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## **Confronting Jim Crow: Boston's Anti-Slavery Tradition, 1890-1920**

**Mark Schneider**

One of the most extensively researched areas in American historiography is the New England anti-slavery movement. However, one of the least asked questions about that crusade is how durable was its legacy? Between 1880 and 1920, the white South codified its burgeoning system of racial discrimination, and the white North turned away with unconcern, while greeting African-American migrants with paternalism at best, or violence at worst. Was it any different in Boston, where a generation of black and white abolitionist descendants and a particularly militant black community looked out at the gathering gloom?

Boston did remain a stronghold of anti-racist sentiment, but this feeling was increasingly marginalized within the city and the country. A small core of activists, highly conscious of the work of the previous generation and the historic importance of their city, vigorously opposed the new racist order. While they obviously failed to stem the rising tide of segregation, disenfranchisement, peonage, lynching, and mob violence that afflicted African-Americans, they did build institutions and a culture of protest that formed a vital link with future generations.

Three interrelated groupings of Bostonians kept alive the antislavery tradition of the past by confronting Jim Crow in the present. Among these were supporters of the accommodationist Booker T. Washington, who included the editors of the *Colored American Magazine* and individuals like Archibald H. Grimke and Francis Jackson Garrison. These people supported Washington's educational and institution-building projects, but did not accept second-class status for African-Americans. Washington's nemesis was the fiery editor of the Boston *Guardian*, William Monroe Trotter, who was probably the central leader of the black

community from 1906 until just after 1915, when he led the protests against the film "Birth of a Nation." The Boston chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (founded 1909 nationally) transformed itself from a mostly white group that fought *for* black people to an institution *of* black people. This was the largest and one of the most important chapters of the Association until 1919. These three groupings were characterized by great fluidity; civil rights activists changed their ideas over time. No doubt many Bostonians hoped that the supporters of Washington, Trotter, and the NAACP would learn to cooperate with one another, and sometimes they did.

Probably no other city was as free of racism as Boston in this period. When Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin organized a national conference of African-American women in 1895, she declared that Boston had a suitable "atmosphere" for such a meeting. Susie King Taylor, a slave from Savannah, escaped to Union lines during the Civil War and made her way to Boston. In 1902, she recalled her experiences, denouncing the racism of her day in outspoken terms. "I have been in many states and cities," she declared, "and in each I have looked for liberty and justice, equal for the black as for the white, but it was not until I was within the borders of New England, and reached old Massachusetts, that I found it." In May of 1904, the *Colored American Magazine* reprinted a Boston Sunday *Herald* article entitled "Boston as the Paradise of the Negro," in which several prominent black Bostonians testified to the city's favorable racial climate. Even the sharp-tongued Monroe Trotter voiced the same sentiment when he greeted his supporters at the 1911 convention of his National Independent Political League. "Welcome to the home of Abolition," a *Guardian* headline enthused, "where it is no crime to be black."<sup>1</sup>

One of the reasons for this was the marginality of African-Americans to Boston and its politics, economy, and culture. Boston's black population grew from only 8,125 (1.8 percent of the city's population in 1890) to 16,350 in 1920 (2.2 percent). The central issue in the city during the late Gilded Age and into the Progressive Era was the shifting relations among Protestant Yankees and British-Americans, Irish-American

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1. *Woman's Era*, May 1895; Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp* (New York, 1968), p. 62; *Colored American Magazine*, VIII (May, 1904), 310-317; Boston *Guardian*, August 12, 1911, p. 1.

Catholics, and new immigrants from Czarist Russia and southern Europe. A relatively harmonious relation between Democratic Brahmin leaders such as Mayor Josiah Quincy III and Governor William Eustis Russell on the one hand, and conservative Irish leaders such as Mayor Hugh O'Brien and Patrick J. Maguire broke down under the impact of the depression of 1893 and the William Jennings Bryan campaign of 1896. Feistier Irish-American leaders such as mayors John F. Fitzgerald and James Michael Curley clashed between themselves and with Brahmin Republicans, and both sides alternately battled and courted the new immigrants. Boston's anti-racist activists operated in a political climate in which their concerns were not important within the city.<sup>2</sup>

To a certain extent, this marginalization accounted for the unique militance of Boston's black community. Small in numbers and relegated to the lowest economic rungs, black Bostonians were not important enough to assault physically or co-opt politically. Unlike larger northern black communities in New York, Philadelphia, or Chicago, black Bostonians suffered no pogroms or lynchings in this period. Republican machine politicians did not regard their votes as important, and did not build up a conservative patronage base among them. Boston's black residents, who migrated from the West End to the South End in this period, lived in an integrated community, and their children attended racially mixed schools.<sup>3</sup>

The small size of the community retarded the growth of a conservative black business class, which typically provided the social basis for Booker T. Washington's support. Nevertheless, Boston's black upper class, according to Willard B. Gatewood, "had a reputation for exclusiveness that went even beyond that of those

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2. Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, III: 77 and table 19; Geoffrey Blodgett, The Gentle Reformers: Massachusetts Democrats in the Cleveland Era (Cambridge, 1966); Constance K. Burns, "The Irony of Progressive Reform: Boston, 1898-1910," in Boston, 1700-1980: The Evolution of Urban Politics, ed. by Ronald P. Formisano and Constance K. Burns (Westport, Conn., 1984), pp. 133-164.

