clergy also began to bear fruit. In the fall of 1962, two white Methodist ministers – Rev. Boyd Wagner of the First Methodist Church and Rev. William Fester of Tigert Memorial Methodist Church – resigned from the Cairo Ministerial Association after the organization’s members refused to admit Black clergymen. Inspired by the recent integration campaign, particularly “kneel ins” held by CNVFC activists at Cairo’s white congregations, the two ministers joined a small but growing number of Methodist clergy in pointing to the contradiction between racial segregation and Christ’s

message of reconciliation and love. Over the coming months, the two ministers organized an interracial Ministerial Association under a new constitution and celebrated its founding at a service attended by both Black and white congregation at the First Methodist Church on Good Friday in 1964. The two ministers also worked behind-the-scenes to pressure recently elected city council members to form a Human Relations Commission in June 1963. In this context of conciliation and reform, local protests subsided and several key leaders left the city, including Rev. Ramsey who was reassigned to Bethel A.M.E. in Champaign in the fall of 1963 and Koen who began his ministerial training at McKendree College that same year.47

Despite promising signs, these progressive efforts received little broader or lasting support from white Cairoites. By the end of 1964, both the Human Relations Commission and the interracial Ministerial Association were inactive. Liberal clergymen increasingly found themselves ostracized by hostile congregants and opted to relocate elsewhere. Popular resistance to integration in Cairo continued, simply taking on new forms. When the Cairo Natatorium and Recreation Club reopened on an integrated basis during the summer of 1963 the majority of white members refused to use the facility, forcing the club to close for the season. Determined to see the pool in operation, the Beadle administration leased it from the club the following summer but chose to close the pool permanently after just two weeks in the face of ongoing opposition. Shortly after, the property was sold to a third party who filled the pool with cement.48


In addition to these setbacks, many local activists reflected on the limits of Operation Open City, particularly its failure to mount a meaningful campaign against employment discrimination. “Once we integrated all over town… everything ended right there,” Koen recalled. “When it came to employment, everything just dropped. It was like the struggle swept in like a cyclone, picked up the door and windows but left the house intact. And this happened not only in Cairo but in other struggling towns during the whole Civil Rights era. When it came to finding jobs for blacks, the struggle ended and though we could eat, swim and skate with whites, we didn’t enjoy the luxury. With no job, we were back where we started. Poor.” While Operation Open City had identified eliminating job discrimination as part of its 11-point plan, local activists had struggled to shift tactics midstream. “It was ironic but nobody wanted to move on employment; for them it was a horse of a different color,” Koen explained.49

The Hearing of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in Cairo (1966)


the committee, eighty-four year old African American Rosie Bryant described how the recent passage of federal civil rights legislation had impacted race relations in the city.

Listen. I don’t see a bit of difference now than I did way back in ’51 or ’52 in the civil rights. It hasn’t reached us. It ain’t got to us – not the civil rights. I reckon it’s on its way but it ain’t got here yet.

While Bryant’s comments downplayed some of the important gains local activists had made over the preceding decades, her words powerfully evoked what most Black Cairoites agreed was “the changing same” of race relations in the embattled border city.50

During the investigation, committee members found much to substantiate Bryant’s statements including ongoing segregation in the city’s schools and public housing as well as widespread discrimination in federal contracts, employment, and social programs. Local unions and employers were found to have maintained a solid wall of resistance to Black economic mobility confining African American workers to the lowest paid unskilled positions or forcing them into unemployment. Indeed, some of the committee’s most damning findings pertained to the treatment of African American welfare recipients by white social workers. In an act that one committee member described as tantamount to “racial peonage,” local residents testified to being routinely thrown off welfare rolls during harvest season when low-paying agricultural work was available in the fields of Southern Illinois, Kentucky, and Missouri. Local growers were accused of conspiring with the Illinois Public Aid Commission and the Illinois State Employment service to ensure continued access to a cheap and dependent surplus labor force at the cost of 50 cents per hour. City officials allegedly made similar arrangements for periodic flood control and road

construction projects. From the report emerged an image of a city seemingly unchanged by the momentous events of the preceding decade.\(^{51}\)

In the aftermath of the hearing, pressure increased on state and federal authorities to address the desperate plight of Cairo’s Black working class, particularly those seasonal workers who had fallen victim to economic exploitation at the hands of the government and corporate interests. The Illinois Advisory Committee was particularly critical of federal programs associated with Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, finding widespread discrimination in Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) projects administered locally through the Shawnee Development Corporation. One organization that took a particular interest was the Illinois Migrant Council (IMC), a not-for-profit corporation founded by some of the state’s leading religious agencies on March 31, 1966 to address the economic, health, housing, and educational needs of migrant and seasonal workers. Shortly after its formation, the Illinois Migrant Council secured federal funding under the auspices of Title III-B of the Economic Opportunity Act for the purpose of establishing schools that would provide adult-education classes to migrant and seasonal farm workers as well as training for those wishing to pass the Eighth Grade or High School Equivalency exam as well as federal and state civil service examinations for typist, clerk, and postal service positions.\(^{52}\)

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In December 1966, Charles Krop, Assistant Project Director of the Illinois Migrant Council, visited Cairo to discuss the development of a local chapter of the organization with community members. Upon his arrival at the Morris Hotel, Krop quickly became aware of local opposition to his visit and the broader work of the Illinois Migrant Council. The proprietor of the Morris Hotel tapped Krop’s phone and other guests were closely monitoring his conversations. Krop left the hotel and met with Charles Koen, who had recently graduated from seminary at McKendree becoming an ordained Baptist minister. Koen was now working as a youth counselor for the Job Corps program with his wife Clydia Koen. The two men met at the Mark Twain restaurant where they were followed by the Chief of Police and a patrolman. That night, Krop was scheduled to speak at Ward Chapel. However, before he could reach the building, a car pulled up beside him and two white men jumped out. “Are you the man from the Migrant Council,” they asked. Krop replied affirmatively. The men struck Krop in the face, knocked him to the ground, and kicked him repeatedly. After the men left, Krop tried to gather himself and locate help. He entered the Cairo Public Library where two police officers conducted a brusque interview before dropping Krop off at Ward Chapel. “I made quite a sight when I entered the Negro church,” Krop recalled. “My face was swollen, my suit, shirt, and tie had been practically torn off my person.” Krop conducted the meeting and returned to his hotel only to be awoken by the sound of a brick smashing through his window. Too afraid to contact local law enforcement, Krop requested protection from the state police, only to be informed that the case was outside their jurisdiction. Krop called the local police who were “very negative,” but after a number of threats, provided Krop with security for the rest of the night. Several nights later, four shots were also fired into Koen’s home.53

Despite ongoing harassment, the Illinois Migrant Council proceeded with its plans to establish a school in Cairo, asking Koen to serve as the organization’s Area Coordinator. Koen agreed and on January 2, 1967, Illinois Migrant School #8 opened, providing classes to more than one hundred and fifty seasonal farm workers, most of whom were African American. To enable low-income students to attend classes, the IMC extended a stipend of $40 per week for individuals and an additional $5 per week for each dependent. In turn, students were expected to complete six hundred hours of classes in three main areas of study: basic literacy, pre-vocational training, and “community living,” a component of the course curriculum designed to orient students to American history and society.54

Under Koen’s leadership and with the support of the school’s principal, Earnest Brooks, the migrant school quickly became much more than a vocational training center. Students took a strong sense of ownership, cultivating their own organizations, customs and traditions. Administrators also encouraged them to “make democracy work” by developing a student council and electing leaders from amongst their peers. These types of activities were designed to empower students and familiarize them with democratic practices essential to civic and political engagement. Civic responsibility was also strongly emphasized in the curriculum, which encouraged students to engage in community service and outreach. These democratic and social responsibilities were undergirded by a broader religious ethos that stressed the interracial cooperation and reconciliation. The school code, which was popularly referred to as the Ten Commandments, described the ministry as “a training school in the love of God and Humanity”


and called on students to use their newfound knowledge to “bind more closely together... the people of Southern Illinois.” Students were called upon to make the school “a center of Love” and to keep “companionship and growth with Christ at the center of its life.” This ethic reflected the liberal theological traditions of the Illinois Migrant School’s sponsors as well as the reconciliationist ideology of local civil rights activists. However, the hostility of local whites to the school, combined with the overwhelmingly African American student population, exposed important contradictions between religious ideals and local realities. While reconciliationist aims continued to undergird the school’s philosophy, they were often supplanted by the goals of Black pride and empowerment in the context of ongoing racial oppression and economic exploitation.\(^55\)

This empowerment mission was readily apparent in Hattie Kendrick’s classroom. At the age of seventy-two, Kendrick was invited to join the staff to teach a course as part of the school’s community living program. After being barred from the city’s public schools for more than a decade, Kendrick was nervous at the prospect of returning to the classroom, particularly since most of the other instructors were much younger and, as she put it, considered her “a Methuselah.” However, in contrast to her younger peers, Kendrick had an extensive knowledge of Black history and culture that she was determined to incorporate into the school curriculum. School administrators supported Kendrick’s idea, asserting that one of the primary goals of migrant schools was to instill confidence and pride in their students. Accordingly, Kendrick developed a survey course in African American history that traced the Black experience from its

African roots through the contemporary moment. The course was divided into three parts – part one focused on the common origins of all humanity in Africa and the intellectual and cultural contributions of early African societies to civilization; part two explored Africans in America focusing particularly on their agency, resistance, and community building efforts; and the final section focused on the contemporary plight of African Americans and their continued economic, cultural, and social oppression. In letters to her family, Kendrick took great pride in the impact her class was having on her students. “It really does my heart good to see their eyes glow as I have incidentally brought in facts about the Negro,” she wrote. “Friday night in two classes no one knew that Ralph Bunche was a Negro… As the period closed one woman caught my hand and said, ‘Miss Kendrick, I hate to see you leave us all the time. You tell us so much about our people that I never knew.’ I left the room hurriedly. What kind of teacher would I be letting my students see me cry?”

Kendrick and the other instructors also challenged their students to bring their newfound knowledge to bear on local problems, prompting a growing assertiveness among students. As part of their mandatory prevocational training, students were expected to survey the types of jobs available in their community and to make visits to local agencies, factories, and industries to gain first-hand job experience. These requirements forced students to confront the reality of discriminatory hiring practices head-on and succeeded in elevating the issue to a position of prominence among local activists for the first time. Throughout the spring of 1967, members of the Interdenominational Ministers’ Alliance approached the city council demanding the creation of permanent employment for Black workers and an end to discriminatory hiring practices. When these efforts fell on deaf ears, Koen and local NAACP member Preston Ewing launched

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unsuccessful bids for city commissioner in an election clouded by allegations of voter fraud.

Ewing was a rising star in the local NAACP who had become involved just prior to the 1966 hearing of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. After his defeat in the election, Ewing began urging the NAACP to stage a boycott of local stores that refused to hire Black workers, a strategy that was increasingly being adopted by civil rights organizations across the country.

Ewing quickly secured the support of Koen and Brooks at the migrant council as well as members of the Interdenominational Ministers’ Alliance frustrated by the city’s inactivity. Shortly after, the group began planning a trip to Tougaloo College to meet with NAACP field secretary Charles Evers who had recently reached a settlement in a ten-month long boycott in Port Gibson, Mississippi, which had resulted in the appointment of a Black police officer, the integration of public accommodations, and the hiring of fifteen black store clerks. Before the boycott could get underway, however, violence broke out.57

**The Cairo Urban Rebellion (1967)**

At around 2 a.m., on the morning of July 16, Preston Ewing awoke to the sound of his phone ringing. On the other end of the line was a Black physician who informed Ewing that he had been called out by local law enforcement to examine the body of Robert Hunt, Jr., a nineteen year-old African American soldier from Urbana, Illinois who had been found dead in his cell at the Cairo police station. Hunt, who was in Cairo to visit his aunt, had been arrested on charges of

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disorderly conduct after a routine traffic stop. Less than an hour after entering police custody, officers alleged that Hunt had committed suicide, hanging himself from the ceiling of his cell with his own t-shirt. Ewing proceeded to the jail where he observed a number of inconsistencies that appeared to challenge the police’s story. Upon examining Hunt’s body, Ewing noticed several bruises that implied a struggle had taken place. The NAACP leader also saw that the ceiling of the cell was constructed out of a flimsy wire mesh incapable of sustaining Hunt’s body weight. As rumors trickled out regarding the suspicious circumstances surrounding Hunt’s death, many Black Cairoites concluded that local officers had in fact killed the young soldier. Within a matter of hours, an uprising had begun as Black working class teens and young adults took to the streets in anger.\(^\text{58}\)

As urban rebellions raged in larger cities across the country in the summer of 1967, Cairo also erupted on the evening of July 16 as groups of young rebels from the Pyramid Courts pelted buildings with homemade gasoline and kerosene bombs. Despite efforts by city leaders to characterize the rebellion as an act of unrestrained and indiscriminate violence, insurgents focused the majority of their activities narrowly on the property of the city’s small commercial and industrial elite, signifying that while Hunt’s death had clearly sparked the rebellion, Black youth were striking back at what they viewed as a broader pattern of racial oppression and economic exploitation in the city. On the first night of the uprising, Molotov cocktails were thrown into several white-owned businesses adjacent to the Pyramid Courts including Rink’s grocery store at 22\(^\text{nd}\) and Pine, the Elias Dollar warehouse at 16\(^\text{th}\) and Walnut, and Boalbey’s Market at 14\(^\text{th}\) and Walnut. Rebels coordinated the assaults using citizen band radios and shot out streetlights in the Pyramid Courts to protect against any subsequent police or vigilante attacks.

incursions. The following night rebels targeted the White-Coleman Lumber Company near the Mississippi River levee on 10th Street as well as the home of the company’s white foreman John Riggs. Shortly after, the insurgents made their first incursions “uptown,” smashing windows at the Hanna Grocery at 32nd and Poplar. When local and state police proved unable to stem the tide, the National Guard was deployed and the Pyramid Court was quickly cordoned off by a perimeter of soldiers armed with fixed bayonet rifles. A curfew was imposed and residents wishing to leave the housing project were required to obtain a pass from the county sheriff.59

In the wake of the uprising, Black working class youth insisted on the political nature of their acts, identifying discriminatory hiring practices as their primary grievance. Speaking with reporters from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, John Brantley, a thirty year-old unemployed laborer, explained, “We are fighting this discrimination – this economic thing.” Twenty-seven year-old Willie Bingham agreed, “We need jobs, we got a right to live, same as you people.” When asked by reporters how many jobs they were demanding, Brantley replied: “No less than half of what we rightly deserve. If you’ve got 20 people working in a department store, we want 10 to be Negro and 10 something else… We goin’ to keep fighting until we get something around here.” While Brantley and Bingham refused to address whether they had been actively involved in the recent disturbances, their statements indicated clear support for the use of property damage as a legitimate strategy in the effort to secure more jobs for Black workers. For Brantley, who had participated in the CNVFC’s earlier direct-action campaigns, white intransigence had

consistently undermined nonviolent attempts to create a just and reconciled community. In his conversation with reporters, Brantley represented the rebellion not as a radical break with earlier civil rights struggles, but as simply a new and potent weapon in the ongoing battle for racial equality and integration. This articulation of the uprising as continuous with earlier civil rights struggles was symbolically reinforced to reporters by a large group of teenagers who gathered around and “began to chant freedom songs” as Bingham and Brantley were interviewed. Revealingly, when asked by a reporter if he was an advocate of Black Power, Brantley replied, “This is not Black Power but Negro strategy.” Far from rejecting the liberal integrationist aims of earlier struggles, Brantley and many of the other youth that joined the rebellion viewed force as the only means capable of challenging a conscienceless people who maintained their position through threats and violence.\(^{60}\)

In addition to repudiating the nonviolent approach of earlier struggles, the rebels had acted independent of the city’s established civil rights leadership and shifted the movement’s organizational center from the unique cross-class and intergenerational milieu of the Black church to the exclusively working class setting of the Pyramid Court housing project. In the midst of the hostilities, civil rights leaders held clandestine meetings with youth at the Pyramid Courts in an effort to calm tempers and channel their energy back into conventional forms of political protest. NAACP President Preston Ewing pleaded with the militants to stay off the streets and refrain from further acts of arson and vandalism. However, speaking with reporters from the Post-Dispatch, Ewing confessed that he had been unable to control the men, whom he described as mostly unemployed “school drop-outs with nothing to do.” Ewing’s inability to

\(^{60}\) “Negro Youth Leaders Give Cairo 72 Hours to Meet Terms,” Post-Dispatch, July 20, 1967. The words of Brantley and other Black youth demonstrate that the rebellion represented a transitional moment between civil rights and Black Power in which liberal and Black nationalist influences blended. See Clarence Lang, “Between Civil Rights and Black Power in the Gateway City: The Action Committee to Improve Opportunities for Negroes (Action), 1964-75,” Journal of Social History 37, no. 3 (Spring, 2004), pp. 725-754.
secure the confidence and support of the rebels hinted at the gulf that had opened up between established civil rights leaders and the Black working class youth who bore the brunt of the city’s economic hardships. In an attempt to convey the situation to local officials, Ewing explained, “I’m a radical to you, but I’m an Uncle Tom to these youths.” In many ways, the barrier between the two had more to do with class and ideology than generation. At thirty-four years of age, Ewing was close in age to some of the rebels but his middle-class parentage and college education set him apart. In turn, Ewing’s commitment to the NAACP’s time honored strategy of legal gradualism and nonviolent direct-action inspired little hope among the residents of the Pyramid Court.61

In contrast, twenty-two year-old Charles Koen had grown up in the Pyramid Courts and knew many of the current residents from his youth and more recent work as area coordinator of the Illinois Migrant Council. Having led the sit-ins five years prior, Koen empathized with concerns about the utility of nonviolent direct action in light of the ongoing intractability of city officials. “My feeling about the whole thing was [that] the youth were tired and non-violent demonstrations had passed away in 1962. They sought to change the system peacefully back then; it didn’t work.” Once the National Guard had been deployed, Koen quickly emerged as a spokesperson for the youth, encouraging them to call a truce and make formal demands to city leaders. On July 20, Koen joined Ewing and other community leaders in a meeting with city officials at the Pyramid Courts. During the meeting, Koen presented a list of demands that had been developed by Black working class youth. At the top of the list was the hiring of Black workers by all public and private employers. Further demands included the complete desegregation of the city’s schools, the reopening of the swimming pool, the appointment of a

Black co-chief of police, and the formation of a city youth commission composed of three whites and three Blacks to determine the validity of the charges against those that were arrested during the uprising. Brantley warned that if the demands were not met within 72 hours, “Cairo will look like Rome burning down.” Another Black youth, James Whitfield, also insisted that if no effective action was taken in three days not even the presence of the National Guard could stop the violence. “We want to get across that we are human beings – nothing else,” Brantley explained, “we have been treated as mules.” Koen agreed insisting that the leaders were seeking “harmony in the community,” but if city officials refused to meet the demands “violence will explode.” After facing decades of obstructionism and violent resistance to their appeals for rights and protection, Black youth determined that their demands would be met by any means necessary.\(^6^2\)

Outraged by the ultimatum, city officials responded with threats of their own, causing negotiations to temporarily break down. “You haven’t got 10 per cent of your own people who will back you,” Alexander County Sheriff Chesley Willis accused. “If these demands are not met in 72 hours, you’ll find out how many are backing us,” local youth Willie Hollis retorted. “If that happens,” Sheriff Chesley Willis warned, “you’ll find out how many white extremists there are here.” When Ewing tried to steer the conversation toward the more straightforward task of integrating the city’s baseball diamonds, Commissioner Bill Ryan threatened to close down the ballpark altogether. However, Mayor Lee Stenzel responded with greater restraint. Stenzel – a former leader of the all-white Cairo Citizens Association – had shown a surprising degree of balance in his assessment of the rebellion. In a statement to the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* just two

days prior the mayor had angered many white citizens by conceding that the rebellion had been prompted by ongoing segregation and a lack of job opportunities for Black workers. “This thing is a bombshell that has been simmering for 20 years,” Stenzel argued. “It was brought on by the politicians. All we have to do is the right thing.” At the meeting, Stenzel maintained this position, insisting that he was working behind the scenes to create more jobs, but cautioned that city officials “cannot solve these problems within 72 hours.” Black leaders, skeptical of Stenzel’s intent, were less that reassured. As the meeting drew to a close, a frustrated Rev. Marshall Smith, pastor of Ward Chapel, pleaded for interracial cooperation. “Where is the white clergy?” he asked. “This is a very serious meeting, not a joke. White and Negro must work together; housing and jobs must be made available. I can tell from the expression on the faces of the officials here that they are not going to do a damn thing [and] if they don’t they are going to create chaos and hell unless this meeting is taken seriously.”

Over the next three-days, Mayor Stenzel negotiated a number of concessions in an effort to avert further violence. The city council agreed to hire one African American to both the fire department and police department as well as appoint a Black officer to the position of Special Assistant to the Chief of Police. In addition, the council agreed to train a member of the police department in the field of human relations. Efforts to secure a firm commitment regarding the hiring of Black workers from the Chamber of Commerce and the Retail Merchant’s Association were less successful producing little more than verbal assurances. Despite these limitations, Koen commended city officials for taking “positive steps in the right direction.” In turn, Black youth accepted the concessions as “a token of good faith,” ordering a continuation of the truce.

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The rebels’ actions had helped to secure some tangible gains for the city’s Black residents and increased pressure on employers to begin hiring Black workers. According to Kendrick, “Some gains were made. A black girl works in a local bank – professionally so. One supermarket has a butcher. Some downtown stores are using black clerks… Burkhart – a textile plant is hiring more negroes. Snower, a sewing plant is hiring on nondiscriminatory basis. A small wood production plant has an almost all Negro working force… The workers are made up of what Cairo has termed – the untouchable, unemployable, the unreliables.” Additional jobs would come from the public sector with the Department of Labor and the Illinois State Employment Service announcing a number of job openings for welders and nurses and the Department of Public Works hiring Black workers on road construction projects.64

Despite the rebels’ success, the uprising and subsequent negotiations had inflamed underlying tensions within both the white and Black communities. The majority of white Cairoites rejected Mayor Stenzel’s assertion that the rebellion stemmed from longstanding problems of segregation and unemployment. Rather, they tended to view the disturbances as the baseless and opportunistic acts of violent thugs and extremists who threatened to undermine the morality and prosperity of the community at large. In this context, the demands of Black youth were viewed as “criminal extortion” and any concessions a sign of capitulation. As in the past, local merchants and small business owners took the lead in organizing these latent sentiments into action. On July 21, more than four hundred white citizens led by Tom Madra, owner of

Cairo Meal & Coke Milling Company, and Carl Helt, owner of a downtown music store, assembled at St. Mary’s Park to call upon city leaders to strictly uphold law and order. While many in attendance denied any racial motivation, handbills circulated prior to the event clearly described it as “an organizational meeting” of the “White Citizens Committee,” and invited white Cairoites to come and “protect your life and property.” In the days immediately following the rally, large groups of white citizens began attending city council meetings to demand the apprehension and prosecution of those responsible for the disturbances as well as the passage of new city ordinances to deal with so-called “agitators of violence”. The city council agreed to consider the proposal and posted a $1,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the rebels. However, when news of the Council’s concessions broke, white citizens were enraged and berated Mayor Stenzel and councilmembers for yielding to the demands of radicals and extremists.65

Recognizing that the city council was not going to champion a strict law and order policy, white citizens took action into their own hands, forming the Committee of Ten Million. Inspiration for the organization came from an article written by former President Dwight Eisenhower in the August issue of The Reader’s Digest. In the essay, entitled “We Should Be Ashamed,” Eisenhower expressed concern for what he characterized as “a growing disrespect for law and order in this country,” exemplified by the “riots” that had swept the nation in recent years. In identifying the root causes of the rebellions, the former president, like many white Cairoites, pointed not to entrenched social and economic problems but to a breakdown in

morality, discipline, and respect. In turn, he advocated a strong and conservative response whereby “culprits” would be “dealt with as any other criminals, regardless of their race or their grievances against society.” To better aid law enforcement in these duties, Eisenhower extended his support for the proposals of the 1967 Crime Commission, including the expansion of police forces and the reform of court procedures to allow for easier prosecution and conviction. However, the former president also called upon local people to join the battle by becoming “a Committee of Ten Million citizens dedicated to law and order in this country.”

How Eisenhower envisioned the specific operations of the Committee of Ten Million at the local level is unclear. In Cairo, however, white citizens interpreted the former president’s essay as a call for the formation of armed civilian units capable of deploying force to quell future disturbances. Led by former Alexander County State’s Attorney Peyton Berbling and car salesman Tony Levill, the Committee of Ten Million quickly recruited members particularly from the city’s business classes and began staging paramilitary drills, patrolling the streets, and openly brandishing weapons. Distinguished by the white helmets members wore, the Committee was known popularly as the “White Hats,” a term that conjured images of the white hoods of the Ku Klux Klan that had terrorized Cairo’s Black residents for generations. Despite the Committee’s exclusively white membership, leaders denied that it was either a vigilante or anti-Black organization. Rather, Berbling and Levill described the White Hats as a civil defense organization capable of supporting local law enforcement in moments of crisis. The organization actively lobbied for an expansion in the police department’s resources and, at Berbling’s suggestion, proposed that members be formally deputized. By the spring of 1969, the organization boasted 600 members “from all walks of life,” ready to be deputized by the county

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coroner and sheriff. These ties lent the White Hats considerable legitimacy and over the coming months members maintained a visible presence across the city aiding police in their ongoing harassment of Black youth in the Pyramid Courts and at the migrant school.⁶⁷

In the context of this growing and increasingly organized white opposition, some members of the Black community also began to speak out against the actions of the rebels and their spokespeople. Pressure on established civil rights and community leaders to condemn the violence and distance themselves from so-called militants was very strong and on July 24 fifteen Black community members representing several of the city’s religious and community organizations met with city officials to express their vehement condemnation of the violence and property damage performed by Black youth. Led by former Cairo police officer, J. R. Stokes, the group chastised Black youth for engaging in acts that had “endangered the lives of innocent citizens and placed them in deadly fear of their lives.” While the leaders insisted that segregation and job discrimination were realities that needed to be addressed, they strenuously objected to the use of arson and vandalism as methods for achieving these goals.

The participation of Stokes, a former police officer, and Ed Wade, a county probation officer, was not entirely surprising. The NAACP had filed complaints against Stokes for his rough treatment of Black citizens while on the force. However, the participation of respected civil rights leaders such as Rev. J. I. Cobb, was troubling and illustrated the profound divisions that the rebellion had provoked within the Black community. An active member of the NAACP

and pastor of a predominantly working class congregation, Cobb was one of the city’s strongest advocates for the expansion of job opportunities for Black workers having served as the county director of the Green Finger Project (aka Operation Mainstream), a job-training program sponsored by the Office of Economic Opportunity. As a Pentecostal minister, however, Cobb’s theology centered on his principled opposition to “all violence, either physical or psychological,” and his commitment to interracial cooperation as not just a strategy but a goal of the civil rights struggle. While not all Black Cairoites shared in Cobb’s pacifism or his prioritization of racial reconciliation over Black advancement, many shared in his moral condemnation of the uprising, provoking important intraracial fissures rooted in class, generation, and theology.⁶⁸

**From Rebellion to Black Power Politics**

Nevertheless, the urban rebellion represented a watershed in the Cairo Black freedom struggle, marking a key transition in the movement’s leadership, aims and approaches. In one fell swoop, a new generation of Black working class youth had shifted the terrain of struggle, injecting a much-needed sense of urgency and elevating their interests to the forefront. In the months that followed, Koen and Ewing renewed their efforts to reach out to Black working class youth and plug them into existing institutions and organizations. The NAACP continued its legal campaign for full integration and the elimination of discriminatory practices, filing complaints against governmental agencies, and private employers. However, Ewing increasingly refocused the organization toward the plight of the Black working class holding the organization’s

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meetings in the Pyramid Courts and mobilizing around issues such as discrimination in blue-collar employment, public housing, welfare, and the criminal justice system. Ewing also actively recruited Black youth into the organization and in December his brother, Van Ewing, established the NAACP Youth Council aimed at channeling “the unused creative energies of youth into constructive… behavior.” At the migrant school, Koen also redoubled his efforts to involve unemployed young adults in the organization’s programming, recruiting Willie Bingham and James Whitfield to take up leadership roles. However, the initiatives Black working class youth would develop through the NAACP’s Youth Council and the migrant school represented a significant departure from the strategies and tactics adopted during the movement’s earlier waves.

In the months following the rebellion, Black working class youth increasingly shifted the movement’s primary focus from integrating existing institutions to developing autonomous economic, educational, and recreational institutions of their own. Rather than petitioning for admission to the all-white Oriac Center (aka Teen Town), teenagers working with the NAACP’s Youth Council began raising funds to purchase and renovate a building that could be used as a

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recreational center for Black youth. Students at the migrant school also adopted a self-help approach, forming the Southern Illinois Cooperative Association (SICA) in the fall of 1967. Through SICA, students established a cooperative buying program and market that allowed Black workers to avoid white merchants, create new jobs, and redirect profits back into the Black community. Members also began developing plans for a cooperative day care center, a record store, a newspaper, a radio station, a housing construction program, a thrift store, and a credit union that would lend at a lower interest rate than local banks.

Underpinning this strategy of Black self-help and institution building was a broader transformation in the outlook of Black working class youth. Mirroring similar ideological shifts taking place within liberal civil rights organizations such as SNCC and CORE during the late 1960s, Black youth would increasingly abandon calls for liberal integration and reform of American society in favor of a Black Power politics rooted in Black Nationalism. The city’s Black working class in particular began to view racial oppression as a fixed and immutable reality that necessitated racial solidarity, self-reliance, and collective action. Members of the NAACP Youth Council, for example, cautioned their peers against the futile hope that white Cairoites might voluntarily cede to demands for meaningful change. “The past decade has shown that the Negro in Cairo cannot wait for the white man to solve his problems for him,” members declared. In delineating a specific plan of action, Youth Council members advocated greater

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racial solidarity among Black Cairoites and a dual strategy of economic nationalism and Black electoral power. “The Negro… is going to have to take it first in expanding his black consciousness and unifying his effort. He is going to have to take it by using his vote where it will do him the most good just as other ethnic groups have done before him. He is going to have to do it by spending his money where possible in ways that will help businesses which give him a fair shake and will help black businesses flourish.” Students and administrators at the migrant school supported this vision viewing racial solidarity and the development of autonomous institutions as the only effective solution to the city’s ongoing practices of economic discrimination.  

In August 1968, these efforts received support from a somewhat unlikely source: the Roman Catholic Church. The urban rebellions of the past year had fostered support among progressive clergy both nationally and within the Belleville diocese for a new strategy to address the slow pace of integration in local parishes and the plight of Black urban communities. Pressure from student protestors in 1962 had prompted the diocese to close St. Columba’s, Cairo’s segregated mission to African American parishioners. The decision to close the parish had coincided with the Second Vatican Council in Rome at which Pope John XXIII called for greater involvement on the part of the Church in the life of the community and particularly to the poor and oppressed. While Vatican II may have also contributed to the decision of diocesan leaders to close the segregated parish, integration of the city’s white churches was ineffective, leaving many Black parishioners without a place to worship. In turn, white priests at St. Joseph’s and St. Patrick’s had stood on the sidelines during the Civil Rights battles of the 1950s and 1960s.

often serving as obstacles and not advocates of racial change. By the late 1960s, however, a small number of progressive clergy in Southern Illinois from both Catholic and mainline Protestant churches were working with established civil rights leaders as well as younger Black Nationalist organizations.  

It was in this broader context that Bishop Albert Zuroweste assigned Father Gerald Montroy to Cairo in August, 1968. Montroy was charged with establishing meaningful programs for the city’s poor and Black residents as well as aiding in the integration of Cairo’s Catholic churches. Having entered seminary in the wake of the Vatican II decisions, Montroy’s faith emphasized the importance of an engaged social ministry. “We were taught that religion was helping people who were hungry, helping people who were disadvantaged. Helping people like that, and we figure that… you were blessed by doing that.” By the end of the year, Montroy had established a tutoring program for local youth and forged strong ties with local activists that shared his concern about the poor and oppressed. Soon after, he offered to lease offices in the former parish to the NAACP, SICA, and the migrant school, bringing the city’s leading Black political organizations all under the same roof. For his work, Montroy quickly earned a reputation among local whites as “the Father Groppi of Southern Illinois,” referring to Father James Groppi the white priest who gained national visibility and attention for his role in the Milwaukee Black freedom struggle during the same period. Groppi and Montroy would eventually meet during a rally in nearby Sikeston, Missouri, in the spring of 1969. Black activists

had gained a new and important ally in their battle to eliminate racial discrimination and economic exploitation.\(^73\)

At the same time as tentative links were being forged between white Catholic leaders and emergent Black Power organizations, Cairo’s Black congregations were beginning to contemplate their own place in this new phase of the struggle. After holding a prominent position in earlier civil rights campaigns, Black congregations and activist church leaders now found themselves on the periphery of an emergent Black Power struggle in which unifying Christian discourses of philosophical nonviolence and racial reconciliation no longer played a central role. Black activists of all ideological stripes, however, recognized the importance of Black church support to local protest traditions and the need to recruit activist clergy and lay leaders back into the struggle. These efforts began in earnest the year following the rebellion with Black Power leaders staging a series of dialogues with congregations about the true meaning of scriptural conceptions of racial reconciliation and “Christian Brotherhood.” In March 1968, local activists also invited Reverend Metz J. Rollins, executive director of the recently formed National Committee of Black Churchmen, to speak on the religious implications of Black Power. In a speech delivered at Ward Chapel, Rollins encouraged Christians not to fear Black Power arguing that that it “only means violence when violence is forced upon Black people.” In a more fundamental sense, Rollins argued that Black Power represented the same concept of “black unity [that] was used to build black churches” in the face of white exclusion and violence. While he acknowledged integration as a “godly way to live” founded on the Christian vision of “a

single human race,” Rollins argued that it was “necessary at this time for all black people to continue to identify [strongly with each other] until freedom from white inflicted injustices is a reality for all black brothers and sisters.” Over the coming years, Black Power activists would build upon this foundation, forging strong ties between Black Power and Black religious traditions facilitating the Black church’s reemergence at the center of the Cairo Black freedom struggle.74

CHAPTER 3
FROM THE SEMINARY TO THE STREETS:
GRASSROOTS BLACK THEOLOGY AND THE FORGING OF A UNITED FRONT

In September 1970, Rev. Charles Koen, leader of the Cairo United Front, joined delegates from across the African diaspora in Atlanta, Georgia, for the founding conference of the Congress of African Peoples (CAP). Organized by Newark-based activist Amiri Baraka, the CAP conference took place at a watershed moment in the Black Power Movement. Coming on the heels of a period marked by intense sectarianism and internecine battles epitomized by the West Coast US-BPP conflict, CAP represented an ambitious attempt to heal old wounds and bring together the disparate ideological wings of the movement into a single united front.

The concept of a national Black united front, popularized by Malcolm X’s (later El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) and subsequently employed by others including Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture) and Amiri Baraka, was reinvigorated at the CAP conference, becoming both a key hallmark and aspiration of what historian Peniel Joseph has called the “second wave” of the Black Power Movement. During the early 1970s, advocates of a united front strategy sought to mobilize Black political leaders and activists of all ideological stripes behind a shared organizational structure and common political agenda. Nationally, these efforts were best represented by the work of Baraka and CAP, responsible for organizing a series of Black political conventions, culminating in the landmark

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1 In order to clearly distinguish between the Cairo United Front and the broader concept of a united front strategy, I capitalize the former and not the latter.
National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana in 1972. However, these broader initiatives grew out of and were informed by the struggles of grassroots activists committed to building united front organizations in communities across the country.³

Forging lasting alliances between cultural and revolutionary nationalists, not to mention mainstream civil rights organizations and Black Power radicals, was no easy feat. For this reason, conference attendees greatly anticipated hearing from Rev. Koen who, like Baraka, was a well-known practitioner of the united front approach. Between 1969 and 1974, Koen’s organization distinguished itself as one of the nation’s leading united front movements responsible for mounting the longest economic boycott in U.S. history and maintaining unprecedented levels of support within the Black community. In a speech entitled, “How Long Must We Wait?” Koen emphasized the urgent need for Black Power organizations to move beyond symbolic forms of racial solidarity and toward the formation of tangible alliances capable of sustaining a national liberation movement. “We must hook up,” he beseeched his audience, “from Cairo, Ill., to Atlanta and back to Chicago and Newark.” “Don’t think for a minute it is going to be an easy struggle,” Koen cautioned. “We must make a decision… Everybody is Black, everybody is yelling ‘nation time,’ everybody has a natural, an afro and a beard,” he joked playfully. “You should know now who you really are… The point is: are you ready?” The crowd responded affirmatively. “Are we going to move together now or wait a little

longer?” The crowd responded again. “If we can hook ourselves together,” he explained, “if we can unite under a banner of redefined, relevant Christianity, then we will have an over-all struggle.” These final words, spoken before an audience of Black leaders from across the diaspora, reflected the distinctive contribution of Koen and the Cairo United Front to Black Power politics. During a period when the Black church’s role in the Black freedom struggle was increasingly questioned by movement participants, Koen insisted on the continued relevance of Black Christian traditions and the pivotal role they might play in forging a national Black united front.4

Koen’s belief in the ability of a “redefined, relevant Christianity” to unify the disparate wings of the Black Power Movement stemmed from his practical efforts to build a grassroots united front movement in Cairo. In this chapter, I explore the formation of the Cairo United Front, an organization that brought together Black Cairoites from across organizational, class, generational, and ideological lines in support of a broad-based and inclusive movement for racial change and social justice. I explore the origins and contours of the united front strategy, focusing on the critical role played by Black Power radicals in both its conceptualization and day-to-day operations. In contrast to other forms of coalitional and alliance-based organizing, the united front strategy had its roots in both Black Nationalist and radical intellectual traditions, and reflected the specific political aspirations of Black Power’s militant wing in the context of narrowing political opportunities and brutal repression. A united front approach afforded Cairo’s Black radicals a degree of insulation from external pressure and a broader platform from which to organize. However, as national Black Power leaders would quickly learn, maintaining a united front was remarkably difficult because it tied radical activists to multiple competing constituencies that frequently differed in their interpretations of the movement’s goals and

4 “How Long Must We Wait?”
tactics. It was in navigating these potential pitfalls that the Cairo United Front was most successful. By building on the shared religious culture of Black Cairoites as well as emergent trends in Black Theology, United Front leaders constructed a grassroots Black Power theology and movement culture capable of bridging intraracial divisions and sustaining the movement over the long haul.

