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Blacks in Springfield, 1868-1880: A Mobility Study

Joseph P. Lynch

This is a study of the Black residents of Springfield during the period from 1868-1880. There had been a small and relatively stable free Black community in Springfield preceding the Civil War. Following the war, Springfield began a course of rapid urban growth brought about by the city's emergence as a major rail transportation center during the 1870s. As industries developed and expanded, immigrants arrived seeking jobs. For the Black residents of Springfield, it was an important transitional period. The question was whether the Black community in Springfield would grow and prosper, or would Blacks lose ground to the new immigrant groups as occurred in so many other cities.

The answer, in historical retrospect, is what one might have expected. While Springfield changed and grew, Blacks, occupationally speaking, appeared to be marking time or losing ground. Despite the expected conclusion, there was, nonetheless, fairly significant property mobility for about one-fifth of the Black households during this period. This was not only a remarkable achievement, but a testimonial to the ability, shrewdness, and drive of the Black barbers, hairdressers, cooks, teamsters, laborers, farmers, and saloon keepers who had to make their economic way under occupational constraints which did not exist for the white society.

The *Springfield City Directories* for the years 1868-69 through 1880-81 were used to identify the Black residents and to study occupational mobility. In the directories of 1868-69 and 1869-70, Blacks or Mulattoes were identified by the abbreviation "(col'd)" meaning colored. After 1870-71 this abbreviation was not used in the directories. After all available information, general and specific, on the lives of these individuals had been gathered, the Hampden County Probate Court's Hall of Records was utilized to determine the amount of personal property and real estate these individuals had acquired through their lifetime.

The *Springfield City Directory* of 1870-71 listed 149 Blacks. All were the heads of their households, and eight were women. The 1865 Massachusetts census indicated that there were 278 Blacks in Springfield¹, and the 1875 census listed a total of 542 Blacks and 157 Mulatto² residents of Springfield. If these figures are divided by five to determine the number of heads of households³, fifty-five in 1865, and one hundred twenty-seven in 1875, this approximates the Directory count.

In 1870, none of these people were professionals or skilled workers. See table one for breakdown by jobs.⁴

TABLE ONE

Laborer	52
Barber	30
Hotel Personnel	20
Whitewasher	15
Farmer	12
Teamster	9
Railroad Personnel	6
Saloon Keeper	3
Minister	2

Following these people through their stays in Springfield, through their occupational changes, and through their address changes in the city directories, the study shows that for the forty-eight Blacks who stayed in Springfield for the entire period, 1868-1880, their social or occupational status was the same at the end of the period as it was at the beginning. However, if the person was hard working, thrifty, and rather stable in residence, he was able to advance economically and leave an estate, sometimes a considerable amount, to his heirs and survivors. See Table Two for the occupations of the forty-eight Blacks who remained in Springfield.⁵

TABLE TWO

Barber	11
Laborer	9
Whitewasher	7
Hotel Personnel	7
Farmer	7
Teamster	3
Railroad Personnel	3
Saloon Keeper	1

General characteristics of this group as a whole were that they tended to stay employed at the same type of job, with the same companies or for themselves (barbers), and, more often than changing jobs, they would change their place of residence. However, no matter how much they did change, there was no rise in their occupational status. There were no Black middle class professionals who emerged from this group.

The average person in this group changed his jobs 2.4 times and changed residence 3.5 times during this decade.⁶ The three Blacks who worked for the Boston and Albany Railroad were by far the most stable. They never changed employers; one never moved, one moved once, while the third moved four times. Laborers were constantly changing residence, many of them moving almost yearly whether or not they changed jobs. The place of employment tended to be close to where the person lived, which was necessary in a time when urban transportation was expensive and not dependable.

The highest percentage of Blacks lived in two particular geographic areas. One was downtown where most barbers had their shops and where the factories, hotels, and boarding houses were located. The second area, known as "Hayti," was near what is known today as Winchester Square and has a large Black population. In fact, much of the land that is now Winchester Square and the lot where the fire station was located was originally obtained by Primus Mason, the most prominent Black of the period. In 1860 Mason sold the fire station lot to the city on the condition that the land be used for public purposes. In 1885, for the nominal sum of one dollar, Mason released all restrictions so the city could build the fire station.⁷ There was a third area, Auburn Street off North Main Street, which appears to have been an upper class Black section. The only member of this study to live there for the entire decade was Thomas Thomas, a saloon keeper, and one of the few Black proprietors.⁸ William H. Adams, a barber, lived in the area from 1875-79, but moved back to State Street in 1880.⁹

