RACE, CLASS AND CITIZENSHIP: THE CIVIL RIGHTS
STRUGGLE IN MOBILE, ALABAMA, 1925-85

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Abstract

This thesis is an examination of the Civil Rights struggle in the city of Mobile, Alabama between 1925 and 1985. Race, class and citizenship were three important factors which shaped African-American leadership, political goals and protest strategies to overcome the problem of racism during this century. The influence of elites, changing class alignments and differing interpretations of the concept of freedom in democratic society, created an uneven social movement for reform among Mobile's African American citizens. In common with other Southern localities of comparable size, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People and the political philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr., influenced the struggle for equality in Mobile. World War II and the economic modernisation of the South during the post-war era, helped to bring the city closer to the national mainstream and foster liberal racial attitudes among middle-class, white Mobilians. Yet Mobile had also established itself as a semi-autonomous area with a distinct cultural tradition drawn from the heritage of early European and African settlement along the Gulf Coast. Within this context, the city did not experience a full Civil Rights movement comparable to other urban localities such as Montgomery, Birmingham and Tuskegee during the racially turbulent 1950s and 1960s. The grass-roots revolutionary aspects of the black freedom struggle emerged in Mobile after 1968 coinciding with the death of King. This movement absorbed the political culture of Black Power and the confrontational tactics of the militant wing of the national civil rights coalitions. Despite over a half-century of civil rights protest and accommodation in the 1980s however, it was clear that racism continued to determine the nature and problem of African-American citizenship in one of America's oldest cities.
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   Class Structure and African American Protest in Mobile

3: White Supremacy Challenged: The Economic and Social Transformation of Mobile, 1940-45.
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<tr>
<td>ACHR</td>
<td>Alabama Council on Human Relations (Mobile)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACMHR</td>
<td>Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (Birmingham)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADDSCO</td>
<td>Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company (Mobile)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFSC</td>
<td>American Friends Service Committee (Philadelphia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSCP</td>
<td>Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCC</td>
<td>Civilian Conservation Corps (Mobile County)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCAP</td>
<td>Committee for Congested Production Areas (Washington, D.C.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIO</td>
<td>Congress of Industrial Organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CORE</td>
<td>Congress of Racial Equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSC</td>
<td>Civil Service Commission (Washington, D.C.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEPC</td>
<td>Fair Employment Practices Committee (Washington, D.C.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEW</td>
<td>Department of Health, Education and Welfare (Washington, D.C.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDB</td>
<td>Industrial Development Board (Mobile)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUMSWA</td>
<td>Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KKK</td>
<td>Ku Klux Klan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDEF</td>
<td>Legal Defense and Educational Fund (NAACP, New York)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MASC</td>
<td>Mobile Air Service Command</td>
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MIA  Montgomery Improvement Association
MOWM  March on Washington Movement
NAACP  National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People
NOW  Neighborhood Organization Workers
      (Mobile)
NPVL  Non-Partisan Voters’ League
      (Mobile)
NUL  National Urban League
      (Washington, D.C.)
RG  Record Group, National Archives
     (College Park, MD)
SAC  Special Advisory Commission
     (Mobile)
SCLC  Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC  Student Non-Violating Co-ordinating Committee
SOHP  Southern Oral History Project
      (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
STAND  Stand Together and Never Divide
        (Mobile Parent Teacher Group)
USA  University of South Alabama Archives
     (Mobile)
WMC  War Manpower Commission
     (Washington, D.C.)
Chapter 1:
Introduction

On March 21, 1981 19-year-old Michael Donald of Mobile, Alabama was kidnapped, beaten and then had his throat cut on his way to the grocery store. He was later found hanging from a camphor tree in an historic part of town known as Tillman's Corner. Donald's murderer, Henry Hays a 42-year-old native of the city, along with two other accomplices were charged and then freed after a court hearing. Sixteen years after the crime was committed, Hays was re-tried and subsequently executed in the electric chair on June 6, 1997. He was the first white man in Alabama to be executed for a racial lynching since 1913. The contrast between Donald and his murderer was symbolic of the limited gains made by the Civil Rights Movement in the South. Hays had been a lifelong member of the Ku Klux Clan (KKK), raised since childhood in the tradition of the 'Exalted Cyclops.' Decades of racial protest and accommodation had failed to penetrate his commitment to the notion of white supremacy. Acting in the spirit of the conservative backlash which influenced the public agenda concerning race, welfare and poverty during the 1980s, Hays was one of a sizeable proportion of Southerners who resented the political and social advances made by African Americans during the 1960s and 1970s. Donald, on the other hand was an innocent victim of this backlash. Barely into his twenties, he had neither participated in the struggles of the previous generation nor had he directly experienced the indignities of Jim Crow segregation. The tragic fate of Michael Donald was a potent reminder that Southern African Americans were yet to be freed from the burden of race in the late 20th century.1

