

As Jones notes, despite access to the ballot and jury boxes, by the turn of the twentieth century the “antebellum . . . patterns had hardened into an ossified system of discrimination, limiting Black workers to casual, ill-paid, dead-end jobs,” leaving “Boston’s social division of labor . . . static” (440).

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### **Black Lives Do Matter in Nineteenth-Century Boston**

*David A. Zonderman*

Jacqueline Jones’ *No Right to an Honest Living* offers readers a deeply researched and richly detailed portrait of Black life and labor in mid-nineteenth-century Boston. Jones has rescued from obscurity dozens of Black activists and orators, boarding-house keepers and root doctors, porters and day laborers. She has shown us where they lived, worked, loved, married, worshipped, and struggled against slavery down south and racism at home up North.

Jones’ meticulous study recreates a world where Black men and women were chronically underemployed and frequently unemployed. Theirs was a life of precarity: struggling to cobble together enough money to live on often through part-time work in constantly changing workplaces, detouring when necessary, into the underground urban economy, and toiling frequently into old age—if they lived that long.

The “Edloe Sixty-Six,” newly manumitted slaves arriving in Boston from a Virginia plantation in September 1847, illuminate the stony path trod by so many Southern rural migrants to the urban North. Both freedpeople and fugitives experienced a world of new opportunities and new competition, a myriad of jobs yet limited occupations, freedom to worship but also freedom to starve on cold streets. Those who arrived with skills

acquired on plantations and by being hired out by their masters, such as blacksmithing and carpentry, often found they could not ply their trades since white craftsmen dominated those fields in Boston. Like other Black workers established in the city, the new arrivals faced a constant struggle to find even the roughest work. Menial day jobs were increasingly filled by refugees of the Irish famine. Black fugitives knew the risks of possible capture and southern rendition, especially once the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 authorized federal marshals to aid slave catchers.

Many Black activists and orators, who toiled and traveled for years without the same recognition accorded colleagues like Frederick Douglass, frequently berated the white population of antebellum Boston. Eloquent opponents of slavery, like William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, often stayed silent when the local Black residents were subjected to segregated workplaces, racist abuse, and grinding poverty. That white abolitionists frequently held assumptions about white supremacy and Black inferiority, even while decrying the inhumanity of chattel slavery, is not news to historians, but Jones has done far more work than most in tracing the deep and lasting impact of such racist ideology, examining the views of Black workers' erstwhile allies in an ostensibly free city.

Jones does an especially good job of reconstructing the lives and labor of Black women in Boston, not surprising given her pioneering work in this field. Working at similar tasks to their sisters in slavery—maid, cook, laundress, seamstress, street hawker, and sex worker (when especially desperate)—these women might find work more readily than their husbands and brothers, but the pay was meager at best. In households where women found full-time employment and men kept struggling with chronic underemployment, marital discord and domestic violence could follow. Jones' chapter on "Women in Service" includes a fascinating discussion of abolitionist and ministers' wives, who held together families with little money and an absent partner on the lecture circuit.

Jones finds that the economic constrictions of the secession winter (1860–61) hit Black Bostonians especially hard. And

when the economy rebounded quickly with wartime jobs, most of those opportunities—especially in the growing field of public works and city employment—went to Irish immigrants and their children in South Boston. The Democratic Party was now actively courting that population of recently enfranchised voters, far more than the Republican Party reached out to Black men who could vote. White prejudice continued to get in the way of fully utilizing (exploiting?) Black labor in the war effort, not to mention the reluctance to recruit Black sailors and soldiers for the Union cause. At the war's conclusion, with unemployment rising in the face of rapid demobilization, Black veterans—including those disabled from service—faced either neglect or the scenario of last-hired, first-fired.

The Civil War's aftermath brought a wave of freedpeople from Virginia to Boston. The Freedmen's Bureau ran a transportation network that seemed uncomfortably close to slavery at times, placing women into domestic positions and men into day laborer work. The existing Black community tried to welcome the new arrivals, yet worried about competition for the limited number of jobs open to workers of color. For former abolitionists, these years nourished a feeling of accomplishment at the destruction of chattel slavery. They also realized that the Republican Party offered few opportunities for Black political leadership and narrow support for Black labor rights. White abolitionists like Phillips quickly joined the campaign for the eight-hour workday. The growing crusade against "wage slavery," however, rarely acknowledged the lingering wounds of bondage, or the continuing stain of racial prejudice on the "Cradle of Liberty."