3. Comparisons of northern African-American communities may be found in August Meier, Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915 (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1968); Willard B. Gatewood, Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920 (Bloomington, Indiana, 1990); and Louis R. Harlan, Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1900-1915 (New York, 1986), pp. 94-106. For population distribution of Boston's black community, see Richard A. Ballou, "Even in 'Freedom's Birthplace!': The Development of Boston's Black Ghetto, 1900-1940," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1984.

in Washington or Philadelphia." Included among this group were wealthy men such as the merchant tailor John H. Lewis and the baker and hotelier Joseph Lee. Distinguished older families of less means, like the Ruffins, Riddleys, Duprees, Haydens, and others, were part of this grouping. Professional people like Samuel Courtney or Monroe Trotter, and southern migrants who were well-educated, like Clement Morgan, William Henry Lewis, or Butler Wilson, also belonged. The upper class established a genteel way of life that included the employment of white servants, vacations on Martha's Vineyard, musical training for their children, and membership in select clubs that were modelled after those of the Brahmin society.<sup>4</sup>

However, this black upper class was riddled with contradictions and was unable to lead the community during the age of Booker T. Washington. On the one hand, some of its members were socially conservative businessmen who had every reason to identify with Washington's version of Andrew Carnegie's "Gospel of Wealth." These people joined the National Negro Business League, but that organization was non-political, and it ignored the depredations taking place in the Southern states. In addition, the black businessmen were generally marginal themselves economically, and they could not build a deeply-rooted conservative political grouping. Moreover, both accommodationist and militant black Bostonians had more links to white society than similar groups in other cities. While they had clubs, lodges, and churches of their own, they also patronized the Boston Symphony Orchestra and similar institutions, and they held themselves aloof from the poorer blacks. Boston's black upper class fragmented across the political spectrum. Its conservatism was perhaps best typified by the career of William Henry Lewis, a southern migrant who attended Amherst College and the Harvard Law School, and during the 1890s was a militant opponent of Washington. He soon sensed that Tuskegee loyalties would open the doors to his ambition, and as a result he switched sides and rose to become an assistant attorney-general in the William Howard Taft administration. When the Democrats took office in 1912, Lewis returned to Boston, but he never had a significant political

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4. Gatewood, Aristocrats of Color, pp. 109-113.

following of his own. The accommodationist upper class could rise, but it could not lead.<sup>5</sup>

The vast majority of black Bostonians worked as unskilled laborers. This was equally true of those blacks whose ancestors were Bostonians, and of the recent arrivals from the South. Very few were able to escape from poverty by obtaining better-paying jobs as factory operatives, by entering the professions, or by starting their own businesses. Using sophisticated statistical techniques, Stephan Thernstrom concluded that "Probably the most significant feature of the economic plight of blacks in Boston was their lack of access to blue-collar jobs above the most menial level." John Daniels, a social worker and a contemporary observer of the city's Progressive Era race relations, used the census of 1900 to record that thirteen percent of white males, thirty percent of white females, sixty-one percent of black males, and seventy-six percent of black females worked at "menial" jobs. Of the 2,930 black men in this category, 1,676 were servants or waiters, 404 were porters, and 665 were day laborers. Of the 1,739 black women in this group, 1,222 were servants, and 492 were laundry workers. Writing in 1914, Daniels did not see much change over the fourteen year period.<sup>6</sup>

The aspirations and capabilities of these menial workers far exceeded their employment status. In 1900, fifty-three percent of Boston's African-American population were southern migrants. They came mostly from Tidewater cities, especially from Virginia, hoping to rise economically and educationally. Elizabeth Pleck found them to be more urban, literate, mulatto, and Upper South in origin than most southern blacks. A significant West Indian component of Boston's population, nineteen percent of black Bostonians in 1920, had similar middle-class aspirations and many had experience in the construction trades. By 1920, only 2.6 percent of black Bostonians over the age of twenty-one were illiterate, in a city with five percent illiteracy

5. Adelaide Cromwell Hill, "The Negro Upper Class in Boston: Its Development and Present Social Structure," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Radcliffe College, 1952; for Lewis, see the Dictionary of American Biography, supplement IV: 492-494; and the Dictionary of American Negro Biography, pp. 396-397, in clipping file, Cambridge Public Library.

6. Stephan Thernstrom, The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970 (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 192-193; John Daniels, In Freedom's Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes (New York, 1968, first published in 1914), pp. 343-378.

as a whole. This figure may be deceiving without further analysis: only one-tenth of one percent of native-born white adults were illiterate, but 10.5 percent of foreign-born whites were illiterate.<sup>7</sup>

This brief demographic sketch explains the radicalism of Boston's black community between 1890 and 1920. The black community was small enough in size and geography to be insulated from white depredation, yet large and growing enough to feel self-confident. Black Bostonians enjoyed a unique personal freedom, and regarded their city as a haven from oppression. At the same time, long-term residents and migrants were frustrated economically. In addition, they had a proud abolitionist tradition and the institutions through which to express themselves. The social basis for political accommodation, a black business class, was weaker in Boston than in other cities. When white southerners attacked the families that the black Bostonians had left behind, the northern cousins naturally responded with protest.

Among the protestors of southern racism were Boston's supporters of Booker T. Washington. While the city is famous in African-American history for the "Boston Riot" of July, 1903, in which Monroe Trotter confronted Washington at a packed Columbus Avenue A. M. E. Church, it is easily forgotten that Trotter offended the sensibilities of black and white Boston that night. Washington's supporters were not timid Uncle Toms content to take what the white man dished out, but they respected Tuskegee Institute and did have a Victorian sense of decorum. Trotter was jailed for a month after the disturbance and held a coming-out-of-jail celebration, but only two hundred people, perhaps a fifth or a tenth of those at Washington's meeting, attended. Trotter's disruptive tactics were a front-page scandal in the Boston newspapers, and his release from prison went unnoticed.<sup>8</sup>

Booker T. Washington had important connections in Boston. His intellectual heritage was of New England: Puritan, Yankee capitalist, and even abolitionist, all molded Washington's

7. Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Black Migration and Poverty* (Boston, 1865-1900) (New York, 1979), pp. 44-90; Violet Mary-Ann Johnson, "The Migration Experience: Social and Economic Adjustment of British West Indian Migrants in Boston, 1915-1950," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Boston College, 1992; *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, III: 1183, table 15, and IV: 367, table 12.