In 1817, Thomas was born a slave in Oxford, Maryland. At the age of ten he was put to work as a waiter on a steamboat in Chesapeake Bay. When about seventeen, he proposed to buy his freedom on the installment plan for four hundred dollars. His owner hired him out, taking his wages and allowing Thomas to earn money working extra hours. In 1836, he was sent to Mississippi where a friend advanced him the money to buy his freedom. Thomas then went to New Orleans where he worked for a year as a servant at the St. Charles Hotel. Next he worked as a steward on steamboats on the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers. During this time Thomas speculated in provisions, buying a barrel of eggs, for instance, from settlers for three or four cents and selling them in New Orleans for fourteen cents a dozen. In 1843 he was jailed in New Orleans for violating the law against free Negroes visiting the State of Louisiana, and he had to pay eleven dollars for board and lodging before he could be released. Generally, a Negro in this situation would be sold into slav-

ery but his employer posted bond and guaranteed that Thomas would leave the state. Thomas moved up the Mississippi River to Quincy, Illinois, but then travelled to Springfield, Massachusetts, where his mother and sister lived. After a brief stay in New York City, he returned to Springfield in 1844, where he found employment in local hotels until 1847. At that time he befriended John Brown, the abolitionist, who hired Thomas as a commission merchant buying cotton to make into cloth. Thomas joined Brown's Springfield Gileadites, a branch of a league of Negroes throughout the United States to resist the capture of fugitive slaves. Thomas also participated in the local Underground Railroad.¹⁰



**Sketch of Thomas Thomas, from the picture collection
of the City Library, Springfield.**

In 1853, he moved to Springfield, Illinois, where he worked in a hotel patronized by both Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. In 1860, Thomas was part of a group which informed Lincoln of his nomination for the office of president. After Lincoln was elected, it was said that Thomas could have been steward at the White House had his wife not become sick. Instead, Thomas returned to Springfield, Massachusetts, and started a restaurant on Worthington Street, a business which he ran for the next thirty-two years. The restaurant was opposite the post office and was frequented by many city officials, professionals, and businessmen. Thomas retired on January 8, 1893, due to ill health, and died on March 9, 1894, leaving his adopted daughter, Hattie, and his second wife, Martha. His personal property and real estate when he died were worth \$3,046.30.¹¹

Perhaps the Black barbers, as a group, best demonstrate the difficulty of economic advancement. Of the eleven barbers followed in this study, two were no longer barbers by 1880. John Evans became a basketmaker in 1876 and continued in that profession,¹² while Henry H. Disney became a farm laborer in 1877.¹³ The nine remaining barbers consolidated into six barber-shops and one hairdresser's salon.

Several of the barbers obviously tried to expand into hairdressing and related areas, but apparently with little success. In 1875, for instance, John A. Adams was listed in the directories as a hairdresser, but the following year he had abandoned that dream and the directory simply listed him as barber.¹⁴ George H. Queen, who had been a barber in 1870,¹⁵ advertised for "Hairdressing and bathing rooms" in 1874,¹⁶ but by 1876 he restricted his activities to his trade as a barber.¹⁷ It is hard to generalize on the basis of such inadequate sources, but it could indicate that while the white man was happy to patronize the black barber, the white woman hesitated to venture into a black man's shop.

In addition to the attempt of several barbers to improve their occupational status, they were typical of the lower class in terms of being exceptionally mobile individuals. John A. Adams, for instance, lived in a boarding house on Bradford Street¹⁸ until he moved to a house on Lyman Street in 1870.¹⁹ By 1880, he was back in a boarding house on State Street.²⁰ William H. Adams, who was previously mentioned, was the only barber to leave the downtown residential area to pursue his occupation, but for some reason his experience was short-lived, and he soon moved back downtown. In terms of economic success, only one barber showed signs of significant improvement, and that was Henry O. Thiemann, whose probate records indicate that he left \$9,850 in personal property.²¹

Thiemann had a very interesting life. He was born in 1825, on the island of Santa Cruz and he ran away at the age of thirteen. He was first a sailor and then a bartender on steamboats around New York and New Haven. He served

on the *Baltic*, which won the International Cup and set a speed record for crossing the Atlantic Ocean in nine days, nineteen hours and twenty-five minutes. Prior to the Civil War, Thiemann helped runaway slaves get to Boston by railroad. In 1860, he joined the Third Connecticut Regiment but was thrown out when the color line was drawn. He enlisted in the Navy at Boston, but was never involved in any Civil War battles. He moved to Springfield in 1864 and set up a barbershop in 1865. He moved the location many times but continued to work as a barber for the next twenty-six years.²² Thiemann's claim to social fame was that he mixed a "secret recipe" punch for one of Springfield's favorite caterers.²³

The directories also showed that Springfield's Black laborers went from job to job and house to house. Nelson Carr, an ex-slave who was listed as a laborer in 1867-68,²⁴ moved three times before he was listed as doing "rustic work" with a house and shop at 4 Dwight Street in 1872.²⁵ In 1874-75 the directory included an advertisement indicating that Carr was a "Manufacturer and dealer in rustic baskets, setters, etc.," with a house and shop at 35 Willow Street.²⁶ He remained there one year when in 1876-77 he moved his shop to 3 Cross Street.²⁷ He continued to live at the Cross Street residence but in 1878-79 Carr started "jobbing"²⁸ and in 1879-1880, he became a whitewasher.²⁹ He began as a laborer, became a small artisan, and finally moved into a semi-skilled trade.

