

condemned white abolitionists as “quick to condemn southern slaveholders, but silent when it came to the plight of their Black neighbors” (145). During Reconstruction it became clear to many Black workers that support for the Republican Party would not translate into help. Jones notes the irony of the central role that Boston and its white Republicans played in the fight against slavery, while the economic condition of its Black residents stagnated. “The plight of Black workers remained off the table and out of sight in city council meetings,” she observes (385).

By placing Black men and women laborers at the center of the story, Jones provides a rich history of lesser-known actors and offers a reimagining of the entire era. In essence, the struggle against slavery and for civil rights was a struggle to control labor and seize economic opportunity. Black labor, for Jones, is not *one* of the questions facing Boston and the nation, but *the* question. As future historians take up this work, they will learn more about the limits of American freedom—and the lengths that Black men and women went to push its boundaries.

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### **The Multidimensional History of Black Labor during the Civil War Era**

*Jacqueline Jones*

I would like to thank Paula C. Austin, David Zonderman, and Millington W. Bergeson-Lockwood for their thoughtful comments on my book, *No Right to An Honest Living: The Struggles of Boston's Black Workers in the Civil War Era*. I'd like to respond to those comments and offer some additional reflections.

First, a word about sources. For part of the time I was researching and writing, we were all in COVID lockdown, with libraries and archival repositories closed. However, even before necessity forced me to focus on online sources, I discovered a wealth of relevant digitized material. The Boston City Council minutes are available online as part of the City of Boston archives. Many nineteenth-century Boston newspapers are accessible—some free, some via subscription—and fully searchable. Genealogical sites such as Ancestry.com proved invaluable in tracking the family histories of the Edloe migrants who arrived in Boston in September 1847. I was fortunate to locate the rich documentation surrounding Peter Randolph's successful attempt to secure for all the living migrants the amount of money that Carter Edloe's will provided them (and his heirs denied them); those records include the legal proceedings and accounts from the Edloe plantation in the 1830s and 1840s.

And there were constant surprises. For example, when I located online Lewis Hayden's December 1865 speech, "Caste Among Masons: Address Before the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Massachusetts," and the Reverend C. L. Woodworth's prescient call for reparations for formerly enslaved people in the form of an essay, "The Full Enfranchisement of the Negro" (1867). I need not mention all the monographs and journals that are available online through libraries or the Library of Congress. I should also note that when I needed unpublished material—from the National Archives or various repositories throughout the country—I could count on the generosity and diligence of archivists to find and duplicate it for me (for cost and within reason, of course).

As for Boston and white residents' image of it: I would suggest that white Bostonians never conceived of the city as an "egalitarian city on a hill." In fact, the Puritans believed that social hierarchies were God-ordained, with the father the head of his household, including his servants and enslaved workers; the minister the leader of his congregants; and secular authorities the representatives of the godly in town and colony governments. The Puritans were not levelers. They held that

differences in people's economic and social standing were natural, part of a spiritual order where certain people took responsibility for overseeing the welfare and labor of their inferiors. Gradually, this notion of hierarchies blended seamlessly into racial ideologies of ranked differences between Blacks and whites. Some historians point to Judge Samuel Sewall's 1705 tract, *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial*, as an early argument for the abolition of slavery. Although Sewall condemned slavery as a prohibited form of "man-stealing," he argued that Black people had no foreordained place in the Bay Colony. He insisted that they would not be allowed to marry white women, or serve in the local militia, or form households. Sewall's views foreshadowed those of many white Republicans, who, in the late 1850s, assumed opinions that were simultaneously antislavery and anti-Black.

Boston earned its reputation as a site of militant abolitionism. For most historians, William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and the Reverend Theodore Parker come readily to mind as the city's foremost orators and activists. Garrison especially showed tremendous physical courage in the face of hostile, pro-slavery mobs. Too often, Black activists get short shrift in this regard. Frederick Douglass visited Boston, as did Charles Lenox Remond of Salem. Lewis Hayden was an active fugitive-assistant and leader of Black Freemasons. Dr. John S. Rock, the first person of color to be admitted to the bar of the U. S. Supreme Court, was an erudite lecturer and activist.