8. *Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald*, *Boston Transcript*, all July 31, 1903, page one; *Boston Sunday Post*, November 8, 1903, page 10.

thought before his exposure to Gilded Age capitalism. The first white person to influence his life was Viola Knapp Ruffner, the Vermont-born woman who instructed him in the essentials of the Puritan ethic. His "Great White Father," General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, born in Hawaii to Massachusetts missionaries, taught the same lesson in codified form. At Hampton Institute, he made what would be one of his longest friendships, with fellow student and future Boston physician Samuel E. Courtney. As a builder of Tuskegee Institute, Washington looked first to Boston and New England for financial support, which came in large part from such abolitionist and Radical Republican families as those of George Stearns and Henry Lee Higginson. Washington's wife, Olivia A. Davidson, attended the Massachusetts State Normal School at Framingham, through the efforts of Boston's Mary Hemenway, and Washington established a summer residence at South Weymouth, on the city's South Shore.<sup>9</sup>

After being catapulted to fame by the Atlanta Compromise Address in 1895, the educator was often welcomed to Boston and Cambridge by various members of the white elite. Harvard's Charles W. Eliot bestowed an honorary degree upon him in 1896, the first ever granted to an African-American by any New England school. The following year, he was the featured speaker at the dedication of the Robert Gould Shaw and Massachusetts 54th and 55th Regiment monument. His ghostwriters, Max B. Thrasher and Robert Park, were Bostonians. He probably chose Boston as the site of the founding of the National Negro Business League because he knew Boston best of the northern cities. He included a tribute to the city in *Up from Slavery*, which appeared in 1901. If Booker T. Washington was a product of the South, he was also a product of the New England philanthropic intervention in the South, as were the leaders of Boston's black upper class. In a sense, Booker T. Washington was one of them.

Washington's biographer, Louis R. Harlan, has shown how complex and impenetrable Washington's character was, and

9. Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901* (London, 1975), pp. 42-43 for Ruffner, pp. 52-77 for Armstrong, pp. 126-127 for Olivia Davidson and Hemenway, pp. 151-152 for Stearns, and p. 238 for Higginson. Booker T. Washington, *Up From slavery*, in *Three Negro Classics*, ed. by John Hope Franklin (New York, 1965), p. 80; Henry Clay Alvord to Booker T. Washington, June 4, 1902, in *The Booker T. Washington Papers* (Urbana, Illinois, 1972- ), VI: 477.



the mixed nature of his message caused great vacillation among his supporters. Some, like the leaders of the National Negro Business League, regarded economic improvement as the necessary precursor to political equality, a goal they relegated to the future. Wealthy white champions of Washington, especially those from New York and Chicago, valued the educator as a guarantor of docile and cheap black labor, which could be used as a club against white workers. Many black Bostonians, however, approved of Washington as a builder of institutions, and as a realistic politician given the relation of forces in the South. Typical of these were the editors of the *Colored American Magazine* and *Alexander's Magazine*, which backed the Tuskegee project but did not counterpose industrial education to higher education. More importantly, they professed support for Washington in general, and denounced his critics, but they spoke out against racist practices when their leader remained silent.<sup>10</sup>

The *Colored American Magazine*, published by the Colored Co-operative Publishing Company, first appeared in May of 1900, vowing its devotion to "the higher culture of Religion, Literature, Science, Music and Art of the Negro, Universally." The professional quality of its prose, photography, layout, and printing suggested that it had gathered sound financial backing and had hope of securing more. Headquartered at 232 West Canton Street in the South End, the magazine proudly proclaimed itself to be, after a year of publication, the first fully up to date publication in the history of the race. It lasted four years in Boston until financial difficulty forced its removal to New York and indirect control by Booker T. Washington.<sup>11</sup>

The *Colored American* was the project of four Virginia migrants whose stories typified the values of hard work, perseverance, and thrift, and one Bostonian. The Virginians were all young men in their late twenties who arrived in Boston a few years before launching the magazine. Walter W. Wallace, the managing editor, was the descendant of Hampton graduates; he worked in Boston as a prescription clerk in a drug store. Jesse W. Watkins had worked as a miner and electrician, and by 1901 he

10. Harlan, *Making of a Black Leader*, pp. 235-236; Washington, *Up From Slavery*, pp. 164-167 and 190-194; Harlan, *Wizard of Tuskegee*, pp. 290-291.

11. *Colored American Magazine*, May, 1900; August Meier, "Booker T. Washington and the Negro Press, with Special Reference to the *Colored American Magazine*," *Journal of Negro History*, XXXVIII (January 1953): 67-90.

owned real estate in Virginia and was a prominent Boston lodge member. The treasurer, Harper S. Fortune, was a musician and legal clerk, and the advertising manager, Walter Alexander Johnson, worked by day for a publishing company. These unknown and largely uneducated young men turned out a remarkably sophisticated publication with a national circulation.<sup>12</sup>