The Genesis of a Strategy

If the politics of civil rights liberalism took clearest shape in the crucible of the postwar Jim Crow South and the new nationalism in the more cosmopolitan urban north of the Sixties, the united front strategy which strove to fuse these two strains into a single struggle was perhaps best articulated at the border in Cairo, Illinois. For Black Cairoites, adopting a united front strategy was in some ways a logical and necessary response to local conditions. Organizing in “the Deep South city of the North” carried the perpetual risk of persecution and racial violence. During the mid-1950s, cross burnings and bombings forced the local NAACP chapter underground, effectively stalling civil rights protest. When the movement regained steam during the early 1960s, teenage protestors were savagely beaten in the streets. Cut off from the rest of the state and trapped behind the city’s fortress-like walls, Black freedom fighters faced the prospect of a dangerous and isolating struggle. Accordingly, activists emphasized the need to reach outwards building broad-based movements and strategic alliances that would draw national attention to the embattled city. While Black professionals historically held leadership roles in civil rights organizations, the rigidity of Cairo’s color line and the consignment of the majority of African Americans to the lowest rungs of the city’s social and economic hierarchy solidified
conceptions of “linked fate” between the Black working and middle class. While the two groups often diverged in their understanding of the appropriate strategies and tactics, they were united by a sense of the fragility of their struggle and the need for solidarity in the face of opposition.  

During the late 1960s, calls for a renewed community-wide campaign for racial change gained increasing support in response to ongoing practices of racial discrimination and segregation as well as escalating poverty, police harassment, and political marginalization. The civil rights battles of the 1950s and early 1960s resulted in the gradual integration of schools, medical facilities, and some public accommodations. However, Jim Crow and racially exclusionary practices persisted in many areas of community life, including the city’s segregated public housing projects, all-white civic and religious organizations, and the labor force where strict color bars locked Black workers out of city jobs and confined them to the lowest rungs of private sector employment. The Chicago-based Alliance to End Repression reported in 1971 that Cairo had the highest levels of poverty, unemployment, and substandard housing in Illinois and that Black Cairoites bore the brunt of these hardships.

Since the urban rebellion of 1967, local activists had engaged in a number of smaller punctuated protests, coordinated largely by the local branch of the NAACP aimed at overturning the remnants of the city’s segregated landscape. Led by the organization’s young and determined president, Preston Ewing, Jr., these efforts relied upon the NAACP’s conventional legal strategy. However, Ewing recognized that while segregationists held key city leadership positions, achieving even the smallest victories would be a long and arduous process that demanded

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6 Alliance to End Repression, “Cairo, Ill.: Law With Justice,” 1971, David Ibata collection, box 1, folder 3, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC).
alternative approaches as well as broad-based alliances. As early as February 1968, the NAACP called upon Black residents to boycott local merchants who refused to hire Black workers, but the branch struggled to shift organizational focus and resources toward mass mobilization and direct action.⁷

At the same time, a growing number of Black Cairoites – frustrated by the slow pace of change and the limited gains of earlier civil rights campaigns – embraced a politics of Black Nationalism and self-determination, throwing their weight behind the development of autonomous institutions focused on addressing the economic needs of Black residents. As the previous chapter showed, these efforts centered on the Illinois Migrant Council’s (IMC) school and its offshoot, the Southern Illinois Cooperative Association (SICA). Under the auspices of these agencies, Black Cairoites developed a cooperative buying program and store that enabled residents to avoid discriminatory merchants and redirect profits back into the Black community. Relationships between the NAACP and these nascent Black Power initiatives were positive and, as in many small communities, considerable cross-pollination existed. Leaders from each of the respective groups worked closely together, viewing their efforts as complementary and not adversarial. All three organizations shared office space at St. Columba’s, the formerly segregated parish, which Fr. Gerald Montroy had reopened in August 1968 to serve the city’s poor and Black residents.⁸

The close relationship between Black Nationalist organizations and the NAACP also contributed to a broadening of the latter’s political agenda beyond traditional integrationist aims. In February 1968, the NAACP released a “30-Point Program” outlining its goals for the coming year. A number of the points listed were clearly inspired by SICA’s Black Nationalist agenda,

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⁸ Ewing and Roddy, Let My People Go, 14.
including the call to establish “a black economic program controlled and executed by black people” as well as “a housing program that will provide good housing for black people.” According to Ewing, the sheer scope of the problems facing Black Cairoites during the late 1960s, as well as the persistence of discriminatory practices supposedly outlawed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, solidified strong bonds between the different Black activist groups in the city. Increasingly, the NAACP called for the groups to formalize these alliances through the creation of “a council” that would include “representation from all black organizations in the county” for the purpose of initiating a unified, community-wide struggle against all forms of discrimination and exploitation. While the organizational structure was slow in taking shape, strong ties of solidarity between local civil rights and Black Nationalist organizations set the stage for the emergence of the Cairo United Front in the spring of 1969.9

While local imperatives justified broad-based and inclusive organizational approaches, the decision to adopt a distinctive brand of united front politics hinged on the intellectual and organizational labor of skilled radical activists during the Black Power era. Mass mobilization and operational unity could have been achieved in any number of ways. During earlier struggles, the NAACP recruited Black working-class people and youth into the organization while maintaining a largely professional middle-class leadership. Later, militant youth created their own independent organizations responsible for spearheading direct action campaigns while working in close alliances with existing civil rights and religious organizations. More recently, Ewing called for the creation of a countywide council in which all Black organizations would participate sharing in resources and coordinating programs and actions. On the surface, Ewing’s proposal, like other forms of coalitional or alliance-based activism, shared some important commonalities with united front approaches and, indeed, many local activists would continue to

conflate the two. However, for Koen and many of the radical activists who would eventually take up leadership positions in the local movement, the united front strategy reflected their own brand of radical pedagogy and praxis geared toward revolutionary change.

United front politics was a product of the radical political milieu of the Black Power era. Advanced initially by communist intellectuals after WWI, front-style tactics were designed to bring together Communist and non-Communist workers and, in some cases, progressive bourgeois allies in common cause against fascism. During the interwar years, Black leftists in the United States adapted the strategy to build mass movements around police brutality, jobs, and housing, forging alliances with Black Nationalist and liberal reform organizations. These efforts culminated in the formation of the National Negro Congress in 1936. United Front organizations were later developed by revolutionary anti-colonial struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Black Power radicals often came to learn of the strategy by way of these earlier Black organizing traditions or through Mao’s writings on the Chinese Revolution and Ghanaian revolutionary Kwame Nkrumah’s expositions on pan-African struggle.

After his visit with the leaders of national liberation movements in Africa in 1964, Malcolm X promoted a united front strategy for the Black liberation movement in the United States. This approach promised to bring together the movement’s disparate ideological wings.

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under a single umbrella. All parties would work together to forge a common agenda while simultaneously respecting the autonomy of each constitutive group. In this manner, Malcolm X hoped that Black radicals and Black Nationalists could form a strategic front with more traditional civil rights organizations without compromising either group’s unique tactical approach. However, in contrast to more traditional political alliances, Malcolm X’s articulation of a Black united front strategy carried a radical connotation in which revolutionary nationalists were positioned as key agents in the eventual reorientation of constituent groups toward a pan-African and leftist critique. Consistent with these aims, Malcolm X founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) in 1964. “Its purpose,” he wrote, was ‘to unite Afro-Americans and their organizations around a non-religious and non-sectarian constructive program for Human Rights.” While the realization of a united front eluded Malcolm X in his lifetime, the concept continued to resonate with Black Power radicals who followed him, most prominently the Los Angeles-based Black Congress formed in 1967 and the Washington D.C.-based Black United Front formed by former SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael in 1968. Like Malcolm X, Carmichael hoped these efforts would provide the organizational philosophy and framework for a broader front with civil rights leaders at the national level.12

It was in this context that Charles Koen learned of the united front strategy and became its key advocate in Cairo. In many ways, Koen’s political development mirrored that of

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Carmichael’s. In 1962, at the age of sixteen, Koen had collaborated with experienced SNCC organizers in mounting a nonviolent direct-action campaign against Jim Crow accommodations in Cairo. He remained in SNCC’s orbit while attending seminary at McKendree University in Lebanon, Illinois during the mid-1960s, eventually joining the organization in 1966 during Carmichael’s tenure as chairman. Koen’s membership coincided with the organization’s dramatic turn toward Black Power struggles in northern cities and brief alliance with the Black Panther Party (BPP). Scholars have tended to view this period of SNCC’s history as one marked by militant rhetoric and internal conflict at the expense of a workable program for northern cities. While there is much truth in this claim, SNCC also provided a new generation of grassroots activists with new ideological and strategic resources at a key turning point in the Black Freedom Movement. Struggling to address rapidly changing social and political realities, SNCC members engaged a wide range of conceptual frameworks including Black liberalism, Black Nationalism, Pan-Africanism, Black Marxist, and Third World internationalism. In this moment of political and intellectual experimentation, SNCC members often vacillated between approaches, their public statements reflecting a fundamental ambivalence that contributed to Black Power’s increasingly amorphous character. However, the stark ideological divisions that would eventually come to characterize the movement had not yet hardened and as a participatory democratic organization, SNCC became a key discursive space for activists hoping to give meaning to Black Power.  


14 Scholarship on SNCC’s work during the late 1960s depicts an organization plagued by internal conflict and disorganization that rendered the group ineffective. Historian Cheryl Greenberg, for example, claims that by 1967 SNCC’s “existence as an effective force for social change had ended.” Greenberg, A Circle of Trust, 12. However, the autobiographies of former SNCC members also reveal that the organization continued to be a site of dynamic
For Koen, who had come of age in a struggle rooted in discourses of racial reconciliation and nonviolence, SNCC offered alternative frameworks that were formative to his own political development. In turn, SNCC’s expansive intellectual and organizational networks encouraged Koen – a working-class activist from a comparatively remote part of the United States – to view local struggles as part of broader pan-African and internationalist struggles. In the spring of 1968, Koen left Cairo and his job as regional director of the Illinois Migrant Council to organize African Americans in the region’s larger cities. He moved to Carbondale and then East St. Louis where he became the spokesperson for the Black Economic Union (BEU), an alliance of local antipoverty, youth and cultural organizations. It was here that Koen solidified his understanding of the ghetto as an internal colony that could be liberated only through the promotion of Black ownership and control of local institutions. Like many SNCC leaders, Koen also developed an anti-capitalist critique that challenged the simple transfer of white colonial rule to a new Black middle-class administration. Building upon his early work with the IMC and SICA, Koen advocated Black working-class leadership and the development of cooperative economic institutions that would distribute wealth and power more equitably within the Black community. During his short tenure in East St. Louis, his support for a united front strategy was also apparent. With Koen at the helm, the BEU brought together a broad cross-section of the Black community with a strategic front around a common agenda of self-determination and community control.  


Koen’s work in East St. Louis raised his profile and at SNCC’s staff meeting in June 1968 he was elected to serve as one of the organization’s national deputy chairmen. At that meeting, Newark-based organizer Philip Hutchings was appointed as SNCC’s program secretary. Under Hutchings’s leadership, SNCC increasingly embraced electoral politics, encouraging local organizers to create Black political fronts with the goal of solidifying a national Black political party. SNCC’s adoption of an electoral strategy converged with the organization’s fragile alliance with the BPP, which was also making incursions into the political realm under the auspices of the Peace and Freedom Party. Inspired by SNCC’s approach and alliance with the BPP, Koen relocated to St. Louis in June to expand regional networks among radicals and Black Nationalist organizations under the auspices of the BEU. Koen initially joined the Zulu 1200’s, the youth “action arm” of an established umbrella organization, the Mid-City Community Congress. However, frustrated by what he perceived as the Zulus’ exclusive focus on Black cultural politics, Koen resigned in August to found the Black Liberators – an organization that, much like the Panthers, would focus more directly on the political and economic concerns of Black working-class youth.¹⁶

Setting up shop in the heart of North St. Louis, the Liberators recruited from the ranks of the hardcore unemployed and underemployed who lived in the surrounding community. They embraced revolutionary nationalism, immersing themselves in the works of Karl Marx, Mao Zedong, and Frantz Fanon and railing against racial and class exploitation. Like the BPP, Koen pressed for the formation of multiracial alliances, particularly with radical student and antiwar

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organizations on the city’s college campuses. The Liberators also adopted the Panthers’ paramilitary organizational structure, donning uniforms, holding weekly marches and drills, and maintaining a strict code of discipline. While Liberators often trafficked in the rhetoric of armed revolution, the strategies and tactics they adopted on the city’s north side were more complex. In stark contrast to SNCC, Black women were excluded from formal membership and encouraged to set up “sister organizations” that would oversee the Liberators’ fundraising and survival programs, including a free breakfast program and clothing distribution service. While these services mirrored aspects of the BPP’s program, Koen’s training in cooperative economics led the Liberators to advocate a broader program aimed at establishing “an economic base for black people” as well as community control of all existing social and political institutions. In the political sphere, the Liberators embraced the recent shift among revolutionary nationalists toward electoral politics, backing candidates in municipal and state elections and organizing voter turnout. By the end of the fall, the Liberators’ work had culminated in a formal alliance with SNCC and the appointment to the leadership positions of several SNCC leaders including Hutchings, James Forman and H. Rap Brown.\textsuperscript{17}

However, the Liberators’ organizing efforts were quickly undercut by a systematic campaign of police harassment. Like the Panthers, the organization’s militant vanguardist posture and strident support for armed self-defense provoked a severe crackdown by local, state, and federal law enforcement. Police set up an office directly opposite the Liberators’ headquarters, engaging in round-the-clock surveillance. Unmarked police cars followed

members and repeatedly picked them up for minor ordinance and vehicular infractions. The press legitimized this treatment by characterizing the Liberators as “nothing more than hoodlums.” State agents were particularly concerned about the Liberators’ growing ties to national Black Power organizations, that had quickly became apparent when SNCC leaders Philip Hutchings and John Wilson came to the city to speak at a Liberator rally in September. Upon leaving the rally, they were pulled over by local police and arrested along with Koen and fellow Liberator Leon Dent on charges of unlawful assembly. Events reached a climax later in the month when the Liberators’ headquarters was mysteriously ransacked and their vehicles set ablaze. Shortly after, Koen and Dent were stopped by police for a broken brake light, taken to the basement of a local precinct, beaten brutally by officers with clubs and brass knuckles (Koen’s hands and skull were fractured) and indicted on charges of assault. In response, Black community leaders joined hands with white allies to demand justice for the Liberators. However, only six months after the organization’s formation, the Liberators had collapsed under mounting legal pressure. Koen resigned and returned to Cairo.18

While brief, Koen’s tenure as Prime Minister of the Liberators was formative to his political development, powerfully influencing the approaches he would adopt in Cairo. Koen’s

earlier subscription to a politics of racial reconciliation and philosophical nonviolence had been supplanted by an emphasis on the need for Black self-determination, community control, and disciplined self-defense. However, the Liberators’ practical efforts to bolster Black political and economic power in St. Louis had been jeopardized by state repression and negative press coverage that focused narrowly on the organization’s militant rhetoric and stylized images of members brandishing weapons. As a result, many former Liberators would come to view the organization’s more high-profile symbolic displays of armed self-defense as a tactical error that served to undercut larger goals as well as alienate crucial allies. Several members pointed to the organization’s provision of an armed escort to Rev. Adam Clayton Powell during his August visit to the city as a particularly unfortunate miscalculation. Taking place within days of the Liberators’ formation, this act resulted in the organization’s branding as violent and dangerous. Whether avoiding such approaches would have allowed the Liberators to escape police harassment is questionable. However, such images certainly hindered relationships between the Liberators and other African American organizations, not to mention the broader Black community. “Black people,” one former Liberator argued, “was afraid to line themselves up with a group they thought was militant.” Once this negative image of the group had solidified, the Liberators found it increasingly difficult to build coalitional ties, mobilize mass support, and leverage much needed resources. Such obstacles were particularly frustrating to Koen, who clearly hoped that the organization would become the vanguard of a city-wide united front of civil rights and Black Power organizations as well as white student and anti-war groups.19

Koen’s experiences in St. Louis solidified his belief in the need for local, regional, and national united fronts. By operating alongside other civil rights and Black Power organizations, radicals might be afforded legitimacy and greater insulation from the assaults of the state. In turn, a united front would allow radicals to expand their political influence and consolidate resources in aid of a more comprehensive economic and political program. The Liberators’ inability to raise the funds necessary to keep activists out of jail let alone operate a sophisticated network of survival programs underscored the importance of this last point. To suggest, however, that Koen’s embrace of a united front strategy was a product of purely pragmatic considerations would be a mistake. Like Carmichael and Malcolm X before him, Koen’s adoption of a united front approach was rooted in a Black Nationalist and radical intellectual tradition that pointed toward the solidarity of African peoples in a national liberation struggle.

**Black Radical Visions of a United Front**

Upon returning to Cairo in the spring of 1969, Koen found ample support for a united front strategy among local activists. These efforts were given added impetus by repeated incidents of racial violence. In January 1968, only a few months after the death of Robert Hunt, Jr., in police custody, local Baptist pastor Larry Potts killed Marshall Morris, a 73-year-old African American veteran. Potts, a leading member of the White Hats, was not arrested or prosecuted by law enforcement. In March 1969, local priest Fr. Gerald Montroy angered white residents when he informed members of the national press that the city was dominated by organized white supremacist activity. For over an hour, white vigilantes fired shots from the Mississippi River levee into the Pyramid Courts, a segregated public housing project. Others
drove into the housing complex and fired upon passing vehicles, including that of IMC area coordinator Ripley Young. In a crucial turning point, Black residents took up arms and began firing back in self-defense. Over the coming weeks, the violence intensified, prompting Governor Richard Ogilvie to deploy the National Guard to the embattled city. Seasoned activists recognized that the crisis provided a political opportunity to mobilize community members behind a sustained campaign for racial change. “By then,” Koen explained, “the black organizations in Cairo realized the importance of moving toward a kind of united front structure combining all blacks in Cairo… It was black unity or black annihilation,” he argued. “We chose black unity.” As an experienced and respected organizer, Koen was well situated to assist in the formation of an alliance and within a week of the initial outburst the Cairo United Front was founded as an “umbrella group” representing all of the Black organizations in the city, including the local branch of the NAACP, SICA, the migrant school, the Interdenominational Ministers’ Alliance, and Black youth organizations. Shortly after, Koen announced that the organization was initiating an economic boycott of all white-owned businesses that refused to hire Black workers.

While the United Front maintained strong support from all segments of the Black community, the organization’s mass base was firmly rooted in the Black working class. The

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Pyramid Court housing project served as a central locus of the United Front’s activities with residents playing prominent roles in rallies, picketing and demonstrations. In turn, Koen recruited a large group of Black working class youth aged between 20 and 35 to serve as the organization’s core activists. This group included unemployed laborers such as James Whitfield, Frank Hollis, and James “Switch” Wilson, all of whom lived in the Pyramid Courts and played active roles in post-rebellion organizing efforts through SICA and the migrant school. Others, like Joyce Gilkey and Mabel Hollis, had also served alongside Koen as children in the nonviolent direct action campaigns of 1962. Joining these homegrown activists were two other primary constituencies. The first was a smaller cohort of young educated Black Power organizers from urban communities and college campuses across the region. Among this group was Leon Page, a former East St. Louis CORE activist who had worked closely with Koen in the Black Economic Union, and Bobby Williams, a Cape Girardeau organizer who had overseen O.E.O. programs in the Missouri Bootheel. These more experienced and cosmopolitan organizers brought a technical expertise and, in Page’s case, ideological sophistication to the local struggle informing its activities and philosophy. The last and smallest constituency was a group of white professional allies that relocated to Cairo to lend the United Front their legal, technical, and moral support. This group included ministers like Fr. Gerald Montory and Fr. Ben Bodewes who opened up St. Columba’s Parish for the United Front’s use as well as attorneys working for the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law whose operations are discussed in the following chapter. Consistent with earlier phases of the Cairo Black freedom struggle, local white support was virtually nonexistent with the notable exception of local attorneys and longtime NAACP members Robert and David Lansden.21

Local activists of all stripes viewed the adoption of a united front strategy as a pragmatic necessity in the face of rigorous opposition to racial change. However, for the organization’s more radical members, the realization of a united front strategy carried broader implications in that it symbolized the possibility of Black Power’s maturation beyond the bitter sectarian strife that had characterized the preceding years. Tensions between established civil rights organizations and emergent Black Power groups dogged the national movement and, more recently, potent divisions had arisen between West Coast cultural and revolutionary nationalists. For Koen, who had witnessed first hand the devastating consequences of such divisions in the failed SNCC-BPP alliance, the stakes were particularly high.

The problem, Koen argued, was one of ideological dogmatism. “Black People are hung up on ideology,” he argued. “It is difficult for them to deal with the real enemy… we have different organizations, but we are yet to have a meeting of minds. When we get through fighting each other – fighting because someone’s a Panther; or he is in SCLC… then our minds can begin to come together.” Getting beyond sectarianism, Koen argued, would require that people stop taking “hard positions.” “We cannot at this stage, be dogmatic about our position,” he argued. “Sometimes we have to be flexible. Sometimes we cannot even speak the real ideas that are in our minds. We have to be very diplomatic about that.” The alternative, United Front leaders contended, was to fight for ideological purity at the expense of a movement large enough to have any hope of success. According to United Front activist Reggie Brown, this was a luxury activists could ill afford at this key juncture. “In the year 1970,” Brown asked rhetorically, “do we have the time or right to rule people out because they do not think like us?” The persistence
of internal battles over “philosophical differences” was “sure disaster” for the struggle. “In all cases,” Brown argued, “the part must remain subordinate to the whole.” “To struggle in developing correct ideology is a good thing,” Brown explained, but it can “become a bad thing when it is done at the expense of the people.” Emphasizing the importance of mass mobilization over ideological purity, United Front leaders called for a broad-based movement that, as Koen put it, was not “hung up’ on any ‘ism’” but focused instead on the “real enemy” of racism and exploitation.

Of course, Koen’s designation of racism and exploitation as the “real enemy” belies the assumption that ideology was unimportant to him and the United Front’s radical founders. Koen’s political ideology is best understood as a continually evolving, eclectic bricolage of Black Nationalist, pan-Africanist, and revolutionary nationalist traditions. The publications and speeches of United Front radicals demonstrate that they viewed the Cairo movement as part of a broader revolutionary struggle against the racial and exploitative dynamics inherent in U.S. capitalism. The organization’s political education materials frequently cited the works of anti-colonial and anti-imperial revolutionaries such as Mao Tse-Tung, Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral and Kwame Nkrumah. The impact of the last of these was most apparent in the organization’s efforts to establish a School of Nkrumah focused on providing political education and training to radicals from across the region. Nkrumah’s vision of revolutionary struggle as having three stages – Nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and Socialism – was formative for United Front leaders due to its acknowledgement of the importance of Black Nationalism and its refusal to obscure important class realities and fissures. United Front radicals argued that the shared experience of racism provided “a material base for the tactical unity of many segments of the black

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community” in a national liberation struggle. However, they also agreed with Nkrumah’s contention that the “nationalist phase” should “never be regarded as the final solution to the problem raised by the economic and political exploitation.” Racism and exploitation, United Front radicals argued, were “necessary ingredients to the maintaining of the capitalist system.” In the longer view, radicals envisioned a “classless society” in which these dual enemies of racism and exploitation would be overturned.23

Forming a united front was considered the most viable strategy to attain that goal. Of course, not all Black Power radicals were sympathetic to a united front strategy. Some viewed it skeptically as a pragmatic response to recent defeats that risked diluting radical influence and presaged an ultimate capitulation to reformist middle-class factions. In an important sense, Koen had reached a united front strategy by way of a litany of failures. However, United Front leaders defended the strategy by grounding it in a radical intellectual tradition. Here, Nkrumah’s call for a “united militant front” against colonial oppression was helpful. However, it was the teachings of Mao that were particularly instructive; United Front leaders frequently cited “The Little Red Book” (1966) in their speeches and publications. At root, Koen’s call for Black activists to move beyond their ideological differences and focus on the “real enemy” of racism and exploitation was inspired by Mao’s 1957 work, On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People, republished in Chapter IV of “The Little Red Book.” In this text, Mao underscores the importance of clearly identifying the primary enemy and mobilizing all other forces behind a unified oppositional front. While differences existed within the people’s opposition movement, particularly between the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry, Mao cautioned against the tendency to “magnify” such differences to the point that they became equivalent to or indistinguishable

from those of the primary enemy. Rather, Maoist teachings encouraged a democratic settlement of these contradictions through rigorous discussion, persuasion and education. It was in this educational and persuasive capacity that Koen viewed the United Front’s radical wing as making its contribution. Rejecting coercion or exclusion as viable approaches to movement building, Koen called upon “the revolutionary activist” to “master the art of persuasion” and “through rational arguments and exemplary behavior” convince the masses “that our cause is just.” In this manner, Maoist teachings lent ideological legitimacy to a united front strategy and provided a sophisticated theorization of the role and responsibility of radicals working within it.24

Importantly, United Front radicals based their vision of revolutionary struggle on a Maoist interpretation of Marxist-Leninism that underscored the importance of adapting approaches based on the concrete realities of different times and places. Revolutionaries in China, in contrast to their Russian counterparts, would not capture state power abruptly through a small armed revolutionary cadre, but rather through a longer broad-based struggle during which, Mao argued, the collective capacity of the masses to rule was simultaneously developed.25 This alternative vision of revolution – not as an event but as an evolutionary process – was attractive to Black Power activists who were frustrated by the failures of the movement’s “first wave” and thoroughly disabused of the notion that rhetorics of armed revolution and guerilla warfare had any immediate utility in the U.S. context. Detroit-based Black Power activists James and Grace Lee Boggs were among the leading theorizers of this approach, characterizing revolution in their landmark 1974 book, Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century, as “a patient and protracted process that transforms us and empowers us as individuals as we struggle to change

24 Nkrumah, Handbook of Revolutionary Warfare, 23-25; Mao Tse-Tung, Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), 45-57; [untitled article], United Front News, May, 1971; Koen, United Front Philosophy, 21.
the world around us.” United Front radicals expressed support for this radical pedagogy, frequently stating: “Evolution precedes Revolution.” For such activists, Maoism – in theory if not in practice – offered an alternative conception of revolution and a new set of methods for its realization.26

Maoism’s central methodology, as articulated in Chapter XI of “The Little Red Book,” was the “mass line,” which situated the peasantry at the center of revolutionary struggle and privileged their practical work, ideas and leadership. Mao warned radicals not to fall into “dogmatism” or “commandism” but rather commit themselves to patiently serving and working alongside the masses to build a movement that reflected their interests and aspirations. In the United Front’s publications, leaders repeatedly emphasized the importance of this approach. “We will never master persuasion nor will we make the revolution,” Koen argued, “if we do not consciously adopt the mass line.” “The mass line,” he explained, “means that we have only people to work with and only people will make the struggle against racism and exploitation victorious.” “Small numbers of people,” he cautioned, “will never make a revolutionary struggle.” To go beyond the masses would, as Mao put it, be adventurism resulting in the alienation and isolation of radicals from the people capable of building an effective struggle. This, Koen argued, was exactly what Black Power radicals had fallen victim to during the past few years. Referencing Mao and possibly his own experiences in St. Louis, Koen identified alienation as “one of the major mistakes” made by Black Power activists. “If you become

isolated,” he warned, “you will [be] destroyed quicker than the person who understands the mass line.” While Koen acknowledged that mass line politics offered radicals some insulation, he cautioned against this being the primary motivation for its adoption. Instead he called upon radicals to be motivated by a genuine love for the people. “The revolutionary,” he explained, “is of the people and serves the people, and the people will judge all those who say they are revolutionaries.”

The commitment of United Front leaders to the Maoist methodology of the mass line powerfully shaped their pedagogy and praxis. While the united front strategy provided legitimation for an alliance between radicals and their more moderate counterparts, the politics of the mass line underscored the need for mass mobilization and the practical involvement and leadership of the Black working-class in all aspects of the struggle. There was already a general agreement among Civil Rights and Black Power leaders in Cairo that mass mobilization would be needed to realize the movement’s goals at this key juncture. However, it is important to recognize that mass line politics imbued mass mobilization with a different set of meanings and purposes for radicals than for Civil Rights activists. Civil rights leaders like Preston Ewing were often utilitarian in their approach, viewing mass mobilization as one of many tools to exert pressure in aid of achieving incremental reforms. In contrast, for radicals the mass mobilization of the Black working class was a more integral and dynamic component of a revolutionary struggle, serving as both the primary source and focus of the movement’s transformative energies.

Maoist teachings on the united front and mass line also informed the organizational structure of the United Front, setting it apart from other forms of coalitions or alliances. Like

many Black Power organizations, the United Front’s leadership strove to balance mechanisms of mass participation with the efficiency and discipline required to mount a vigorous and organized campaign. Unwieldy consensus-based decision making models were rejected in favor of a more hierarchical structure that formalized leadership and streamlined program operations. Overseeing the United Front’s daily operations was Koen as the organization’s chairman as well as an elaborate staff structure that included a program coordinator, chief of staff, public relations officer, secretary, treasurer, and field organizers. Some of these staff positions were held by local Black working-class activists such as Herman Whitfield (field organizer), Frank Washington (field organizer), Al Farmer (treasurer), and Mabel Hollis (secretary), while Koen’s radical political allies from cities across the region held others, including Leon Page (program coordinator), Bob Williams (economic development), James Chairs (chief of staff) and Carl Hampton from Chicago (photographer). However, the key policy-making arm of the United Front was its Central Committee that included the chairman, three staff members, and representatives from Cairo’s Black civic, religious, and political organizations. It was through the Central Committee that the united front strategy was operationalized, as groups representing a broad cross-section of Cairo’s Black population worked collectively to determine the movement’s objectives and priorities as well as develop new programs. In turn, the Central Committee was closely monitored by an even broader group of community representatives called the Advisory Council that offered continual guidance and oversight. Finally, the United Front held weekly mass meetings every Saturday at St. Columba’s Church where rank-and-file participants could share their perspectives and vote on questions of strategy and tactics. United Front leaders utilized these meetings to identify the interests and needs of the membership, as well as to engage in the kind of political education they viewed as central to their broader vision
of revolutionary change. In turn, Black working-class people who had been marginalized from the city’s political institutions for generations gained new and important skills in democratic participation.\textsuperscript{28}

While Maoist teachings were foundational to Black radicals’ support for a united front strategy in Cairo, maintaining the support of broader constituencies necessitated an alternative set of legitimating discourses and practices. In accordance with the mass line methodology, United Front leaders looked to the oppositional culture of the Black working-class, particularly its religious elements, as an organic ideological tradition that could inspire, motivate, and discipline movement participants to challenge racism and exploitation as well as bridge intraracial barriers of generation, class, and ideology that might serve to undercut racial solidarity.\textsuperscript{29}

A Shared Religious Tradition

One tradition that Black Cairoites tended to share was a familiarity with the discourses and practices of the Black church. As Chapter One demonstrated, African American Christian traditions in Cairo exhibited greater homogeneity in comparison to larger northern cities where

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the processes of migration, urbanization, and industrialization had generated religious plurality as well as secularization among certain segments of the Black population. In contrast, church attendance and membership in Cairo remained high with the vast majority of Black residents coming into contact with the institution whether it was for regular Sunday worship, childhood Sunday school classes, or the church’s extensive social and cultural programming. Most Black Cairoites, like their counterparts across the Ohio River Valley, shared an evangelical Protestant faith, belonging largely to historically Black Baptist and Methodist denominations or one of the city’s three Pentecostal congregations. While important social and ecclesiastical differences existed between these traditions, all three shared a belief in the centrality of scripture as the inspired word of God, the primacy of a personal relationship with Christ, and the power of the divine as a present and active force in the world.

In addition to these deep theological bonds, Black Christians in Cairo were united by a set of shared cultural practices rooted in the Black church, including call-and response oratory, communal prayer, congregational worship, and charismatic sermonizing. Shared religious traditions had historically functioned as an important source of ecumenicalism, binding together Black Cairoites of different social classes and generations. Ministers from different denominational backgrounds joined hands to form a citywide Black ministerial alliance; community choirs brought Christians together in ecumenical displays of worship; and periodic revivals served to unite believers around a shared evangelistic mission to reach “lost” friends and relatives as well as rededicate their own lives to personal holiness and righteousness. Although important differences did exist in denominational affiliation and worship style, Black Christianity in Cairo was a pervasive and comparatively homogenous tradition that, as
sociologist Mary Patillo-McCoy argues, “culturally and religiously [bound] together the black middle class and the black poor,” both young and old.\textsuperscript{30}

Coming out of this tradition, Koen recognized the importance of securing the support of Black clergy and congregants to build an effective movement. Black congregations such as Ward Chapel A.M.E. and the First Missionary Baptist Church had functioned as important staging grounds for earlier civil rights struggles as well as a source of political leadership. During the Black Power era, many of the more established Black civic and political leaders remained prominent churchgoers. Most prominent among them was retired schoolteacher and former NAACP president, Hattie Kendrick. Kendrick was a highly respected community member and devout churchwoman who had been a member of Ward Chapel for almost fifty years. Kendrick, like many Black middle-class activists of her generation, was known for her commitment to a conception of Christian ministry that fused religion with a politics of racial uplift. Kendrick had worked through missionary societies, women’s auxiliaries and secular civil rights organizations to improve the quality of life of all Black Cairoites. Her extensive experience and personal sacrifice ensured that she was the object of almost universal respect among Black residents. Maintaining her support as well as that of other older community leaders such as Rev. J.I. Cobb, pastor of the Pulaski COGIC congregation, Rev. Sherman Jones of the First Missionary Baptist

Church, and retired minister Rev. Levi Garrett would be important if the United Front hoped to gain legitimacy among the community’s elders as well as generate mass support in a close-knit community.

Koen’s interest in mobilizing Black churches into the United Front set him apart from many other Black Power activists. For Black radicals in particular, Christianity often conjured Marx’s dictum that religion was the “opiate of the masses.” Such critiques also found support among cultural nationalists such as Maulana Karenga, leader of the US Organization, who frequently referred to Christianity as a form of “spookism.” Karenga and his sometime protégé Amiri Baraka offered the secular humanist tradition of Kawaida as an alternative that resonated with many of the cultural practices of former Black Christians while rejecting what they viewed as Christianity’s “otherworldly” theology. Revolutionary and cultural nationalists roundly criticized Black clergy, including more progressive members of the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC), which had formed in the wake of the urban rebellions as an expression of resurgent Black Nationalism within church circles. Speaking to NCBC members in St. Louis in November 1968, Karenga accused ministers of being “a liability” in the Black community, more concerned with ruling than with revolution, and providing “comfort not change.” More crudely, BPP Chief of Staff David Hilliard denounced NCBC members at an event in Berkeley in 1970 as “a bunch of bootlicking pimps and motherfuckers.” During the late 1960s, the repudiation of the Black church as a harbinger of false hope and unprincipled leadership was a common refrain among Black Power activists.31

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However, many leading Black Power activists would come to reconsider their earlier criticisms of the Black church, if not their anticlericalism, during the movement’s “second wave,” as the movement’s militant wing struggled to overcome a tide of state repression and political isolation. Having worked on the ground in the rural South with SNCC, Stokely Carmichael grasped the importance of the Black church and faith to organizing traditions early on. “I instinctively understood that if my struggle was to be among my people then any talk of atheism and the rejection of God just wasn’t gonna cut it. I just knew that. My early political work in the rural South would confirm this. All our meetings were held in churches. They all began with prayer. When they approved, people would say, “Son, you doing the Lord’s work.”… I did not want to be alienated from my people because of Marxist atheism.” Activists working in the urban north where religious traditions were more diverse often took longer to reach this conclusion. Among the most memorable of these instances was BPP leader Huey Newton’s May 19, 1971 speech, “On the Relevance of the Church,” at the University of California-Berkeley. Presented in the same location that David Hilliard had made his infamous remarks to NCBC just a few months prior, Newton offered what many viewed as a dramatic reversal of the BPP’s position on the Black church. By rejecting this key institution, Newton argued, the Panthers had cast themselves into “a void alienated from the whole community.”

We said the church is only a ritual, it is irrelevant, and therefore we will have nothing to do with it. We said this in the context of the whole community being involved with the church on one level or another. That is one way of defecting from the community, and that is exactly what we did. Once we stepped outside of the church with that criticism, we stepped outside of the whole thing that the community was involved in and we said, “You follow our example; your reality is not true and you don’t need it.”
Facing marginalization, Newton explained that BPP members had reevaluated their earlier position and that many were now church attendees and participants.32

While some dismissed Newton’s speech as purely strategic, it also reflected the BPP’s recent adoption of revolutionary intercommunalism, an ideology that, like the United Front’s, shifted emphasis away from small cadre politics and toward the development of a practical political agenda rooted within Black communities. However, the practical significance of the BPP’s embrace of the Black church was still unclear. While Newton’s statements lent greater legitimacy to the ongoing reliance of local BPP on church resources, the role that religious practices and beliefs would play in the movement itself was not elaborated. Moreover, Newton offered no indication that the organization had reneged on its interpretation of Christianity as an opiate, leaving listeners to infer that the Panthers were willing to tolerate such abstractions if it helped achieve their broader goals.33

While Newton struggled to find space for Black Christian institutions and traditions in the Black liberation struggle and others proposed their substitution with secular humanist alternatives, Koen was among the movement’s leading advocates for the continued relevance of the Black church to Black Power. Although Koen’s political ideology had altered significantly in the preceding years, his personal faith persisted. Koen’s small-town roots grounded him in the intimate yet potent social networks of the Black church, infusing his politics with a grassroots religious revivalism that distinguished him from many of his radical peers who had come of age in larger and more cosmopolitan northern cities. Koen’s emergence as a nationally renowned...