Other laborers followed a similar pattern. Henry Wiley was employed for a time as a mason,³⁰ but ended the decade as a porter in the Belmont Hotel.³¹ Almost every year he moved to a new residence. Another Black, John L. Ritter, worked as a cook in four hotels and changed his residence each time.³²

Thus far, this study demonstrates that Blacks in Springfield in the post-Civil War period were residentially mobile as occupations changed, but never with substantial improvement. They could move upwards, occupationally, but it seldom became permanent. In the middle years of the decade the barbers and people like Carr and Evans appeared to be making some progress towards skilled labor or small proprietary status, but by the end of the decade they were right back where they started. Occupationally, the Blacks were no better off than before. But occupation is only one view of the picture. The other is invested savings which translated into property mobility.

Economically, it appears that the Black could improve himself through hard work and saving or proper investment. Primus P. Mason was the best example. When Mason died, he left funds to start a home for the aged men of all races, and his grand-nephew, Paul Mason, was the first Black city councilman in Springfield.

Primus Mason was born free in Monson. His father died when Primus was seven, and he went to live with Jonathan Pomeroy of Suffield, Connecticut,

perhaps as an apprentice. Mason ran away at the age of twelve, returning to Monson. In Monson, he worked for a farmer named Ferry who, by agreement, was to pay Mason twelve dollars for three months work if Mason did not leave before the time period had expired. Ferry had his son beat Mason, driving him off, just before the three months ended. Mason got his revenge by purchasing some land that Ferry wanted, and selling it to him for a forty dollar profit.³³



Primus Mason, from the picture collection of the City Library, Springfield.

Mason went to Springfield after leaving Monson and started working for himself by collecting bones, harnesses, old shoes and disposing of dead animals, horses in particular. In 1850 he went to British Columbia seeking mineral wealth, and later to California, but returned penniless to Springfield in 1860. Upon returning he went back to doing jobs other people refused to do, and with the money he earned Mason began to speculate in real estate. For \$150 Mason bought in 1860 a large tract of land on the south side of State Street. Ten years later he sold the same land to the McKnight Syndicate for \$17,500. Whenever he had spare money he invested in real estate and when he died in 1892, Mason owned nineteen properties, eighteen of which had

houses on them. These were worth \$35,700 and added to his \$421.18 in personal property left his total estate valued at \$36,121.18. In his will, he left some money to his relatives but the bulk of his estate went to the founding of Mason Hall, the home for aged men and women located on Walnut Street.³⁴

As successful as Mason was, and despite the fact that Mason Hall, and later Mason Street were named in his honor, Primus Mason received little recognition while he was alive.³⁵ His friends were his Black and Irish immigrant neighbors. When his will was to be probated by his relatives (he had been married three times but left no immediate family) *The Graphic*, an old Springfield newspaper referred to his family as "the dead darkey's tribe"³⁶ and said that "Africa will not be visited by missionaries traveling on Primus Mason's money."³⁷

Mason's was not an isolated case of a Black in the study who left an estate when he died. Fifteen of the forty-eight Blacks had their wills entered in Hampden County Probate Court.³⁸

NAME	OCCUPATION	PERSONAL PROPERTY	REAL ESTATE	TOTAL ESTATE
H.O. Theimann	Barber	\$9,850.00	---	\$ 9,850.00
H.H. Disney	Barber	171.86	---	171.86
H. Erb	Barber	500.00	---	500.00
M. Erb	Hairdresser	125.00	\$ 3,000.00	3,125.00
C. Purvis	Cook	316.47	7,200.00	7,516.47
W. Francis	Whitewasher/ cook	---	1,600.00	1,600.00
A. Spradley	Laborer	1,206.35	---	1,206.35
D. Roberts	Laborer	---	100.00	100.00
P. Washington	Teamster	2,420.14	4,848.00	7,268.14
E. Baptiste	Buyer	695.30	1,200.00	1,895.30
C. Vanall	Laborer	447.73	600.00	1,047.73
A. Vanall	---	---	2,600.00	2,600.00
L. Mason	Farmer	---	1 lot	1 lot
P. Mason	Farmer/ Real Est.	421.18	35,700.00	36,121.18
T. Thomas	Saloon Keeper	446.30	2,600.00	3,046.30

As a group, nine of these people never moved during the study and two moved only once. Primus Mason moved three times, the same amount as Alfred Spradley and Henry H. Disney, to be the most residentially mobile of these Blacks.³⁹ Overall, they were a very stable group, compared to the rest of the Black community.