The real work-horse of the magazine, who became the editor in 1903, was Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins. Born in 1859 to a Virginia-born father and a mother descended from Boston church leaders Nathaniel and Thomas Paul, Hopkins showed early literary promise and was influenced by Boston novelist William Wells Brown. The magazine serialized three of her novels; she also contributed short stories and feature articles to such an extent that she had to use a pseudonym so that the magazine would not seem to be dominated by her pen. Her work was unabashedly sentimental, and her moral values steadfastly Victorian, as she presented characters of good and evil in mortal conflict. At the same time, she was a race-proud feminist, and the typical Hopkins conflict involved a strong black woman struggling against an evil white despoiler of womanly virtue. Although she wrote for a magazine that operated in the framework of Booker T. Washington's policies, her fiction portrayed black heroines and heroes fighting against an oppressive white world. In *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, the heroine Sappho shows contempt for a Booker Washington-like character who would keep women out of the public arena.<sup>13</sup>

In his first editorial, Wallace set the magazine's tone for the next four years. He denounced the white South for its racist policies, the Supreme Court for its retreat on the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and the New England clergy for its silence. While determined to speak out for justice, Wallace defended Booker T. Washington against complaints "that he caters too much to the opposite race at the expense of his own." This was an unwarranted charge against a "benefactor" who "does not deserve censure, criticism and calumny." *The Colored American*

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12. *Colored American Magazine*, May 1901.

13. Ann Ellen Schockley, "Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: A Biographical Excursion into Obscurity," *Phylon*, XXXIII, no. 1 (Spring 1972): 22-26; Jane Campbell, "Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, L (Detroit, 1986); Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (Boston, 1900).

thus would shield Washington from his critics, but would also decry lynching, segregation, and disenfranchisement.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to Washington's even-handed condemnation of lynching and black crime, the *Colored American* always denounced lynching as a crime against black people. One contributor, Charles H. Williams of Wisconsin, even advocated the right of armed black self-defense against lynch mobs. Reverend Quincy Ewing, of Greenville, Mississippi, compared lynching to the anti-Semitic pogroms of the Dark Ages, and demanded that Mississippi deny state funds to counties in which extra-judicial terror occurred. After the 1903 lynching at Wilmington, Delaware, the *Colored American* denounced the city as "a community corrupted in civic ideals and void of civic and moral virility." While the magazine did not call for federal legislation and enforcement of anti-lynching laws, as did activists like Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Monroe Trotter, the editors approached this question in a different framework than did Washington himself.<sup>15</sup>

However, the dilemma of the Boston supporter of Booker T. Washington showed itself after the July 1903 "Boston Riot," in the wake of which the *Colored American* maintained a discrete and lengthy silence. Its first response came not until November, when it printed a piece by Kelly Miller, of Howard University, who used a pseudonym instead of his own name on the article. Miller placed himself in the middle ground between the contending forces. A two-part series in December of 1903 and January of 1904 tilted more heavily in Washington's favor. A. Kirland Soga, a South African correspondent, argued that Harvard-educated Boston Negroes, who enjoyed the liberties of their city, a "beacon light of civilization," should not turn their fire on a beleaguered representative of southern Negro education. The editors of the magazine themselves remained silent in a rapidly polarizing situation. That they had to speak through Miller and Soga, writing from their distant vantage points, showed

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14. "Editorial and Publishers' Announcements," *Colored American Magazine*, May, 1900.

15. Charles H. Williams, "The Race Problem," (September 1901); "In Columbia's Fair Land: A Lesson in Barbarism and Injustice," (November 1901); Quincy Ewing, "The Beginning of the End," (November 1901); "The Wilmington Lynching," (August 1903), all in *Colored American Magazine*.

the contradictions of being anti-racist supporters of Booker T. Washington in abolitionist Boston.<sup>16</sup>

The *Colored American Magazine* was published in Boston during the height of Washington's power, but *Alexander's Magazine* appeared between 1905 and 1909. The Atlanta race riot and the Brownsville incident, both in 1906, marked a turning point in African-American politics, that spelled the beginning of the end for accommodationism. Washington defended himself in Boston through Charles Alexander, a product of Tuskegee, whose magazine he financially supported. Alexander began by cautiously praising his mentor and by sniping at his critics, featuring an interracial list of writers that included lawyer and diplomat Archibald Grimke, Walter F. Walker, corresponding from Liberia, settlement house worker John Daniels, old abolitionist Frank Sanborn, and Boston *Transcript* editor, E. H. Clement.<sup>17</sup>

The accommodationist framework fell apart under the pressure of the events of 1906. In August, the Army accused black troops of shooting up Brownsville, Texas, a garrison town that had greeted them with hostility. Contemporary scholarship argues that the men were framed, and African-American indignation really exploded after President Theodore Roosevelt discharged all of the soldiers, without regard to their guilt or innocence, when none of them would testify against their comrades. In September, the white residents of Atlanta rioted against the black citizens, killing ten of them. In the aftermath, sixty African-Americans were indicted for murder. Booker T. Washington, who was closely associated with Roosevelt and the moderate Atlanta white leadership, suffered a series of defections from his ranks.<sup>18</sup>

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16. "Fair Play," pseudonym for Kelly Miller, "Washington's Policy," *Colored American Magazine*, November 1903. The article originally appeared in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, September 18 and 19, 1903. A September 24, 1903, letter from Miller to Emmet J. Scott, in *Booker T. Washington Papers*, VII: 292, shows that Washington knew the author's identity. A Kirland Soga, "Call the Black Man to Conference," *Colored American Magazine*, December 1903 and January 1904.

17. Harlan, *Wizard of Tuskegee*, pp. 58-61.

18. Ann J. Lane, *The Brownsville Affair: National Crisis and Black Reaction* (Port Washington, New York, 1971); David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. DuBois: Biography of a Race, 1865-1919* (New York, 1993), pp. 330-345.