32 Stokely Carmichael quote taken from Savage, Your Spirits Walk Beside Us, 260. Newton, To Die for the People, 60-74.
Black Power leader took place within this unique cultural milieu and, like many southern and border state radicals before him, he approached radical frameworks through the lens of a prophetic Black working-class faith. In turn, Koen’s embrace of radical frameworks played a key role in his effort to transform the dominant civil rights theology of racial reconciliation and nonviolence in order to make grassroots religious traditions amenable to the new realities of the Black Power era. The centrality of Koen to this process of re-working and radicalizing grassroots religious traditions, a process political scientist Doug McAdam terms “cognitive liberation,” cannot be overstated. As a Baptist minister by training, Koen possessed both the skills and investment in reframing religious beliefs and practices to serve radicals ends. From his position as chairman of the United Front, Koen situated Christian discourses at the center of the organization’s philosophy and infused the movement with the cultural practices of the Black church. In doing so, he called upon the existing religious cultures of Black Cairoites as well as new theological traditions emerging from the nation’s seminaries.34

**Spiritual Rallies and the Crafting of a Movement Culture**

Visitors were captivated by the religious dynamics of the Cairo struggle. Their reports conveyed a vivid image that jarred with popular conceptions of Black Power. Writing for the *New York Times Magazine* in February 1971, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist J. Anthony Lukas strove to capture the unique tone and cadence of the United Front’s Saturday spiritual

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rallies. Lukas opened his article with an image of the United Front Choir “bobbing and weaving” to the sound of a church organ while the packed crowd at St. Columba’s clapped “to the driving, syncopated beat” of a familiar gospel tune. As the music ended, Koen rose to the pulpit, his “Afro outlined like a warriors helmet against the blue-green of the stained-glass window,” and began to speak. “The essence of our struggle today,” he exclaimed, “is that we got one more river to cross.” “We crossed the Nile. We crossed the Mississippi. We crossed the mighty Ohio. But the river we’re going to cross downtown today isn’t a physical river. It’s a river of the spirit.” “You might see some brothers fall,” he continued. “But no matter how many folks they kill, no matter how many armored cars they bring in, we got to have faith,” he urged. With that, the young minister motioned for the crowd to join him at the altar in prayer before taking to the streets of downtown in Cairo in protest.35

Lukas’s article drew national attention to the emergence of a distinctive movement culture in Cairo that pulled heavily from the ritualistic world of the city’s Black churches.36 The fascination of social commentators with these manifestations of popular religiosity reflected broader assumptions regarding Black Power’s secular quality in contrast to earlier civil rights struggles. The juxtaposition left commentators scrambling for ways to explain Cairo’s confounding combination of “old-time religion and revolutionary thought.” However, for local activists less interested in demarcating themselves from the legacy of civil rights than in building broad-based alliances, embracing religious rituals was a conscious and deliberate act that positioned the United Front favorably within a longer tradition of struggle steeped in religious meaning and mores. By pulling from the Black church’s cultural “toolkit” of call-and-response

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35 Lukas, “Bad Day At Cairo, Ill.”
36 On the concept of social movement cultures, see Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier, “Analytical Approaches to Social Movement Culture: The Culture of the Women’s Movement,” in Social Movements and Culture, Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans, eds., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995), 163-188.
oratory, communal prayer, and congregational worship, the United Front situated itself as continuous with earlier phases of the Black freedom struggle, garnering the organization considerable legitimacy among Black residents.37

Cultural continuities between the United Front and earlier civil rights struggles played an important role in securing the support and participation of an older generation of established community leaders. Spiritual rallies provided respected community elders with a familiar and comfortable context for participation. Local Black clergymen of all denominational stripes were invited to provide words of inspiration and instruction to United Front members at the weekly spiritual rallies. Rev. Sherman Jones, pastor of the First Missionary Baptist Church, and Rev. Blaine Ramsey, former pastor of Ward Chapel, were frequent speakers and would come to play an active role on the United Front’s advisory board. Joining them were older churchwomen such as Hattie Kendrick and Carmel Fowler who gave regular updates on local organizing efforts. The organization also maintained an ecumenical choir that performed a familiar selection of spirituals, hymns and gospel songs. Local church music directors and accompanists including Rice Whitfield, Hernean Mallory and Gradie McMillen, were invited to lead the United Front Choir and in the process formed close bonds with younger activists.38

By inviting community elders to participate, the United Front’s radical wing sought to build upon the unique intergenerational milieu of the Black church which had historically provided a valuable institutional context for the development of mentoring relationships between

37 Quote from Howard Kohn, “Civil War in Cairo, Ill.: A Dispatch from the Front,” Ramparts 9, No. 9 (April 1971). In referencing the “toolkit” provided by the Black church, I build upon the important work of social movement scholars that have underscored the role of culture in protest movements and have drawn particular attention to the role of the Black church. See, Mary Pattillo-McCoy, “Church Culture as Strategy of Action in the Black Community,” American Sociological Review 63, no. 6 (Dec., 1998), 768; Sandra L. Barnes, “Black Church Culture and Community Action,” Social Forces 84, no. 2 (Dec., 2005): 967-994; Johnny E. Williams, “Vanguards of Hope: The Role of Culture in Mobilizing African American Women’s Social Activism in Arkansas,” Sociological Spectrum 24 (2004), 129-156.
younger and older activists. Through her extensive church networks, Kendrick had forged close relationships with many of the younger men and women in the movement. Her enigmatic protégé at the NAACP, Preston Ewing, Jr., was the son of fellow Ward Chapel member Nancy Ewing and a former student at Washington Junior School. Koen had also been a member of Ward Chapel, serving with Kendrick on the church’s steward board. During the civil rights struggles of the early 1960s, Kendrick and Ramsey had “recruited and mentored” Koen, taking him under their wing and teaching him “how to do church work.” After his marriage, Koen’s wife Clydia joined Ward Chapel, working closely with Kendrick on church hospitality and social programs. Carmel Fowler, a fellow church member and NAACP leader, became godmother to the young couple’s children. The centrality of churches to Black life in Cairo and the intergenerational bonds fostered within them ensured that strong ties existed between the city’s established civil rights leaders and key Black Power activists.39

Far from rejecting these bonds, Black Power leaders further institutionalized them within the United Front’s structure bridging generations and casting community elders as much-needed advisors. Black women elders such as Kendrick and Fowler served as what sociologist Belinda Robnett has called “community bridge leaders,” specializing in linking social movement organizations to each other and to indigenous community networks. Robnett provides the concept of bridge leadership as a way of theorizing Black women’s key roles in social movement mobilization in the context of their gendered exclusion from formal leadership positions. However, in Cairo Black women activists like Kendrick and Fowler had held prominent

positions within the NAACP during the campaigns of the postwar era. In this context, their designation as informal advisors to the United Front was a role they embraced as elders deeply invested in passing the torch to a new generation of leaders. While informal, the role of advisor was a privileged position that afforded Kendrick and Fowler a powerful voice and influence in the organization’s decision-making. Described by United Front leaders as “the Mother of the Struggle,” Kendrick’s long history as a church leader and community activist provided her with an excellent understanding of local people, their attitudes, and interests. In turn, her work with the NAACP allowed Kendrick to establish a vast network of contacts within the broader civil rights community that proved invaluable to younger activists. As Preston Ewing explained, “She knew who to contact… not only her state NAACP contacts, but she had her national contacts. So she knew people, who to call.” As a result, younger activists “sort of piggy-backed on [Kendrick] and her resources,” according to Ewing. Like Ella Baker, Kendrick used her capacity as an advisor to mentor and guide younger activists as well bridge different generations and organizations.40

The United Front’s extension of the intergenerational milieu of the black church into the movement as well as its incorporation of religious practices ensured that youth involvement would be widely accepted and encouraged by parents. In the years following the urban rebellion, addressing the lack of constructive social activities for Black youth had become a central concern of parents and community organizations. Historically, Jim Crow practices had locked Black children and teenagers out of white only organizations like the Boy Scouts as well as popular youth hangouts like the Oriac Center (a.k.a., Teen Town), the Rollerbowl, and the swimming

pool. By the end of the decade, most of these recreational spaces had closed under pressure to integrate and dwindling financial resources. Black working-class parents, in particular, worried that their children were being left to roam the streets unsupervised where they could easily be injured or fall prey to illicit activities and police harassment. In this context, the United Front’s weekly rallies offered a much-needed social space for all generations within the Black family to participate collectively. Many of the United Front’s “strong sisters” and “strong brothers,” as local activist Clarence Dossie described them, came from a few core Black working-class families including the Garretts, the Whitfields, and the Mallorys. In each case, multiple generations of a single family joined the United Front, taking on active roles in the movement. The sight of “grandmothers with canes, middle-aged parents with children, and teenagers with dogs” all amassing at St. Columba’s to join in worship surprised many out-of-town visitors who tended to view Black Power as a predominantly Black urban youth phenomenon.41

While the United Front’s mass meetings built upon the cultural conventions and networks of the Black church, they also challenged some of the institution’s less democratic aspects. United Front radicals played a prominent role by bringing Maoist teachings on the mass line to bear on prevailing understandings of leadership and decision-making. Radicals did embrace the Black church’s tradition of charismatic leadership, recognizing its ability to galvanize and empower members. Saturday rallies were held just prior to the organization’s weekly demonstrations and were designed to meet the deeper emotional and spiritual needs of members, binding them together in preparation for the obstacles they might face downtown. In these moments, Koen’s pastoral voice elevated above others, taking on the quality and tone of the prophetic tradition so familiar to many movement participants. However, United Front radicals, including Koen, firmly believed that the legitimacy of their leadership hinged not on divine

calling alone but on the sanction and support of the rank-and-file. In accordance with mass line teachings, radicals considered the interests and aspirations of the Black working class to be central to matters of correct program development and decision-making. Radicals believed it was their responsibility to work among the people and learn from them, extracting their ideas, and putting them into practice. Accordingly, the United Front’s mass meetings functioned as democratic assemblies serving to “unite the people spiritually” as well as “inform” them and “allow for community expression.” *Ramparts* reporter Howard Kohn aptly described the meetings as “a combination of religious service and experiment in participatory democracy.”

In implementing democratic practices at mass meetings, the United Front built upon the limited traditions of democratic exchange present in many Black congregations. While decision-making in evangelical congregations tended to be hierarchical and gendered, laity exerted a limited degree of influence through a system of internal committees and boards. By volunteering to serve on church steward boards, women’s auxiliaries, and mission societies, laity played an active role in shaping discrete components of the church’s overall program. The United Front expanded upon this existing tradition by asking members to engage in Christian service by joining committees focused on specific areas of their political program such as housing, education, and cooperative economics. Interspersed between the hymns and sermons at the weekly spiritual rallies, leaders would report back from these committees as well as provide opportunities for those in attendance to ask questions, offer testimonies, and register complaints. In allowing this kind of democratic feedback, United Front leaders expanded upon call-and-response traditions utilized for the purpose of affirming and uplifting. Members were encouraged

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to offer testimonies of support and encouragement, but also disagreement and criticism. The latter was particularly important because it reflected the process of critical study and reflection essential to radicals’ understanding of the revolutionary process. In turn, major questions of strategy and tactics were put to a formal vote in which all members were permitted to participate irrespective of class, gender, or generation. Accordingly, United Front radicals deepened the church’s existing democratic practices, challenging conformist tendencies and opening up the possibility for mass participation.  

While radicals viewed the aspirations and interests of the rank-and-file as central, they did not romanticize their position. Mass meetings were imagined as a site of dynamic exchange in which radical intellectuals skilled in the art of persuasion played an active role. In his writings, Koen emphasized the importance of providing activists with “correct political training” through the immersion and systematic study of local conditions as well as “the science, art, and works of others who have been actively engaged in struggle.” This knowledge, he argued, should then be mobilized to persuade the people through “rational arguments” at mass meetings and in the United Front’s various committees. In accordance with their political training, radicals viewed themselves as playing an active role in raising the political consciousness of the Black working-class and pushing them, through criticism and rational exchange, to a more advanced form of praxis. In reality, however, rational arguments were rivaled if not surpassed by discourses of a more spiritual tenor.

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44 [Untitled article], United Front News, May 1971.
A Handbook for the Revolution

The significance of the scriptures to the United Front’s political ideology and programming cannot be overstated. In the organization’s publications, the King James Bible was referred to as a vital “tool” and “central focus” of the struggle. In political education, scriptures took their place alongside the words of Malcolm X, Nkrumah, and Mao. Koen referred to the Holy Book as a “handbook for the revolution,” insisting that he personally looked “to the Bible for divine guidance.” Visitors to the city noted a broader reliance upon the scriptures by rank-and-file movement participants. John H. Britton, managing editor of Jet magazine, described seeing Bibles prominently displayed in the homes of United Front members during his visit to the city in 1970. “Typically,” he said, “it [the Bible] shows telltale signs of having been opened, leafed through repeatedly and closed shut many times.” United Front members, Britton argued, were clearly employing this “instrument of salvation” to “bargain for a few days more sanity” in the midst of violence and terror. While the Bible did function as an important source of reassurance and comfort, Britton’s statements obscured the very important way in which local activists called upon scriptures not only to survive Cairo, but also to transform it.45

Christian discourses had played an important role in earlier civil rights struggles functioning as a source of transcendent motivation and imbuing the movement with religious meaning. Cairo’s liberal integration campaigns of the postwar era were underpinned by a civil rights theology of racial reconciliation and nonviolence that appealed to Black Cairoites across class and generational lines and legitimized their participation in direct-action tactics. As a

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teenager, Koen had come of age in a movement shaped by a philosophy that emphasized the redemptive quality of nonviolent acts and their ability to transform hate through love. Nonviolent protest, he had hoped, would prompt white Cairoites to repent of their sin and join in the creation of a Beloved Community where Black and white community members would be reconciled. However, the refusal of white Cairoites to accede to the demands of peaceful protest as well as their continued reliance upon racial violence to maintain relationships of power and privilege prompted Koen and other movement participants to develop not only new strategies and tactics, but new scriptural referents by which Black Power could be better articulated and understood.

The United Front’s leadership utilized Biblical narratives to frame their practical organizing efforts, which represented a creative blend of the legal and nonviolent direct action tactics of earlier civil rights struggles with a Black Nationalist program that emphasized community control, institution building and armed self-defense. The tremendous diversity of approaches employed by Black Power activists in Cairo reflected the United Front’s broad-based membership and distinctive organizational structure. Shortly after the United Front’s formation in the spring of 1969, members initiated an economic boycott of white-owned businesses that refused to hire Black workers. The boycott, which would last for almost three years, was the longest in the nation’s history and critical to reigniting mass protest in Cairo as well as unifying the movement’s ideological wings behind a shared tactical agenda. However, as a united front organization, constituent groups were also granted considerable autonomy to pursue their own tactics independently of each other. Thus, the NAACP continued its robust legal campaign against the city’s discriminatory practices and SICA remained committed to the development of separate cooperative institutions. In this context, the United Front utilized Biblical narratives of
exodus, exile, and nation building to provide an overarching sense of unity and purpose to the varied organizing efforts of Black Cairoites.46

The Exodus story that had been so central to earlier civil rights struggles continued to play a prominent role in Black Cairoites understandings of their place and purpose during the Black Power Movement. The story of the oppression of the Israelites at the hands of their Egyptian rulers and their deliverance into a Promised Land resonated with the collective experience of African Americans living in Little Egypt and was frequently retold by United Front leaders at the organization’s spiritual rallies and in its publications.

And God said: “LET MY PEOPLE GO!” The people left Cairo, Egypt, a prosperous land, a fertile land, a land of security. They left for an unknown land, an unknown future, but they left for FREEDOM. When they left the greatness of Cairo left with them. Cairo gained its might through the misuse of God’s children as the Egyptians found their power through the enslavement of God’s people. Their economy was built around slavery. And then there was Little Egypt, in the United States of America, State of Illinois. Little Egypt, a prosperous land, a fertile land, a land of security. Its major city and capital city was Cairo. It too became great and prosperous and maintained its power through Slavery of God’s children. But throughout history God’s children kept hearing His Voice proclaiming “Let my People Go!” The voice grew louder, the message became clearer to His people. But as in Egypt, the Pharaoh’s hardened their hearts as the people heard and moved slowly, but surely toward Freedom’s Land.

As this retelling of the Exodus story shows, Black Cairoites drew significant parallels between the Israelites’ plight and their own. Particular emphasis was placed on the unjust and immoral foundation upon which the Egyptians had built their society. United Front leaders contended that Cairo’s wealth and prosperity, then as now, had been established “through the enslavement of God’s children.” In turn, “Pharaohs” of the past and present had “hardened their hearts” to the cries of the people, placing them at odds with God and the inexorable drive toward freedom.

“Just as time caught up with the Pharaohs of Egypt,” United Front leaders contended, “time

46 Religious studies scholar Eddie Glaude argues that “religious stories have provided an interpretative framework within which experiences can be made sense of and, for some, hope can be sustained.” Eddie S. Glaude, In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 68. On the importance of narratives and storytelling in social movement mobilization, see Francesca Polletta, “Storytelling in Social Movements,” in Culture, Social Movements, and Protest, ed. Hank Johnston (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 33-54.
surely has caught up with the Pharaohs of Little Egypt.” The sin and pride of the city’s white officials ensured their position on the wrong side of history and God’s active work within it as a liberating force on behalf of the oppressed.47

However, in their retelling of the Exodus story, United Front activists drew important distinctions between the biblical account and their own freedom dreams. Most evidently, they rejected a literal interpretation of the Exodus that might have tied them to an emigrationist or territorial nationalist politics. While the Israelites had “sought their freedom outside of Cairo,” the United Front interpreted God’s proclamation of “let my people go” to mean “let my people find their freedom in Cairo.” Realizing this vision, United Front leaders argued, would involve overturning the city’s exploitative system of rule and “rebuilding” the city on a godly foundation of “justice,” “equality,” “brotherhood,” and “Freedom.” Echoing a longer ecclesiastical tradition in African American Christian thought that scholar Eddie Glaude terms the “ideology of chosenness,” Koen situated Black Cairoites as “a chosen people” called by God to radically reorder society so that “the top shall become the bottom, and the bottom shall become the top.” Importantly, this interpretation situated Black Cairoites at an exilic moment, the promise of liberation yet to be fulfilled. For this reason, many contemporaries likened Rev. Koen not to Moses, the prophet who led the Israelites out from under slavery, but to Joshua, the prophet called to lead his people through the wilderness and to the building of a new nation. Indeed, after

performing at one of the United Front’s spiritual rallies, jazz drummer Max Roach dedicated the
song “Joshua” on his 1971 album, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, to Koen.⁴⁸

Exodus and exilic narratives provided a powerful discursive frame for the United Front’s
economic boycott against white merchants. While United Front leaders recognized that these
small family-owned businesses could not address the full extent of the crisis facing the city’s
Black workers, the boycott’s targeted moral critique proved particularly effective in mobilizing
large numbers of Black Cairoites into the movement. Cairo’s economy, the United Front argued,
was so “totally engulfed with exploitation” that “we can no longer support it.” New recruits
viewed their exodus from downtown stores as a clear repudiation of the unjust and immoral
practices of the city’s white elite. By withholding the “Black dollar,” African Americans
expressed their unwillingness to be complicit in a system of racial discrimination and economic
exploitation that had kept people in Little Egypt oppressed for generations. “After we pulled
back the economic wealth,” Koen argued, “it was like the children of Israel leaving the camp
after they pulled out the economic wealth of Egypt, Pharaoh was in seriou
s trouble.” “We didn’t
pull out physically,” he explained, “but we pulled out in terms of our economic support.” In this
manner, Black Cairoites took on what religious studies scholar Cheryl Sanders calls an “exilic
identity,” separating themselves from a sinful society until God’s restorative work had been
performed.⁴⁹

The boycott placed moral responsibility for the city’s restoration in the hands of its rulers.
Initially, the boycott was framed as a moral appeal to the Pharaohs’ of the day to take a public

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⁴⁸ “Blacks Vote Boycott On,” United Front of Cairo, Press Release, December 2, 1970, James Forman Papers,
LOC, Washington D.C., box 69, folder 10; Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth Century
Black America*, 63-81; Michael Watson. “Cairo,” *PROUD* (October 1971); Max Roach, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*
(Atlantic Records, 1971).

⁴⁹ Koen, *United Front Philosophy*; Koen, *The Cairo Story*, 91; Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-
Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 128-
29; Robert E. Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (NY:
NYU Press, 1998).
stance against racial discrimination in Cairo. The United Front presented city officials with a list of demands and expressed a willingness to “meet today or any day at whatever time and place… to begin meaningful discussions.” The demands were wide-ranging, calling for “public acknowledgement of the injustices black people live under in Cairo, fair representation of black people in the judicial system and equal and fair redistribution of the city’s economic and political power.” Once city leaders met these demands, the boycott would be called off and true reconciliation could begin.

However, local merchants and city officials refused to comply, denouncing the boycott and ushering in a reign of terror led by members of a newly formed chapter of the White Citizens Council. Accordingly, United Front leaders called upon Republican Governor Richard Ogilvie to intervene, petitioning him to declare Cairo a disaster area, initiate job creation and training programs, and solicit federal support for the resolution of the city’s legal, economic and political problems. The United Front reinforced these demands by staging a series of sit-ins, wait-ins, and pray-ins at the Governor’s office in Springfield during the summer of 1969. These demonstrations of nonviolent direct action were designed to dramatize the moral aspect of the United Front’s struggle and draw out important continuities with earlier civil rights campaigns. During a period when many Black Power activists were actively distancing themselves from the legacy of the civil rights era, the United Front did exactly the opposite, describing their nonviolent methods as “consistent with the philosophy of the late Dr. Martin Luther King.” This was a strategic move on the part of radicals who recognized the privileged position King held among Black Cairoites and, more importantly, that, for many, King’s spiritual philosophy of racial reconciliation and nonviolence had not fully exhausted its utility. By deploying nonviolent direct-action tactics at this early stage in the movement, United Front leaders were able to
solidify broad-based support. In addition, these approaches also appealed to liberal clergy, particularly members of the Illinois Council of Churches, who played an active role in the demonstrations at the Governor’s office.\(^{50}\)

However, Governor Ogilvie took an oppositional stance to the United Front, refusing to meet with the organization’s leaders, and greeting protestors with mass arrests. By the end of the summer, more than 200 people, including large numbers of nuns and ministers, had been jailed as a result of the demonstrations in Springfield. These actions prompted the United Front to brand the Governor “Pharaoh Ogilvie,” drawing explicit parallels between him and the biblical rulers of the Exodus story. While the United Front had previously utilized the Pharaoh moniker to frame their own moral appeal to political leaders as “Let My People Go,” the Governor’s failure to restore the city ensured that the label would be increasingly used as an expression of judgment that marked him as an enemy of God’s children, “more concerned about… money than… the poor and oppressed.” “When we distinguished him as Pharaoh,” Koen explained, “the whole realm of oppression became a total reality. The enemy had been defined: he was symbolic of the whole creation of the existence of the oppression.”

This rhetorical shift reflected a broader loss of hope among United Front members that nonviolent tactics would result in any meaningful concessions from intractable white officials. Over the coming months, this sentiment would solidify, as local merchants who were willing to

go out of business before hiring Black workers rendered discourses of racial reconciliation irrelevant. The United Front, however, refused to abandon the boycott, instead rearticulating it as a sign of God’s judgment and the impending destruction of Little Egypt. “Without money,” United Front leaders explained, “their entire program of destruction and overall exploitation is doomed to failure.” Borrowing from another exilic story, Rev. Koen described the boycott as akin to Joshua’s battle against Jericho, predicting that the “walls of hatred, pride, bias and oppression would fall in Cairo through the efforts of black residents as they struggled to be free from their white oppressors.” By withholding their money, United Front members now viewed themselves as God’s agents in an uncompromising battle against injustice that would result in the overthrow of Cairo’s corrupt system of rule whether local rulers repented or not.51

The Exodus story was the most salient Biblical narrative for civil rights activists. By deploying it, Black Power radicals forged a discursive bridge between themselves and those who still subscribed to a politics of racial reconciliation and nonviolence. When Pharaoh hardened his heart to the plight of the oppressed, the United Front’s use of the Exodus story allowed them to transform what might have been construed as a sign of defeat into an act of prophetic fulfillment. However, the Exodus story proved much less germane to activists’ practical efforts to develop new and galvanizing strategies to liberate an exilic people. Accordingly, stories of exodus were supplemented and at times supplanted by other stories, particularly postexilic ones focused on the practical work of (re)-building a nation. Religious studies scholar Allen Dwight Callahan explores how the story of Nehemiah, in particular, has offered many African Americans “an alternative to a grandiose hope of freedom the deferral of which had made black folks heartsick

with political disappointment.” The story’s depiction of Nehemiah’s return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city’s walls and reform oppressive political and economic institutions in the wake of Babylonian captivity has historically struck a chord with both Black Nationalist and Black radical ministers. During the nadir, Black socialist minister Reverend George Washington Woodbey cast Nehemiah as a priest filled with righteous indignation for the unjust treatment of the poor by rulers who sought to extract usury for their own personal gain. For Woodbey, Nehemiah’s godly anger at the robbery of the poor echoed that of contemporary socialists who called for an end to the sharecropping system in the U.S. South. In their efforts to move beyond a nonviolent direct-action strategy, United Front leaders also looked to Nehemiah as a scriptural guide and legitimation for a grassroots politics that blended Black Nationalist visions of nation building with a radical critique of capitalism.\textsuperscript{52}

The biblical concept of rebuilding the city was central to the United Front’s political and spiritual philosophy. Like Jerusalem in the age of Nehemiah, Cairo was cast as a city plagued by corruption and strife stemming from city administrators’ failure to adhere to godly precepts. The notion of the “fallen” or sinful nation pervaded Black Cairoites’ representations of the city. In a poem entitled “Cairo Will Die!” published in the East St. Louis Monitor in March 1968, an unnamed local author provides an exemplary representation of how many Black Cairoites viewed the city’s sin and the imminent nature of God’s wrath and judgment.

Cairo will die because of its  
own creation of fear and hate.  
Cairo will die from its  
malignant cancer of racism, prejudice, bigotry and injustice.  
Cairo will die because of its

incompetent city administrators.
Cairo will die because of its
Russian type police force and illiterate chief.
Cairo will die because of its
economical and industrial starvation.
Cairo will die because of its
retail merchants exploitativeness.
Cairo will die because of its
hypocrisy in Christianity.
Cairo will die because all men, women, and children can not
work, live and play together.

Others drew more explicit parallels between Cairo and other “fallen” cities in the Bible whose imperial power had collapsed under the weight of divine judgment. In a poem, entitled, “Cairo,” published in the East St. Louis Monitor in February 1968, local poet and migrant school student Ed Riddick drew parallels between Cairo and Babylon’s spiritual sin that led to physical destruction:

Shout aloud all ye people
for old Cairo
like ancient Babylon falls
to rise
no more
and Migrants unite to arise
and stoop no more
and hope surfaces to
die no more
die no more!!

However, while the Exodus narrative motivated Black Cairoites to remove all support for the city’s existing institutions, United Front leaders argued that Nehemiah represented their divine calling to return to the city and rebuild it on a more just and righteous foundation. At the organization’s spiritual rallies, speakers frequently drew parallels between Nehemiah’s mission to mend the broken walls of Jerusalem and Black Cairoites’ divine calling to rebuild a sinful city. Speaking at a rally in September 1970, Reverend Blaine Ramsey called upon United Front members to be like Nehemiah, who “returned to that rebel, that torn down community, and said, we are on this wall, we are going to do our work, and we can’t come down.” Through the
Nehemiah story, the restoration of Cairo was now rearticulated not as the prerogative of the Pharaohs but as the divine calling of a formerly captive people.53

The phrase “building the wall” took on multiple meanings for Black Cairoites, but its most prominent usage was in reference to the development of autonomous parallel institutions. The failure of the economic boycott and demonstrations to secure meaningful concessions from political and economic leaders further encouraged the United Front’s shift toward a Black Nationalist politics of self-help and institution building. SICA had already pioneered efforts in this area, founding a cooperative store and market, and in the wake of the failed demonstrations of the summer of 1969 the United Front increasingly embraced these efforts, elevating cooperative institution building to the top of the organization’s political agenda. In the United Front’s end of year report, this shift in strategy was framed explicitly in the language of the Nehemiah story. Finding themselves “unable to move from an economic or political base,” United Front members had been “forced to recognize that it is the order of finite man which has things in its present state” and not divine will. “Therefore,” United Front leaders argued, “we must now begin to relate to a higher order” by “rebuilding a community that has been dying under the white administration.” In a direct reference to Nehemiah 4:17, the United Front called upon Black Cairoites to “assume the burdens of one another and the responsibilities for one another” by establishing “an economic base on the cooperative principal [sic].” In contrast to the old system, the United Front’s parallel economic institutions would be responsive not just to “the needs of a few but for the masses.” By adopting practices of profit sharing and cooperative

marketing, the United Front hoped to develop “a whole new economic order” without duplicating the unjust and exploitative dynamics of Cairo’s ruling elite.54

Working closely with its constituent groups, the United Front initiated an extensive network of cooperative institutions designed to distribute jobs and wealth more equitably within the community as well as providing a much-needed alternative to the services offered by white business owners. Programs included a cooperative day care-center, a women’s clothing store, a grocery store, a taxi service, a pig farming project, and a pre-fabricated housing factory. Consistent with Maoist mass-line methodology, these programs emerged from dialogues with Black Cairoites who were expected to cooperatively own and operate them. To become a “part owner,” community members were required to purchase low-cost shares, which allowed them to vote and collect profits at a rate proportional to their investment. This emphasis on democratic ownership and participation gained scriptural reinforcement from the Nehemiah story, which cast the rebuilding of the city’s walls not as an individual act of heroic leadership, but as a community-wide responsibility. “The role of Nehemiah,” South African theologian J. N. K. Mugambi explains, “is very different from that of Moses.” While Moses was situated as the indispensable leader, Nehemiah “encourages the people and facilitates their work.” In this sense, the shift from Exodus to post-exilic scriptural referents was also indicative of Black Power’s embrace of a radical tradition that called for the broadening of democratic rights, powers, and responsibilities.55

While cooperative programs met many of the immediate needs of Black residents by creating new jobs and affordable goods and services, they also served as a powerful expression of the United Front’s broader political and moral critique of American capitalism. In Cairo, the Black radical tradition was informed by African Americans’ position as a largely superfluous labor force. While Black Power radicals in larger urban areas were predicting that Black labor would soon become “expendable” in the context of a deindustrialized national economy, Cairo’s position as a declining river city had already sealed Black workers’ fate as surplus labor making the city an important barometer for future trends. For the United Front’s radical wing, Black life in Cairo raised contradictions inherent in the capitalist system and the moral discourses utilized to bolster it. “Black people are struggling desperately to live a philosophy commonly known as the ‘White Protestant Ethic,’” United Front leaders argued. “This philosophy [states]: ‘Work long, hard and honestly and someday the great reward will be yours.’” However, despite their best efforts most Black Cairoites were stuck “drawing Social Security” or “struggling for a dollar an hour or less.” In fact, United Front leaders argued, the only lesson Black Cairoites had learned from “white American capitalism” was that “if you can’t build yourself up, the rest of America will leave you on the ground – making life in America one long… death march for poor people.”

At its core, the United Front’s critique of capitalism was a moral one that characterized the system’s reliance upon racial and class inequalities as inconsistent with the Christian message. In his speeches and written works, Koen took aim at what he termed the “white value system” of “dollarbillism” that prioritized the individual over the collective, the material over the

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spiritual, and profits over people. White merchants were targeted for capitalizing on the shortage of competition by driving up prices on the poor in search of higher profits. So-called “Black profiteers” were also singled out for their treatment of the Black community as “an endless market” to be exploited for their own personal gain. “No man can serve two masters,” he cautioned. “Ye cannot serve God and money.” In this context, the United Front viewed cooperatives as an ethical alternative because they were “people orientated” and in God’s eyes, “men are so much more valuable than property.” (Matthew 12:12) United Front leaders did not oppose for-profit initiatives, only the inequitable distribution of their fruits. “Capital,” United Front member Reggie Brown argued, “is not inherently evil, but is made so only in the hands of those who want it to be.” Instead, cooperative programs were designed to operate at a smaller profit margin, allowing goods and services to be purchased at affordable prices and surpluses to be redirected back into the community. In the longer view, United Front leaders hoped that these new institutions would provide the foundation for a new economy as well as reinforce a new Black value system rooted in a culture of mutuality and cooperation or what local activists referred to as “Soulism.” “We must replace the white value system,” Koen argued, “with a Black system [based upon] the cooperative principal [sic]… When the whole essence of dollarbillism ceases to exist then Soulism will become the essence of the day.”

In many ways, Koen’s moral critique of American capitalism paralleled that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who denounced the “moral and spiritual famine in Western civilization” brought on by a rejection of Christ’s teachings in favor of “secularism” and “materialism.” However, in his articulation of a new Black value system, Koen also built upon the important

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work of cultural nationalists Maulana Karenga and Amira Baraka, for whom Kawaida represented an alternative “religious creed” and the doctrine of Nguzo Saba, or the “Seven Principles of Blackness,” a “code of common morality” for people of African descent. United Front radicals embraced cultural nationalists’ conception of Black liberation as both an internal and external struggle that necessitated the overhauling of values as much as institutions. However, while cultural nationalists often looked to a shared African history and culture for inspiration, the United Front’s understanding of Soulism or Soul Power emanated from the existing religious worldviews of Black Cairoites.58

In “United Front Philosophy,” the organization described its value system as “taken directly from the Book of Matthew, 25th Chapter,” which “deals with the feeding of the hungry, clothing of the naked, and providing housing for the needy, also administering unto the sick, taking in strangers, and visiting those in captivity.” As the previous chapter illustrated, this scriptural mandate served as the bedrock of Hattie Kendrick’s earlier church-based activism as well as that of the Ward Chapel’s Social Action Commission out of which many of the civil rights leaders of the early 1960s had emerged. Koen recognized the salience of this scriptural mandate and its deep roots within a Black Christian politics of racial uplift and self-help. In the Black Power era, Jesus’s appeal to his followers to meet the needs of the poor and oppressed was easily refashioned to legitimate a programmatic agenda targeted at empowering Cairo’s Black and poor residents. This program included cooperative programs as well as “survival programs” aimed at meeting the immediate needs of Cairo’s poorest residents. Consistent with revolutionary nationalists’ call for “survival pending revolution,” the United Front organized a

free medical clinic, a clothing and food distribution program, and free legal aid services. Examined in more detail in the following chapter, these programs helped Black working-class people survive the daily battles of life in Cairo as well as sustain the boycott. However, survival programs also served as a powerful expression of Soulism’s alternative values of mutuality and cooperation. As United Front activist Mabel Hollis put it, people participated in these programs “because the Scripture of Matthew inspired them.” “They wanted to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, and to provide shelter to the homeless.” By building cooperative and survival programs, Black Cairoites viewed themselves as fulfilling Christ’s mandate as well as Nehemiah’s call to “assume the burdens” and responsibilities of one another. For radicals, Matthew 25 also evoked Mao’s call for revolutionaries to “serve the people” – a dictum that was aptly printed alongside scripture in the organization’s political education materials.59

Serving the people, United Front leaders argued, also meant being “prepared to protect and defend the community from all forms of evilness,” whether directed from within or without. Internally, the organization imposed a strict “Code of Ethics” containing fourteen principles, which they adapted from Nkrumah’s “Rules of Discipline” elaborated in the African leader’s Handbook of Revolutionary Warfare (1969). Nkrumah, in turn, took and adapted these principles from Mao’s “Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points of Attention” (1928).

1. Obey orders in all your actions.
2. Do not take a single needle or piece of thread from the people.
3. Turn in everything captured.
4. Speak politely.
5. Pay fairly for what you buy.
6. Pay for anything you damage.
7. Do not hit or swear at people.
8. Do not take liberties with women.
9. No excessive drinking.

10. No drugs, period.
11. Keep eyes and ears open.
12. Know the enemy within.
13. Always guide and protect the children.
14. Always be the servant of the people.

Disciplinary codes were adopted by many radical Black Power organizations and viewed as important tools in maintaining internal discipline and unity. However, for the United Front, these codes of ethical conduct also provided a vision of the revolutionary activist that, according to historians Robin Kelley and Betsy Esch, “resonated with black religious traditions.” Speaking with a reporter from the Los Angeles Times about the “Code of Ethics,” Koen argued: “I can take you to the Bible and show you where it says the very same thing.”

The United Front supplemented the “Code of Ethics” with a document entitled, “Ten Positive Attributes to Discipline,” which in a more pronounced fashion demonstrated the religious import of disciplinary codes to the local struggle.

1. Will… Power over-self, power over temptations that lead us away from truth and the struggle.
2. Patience… The ability to bear pain without complaint to oneself.
3. Humility… To accept a position of insignificance with the people to be humble before them.
4. Faith… Belief and trust, confidence in the struggle, its leaders and people.
5. Identity… Sameness, oneness with our people, wholeness
6. Responsibility… The ability to fulfill obligations, reliable in work and struggle.
7. Perseverance… To persist in spite of difficulties and hard times.

8. Diplomacy… The art or practice of conducting negotiations between political entities, organizations and agencies.

9. Love… The ability to place oneself after the people in both thought and action

10. Courage… The ability to conquer fear, doubt, and despair.

While other proponents of ethical codes viewed them primarily as a set of tools necessary for disciplining soldiers in revolutionary warfare, the “Ten Attributes” demonstrate that the United Front’s leadership viewed them as having an intrinsic moral value essential to Black liberation. In a fashion consistent with both Black Nationalist and Black Christian traditions, the United Front promoted a politics of personal responsibility that situated discipline not merely as a means to an end but a movement goal in its own right. 61

United Front members were also expected to defend the Black community against external threats, the most visible coming from local law enforcement and white vigilantes who engaged in near nightly armed assaults on the Pyramid Courts. In response to these acts, the United Front established the United Front Liberators, an armed-self defense unit led by “Switch” Wilson, that was charged with performing regular “survival patrols” to protect the Black community from vigilante attack. Geneva Whitfield, a member of the Morning Star Free Will Baptist Church, operated a civilian band radio network out of her home in the Pyramid Court keeping her neighbors abreast of the latest information. The United Front also withdrew all support for the city’s existing law enforcement agencies. Consistent with its philosophy of exodus and nation building, the United Front banned local and state police from the Pyramid Courts, set up barricades and checkpoints at the entrance, and called upon residents to utilize the

organization’s new independent system of justice known as the Regional Council. “Our protection,” Koen declared, “will come from God and from ourselves.”

For the vast majority of Black Cairoites, armed self-defense was a logical and necessary measure that warranted little justification. Philosophical nonviolence, while popular with members of SNCC and the Cairo Nonviolent Freedom Committee (CNVFC) during the sit-ins of 1962, did not gain broad-based support among Black Cairoites. While many participated in organized nonviolent direct-action tactics during the movement’s “heroic” phase, Black Cairoites—like African Americans in other communities across the South and borderland—viewed armed self-defense as a legitimate response to acts of racial terror and violence. Although a small number of Black Cairoites, such as COGIC minister Rev. J. I. Cobb, described themselves as “against all violence, either physical or psychological,” most others drew ethical distinctions between offensive violence and armed self-defense. United Front leaders, however, were also cognizant of the more popular tendency to conflate acts of armed self-defense, when performed by African Americans, with offensive violence. Governmental officials at the local and state level frequently accused the United Front of engaging in an “orgy of violence” and displays of “outward para-military aggression.” Accordingly, Leon Page and Charles Koen worked hard to provide a clear conceptual framework that would legitimize armed self-defense and distinguish it from other uses of force.