As Black veterans approached old age, they or their widows battled with the U.S. government's pension system. Although colorblind in the equal benefits paid to all who qualified, the federal officials who made the determinations about eligibility were nearly all white and prone to racist assumptions about Black bodies, health, character, and honesty. Jones' record of Black workers in their sunset years shows that even the fortunate few who held down years of steady work could rarely provide for retirement, let alone leave

any inheritance. In a postwar world that looked much like the antebellum—low wages, frequent underemployment, and chronic debt for most Black workers—even the small Black middle class struggled to rise above a hand-to-mouth existence. Black professionals made meager livings because their Black clients had little income to pay the bills, even though many were as skilled as their far wealthier white counterparts. From porter to physician, laborer to lawyer, maid to medicine dealer, Black Bostonians continued to live in a world where their opportunities for advancement, dignity, and an “honest living” were constricted due to the stranglehold of systemic racism.

In a study as richly detailed and voluminous as Jones’ work (440 pages of text), it is hard to find much that is lacking. The maps are beautifully constructed and do an excellent job of sketching out the choreography of street life in Black neighborhoods. A few more illustrations that traced where Black Bostonians worked, lived, worshipped, and played, and at the same time showed how their neighborhoods were closely confined and tightly controlled spaces in the larger city, would add to the book’s vivid texture. The cases of fugitive slaves Anthony Burns, Shadrach Minkins, and Thomas Sims are familiar ones. Jones adds new historical insight to how the Black community in Boston responded to their capture. But might she have told us more about how local Black resistance was organized? What were the communication networks? How did their opposition coordinate, if at all, with the efforts of elite white abolitionists?

On the other hand, a book this compendious might have benefitted from some editing to maintain its deep focus on the Black community in mid-nineteenth-century Boston. The two chapters on “Boston Diaspora” trace Black and white missionaries and teachers during the Civil War, who later went south to live and work among the newly emancipated Black populations. This is a subject familiar to historians and one deserving of greater research and analysis. But is it a topic that advances this study? Do we need to follow some of these subjects’ sojourns into Virginia, the Sea Islands of South Carolina, and Savannah? Similarly, the section on the Civil War follows Black soldiers in Boston-based regiments into battle, even though most who

enlisted in the 54<sup>th</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiments were from outside the state. Perhaps this section could have focused more on how the war impacted life and labor for Black Bostonians, and how that community processed news from the battlefield.

At times, the larger arguments are nearly submerged in a surfeit of details about individual lives and labor. Jones is to be commended for her astoundingly capacious research, which brings so many Black women and men out of obscurity and gives them the historical recognition they deserve. But the community as a whole deserves to have its larger story of oppression, struggle, resilience, and endurance brought to the fore whenever possible. When Jones does tell that broader narrative, which she does on many occasions, this book is at its best—vivid, vibrant, and assertive in its claims that these fleeting lives have so much to tell us about race and justice in nineteenth-century America.

Finally, Jones admits that this community is a numerically modest one—never more than 1–2 percent of the city's population, perhaps 3,000–4,000 residents as of 1875. An obvious question remains: Why write such a big book about such a small group of people? Part of the answer is that Jones' prodigious research demonstrates that there is much to know about what might at first seem to be a miniscule minority in a big city. The Black community of Boston, despite the white community's frequent efforts to marginalize it, developed a rich network of institutions and personal relationships that helped them survive in a cold and racist climate. Jones' approach to writing this detailed case study based on a relatively modest sample nets big dividends in the richness of its historical textures, illustrating the many ways in which these Black women and men come to life in all their struggles.

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IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BOSTON. *He is currently writing a book on workers and the American Civil War.*

### **The Politics of Labor and the Labor of Politics**

*Milton Bergeson-Lockwood*

In 1864 George Ruffin, Boston lawyer and the first African American judge in the United States, recorded the “First List of Colored Voters After Emancipation.” Among the list of over 300 names were many of Boston’s better known Black antislavery activists and reformers. The document also listed a significant number of Boston’s Black working class. As an artifact of the early years of emancipation and Reconstruction, it is a reminder of the inseparable relationship between Boston’s Black workers and activists in the struggle for freedom. As Jaqueline Jones shows in *No Right to an Honest Living*, the story of the civil rights fight in Boston is a story about Black labor. “Wage earning,” Jones explains, “was a key signifier of citizenship” (5).

Jones calls historians’ attention to the overemphasis on legislation and legal rights as the battleground of nineteenth century freedom, arguing that this “pervasive focus . . . pushes the inequities associated with wage labor out of sight and into the background” (25). Jones brings Black labor to the forefront and, in doing so, offers not just an in-depth view of Black working-class life, but a rethinking of the boundaries of American citizenship.

Boston is well known as a home to Black and white abolitionists and reformers. These subjects dominate past histories of the city. Although the Black working class appear in more recent studies, Jones is the first to dedicate a full volume to this population. She shows the hidden history obscured by the more popular narratives focusing on Boston’s Black leaders. Jones goes farther to demonstrate how those in so-called respectable occupations could find themselves in precarious financial situations, noting that “the label ‘laborer’ might obscure the true nature of a person’s work,” and mask notable wealth (13).