Charles Alexander threatened to join those renegades. He wrote angry articles on both events, and he encouraged black leaders to set aside their differences and join forces. This plea fell upon deaf ears, however. By the fall of 1907, Alexander turned the editorship over to the most prominent Boston ally of Tuskegee, Archibald Grimke, who had an on-again, off-again relationship with Washington. Grimke (1849-1930) was the son of a Charleston master and his slave, and the nephew of his famous aunts Sarah Grimke and Angelina Grimke Weld. As a youth, he escaped to freedom and later to Boston, where his aunts introduced him into abolitionist society. Grimke graduated from Harvard, became a lawyer, strolled with Wendell Phillips, edited the black community newspaper, *The Hub* in the mid 1880s, and as a political independent, he was appointed consul to Santo Domingo during the second Grover Cleveland administration. A talented speaker, writer, and intellectual, his militance lent prestige to Washington's camp, which he supported mainly for its institution-building work, and not for its policy of accommodation.<sup>19</sup>

As editor of *Alexander's Magazine*, Grimke blasted the "autocratic occupant of the White House" for refusing to cooperate with the Congressional investigation into the Brownsville incident, and reminded the Republicans that they were doing nothing while the Southern blacks were being disenfranchised. As it became clear that William Howard Taft, executor of the Brownsville dismissals as Roosevelt's Secretary of War, was about to receive the Republican presidential nomination, Grimke rebuked him for his discriminatory performance as Governor-General of the Philippines, for his role in Brownsville, and his conciliation with the lily-white Republican faction in the South. Soon, however, Republican slush funds found their way to *Alexander's* coffers, Grimke relinquished the editorship, and within a few years he became a leader of the NAACP in Washington, D.C. Charles Alexander remained a Republican loyalist through the election, but in 1909 he folded the magazine after offering it to a disinterested Francis Jackson Garrison, a former supporter of

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19. Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., Archibald Grimke: Portrait of a Black Independent (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1993).

Booker T. Washington who would soon become the president of the Boston branch of the NAACP.<sup>20</sup>

The gradual crumbling of Booker T. Washington's forces in Boston opened the way for Monroe Trotter to take the leadership of Boston's black community. He launched the *Boston Guardian* in 1901, with the expressed purpose of blasting Washington, and he brought the paper out every week until his death, a probable suicide, in 1934. He was deeply rooted in the Boston black community in a way that few other militant black leaders were rooted in their own communities. From his base in Boston, Trotter challenged Washington, then DuBois as leader of the "Niagara Movement," and finally the NAACP. After Washington's death in 1915, and the gradual ascension of the NAACP within the Boston and national black community, Trotter had no clear counter-strategy to offer African-Americans, and he lapsed into obscurity.

Trotter's father, James Monroe Trotter, had been a member of the Massachusetts 54th Regiment during the Civil War, and a leader of the protest against unequal pay given to black troops. Snubbed by the Republican patronage machine after the war, he rose to the highest appointed post open to African-Americans, recorder of deeds in Washington, D.C., during the first Grover Cleveland administration. James Trotter had a successful real estate business in Boston, and he was able to send his son to Harvard. After graduating *magna cum laude* in 1895, William Monroe Trotter worked in real estate, married Geraldine Pindell, whose uncle had helped to desegregate the Boston public schools in the 1850s, and helped to found the Boston Literary and Historical Association, with other upper-class African American militants. But Trotter's real work began with his launching of the *Guardian* as a vehicle to denounce Booker T. Washington, and to promote a campaign against southern racism. He struck a powerful chord among the majority of Boston's black citizens, who flocked to his indignation meetings at Faneuil Hall or the Twelfth Baptist Church. There they would hear an array of African-American ministers, white anti-racists, and occasionally Trotter himself. One of the first of these meetings was held in May of 1902, to urge passage of the Crumpacker Resolution that would reduce

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20. Unsigned editorial, probably by Grimke, in *Alexander's Magazine*, September 1907; Grimke, "The Third Term Spectre," in *Alexander's Magazine*, November, 1907.

Congressional representation of states that disenfranchise black voters. Congressman Edgar D. Crumpacker, a Republican from Indiana, joined Massachusetts Governor Winthrop Murray Crane, former Governor George Boutwell, attorney Moorfield Storey, and black community leaders Archibald Grimke and Everett Edward Brown, among others, on the platform. Trotter was clearly capable of assembling an impressive array of personages, and he held such meetings regularly until at least 1915.<sup>21</sup>

The key to his success was that he had crucial support in the black community, and he expressed the anger that African-Americans felt while others counselled moderation. Oddly enough, the militant Trotter was a church-goer, while the accommodationist Washington was skeptical of clerics. Trotter enjoyed the backing of ministers like Reverdy Ransome of the Charles Street A. M. E. Church, M. A. N. Shaw and Johnson Hill of the Twelfth Baptist, Byron Gunner of Newport, Rhode Island, and others. These ministers probably announced Trotter's meetings in church, and the *Guardian* in turn publicized church activities. In addition, he had the support of women's club leader M. Cravath Simpson, Elks leader Alfred P. Russell, and individual activists like Walter J. Stevens, whose memoir of this period, *Chip On My Shoulder*, is dedicated to Trotter. If none of these people were Trotter's equal in drive, education, and force of personality, neither were they mere lieutenants. They were all independent leaders in their own right, who respected Trotter and rallied their parishioners or club members to him.<sup>22</sup>

Nor was Trotter bereft of friends in the white world. While he had antagonized certain white liberals who worked with Booker T. Washington, others like Moorfield Storey understood that Trotter was the key leader of the community. During the 1911 national NAACP convention, which was held in Boston, Storey worked to keep Trotter from attacking the supporters of Washington and upsetting the delicate coalition; in 1918, Trotter organized a community celebration for the aging NAACP leader. A frequent Democratic voter, Trotter assiduously praised Mayor John F. Fitzgerald in the *Guardian*, and backed his election. He

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21. *Guardian*, March 17, 1902, pp. 1 and 4; and Stephen R. Fox, *The Guardian at Boston: William Monroe Trotter* (New York, 1970), pp. 3-19.