Any number of legal or philosophical traditions could have been utilized by United Front leaders to frame armed self-defense as a legitimate tactic. In Southern Illinois, like the Deep South, gun ownership was for many a way of life and a fiercely held constitutional right.

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However, the United Front did not appeal to legal or rights-based discourses, but rather scriptural mandates rooted in the Nehemiah story. Like the United Front, Nehemiah’s efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem had drawn the ire of corrupt administrators who had benefited from the city’s rampant inequalities and unjust practices. According to the United Front, these men engaged in repeated attempts to deceive and even kill Nehemiah. Accordingly, in Chapter 14, Nehemiah establishes that his supporters built the wall under the cover of night carrying weapons to protect them. United Front leaders frequently cited Nehemiah 4:17-18 as evidence that armed self-defense was morally sound and a necessary precaution for activists engaged in the god-ordained work of rebuilding a city. “Like Nehemiah,” Koen exclaimed, “we will carry the Bible in one hand and the gun to protect ourselves in the other.”

Biblical justifications for armed self-defense were also visually represented through the organization’s symbol of “the Bible and the Gun,” shown in Figure 1, which was proudly displayed above the altar of St. Columba’s Church, in the organization’s mass-publications, and in the homes of many members. This provocative image played cleverly on popular understandings of Black Power as having jettisoned the spiritual moorings of earlier civil rights struggles by embracing “violent” tactics. Contradicting these binaries, the United Front represented both the Bible and the gun as essential and harmonious components of the Black activist’s toolkit. For local organizers the meaning of the image was apparent. “The gun,” United Front activist Clarence Dossie explained, “was for your protection and the Bible was for your

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direction.” By positioning the gun on top of the Bible, the image suggests that its use has not been taken lightly but rather after prayerful consideration and study. 

Through such religious imagery, United Front leaders endeavored to clearly distinguish between moral acts of disciplined armed self-defense performed by Black Cairoites and the unrestrained use of offensive violence by local whites. As the next chapter shows, drawing this distinction became increasingly important as the United Front came to rely upon funding from church-based agencies which were prohibited from extending grants to organizations that advocated the use of violence. However, scriptural interpretations of armed self-defense were also used to discipline United Front members regarding the ethical use of force. With Black Cairoites facing an onslaught of violence from police and white vigilantes, tensions could easily flare, resulting in retaliation and counter-attacks. Keeping passions in check and preventing uncontrolled outbursts of anger that might be used by officials to validate further acts of repression was critical. In this context, the ability of United Front leaders to frame the use of violence in explicitly moral terms played an important role in legitimizing armed self-defense while characterizing retaliation or offensive violence as unacceptable. “If they [law enforcement] are trying to intimidate us, they won’t succeed,” Koen insisted. While members would “defend themselves”, Koen insisted that they “[would] not attack anyone.”

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By “assuming the burdens” and responsibilities of one another through the extension of cooperative programming, survival programs, and armed self-defense, United Front members envisioned a new society being birthed out of the ashes of the old. While the Biblical cities of Cairo, Babylon, and Jerusalem functioned as powerful symbols of the experience of captivity within a fallen or sinful city, “Soul Valley” came to embody the United Front’s vision of the new society they were building. In the organization’s communications, “Soul Valley” became common parlance for Cairo and its surrounding areas, serving as an almost prophetic expression of what could and might be. United Front leaders utilized this language to inspire others and encourage them to begin to imagine and build a world beyond slavery, oppression, and captivity.

Mighty Egypt has Fallen!
A New Creation is Being Born!
“Little Egypt” is no more! Cairo is now in Soul Valley!
Thank God Almighty, Free at Last --- in Soul Valley!
Consistent with Exodus and exilic narratives, Soul Valley was cast as “God’s promised land of milk and honey.” However, United Front members firmly rejected what they referred to as “pie-in-the-sky” religion, insisting that Soul Valley’s realization hinged on the active work of God’s children. “We aren’t just going to walk upon Freedom,” Koen exclaimed. “We aren’t just going to pray upon Freedom. It is going to take blood, sweat, and determination.” Using ecclesiastical terms, the United Front leaders depicted Black Cairoites progression from “Little Egypt to Soul Valley” as “a long journey” and a “narrow way,” a language that resonated with radical interpretations of revolution as an ongoing evolutionary process. “Your freedom and liberation,” Koen insisted, “depends upon your commitment and purpose.”

A Grassroots Black Theology

The United Front’s distinctive brand of Black Power radicalism quickly drew the attention of nationally prominent Black clergy who were engaged in their own battle to preserve the church’s relevance to Black urban communities and their struggles for freedom. At the heart of this endeavor was the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC), an ecumenical organization of Black Churchmen founded in 1966 in direct response to the urban rebellions and the rise of Black Power. In the years immediately following the rebellions, NCBC’s members—

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many of whom were national church executives within predominantly white denominations – worked hard to reorient the nation’s churches toward the plight of Black urban communities. These efforts contributed to the birth of new denominational task forces aimed at addressing the urban crisis by funding grassroots community organizations. However, members of NCBC were also deeply invested in the broader theological implications of Black Power, a concern that prompted the publication of James Cone’s landmark *Black Theology & Black Power* (1968) as well as the formation of NCBC’s Theological Commission (1967) and the Black Theology Project (1976), aimed at the development of a systematic Black theology. In this context, the United Front’s radical grassroots theology was a source of inspiration that laid the foundation for strong alliances between NCBC and the United Front.68

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black church executives visited Cairo in droves to extend their support and witness firsthand the movement’s distinctive spiritual character. Among those attending the United Front’s events were Father Robert Chapman, executive director of the National Council of Churches’ (NCC) Department of Social Justice; Rev. J. Metz Rollins, executive director of NCBC; Leon Modeste, director of the Episcopal Church’s General Convention Special Program; Rev. Charles Cobb, executive director of the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice; and, Rev. Albert Cleage, pastor of the Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit and author of *The Black Messiah* (1968). The latter was a regular and popular speaker whose theology of Black Christian Nationalism resonated with many United Front members. During the summer of 1970, Cleage’s sermons on Christ as “a Revolutionary Messiah” and the Black church as “a power base for the struggle” were particularly well received.

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by audiences at the spiritual rallies. For those unable to attend, summaries of the sermons were published in the East St. Louis Monitor and the United Front News. In this sense, the United Front’s spiritual rallies as well as the follow-up publicity generated by them functioned as an important medium for the transmission and consumption of emergent Black theologies by grassroots Black Power activists.⁶⁹

The leadership of the United Front embraced these new relationships with enthusiasm, viewing Black church executives as logical allies capable of bringing vital resources to the city. The next chapter explores how Black church executives did just that, using their positions within predominantly white denominations to leverage the church’s extensive financial and legal resources on behalf of the United Front. However, in contrast to many other Black Power organizations that relied heavily upon churches for their survival, the United Front also desired access to the church’s theological resources. The United Front’s radical leadership placed primacy on political education and the development of a disciplined and educated leadership cadre. The organization’s “hard core workers” were expected to receive training not only in revolutionary theory and praxis, but also in theological study. Recognizing this need for formal training, Rev. Cobb and George Bell of the UCC’s Commission on Racial Justice invited United Front members to participate in the Commission’s in-service training program in community organization and Black Theology at Columbia University in New York. The program, which was co-sponsored by the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) and

Riverside Church, offered students the opportunity to receive ordination in the UCC as well as take classes specifically targeted toward ministry in Black urban communities. The United Front’s leadership agreed, viewing the program as an opportunity to develop a second tier of leadership. In the summer of 1970, Randy Robinson was the first Black Cairoite to participate in the program followed in the fall by a cohort of twelve local men including Clarence Dossie and Johnny Garrett.  

Through these programs and the regular visits of leading Black clergymen, United Front members became active participants in a broader dialogue about the character and role of Black theology. The enthusiasm with which grassroots activists engaged these theologies challenges not only assumptions about the secular quality of Black Power but also popular characterizations of Black Theology as an academic pursuit that failed to resonate with folk traditions. This is not to suggest that the United Front adopted these formal theologies wholesale. Rather, the United Front’s distinctive religious worldview, as established in this chapter, represented an eclectic bricolage of formal Black theologies, radical political ideologies and the organic religious traditions of Black Cairoites themselves. In this sense, the United Front anticipated the more recent work of theologians such as Dwight Hopkins who strive to connect Black Theology to its roots in the folk traditions of African Americans. In turn, in their blending of radical ideology and scripture the United Front anticipated more recent criticisms of Black Theology as failing to acknowledge social class as a meaningful category of identity and experience.


On April 20, 1971, Black clergy and laypersons from across the country converged on St. Columba’s Church in Cairo for a special spring convocation of the National Conference of Black Churchmen (NCBC). Cairo’s nationally recognized Black Power struggle and its conscious incorporation of both the Black Church and Black Theology made the city an obvious site for the nation’s premier conference for militant Black clergy. Indeed, for many attending the convocation, Cairo represented a place where a relevant faith had given rise to a powerful social movement. Chaired by NCBC’s Executive Director Reverend J. Metz Rollins, the convocation constituted a veritable who’s who of the Black Church and included representation from almost all of the major historically Black and predominantly white denominations.

Seeking to capitalize on this extraordinary gathering, United Front activists organized a separate meeting on April 22 to discuss in more detail the plight of Black Cairoites and to coordinate a national church strategy in support of their struggle. Rev. Blaine Ramsey Jr., former pastor of Cairo’s Ward Chapel A.M.E Church and, more recently, Executive Secretary of the Illinois Council of Churches’ Special Task Force Committee, had played a key role in bringing NCBC to Cairo and was now charged with chairing the special session. Ramsey immediately opened the floor to the United Front’s dynamic leader Rev. Charles Koen, who petitioned those present to “recognize the racial, economic and political strife in Cairo as being of immediate concern” and called upon “the interreligious communities to respond with funds and other
resources… to help alleviate the causes of the strife.” By the meeting’s end, those in attendance had committed to secure greater church resources from the nation’s largest denominations and asked Rev. Ramsey and the ICC’s Special Task Force Committee to function as the state-level liaison for “channeling these resources to the United Front.”

The image of national Black church leaders converging on the small borderland community of Cairo, Illinois, while surprising to many contemporary readers, was not uncommon during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As the previous chapter illustrated, the United Front’s skillful deployment of Black religious traditions put the organization in close relationship with leading Black theologians and ministers who were seeking to render the Black Church relevant to the Black Power Movement. However, as Rev. Koen’s statements at NCBC’s 1971 Spring Convocation suggest, local activists expected Black clergy to contribute in ways that extended beyond rhetorical forms of solidarity. On the contrary, local activists urged Black clergy in both historically African American and predominantly white denominations to use their influence to open up denominational hierarchies and make the tremendous organizational resources of the nation’s churches available to the Black Power Movement.

This chapter explores those efforts and demonstrates the remarkable success of the United Front in securing the transfer of organizational resources from state and national denominational structures to Black Power initiatives at the local level. Between 1969 and 1974, the United Front secured more than $475,000 in grants from church-based organizations as well as extensive lobbying, consultancy, and technical support for their political programming. As

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support for traditional civil rights organizations declined during the 1960s and faith in the War on Poverty dwindled, access to these new organizational resources proved invaluable and ensured that churches would become a significant, albeit overlooked, source of coalitional support for the Black Power Movement.

As I will demonstrate, the extraction of church-based resources relied in large part on the support of progressive Black clergy. Using their newly acquired power in denominational caucuses, task forces, and committees, Black clergy pushed for a more active social ministry and refocused denominational engagement with Black freedom struggles from an emphasis on resolutions and lobbying to more tangible involvement through the direct extension of financial grants to social movement organizations working in Black communities at the local level. In contrast to federal or corporate support, church-based grants were extended with comparatively few strings, making them particularly attractive to Black Power activists. As a result, churches made critical contributions to those components of the United Front’s daily operations that a governmental or corporate agency either could not or would not support, including staff salaries, office space, travel expenses, and bail bond. Further, church-based organizations extended “seed money” for the initiation of the United Front’s economic development programs, a factor that increased the likelihood that such initiatives would eventually receive additional governmental support from state and federal agencies.

However, church-based resources were not without their limitations and, despite their comparative malleability, they represented a highly unstable foundation for any organization. As the final chapter will demonstrate, the liberal distribution of church funds to Black Power organizations, when combined with a rising conservative political agenda in the early 1970s, left
the United Front and the nation’s largest denominations vulnerable to unique forms of state repression and shifting political sentiments within the churches themselves.

**Black Power and the Expansion of Church-Based Resource Opportunities**

Scholarly accounts of the mobilization of external resources by the Black Power Movement are still limited, and focus almost exclusively on the role played by such corporate donors as the Ford Foundation and federal War on Poverty programs.² In comparison, the role of state and national church structures has been under-examined. On one level, this neglect reflects the newness of Black Power Studies emergence as a subfield whose proponents are still very much invested in the important work of recovering histories of forgotten struggles. However, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, the historical inattention to the church’s contributions can also be attributed to the broader acceptance of a dominant civil rights story that characterizes Black Power, in historian Peniel Joseph words as an “evil twin” and “negative counterpart to more righteous struggles for racial integration, social justice, and economic equality.” Indeed, scholars in the field of Black Freedom Studies have traditionally associated the peak of church-based coalitional support with the Civil Rights Movement’s “heroic” phase, particularly with the National Council of Churches’ contributions to the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and clergy participation in the March on Washington and the Selma-to-Montgomery march of 1963 and 1965 respectively. By contrast, Black Power is characterized as a disruptive secular force.

that “fragmented” this fragile civil rights coalition, resulting in the retraction and eventual dissipation of liberal external support, including church-based support.\(^3\)

However, denominational histories and contemporary accounts paint a different picture, suggesting that the declension of church support, particularly that of liberal predominantly white denominations, was not as straightforward or sudden as scholars would have us imagine. On the contrary, these accounts indicate that the urban rebellions of the mid-1960s prompted a major reevaluation of the role and responsibility of the church to poor and Black communities as well as a new and controversial emphasis on the need for financial contributions to be made directly to economic development initiatives at the local level. This new wave of activity can be seen in the outgrowth of various church-based funding programs during this period. Between 1966 and 1970, several of the nation’s largest predominantly white denominations launched grant awarding programs focused on addressing what they termed the “urban crisis.” Liberal denominations like the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the United Presbyterian Church, and the United Church of Christ were at the forefront of these efforts. The Episcopal Church’s General Convention Special Program (GCSP) and the United Presbyterian Church’s National Committee on the Self-Development of People, founded in 1967 and 1970 respectively, were two of the largest such programs and were responsible for redirecting denominational resources to various community organizations throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. In addition, ecumenical funding initiatives like the National Council of Churches’ Crisis in the Nation program and the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations (IFCO), both

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formed in 1967, demonstrated an increased willingness on the part of both predominantly white and historically Black denominations to work collectively to seek solutions to the problems facing urban communities in this period. As one contemporary put it, these new initiatives constituted a “unique program of channeling large sums of church monies for people who until recently had no possibility whatever of getting these kinds of grants.”

Although denominational histories and contemporary accounts demonstrate the ongoing participation of the nation’s largest denominations in Black freedom struggles, they have been much less successful in assessing the impact these organizations had on the Black Power Movement itself. Though a comprehensive account of national church-based resources for Black Power is still needed, even the most cursory examination suggests that they were far from insignificant in terms of size and scope. For example, the Episcopal Church’s General Convention Special Program distributed $7.5 million to local projects between 1967 and 1973. The Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations donated $1.5 million in 1969 alone, and, in its first two years, the National Committee for the Self-Development of People of the Presbyterian Church allocated $4.5 million. In contrast to prevailing accounts, these initiatives demonstrate that many of the nation’s largest denominations actually expanded their commitment to Black freedom struggles during the late 1960s and early 1970s.


Moreover, these findings challenge long-held assumptions about the decline of the Black Freedom Movement as being accelerated by the retraction of external resources by the liberal-labor coalition. Studies of the retraction of external resources from the Black Freedom Movement have generally focused on the collapse in donations for three of the “Big Four” civil rights organizations during the mid-1960s, namely the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). As these organizations increasingly adopted anti-war stances and, in the case of SNCC and CORE, Black Power approaches, scholars contend that external support decreased rapidly. According to political scientist Doug McAdam, by the end of the decade, many external donors had “shifted their support to the NAACP” which was now perceived “as virtually the only “acceptable” funding alternative” to liberal supporters.6 This shift, McAdam argues, “drastically diminished the insurgent capabilities of the direct-action wing of the movement” resulting in conservatization.7

However, such assumptions do not take into account the possibility that external funding from liberal donors may have eventually shifted from nationally recognized civil rights organizations to a number of new local Black Power organizations in the wake of the urban rebellions. While the sheer multiplicity of local Black Power organizations makes a definitive financial assessment of external resources almost impossible, even a partial glimpse at the scope of denominational and ecumenical funding for such organizations demonstrates that funding for Black freedom struggles was instead rechanneled during the late 1960s and early 1970s. IFCO’s donation of $1.5 million to local community organizations in 1969 was more than the NAACP,

7 Doug McAdam, Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 209.
CORE, and SCLC received combined in any given year prior to 1960. The $4.5 million in
donations made over two years by the National Committee for the Self-Development of People
of the Presbyterian Church totaled more than all donations made to the “Big Four” between 1958
and 1961. Therefore, these were not insignificant donations and were, in many ways, comparable
in size and scope to those made during the movement’s “heroic phase.”

The reconfiguration of church activities and resources was a direct response to the urban
rebellions of the mid-1960s and the deeper social and economic crises affecting urban
communities. The profundity of the urban crisis challenged and, in some cases, transformed
clergy’s understandings of the efficacy of recent civil rights legislation to address the problems
facing Black urban communities and highlighted the need for more sustained church
involvement. Indeed, a 1965 survey of clergy in six major Protestant denominations indicated
that nearly 75 per cent of parish ministers polled felt that churches, for the most part, had been
“woefully inadequate” in their response to the issues facing Black urban communities. Even
more significantly, nearly 70 per cent believed that the responsibility of Christian education was
to “bring laymen face to face with urban problems and propose solutions.” Remarkably, clergy
across denominational lines were unified in their belief, if not practice, that issues of urban
poverty and discrimination required the churches’ concerted attention.

However, equally important was the critical role played by Black clergy and Black Power
activists in exerting pressure on religious institutions to transform their beliefs into practice by
making good on earlier promises of support. Indeed, in the wake of the urban rebellions,
predominantly white denominations came under intense scrutiny on two fronts. First, Black
clergy, themselves radicalized by Black Power’s call for racial unity and empowerment,

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8 For financial comparisons see “Appendix 3: Estimated Total External Income for Five Major Movement
challenged denominational leaders over their failure to address racism within the church itself. Accordingly, Black clergy in liberal, predominantly white denominations created their own autonomous Black caucuses to better represent their interests. In 1968, Black clergy in the Episcopal Church formed the Union of Black Clergy and Laymen. That same year, their counterparts in the United Methodist Church formed Black Methodists for Church Renewal. These efforts to consolidate Black clergy’s power are best represented by the 1966 formation of the National Conference of Black Churchmen (NCBC), an ecumenical organization that brought Black clergy from both historically African American and predominantly white denominations together.10

Simultaneously, Black Power activists turned up the heat on the nation’s churches, demanding that they render themselves relevant to Black communities by extending resources directly to Black Power organizations. On May 4, 1969, in a now iconic series of events, James Forman, former Executive Secretary of SNCC, interrupted Sunday morning worship at the beacon of liberal Protestant Christianity, Riverside Church in New York and presented a Black Manifesto demanding that America’s white religious community give $500 million (later increased to $3 billion) in reparations to atone for wrongs committed against African Americans. Black Power activists across the country echoed Forman’s demand, calling upon the nation’s largest denominations to “put up or shut up.”11

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10 For more on the growth of Black caucuses during this period, see Shattuck, Episcopalians and Race, 182-183; Murray, Methodists and the Crucible of Race, 201; Wilmore, Pragmatic Spirituality, 191-192; Sawyer, Black Ecumenicism. For more on the formation of the National Committee of Black Churchmen, see Wilmore, Pragmatic Spirituality, 57, 187-189, Pinn, The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era, 15; Lecky and Wright, Black Manifesto, 7; Hopkins, “A Transatlantic Comparison of a Black Theology of Liberation,” 85-87; Lincoln and Mamiya, The Black Church in the African-American Experience, 192-193.

11 The statement was made by the director of Social Justice for the National Council of Churches Charles Spivey, Jr., in response to the James Forman’s Black Manifesto of 1969. Spivey argued that the Manifesto told the nations church to “put up or shut up”. For full citation see, Lecky and Wright, Black Manifesto, 6. For a discussion of the Black Manifesto see, James Forman, The Making of Black Revolutionaries, 544-5, Gayraud S. Wilmore and James
Lawson called white churches to “radical repentance” through the “deliberate act of redirecting their financial resources.” These dual pressures on the nation’s largest denominations—internally from Black clergy and externally from Black Power activists—presented a significant challenge to church executives and resulted in a radical reorientation of church priorities and resources.

Church executives were often hesitant to distribute funds directly to Black Power organizations. However, mounting pressure resulted in the transfer of substantial resources to new caucuses, task forces, and ecumenical bodies run by Black clergy who would, in many cases, opt to extend them to local Black Power organizations anyway. Responses to Forman’s *Black Manifesto* are particularly illustrative of this pattern. While Forman had requested that all reparations payments be made directly to the newly established Black Economic Development Corporation (BEDC), most denominations opted to sidestep Forman’s secular organization in favor of funding less controversial church-based initiatives led by Black clergy. The United Methodist Church, for example, refused a proposal made by the denomination’s Black caucus, Black Methodists for Church Renewal, to transfer $750,000 directly to BEDC, but offered an alternative whereby $1.3 million would be allocated for “economic empowerment” to be administered by six African American bishops. The United Church of Christ also sidestepped BEDC by creating the Commission for Racial Justice that would be staffed primarily by Black clergy and maintain a minimum annual budget of $500,000. Other denominations opted to fund external Black-led ecumenical organizations. For example, the United Presbyterian Church allocated $100,000 to the Interreligious Fund for Community Organization while the Episcopal

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Church and the National Council of Churches made large contributions of $200,000 and $500,000 respectively to the National Conference of Black Churchmen (NCBC). In this manner, Black clergy expanded their decision-making power within denominations and secured access to considerable resources for Black community development programs.¹³

This broader transfer of power and resources elevated prominent Black clergy to gatekeeper roles within denominational hierarchies and ensured that they would become key players in the distribution of church-based resources to local Black Power struggles. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, this core group of Black church leaders included amongst others: Rev. Lucius Walker, a Baptist minister and the director of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations; Rev. Leon Modeste, chair of the Episcopal Church’s General Convention Special Program; Rev. St. Paul Epps, director of the United Presbyterian Church’s National Committee on the Self-Development of People; Rev. Albert Cleage, Jr., chairman of the United Church of Christ’s Commission on Racial Justice; Rev. Gayraud Wilmore, executive director of the United Presbyterian Church’s Commission on Religion and Race; and Rev. Robert Chapman, executive director of the National Council of Churches Racial Justice Section of the Department of Social Justice. Through their labor, these church-based organizations became important hubs of support for Black Power organizations across the country, including the Cairo United Front.

While some might have regarded the rise of Black clergy to gatekeeper roles as a tragic co-optation of the Black Manifesto, its author, James Forman, saw something more positive. Looking back on the Manifesto’s impact in his autobiography, Forman argued that it had been “a

positive struggle” and suggested that the biggest success was in its ability to forge an “alliance between black churchmen and revolutionaries.” For Forman, this was “an important development that [helped] to radicalize other church people and offer[ed] bases of material and moral support for revolutionaries.” In the case of Cairo, Forman’s analysis proved to be particularly astute.14

The Cairo United Front and the Mobilization of Church-Based Resources

Locating and securing external resources was of particular importance to Cairo’s United Front. While local activists had shown remarkable skill in mobilizing the indigenous cultural and moral resources of Cairo’s African American residents, they were continually faced with the harsh reality of organizing in an impoverished Black community that lacked significant material and financial assets. Cairo’s declining river economy, limited industrial opportunities, and strict adherence to Jim Crow segregation trapped the vast majority of Black Cairoites in a cycle of unemployment and underemployment that inhibited the development of a stable Black working-class and attendant Black professional class. By the late 1960s, these problems had reached a crisis point. The official unemployment rate for Black males was 16.2 per cent, as compared to 6.5 per cent for whites, leaving a large segment of Cairo’s Black working class to rely upon a combination of piecemeal work and public assistance. In 1969, almost three quarters of all Black families in Cairo earned less than $3,000 in total income. While Cairo’s poverty rates were high across the board, statistical data demonstrates that Blacks bore the brunt of the city’s economic crisis. The median annual income for Cairo’s Black families in 1969 was $2,809, compared to

$6,428 for whites. This figure compared poorly with the national median average income for Black families at $8,074 per annum, almost three-times that of Black Cairoites. The United Front pulled heavily from the ranks of the jobless and working poor who lived in the city’s segregated public housing projects. This allowed the organization to avoid many of the internal class divisions that plagued other Black Power struggles, but it also meant that the United Front would face significant financial obstacles to the realization of its goals.15

During earlier civil rights struggles, these problems had been less apparent due to the narrower strategic and tactical focus of the city’s leading social movement organizations. As shown in Chapter One, the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had focused on attacking segregation in public accommodations by filing legal suits and engaging in acts of civil disobedience. As a result, these organizations had incurred relatively small costs, mainly in the areas of legal defense and bail bond. However, the shift to Black Power brought with it a tremendous expansion in the strategies and tactics adopted by Cairo’s social movement organizations, including an emphasis on the development of self-determining parallel institutions. Establishing and sustaining such institutions would require thousands if not millions of dollars in funding. Despite mobilizing a broad-based coalition of the city’s Black residents and securing the support of all of the Black community’s civic, religious, and political organizations, the United Front was unable to meet these costs without considerable external support.

In other communities, shortages in indigenous resources might be overcome through interracial coalition building, particularly with local labor unions and religious organizations that had a tradition of civil rights activities. However, the near universal opposition of Cairo’s white population to the United Front ensured that this kind of support would be virtually nonexistent. In fact, militant white opposition to Black Power exacerbated the United Front’s dependence upon external resources by promoting a culture of popular vigilantism and state repression that resulted in mass arrests, costly criminal proceedings, and a resistance to the United Front’s initiatives. Accordingly, between 1969 and 1974 securing external resources would become one of the organizations’ highest priorities.

Church-based resources were particularly attractive to the United Front for a combination of reasons, both principled and pragmatic. Most importantly, the United Front envisioned church-based resources as the natural funding base for its political program. The distinctly religious tenor of the United Front’s ideology ensured that the organization was sympathetic to Black clergy’s efforts to radicalize the nation’s churches. Many of the United Front’s leaders held respected positions within local churches, where they had also fought vigorously for a more “authentic” Christian message that emphasized an expanded social ministry to the city’s poor and oppressed. Therefore, United Front leaders tended to view the extraction of national church-based resources as a logical extension of longstanding local practices and part of a broader political project to render the church relevant to Black communities.

Church-based resources also provided the United Front with an important alternative to governmental aid, which was consistently obstructed by local officials. While other cities were scrambling to secure War on Poverty funds, Cairo’s city leaders refused to comply with federal requirements mandating the formation of racially representative committees to oversee the
initiation and development of new projects. By refusing to formally involve Black community members, city leaders effectively blocked the extension of governmental programs that would have improved the city’s economic base and benefited both Black and white Cairoites. Furthermore, when Black Power activists endeavored to work around the city in obtaining federal and state grants for community programming, they were undercut again and again by the city administration. In the absence of state and federal support, the United Front was left with relatively few funding options. Thus, the United Front’s solicitation and acceptance of church-based support was both a pragmatic and principled affair.\footnote{16 “Cairo Mayor Thomas Resigns,” The Tri-State Informer, November 1971, “Fed Agencies Critical Of Mayor’s Plan,” The Monitor (East St. Louis, Ill.) March 3, 1970, “Mayor Angry At Ewing,” The Monitor (East St. Louis, Ill.) March 12, 1970, “Mayor Attacks Federal Agencies,” The Monitor (East St. Louis, Ill.) April 16, 1970, “Mayor Tells State No On Task Force,” The Monitor (East St. Louis, Ill.) April 23, 1970, “Cairo Mayor A Failure In Washington, D.C.,” The Monitor (East St. Louis, Ill.) May 14, 1970, “Federal Agencies Criticize City Council,” The Monitor, October 1, 1970.}

However, securing church-based resources was far from inevitable. Most of the grant-awarding programs were based in the New York headquarters of liberal, predominantly white denominations that had few ties to Cairo’s Black community. With the exception of the local Black Catholic congregation, Black Cairoites attended churches that were affiliated with historically Black denominations that had their own separate institutional structures. Moreover, the traditionally liberal United Presbyterian and United Methodist congregations in Cairo were widely considered to be bastions of white supremacy. Congregants at Cairo’s First Methodist Church, Tigert Memorial, and First Presbyterian Church resisted the integration campaigns of the early 1960s, forcing liberal white clergy to transfer out of the city. By the late 1960s, little had changed. Longstanding activist Hattie Kendrick underscored these problems in a letter to her sister in 1969. “The [United] Methodist Church is trying to work here,” Kendrick wrote, but with “no success.” “I went up and had an interview with the Bishop,” Kendrick explained. “He said
when ever he sends a pastor here to preach love & compassion etc., the peckerwoods quit
coming to church and won’t let him come back.” William Warner, pastor of both the First
Methodist Church and Tigert Memorial Church, confirmed Kendrick’s claims, stating that since
relocating to Cairo in 1968 he had been “hamstrung” by “intercongregational conflict” and
“racial tones” that had made it virtually impossible for any meaningful ministry to be
established. Similar problems plagued the First Presbyterian Church and leaders within the
Presbytery of Southeast Illinois, and the Southern Illinois Synod consistently opposed
denominational efforts to extend church-based resources to local community development
initiatives. As a result, Black Power activists would find few local allies in their efforts to secure
organizational resources from predominantly white denominations.17

In the absence of local support, the United Front forged key coalitional relationships with
clergy working at the state level that would ultimately provide the networks necessary to secure
church-based resources from national denominational structures. Most important among these
relationships was the United Front’s ties to the Illinois Council of Churches Special Task Force
Committee. Mirroring patterns in church organizations across the country, the Illinois Council of
Churches, the state’s leading ecumenical agency, voted to establish the Special Task Force
Committee at the organization’s 38th General Assembly in January 1968 in direct response to the
urban crisis. The Task Force was charged with developing “an ecumenical statewide strategy” to
address the urban crisis in conjunction with secular organizations. Founded on the scriptural
mandate “to feed the hungry, to receive the stranger, to clothe the naked, to heal the sick and to
be present with the imprisoned” (Matthew 25:25-46), the Task Force declared itself to be the

20, folder 10; William R. Warner to John P. Adams, September 9, 1969, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-
3-2-08, United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., Minutes of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in
“functional arm of the institutional church” coordinating the efforts of religious institutions to address “the problems of race and poverty that exist in Illinois.” According to the General Assembly, the Task Force would “assist local communities in the establishment of an effective emergency program to further the development of adequate housing on a complete nondiscriminatory basis; equal justice under the law; the development of equal and excellent education for all children and youth; and to make provision for the training of adults for employment in work that pays wages sufficient for an adequate standard of human dignity, decency, and health.” In this context, the Special Task Force was a logical ally and would come to serve as an important locus for church-based resources for the United Front and other Black Power organizations across the state.18

In the first year of its existence, the Special Task Force struggled to make good on its mission to assist the state’s poor and Black communities. Until the late 1960s, the Illinois Council of Churches’ work on race and poverty, like that of many church organizations, had focused almost exclusively on behind-the-scenes lobbying in support of civil rights legislation. As one member put it, the organization had actively participated in the work of “making quiet contacts with key people in government to help get good laws into being.” While critical to the passage of civil rights legislation, these particular experiences did not prepare the Illinois Council of Churches to meet the unique demands of Black Power activists working in some of the state’s most impoverished communities.19

This obstacle was by no means insurmountable. With the creation of the Task Force in 1968, the Illinois Council of Churches demonstrated at least the intent to translate rhetoric into

reality. However, once the Task Force came into being, members were forced to address the much more serious obstacle presented by the organization’s failure to place Black clergy into leadership positions. Lacking these ties, the Task Force struggled to make meaningful connections with local congregations and community organizations working on the ground to address the urban crisis. In January 1968, concerns that Black clergy had “written off” the Illinois Council of Churches as an “ineffective vehicle for meeting the needs of the black community” prompted the organization to perform a formal study of Black clergy’s participation in the organization. The study indicated that the Illinois Council of Churches’ efforts to respond to the urban crisis had been “curtailed by the lack of meaningful rapport or functional relationships with the black sector of the church which largely resided in the midst of the Core City which so often is the foundation of the urban crisis.” According to the study, this situation fostered considerable cynicism among Black clergy who, in many cases, believed “that the white sector of the Church is too deeply enmeshed in the diseased society to extricate itself sufficiently to be of any assistance.”

If contacts with Black clergy were weak, relationships with local Black Power organizations were virtually nonexistent. The 1968 study indicated that very few local councils maintained functional relationships with “black nationalist groups or radical civil rights organizations.” In the few cases where such relationships did exist, they tended to be on “a personal basis” rather than formalized. Task Force members worried that even if they could identify and incorporate more Black clergy, this would not inevitably lead to better ties with Black Power organizations since, as one member put it, “the average Negro church” was largely

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middle-class and was “not reaching the disadvantaged Negro in the ghetto.” In the absence of Black clergy representation and access to deeper community networks, the Task Force initially remained an observer of local struggles and quickly fell back on old practices. Predominantly white members exchanged anecdotal information about which communities were most likely to succumb to urban rebellions, and the group threw its collective energy into the production of an educational pamphlet directed at local churches entitled “What To Do Before, During, and After a Civil Disturbance.”