Had John L. LeFlore, Mobile's veteran civil rights activist and lifelong member of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), who died in 1976, lived to hear of the Donald case, he would have been deeply saddened by the continued failure of the American justice system to deliver equal protection of the laws to all citizens regardless of race. He would also have felt a sense of sympathy for Hays as a white man who had been enslaved by the delusion of white supremacy. LeFlore had led his community's struggle for civil rights for almost a half-century until Martin Luther

King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4th, 1968. During that time, he served as Executive Secretary of the Mobile NAACP branch, (1925-55) and successfully created his own civil rights organisation when Alabama’s Attorney General, John Patterson enjoined the NAACP from all its activities in 1956. Working in the ideological tradition of the NAACP, LeFlore was Director of Casework for the Non-Partisan Voters' League of Mobile (NPVL), between 1956 and 1975. In this position he emulated the NAACP leadership goals and strategy achieving remarkable gains for Mobile’s black community during an era in which racial confrontation and political repression of civil rights activities were sweeping other parts of Alabama.2

LeFlore was the undisputed political leader of black Mobile for much of this century. Under his leadership, the black protest movement retained a remarkable degree of independence from national organisations and leaders. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), did not stage any protest demonstrations in Mobile during the climax of racial confrontation that took place elsewhere in the state of Alabama between 1961 and 1963. Instead, LeFlore ensured that the NPVL successfully spearheaded the integration of the city without violence and loss of peace. His public alliance with the liberal white establishment, forged during World War II, brought significant gains in voting, housing and other civil liberties for blacks. After 1968, however, he was rejected by a new band of activists influenced by the grass-roots mobilising program of the Black Power movement. The emergence of the Neighborhood Organization Workers (NOW), in that year represented the first major break from traditional black accommodationist political leadership in Mobile. Events thereafter revealed the class and generational conflicts which continued to influence the political mobilisation of African-American civil rights protest during the post-revolutionary era, (1965-70). The grass-roots political revolution induced by the new black militancy of the Southern movement beginning in the 1950s, did eventually come to Mobile but not in LeFlore’s lifetime. The election of three black city commissioners in 1985 brought to a successful conclusion, almost a century of black resistance and protest against Mobile’s caste system. Yet this was not solely the achievement of Mobile’s traditional, middle-class

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leadership. NOW's brief impact on the local scene from 1968 until 1971, prepared African Americans for the task that lay ahead: the assumption of political leadership roles independent of the white power structure.\(^3\) Donald's murder should be regarded as only a momentary cloud over the strength, persistence and determination which propelled the Civil Rights Movement in the South. What follows is the story of one community's struggle to overcome the barriers imposed by race, class and citizenship in the 20th century. It is a story which reveals a great deal about the diversity of social relations in Alabama and one that has largely been neglected by historians of the Second Reconstruction in Alabama.

**Race, Class and Citizenship: Three Perspectives on Mobile's Civil Rights Struggle in the Twentieth Century**

Numerous local struggles for civil rights converged after World War II to constitute a national and regional movement for freedom waged by America's black population. Called the 'Civil Rights Movement' by contemporary participants, it was the greatest social and political upheaval to be inspired, led and directed mainly by blacks themselves. It opened the floodgates for new frontiers in individual and collective action among minorities and was framed within a rhetoric of freedom that has had a long intellectual tradition in the United States since slavery.\(^4\) Distinguished historian of the South, C. Vann Woodward, identified this as the important difference between the First and Second Reconstruction's.\(^5\) Drawing on the historical legacy of black resistance to white domination since slavery, those who joined the movement of the 1950s and 1960s played a pivotal role in re-shaping American society and politics closer toward the lines of equality for all citizens regardless of racial origin. The 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were the main legislative achievements of black protest and political mobilisation in the South. They protect all Americans today from discrimination and violation of civil liberties. But the freedom struggle transcended the purely legal war against segregation by bringing African Americans into political office as mayors, representatives and congressmen in significant numbers for the first time since Reconstruction. Gains after 1965 were slow but lasting. The most important legacies, of

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the Civil Rights Movement in the South were the destruction of its caste system and the exemplary spirit of the oppressed to successfully wage a direct attack on the institutions and practices of white supremacy.6