This table shows that the Black in Springfield could acquire both real and personal property. Although they did not have occupational mobility, they were capable of some economic mobility. This occurred at a time when the Black middle class was losing ground in most American cities due to the influx of poor whites who moved in to take the jobs previously held by Blacks.

A Black middle class did not emerge at that time in Springfield, but people such as Mason, Thomas, and Baptiste did emerge as leaders in the Black community through acquisition of property. Springfield was growing as a railroad center and the incoming whites could take the jobs, but they could not take away the property. Some local Blacks, through hard work and saving, were able to pull themselves up to where they had something that no one could take away from them. This economic mobility was to be the foundation for Springfield's Black community in the future.

NOTES

1. *Census of Massachusetts*, 1865 (Boston, 1867), p. 227.
2. *The Census of Massachusetts*, 1875 (Boston, 1876), I, 49.
3. Following the formula utilized by Peter R. Knights, *Plain People of Boston* (New York, 1971).
4. *Springfield City Directory*, 1869-70.
5. *Springfield City Directory*, 1870-71.
6. To arrive at these figures, the total number of moves and jobs for the Blacks was divided by forty-eight. Extreme cases were Abram Jennings (moved three times, changed jobs six times), and Isaac Callahan (changed jobs nine times, moved twice).
7. *Springfield Sunday Republican*, Feb. 5, 1956.
8. *Springfield City Directories*, 1870-80. Thomas had a bold face advertisement for his saloon following his name in the 1876-77 and 1877-78 directories.
9. *Springfield City Directories*, 1870-80.
10. "Springfield Scrap Book," Vol. 19, p. 4; "J.C.B. Newell Scrap Book," Vol. I. Newspaper Clippings, pp. 493-494, Springfield City Library.
11. *Ibid*; *Springfield Daily Republican*, (Obituary) March 10, 1894, p. 1; Registry of Probate Hampden County, Springfield, 1894. Case #19440.
12. *Springfield City Directory*, 1875-76, p. 193.
13. *Springfield City Directory*, 1876-77, p. 141.
14. *Springfield City Directory*, 1875-76, p. 102; *ibid.*, 1876-77, p. 66.
15. *Springfield City Directory*, 1869-70, p. 190.
16. *Springfield City Directory*, 1874-75, p. 315.
17. *Springfield City Directory*, 1876-77, p. 275.
18. *Springfield City Directory*, 1867-68, p. 42.
19. *Springfield City Directory*, 1869-70, p. 37.
20. *Springfield City Directory*, 1879-80, p. 70.

21. Registry of Probate, Hampden County Hall of Records, Springfield, 1894, case no. 19529.
22. Newspaper articles compiled by Springfield Library Association, in "John Brown" file.
23. *Springfield Republican*, December 11, 1898. p. 10.
24. *Springfield City Directory*, 1867-68, p. 62.
25. *Springfield City Directory*, 1872-73, p. 152.
26. *Springfield City Directory*, 1874-75, p. 143.
27. *Springfield City Directory*, 1877-78, p. 108.
28. *Springfield City Directory*, 1878-79, p. 104.
29. *Springfield City Directory*, 1879-80, p. 94.
30. *Springfield City Directory*, 1869-70, p. 242.
31. *Springfield City Directory*, 1879-80, p. 234.
32. *Springfield City Directory*, 1867-80.
33. "J.C.B. Newell Scrapbook," Vol. I. p. 195.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 195, "Progressive Springfield," Vol. II. (scrapbook of periodical), October 1891, No. 5., p. 137; *Springfield Daily Republican*, January 13, 1892. p. 1, and January 16, 1892. p. 3.
35. Registry of Probate, Hampden County, Springfield, Massachusetts. 1894. Case #17912 (Primus P. Mason).
36. *The Graphic* (Springfield), March 12, 1892. p. 3.
37. *The Graphic* (Springfield), January 16, 1892. p. 2.
38. Registry of Probate, Hampden County, Hall of Justice, Springfield, Mass. 1894 case no. 19529 (H.O. Thiemann); 1891, case no. 17629 (H.H. Disney); 1904, case no. 27193 (H. Erb); 1892, case no. 18349 (M. Erb); 1899, case no. 23185 (C. Purvis); 1892, case no. 22435 (W. Francis); 1892, case no. 18400 (A. Spradley); 1892, case no. 18358 (D. Roberts); 1895, case no. 19825 (P. Washington); 1905, case no. 27831 (E. Baptiste); case no. 36460 (C. Vanall); 1914, case no. 11512 (A. Vanall); 1876, case no. 7411 (L. Mason); 1892, case no. 17912 (P. Mason); 1894, case no. 19440 (T. Thomas). No income tables were available.
39. *Ibid.*