However, the Task Force’s stated mission to work alongside secular organizations in addressing the urban crisis provided an important contradiction that the savviest Black Power activists would quickly use to their advantage. Within a few months of the Task Force’s founding, reports began circulating that Black Power activists in downstate Illinois were tiring of what they perceived to be inactivity on the part of the church. At a Task Force meeting in April 1968, committee members discussed an ultimatum they had received from Koen’s Black Economic Union operating out of East St. Louis. The Black Economic Union had already requested funding for its programs from church-based organizations, but little had been forthcoming. As a result, Koen made “one last appeal” to the churches to extend their unconditional support. Over the next few months, pressure on the Special Task Force to extend resources directly to local Black Power organizations intensified, prompting Dr. Frederick Roblee, executive secretary of the Illinois Council of Churches, to make a clear statement. Dr. Roblee informed activists attending the Task Force’s meetings that he “did not want to undersell or oversell what the Illinois Council of Churches can do,” emphasizing that “immediate funds” were not available. However, referencing the growth in church-based grant-awarding bodies at

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the national level, Dr. Roblee stated that “it might be possible to go to certain foundations or organizations that are set to channel funds into needed areas.” Local activists affirmed Dr. Roblee’s suggestion and directed the Task Force to focus its energies on identifying, soliciting, and rechanneling resources to local organizations working in the state’s largest Black communities.24

Over the next five years, this call to action would become the Special Task Force Committee’s mandate as it emerged as a key mediator between Illinois-based Black Power organizations and national denominational funding sources. However, as late as the spring of 1969 the Illinois Council of Churches still lacked the connections to Black Power organizations necessary to facilitate this kind of relationship. Accordingly, the Task Force developed a proposal to hire a permanent staff member charged with establishing firmer relations with local Black Power organizations as well as identifying potential resources and funds for their use. The proposal found widespread support at the Illinois Council of Churches 39th General Assembly held in Carbondale on January 17, 1969, where delegates determined that the Task Force’s efforts should be “continued, strengthened and enlarged” and that participation should be broadened to include historically African American denominations.25

Shortly afterwards, Rev. Blaine Ramsey, Jr., a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church and respected civil rights activist, was appointed as the Task Force’s first permanent staffer. Ramsey, a former pastor of Cairo’s Ward Chapel and leader in the campaign to integrate the city’s public accommodations, was an obvious choice for the chair of the Illinois Council of Churches’ most engaged committee on race and poverty. Since leaving Cairo in 1962, Ramsey had remained a staunch advocate of an activist ministry despite finding

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himself relocated to several different downstate communities in accordance with the itinerancy system of the A.M.E. Church. Although the itinerancy system could hinder some ministers from putting down the kinds of roots necessary to build effective local struggles, it also had the paradoxical effect of providing activist ministers like Ramsey with extensive statewide networks and a concrete understanding of the struggles facing multiple Black communities. After leaving Cairo, Ramsey had undertaken several pastorates in quick succession, beginning with Champaign’s Bethel A.M.E. Church (1963-1966) followed by Peoria’s Ward Chapel (1966-1969) before arriving in the state capitol in 1969 to serve as chair of the Special Task Force Committee. In each community, Ramsey had refocused the local congregation toward civil rights activities, challenging both clergy and laity to reconceptualize the meaning of their faith in the context of the struggle for Black freedom. In the shift to Black Power, Ramsey also exhibited a flexibility uncharacteristic of many of his peers by taking some of the earliest steps toward opening up church spaces to secular Black Power organizations. In 1966, upon relocating to Peoria, Ramsey worked closely with local Black Panther Party leader Mark Clark, opening up Ward Chapel A.M.E. to the organization’s free breakfast program. In 1969, he brought this tactical flexibility as well as his extensive experience of Black community struggles across central and southern Illinois to the role of chair of the Illinois Council of Churches’ Special Task Force Committee.26

Under Ramsey’s leadership, the Task Force was transformed. Prior to his appointment as chair, participation in the Task Force was largely confined to the executive officers of the ICC and a small group of white liberal representatives of mainline denominations. However, by

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drawing on his own extensive church networks, Ramsey was able to secure the participation of Black clergy from historically African American denominations. This new group of participants represented longstanding African American congregations in some of the state’s largest urban communities. They included, Rev. Newell W. Guy (Springfield A.M.E.), Dr. Carroll McCoy Felton (Chicago African Methodist Episcopal Zion), Rev. Negil McPherson (Springfield, National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.), and Rev. Norman Owens (East St. Louis, National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.). Ramsey asked members of the committee to forge relationships with civil rights and Black Power organizations in their own communities and to encourage them to begin submitting proposals and funding requests to the Task Force for consideration. Ramsey recognized that while African American clergy were often best situated to develop relationships with local activists, representatives of predominantly white denominations could use their own denominational networks to secure the funding and resources that community organizations needed. Therefore, once the Task Force received a funding request from a community organization, it was circulated to the Illinois Council of Churches constituent members as well as to national denominational networks and emergent Black-led church organizations. In this manner, Ramsey succeeded in forging important coalitional ties between community organizations, Black church leaders, and the progressive wing of the predominantly white mainline denominations.27

By the end of 1969, with Ramsey at the helm, the Task Force had forged working relationships with community organizations in cities across the state, including Rockford, Kankakee, Rock Island, Peoria, Bloomington, Champaign, Decatur, Springfield, Alton, East St. Louis, and Cairo. Representatives of African American community organizations in each of these cities regularly attended Task Force meetings and were incorporated at every stage of the

“dialogue, planning, and programming.”28 Through these relationships the Task Force was able to contribute to a variety of public and private projects supported by local Black Power organizations, including the East St. Louis Model Cities Model Cities Program, the Massac County O.E.O. Program, the Peoria Community Action Program, the Champaign Non-Profit Housing Corporation, the Rock Island County Model Cities Program, and the Macon County Community Action Program. The Task Force’s contributions to these projects included providing consultancy services for program development, conducting leadership training, and functioning as a liaison between community organizations and denominational and governmental agencies. However, the Task Force’s most important and controversial role was in the leveraging and brokerage of church funding to local Black Power organizations.29

As the chair of the Task Force, Ramsey was outspoken in his insistence that “denominations at [the] state and national levels… respond above the token level for funding community organizations and projects.” Such support, Ramsey argued, was “very necessary” in terms of establishing “the kind of base upon which real economic and political power can be built.” Ramsey championed a direct, “no-strings” approach to funding community organizations and was very critical of what he described as the “pernicious paternalism” of many clergy toward self-determining local Black Power groups. Accordingly, he challenged the executive officers of the Illinois Council of Churches to “revamp” their funding guidelines “to relate to new situations that demand new responses.” To this end, Ramsey was responsible for establishing the Special Task Force’s brokerage system through which church-based donations could be channeled directly to local Black Power organizations. During his time as chair, Ramsey – like other

progressive Black clergy – oversaw an expansion of the Illinois Council of Churches’ involvement in poor and Black communities and played a critical role in leveraging key organizational resources for local organizations.\textsuperscript{30}

Between 1969 and 1974, Cairo was consistently at the top of the Special Task Force’s list of priorities for funding and resources. In part, this was a consequence of the national attention garnered by events in the embattled community. However, it was also a very tangible product of Ramsey’s unique relationship with the city and its leading Black Power activists. His activist approach to ministry was cultivated during his itinerancy at Cairo’s Ward Chapel. Outraged by the southern manners and practices of life in the border city, Ramsey cut his teeth in civil rights struggles against segregation in public accommodations. As I have argued, Ramsey owed older Black Cairoites like Hattie Kendrick a particular debt for shaping his outlook as a junior minister and ushering him into a lifetime of service and struggle. In turn, he had mentored many of the younger activists who came to serve as leaders of the local Black Power Movement. Rev. Charles Koen, the United Front’s director, described Ramsey as a spiritual mentor and, in the absence of his own father, a surrogate parent who was responsible for bringing him into the ministry. Accordingly, when Ramsey became the chair of the Special Task Force it was natural that he functioned as what Belinda Robnett has defined as a “professional bridge leader,” continually foregrounding the city’s concerns and linking the United Front to grant-awarding agencies in state and national denominational structures. Indeed, Ramsey maintained an extraordinarily close relationship with events and actors on the ground in Cairo, visiting the

community regularly and assisting United Front leaders in the development of their political program.\footnote{Belinda Robnett, \textit{How Long? How Long?}.}

The Illinois Council of Churches Special Task Force Committee was the first of the state and national church-based organizations to establish a formal working relationship with Cairo’s Black Power Movement. In the spring of 1969 Blaine Ramsey began to encourage representatives from Cairo’s various community organizations to attend the Task Force’s meetings and make their needs known to its members. During these early interactions, a pattern was quickly established that solidified the Task Force’s role as a primary vehicle in the mobilization of church-based resources. Representatives from the city’s various Black Power organizations presented their political programs before the Task Force and submitted formal proposals for funds and other resources. The Task Force often extended whatever consultative or financial support it could immediately offer before circulating a proposal to various state and national denominational bodies. All donations were then transferred directly to the local Black Power organizations via the Task Force’s brokerage system. In this manner, the Task Force played a dual role in extracting church-based resources for local Black Power organizations and, simultaneously, educating church leaders as to the struggles of Black Cairoites.\footnote{For evidence of these early interactions between the Task Force and Cairo’s Black Power organizations, see Memorandum by Ripley Young, “Concerning Staff for the proposed Alexander County Community Council of Organizations,” April 10, 1969, ICC Records, box 10, folder 29; Memorandum by Fay H. Smith, “Concerning the Alexander County Community Council of Organizations,” April 24, 1969, ICC Records, box 10, folder 29; Minutes of the Inter-Organization Task Force for Community Action, April 14, 1969, ICC Records, box 10, folder 31; Alexander County Council of Community Organizations, “A Proposal for the Alexander County Council of Community Organizations,” ICC Records, box 10, folder 30; Committee 13, “A Resume of the Situation in Cairo,” n.d., ICC Records, box 19, folder 8; E. D. Bruegemann to Rev. Faye Smith, May 13, 1969, ICC Records, box 19, folder 8; Minutes of the Special Task Force Committee, May 26, 1969, ICC Records, box 10, folder 29.}

Initial support came primarily from regional and state denominational bodies that were constituent members of the Illinois Council of Churches and had direct jurisdictional ties to Cairo. By the end of 1969, the Task Force had transferred close to $15,000 in small one-time
donations to various community organizations working in the city. These donations were made by several Illinois-based church organizations, including: the Illinois Council of Churches South Conference, the Southern Illinois Association of Priests, the Illinois Conference Branch Missionary Society of the A.M.E. Church, the Southern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church, the Special General Convention Program of the Illinois Episcopal Church, and the Illinois Synod of the Presbyterian Church. However, the outbreak of violence in the summer of 1969 and subsequent deployment of National Guard and state police units to Cairo drew national attention that, over the coming months, would serve to expand and broaden church-based support for the city’s Black Power organizations significantly.

The United Methodist Church and the Cairo Legal Aid Office

The first signs of this expansion in church-based support emerged in June 1969 at the annual convention of the Southern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church. Representatives from over four hundred United Methodist congregations arrived in East St. Louis for the opening session of the convention, where a small number of determined African American clergy and laypersons ensured that the plight of Black Cairoites would be at the forefront of discussions. In light of the summer’s violence, Dr. Ernest Teagle, an African American surgeon from Belleville, called upon the conference to “tell us if we have a structured ministry for the poor and black immediately in Cairo.” The United Methodist Church, which

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maintained Cairo’s all-white Tigert Memorial and First Methodist Church, of course did not have such a ministry. Therefore, at the recommendation of Rev. Charles Napier, an African American minister of a recently integrated parish in East St. Louis, delegates appointed a nine-member ad-hoc committee charged with developing a proposal that would be delivered to the conference at the end of the week. On the final day of the conference the ad-hoc committee returned and recommended that the Board of Missions be directed to set up a task force to begin exploring and implementing programs in communities, like Cairo, where the conference lacked any ministry to “minority groups.”

Recognizing the weakness of the proposal and its failure to deal with the immediate concerns of Cairo’s Black residents, Ernest Teagle rose again and presented an amendment recommending that the conference establish a legal office in Cairo “to offer legal advice and representation to the poor and dispossessed of that city.” In the wake of the summer’s violence, allegations that Black Cairoites were receiving inadequate and often discriminatory treatment at the hands of local law enforcement and the court system had been made by a number of different governmental bodies, including a special investigative committee of the Illinois legislature and the Illinois Attorney General’s Office. The United Front had spent most of the summer petitioning Governor Richard Ogilvie to take immediate steps to remedy these problems and restore law and order to the city. With this in mind, Teagle encouraged the conference to make a meaningful contribution to Black Cairoites’ struggle to secure justice by establishing a legal office that would be staffed by an attorney and legal secretary.


35 “Committee Study Proposal by Methodists,” Cairo Evening Citizen, June 2, 1969; “Methodists Discuss Ministry to Black Community in Cairo,” Cairo Evening Citizen, June 3, 1969; “Methodists Establish Task Force to Minister
Conference delegates were divided over the proposal to provide Black Cairoites with legal support, much to the consternation of progressive Black clergy and their allies. In response to a plea from one delegate that the conference “slow down” on its Cairo study, Rev. Charles Napier warned, “Time is short. Hatred begets hatred... We are a white racist institution. These are God’s people and we have an obligation to minister to them.” Dr. Lowell Hazzard, a United Methodist theologian from Washington D.C., agreed and called upon delegates to “quicken the pace of reconciliation with the black man, not slow it down.”36 Importantly, church leaders, including Bishop Lance Webb, supported the proposal. By the conclusion of the conference delegates had voted to create a “biracial and ecumenical” task force charged with establishing a ministry to Cairo’s Black community and, in accordance with Teagle’s amendment, allocated $10,000 for the establishment of a legal office.37

The decision of the Southern Illinois Conference reverberated in Cairo where the abuse of legal power had functioned as a central tool in the repression of the Black freedom struggle. Historically, Cairo had maintained an inequitable system of criminal justice in which African Americans were subject to glaring discrimination. Longstanding concerns included a failure to enforce and prosecute the law in cases involving Black victims; harsher enforcement, prosecution, and sentencing of Black defendants; widespread police brutality; unrepresentative

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jury composition; and discriminatory implementation of court costs. By 1968, these concerns had led the U.S. Department of Justice to conclude that one of “the greatest deterrents to racial progress was the firm conviction of Negroes and many whites that the administration of justice in Cairo was working against the Negro community.” By the summer of 1969, these longstanding inequities were exacerbated by the joint efforts of white citizens, law enforcement, and city officials to repress the local Black Power Movement through a combination of legal and extralegal channels. Spearheaded by the local chapter of the White Citizens Council (a.k.a., United Citizens for Community Action), these efforts included the passage of restrictive city ordinances criminalizing conventional protest activities, mass arrests and prosecutions of Black Power activists, and a pattern of sustained and unbridled terrorism directed against Black community members.38

The United Front’s ability to counteract these forces as well as to secure progressive changes to longstanding patterns of discrimination had been severely limited by the absence of indigenous legal resources. Of the approximately ten attorneys working in the city, none would handle civil rights cases or even, for the most part, criminal cases involving Black clients. The few who did accept Black clients were widely considered to provide inadequate and discriminatory services. As a result, the United Front had depended largely on the services of African American attorneys from larger Black communities like East St. Louis, resulting in additional transportation and lodging costs that were an added burden on the organization’s already limited resources. As a result, local Black Power activists were fully aware that legal

support would have to be obtained from outside the county and were eager to ensure that the resources promised by the United Methodist Church would become a reality.  

Shortly after receiving word that the Southern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church had committed to open a legal office in the city, local Black Power activists and their allies began exerting pressure on the national denomination to follow through on their commitment. On July 3, United Front leaders wrote to Rev. John P. Adams, director of the United Methodist Church’s Department of Law, Justice, and Community Relations in regards to the opening of a legal office in the city. “We have had many promises made by different state agencies,” the letter stated, “but as usual they have been promises… We do not need promises because we have a file of them.” Instead, the United Front asked for “help and action from you and concerned agencies who are willing to work for Justice.” Specifically, the United Front asked that the Methodists secure the services of a lawyer who could work in Cairo “over an extended time, not just for one or two cases.” It appears that this subtle prodding was relatively successful and prompted further action from the national denomination. Shortly after, leaders within the United Methodist Church’s General Board of Christian Social Concerns began exploring a variety of potential non-profit legal aid providers that might be willing to open an office in Cairo. They eventually settled on the Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, a non-profit private advocacy group that focused on racial discrimination cases, and began working hard to solicit funds for the upkeep of the program.

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After a brief investigative trip to the city, the Lawyers’ Committee concluded that there was “a substantial need for legal assistance” and estimated that it would require a budget of $14,500 for the establishment and operation of a legal office in Cairo for the first six months. Upon receiving assurances from the United Methodist Church that finances would be obtained, the Cairo legal aid office officially opened its doors in October 1969. Lawrence Aschenbrenner, Chief Counsel of the Lawyers’ Committee in Jackson, Mississippi, was sent to Cairo to set up the office and deal with the initial cases. Ashenbrenner departed in December and was replaced by a permanent staff, including Martha Jenkins, who had functioned as Mayor Charles Evers’s special attorney in Fayette, Mississippi.41

With the assistance of the Lawyers’ Committee, the United Front was able to challenge longstanding practices of racial discrimination in the city as well as counteract many of the legal and extralegal methods utilized by whites to repress the local Black Power Movement. Moreover, the Lawyers’ Committee was also able to provide free legal services to low-income residents in Alexander, Union, and Pulaski counties for the first time. Thousands of working people – Black and white – were able to obtain legal support for civil cases involving divorce, adoption, employment discrimination, child support, social security, and public aid.42


Within a few weeks of arriving in the city, the Lawyers’ Committee had halted all jury trials in the county and forced a series of reforms that eliminated longstanding patterns of discrimination in jury selection. With the assistance of local Black Power activists, the Lawyers’ Committee was also able to overturn a series of repressive city ordinances that criminalized such conventional protest activities as picketing and marching. On top of counteracting such repression, the Lawyers’ Committee also fought and won a series of landmark civil rights suits overturning longstanding patterns of discrimination in education, housing, employment, and political representation. Long-term practices of segregation in public housing were overturned when Black residents won a class action lawsuit against the Alexander County Housing Authority. City jobs were opened up after the Lawyers’ Committee filed suit after suit alleging racial discrimination in hiring practices. County boards and commissions that had traditionally been the preserve of white appointees were eventually forced to include Black representation. And, in *Kendrick v. Walder* (1980), the district court abolished the city’s discriminatory at-large voting system and restored the earlier ward-based system, resulting in the election of African Americans to the city council for the first time in almost one hundred years.\(^4\)

For many, the United Methodist Church’s establishment of a legal aid office in Cairo represented exactly the kind of engaged social ministry that the Black Power Movement demanded of predominantly white denominations. A regional conference of the United Methodist Church had been challenged to address the very real problems facing Black residents in its jurisdiction and had boldly stepped forward and offered a solution. In turn, the national denomination had thrown its weight behind the local initiative and offered to assist in securing critical resources. In many ways, the United Methodist project might be characterized as a model

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for church-based support for Black Power. However, a closer examination illustrates some of the problems that would plague many church-funded initiatives during this period.

From the outset, the legal aid office lacked fiscal stability and a long-term financial plan. Since the United Methodist Church had initiated the project, the United Front could be forgiven for expecting that the denomination would provide a stable source of ongoing support for its operation. However, such a commitment was never forthcoming for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, the Methodists viewed their support for the legal aid office as seed money, believing that a more permanent state-supported legal aid service and public defenders office could be secured in time. On the other, Methodist leaders hoped that the more immediate financial needs of the legal aid office could be met by an ecumenical funding effort that simply never materialized.44

In this context, the legal aid office was forced to operate on a series of short-term funding grants as opposed to more institutionalized sources of revenue from within the denomination. During its first year, for example, the legal aid office was primarily supported by a combination of private donations from Methodist laypersons and small grants from church committees. Dr. Ernest Teagle, the Belleville surgeon who had proposed the creation of the legal aid office, personally donated $5,000 to the project. Robert C. O’Neil, another layperson who had also committed to assist in the legal aid office’s formation, matched this donation. Supplementing these individual donations were a number of small grants from the Southern Illinois Conference ($4,000), the Southern Illinois Bishop’s discretionary fund ($1,000), and the Women’s Division of the Board of Missions of the national United Methodist Church ($2,000). These, like the

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individual donations, were one-time grants with no firm commitment for renewal. Thus, in its first year the legal aid office operated on a precarious and unsustainable funding base.\textsuperscript{45}

On several occasions, a shortage of funds caused the legal aid office to operate at a deficit, hindering work and putting considerable pressure on the United Front to lobby denominational leaders for additional resources. As the office became more established and its achievements more widely known, the United Front was able to better utilize its contacts within denominational hierarchies to leverage a number of emergency grants. Many of these grants came from within the United Methodist Church. However, significant allocations also came from other denominations, including in 1970 an $8,000 donation from the United Presbyterian Church and $13,000 from the Illinois Council of Churches Special Task Force Committee. Like other donations, however, these emergency grants were one-time, nonrenewable allocations designed to sustain the legal aid office in a time of crisis.\textsuperscript{46}

Despite periodic requests to other denominations for more sustainable long-term allocations, the United Methodist Church remained the primary church-based funding source to the legal office, much to the frustration of Methodist leaders. Shortly after the Lawyers’

\textsuperscript{45} John P. Adams to Dr. A. Dudley Ward, Dr. Grover C. Bagby, and Dr. Earnest A. Smith, January 23, 1970, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-08; Carolyn D. Wilhelm to Mike Miskovsky, January 18, 1970, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-08; Boyd Wagner to John P. Adams, December 19, 1969, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-08; John P. Adams to Mr. and Mrs. Robert Davis, October 10, 1969, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-08; John P. Adams to Dr. Earnest H. Teagle, August 25, 1969, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-08; William W. Bennett to Mrs. Carolyn Wilhelm, August 18, 1969, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-08; Dr. Earnest H. Teagle to Preston Ewing, August 10, 1969, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-08.

Committee opened the legal office in Cairo, Methodist leaders reached out to Rev. Robert Chapman, executive director of the National Council of Churches Committee for Racial Justice, to ask for assistance in coordinating ecumenical support for the project. Unfortunately, these efforts bore little fruit, prompting John Adams, director of the United Methodist Church’s Department of Law, Justice and Community Relations, to write a letter of complaint to Chapman. “[W]e have endeavored to search out every possible source of funding,” Adams wrote, “and to this date have been able to receive only Methodist money for a project that was assumed to be inter-denominational and ecumenical from the beginning.” Adams reminded Chapman that the Methodist funding was simply “an initial effort to establish the Project” and that it had been believed that “other denominations would come up with support similarly and that the Project could be secured.” Instead, Adams feared that “the Methodist sources have been explored and exploited to their fullest” and that “unless there are other expressions of support soon the Project unfortunately will have to be terminated.”

In reality, the legal aid office was a Methodist-initiated project, and Adams’s expectation that other denominations would support the project in a more sustained fashion was probably wishful thinking on his part. Moreover, his claim that Methodist sources of funding had been “explored and exploited to their fullest” rings hollow considering the size and non-institutional character of the denomination’s donations. By the time Adams wrote his letter to Rev. Chapman in December 1969, the national United Methodist Church had contributed a grand total of $2,000 to the legal office from a one-time donation made by the Women’s Division of the Board of Missions. Clearly the United Methodist Church, an organization with a total operating budget in

the millions, had not exhausted its resources. Rather, the organization had failed to prioritize and secure the kind of long-term and institutional funds necessary to sustain the legal office, hoping instead that they could persuade other denominations to extend their own resources. While other denominational leaders including Rev. Chapman clearly supported the Lawyers’ Committee’s work, they were hampered in their ability to secure donations as a result of their own allocation of much larger amounts of institutional funding to the United Front for the bail bond and economic development programs that I will examine further in this chapter.

Unsurprisingly, these funding concerns provoked considerable animosity among local Black Power activists, who appreciated the support of the Lawyers’ Committee but fretted that a shortage of church funding would cut the organization’s efforts short. In a letter dated January 31, 1971, the United Front leadership expressed its “deepest appreciation for the funds the United Methodists made available so that the Lawyers’ Committee could serve in Cairo.” However, they emphasized the importance of locating long-term funding that would allow the Lawyers’ Committee to stay in the community, stating that to leave now would be “insane” and would turn the committee into “a gigantic farce upon our community.” The United Front apologized if the tone of these statements sounded “hostile,” but emphasized that too many “well intentioned” people had “set back the day of reconciliation by unwise, premature and what have turned out to be the abortive attempts to mediate and reconcile.” In order to preserve the legal aid office, the United Front recommended that the Methodists commit further resources immediately and cast wide their net to incorporate other denominational support. While tense, these types of interactions were one of the key ways in which local Black Power activists held church leaders accountable for their commitments and leveraged much needed resources.48

Ultimately, concerns regarding the sustainability of the legal aid office were partially addressed by the extension of federal funds from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). In July 1970, the OEO approved an annual budget for the Lawyers’ Committee of $101,500, of which $90,000 came directly from an annually renewable OEO grant. This funding allowed for a significant expansion in the work of the Lawyer’s Committee and the kind of financial stability that had been absent in the past year. With these new resources, the Lawyer’s Committee was able to provide free legal services to all poor residents in Alexander, Pulaski, and Union counties. However, the remaining $11,500 would still have to be raised by the United Front, which would continue to rely heavily on church-based resources. This pattern was continued in July 1971 when the OEO renewed its grant, prompting the United Front to begin lobbying denominations to renew their own donations to the sum of $12,000. John Adams of the Methodist Church and Robert Chapman of the National Council of Churches’ Racial Justice Commission continued to play key roles in leveraging funds that sustained the organization throughout the early 1970s. This included securing a significant grant from the Legal Defense Fund of the United Presbyterian Church in 1972. However, the need to continually mobilize new funding sources placed a considerable burden on the United Front, fueling underlying tensions between the organization and its church donors.49

A fundamental tension between the United Front and its church-based donors was over control of the allocation and distribution of church-based resources. With the Lawyers’

Committee now receiving generous federal grants, Charles Koen demanded that church
donations be redirected to the United Front to address the organization’s more immediate
concerns. When this advice was not heeded, Koen wrote to the national director of the Lawyer’s
Committee, Peter Connell. Koen explained that over the past few months the United Front had
actively pursued funds for the legal office at the expense of other key programs and services.
“We did this,” Koen explained, “without any knowledge that the Lawyers’ Committee was
seeking funds from the Office of Economic Opportunity.” Now the Lawyers’ Committee had
received the OEO funding and Koen worried that “there are still some church funds being
siphoned from the United Front to the Lawyers’ Committee on the basis of our pleas and
requests.” Specifically, Koen informed Connell that it was his understanding that “the United
Presbyterian Church will give $8,000 to the Committee and that the National Missionary Society
of the United Methodist Church has earmarked another $2,500.” This frustrated Koen because of
the desperate need of his own organization for bail bond and economic development funding.
Koen explained that the high bail bonds had “caused the United Front to be in serious financial
condition” and that “[t]his happens at the same time our program is rapidly expanding in the
fields of economic development and housing.” In a desperate last appeal for help, Koen informed
Connell that the United Front was “not able to adequately finance these and other programs
because of this tremendous drain-off due to necessary legal expenses.”

At one level, Koen’s concerns were a logical consequence of escalating bail bond and
legal aid costs incurred by local Black Power activists who were systematically picked up on
spurious charges and prosecuted under repressive city ordinances. The Lawyers’ Committee did
not fund bail bond and, as a result, the United Front had to devote considerable energy to
fundraising just to keep its members out of jail. Rev. Blaine Ramsey of the Illinois Council of

50 Charles Koen to Peter Connell, September 1, 1970, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-12.
Churches’ Special Task Force and Rev. Robert C. Chapman of the National Council of Churches’ Racial Justice Committee played key roles in securing allocations for bail bond by lobbying their constituent members at the state and national levels.51

However, at a more fundamental level, Koen’s letter to Connell indicated the frustrations many Black Power activists had with the funding priorities and processes of predominantly white churches. “Since much of our funding comes from the white church,” Koen wrote, “we are faced with a situation which appears to be that the white church will fund us indirectly and through another white person who they feel would safely administer their monies.” For Koen, the Lawyer’s Committee was a good example of this pattern because it allowed “white American Church officials to escape from dealing directly with real Black citizens.” According to Koen, the United Front rejected “this subterfuge which allows some whites for a few moments to assuage their guilt, but not remove their prejudices.” Instead, Koen demanded that churches adopt a “no strings attached” model by forwarding donations directly to the United Front and allowing Black Power activists working at the grassroots level to make decisions about the appropriate usage of funds.52

In September 1970, the United Front made this request directly to the United Presbyterian Church that had extended an emergency grant of $8,000 to the Lawyers’ Committee after the OEO funding had been received. When Presbyterian Church executives refused to meet with the United Front to discuss the matter further, Koen wrote a letter in which he “strongly urged” that

52 Charles Koen to Peter Connell, September 1, 1970, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-12.
church executives “reconsider your flat refusal to meet with us in Cairo to discuss this grant.” “It has always been our feeling,” Koen wrote, “that the white church should always desire to talk with Black citizens who are involved in the struggle when grants are being made in a city on the assumption these monies would aid Blacks.” Further, Koen reiterated that the Front would “not become part of a goodwill program which allows the white church to buy off their guilt by giving money, but at the same time permit the church to remain as prejudiced and non-understanding as before.” According to Koen, this was exactly what the Presbyterian Church had done in Cairo by diverting funds needed by Blacks “to an operation adequately funded by a $90,000 grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity.” Koen acknowledged that the Lawyers’ Committee “needed funds to survive,” but insisted that since they had received the OEO grant, “priorities have changed dramatically.” Therefore, Koen informed the Presbyterian leadership that they must “be prepared to change as circumstances change” or face the loss of faith of Black communities. “We would hope,” Koen stated, “that you will face this issue head on and understand that Blacks must determine their own destiny and Blacks must determine the priorities, at a given time, as to how and to whom, funds must be spent.” “The white church,” he insisted, “cannot and must not pick a white person or a committee with a majority of whites to make these determinations for Blacks.” Such an approach, Koen argued, could not be accepted by the United Front because it represented a compromise both of the “covenant” they had made with God “to fight racism at all levels” and to their “rights for self-determination.” Similar demands were sent to John Adams at the United Methodist Church. All future donations, Koen demanded, “should come directly to the United Front.”

53 Charles E. Koen to Lewis Andrew, September 1, 1970, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-12; Charles Koen to John Adams, September 1, 1970, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-12.
These initial encounters between the United Front and national church executives crystallized both the tremendous potential and unforeseen limitations of church-based resources in the minds of Cairo’s Black Power activists. One contemporary of the Black Power Movement has described the nation’s churches as “the only major institutions in our society possessing both the latent and moral capability and sufficient financial resources to play a catalytic role.” Black Cairoites and their allies tested this theory and, in the process, demonstrated the vulnerability of church executives to Black Power’s rhetorical appeals. Church-based resources had played a critical role in initiating a program to address Black Cairoites’ legal problems when federal and state agencies had failed to do so. In turn, the existence of a fully operational legal aid office had made obtaining federal support much more achievable. However, church-based funding had been piecemeal and unreliable, forcing the United Front to engage in its own rigorous fundraising campaign. This had added to the organization’s workload and “siphoned” funds away from other important initiatives. Consequently, United Front leaders began working with Rev. Blaine Ramsey and the Illinois Council of Churches Special Task Force Committee to identify more stable sources of church support for their survival programs, organizational operations, and economic development initiatives that came with fewer “strings attached.” One of the places they began to look was toward historically Black denominations in the state of Illinois.  

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Black Denominational Networks and the United Front’s Survival Program

While predominantly white denominations played a key role in addressing the United Front’s legal needs, the organization’s survival programs in the areas of food and clothing security and medical assistance illustrate the unique and significant contributions of historically Black denominations. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black church networks in Chicago played a critical role in facilitating the work of Operation Need, the United Front’s emergency food and clothing distribution service. Chicago-based AME congregations donated food, clothing, and funds for distribution through Ward Chapel, their sister-church in Cairo. By early 1970, these donations were consistent and substantial enough to warrant the opening of a separate United Front Office in the Hyde Park Bank Building in Chicago. United Front activist Edna Williams coordinated the churches’ donations and arranged for regular convoys to transport the goods to Cairo. In this manner, Operation Need was able to meet the basic needs of Cairo’s poorest community members as well as provide a viable alternative to white merchants.55

Operation Need typified the unique relationship forged between historically Black denominations and the United Front. While the contributions of predominantly white denominations were extended from powerful state and national bodies, Black churches tended to coordinate their support locally in the form of a continuous stream of clothing, food, and monetary donations. Local congregations discussed the plight of Black Cairoites, their relationship to the struggle, and the need to extend Christian support and encouragement. Thus,

the coalitional relationships forged between the United Front and Chicago’s Black congregations were often more personal and direct, reflecting stronger grassroots solidarity.

However, unlike their predominantly white counterparts, historically Black denominations did not extend significant financial resources to the United Front from their state and national bodies. Of course, it was predominantly white denominations that had been the target of both Forman’s reparations demands and Black clergy’s critiques. It was predominantly white denominations, Black Power activists contended, that needed to atone for past wrongs through the extension of financial contributions to Black communities. However, as my earlier examination of Cairo’s Black churches demonstrates, the call for a more relevant ministry clearly influenced African American congregations, and although they might not have matched the large financial contributions of their predominantly white counterparts, they did use their networks to extend critical resources to Black Power initiatives.

In addition to coordinating food and clothing donations for Operation Need, historically Black denominations provided the United Front with the technical expertise of Black professionals. This approach is most visible in the efforts of the AME Church’s Health Commission to address the desperate medical concerns of Cairo’s poor and Black community members. In 1969, the United Front began to develop plans to secure access to medical resources from outside the city. The need for medical resources was critical for several reasons. First, Cairo’s only medical facility, St. Mary’s Hospital, had a history of discrimination in the provision of medical services. The civil rights struggles of the 1960s had successfully challenged some of St. Mary’s more overt discriminatory practices. However, by the late 1960s the hospital was facing bankruptcy and could only provide what its own administrator, Sister Joan Marie,
defined as “grossly inadequate” care for both Black and white low-income residents.\textsuperscript{56} Reports of Black Cairoites being turned away in emergency cases were all too common, forcing African Americans to drive almost thirty miles to hospitals in Paducah, Kentucky and Cape Girardeau, Missouri for medical assistance.\textsuperscript{57}

Efforts to provide alternative medical services from within the community were hampered by a combination of the city’s intractable white civic leadership and the shortage of Black doctors. Cairo’s civic leaders turned a blind eye to the massive health problems. As the 1972 Hearing of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights would show, local officials had never applied for state or federal resources that could have addressed this health crisis.\textsuperscript{58} In the absence of these resources, the Black community and poor whites commonly went untreated. In the late 1960s, only two African American doctors operated in Cairo and, according to the United Front, both failed to contribute to the extension of adequate and accessible medical services to the city’s Black population.\textsuperscript{59}

With the formation of the United Front, Black Power activists determined to address this health crisis themselves by securing outside support and resources. Their efforts were spurred on in January 1970 when Dr. Leonidas Berry, chairman of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church’s Health Commission, came to Cairo to speak at Ward Chapel AME Church. Berry, a nationally renowned physician and churchman working at Chicago’s Provident Hospital, had been following events in Cairo closely and decided to fill a truck with food and medical supplies and drive to the embattled city. After speaking at Ward Chapel AME Church on Sunday, Berry stayed in Cairo to participate in the United Front’s protests and discuss the needs of Black

\textsuperscript{56} Hearing before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 287
\textsuperscript{57} “Medics, Aides Fly to Cairo”, Chicago Daily Defender, February 16, 1970, “Free Medical Clinic to Open,” The Monitor (East St. Louis, Ill.) February 12, 1970.
\textsuperscript{58} Hearing before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 297
\textsuperscript{59} “Flying Black Medics Dramatize Cairo’s Poor Health Care,” Jet (March 5, 1970)
community members. When local residents described being denied medical care at St. Mary’s and driving across state lines for emergency treatment, Berry felt compelled to take action.⁶⁰

On his way home to Chicago, Berry developed the idea for the Flying Black Medics – a team of Black physicians and nurses that would make trips to Cairo to provide immediate medical assistance and bring media attention to the city’s health crisis. Berry quickly set up a meeting with a group of Black doctors in Chicago to begin coordinating the trip. The group worked on securing the voluntary participation of Black nurses, technicians, and doctors while Berry worked through AME church networks to secure access to medical supplies and other resources. Berry met with Bishop H. Thomas Primm of the Fourth Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and he was granted permission to solicit foodstuffs and medicine through the health groups and missionary societies of the Woodlawn, Grant, and Coppin AME churches in Chicago for distribution through Cairo’s Ward Chapel. More help came from the Black-owned Williams Clinic in Chicago, which provided over $10,000 of laboratory equipment. Finally, the Black doctors pooled their resources and financed two charter planes to transport the staff and supplies to Cairo.⁶¹

The Flying Black Medics landed in Paducah on a cold February day where they were met by Rev. Charles Koen and other leaders of the United Front. The team of thirty-two doctors, nurses, technicians, social workers, and dieticians were loaded onto the United Front bus and transported across the river into Cairo. Awaiting the group at Ward Chapel AME were hundreds of patients who had been organized and registered in advance by the United Front and the

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church’s own Social Action Committee chaired by Hattie Kendrick. The doctors set up a makeshift clinic in the basement of the church and began taking patients one by one.

As they met with the patients, the doctors were alarmed by the tragic human cost of Cairo’s grossly inadequate medical services. Dr. Audley F. Connor of the Chicago Board of Health stated that 12 of the first 15 adults he examined had “serious medical problems which needed immediate medical treatment.” Men and women suffering from treatable conditions all but wiped out elsewhere came to the clinic and received medical attention for the first time all in front of the gaze of the national news media. Most notably, NBC’s famed television news show, the *Huntley-Brinkley Report*, had moved into the basement of Ward Chapel and was covering the remarkable scene for a national audience. Koen, taking advantage of the opportunity, made a statement to press. “Those in our city who have said that local medical facilities and personnel are keeping up with the medical needs of our poor will have to do some rethinking and evaluating,” Koen stated. “The poor in Cairo and its surrounding communities,” he explained, “have been sadly neglected in this important area of their life.”

The Black Flying Medics had won a remarkable victory. They had provided immediate medical care and attracted the kind of attention necessary to secure a more long-term solution to the city’s health crisis. According to Berry, “the medical power structure of the state was greatly upset” by what they had seen in Cairo and even more so by the wave of bad publicity that had followed. The Black Flying Medics worked with the United Front to lobby state officials to

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provide funds from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) for the establishment of a Black-owned and controlled medical center in the city. However, Berry complained that the project was “bogged down by state, medical, and local politics” from the start, and a year after the Black Flying Medics had visited the city, state officials extended the OEO grant to St. Mary’s Hospital instead. Berry’s efforts to secure the program for the United Front were defeated, and the hospital that had been at the center of debates over racial discrimination reaped the harvest of others’ seed. In his autobiography, Berry situates his struggles with the OEO as one of the most exhausting and demoralizing moments of his career. Shortly after the OEO’s decision, Berry announced his “semi-retirement” from the profession and a “drastic reduction” in his private practice.63

On January 4, 1971, St. Mary’s Hospital opened a walk-in clinic with the support of a $100,000 federal OEO grant channeled through the Shawnee Development Council. The crusading role of Dr. Leonidas Berry and the AME church in securing these much-needed medical resources was quickly forgotten by those outside the Black community, but those within continued the fight to ensure that the new clinic was accountable and accessible to them. In accordance with the federal OEO grant guidelines, a bi-racial board that included representatives from the health care profession and the community administrated the clinic. In the first three months of its operation, the community clinic served over 650 patients in a total of 1300 visits. The heavy load required the clinic to borrow personnel from St. Mary’s Hospital and begin identifying other sources of funding to expand the clinic’s services. An important source of support came from the Governor’s Office of Human Resources in the form of a Mobile Health Unit that allowed the clinic to extend its services to the areas surrounding Cairo. Shortly after,

the clinic also opened three Outreach Program Centers in the city’s public housing projects. The mobile units and the outreach centers allowed residents to have continual on-the-spot contact with medical practitioners. However, when hospital administrators testified before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1972, they continued to emphasize the inadequacy of the level of care and the need for a more long-term solution to the serious medical problems facing the city’s Black and poor residents. “I believe,” Sister Joan Marie stated, “that we are still just putting out fires.” While Sister Marie believed the clinic was a good thing, she insisted that “a great deal more needs to be done.” However, additional assistance was not forthcoming, and by the end of the year the OEO explained that it would not be renewing the clinic’s grant due to insufficient funds. By 1974, with St. Mary’s Hospital facing bankruptcy, the clinic was closed.

The closure of the medical clinic underscored the risks that came with accepting governmental funding. The clinic, like the legal aid office, had been initiated with the critical support of church-based organizations under the assumption that governmental resources would provide a more stable, long-term base. Indeed, implicit in the vision of liberal denominational bodies like the United Methodist Church and the National Council of Churches was a fundamental belief that poverty would be eradicated by the creation of a guaranteed annual wage and the provision of federal and state social welfare programs. Their own grant-awarding programs were often envisioned as stop-gaps on the path to longer term government solutions. However, by involving state and federal agencies, Black Cairoites had rapidly lost control over the clinic and, ultimately, witnessed its closure due to cuts in governmental funding. This pattern

66 Cairo City Council Minutes, (Cairo, Ill.) July 10, 1973;
would play itself out in a number of the United Front’s projects, undercutting the early collaborative efforts of Black Power activists and church-based donors and setting back the community’s struggle for equity and empowerment.67

**Church-Based Grants for Organizational Operations and Economic Development**

Identifying alternative funding sources that would allow the United Front to preserve control over local projects as well as secure stable sources of ongoing funding became a central priority for the United Front. Blaine Ramsey’s networking on behalf of the United Front had brought him into direct contact with leading Black church executives who functioned as gatekeepers of much larger sources of denominational funding at the national level. Through these networks, the United Front became aware of several new grant-awarding bodies, including the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations (IFCO), the Episcopal Church’s General Convention Special Program, and the United Presbyterian Church’s National Committee for the Self-Development of People. These grant programs were particularly attractive to local activists because they had large institutional budgets that were controlled by progressive Black clergy committed to extending funds directly to Black Power organizations. With significant portions of the United Front’s budget being redirected to legal aid and bail bond, its leaders began working with Blaine Ramsey to craft funding proposals that would allow them to sustain their own organizational operations as well as initiate autonomous parallel institutions, including a day care center, a food cooperative, a prefabricated housing factory, and a cooperative shopping center.