22. *Black Biographical Directories* Title 120, 433; Title 166, 126 (microfiche edition); Alfred P. Russell Papers, Mugar Library, Boston University; Walter J. Stevens, *Chip On My Shoulder* (Boston, 1946).

probably also supported James Michael Curley, appearing before his hearing on the film *Birth of a Nation* as a Curley backer, seeking the mayor's suppression of the film as a political *quid pro quo*.<sup>23</sup>

These relationships with white politicians carried within themselves the seeds of Trotter's own political destruction. Unlike most black leaders, who remained loyal Republicans in the spirit of Frederick Douglass, Trotter followed his father's path of political independence. In fact, electoral politics was the touchstone of his strategy, and the names of his various organizations reflected this: New England Suffrage League, Negro-American Political League, and the National Independent Political League. At the same time, he barred members of his organization from holding any posts in either party. On this basis, he demanded the resignation of Virginia's James H. Hayes from his National Negro Suffrage League, in 1904, because he was a delegate to the Republican National Convention. Trotter initiated this sort of dispute throughout his career, denouncing black supporters of Roosevelt or Taft as traitors, after the Brownsville incident. Needless to say, Booker T. Washington headed this list. But the grand irony of Trotter's career was that he wound up trying to play Booker T. Washington to Woodrow Wilson's Roosevelt. Washington was Roosevelt's advisor on "Negro" affairs, and Trotter criticized Roosevelt for accepting Washington's advice, and Washington for giving it. Trotter coveted Washington's role for himself, and he tried to play it when his man, Woodrow Wilson, became president. In exchange for vague promises made before the 1912 election, Trotter campaigned enthusiastically for Wilson, while his own followers split among Wilson, Roosevelt, and Taft. The NAACP, by contrast, was a non-partisan Progressive-type pressure group, and it held together in 1912, while Trotter's all-black group split over which racist presidential candidate to support. When Wilson segregated the federal departments, the shoe of "treason" was placed upon Trotter's foot. The editor redeemed himself in part by arranging two interviews with Wilson, one in November of 1913 and another in 1914. In the second interview, Trotter achieved the high point of his

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23. *Guardian*, November 16 and 30, December 7, 1907, and January 11, 1908; *Boston Globe*, December 4, 1907, p. 14; *Guardian*, February 23, 1918 and n.d., in Scrapbook 5, Moorfield Storey Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; Jack Beatty, *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley* (Reading, Mass., 1992), pp. 179-180.



national notoriety by daring angrily to cut Wilson's monologue, and demanding that he end the segregation of the federal departments.<sup>24</sup>

Trotter's other weakness was his personal egotism, which made it impossible for him to work collectively with other black leaders. A good example can be found in the years from 1905 and 1908, when Trotter wrecked the Boston Niagara movement, rather than accept the leadership of DuBois and his best Boston friend, Clement Morgan. Morgan, an attorney and Harvard's first African-American Class Day Orator, in 1890, had represented Trotter after the Boston "Riot." Nonetheless, Trotter transformed minor differences into matters of principle, and left Niagara in a huff. He then launched the Negro-American Political League, which held sizable meetings in Boston and Philadelphia, as the Niagara movement crumbled. Trotter simply saw himself as the leader of the national militant black movement, and the NAACP as helpful white allies.<sup>25</sup>

Herein lay the most profound of Trotter's contradictions. He was a conscious Garrisonian who rejected building separate black hospitals, YMCAs, or schools, as a concession to racism. The masthead of the *Guardian* proudly proclaimed that it was published at "Garrison's Old Stand." Yet, Trotter could not see the crucial role the interracial NAACP was to play. He had no scruples against such an organization, which he briefly joined, and in 1911, he urged his readers to attend the national NAACP convention in Boston. However, he insisted on maintaining his own black-led organization, from which whites were not barred (a minister, William Brigham, was his most prominent white follower), but they were not especially invited either.<sup>26</sup>

Trotter's Boston setting was perhaps one reason for this. He had a reliable base of support in the black community that he was unwilling to deliver to other leaders, black or white. At the same time, like many white Boston Brahmins, he was essentially provincial and Harvardian. His Chicago ally, Ida B. Wells-

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24. *Guardian*, March 12, 1904, pp. 1 and 4; Fox, *Trotter*, pp. 168-187.

25. "A Brief Resume of the Massachusetts Trouble in the Niagara Movement," 1907 report by W. E. B. DuBois, in DuBois papers, microfilm edition, reel 2; Minutes of the Niagara Movement, August 27 and 29, 1907, in DuBois Papers, reel 2; *Guardian*, July 27, 1907, p. 1; *Boston Globe*, November 7, 1907, p. 7.