In particular, I was struck by the courage of Douglass and Rock. They called out white abolitionists who cared deeply about the plight of southern enslaved men, women, and children but said nothing about the injustice visited upon their Black neighbors in Boston every day. Garrison and other whites feared that a push for integrated workplaces would alienate rich donors to the antislavery cause and cause trouble among the white laboring classes. Some of the more dramatic scenes of the book highlight speeches delivered by Douglass and Rock excoriating white abolitionists for not hiring Black workers or patronizing Black businesses. Only a few Black leaders had the stature to openly criticize white abolitionist-allies.

I want to acknowledge two themes that needed more extensive development—the idea of mid-nineteenth-century Boston as a post-emancipation society, and the reasons why I included chapters on what I called the “Boston Diaspora,” following several Black Bostonians to the south during and after the Civil War. On the first point, it is clear that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Boston’s social division of labor to some extent resembled that of the south after the Civil War. In both times and places, newly emancipated craftsmen of color lost the means to make an independent living. Their former owners retained the specialized tools that carpenters, coopers, Blacksmiths, and masons needed to do their work, and white customers refused to patronize them. Deprived of the opportunity to work at their craft, they and their offspring had little choice but to become casual laborers.

Moreover, in post-revolutionary Boston and in the postbellum South, whites concocted a post-emancipation ideology of race that would prove useful, and even necessary, in rationalizing the new order of Black subordination in a “free” city. This ideology, which held that Black people were by nature poor and dependent, displayed a certain circular logic—for example, the notion that Black people were incapable of working as factory operatives because they had not been hired to do so. In the south of the 1870s and beyond, textile mill owners declared that Black men and women could not work machines, an assertion that would have astounded the antebellum manufacturers who relied heavily on enslaved mill workers. In Boston in 1900, a similar dynamic pertained when employers told Progressive economist John Daniels that Blacks were “unsuited” for certain types of work, though they had never hired Black employees to test out that theory. This theme of Boston resembling in certain ways the deep south of the postbellum period would have strengthened my argument that the nineteenth-century Massachusetts city was not the egalitarian outpost that whites often claimed it was.

My decision to follow Harriet Jacobs, her daughter Louisa, and Aaron Bradley to Savannah and John Oliver to Richmond was premised on the idea that their decision to go south was

a direct result of their unhappy work circumstances in Boston. Like many women, Harriet Jacobs had a visceral dislike of domestic service. She found doing housework and looking after her employers' children to be enervating, exhausting, and demeaning. She did not want her own daughter condemned to this kind of work. By operating schools for freed children and adults, the two women could take pleasure in doing good and, not incidentally, improving their physical and emotional health. Aaron Bradley's story is entirely different. By 1865, the rogue lawyer had burned many bridges in Boston; he had kept money due his clients and, with his unprofessional behavior, aggravated and alienated judges and legal colleagues alike. It therefore made sense for him to return to his native state of Georgia and try his luck at making money by presenting himself to low country rice workers as their standard-bearer, if not their savior. Boston's John Oliver, a gifted speaker and loyal Republican, soon found that whites would allow him no path to party leadership or spoils jobs. He took advantage of the much wider partisan-political opportunities afforded him in Richmond. Thus, the contrast between diminished job prospects in Boston and (at least temporarily) expanded and qualitatively different prospects in the South highlighted the plight of all Black Bostonians after the war.