In the fall of 1969, the United Front began developing a funding proposal for the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations (IFCO). IFCO was a not-for-profit ecumenical foundation that, under the leadership of Rev. Lucius Walker, funded a wide variety of Black Power initiatives during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In September, Rev. Charles Koen and Rev. Blaine Ramsey traveled to IFCO headquarters in New York to discuss the proposal and, a few weeks later, IFCO leaders converged on the border city to witness for themselves the United Front’s work. The United Front’s first proposal was unsuccessful. However, after making some suggested modifications their second proposal was accepted in September 1970, resulting in the extension of a grant totaling $229,660.68

The IFCO grant was the largest single church-based donation to the United Front and was responsible for underwriting much of the organization’s work between September 1970 and September 1971. Most critically, the grant contained allocations covering the United Front’s day-to-day operational expenses including staff salaries and office expenses. In accordance with the United Front’s proposal, IFCO extended $78,000 for salaries for the United Front’s Executive Director ($10,000), Program Coordinator ($9,000), Public Relations Officer ($8,000), Research Assistant ($8,000), seven Field Organizers ($35,000), and two secretaries ($8,000). In addition, separate allocations were made for the maintenance of the United Front’s offices at St.

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Columba’s ($15,000) and travel expenditures ($10,000) necessary to ensure that the group maintained its coalitional relationships with Black Power organizations across the country.\footnote{United Front of Cairo, “IFCO Grant Proposal Records,” August 27, 1970, IFCO Papers, box 35, folder 78; United Front of Cairo, “A Proposal for Funding,” 1970, IFCO Papers, box 35, folder 78.}

The IFCO grant also allocated funds for the initiation of the United Front’s economic development projects. In their proposal, the United Front explained that they “had become increasingly aware of the need to move along the lines of economic development,” and because of the distinctive nature of that kind of work, they requested funds for “a separate staff of persons” that would work through a new Economic Development Corporation. In accordance with this request, IFCO extended a total of $39,500 for salaries for a Program Director ($12,500), Economic Developer ($12,000), Deputy Economic Developer ($10,000), and a secretary ($5,000). IFCO also provided funds for the maintenance of an economic development office at St. Columba’s Church ($8,260) and travel expenses for its director ($4,500). The staff of the Economic Development Corporation, headed by Bobby Williams, devoted themselves full-time to a series of local projects including the development of a shopping plaza, a prefabricated housing factory, a food cooperative, a clothing store, and cleaners. To help launch these programs, IFCO extended $60,000 in seed money to be used at the United Front’s discretion.\footnote{United Front of Cairo, “IFCO Grant Proposal Record,” August 27, 1970, IFCO Papers, box 35, folder 78, United Front of Cairo, “A Proposal for Funding,” 1970, IFCO Papers, box 35, folder 78, United Front of Cairo, “A Proposal for the Funding of A Program In Economic Development for Cairo, Illinois,” 1970, IFCO Papers, box 35, folder 78.}

Over the next two years, the United Front’s organizational operations and economic development programs would be supported by a series of similar church-based grants. In 1970, the IFCO grant was supplemented by a grant from the Episcopal Church’s General Convention Special Program. Established in 1967, the program was designed to address the problems of African Americans and other oppressed populations in urban communities by extending grants
directly to local community organizations. In February, Leon Modeste and other members of the General Convention Special Program approved a $68,000 grant to “sustain [the United Front’s] office and staff expenses, develop its economic program further, continue political organizing and finance leadership training classes.”

At the start of the next funding year, the United Front secured two separate grants totaling $127,000 from the National Committee for the Self-Development of People of the Presbyterian Church. Established in 1970, the National Committee extended seed money to community organizations for the initiation of programs that would allow affected communities to “use their own efforts to gain material, social, political and spiritual freedom.” Over the past year, the program had funded, among other projects, a wood products company in Lowndes County ($62,500), the Black People’s Unity Movement in Camden, New Jersey ($150,000), the San Diego Welfare Rights Organization ($29,000), and a cooperative feeder pig program run by the Southeast Alabama Self-Help Association ($50,000). In 1971, representatives from the National Committee visited Cairo to meet the United Front and study their plight. Shortly after, the United Front submitted a proposal for funding to the National Committee. The grants from the National Committee were extended to the United Front for the purpose of assisting the organization in its most “urgent needs of personnel and operating capital to establish a transit system, design a welfare program, protect tenants rights, settle union and employment problems, and design and implement an education plan for children.” In addition, funds were allocated for the ongoing

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After struggling for almost a year with limited organizational resources, the United Front was now able to maintain a full-time professional staff capable of devoting considerable attention to the development of the organization’s political program. In most cases the United Front hired local Black activists, like Mabel Hollis and “Switch” Wilson, who had demonstrated considerable loyalty and commitment. This created jobs for local activists and ensured that people familiar with local conditions and networks were at the center of the United Front’s operations. With their salaries coming from church-based organizations located outside of the city, the United Front’s staff was relatively autonomous and insulated from the economic pressure of Cairo’s white elite. Such autonomy was important in Cairo since active participation in the United Front’s activities often carried the risk of harassment at the hands of white merchants and city officials, not to mention law enforcement.

Hiring a permanent staff also had important programmatic implications. Without a paid staff structure, Black Power organizations could exhaust themselves simply doing, what the United Front called, “survival” work. Engaging in self-defense patrols; ensuring that Black community members were clothed and fed; keeping activists out of jail; these were the daily survival acts that many Black Power organizations performed. However, having a permanent staff structure afforded the United Front the stability and resources to develop more long-term plans to improve the social, political, and economic position of Black Cairoites. Since
governmental and corporate donors were unlikely to extend funds directly to Black Power organizations for staff salaries, the United Front’s ability to move beyond “survival” work and into long-term political programming was possible, to a large extent, because of their ability to secure more flexible church-based grants.

The development of autonomous parallel institutions was a key component of the United Front’s broader political program, a fact that fit well with the funding criteria of many church-based organizations. Grant-awarding programs like the National Committee for the Self-Development of People placed primacy on funding self-determining initiatives that would eventually operate independent of external support. Accordingly, grants were extended in the form of seed money that allowed Black Power organizations to initiate new and innovative programs. This type of “start-up” funding allowed the United Front to work on a variety of programs, including a shopping plaza, a women’s clothing store, a prefabricated housing plant, a cleaners, and a food market, all operated on a cooperative basis. These programs were designed to create new jobs for local Black workers, provide Black consumers with an affordable alternative to discriminatory white business owners, and redirect accumulated wealth back into the Black community.

However, the extension of seed money assumed that once economic development programs were established Black Cairoites would operate on an equal playing field with their white counterparts. In reality, the United Front’s Black-owned and -operated institutions faced rigorous opposition from white vigilantes and civic leaders willing to utilize a variety of legal and extralegal methods to destroy them. City leaders were unified in their opposition to the United Front and used their administrative powers to hinder the development of the organization’s programs at every turn. The United Front’s efforts to develop a shopping plaza,
for example, were halted by the city council, which in a last ditch effort to prevent the project’s development, refused to rezone the property the organization intended to build the plaza upon. Similarly, the United Front’s housing program stalled when the city council refused to sell city-owned lots to a non-profit housing development corporation. When such methods failed, white vigilantes demonstrated their willingness to engage in violent, terroristic activities. The United Front’s clothing store and pre-fabricated housing factory both came under assault by white vigilantes. The United Front’s clothing store was subjected to drive-by shootings, almost killing a security guard who had been posted outside to protect the building. Meanwhile, arsonists torched the housing factory, resulting in extensive damage to the building and lumber supplies.\footnote{Cairo City Council Minutes, October 12, 1970; “Mayor Speaks Against Black Business Opportunities,” The Monitor (November 5, 1970; “Mayor Says He Opposes Rezoning UF Property,” Cairo Evening Citizen, October 29, 1970; Cairo City Council Minutes, November 9, 1970; “Palace Now Open,” United Front News, November 14, 1970; “Koen in Attack on Ralph Smith,” Chicago Daily Defender, October 15, 1970; “A Summary of the Week’s Violence against Blacks of Cairo,” United Front News, October 24, 1970; “City Council Rejects New Housing,” The Monitor, May 13, 1971; “Housing Program to Be Explained to City Council,” The Monitor, May 20, 1971; Hearing before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 184, Illinois Advisory Committee, A Decade of Waiting in Cairo, 18-19.}

Even if the United Front’s cooperative programs could survive these immediate threats, they faced more long-term structural obstacles to their efforts to achieve self-determination and autonomy. In Cairo, the absence of a stable Black working-class and attendant Black middle-class meant that Black consumer power was remarkably limited. As Chapter One showed, Cairo’s underdeveloped Black class structure had contributed to the failure of earlier attempts to establish black business enterprises and cooperative institutions. The United Front’s economic boycott of white merchants did present the organization with a unique opportunity to capitalize on a highly organized and unified Black consumer base. However, once the boycott ended, the United Front’s cooperative institutions faced stiff competition from local business owners, not to mention the broader challenges presented by a regional marketplace in which industry was rapidly declining and large employers were consolidating their control. As political scientist
Robert Allen explains, Black Power’s emphasis on the development of autonomous and self-determining economic programs “assumes that the economy is still open to new enterprises.” This assumption, according to Allen, “is unrealistic in an era when small businesses are failing at a high rate and large-scale commercial enterprises, because of the virtual monopoly of gigantic corporations, are extremely difficult to launch.”

In this context, the extension of seed money by church-based organizations resulted in the initiation of economic development programs that often appeared destined to fall either to the first wave of repression or to a more long-term financial instability. The fact that the United Front was able to ensure that some programs survived is testament to the skill and perseverance of local activists as well as their ability to mobilize alternative governmental resources that they unwittingly believed would be more sustainable. Indeed, despite the best intentions of progressive Black clergy, the extension of seed money, far from putting the United Front on a track to self-determination and autonomy, actually increased dependence upon governmental funding sources that took power out of the hands of Black Cairoites, and with the end of the War on Poverty would eventually dry up.

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CHAPTER 5

“THE RECESSION OF NATIONAL SPIRIT”:

THE DECLINE OF THE CAIRO BLACK POWER MOVEMENT

Since its founding in the summer of 1969, the United Front had waged a powerful assault on Cairo’s unique system of racial oppression, catapulting the organization into the national spotlight. In a period so often characterized by sectarianism and internecine battles, the United Front had forged a surprisingly broad-based and inclusive coalition under the banner of a new spiritual philosophy and a set of shared cultural practices and discourses rooted in the Black church. This unique approach served to promote great solidarity among Black Cairoites and opened the door to new and important coalitional relationships, particularly with Black clergy operating at the state and national level. Building on these relationships, the United Front mounted one of the country’s longest and most effective economic boycotts, overturned longstanding practices of discrimination, and established a series of parallel institutions that catered to some of the most basic needs of the city’s poor and Black residents. Accordingly, many Black Power activists looked to Cairo as a model for organizational unity and a key bellwether of national trends.

However, by January 1972, the East St. Louis Monitor reported that Cairo had “all but vanished from the news.” Picketing downtown had ceased a few months prior, the organization’s Saturday rallies were sporadic at best, and the economic boycott was, for all intents and purposes, broken. Black Cairoites now returned to a downtown business district decimated by intractable white merchants who, in many cases, favored bankruptcy over hiring Black workers.
and extending courtesy titles to all of their customers. Writing for the *Washington Post*, journalist Andrew Wilson pointed out that despite the failure of local business owners to meet the United Front’s demands, the organization had “allowed the boycott to peter out” and local activists had seemingly abandoned “the practice of holding weekend rallies and parades.” Mass mobilization and direct action, he contended, were no longer the order of the day. However, Wilson was quick to note that the United Front was “hardly on its last legs,” arguing that the organization had simply “redirected its energy.” Indeed, beginning in the winter of 1971, the United Front increasingly shifted organizational focus away from mass mobilization and direct action and toward electoral politics, state-sponsored economic development, and the mountain of ongoing legal cases still awaiting trial. While this strategic decision was made in earnest by United Front leaders determined to both protect and further the Black Freedom Movement, it was also a critical signpost that marked the United Front’s final hours as a mass-based organization engaged in the “noninstitutionalized discourses and practices of change” that sociologist Roberta Garner identifies as the key hallmark of any social movement. Although committed men and women continued to work to improve opportunities for African Americans in Cairo, by 1974 these efforts no longer constituted a coherent social movement.¹

This chapter traces the closing stages of the Cairo Black Power Movement, drawing out those factors that contributed most significantly to its decline. In contrast to many other Black Power organizations, the United Front survived the narrowing structure of opportunities and initial wave of state repression that characterized the late 1960s and early 1970s. Moreover, the organization’s united front strategy, solidified by its overarching spiritual philosophy and a movement culture rooted in the Black church, allowed the United Front to maintain remarkable

levels of internal unity. Thus, traditional accounts of Black Power’s declension that have focused largely on the internal disorganization of Black Power groups or the external pressure of state repression are by themselves less persuasive in Cairo’s case.

Rather, in this chapter I trace the roots of the decline of the Cairo Black Power Movement to 1971 and the dynamic interplay of an increasingly obstinate city leadership, an escalation in local forms of repression, and, most importantly, the collapse of the church-based resources that had facilitated much of the United Front’s political program. Rather than upping their support at this critical juncture, the United Front’s primary sponsors - predominantly white mainline denominations – pulled back under pressure internally from conservative white congregants and externally from federal and state agencies including the FBI and the IRS. This so-called “recession of national spirit,” as Rev. Blaine Ramsey so aptly termed it, forced the United Front to make some difficult decisions about their political program and in so doing set the stage for the movement’s decline.

**Historicizing the Decline of the Black Power Movement**

Until recently, interpretations of the Black Power Movement’s decline were hampered by a prevailing civil rights story that portrayed Black Power as a chaotic and violent aberration that served to undermine earlier civil rights struggles. According to such accounts, Black Power’s demise followed shortly after and was the almost inevitable outcome of the movement’s internal disorganization, overblown rhetoric, and failure to establish what political scientist Doug McAdam termed a “broad-based issue consensus” that could unify participants and mobilize coalitional support. Historians Charles Payne and Clayborn Carson also underscored what they
perceived as Black Power’s fatal retreat from the community organizing tradition that typified earlier civil rights activism, particularly that of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). When combined with narrowing political opportunities and rampant state repression, scholars contended that Black Power’s obituary was all but written by the end of the Sixties.²

However, a new generation of Black Power scholarship, to which this dissertation contributes, overturns this narrative by tracing the contours of a number of previously overlooked local struggles that survived well into the early 1970s. Such studies have transformed understandings of Black Power’s character and periodization as well as having taken some tentative steps towards a reinterpretation of the movement’s untimely demise. Most obviously, by pushing the movement forward into the 1970s these studies demonstrate that the narrowing structure of political opportunities ushered in by the rise of the New Right and the wave of state repression that followed did not immediately result in Black Power’s decline. In fact, historian Peniel Joseph contends that a “second wave” of Black Power organizations came to the fore after 1970, skillfully adapting their approaches to the harsh political realities of the period. Studies of these previously overlooked struggles upend interpretations of Black Power’s declension as a logical outcome of activists’ abandonment of the community organizing tradition. Rather, as Joseph contends, these studies show that Black Power activists “amplified traditions of community organizing” as opposed to weakening them. Nevertheless, the consensus in the emergent subfield of Black Power Studies, with few exceptions, is that the national movement had ended by 1975, raising new and important questions in regards to causality.³

² Doug McAdam, Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 186.
Somewhat surprisingly, recent studies have reached remarkably similar conclusions regarding the causes of Black Power’s decline as their predecessors. Despite rejecting the claim that Black Power represented a shift away from the community organizing tradition, the more general conception of the movement as internally disorganized and divided continues to hold sway, particularly at the national level. Scholars have drawn particular attention to the ideological diversity of Black Power and the difficulties this presented to a coalitional or united front approach. Historian William Van DeBurg contends that the movement was dogged by “spirited critiques” from within that made “it appear that none of the activists’ programmatic approaches to empowerment were viable.” In contrast, Joseph finds room for hope in the modern Black convention movement that reached its zenith at the 1972 Gary Convention, but argues that efforts to forge a united front between the movement’s disparate ideological wings were aborted shortly after by a resurgent sectarianism. Furthermore, well-known fissures between cultural and revolutionary nationalists, not to mention mainstream civil rights organizations and radical Black Power groups, often overlapped with other important divisions rooted in class, region, generation and gender. Intraracial class divisions, in particular, have emerged as a key factor in narratives of movement decline, with historian Clarence Lang persuasively arguing that a truly democratic, grassroots approach to Black Power was ultimately undercut by a Black middle-class agenda that focused narrowly on the aims of Black capitalists and politicians. Lang builds upon the work of sociologist Robert Allen who in his landmark 1969 study, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, argued that the Black middle-class captured the Black Power Movement and harnessed its energy and ideology of Black Nationalism to expand their own economic and political power over Black communities, often producing little in the way of tangible gains for the Black working-class.⁴

⁴ Joseph, *Waiting ’Til the Midnight Hour*, 263; Van Deburg, *A New Day in Babylon*, 295, 301; Allen, *Black*
While scholars generally agree that internal divisions contributed to Black Power’s
decline, most view external factors as equally, if not more, important. Particular emphasis is
placed on the narrowing structure of political and economic opportunities faced by Black Power
organizations during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The rise of the New Right and “backlash”
politics undermined the War on Poverty, slashed domestic spending, and ushered in a “law and
order” agenda that powerfully shaped the context in which Black Power activists operated. A key
component of this delimited structure of opportunities was an upsurge in the repressive moves of
state actors, a factor that scholars have almost universally emphasized as contributing to Black
Power’s decline. Repression came in many different forms and at the hands of multiple
individuals and groups, including federal agencies like the FBI and the IRS, as well as state and
local law enforcement. Studies of specific nationalist and radical organizations show the
devastating effect these forms of repression had on the movement’s militant wing and their
corollary role in fostering tensions both within and between Black Power organizations.
Accordingly, external repression has also been attributed a role in the exacerbation of internal
disorganization and divisions.5

However, the salience of such factors in explaining Black Power’s decline comes with
some important caveats in light of the sustained activity of many Black Power organizations
throughout the early 1970s. While the periodization of earlier studies implied that the emergence
of “law and order” politics after President Nixon’s election in 1968 had an almost immediate

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5 Joseph, Waiting ’Til the Midnight Hour, 188, 210-11, 239-242, 248, 262-3; Ogbar, Black Power: Radical Politics
and African American Identity, 199-200; Winston A. Grady-Willis, Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black
Germany, New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society. (Athens:
University of Georgia Press, 2007), 271-295; Williams, Black Politics/ White Power, 132-142, 150-168; Curtis J.
Austin, Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party (Fayetteville:
University of Arkansas Press, 2006); Lang, Grassroots at the Gateway, 217-44.
effect, more recent accounts reveal that many local organizations were able to adapt and survive to their new and hostile surroundings. Which organizations survived and how they were able to adapt is an important but understudied question. However, scholars increasingly point toward an interpretation of decline that emphasizes the gradual, cumulative, and often, uneven effect of repression on the Black Power Movement and the adaptability of many local organizations against the odds. Accordingly, historian Matthew Countryman correctly argues that a narrowing structure of political and economic opportunities “can provide only a partial explanation for the decline in popular response to Black Power appeals during the 1970s.”

Thus, scholars have presented three main causes of Black Power’s decline: internal disorganization and division; narrowing political and economic opportunities; and the destructive role of state repression. In their accounts, scholars tend to mobilize several of these claims simultaneously. For example, the combination of a delimited structure of opportunities and state repression is often characterized as having contributed to the destruction of radical Black Power groups and the incorporation of their more moderate counterparts. However, scholarly attempts to elucidate the causes of decline, whether nationally or locally, tend to be lacking in spatial and historical specificity. What is often lost in such accounts is the agency of Black Power activists. Decline often becomes the tragic, but inevitable outcome of a catalog of errors and insurmountable obstacles.

By examining Black Power’s decline at the local level in Cairo, Illinois, this chapter builds upon and complicates the preceding scholarship. At the grassroots, the story of decline was often a gradual one in which small but significant changes in the structure of opportunities, the character of repression, and, importantly, the resources of an organization, all contributed to the movement’s decline. While studies have tended to emphasize the cumulative pressure that

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6 Countryman, Up South, 329.
these factors placed upon the Black Power Movement, as though each added a little more weight to an already weak foundation, this chapter argues that it was the interplay between specific and, in some cases, innocuous factors that ultimately mattered most.

Finally, this chapter seeks to restore the agency of Black Power activists to react and respond to their changing conditions. Far from being crushed by external factors like state repression and narrowing political opportunities, the United Front was able to adapt and survive as a result of the skill of their leading activists. Tactical innovation, the skill of adjusting and adapting to new conditions and threats, was in abundant supply in Cairo. However, tactical innovation also provides a key to understanding the often-overlooked role that Black Power activists played themselves in the de-escalation of mass mobilization. In Cairo, the decline of Black Power as a social movement is a story of conscious tactical decisions made in the context of narrowing opportunities, of repression and of dwindling resources.

**Black Power Against All Odds**

In October 1971, the St. Louis-based magazine, *Proud*, published an article by freelance journalist Michael Watson about his recent visit to Cairo, Illinois. Watson cast the significance of the Cairo struggle in the highest possible terms, defining the city as “the seat of racism and oppression” and the primary “battleground for Black Survival in the country.” “Why such importance for Cairo?” Watson asked. “Because leaders in the black struggle view it as a microcosm of America – a forecast of what is to become in the not too distant future.” Visions of the nation’s future through a Cairo-shaped lens carried foreboding and terror. “Here,” Watson declared, “polarization of the races is complete” and “here the white forces of business,
government, and the military have joined in their efforts to stamp out black insurrections in a raw, overt display of power.” Watson concluded, “There is no hiding behind the facades of accommodation and social amenity… The lines are sharply drawn.”

Watson’s comments point to the remarkably repressive conditions and narrow structure of opportunities faced by Black Power activists in Cairo, Illinois. While political opposition handcuffed Black Power organizations across the country, Black Cairoites had to negotiate the triple threat of a conservative president, an unsympathetic Republican governor, and an intractable white city leadership. Elsewhere Black Power activists might leverage discourses of civility to secure incremental changes to public policy and access to anti-poverty funding. In Cairo, Black Power activists locked horns with militant white officials who refused to compromise, opting to use public policy as a weapon and actively obstructing federal War on Poverty funds. In another city, the failure of white officials to compromise might jeopardize their electoral chances and would certainly fuel the rise of Black officialdom. However, in Cairo, Black candidates ran up against an at-large electoral system that neutralized African American voting power and effectively locked Blacks out of the political process. The city’s business elite, as Watson argued, also took a hard line, refusing to bend to the prolonged economic boycott opting, in many cases, to close downtown stores rather than hire Black workers. In this manner, Cairo’s civic elite stymied even the smallest reforms to the status quo.

Underpinning the city’s political and economic elite and serving to further cement their intransigence was vigilante terror mounted by a highly organized chapter of the White Citizens Council, known locally as the United Citizens for Community Action (U.C.C.A.). Founded in July 1969 by local businessmen Carl Helt and Bob Cunningham, the U.C.C.A. grew to an estimated two thousand members and encompassed a broad cross-section of Cairo’s white

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population. The U.C.C.A. functioned as a vigilante organization and a powerful pressure group lobbying city leaders to operate in a manner consistent with their ideals. The most important among these ideals was the preservation of white supremacy, a fact made abundantly clear by the large sign hanging outside of the organization’s offices on Washington Avenue, which was blazoned with a Confederate Flag and the motto “State’s Rights-Racial Integrity”. This ideology was further elaborated in the organization’s monthly publication, *The Tri-State Informer*, of which Carl Helt was the editor. By October 1971, the paper boasted a circulation reaching 28 states with articles written by members of Citizens Council chapters across the country. Moreover, the U.C.C.A. maintained close ties with other white supremacist organizations across the region. Through these organizational networks, Cairo became a flashpoint for white supremacist activity during the late 1960s and early 1970s.8

The U.C.C.A proved remarkably successful in pressuring Cairo’s white civic leadership to adopt a heavy-handed “no compromise” approach. As the previous chapter showed, U.C.C.A. members played a key role in securing the passage of a series of local “law and order” policies including a civil emergency ordinance and a number of strict picketing and parade laws. However, between 1969 and 1971 the U.C.C.A.’s real stronghold was in law enforcement, where longstanding segregationist Peyton Berbling served as State’s Attorney and a number of U.C.C.A. members worked closely with the police department. After visiting the city in December 1970, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist J. Anthony Lukas published an article in the *New York Times Magazine* in which he characterized white vigilantes and local police as being

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virtually indistinguishable due to the Sheriff’s continued practice of deputizing local white men. During his visit, Lukas was able to obtain a list of the deputies, proving that only a handful were professionally trained and that a significant number were known to be either active members or sympathizers of the U.C.C.A. One of those men was Bob Hogan, who in 1953 pled guilty to a “malicious mischief” charge stemming from the bombing of the home of civil rights activist Dr. Urbane Bass. “Today,” Lukas ironically stated, “he [Hogan] is a sheriff’s deputy authorized to patrol the streets of Cairo with a rifle or submachine gun and keep racial peace.” Wilbert Beard, an African American who had recently resigned from the police force, further corroborated these allegations in an interview with Lukas. Beard explained that during his three and a half years with the Cairo Police Department, he had been privy to the extraordinarily close ties that existed between the U.C.C.A. and white police officers. According to Beard, members of the vigilante group were “real chummy with the police” and “in and out of the police station all the time.” Moreover, after being contracted by the city to perform an independent study of these concerns, the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police (ICAP) bluntly concluded that the Cairo Police Department was “insensitive to the racial conditions confronting them” and had failed to demonstrate “the ability to maintain order with justice or to achieve the traditional objectives of a police agency.” Despite these obvious red flags, the Cairo police force continued to operate with only cosmetic changes during the late 1960s and early 1970s.9

On the few occasions that the police department failed to enforce the law in a manner deemed appropriate by the organization, U.C.C.A. members took aggressive action, forcing the resignation of three police chiefs in less than two years and threatening others unless their concerns were addressed. Similar actions were taken against other high-ranking city officials, including the mayor. In this context, even those white officials considered to be more moderate

tended to capitulate to the U.C.C.A.’s demands. As one city official told a reporter from the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*: “We send out the police and let them fire on the [Pyramid Court] project to keep the whites satisfied.”

The ties between local law enforcement, city officials, and the U.C.C.A. allowed the organization to engage in a systematic campaign of terrorism against the city’s Black residents without fear of arrest or prosecution. Indeed, United Front leaders contended that many of the assaults on Black homes and businesses were conducted with the direct participation and sanction of local police officers. The truth of these allegations was exposed to the nation in December 1970 when J. Anthony Lukas and other journalists from national publications descended on Cairo only to witness the outbreak of a police riot. Lukas depicted peaceful Black protesters facing off against law enforcement and deputized white vigilantes “armed with automatic carbines, submachine guns, grease guns, shotguns and oversized riot sticks.” Scuffles quickly broke out when police threw one local activist, Herman Whitfield, up against an unmarked police car and pointed a shotgun at another, James “Switch” Wilson, while officers beat him to the ground with billy clubs. Shortly after, shots rang out by the Ohio River levee and police ordered everyone, including Lukas, off the streets. Later it was discovered that Lloyd Bosecker, a police deputy, had been shot in the melee as the United Front, U.C.C.A., and police officers exchanged gunfire. Black witnesses alleged that Bosecker had been caught in police

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crossfire, but five Black men were quickly arrested and charged with attempted murder. Howard Kohn of *Ramparts* magazine was also in Cairo that day and described the scene as a “free-for-all.”

The police riot of December 1970 was not the only instance of open collaboration between white vigilantes and local law enforcement, though it was the most publicized. Between 1969 and 1971, arson and sporadic gunfire were an almost daily experience for Black Cairoites. Black businesses were firebombed, homes shot into, and churches burned. According to former police officer, Wilbert Beard, white officers often had advance knowledge of such acts. “It was uncanny,” he explained, “but they’d already have men on stand-by.” Accordingly, arrests of white vigilantes were few and far between. A 1971 report released by the Chicago-based civil liberties organization Alliance to End Repression showed that only three white Cairoites were arrested between March 3, 1969 and June 1, 1971. None were convicted despite the fact that during the same period there were reportedly more than 140 incidents of shooting or firebombing directed at the homes and businesses of Black residents. As testament to the sheer absurdity of law enforcement in Cairo, one of these three cases involved Black residents performing a citizen’s arrest of a white man caught shooting into a Black church and a second was of a white man who had fired shots at police officers.

Republican Governor Richard Ogilvie’s periodic deployment of state police did little to rectify these inequities. Instead, state troopers played a key role in enforcing the city’s repressive ordinances arresting Black protesters in droves. Moreover, their presence sparked new

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11 Lukas, “Bad Day at Cairo, Ill.”; Kohn, “Civil War in Cairo, Ill.”
allegations of discriminatory treatment and brutality. United Front activists accused state police of failing to investigate the complaints of Black residents and standing by as local law enforcement and white vigilantes harassed and shot into their communities. At the same time, state police heavily patrolled the Pyramid Courts and secured “blanket” search warrants to raid the homes of Black residents in search of weapons. Many local activists believed that this harassment was an attempt to bait the Black community into acts of retaliatory violence that would serve to justify a full-scale assault on the housing project. While a full-scale assault was averted, Black residents living in the Pyramid Courts continued to live in fear, arming themselves and sleeping in bathtubs or under beds for protection.13

Indeed, the laxity with which local and state police enforced the law against white vigilantes was matched only by the severe and unjust manner with which the same officers handled Black Cairoites and their allies in the United Front. The Alliance to End Repression report showed that a total of 266 African Americans, in contrast to 3 whites, were arrested between March 3, 1969 and June 1, 1971. While many were smaller ordinance and vehicular charges, in the summer of 1970 local and state police also began arresting high profile Black Power activists on trumped-up felony charges carrying high bail bonds. In June, several of the United Front’s key leaders fell victim to these sweeps including, Rev. Charles Koen and James “Switch” Wilson for aggravated battery; Rev. Manker Harris for attempted murder; and Herman Whitfield for assault with a deadly weapon – the weapon being a charm bracelet. With the support of the Lawyer’s Committee, the United Front was successful in securing acquittals in the

vast majority of these cases at jury trial. In fact, the Alliance to End Repression’s report indicated that only 2 of the 266 arrests had resulted in a conviction prior to June 1, 1971. However, the arrests and repression continued unabated and towards the end of the year Mayor Pete Thomas ratcheted up the tension by issuing a “shoot-to-kill” order if racial disturbances occurred. “And when we’re gonna kill ‘em,” Mayor Thomas explained, “I mean we’re gonna kill ‘em.”

When vigilante violence and police harassment failed to halt the United Front’s activities, city officials and federal agents collaborated in an effort to destroy the organization’s internal unity. The FBI had closely monitored Charles Koen’s activities since his time with the Black Liberators in St. Louis in 1968. Koen had been placed high on the agency’s Security and Agitator Index’s for so-called “Black extremists.” After Koen moved back to Cairo, his surveillance continued and was expanded as the FBI opened separate case files on several of the United Front’s key leaders. Working in close collaboration with local and state law enforcement, federal agents attempted to track the United Front’s activities and develop local informants who could provide a continuous stream of information on the Black Power group. However, despite their best efforts, the United Front proved to be a remarkably difficult group to infiltrate due to the extremely strong social networks that existed in the city. Beginning in November 1970, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover wrote a series of memos to the Springfield FBI criticizing local agents for failing to develop contacts within Cairo’s Black community that could provide advance

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information regarding the United Front’s activities. This failure on the part of Springfield agents was not for lack of trying. In a memo dated November 27, 1970, Springfield agents explained the difficulties they faced in their effort to “develop informants who have an inside working knowledge of the tightly knit Cairo United Front.” Clearly unimpressed, Hoover informed Springfield agents that he was “deeply concerned” by the violence in Cairo and their “failure to secure advance, pertinent information.” The FBI director demanded that the agents exert “more effort, more imagination and supervisory direction” toward the “development of racial informants in Cairo.” However, Hoover appeared much less interested in securing advance information on the white vigilantes that had been terrorizing the Black community for more than a year.¹⁵

Spurred by Hoover’s criticism, Springfield FBI agents intensified their efforts to identify potential informants in Cairo’s Black community. Agents focused initially on the Pyramid Courts, constructing a working profile of the housing project’s residents and performing interviews with individuals they hoped would become the agency’s eyes and ears. By the end of 1970, Springfield agents had developed at least three “confidential sources” who provided regular information regarding the United Front’s activities. According to FBI records, all three informants were African American and had access to the United Front’s public meetings and events. None were part of the organization’s inner core.¹⁶


Information obtained from confidential informants assisted the FBI in its broader effort to disrupt the United Front’s operations. In November 1970, FBI agents targeted local Black businessman James Avery as a potential informant. A former boxer and state police officer, Avery had apparently been on friendly terms with the United Front before he had decided to go to police with information regarding a break-in that took place at his tavern. Branded a traitor for speaking with police, Avery became the only Black business owner targeted by the boycott and his tavern was ultimately forced to close in November 1970. FBI records indicate that Springfield agents approached Avery shortly afterwards and “encouraged” him to “attempt to discredit the United Front.” Avery allegedly responded with some enthusiasm, explaining to FBI agents that he intended to file criminal charges against United Front leaders and “air an appeal to the black people in Cairo to no longer follow the dictate of... the United Front.” Springfield agents notified their superiors that Avery was “confident that with backing he will be able to break the United Front hold on Cairo and gain a peaceful settlement of all difficulties.”17

In January 1971, Avery mounted a high profile but ultimately unsuccessful challenge to Koen’s leadership. Showing up at a United Front rally at St. Columba’s Church, Avery petitioned those present to reconsider their support for Koen and the organization. “The United Front ain’t out for you,” he bellowed, “They’re really out for themselves.” Avery was booed out of the hall, gaining virtually no support from those in attendance. However, in the weeks that followed he continued his campaign on local television and radio networks, calling upon Black Cairoites to participate in a formal election on January 16 to decide once and for all the legitimate leadership of the Black community. Rumors abounded as to where Avery was getting his support. The Chicago Defender alleged that Avery had received “materials and some money”

17 Lukas, "Bad Day at Cairo, Ill."; Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Memorandum from SAC, Springfield to Director, FBI,” 8 January 1971.
from local white officials who had also “arranged for TV appearances and radio spots to proclaim his challenge.” Koen agreed, informing a journalist from the Defender that Avery was “being supported by the Mayor, and the council and who knows what else.” Indeed, FBI reports reveal a chain of evidence that implicates officials at the highest levels. Classified inter-agency memos reveal that President Nixon, Vice President Spiro Agnew, Attorney General Robert Mitchell, the military, and the Secret Service were all kept abreast as to Avery’s efforts to “depose” Koen.18

Despite this coordinated effort, the vote was an unmitigated failure for Avery and those who had backed him. While Avery continued to work to build popular opposition to the United Front in Cairo’s Black community, such attempts struggled in the face of the organization’s broad-based consensus and internal unity. In a 1971 report, IFCO’s assistant director Lorenzo “Renny” Freeman described Cairo as “the most cohesive Black community I have ever experienced. All elements seem to be represented in the [United Front] hierarchy and no polarization is evident within the organization. The ranks are well closed.”19

Indeed, by the start of 1971 it seemed that the United Front had beaten the odds. Despite facing an extraordinarily narrow structure of opportunities and a coordinated pattern of repression, the organization did not fragment or collapse but rather made significant strides in efforts to address the plight of Cairo’s poor and Black population. The United Front’s deployment of armed self-defense, including its adoption of “survival patrols” and a checkpoint system at the entrance to the Pyramid Courts, allowed community members to survive this initial

wave of violence and restrained the potential for retaliation. Moreover, by collaborating with the Lawyer’s Committee, the United Front was eventually able to secure some important legal victories. However, the United Front was, by no means, in an exclusively defensive posture. As the previous chapters showed, Black Power activists advanced a progressive political program that included a successful boycott of downtown businesses and the development of a series of autonomous parallel institutions designed to build economic power within Cairo’s Black community. Furthermore, the United Front was able to mobilize a powerful coalition, planting chapters in cities across the region and establishing a national organizational infrastructure with Charles Koen at the helm.

This is not to suggest that the effects of police harassment, vigilante violence, and city intransigence were insignificant; quite the opposite. Instead of viewing repression as a simple “cost” imposed upon social movement organizations by authorities, scholars increasingly favor an interpretation that focuses on the dynamic interaction of repression and mobilization and the often unintended consequences that result. While repression did not initially crush movement mobilization in Cairo, it powerfully shaped the approaches adopted by Black Power activists, prompting a series of, what political scientist Doug McAdam has called, “tactical innovations.” Even before returning to Cairo in 1968, Charles Koen’s experience of severe repression at the hands of St. Louis police officers and FBI agents prompted him to reevaluate the strategies and tactics utilized by the Black Liberators. The Cairo movement’s adoption of a united front approach, combined with a spiritual philosophy that emphasized both nonviolent direct-action and disciplined armed self-defense, was at least partially motivated by this experience and designed to insulate the organization from more extreme forms of repression. This kind of tactical innovation continued as activists struggled to respond to the realities of movement
mobilization in Cairo. For example, the economic boycott, a tactic wholly consistent with the United Front’s broader strategy of nonviolent direct-action, was eventually superseded by the creation of parallel institutions when it became apparent that white merchants and city leaders were unwilling to compromise. In this manner, even when narrow political opportunities and systematic repression failed to destroy local movements outright, they contributed powerfully to the transformation of movement strategies and tactics.²⁰

**Church-Based Resources and the Seeds of Decline**

In January 1971, as the United Front rang in the New Year, many commentators viewed the organization as the only bright spot remaining in the struggle for freedom and justice. Reviewing the events of the last twelve months, the *Chicago Daily Defender* characterized 1970 as having been “a slow year for civil rights.” “Activity on the civil rights front,” according to the paper, had “dropped to a murmur” as “more militant organizations either changed their modus operandi or went completely underground.” Many Black Power activists had reportedly “redirected their energies from the podium to the backroom,” rendering demonstrations and direct action “obsolete.” “Nowhere,” the paper concluded, “is anybody doing anything, except in Cairo and the political arena.” While somewhat exaggerated, statements like these provide a contemporary account of Black Power at a critical juncture. Faced with heightened repression and a narrowing structure of political and economic opportunities, many Black Power activists had apparently abandoned mass mobilization and direct action in favor of Black officialdom. In

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this context, the Cairo United Front appeared to be a throwback to the militancy of a prior and quickly fading tradition.\textsuperscript{21}

However, the United Front had not escaped 1970 unscathed. The organization entered the New Year in dire financial straits after being saddled with the burden of skyrocketing bail bonds accumulated during the law enforcement sweeps of the preceding months. On a single day in December 1970, fifteen United Front members were arrested and jailed, resulting in over $100,000 in bail bond costs for the organization. Many of those targeted were United Front leaders, a fact that placed added pressure on the activist community. The arrests continued in January and February as James Chairs, chief of staff for the United Front, was picked up while protesting the discriminatory practices of state and local police at the Governor’s office in Springfield. Shortly after, state police raided the Pyramid Courts, arresting Frank Hollis, Debra Flowers, and James “Switch” Wilson on federal gun charges. In March, the courts ruled the search warrants to be illegal, but the damage had already been done. Large segments of the United Front leadership were now awaiting trial and the organization was floundering under a mountain of legal bills.\textsuperscript{22}

The United Front’s ability to meet bail bond and keep key activists out of jail hinged on the organization’s relationship with external donors. The United Front was heavily reliant upon funds extended by church-based organizations. Grant awarding bodies including the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations (IFCO), the Episcopal Church’s General Convention Special Program, and the Presbyterian Church’s National Committee on the Self-

\textsuperscript{21} “’70 Was a Slow Year for Civil Rights,” \textit{Chicago Daily Defender}, January 2, 1971.
Development of People extended critical resources to the United Front that sustained much of the organization’s daily operations and political programming. In addition, predominantly white denominations provided emergency legal aid donations that helped the organization counteract repression by law enforcement. However, by 1971 United Front activists and their network of allies within national denominational structures began to express concern about the reliability of church-based funding. An upsurge of opposition to the church’s social justice initiatives among white lay people, the emergence of an organized conservative opposition within denominational hierarchies, and the growing popularity of evangelical and fundamentalist alternatives all contributed to a significant decline in mainline denominational support for the United Front and other Black Power organizations during this period.