26. Fox, *Trotter*, pp. 137-144.

Barnett, organized a midwestern speaking tour for him, once, writing in her autobiography: "I thought he needed to get out in this part of the country and see that the world didn't revolve around Boston as a hub." Unlike DuBois, who was a Massachusetts native who lived and taught for years in Atlanta, Trotter never set foot in the South, and he never appreciated the real relation of forces between racists and African-Americans during the nadir of African-American history.<sup>27</sup>

In alliance with DuBois, Trotter could have contributed enormously to the NAACP, but he chose not to do so. The Boston branch of the NAACP was the largest in the country, until 1918, reaching 2,553 members in that year. When the NAACP held its third annual meeting in Boston in March of 1911, the *Boston Globe* noted that "descendants and relatives of William Lloyd Garrison, Parker Pillsbury, Lucretia Mott and representatives of the Channing, Clarke, Bowditch, Atkinson and other families" were in attendance. While the Boston NAACP chapter was rooted in the city's abolitionist past, it was also based upon the entire antebellum anti-slavery experience. The Boston NAACP was a product of all the prior struggles, not only of the white families identified by the *Globe*, but also of the work of William Cooper Nell, Frederick Douglass, Maria W. Stewart, Charles Lenox Remond, Louis Hayden, and other African-American activists of earlier generations. No city in America had an anti-slavery tradition like Boston's, and the NAACP crystallized the disparate elements of this past into a new solution. By the end of the decade, this originally mostly white organization was transformed into an institution of the black community.<sup>28</sup>

The Boston branch was singular in the whiteness of its leadership. It included Moorfield Storey, the first president of the national Association and its most respected legal strategist. A successful corporation lawyer, as a young man he had been a secretary to Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, during Reconstruction. Storey crafted the organization's victorious Supreme Court cases against the disenfranchising "grandfather" clause in an Oklahoma case, another against a residential

27. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice: the Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. by Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago, 1970), pp. 375-379.

28. *Boston Globe*, March 31, 1911, p. 4; an excellent recent contribution to this subject is Donald W. Jacobs, ed., *Courage and Conscience: black and White Abolitionists in Boston* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1993).

segregation ordinance in Louisville, Kentucky, and he was an architect of the crusade against lynching. Another prominent attorney in the Boston NAACP was Albert E. Pillsbury, a nephew of the Garrisonian abolitionist Parker Pillsbury. He served as Massachusetts attorney general between 1891 and 1894, and he had been a lecturer in Constitutional Law at the Boston University Law School. Francis Jackson Garrison had set the type on the last issue of the *Liberator*, with his father, and written his father's biography, with one of his brothers. For most of his adult life, he worked as an editor at Houghton Mifflin, and he was a chronicler of the abolition movement. He had been an earnest supporter of Booker T. Washington, seeing no other way to move forward, until the NAACP was launched, and he served as the Boston branch's president until his death in December of 1916.<sup>29</sup>

Not all the leaders were white. Mary Wilson and her husband Butler Wilson were the most consistent activists in the Boston branch of the NAACP. Butler Wilson moved to Boston in 1881, after growing up near Atlanta and attending Atlanta University. He received a law degree from Boston University, and in the mid-1880s he worked with Archibald H. Grimke on *The Hub*, an African-American weekly. As a civil rights attorney, he represented William Henry Lewis in 1893, in a case that culminated in a legislative expansion of the state's civil rights law. Although he signed the call for the Niagara Movement, in which future NAACP member Clement Morgan took a more active part, Wilson's most visible role was as an NAACP leader. He became the branch president in the 1920s. Mary Evans Wilson was less prominent publicly than her husband, but she was a key recruiter to the movement and a builder of new branches. She travelled through New England, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, on behalf of the Association, leaving a trail of new affiliates. After the World War, she led the recruiting drives in Boston that brought thousands of new African-American members into the branch.<sup>30</sup>

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29. William B. Hixson, Moorfield Storey and the Abolitionist Tradition (New York, 1982); Papers of Booker T. Washington, vol. 5, note 449; New York Evening Post, December 16, 1916; obituary of Garrison, in Oswald Garrison Villard Papers, (file 1453, Houghton Library, Harvard University.)

30. Clarence Contee, "Butler R. Wilson and the Boston NAACP Branch," The Crisis, December 1974, pp. 346-348; Contee, "Wilson, Butler R.," in Dictionary of American Negro Biography, ed. by Rayford W. Logan and Michael R. Winston

Boston's African-Americans at first were wary of the new association, but they ultimately chose it over Trotter's approach, because it fought for their rights more effectively. While Trotter hesitated for almost two years before crossing Woodrow Wilson, the NAACP mobilized a spirited campaign of opposition to the segregation of the federal departments. After an October 1913 protest meeting at the Park Street Church, Butler Wilson organized a December first meeting at Faneuil Hall. He convinced the Masons, the Odd Fellows, and sundry church leaders to march through the West and South Ends to the meetingplace. Nor could Trotter match the NAACP's legal muscle and the insider influence of its white leaders. When a light-skinned African-American child was removed from a private kindergarten after her race was discovered, the NAACP protested, successfully arguing that the school was in part public and tax-supported. The YMCA barred an African-American member from its swimming pool, so Wilson and Garrison spoke before the board and won a reversal. "I know Arthur Johnson, the president, and . . . I think the Directors will hardly care for the advertising I assured them the institution would receive if they drew the color line," Garrison wrote. When a high school graduate was barred from a dental school because of his color, the NAACP managed to get that decision overturned as well. In November of 1914, the Association convinced the Boston School Committee to dispense with a songbook that contained lyrics about contented "darkies" on the old plantation. Individual victories like these helped to establish the NAACP as a fighter for African-American rights.<sup>31</sup>

Trotter and the NAACP worked together publicly during the campaign against the David Wark Griffith movie, "Birth of a Nation" in 1915, but grappled behind the scenes for pride of place. Trotter and his allies mobilized the black community in protest, while the NAACP provided the legal arguments for banning the film before judicial, legislative, and municipal bodies. Both groups held protest meetings on May 2, the NAACP at the Tremont Temple and Trotter's group immediately afterward,

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(New York, 1982), pp. 662-663; Mary Evans Wilson to May Childs Nerney, December 1 and 29, 1914, and January 5, 6, 7, and 11, 1915, in NAACP Papers, microfilm ed., Special Correspondence, reel 24.