In response to the query about why I included discussions of the three Black regiments—the Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup>, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry—I would make several points. These units of Black soldiers were a source of pride for all Black people in the city, and the process of recruiting them yielded much-needed cash for several well-known Black leaders, including Douglass, Rock, and the Reverend Leonard Grimes. I thought it was significant that, although these Black soldiers helped Massachusetts make its quota of fighting men—a quota that was deeply resented and resisted by local white officials—their families did not qualify for the kinds of aid that the state paid to the families of in-state soldiers. I applied the idea of a “workplace” to write about soldiers' labors in the field. I examined their pay, work assignments, opportunities for advancement (to the rank of officer), work culture, occupational hazards, and

relations with their co-workers and superiors. Here it was revealing that their military experiences, especially the relegation of Black soldiers to fatigue work and the lesser pay they received compared to their white counterparts, largely reflected conditions in the civilian workforce.

I was able to explore these themes through the military service of the Edloe migrant Thomas Selden, who suffered a devastating, life-altering injury while emplacing cannon on the Sea Islands in 1863. Following him from Boston to South Carolina allowed me to consider the white Bostonians determined to make a profit off the freedpeople's labor in the cotton fields after the war. Indeed, I was struck by those whites' intellectual contortions to justify discriminatory racial ideologies while acknowledging that the status and life-chances of formerly enslaved field hands and Black Bostonians were radically different. That theme became clear when the missionaries-cum-labor agents Charles and Harriet Ware invited the Boston-born seaman Aaron Joseph to dinner on their Coffin Point plantation; they marveled at how intelligent and well-spoken he was. Like other whites, the Wares knew few Black Bostonians and engaged in stereotyping based on their limited understanding of formerly enslaved workers.

In 1862 the Massachusetts writer Nathaniel Hawthorne observed a group of Black refugees in Virginia and pronounced them more "authentic" than northern Blacks, with the former "so picturesquely natural in manners, and wearing such a crust of primeval simplicity (which is quite polished away by the Northern Black man)." In these ways, northern whites' descriptions of their encounters with southern Blacks revealed a fluidity in racial ideologies.

Part of the story that I tell is contingent on the relatively small number of Black residents of Boston during this period. To a certain extent I was able to identify networks of people—extended kin, fellow church congregants, migrants and fugitives from the South—because the numbers were so small. The fact that Black Republicans felt free to pay lip service to Black equality while at the same time ignoring the plight of Black workers stemmed from the fact that Black voters were

not numerous enough to be courted to any meaningful extent. In contrast, the Democratic Party was quite solicitous of Irish immigrants and their offspring simply because by the 1870s or so these newcomers represented a significant proportion of the Boston electorate. Boston had police officers, public school teachers, and local politicians with Irish surnames, a testament to the community's loyalty to the Democratic Party. In Philadelphia and New York, where the Black populations were larger in both absolute and proportionate numbers, Black voters and workers wielded somewhat more power at the ballot box and in the workplace. In this sense, demography tells a larger story.

It is certainly true that I view Black civil-rights activism through the prism of labor. In Massachusetts, white people were able to accommodate themselves to integrated public schools, Black men in the jury box, Black enfranchisement, intermarriage, and Black professionals who served a white clientele. In contrast, neither white elites nor members of the white laboring classes could abide workplace equality. That simple fact had far-reaching consequences—for the (in)ability of Black families to own their own homes, to move out of the city into the suburbs, to send their children to college, to enjoy a life of middle-class stability. What does this resistance to workplace equality tell us about the nature of the civil-rights struggle in general? Why were integrated workplaces—and training schools, and unions—a bridge too far for even the most seemingly committed white activists? To ignore the persistent discriminatory social division of labor in Boston or elsewhere is to miss a large part of the unfinished story of various civil-rights revolutions.

In a sense, my book is not just an addendum, but an answer, to the recent expansive, vibrant literature on the northern Black civil-rights struggle in the nineteenth century. It was a struggle fought in state legislatures and city councils, in party caucus meetings, in the columns of newspapers, and in the pulpits of churches. The fact that there was so much resistance to Black economic opportunity, then, suggests that these other markers of citizenship—while surely essential—were and would continue to be insufficient guarantors of true equality.

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