From his position at the Illinois Council of Churches (ICC), Rev. Blaine Ramsey was among the first to spot the warning signs. As chair of the ICC’s ecumenical Special Task Force Committee, Ramsey was well-situated to observe broader trends within the nation’s largest denominations and as early as May 1970 sounded the alarm that funding for local Black Power struggles was unstable. In a report written that month, Ramsey informed the leadership of the ICC that the “greatest problem” facing his agency was that major denominations would “cop out” on funding Black Power organizations. According to Ramsey, this trend was already “evidenced by an increased reluctance on the part of some to work ecumenically with programs which the Task Force designates as being necessary to accomplish a reconciled community.” While Task Force staff were doing their best “to maintain financial and moral support” for such programs, Ramsey argued that they were dealing with denominations that were often reluctant to extend resources due to their own “polarized constituency,” “dwindling funds,” and “a so-called reordering of denominational priorities.” In addition to these internal factors, Ramsey also
pointed to the increased burden imposed on church resources by what he perceived to be competing struggles. “National events related to pollution, campus unrest and national violence, aggravated by the Vietnam War and the Cambodian incursion have not helped,” Ramsey explained. “These events have overshadowed the unresolved problems of black people in the nation’s ghettos.” When combined with the fact that churches were planning “to cut back in areas of social action and ecumenical relations,” Ramsey saw little reason for optimism. “The unhappy picture of the ecumenical church in Illinois,” he concluded, “reflects the recession of national spirit.” Over the next few months, Ramsey’s immediate fears for the United Front were allayed by IFCO’s extension of a substantial grant to the organization. However, his report was prescient in that it highlighted major shifts taking place within liberal denominations that in the coming years would place extreme pressure upon the United Front.  

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, an abundance of studies pointed to the latent conflict burning just beneath the surface of many Protestant and Catholic congregations. In his 1969 bestseller, The Gathering Storm in the Churches, sociologist Jeffrey Hadden described how the “New Breed” of clergy and church executives, radicalized in the crucible of Civil Rights and the War on Poverty, were now finding themselves polarized from a more conservative laity. According to Hadden, tensions between clergy and laity had deep roots in longstanding theological debates over the Social Gospel and Higher Criticism but had been exacerbated by the very visible involvement of progressive clergy in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. A 1967 national opinion poll showed that while less than 10 per cent of mainline Protestant clergy “basically disapproved” of the modern Civil Rights Movement, almost half of all church attenders polled were opposed. When the question of clergy involvement in protests was raised,  

the numbers were even more telling. Half of all Catholic and Protestant church attenders indicated that they believed that clergy “should stick to religion and not concern themselves with social, economic, and political questions.” When asked specifically about clergy’s participation in picketing and demonstration’s almost three-quarters of church attenders indicated that such activity did “more harm than good” and that they would be personally “upset” if they were to discover their own minister or priest was participating.24

Sociologist Yoshio Fukuyama’s 1968 study of the United Church of Christ reinforced many of Hadden’s findings but underscored important distinctions in the perspectives of Black and white parishioners. While only 20 percent of white respondents felt that their church leaders should spend a lot of time “working for social justice,” 77 percent of African American respondents indicated that this was a key responsibility of clergy. Moreover, while white respondents ranked “working for social justice” tenth in frequency among twelve ministerial roles, African Americans respondents ranked it first. Thus, even in the most liberal of Protestant denominations, important divisions existed between both laity and clergy and Black and white parishioners as to the role and responsibility of clergy in regards to social justice. As Hadden explains, these disparities constituted “a very significant source of conflict within the churches” and put activist clergy on “a collision course” with a large segment of the laity.25

The growing ties between progressive clergy and the Black Power Movement exacerbated these tensions. The use of church revenues by new denominational task forces and grant-awarding bodies to bolster local Black Power struggles was for many laypeople in sharp conflict with their understanding of the role and responsibility of the church. In his 1971 book,

Protestant Power and the Coming Revolution, author Will Oursler documented the rise of an increasingly organized conservative response from within mainline denominations. “There is a growing fear,” Oursler explained, “that the churches are moving too far into the questionable action programs.” While laity would “accept moral and spiritual guidance from their pastor,” Oursler argued that most believed that “they should be free to make their own judgments on any individual political issue without interference.” Accordingly, many conservative laypersons, Oursler explained, recoiled at the idea of being “committed as individuals or a congregation to the support of groups and causes with which they may not sympathize – and which they may actively oppose.”

The fact that decisions about funding Black Power organizations tended to be made by church executives at the highest levels of the denominational structure with little input from local laypeople further antagonized conservative laypersons. Despite subscribing to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, laity in mainline Protestant denominations had long entrusted authority to professional clergy. However, support for such a model of decision-making had its limits and, according to Hadden, during the late 1960s laity came to have “grave doubts” about how that authority had been used. Tension over decision-making power, Hadden argues, was compounded by the fact that many activist clergy held key administrative positions within denominational structures as opposed to at the parish level. By the end of the decade, Hadden explained, the “New Breed” of clergy “saturated virtually every non-parish structure within the church” including denominational administrative positions, college and seminary teaching, and inner-city experimental ministries. These positions, Hadden explained, allowed radical clergy to “maximize their power to bring about innovation and change” and insulated them from “direct reprisals from laity.” However, the insulation of activist clergy combined with their failure to

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26 Oursler, Protestant Power and the Coming Revolution, 165, 181
engage in the systematic political education of laypeople fostered a significant rift between local congregations and national church structures.\textsuperscript{27}

In an ironic twist, conservative critics from within the church mobilized the grassroots participatory democracy discourse of sixties liberal activists to point out what they perceived to be the unrepresentative mechanisms by which many denominational policy and funding decisions were made. In his 1967 polemic, \textit{The Protestant Revolt}, fundamentalist clergyman James DeForest Murch railed against liberal church executives who, he contended, were trying to form a new ecumenical and “socio-politically oriented Super-Church.” Laypeople, Murch explained, were “rebelling against a clerical domination which treats them as sheep, demanding their complete acquiescence in the distasteful programs of a Super-Church.” According to Murch, laity deeply “resented being lumped into a mass of faceless automatons and delivered by the Liberal Establishment as in favor or not in favor of this or that social or political position, without ever bothering to consult them or to get their approval.”\textsuperscript{28}

Conservative commentators like Murch were not alone in their criticism of the liberal church establishment. Laypeople increasingly engaged in organized forms of protest against what was widely perceived as the liberal domination of their churches. Protest came in numerous forms. Most visibly, conservative laypeople within mainline Protestant denominations formed dissident lay committees in an effort, according to Will Oursler, “to thwart the steam-roller power of the ecumenical high command.” Organized in 1965, the Presbyterian Lay Committee described its work as “a silent revolution” that incorporated “an increasing number of church members who are getting tired of paying for all the radicalism and secularism of their church

\textsuperscript{27} Hadden, \textit{The Gathering Storm in the Churches}, 6, 29-37, 185-235.
leaders.” Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, similar groups emerged in the Episcopal and Methodist denominations to resist the “rising tide of church pronouncements and involvement in social issues.”

Angered by church executives’ support for Black freedom struggles, many local congregants also withheld their financial contributions and, in some cases, opted to leave the church entirely. In his 1971 study, Will Oursler pointed to a general “retreat in gifts and giving” that was particularly targeted at the new task forces and committees developed to address the urban crisis. In his 1972 study, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, Dean Kelley, an executive at the National Council of Churches, also pointed to the decline in mainline Protestant church membership that was being prompted by the social justice focus of activist clergy. By the early 1970s, concerns over what Blaine Ramsey had aptly defined as a “polarized constituency” and “dwindling funds” dominated the national conventions of all of the mainline denominations forcing church executives to either face down conservative factions or engage in a “reordering of denominational priorities.” On the whole, the churches opted for the latter.

The scaling back of church support for ecumenical and social justice ministries was swift and devastating in its effects. Task forces and grant-awarding programs designed to address the urban crisis were disproportionately affected. The Episcopal Church’s General Convention Special Program (GCSP), a program that had extended significant resources to the United Front, was one of the first to feel the backlash. Since its founding in 1967, the program had come under consistent attack from conservative clergy and laypeople for granting funds to groups whose political agendas were considered to be out of sync with that of the church. In particular, criticisms honed in on GCSP’s failure to incorporate local diocesan leaders into the decision-

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making process and the program’s alleged sponsorship of programs that advocated violence. One controversial case was the GCSP’s extension of a grant to the Jackson Human Rights Project in Mississippi. Concerns were raised that the organization, far from advocating racial reconciliation, was a Black separatist group that advocated the use of violence against whites. As evidence, critics pointed to the organization’s newspaper that had allegedly published an article in which staff member Muhammed Kenyatta demonstrated how to construct a “Molotov cocktail.” Moreover, conservative clergy claimed that the funding should not be granted because the local bishop had objected. The GCSP granted the funding despite local opposition and concerns regarding the organization’s goals and tactics. A second high profile case was the extension in 1970 of a grant to the Malcolm X Liberation University in Durham, North Carolina. When the GCSP awarded a grant over the cries of the local bishop, white conservative Episcopalians slashed their financial contributions, costing the North Carolina diocese nearly $165,000. As a result, the diocese reduced its donation to the national church by nearly 40 per cent that year.

With tensions over the GCSP increasing, twenty-five diocesan conventions across the nation passed resolutions requesting that local bishops be permitted to veto potential grants within their diocese. At the 1970 General Convention, these tensions came to a head and the conservatives gained the veto power for local bishops that they had been seeking. Bishops were now given thirty days in which to object to any proposed grant in their diocese. If the bishop objected, only a full majority of the Executive Council could override it. By mobilizing discourses rooted in the local, conservative clergy and laity radically undercut the power of the
GCSP and its director, Leon Modeste, who had functioned as a key gatekeeper to church resources.\textsuperscript{31}

By 1973, the GCSP’s very survival was threatened as the Executive Council, according to Modeste, increasingly felt that it must respond to the demands of the “folks back home.”\textsuperscript{32} On October 18, the entire African American staff of the GCSP received notices of termination from the Episcopal Church and in December the program was officially closed. Since its creation at the height of the urban rebellions, the program had funded projects totaling $7.5 million in urban areas across the country. However, heightened hostility toward the program from conservative laity and clergy ensured that it had become a liability for liberal church executives. The Community Action and Human Development section replaced the program. However, in his annual address Bishop Hines conceded that the resources allocated to the group would be considerably less than in previous years and its mission broader than originally defined. The program would now deal with the plight of all ethnic and racial “minorities” with a small budget and no permanent full-time director and only two staff members. Hines gave the project a begrudging and defiant farewell, describing it as “a moment in the conscience of men” that had served to broaden understandings of the church’s role and responsibility in the world.

In contrast, the program’s outgoing director Leon Modeste blamed the program’s closure on church executive’s lack of commitment and capitulation to white Episcopal laypeople who, when asked in a series of hearings in 1973, insisted that the program was “causing a schism in the church, and had to go.” Reflecting on his experiences, Modeste concluded that reliance upon the church had been a mistake. “[T]here is no question in my mind,” Modeste stated, “that


Blacks will never be free as long as we are dependent upon white institutions for resources. For at the most crucial time for us, the white institution will always withdraw the resources in favor of self-interest.” Accordingly, Modeste argued, “Blacks must build and maintain our own institutions and control those agencies which provide services in our communities.”

As the Episcopal Church moved to close down its largest grant-awarding body, the Presbyterian Church’s National Committee for the Self-Development of People (NCSDP) was also struggling to keep afloat. By July 1972, the program was forced to order a moratorium on all new funding awards due to declining donations and a backlog of unpaid bills. The committee’s director, Rev. St. Paul Epps, bemoaned the fact that donations were dramatically lower than the anticipated $10 million a year level required to reach the denominations target of raising “70 million in the 70s toward overcoming poverty.” According to Epps, donations for the program barely reached $2 million, prompting a scaling back of programming and expectations. In 1973, these financial realities forced Epps and his staff to reject more than 200 grant applications so that the committee could meet more than $1 million in outstanding commitments to programs that had been validated the previous year. The moratorium was not lifted until early 1975.

Another key Presbyterian agency charged with addressing issues of race and poverty, the Council on Church and Race (CORAR), also came under heavy attack and by 1972 had witnessed a dramatic curtailment in its power and autonomy. At the 1972 General Convention, widespread opposition to CORAR’s recent extension of a $10,000 grant from the Emergency Fund for Legal Aid to the Angela Davis Defense Fund erupted into protests, prompting a series


of proposals from local synods demanding that Black-led task forces like CORAR come under
greater supervision from the General Convention, be governed by stricter guidelines, or be
stripped of their autonomous funding capacity. These efforts were voted down by the General
Convention; however, tensions over the dissemination of funds, particularly without the consent
of local presbyteries, persisted. As a result, many synods, including the Synod of Illinois, began
to impose stricter measures of their own regarding the dissemination of funds to local programs

Ecumenical bodies like IFCO and the National Council of Churches (NCC) were also
affected by these broader denominational cutbacks. IFCO, an organization heavily dependent
upon denominational contributions, quickly saw its resources dwindle, and in 1971 was forced to
declare its own moratorium due to what executives called the “unstable climate within the
churches.”\footnote{“IFCO reflects mood of churches retreat from ecumenical commitment,” \emph{Chicago Daily Defender}, January 2, 1971.} At the NCC, Father Robert C. Chapman, the C.M.E. minister who had worked as
the organization’s Director for Racial Justice from 1969 to 1971 and had been recently promoted
to Executive Director of the Social Justice Department, was fired in July 1973, prompting sit-
down protests from supporters at the organization’s headquarters in New York. While the NCC
claimed that Chapman had been discharged for “lack of concurrence with policy,” his supporters
alleged that Chapman had fallen out of favor with the organization as its priorities had shifted.
Close to fifty protestors participated in a sit-in at the NCC’s offices at the Interchurch Center,
demanding that the organization fire its General Secretary, apologize to Father Chapman, and set
up a separate and autonomous division on criminal, racial, and social justice that would be
financed by one-tenth of the organizations overall operating budget. At an earlier moment, this
proposal might have gained some support from within the denomination. However, by 1973, the tide was turning and the plea fell on deaf ears.\textsuperscript{37}

Back at the ICC, Blaine Ramsey began to observe a similar pattern. What initially had been an issue of concern was by 1971 a full-scale crisis that struck at the heart of the organization’s ability to meet the needs of the state’s poor and oppressed communities. Blaine Ramsey explained to ICC leaders that the Special Task Force’s resources “had dwindled” and in certain cases “dried up entirely.” From conversations with church executives, Ramsey deduced that the shortage of funds was connected to the fact that “lay giving for benevolent enterprises [had] been cut to the bone.” “People have been turned off,” Ramsey explained, “by what they call a preoccupation in political affairs.” “This situation,” Ramsey informed the ICC executive board, “has greatly jeopardized the morale of staff and hindered the development and execution of programs designed to meet the needs of people in areas where poverty and racism are acute.” Ramsey, like Modeste, argued that the fundamental cause of this decline in resources was a lack of commitment to racial justice and anti-poverty initiatives by church leaders and members. “Benign neglect,” Ramsey argued, “seems to be the posture now taken by funding groups.” In the face of dwindling funds, Ramsey increasingly believed, like Modeste, that the nation’s churches could “no longer be depended upon to adequately fund Community Action Programs.” The fragile coalition between liberal white church executives, progressive Black clergy, and Black Power activists forged in the wake of the urban rebellions was rapidly disintegrating.\textsuperscript{38}


The effect of this fragmentation was felt most powerfully at the local level, where many Black Power organizations had relied heavily on church resources to build effective movements and institutions. Between 1971 and 1974, the United Front witnessed a precipitous decline in funding from church-based organizations at both the state and national level. While comprehensive financial records for the United Front are unavailable, an examination of donations made to the United Front by the three largest funding bodies – IFCO, the Episcopal Church’s GCSP, and the Presbyterian’s NCSDP – indicates the scope of this decline. As Figure 1 shows, donations from these bodies peaked at $297,660 in 1970, were slashed by more than half the following year, and dried up completely in 1973.

![Figure 6: Annual Donations made to the Cairo United Front from Three Major Church-Based Organizations, 1968 through 1974](image)

Source: See appendix 1.

These fiscal woes were compounded by the inability of some national church bodies to meet even their existing commitments. In the fall of 1971, for example, the Presbyterian Church’s NCSDP found itself unable to transfer the second half of an $112,000 grant to the
United Front due to a shortage of funds. While the grant was eventually received, its delay created a crisis of liquidity that hampered the United Front’s ability to cover immediate expenses. Efforts to secure the money from alternative sources within the denomination ran up against fierce resistance. Although the Presbyterian Church set aside several million dollars for social, educational, and economic programs each year, fifty percent of that money was designated for distribution by local presbyteries and, for its part, the Southern Illinois Presbytery refused to transfer any funds to the United Front. The funding scene outside the Presbyterian Church was not much brighter as denominational programs targeting the urban crisis had their budgets slashed and IFCO, the United Front’s largest donor, was forced to announce a moratorium due to declining donations. Moreover, the United Methodist Church’s ongoing support for the Lawyer’s Committee galvanized a backlash from local congregations who, according to United Front member Hattie Kendrick, were threatening to cut off support if church executives persisted in “taking their money…to help the niggers fight them.”

Heavily reliant upon church-based resources, the United Front began to experience serious financial difficulties almost immediately. As the previous chapter showed, the “no strings” model of funding championed by many Black clergy made church funds indispensable in meeting expenses that corporate and governmental grants prohibited, including the United Front’s legal bills and daily operational costs. Unsurprisingly, these two areas were the most immediately affected by the scaling back of church support and the concomitant collapse in the United Front’s liquidity. The fact that the United Front faced a rapid decline in church resources at the exact moment its key activists were facing criminal prosecution only served to exacerbate the emerging crisis.

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Pushed back on their heels, Black Power activists responded to the lethal combination of legal repression and declining resources by engaging in a vigorous fundraising campaign and redirecting all available funds to legal aid. At this early stage, it was far from clear that the decline in church funding was going to be a permanent feature of the landscape. Therefore, the United Front predictably threw its energy behind a series of fundraising events in an effort to reenergize the organization’s base and mobilize support from allies in both the Black Church and Black Power organizations across the country. In the Spring of 1971, a host of the nation’s leading Black activists, performers, and clergymen descended on the city, including poet and activist Amiri Baraka, clergyman Albert Cleage, singer Nina Simone, jazz musician Max Roach, and SCLC president Rev. Ralph Abernathy. In April, these efforts culminated in the United Front’s hosting of the spring convocation of the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC). Black church executives from across the country pledged their ongoing support for the United Front and their commitment to seek further resources from the nation’s largest denominations. Shortly after, smaller donations did begin to trickle in through the ICC’s Special Task Force Committee’s brokerage system and from various denominational emergency legal aid funds. However, donations would never reach 1970 levels again, despite the best efforts of Black church executives. Increasingly, NCBC’s leadership – many of whom worked within predominantly white denominations – found themselves fighting to prevent the total dismantling of the church infrastructure they had helped build to address the urban crisis.40

Tensions over the church’s support for Black Power were not confined to Protestant denominations. In fact, for Black Cairoites one of the year’s most visible signs of broader retrenchment in church support came from the Belleville diocese of the Roman Catholic Church. Progressive forces within the Belleville diocese had leveraged the urban rebellions to open up St. Columba’s Parish, Cairo’s formerly segregated mission, to Black parishioners and social service organizations. These social services – in many cases advanced by Black Power organizations would, according to radical priests, assist the needy and dispossessed and thus establish the foundation upon which true reconciliation might be achieved. It was on this basis that the United Front – along with the Illinois Migrant Council, the Alexander County NAACP, and several other community organizations – established offices at St. Columba’s, using the parish’s main hall for its weekly meetings. However, by 1971 St. Columba’s had become a controversial symbol of the Roman Catholic Church support for Black Power as well as the target of frequent gunfire by white supremacists and law enforcement. Allegations ran rampant that Black Power activists were using the building as a staging ground for sniper fire and arson. Local officials exerted tremendous pressure on the diocese to evict the United Front.

The coalition between diocesan leaders, radical priests, and local Black Power activists was a fragile one to say the least, and in the winter of 1970 it quickly fragmented as leaders within the Belleville diocese succumbed to some of the same pressures affecting their Protestant
counterparts. In December, Bishop Albert Zuroweste ordered the United Front, the Alexander County NAACP, the Illinois Migrant Council, and several other community organizations to vacate their offices at St. Columba’s parish by February 1, 1971. Furthermore, the Bishop made clear that St. Columba’s religious ministries would be terminated and Black parishioners transferred to nearby St. Patrick’s Church. According to the Bishop, these changes were necessary to make room for the Cairo Recreational Committee, an interracial program initiated by Flora Chambliss, a middle-class Black woman and vocal opponent of the United Front. Chambliss’s committee, the Bishop argued, better reflected the church’s reconciliation mission and represented a positive step toward healing the embattled community. Father Kasper Deis, a priest brought in the previous summer to oversee the integration of Cairo’s all-white St. Patrick’s Church, supported what he called the Bishop’s “Gospel-spirited decision” and pointed to the bad reputation that was being brought upon the parish as a result of the United Front’s use of St. Columba’s. “Our concern,” Fr. Deis informed reporters, “must be that the Catholic Church disassociate itself from even the appearance of violence.” Fr. Deis agreed that the Cairo Recreational Committee was more consistent with the church’s reconciliationist goals, arguing that the program was better situated than the United Front to promote programs that afforded “opportunities for blacks and whites to develop understanding for each other”.41

The United Front and its supporters vehemently disagreed with such claims, insisting that true reconciliation could not be achieved without first addressing the fundamental economic, political, and social problems facing Black Cairoites. Blaine Ramsey raised this point at a meeting with Bishop Zuroweste at the end of January. In a letter following the meeting, Ramsey

expressed disappointment that they had been unable to reach a common understanding of the “critical urgency” facing Black Cairoites. “At times,” Ramsey wrote, “I got the impression that we weren’t communicating.” In a statement that powerfully illustrated the distinctions between many white and Black liberal clergy, Ramsey alluded to the “false sense of optimism” he had noticed that “kept coming through as we talked about the changed attitudes of the white people in Cairo, especially those who make up the Catholic constituency.” While Ramsey stated self-deprecatingly that he might have been “too pessimistic,” his point was clear. The Bishop’s goal of integrating the two parishes was unrealistic and reflected a willful ignorance of the deep-seated racism prevalent among white Cairoites.42

Ramsey also challenged the assumption that the Cairo Recreation Committee offered a pathway to reconciliation for Black and white residents. In his letter, Ramsey informed the Bishop that he had recently visited Cairo to look further into the work of the recreation committee. “To my chagrin,” he wrote, “I found that the Committee membership, made up of whites and blacks, is not solid.” In fact, the Committee was highly “fragmented,” raising serious questions about the integrity of the group as a potential “Catholic alternative to the racial problems in Cairo.” Ultimately, Ramsey argued that while removing the United Front would “ameliorate the anxiety of the white people in Cairo,” it would exacerbate tensions in the Black community, leading to violence. Ramsey concluded by reminding the Bishop that the Catholic Church had historically been “part of the segregated posture in Cairo” and that if he was sincere in his desire to correct this situation a “moribund recreational program is not the answer.”43

The Bishop also received correspondence from United Front member and former Alexander County NAACP president Hattie Kendrick. A devout churchwoman and lay leader at

43 Ibid.
Ward Chapel AME, Kendrick was particularly disheartened by the Bishop’s eviction order not just because it represented a potential loss of valuable space and resources for the United Front but also because it contradicted her personal understanding of the mission of the church. According to Kendrick, “one of the greatest contributions that the Black Catholic Church has made to this community has been its demonstration in acts of brotherly love.” “For years,” Kendrick wrote, “the six o’clock mass was celebrated at St. Columba by black and white praising God and praying together.” “The celebration of His birth and His resurrection,” she continued, “knew no color line.” By contrast, St. Patrick’s had treated Black congregants poorly and Kendrick had little hope that this renewed attempt at integration would be successful. In respect to the United Front, Kendrick argued that the organization “only wants of you a place to have their meetings, keep their records and assist the needy.” “Do you knowingly deprive them of this opportunity,” Kendrick asked, “or are you like Pilot listening at the angry mob outside as they scream ‘crucify them’?”

In a final appeal to the Bishop’s conscience and past commitment to racial justice, Kendrick wrote: “If Christ be the head of the Church, then why can it not be steadfast, unmovable abounding in the work of God and his cause?” Kendrick’s words were directed at Bishop Zuroweste, but her plea for the Church to be “steadfast” and “unmovable” can also be interpreted as a broader critique of liberal, predominantly white religious institutions now backtracking on earlier commitments to racial justice and support of the poor. For a churchwoman like Kendrick, who had devoted her life to that cause, the Church’s recent actions

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were not just detrimental to the movement; they were antithetical to her faith. Kendrick signed the letter, “a discouraged Christian.”

The Bishop’s order of eviction divided Catholic leaders. While Fr. Deis of St. Patrick’s Church was encouraged by the eviction order, past and present priests who had served at St. Columba’s were outraged, viewing the Bishop’s decision as a betrayal of the Black community and the church’s own obligations. Fr. Benjamin Bodewes objected to what he described as the Bishop’s “unilateral decision” to evict the United Front, insisting that the church’s Black parishioners should have been consulted. For all intents and purposes, Fr. Bodewes, had functioned as St. Columba’s parish priest since the outbreak of violence in the fall of 1969. Now faced with the prospect of losing his ministry, Bodewes was defiant. “Since many black people have asked me to stay,” he declared, “I will stay in St. Columba and the United Front and the other six organizations, the food distribution and clothing distribution [services] will remain and continue to use the building and facilities… I shall not be moved.” Fr. Bodewes’s predecessor, Fr. Gerald Montroy, was also outraged, calling Bishop Zuroweste a “white racist” for his actions in an interview with reporters.

As news of the eviction order spread, Fr. Bodewes and the United Front gained further support from progressive nuns and priests across the country. The Southern Illinois Association of Priests released a statement condemning the Bishop’s decision as an “unequivocal vote for the continuance of power and bigotry” and offered to join local parishioners in resisting eviction through nonviolent direct action if necessary. The National Coalition of American Nuns also

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petitioned Bishop Zuroweste to halt the eviction proceedings and, rather, assist the United Front “financially and morally.” When these petitions fell on deaf ears, a coalition of Catholic organizations, including representatives from the National Coalition of American Nuns, the National Conference of Interracial Justice, the National Federation of Priests Councils, and the Catholic Interracial Council of Chicago, converged on Cairo in a last-ditch attempt to halt the eviction and if necessary purchase the parish property on behalf of the United Front. Facing widespread opposition, Bishop Zuroweste offered a compromise in which the NAACP and the Illinois Migrant Council would be permitted to stay if the United Front agreed to leave. The leaders of the two organizations, Preston Ewing, Jr., and Ripley Young, rejected the offer and when February 1 arrived no eviction took place.47

However, the struggle over access to St. Columba’s parish continued, fueling considerable tension between the Black community and the Belleville diocese and hindering the daily operations of the community organizations that occupied the building. For instance, in early September all utilities to St. Columba’s was shut off. According to the public utility company, a member of Bishop Zuroweste’s staff had informed them that the building was church property and that as landlord the Bishop did not want electric service to be restored to the building. As winter approached, the men and women who worked and worshipped at St. Columba’s prepared themselves for the cold winter nights without lights, hot water, or heat.48

When this tactic failed, Bishop Zuroweste, in a move that appalled many Black parishioners, passed ownership of the property onto St. Patrick’s Church. Shortly after, Father

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Deis announced that St. Columba’s would be demolished and the land given to two “poor Catholic families” who allegedly wanted to build homes on the property. The United Front received a letter from Deis’s attorney demanding that they immediately vacate the parish in preparation for the demolition. When United Front coordinator Leon Page and NAACP president Preston Ewing met with Fr. Deis in May 1971, they challenged both his legal right to evict the tenants and his claim that two Catholic families wanted to build homes on the parish lot. Pointing to the fact that St. Columba’s was located in a predominantly poor and Black area that had witnessed considerable violence over the past three years, Ewing argued that this was not the real motive and offered to extend the couple a site in a better neighborhood. However, Fr. Deis rejected the offer, insisting again that the organizations vacate the premises immediately. These struggles continued for several months before a coalition of Catholic leaders finally purchased the building on behalf of the United Front.49

The United Front’s struggle to secure ongoing access to church resources took a significant toll on the organization, diverting activists’ energy away from the larger campaign to end the city’s history of racial discrimination and exploitation. Moreover, the United Front became increasingly vulnerable to new forms of economic repression. Ironically, the support of predominantly white religious institutions had provided United Front activists with a modicum of independence from local whites. The organization’s paid staff structure, funded almost exclusively by church grants, allowed leading activists protection from economic discrimination at the hands of local employers and welfare officers. Bail bond donations and the opening of the Lawyer’s Committee provided important legal protections to activists who were picked up and

pushed through the criminal justice system. Moreover, the Catholic Church had provided the organization with office and meeting space beyond the control of local landlords. For this reason, resisting eviction from St. Columba’s was essential since the United Front would almost certainly have found itself unable to purchase or rent another building in the city. Even those few landlords who might otherwise have been willing to lease property to the United Front faced the possibility of harassment by white vigilantes and almost inevitable property damage. Thus, by retracting their support, church leaders, as Southern Illinois Priest Father James Genisio put it, removed an important “umbrella of protection,” leaving local activists to face a new set of obstacles to the realization of their goals.\(^{50}\)

Making sense of the rationales that underpinned this retraction of support was something that frustrated many Black Power activists and radical clergy. Most viewed liberal church executives as having succumbed to internal opposition from conservative white laity and a few firebrand clergymen. Some, like Leon Modeste, began to interpret white church executives’ failure to take a principled stance as an almost inevitable consequence of their positionality as leaders of white racist institutions. Future programs, he argued, would have to be developed independent of their support or risk a similar outcome. For others, like Fr. Genisio, “money was the prime motive” and church executives had opted to prioritize tithes and offerings over their commitment to the poor and oppressed. However, the United Front case is particularly instructive because it reveals both the internal and external opposition that church executives faced to their support of Black Power organizations. While the precipitous decline in church support was clearly sparked by broader struggles over the appropriate role of the church in social

and political affairs, these tensions were clearly exacerbated by external pressure from state actors including, most significantly, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and the FBI.51

During the early 1970s, Black Power activists and their church-based funders came under fire as the IRS began to demonstrate what one contemporary described as “an unprecedented interest in the civil rights, anti-poverty, and anti-war activities of certain religious organizations.” Investigations were launched into the activities of several national denominations and ecumenical bodies concerning allegations that they had violated the provisions of their tax-exempt status by “carrying on propaganda or attempting to influence legislation.” So-called “routine audits” were performed of the financial records of both the NCC and IFCO in response to allegations that the organizations were funneling church funds to subversive groups. In IFCO’s case, the IRS quickly expanded the audit to include approximately half of the approximately 100 community groups that had been sponsored by the organization as well as the personal returns of the foundation’s board members. Between 1970 and 1973, the IRS performed similar investigations of the accounts of more than a dozen church organizations. Writing for the Nation, attorney Joseph Ruskay described the IRS investigations as “the covert weapon” employed by the Nixon Administration to “discourage its critics within the churches.” According to Ruskay, “The legal basis for this alarming intrusion of the government in church affairs is dubious at best” and at worst “a clear abridgment of First Amendment guarantees.” Dean Kelley, Director of Religious and Civil Liberties at the NCC agreed, stating that the Nixon Administration had used the IRS as “[t]he chief but not only means” to threaten “religious groups which engage in dissident secular activities outside their own walls.”52

Declining resources certainly made the United Front vulnerable to this kind of harassment, and for several years the local chapter of the White Citizen’s Council, angered by church donations to the United Front, petitioned state officials to investigate the organization’s finances. Indeed, a central tool in the arsenal of the United Front’s opponents was spreading rumors of financial impropriety. Local officials mocked the so-called “bleeding hearts” who had “poured tons of money” into the United Front for failing to recognize that they “were being used” by Black Power activists. In the winter of 1971, the Illinois Attorney General’s office demanded that the United Front file an audit. With external funds dwindling and previous donations tied up in bail bond, the United Front was in no position to advance the six to ten thousand dollars required to perform an audit. Consequently, the United Front lost its charitable status, preventing activists from soliciting donations until the fall of 1972.53

That same year, the IRS’s Intelligence Division began a major investigation into Charles Koen’s personal finances. Alleging that Koen had diverted thousands of dollars in funds from the United Front for his own personal use without declaring them as income, the IRS honed its investigation on the United Front’s church donors, filing summons in person at the national headquarters of the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, the United Presbyterian Church, the Christian Church, and the NCC. The summons demanded copies of “[c]ancelled checks, money orders or other means to payment” to Charles Koen; any “[c]orrespondence, notes or memoranda” related to those contributions; and, more
broadly, “[a]ny other records relating to the activities of Charles Koen [or] the United Front, Inc.” Church executives immediately met to discuss the investigation and coordinate a strategy. None of the groups had given money directly to Koen. However, the final component of the summons cast a broader net to include information related to funds that had been extended to the United Front. Deeming this beyond the scope of the investigation, church executives decided to comply with the first two parts of the summons but not the final one.54

Local Black Power activists and their allies in the Black Church viewed the IRS inquiry with skepticism and tried their best to persuade other church executives it was part and parcel of a broader pattern of state repression. Presbyterian leader Gayraud Wilmore reminded church executives that many other African American activists had been “the objects of inquiry by IRS and other governmental agencies in recent years.” Fr. Robert Chapman echoed Wilmore’s claims, calling the IRS inquiry “just another in a long series of efforts to crush the United Front.” Chapman also suggested that local whites might have “sparked” the IRS investigation since on his many trips to Cairo Chapman had observed that “rumors circulate freely that large sums of money have been pouring into the Front” from church-based organizations.55 Blaine Ramsey agreed with Chapman’s assessment, stating that the investigations were “the result of strong pressure brought to bear on the United Front by the local power structure to short circuit funding channels.” Like Chapman, Ramsey had observed “[a]ll sorts of rumors… swirling in the Cairo community about the financial accountability of the United Front” and while he conceded that

54 IRS Summons issued to George Granger the Treasurer and Business Manager of the United Methodist Church, July 26, 1972, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-10; IRS Summons issued to Rt. Rev. Roger Blanchard the Executive Vice President of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, July 26, 1972, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-10; IRS Summons issued to Dr. H. Leroy Brininger the Associate General Secretary for Administration of the National Council of Churches, July 31, 1972, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-10; Minutes of meeting on Internal Revenue Service Summons, August 2, 1972, ICC Records, box 19, folder 15; Joseph A. Ruskay, “New Muzzle for Churchmen,” The Nation (October 2, 1972), Dean Kelley, “Freedom of Religion,” in Papers from the Conference on American Freedom (Washington D.C., April 10 – 11, 1973) 55-59.
55 Minutes of meeting on Internal Revenue Service Summons, August 2, 1972, ICC Records, box 19, folder 15.
the organization may have not “employed the best bookkeeping procedures,” the accusation that Koen was siphoning large sums for his personal use was patently false. The United Front leadership agreed with Ramsey’s interpretation, characterizing the tax investigations as a new spin on older forms of harassment.\footnote{Blaine Ramsey to unknown recipient, September 15, 1972, ICC Records, box 19, folder 26; Minutes of Special Meeting Concerning Cairo, Illinois, September 20, 1972, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-12.}

While many church executives took a principled stance in relation to the IRS’s harassment of the United Front, the general effect was to further dampen church-based funding for Black Power. Dean Kelley argued that the IRS investigations had “a chilling effect” upon the churches’ social justice activities: “[E]ven if the investigated organizations get a clean bill of health, it will often have spent several thousand dollars in legal and other fees to defend itself and will be a little less eager to do anything which might precipitate another complaint and investigation.” According to Kelley, these investigations only served to exacerbate the “growing mood of quiescence, consolidation, disenchantment and loss-of-nerve” taking place in churches throughout the country. This quiescence, Kelley argued, “is a sign that the government’s efforts to discourage boat-rocking and trouble-making were not altogether failures.”\footnote{John P. Adams to Reverend Ned Dewire, October 9, 1972, Administrative Records of the DGW, 1477-3-2-12; Mary D. Powers to Mr. John Buggs, September 16, 1972, Administrative Records of the DGQ, 1477-3-2-12. Dean Kelley, “Freedom of Religion,” in \textit{Papers from the Conference on American Freedom} (Washington D.C., April 10 – 11, 1973), 59.}

The IRS was not the only federal agency devoting considerable energy and resources to breaking the ties between the United Front and their church donors. FBI records show that agents were particularly concerned with the United Front’s ability to leverage church resources and kept close tabs on those denominations that extended grants. When it was discovered that the United Front was receiving significant donations from the Episcopal Church, FBI agents in Springfield and the Washington Field Office collaborated on a counterintelligence initiative aimed at
“having these funds cut off.” Agents crafted a letter to an unidentified leader in the Episcopal Church posing as “a Vestreyman of one of the largest downtown Episcopal Churches in Chicago.” In the letter, the supposed “Vestreyman” informed the reader that he was “aware that the Episcopal Church funded the United Front of Cairo in amount of $50,000.00 for the year 1970” and that one of the organization’s leaders had been “given an opportunity to speak” before the church’s general convention. The author warned that the church’s funding of the United Front had prompted “many members” to “cut their pledges, thus forcing a cut of funds for local parish programs as well as funds for National Church programs.” “I ask you,” the author pleaded “for the good of our church, to withhold funds from the United Front of Cairo.” “I want to assure you that I agree with most of the Church’s program and am convinced much good can and will come of such a program if it is well directed and run on a sound basis.” “I disagree,” the letter concluded, “only with funding groups which advocate violence.” Agents also circulated an anonymous flyer among Black and white Cairoites highlighting “the expensive taste of [Koen] and possibly some of his other opportunistic traits.” According to field agents, it was hoped that “circulation of this would further latent resentment against [Koen] in the black community and assist in neutralizing him.”