31. Francis Jackson Garrison to Oswald Garrison Villard, October 29 and November 4 and 5, 1913, in Villard Papers; "The Growth of Race Prejudice in New England and How We Are Meeting It," Butler Wilson report in NAACP Papers, Microfilm ed., part 1, reel 8; *The Crisis*, January 1915, p. 136 and April 1915, p. 300.

outside on the Boston Common. The meetings were roughly equal in size, and they probably drew overlapping constituencies. For the first time, the newspapers described the NAACP's audience as largely "colored." The speakers list was correspondingly white. By contrast, Trotter's meeting on the Common was addressed by several African-American ministers. The efforts to ban the film ultimately failed, and white Bostonians flocked by the thousands to the theater.<sup>32</sup>

The distance between the white NAACP leadership and the black community was not unnoticed by the white Boston leaders, who were sometimes conscious of their own paternalism, but who were not quite sure what to do about it. In a revealing letter to his nephew, NAACP national leader Oswald Garrison Villard, Francis Jackson Garrison expressed this hope for a large attendance at a meeting: "Tonight another meeting will be held at the West Newton colored church. . . . I believe the colored people will yet wake up and help us." Incredibly, Garrison seemed to have reversed in his own mind who was giving "help," and to whom. Nine months later, he expressed a similar frustration: "I hope we shall be able to muster a respectable audience, But one can never count upon the colored people in such matters. Trotter understands them when he gets up a dancing entertainment to raise funds to send him to Washington!" Although the white NAACP leaders had paternalistic attitudes, they were nonetheless the most advanced racial thinkers of the day among whites, and their private confidences demonstrate much about the temper of the times.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, these times were changing swiftly. Pulled by the lure of jobs in the wartime industries of the North, a great many African-Americans migrated out of the South. After American entry into World War I, they developed a new self-confidence forged in combat, and in struggle against the racism of their fellow soldiers. When they were met in the North and the border regions with mob brutality, at East St. Louis, Illinois, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and elsewhere, they fought back. The "New Negroes" developed a Harlem Renaissance, and flooded into

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32. *Boston Globe*, May 3, 1915, p. 1; *Boston Herald*, May 3, 1915, p. 1; William Brigham to W. E. B. DuBois, May 26, 1915, and DuBois to Brigham, June 5, 1915, in DuBois Papers, reel 5.

33. Francis Jackson Garrison to Oswald Garrison Villard, January 2 and October 11, 1913, in file 1451.

the NAACP, making it their own organization. In 1920, James Weldon Johnson became the first black chairman of the Association.

In Boston, as elsewhere, African-Americans began looking to the NAACP as their own organization. After the war, black soldiers stationed at Fort Devens waiting to be demobilized were assigned southern officers and sergeants. The new officers began cursing, hitting, and humiliating the black soldiers, by assigning them to useless labor details. Private Harold Coleman wrote to complain to the NAACP in New York. "Since they choose to regard us as so many dogs or slaves we have lost interest in it all," he concluded. A few months later, Private Nelson Dukes reported that the officers threatened to court-martial black soldiers who used a "white latrine," and that another black soldier had been punitively busted in rank. Butler Wilson went out to investigate, and the NAACP helped to speed the men's discharges, with varying success.<sup>34</sup>

To take advantage of the new militant mood, the Association launched two membership drives at the end of the war, placing Mary Wilson in charge. By the winter of 1918, the Boston branch was still the largest in the nation, with 753 members. By the summer of 1918, the Boston branch enrolled 1,800 new members, for a total of 2,553. The following year, Boston issued its own branch bulletin, reporting 3,300 members, "and this drive is due to add another 1,000." The likelihood is that these were overwhelmingly paper members who filled out a card and perhaps paid a minimal fee, but the recruitment drives did show that the Association had widespread support. While the NAACP did not keep racial statistics, these new members were almost certainly African-American. Mary Wilson's knitting classes produced three hundred new female members, and a Methodist Sunday School yielded another 176. By 1920, there were separate committees in the nearby towns of Cambridge, Everett, and Lynn. "There are two score race groups in Boston, 17 are represented in the Branch," the local bulletin reported. A further sign that the

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34. Moorfield Storey to Archibald H. Grimke, October 10, 1918, includes the "Confidential statement of Dr. Barry, YMCA Secretary at Ft. Devens;" Storey to Grimke, November 18, 1918, in Archibald Grimke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Room, Howard University Library; Howard W. Coleman to Arthur Shillady, received January 13, 1919; Nelson Dukes to NAACP, March 16, 1919; Butler Wilson to Arthur Shillady, April 7, 1919; Boston Branch Bulletin, January 1920, all in Box G-88, "Fort Devens" File, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress.

Association was taking root in the African-American community was the participation of a new group of ministers in the leadership, including Samuel A. Brown, Benjamin Swain of the sizeable Columbus Avenue A. M. E. Church, and David S. Klugh of People's Baptist.<sup>35</sup>

Over the course of a decade, the NAACP had transformed itself from an organization of white people who were descended from anti-slavery activists to an institution within the African-American community. If it could not maintain itself as a genuinely bi-racial organization after 1920, it did a better job of achieving that goal for a while than any other organization. The unique historical tradition of Boston contributed to crafting the national response to racism during the nadir of African-American history.

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35. NAACP Branch Bulletin, February 1918, on microfilm in the Library of Congress; Boston Branch Bulletin, May 20, 1920, in the "Boston, MA 1912-1920" file, Box G-88, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress; Robert C. Hayden, "Faith, Culture, and Leadership: A History of the Black Church in Boston" (Boston Branch NAACP and Robert C. Hayden Pamphlet), pp. 8, 24-26, and 38-39.