These examples of IRS and FBI repression demonstrate the concern that church support for the United Front generated and the lengths that state actors would go to cut it off. For a brief period, church support had brought valuable resources and legitimacy to the local struggle. Each new contribution broadened the United Front’s coalition and expanded knowledge of the

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challenges facing Black residents in a small, embattled town. The fragile coalitional bond between Black Power activists and national denominational bodies had also challenged the church to examine its own mission and make good on rhetorical commitments to the marginalized and dispossessed. However, as pressures mounted church executives began to retreat, fostering disillusionment and division within the ranks and creating new obstacles for the United Front that would prove very difficult to navigate.

**Tactical Innovation and the End of a Mass Movement**

As the full extent of this bleak financial picture set in, the United Front faced some difficult decisions. Churches had not only underwritten the organization’s legal aid and daily operational expenses but had also extended the crucial seed money that made the United Front’s progressive political programs possible. In 1971, however, the combination of mounting legal bills and declining resources had forced the United Front to dig into church grants that had been provided for long-term community development initiatives. Therefore, while the organization had witnessed some important gains, particularly in the areas of housing and health, the reality was that funds for the initiation of new programs and the continuation of existing ones were rapidly diminishing, casting the organization’s long-term political program into jeopardy. These unique circumstances necessitated a fundamental reevaluation of the United Front’s strategy and tactics. Should Black Power activists continue to focus their efforts on mobilizing coalitional support from the nation’s churches? If not, could they identify new coalitional allies or revenue streams to support their long-term political program? Alternatively, would the United Front opt to abandon the costly strategy of developing parallel institutions and embrace a new approach due
to financial constraints? As the year progressed, answering these questions became the organization’s central focus.

As they discussed their options, United Front activists not only had to consider the precipitous decline in church resources but also the further narrowing of political opportunities that had begun in Cairo during the spring of 1971. Prior to that spring, the U.C.C.A. had not exerted formal control over city government, opting instead to use threats and intimidation to secure favorable policies. The organization’s real power had been its domination of local law enforcement. However, unhappiness with the city’s failure to eliminate the United Front prompted the U.C.C.A. to run a number of candidates for public office in 1971. As in previous elections, a number of African Americans also announced their candidacy despite the obstacles posed by the city’s at-large commission form of governance. Al Farmer became the first African American candidate for mayor, running against U.C.C.A. candidate E. J. Walter. Black candidates from Mt. Moriah and First Missionary Baptist Churches also ran for the four city commissioner positions, including Rev. Sherman Jones, Ed Wade, and Preston Ewing, Sr. Fearing that Black and white “extremists” might seize political office, incumbent mayor Pete Thomas declared that he would run for reelection. With that, the election of 1971 became a referendum of sorts on the different factions working within the city.59

When the ballots were counted, the results marked a resounding victory for the White Citizens Council. Three U.C.C.A. candidates – Allen Moss, James Walder, and James Dale – were elected to the city council, securing the organization’s control over city governance. Dale, a well-known local business owner and sheriff’s deputy, was also appointed Police Commissioner to serve alongside fellow U.C.C.A. member and Alexander County Sheriff Donald Turner. The

election of the militants stunned Black Power activists. “These men,” Charles Koen declared, “are the most extreme of the extremists” and “have vowed to keep blacks in their place.” Even mayor Pete Thomas was appalled, describing the election results as a loss for the city and his own “moderate” approach. “I am going to see what can be accomplished,” Thomas stated. But, he warned the new commissioners that if they refused to “go along” with his plans he would “check it to them.” Bob Cunningham, president of the U.C.C.A., assured Thomas that the new commissioners shared his concern for the city but warned that they would “not back him in anything that is good for just the United Front.” Shortly after, Mayor Pete Thomas was forced to resign and was quickly replaced by Walder, treasurer of the U.C.C.A. All three commissioners secured reelection in 1975, marking a fundamental realignment in political power.\(^\text{60}\)

This realignment had significant implications for the United Front, ending any hopes of dialogue or compromise. Prior to the election, the United Front and Mayor Pete Thomas’s administration had been engaged in discussions regarding the potential for a cease-fire agreement. While the terms of such an agreement were a source of contention, the lines of communication were open. However, with U.C.C.A. leaders controlling city government, the possibility of any agreement was foreclosed. In a more stringent sense than their predecessors, Mayor Walder and the U.C.C.A. commissioners demonstrated a principled opposition to negotiating with the United Front. As storeowners, Walder and Dale had cultivated this no-compromise approach through their experience in combatting the boycott of downtown

businesses. By the time they secured political office, at least twelve downtown businesses had closed and the U.C.C.A.-led city council was determined to remain firm in its opposition to any actions that might appear to legitimize the United Front’s tactics. Faced with a mountain of civil suits challenging the city’s longstanding practice of discrimination, the city council dug in its heels and pursued the cases at tremendous expense even when it was clear that the courts would rule in the United Front’s favor. Moreover, with the city facing financial catastrophe, U.C.C.A. city council members approved significant increases in the police department’s budget, believing that “law and order” was the only way to end the boycott and protests. Increasingly, it appeared that the city council was willing to bankrupt the city rather than negotiate. As one U.C.C.A. member stated to a journalist from Ramparts magazine, “We would rather see the town wiped off the map than turn it over to those revolutionaries from the United Front.”

Nowhere was the intransigence of the U.C.C.A. city council more apparent than in its refusal to accept any federal or state funds that might benefit working-class African Americans. If Mayor Thomas and the United Front had agreed on anything, it was that improving economic conditions in the city was critical to resolving the current crisis. As the previous chapter showed, Mayor Thomas made a determined effort to secure federal and state programs, but faltered when officials mandated that he construct representative task forces to oversee their initiation. In contrast, the U.C.C.A. was opposed on principle to what it described as “hand-out programs” run by “fat necked Negro administrators” designed to “bribe-off” so-called troublemakers. Accordingly, the city council obstructed the extension of a number of social and economic programs that would have improved the city’s economic base and benefited both Black and white Cairoites. Furthermore, when Black Cairoites endeavored to work around the city in

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obtaining federal and state grants for community programming, they were repeatedly undercut by the city administration.62

A particularly egregious example of this obstructionism was the city’s refusal to sell lots to the United Cairo Housing Corporation for use in new home developments. Now a state sponsored agency, the United Cairo Housing Corporation wished to obtain city lots for the development of new homes that were projected to bring a total of $1.9 million to the local economy, increase the tax base, and create a number of new jobs. However, the fact that the Housing Corporation had ties to the United Front and was led by Van Ewing, Preston Ewing Jr.’s brother, ensured the opposition of the U.C.C.A. Members of the U.C.C.A. showed up in force at a city council meeting in May when the housing program was slated for discussion. The organization’s president, Robert Cunningham, declared that members of the U.C.C.A. were “not opposed to new housing” but were rather “against any housing… controlled by the United Front.” Commissioner Dale also released a written statement explaining that he was also “opposed to having control of any housing development in the hands of the United Front, under its own or any other name.” After the meeting, the new commissioners closed ranks in opposition to the sale of the lots, forcing the Housing Corporation to reevaluate a proposal that had secured considerable support from state and federal agencies. This obstructionism on the part of the city council infuriated members of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, who addressed the issue directly at a hearing held in Cairo the following spring. “I’m trying to understand,” one member of the commission remarked to city council member Allen Moss, “the logic of refusing to sell vacant land owned by the city which receives nothing to a group that wants to build housing which you say is needed.” In response, Moss claimed that the aforementioned lots were listed for a broader urban renewal project that would result in the development of town homes on

that site. However, after further questioning, the city’s legal counsel admitted that the urban renewal program to which Moss referred had been cancelled several years earlier. The real motivation, the Commission concluded, was that the city opposed the plan because of the Housing Corporation’s ties to the United Front, a fact that commissioners had quite openly conceded only a year before.63

The rise of the U.C.C.A. to political power played an important role in the United Front’s discussions of the need for tactical innovation. Black Power activists in Cairo had always adopted a multi-pronged approach to addressing the longstanding practice of discrimination in the city: filing legal suits, engaging in nonviolent direct-action, running Black candidates for political office, and developing autonomous parallel institutions. For some, however, these new political realities appeared to render many of the older tactics obsolete.

Most obviously, the election of 1971 demonstrated the limitations of electoral strategies to achieving Black Power in Cairo. Until the discriminatory at-large commission system could be dismantled, Black Cairoites would find themselves locked out of city government and unable to capitalize on their latent voting power. Of course, this exclusion of Black Cairoites from formal avenues of power wasn’t new, and between 1969 and 1971 local activists had become particularly adept at operating through non-institutionalized channels, mounting boycotts and protests in an effort to extract concessions from local officials. However, with U.C.C.A. members now in full control of city government, the business district and law enforcement, serious questions were raised about the viability of nonviolent direct action in achieving the United Front’s goals. Black Power activists had never subscribed to the concept of moral suasion that had underpinned SNCC’s earlier campaigns. However, Black Power activists maintained

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that nonviolent direct-action could be powerful when the power of the Black dollar was
deployed. Economic pressure, local activists contended, would force local merchants and city
leaders to meet their demands. Two years into one of the nation’s best organized boycotts,
however, the United Front was forced to question this assumption as local business owners
continued to act against their own economic self-interest in order to preserve the status quo. In
many ways, the election of 1971 represented the final repudiation of this logic as city leaders
drove Cairo to the brink of financial collapse in order to hinder the United Front’s efforts.

It is also important to recognize that the costs associated with nonviolent protest did not
only affect those against whom the actions were directed. Indeed, as this chapter has shown,
Black Cairoites faced severe economic and legal penalties for their participation in nonviolent
direct-action campaigns, particularly picketing connected to the boycott of downtown businesses.
After the 1971 election, the United Front expected these repressive acts to intensify. With church
funds dwindling and key leaders facing jail time, it is unsurprising that Black Power activists
began to question whether the picketing and protests associated with the boycott in particular
were still worth the cost. Upon reflection, most of the victories secured by the United Front had
taken place outside of the city’s existing economic and political institutions through the creation
of autonomous parallel institutions. In contrast, the organization’s use of direct action tactics to
counteract discrimination in local government and business, while well coordinated, had been
largely unsuccessful due to white opposition. With the U.C.C.A. now controlling city
government, the odds of future concessions were negligible. Increasingly, the United Front’s best
chance of eradicating longstanding practices of discrimination seemed to lie in the hands of the
organization’s lawyers who were busy fighting it out in the courts.64

64 “Front calls Dale, Thomas Cairo threat,” Afro-American, May 22, 1971; “Says more repression in Cairo,”
The debate over whether to pursue costly forms of nonviolent direct action continued during the summer of 1971, as police resumed their assaults on the United Front with the sanction of city administrators. Heavy police patrols returned to Cairo’s streets. An armored truck was deployed. Conflict seemed imminent. In June, violence erupted when police fired shots and tear gas into St. Columba’s Church as three unarmed people—two priests and a lawyer—worked quietly inside. The order to fire on the church had been given by Commissioner Dale, who alleged that four “black militants” had been seen shooting out of the rectory and into the police station. The chaos that followed required state police to risk their lives to rescue the men and women trapped in the church from being shot by local law enforcement. As the smoke dissipated, Governor Ogilvie would be forced once again to send his top aide Paul Wisner to investigate allegations of police misconduct.65

The United Front had survived police repression in the past, but this time they would have to cope without the assistance of several key leaders. Over the course of the summer, a number of United Front activists faced trial dates, some lost appeals, and others were sentenced to jail. The organization’s economic development coordinator, Bobby Williams, was trapped in the middle of a protracted legal battle stemming from his arrest on weapons charges in Cape Girardeau in 1969. Although Williams was exonerated on appeal, he was picked up again in June 1971 for violating the Federal Gun Control Act. Living and working in the Pyramid Courts, Williams approached a licensed gun dealer in Cape Girardeau to purchase two rifles to protect his family. When asked by the salesman if he had any felony convictions, Williams explained that he had one but that it was currently under appeal. The salesman allegedly made a phone call and subsequently informed Williams that it was okay for him to purchase a firearm. Shortly

afterwards, however, Williams was arrested. Two convictions and two successful appeals later, representatives from the Internal Security Division of the U.S. Justice Department were brought in to prosecute the case against Williams one more time. Williams was found guilty in 1974 and surrendered to the federal marshal in St. Louis to begin serving a five-year prison sentence in federal prison in Terre Haute, Indiana.  

While the United Front’s economic development coordinator struggled through an exhausting number of trials and appeals, its director, Rev. Charles Koen, was also facing sentencing for charges dating back to his 1968 beating at the hands of St. Louis police officers. In July, Koen surrendered to officers and began serving a six-month sentence at the St. Louis County Jail for disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. Koen’s incarceration was greeted by outrage from the United Front’s allies across the country. In September, supporters staged protests in twelve different cities, calling upon President Nixon to pardon Koen immediately. During his incarceration, Koen began a water fast to protest his unjust imprisonment and those of other Black Power activists across the country. By the time he was paroled in September, Koen had lost almost sixty pounds, his body wracked by the effects of malnutrition. It took months for Koen to gain the strength to even leave his home, and when he did he was unable to walk without the assistance of a cane. Koen would never recover the physical and verbal dexterity that had characterized his youth, a powerful illustration of the tremendous personal cost borne by so many Black Power activists during this period.  

Koen’s absence in particular had a visible effect on the United Front. Despite preparing for such an eventuality for several months by training a second tier of leadership, the combination of dwindling resources, narrow political opportunities, and the loss of Koen’s charismatic and energizing leadership style left the organization reeling without clear direction. Although the NAACP and the Lawyer’s Committee continued their legal battles, the direct-action arm of the United Front was stagnating. Picketing ground to a halt and Black shoppers trickled back to some of the stores. In October, *The Tri-State Informer* bragged that all was quiet in the embattled city. “Downtown,” the paper alleged, “more and more Negroes are seen among the whites, going about their business of shopping in the stores.” “Yes,” the author concluded, “Cairo in the Autumn of 1971 is peaceful and serene and has been for some months now – and the answer to it all is very simple – Rev. Koen is still in St. Louis.”

United Front leaders contested the U.C.C.A.’s characterization of the city as peaceful, arguing that tensions lay just beneath the surface. According to the organization’s public relations officer, Rev. Manker Harris, conditions in the city were still “potentially explosive” but after being released from jail Koen had “asked the black community to keep calm” and “not respond to these intimidations and provocations.” Rather, he encouraged local activists to abandon confrontational tactics and continue the pursuit of justice through the legal system. While not openly stated, the implications of Koen’s new strategy quickly became apparent. The boycott would continue in spirit but the picketing and protests that had sustained it would be deemphasized in order to protect local activists and allow the organization’s legal counsel to focus their energies on the growing number of civil rights cases. As a skilled organizer, Koen characterized this tactical shift as a sign of victory, not accommodation. “We feel the social

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aspect of the struggle has been won,” Koen explained. “Our economic boycott has been so successful that not only are the merchants going broke but the whole city and county are both about bankrupt.” Situated now as an example of Black power and unity in the face of discrimination, the boycott was characterized as a complete success. But, what was also tragically apparent was that city officials had refused to meet any of the United Front’s demands, a fact that made sustaining a boycott interminably very difficult.69

The end of picketing and protesting in Cairo could have easily demoralized local activists and resulted in a complete dissipation of the United Front’s activities. However, United Front leaders took the opportunity presented by the de-escalation to initiate what they described as “a new stage” in the Black Power struggle. According to the United Front’s coordinator, Leon Page, the organization had held a series of meetings with local community members to assess how they should proceed after three years of struggle. While the NAACP and the Lawyer’s Committee were engaged in what promised to be a very slow and arduous legal struggle, United Front leaders redirected their energy to the organization’s more immediate solutions to the crisis facing Black Cairoites – namely the organization’s parallel institutions. The United Front’s housing and medical initiatives had met with some limited success and with white militants in control of the city independent Black-run programs appeared to be the only way to address the needs of the city’s poor and Black residents. However, the reinvigoration and expansion of these programs faced one obvious problem – funding. With church funds declining to record lows in 1972, the United Front would have to identify new sources of revenue immediately.70

In their efforts to locate more stable sources of revenue, the United Front turned its attention increasingly to state government. For the past three years the United Front had struggled to make headway with Republican Governor Richard Ogilvie. However, in 1972, Ogilvie faced an uphill battle to reelection against his Democratic opponent, Daniel Walker. Seeing the potential for a shift in power, Rev. Koen stepped out in early support for Walker, denouncing Ogilvie’s record and describing the sitting governor’s administration as “the most repressive in Illinois’ history.” “Blacks cannot survive another four years of Ogilvie’s repression,” Koen declared in a press conference in November. “We must get ourselves together… At the ballot box we’re not going to be turned around.”

Using the United Front’s existing infrastructure, Koen brought together a powerful coalition of Black leaders behind Walker’s campaign. “We activated the Coalition downstate to work for the election of Gov. Walker,” Koen explained, “based on offsetting the ills of the Ogilvie administration.” The coalition included representation from 24 downstate communities and focused its energy on getting out Black voters in their districts for Walker. When the election results came, the coalition claimed success as Ogilvie was ousted from the governor’s office with Black voters playing an important role in several Illinois communities.

United Front leaders anticipated that their support for Walker would afford them political patronage and influence over the new governor. With Walker in office the lines of communication were certainly more open than they had been under the Ogilvie Administration. Moreover, some tangible gains for Black Cairoites were secured, including a commitment to prevent the closure of St. Mary’s Hospital, which had been facing serious financial difficulties, and the extension of $50,000 in economic development grants to a new United Front initiative.

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focused on assisting in the development of small business enterprises. Indeed, by the fall of 1973, United Front leaders expressed some optimism about their community development initiatives seeing some small but significant progress.\textsuperscript{73}

Building upon these initial successes, the United Front’s coalition organized a series of local forums aimed at highlighting the concerns facing the state’s poorest communities. Talk of a comprehensive state project that would bring significant economic development and social service programming to Southern Illinois was discussed, including expanded funding for the OEO agencies to allow for job training. “We went to Springfield with a master plan,” United Front chief of staff James Chairs explained. “And they listened.” However, over the next year very little progress was made and the relationship between the United Front’s coalition and the Walker administration ultimately broke down when the governor supported a series of regressive welfare policies. United Front activist Geneva Whitfield had actively campaigned for Walker but now lamented her decision. “I could claw my eyes out now,” she declared. “Walker brainwashed us, I figured if a man wore out his shoes going around talking to people and if he didn’t drive a limousine, I figured we had a chance with that man. But now, I don’t see nothing that he has done to help the poor people. People are suffering under the administration of Walker.”\textsuperscript{74} In March 1974, members of the United Front electoral coalition showed up at a joint session of the legislature to protest the fact that the governor had turned a “deaf ear” toward the plight of the poor. As the coalition broke down, so did hopes that electoral politics was a solution to the plight


\textsuperscript{74}Bud Farrar, “Walker’s charisma has faded away,” \textit{Southern Illinoisan}, May 19, 1974.
of Black Cairotes. “They kept telling us to try the political process,” one United Front activist declared, “and we tried the political process only to get cheated again.”

The Cairo United Front’s attempts at tactical innovation between 1971 and 1974 had produced a mixed bag for local Black Power activists. Prompted by what Rev. Blaine Ramsey called a “recession of national spirit,” the United Front had been forced to make some difficult decisions after their primary source of funding dwindled. This decline in church resources was compounded in the summer of 1971 by a further narrowing of political opportunities when members of the White Citizen’s Council rose to political power and several of the United Front’s leadership faced incarceration. It was in this context that United Front leaders decided to deemphasize the high profile mass mobilizations and direct action campaigns that had characterized the organization’s first three years. Instead, local activists opted to shift their focus to the organization’s ongoing legal battles and the leveraging of political patronage through involvement in electoral politics at the state level. The latter proved largely ineffective as a tool to expand the United Front’s fledgling economic programs, though some limited progress was made. On the other hand, legal strategies, as the concluding chapter shows, were remarkably successful in transforming the city’s longstanding patterns of racial discrimination in politics, hiring, and law enforcement. However, the onset of a primarily legal and electoral battle over the rights and opportunities of Black Cairoites also marked the end of mass mobilization and social movement activity in Cairo, Illinois. While key leaders like Rev. Charles Koen, James Chairs, and Preston Ewing, Jr., continued to devote considerable energy to the struggle for Black Power, the days of rallies, picketing, and protest had drawn to a close. In December 1985, the St. Louis

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Post Dispatch poignantly characterized the impact of these tactical innovations. While the United Front had survived, the paper reported that “in a touch of irony” the organization was now “part of the establishment,” functioning as a “clearinghouse for federal and state social services grants.”

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CONCLUSION

In the spring of 1972, the United States Commission on Civil Rights held a three-day public hearing in Cairo to examine the “underlying causes of racial strife” in this now infamous city. For almost five years, events in Cairo had dominated national headlines, prompting commentators to ask whether the city was a “bizarre anomaly,” or if its story offered “an ominous portent of the future.” Commissioner Frankie Freeman explained that information gathered during the hearing would be used “to examine and evaluate not only the problems of Cairo, but… of cities throughout the Nation that are also troubled by poverty [and] racial strife.”

After hearing from representatives from city government, state and federal agencies, private business, and the Black community, the Commission made nineteen recommendations. Among them were a proposal to overhaul the policies and practices of the Cairo Police Department, which the Commission condemned as having been “both unprofessional and biased;” the appointment of Black residents to serve on all county and city boards and commissions; the immediate integration of public housing; and the initiation of investigations into discriminatory practices in public and private employment. Governmental agencies at the local, state, and federal level were tasked with ensuring that these recommendations were carried out.¹

Two years later, staff members from the Commission’s Illinois Advisory Committee returned to Cairo to evaluate what progress had been made. Despite the cessation of open hostilities, committee members quickly discerned that the relative calm did not stem from meaningful changes in the city’s racial practices. Under Mayor Walder’s U.C.C.A.-dominated

¹ Kohn, “Civil War in Cairo, Ill.”; Lukas, “Bad Day At Cairo, Ill.”; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Cairo, Illinois: A Symbol of Racial Polarization,12; Hearing Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 325.
city council, local government remained a bastion of white power. Black Cairoites held only 5 of the 126 positions available on city and county boards and commissions and continued to experience chronic underrepresentation in municipal employment. The city still had no Black firemen and only two Black police officers charged with patrolling the still rigidly segregated Pyramid Courts. Investigations performed by the Illinois Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) confirmed widespread discriminatory practices in public and private employment, but both agencies reported that statutory and budgetary constraints had prevented effective action.

Perhaps most disconcertingly, the Committee found that “no action” had been taken “to prevent a recurrence of the breakdown of law and justice which occurred in Cairo during the late 1960s and early 1970s.” The policies and practices of the Cairo Police Department remained wholly unchanged. Almost a decade after the Committee’s first visit to the city in 1966, members concluded that the “impact of civil rights legislation has still not reached Cairo.”

The findings of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1972 and the Illinois Advisory Committee in 1974 revealed the extent and resiliency of Cairo’s racial and economic problems. Despite mounting one of the longest and best-organized struggles of the Black Power era, the United Front had struggled to pierce a solid wall of white intransigence and naked terror. In turn, these local challenges had been exacerbated by the refusal of public officials at all levels of government to use their authority to force compliance with civil rights legislation, opting instead to use the punitive arm of the state to quash protests. However, despite the bleak picture rendered by the hearings, the United Front’s efforts had not been in vain. As protests waned, legal suits filed at the height of the struggle continued to make their way through the courts, culminating, by

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the decade’s end, in a series of landmark victories that would irrevocably transform racial practices in the city.

A key turning point in the legal battle took place in October 1974 when a resolution was finally reached in *Young v. Alexander County Housing Authority*, a suit filed five years earlier addressing segregation in public housing. The consent decree that followed resulted in the integration of public housing and the allocation of federal funds for renovations necessary to bring accommodations up to equal standards. Importantly, the consent decree also stipulated that members of the Alexander County Board should retain two Black representatives to serve on the Housing Authority establishing a precedent for affirmative action appointments to other boards and commissions. The following year, a settlement was reached in *Ewing v. Walder*, resulting in a consent decree mandating Black representation on the boards of a number of municipal agencies including the county Welfare Commission, Land Commission, Building Commission, and Health Department, as well as the city Board of Zoning Appeals, Library Board, Police Pension Board, and Board of Fire and Police Commissioners. In February 1976, a resolution was also reached in the seven-year-old *Hollis v. Emerson* case, resulting in the appointment of a Black representative to the four-member Public Utilities Commission. Collectively, these legal rulings contributed to a significant expansion of formal Black political power in the city, affording African Americans a greater role in the administration of governmental programs and agencies.³

However, the biggest political victory would not come until March 1980 when the district court ruled on *Kendrick v. Walder*, a suit filed by Hattie Kendrick in 1973 charging that Cairo’s at-large city council system violated the 14th and 15th Amendments as well as the Voting Rights

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³ Seng, “The Cairo Experience: Civil Rights Litigation in a Racial Powder Keg,” 305-310; Illinois Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, *A Decade of Waiting in Cairo*, 16-17; Cairo City Council Minutes, September 24, 1974; Cairo City Council Minutes, June 24, 1975.
Act of 1965 by “canceling, minimizing, and diluting” the votes of Black citizens. After seven years of legal wrangling, a consent decree was imposed abolishing the at-large city council system of governance and replacing it with an aldermanic system in which the city was divided into five wards, two of which were predominantly African American. In November 1980, two Black Cairoites – Bobbie Whitaker (Second Ward) and Earl Wade (Third Ward) – were elected to the city council, becoming the first African American councilmembers in almost seventy years. In the next election, the United Front’s chairman, Charles Koen, would join them, symbolizing a transition of movement leadership from protest to Black officialdom.4

Beyond the political sphere, Black Cairoites also made some significant strides in the battle against employment discrimination, increasing the number of municipal jobs held by Black workers. In February 1976, under pressure from the EEOC, the city agreed to maintain a 17 percent Black workforce as well as employ two African Americans on the fire department and three on the police department. That same year, Charles Bridges became the city’s first African American firefighter. “Back then you had some bad bigots in this department,” Bridges recalled. “But I knew I had to fight it. Either blacks were going to be here or I was going to go down swinging.” Legal action also prompted a number of county agencies including the Department of Corrections, the Housing Authority, the Highway Department, and the public aid office to begin hiring Black workers in skilled and semi-skilled positions. Former United Front activist Clarence Dossie pointed to the significance of these gains for Black workers. “If it wasn’t for the

movement… a lot of brothers that were around here they wouldn’t have gotten jobs… because we were instrumental in helping them get jobs on the highway department and the prison jobs.”

The Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law played a critical role in securing these victories and continued to provide the only free legal services available to poor Black and white citizens in the county. In 1972, the Lawyers’ Committee played a prominent role in the formation of the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation which took over operations in the city and went on to provide free legal services in sixty-five counties across central and southern Illinois. Among the organization’s founders were local attorney Robert Lansden and NAACP president Preston Ewing, Jr. In this manner, Black Power struggles in Cairo directly contributed to the development of what Ewing describes as a vast “network of legal services” across the state of Illinois.6

In tandem with these important legal gains, the United Front and its many organizational offshoots were responsible for the only substantive economic development efforts of the 1970s. In addition to their earlier cooperative ventures, United Front activists worked with the Pulaski-Alexander Development Corporation (PADCO) to attract a small number of new industries to the city and provide technical assistance to individuals seeking to start businesses of their own. In conjunction with the latter, United Front members also formed Help Your Brother, Inc., a non-profit organization that leveraged state and federal grants to assist in small business development. The United Front’s housing initiative, the Egyptian Housing Development Corporation, was particularly effective, resulting in the construction of over 160 homes for low-

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income residents as well as creating jobs for local carpenters and laborers. While modest, these programs represented the only meaningful local efforts to counteract capital flight, job losses, and growing poverty.\footnote{Illinois Advisory Committee, \textit{A Decade of Waiting in Cairo}, 13, 33-34; Minutes of the Illinois Consortium for Community Action, October 11, 1973, ICC Records, box 10, folder 31; Minutes of the Illinois Consortium for Community Action, November 15, 1973, ICC Records, box 10, folder 31; Seng, “The Cairo Experience: Civil Rights Litigation in a Racial Powder Keg,” 305; Preston Ewing Interview, Cairo, Illinois, October 29, 2011.}

Beyond these tangible gains, Black Power had also facilitated a potent transformation in the consciousness and identity of Black Cairoites, particularly the working class activists who had been at the forefront of local struggles. In oral interviews and biographies, United Front members stress the role that the movement played in fostering a powerful sense of racial solidarity or, in their own words, “oneness” and “togetherness.” The organization’s democratic organizing model allowed people who had been marginalized from formal political power for generations to articulate their shared experience of racial oppression and cultivate a sense of agency necessary for collective action. Parallel institutions afforded the unschooled and unemployed new knowledge and skills instilling pride and a belief in the capacity for self-determination. For a working class activist like Clarence Dossie, the movement offered an opportunity to obtain a formal education as well as visit other parts of the country forging connections with leaders in a broader movement for racial justice and social change. “I would never have gone anywhere if it hadn’t been for the [movement],” Dossie states. “I never would have traveled the highways… I would never have had a chance to meet Cesar Chavez… Dick Gregory… Louis Farrakhan.” Emboldened and inspired by these types of experiences, United Front activists would continue to organize around the plight of Black workers in Cairo even after the broader movement had dissipated. Dossie eventually became a master craftsman and turned
his attention to addressing discrimination in local craft unions. Others entered local politics, organized around welfare and tenants rights, and championed equitable taxation policy.8

Importantly, *Soul Power* has shown that these cultural, political, and economic transformations were possible in large measure due to the United Front’s ability to mobilize the organizational and ideational resources of the Black church. Challenging accounts of Black Power’s de-Christianization, this dissertation has shown that activists in Cairo successfully counteracted the narrowing political opportunities and sectarianism of the late 1960s and early 1970s by forging a surprisingly broad-based and inclusive coalition under the banner of a new spiritual philosophy and a set of shared cultural practices rooted in the Black church. Building on the unrivaled social and cultural power of Cairo’s Black churches, local activists mobilized religious discourses and cultures to bridge potent intraracial divisions rooted in class, generation, and ideology. In the hands of grassroots activists, Black religious traditions operated as a kind of glue, binding together disparate peoples in a common struggle for social justice and racial change. It was primarily because of this broad-based and cohesive foundation that the United Front was able to survive state repression and vigilante violence mounting one of the longest and most successful Black Power campaigns of the era.

This vision of a religiously grounded Black united front was Reverend Charles Koen’s most important contribution to the national Black Power Movement. A little examined and undervalued movement theorist, Koen skillfully navigated the organizational rifts and thorny political debates of Black Power’s “second wave” building an effective local united front

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organization and solidifying ties with offshoots in communities across Illinois and Missouri. By 1971, Koen – with the aid of his extensive political allies – had succeeded in developing a national political structure foreshadowing the emergence of the National Black United Front at the decades end.

Central to all of Koen’s political projects was a belief in the unifying power of a religious tradition that placed emphasis on the poor and oppressed. *Soul Power* has shown that Koen and other United Front activists, far from being disconnected from the emergent Black Theology, were key agents in its production, consumption, and transmission. Engaging the latest religious literature, inviting theologians to speak at weekly rallies, and obtaining training at seminaries and universities across the country, Cairo’s Black Power activists were significant participants in a broader dialogue about Black Theology’s character and role in protest and community building traditions. In many ways, grassroots activists anticipated many of the more recent turns in Black Theology, though the rise of Womanist Theology was an important exception to this rule. As community organizers, United Front leaders intuitively fused formal academic theologies with deeper African American folk traditions, presaging the important work of theologians such as Dwight Hopkins. In turn, Koen’s blending of grassroots revivalism and radical politics produced a strong emphasis on social class as well as a critique of U.S. capitalism neglected by many early works in Black Theology. Accordingly, I argue that Koen and other grassroots movement theorists should be understood as pioneers and co-contributors in the effort to develop a systematic Black Theology during the late 1960s and 1970s.

If grassroots activists were formative to the development of Black Liberation Theology, *Soul Power* also shows that Black theologians and church executives made vital contributions to local Black Power struggles. Emboldened by the New Nationalism of the post-rebellion era,
Black clergy developed their own caucuses and ecumenical bodies, exerting pressure on predominantly white denominations to extend resources directly to Black Power organizations. As a result of these efforts, the United Front was able to secure more than half a million dollars in grants from church-based sponsors between 1969 and 1974, as well as vital technical and legal support. The “no-strings” funding model adopted by denominational authorities ensured that church funding would play an important role in sustaining those aspects of the United Front’s work that corporate and state donors refused to sponsor such as legal expenses, rent, and staff salaries. This funding insulated Black working class activists from economic harassment and allowed the United Front to move beyond “survival work” to the development of a constructive program for economic and community development. In turn, seed-money grants provided by churches played an important role in initiating programs like the Lawyers’ Committee and the Egyptian Housing Development Corporation, increasing the likelihood that more stable sources of governmental funding would eventually be secured. Accordingly, I argue that the nation’s churches were an important and overlooked source of coalitional support for Black Power and challenge traditional periodizations of the liberal civil rights coalition’s decline.

However, in an era of conservative ascendancy the United Front’s reliance upon such funds proved to be a double-edged sword and by the mid-1970s churches retreated under mounting opposition from state agencies and white congregants. When combined with ongoing repression at the local level, the collapse in church funding compelled United Front leaders to redirect energy away from mass direct action strategies and toward legal gradualism and state sponsored economic development projects, resulting in the decline of the Cairo movement. Accordingly, *Soul Power* also contributes to broader debates about Black Power’s decline as well as the rise of modern conservatism, situating the nation’s churches at the center.
While the shift away from mass direct action signaled the end of the Black Power Movement in Cairo, the aforementioned legal and political victories were secured in the quieter years that followed, serving to expand Black political power and access to municipal employment. However, victories in the battle against economic decline, capital flight, and Black deproletarianization were harder to come by, indicative of a broader national problem. In the forty years following the Black Power struggle, Cairo has continued to decline, its population plummeting from just over six thousand in 1970 to less than three thousand in 2010. Downtown stores are closed, industry has relocated, and the city itself is in dire financial straits. “Cairo has been raped and everything else as far as the economics,” former United Front activist Clarence Dossie stated in 2010. “The people that was controlling Cairo they done taken everything out of Cairo and Cairo is indebted like I don’t know what… They ain’t got no base as far as a tax base… and no businesses.” Reflecting back on his years in the struggle, Dossie surmised that the United Front had “won the battle but we lost the war.” Despite the severity of the city’s economic problems, the impact of the Cairo Black Power Movement has continued to resonate across the nation, giving rise to new political alliances such as the National Black United Front and theologies that offer an important alternative to prevailing conservative doctrines such as the prosperity gospel.⁹

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Providence, Rhode Island

Brown University, John Hay Library
Hall-Hoag Collection

Washington D.C.

Library of Congress
Kendrick-Brooks Family Papers
James Forman Papers

National Archives
Records of the United States Commission on Civil Rights

ORAL HISTORIES AND INTERVIEWS


Shawnee Community College Oral History Program, Ullin, Illinois

NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS

Afro-American (Baltimore, MD)
Atlanta Daily World
Black Enterprise
Black World
Cairo Evening Citizen
The Carolinian
Chicago Daily Defender
Chicago Tribune
The Christian Science Monitor
Chronicle Telegram (Elyria, OH)
Commonweal
The Crisis
Diocesan Press Service (Episcopal Church, U.S.A.)
Ebony
The Egyptian (Carbondale, Ill.)
FOCUS/Midwest (St. Louis, MO)
Globe-Democrat (St. Louis, MO)
Illinois Human Relations
Indianapolis Star (Indianapolis, IN)
Jackson Daily News (Jackson, MS)
Jet
Journal Star (Peoria, Ill.)
Los Angeles Times
Los Angeles Sentinel
Louisville Defender (Louisville, KY)
Marion Daily Republican (Marion, Ill.)
Monitor (East St. Louis, Ill.)
The McKendrean (Lebanon, Ill.)
The Nation
National Catholic Reporter
The News-Gazette (Champaign, Ill.)
New York Amsterdam News
The New York Times Magazine
The Pittsburgh Courier
Playboy Magazine
Presbyterian Journal
Proud
Ramparts
Reader’s Digest
The Rotarian
St. Louis Argus
St. Louis Post-Dispatch
Southeast Missourian
Southern Illinoisan
Southern Illinois Labor Tribune
TIME
The Tri-State Informer (Cairo, Ill.)
United Front News (Cairo, Ill.)
Urbana Courier (Urbana, Ill.)
The Washington Post
Win
DISCOGRAPHY


PAMPHLETS


FBI FILES

FBIBUF File No. 157-HQ-14335 (Black United Front, Cairo, Illinois.)


GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS


Cairo City Council Minutes. City Hall, Cairo, Illinois.


**ORGANIZATIONAL PAPERS**


**DENOMINATIONAL AND CHURCH RECORDS**


**UNPUBLISHED DISSERTATIONS AND PAPERS**


ARTICLES AND BOOK CHAPTERS


**BOOKS**


*The Attractions of Cairo, Illinois*. Cairo, Ill.: The People Print, 1890.


Bell, Taylor H. A. *Sweet Charlie, Dike, Cazzie, and Bobby Joe: High School Basketball in


Federal Writers’ Project. *Illinois; a descriptive and historical guide*, 1939.


Murch, James DeForest. *The Protestant Revolt: The Road to Freedom for American Churches*. 


APPENDIX: ANNUAL DONATIONS MADE TO THE CAIRO UNITED FRONT BY THREE
MAJOR CHURCH-BASED AGENCIES, 1968-1971

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Church-Based Agency</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Episcopal General Convention Special Program</td>
<td>1,100</td>
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<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Episcopal General Convention Special Program</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Episcopal Church General Convention Special Program</td>
<td>68,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations (IFCO)</td>
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<td>1971</td>
<td>Presbyterian Church National Committee on the Self-Development of People</td>
<td>112,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Presbyterian National Committee on the Self-Development of People</td>
<td>15,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>435,760</strong></td>
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