In their struggle for the basic rights of citizenship in the world's largest democracy, African-American communities have relayed a story of protest and strength in the face of intense conflict that remains a blistering testimony to the power of the human spirit. It is therefore not surprising that historians since the 1960s have been drawn to documenting and analysing African American protest during the second half of the 20th century. As with most fields of historical scholarship, there remain many gaps and inconsistencies. This study of the civil rights struggle in one of America's oldest cities seeks to offer new perspectives on the Southern movement based upon recent developments in civil rights historiography. The Mobile struggle began essentially in 1925, when postal worker, John L. LeFlore re-organised the defunct local chapter of the NAACP. Between 1925 and 1985, African Americans in Mobile waged an almost continuous, organised struggle for first class citizenship that ended, in the strictly political sense, in 1985. It is immediately obvious that such a time-scale stretches well beyond the traditional chronology of the Civil Rights Movement, (1954-68). Rather than complicating matters, recent calls for a longer view of black protest from the 1930s through to the post-civil rights era are considerably justified.7

The essential problem confronting black Mobile in the 20th century can be defined in simple terms as the triple barriers to social and political advancement imposed by the constraints of race, class and inferior citizenship status. These barriers were shaped, to a large extent, by the age, social structure and distinctive cultural heritage of Alabama's only seaport. It is important to distinguish between class and caste in the case of black Mobilians. While regarded as a caste by Jim Crow society in common with other Southern African Americans, class structure has played an important role in the development of black leadership and group identity in Mobile. A class structure which

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emulated that of whites in the Old South was formed in black Mobile during the 19th century. Free blacks, mulattos and Creoles blurred contemporary racial classifications in the ante-bellum period. All three groups enjoyed certain limited privileges including the right to own land, purchase slaves, and attend schools, factors which distinguished them from ordinary blacks. During Reconstruction, blacks descended from Creole and mulatto backgrounds assumed positions in state and local government. During the Progressive era, a new middle-class had been created by the end of the 19th century which merged black professionals with the established ministerial and Creole classes. Leadership was vested in these social groups and the pattern was set by the end of the 1920s for bourgeois, accommodationist leadership throughout the unfolding century.8

The existence of a black elite in Mobile's racial order did not free them nor the vast majority of their contemporaries from the limited citizenship rights granted to persons of their racial category in Jim Crow society. Class status was no guarantee that racial barriers would be lifted, indeed the reversed fortunes of Mobile's blacks since the start of the 20th century was indicated by the number registered to vote in 1930. Of the total voting-age population, a mere 300 had successfully retained this privilege.9 Within the context of politics, race and second-class citizenship have served the function of retarding African American participation and representation in the public life of the nation, leaving them to seek the full benefits of democratic government from the margins. Second-class citizenship was an effective way in which the white majority reinforced the presumed inferiority of black Americans on account of their race. Within this context, race assumes a greater significance in analysing African-American civil rights history rather than class, ethnicity or gender. The latter three have been used by social historians to explain the pattern of American inter-group relations, but it is the analytical category of race that has proved more fruitful when deconstructing the history of black Americans and particularly their historically uneven relationship to the white majority.

While class-conflict and ideological disunity have characterised African American responses to white racial domination, it is the disabilities arising from their racial identity
that the modern Civil Rights movement sought to eradicate. Scholarly treatments of racial societies in the past tend to view race itself not as a physical fact, but as an idea which has been socially constructed and then manifested in the form of racial ideologies. In the case of America, racial theories have almost always been articulated first by the white majority in response to changing socio-economic conditions. The ideologies of race can be constructed differently by the same people and at the same point in time. Historical forces such as war, industrialisation and social discontent have shaped racial ideologies in each era of America's past, most notably, during the Civil War, the Second World War and the racial turmoil of the 1960s. These events required a re-visioning of the racial status quo due to the disparity between the principles of equality and freedom enshrined in the Constitution and the racial domination imposed upon African Americans and other minorities by the white majority. The first task of the historian is to uncover what role race plays or has played in the shaping of societies and second, to identify both the weaknesses and strengths of racially-motivated laws, government and culture.

Two important studies examining the theoretical approaches to the problems created by race in America urge us to consider the primacy of this analytical tool over that of class. Alphonso Pinkney makes the case that class barriers upon blacks in the United States were superseded by the barriers imposed by race. Put another way, the meanings associated with African Americans as a distinct racial group as categorised by the state, transcended their class status since they have been the victims of both economic and racial exploitation. An educated, professional black male would, according to this trajectory, face the same racial barriers despite his moving up into the middle-class stratum of society. While class has undoubtedly fostered divisions in American society and, therefore, helped to maintain racial inequality, it is the conceptualisation of race by the modern state which has achieved an autonomous force in determining what Pinkney refers to as black 'life chances'. Hence, the social construction of race and its institutionalised forms have most limited black progress in the 20th century. We need only to look at the long line of statistics provided by Pinkney which conclude that one of the major failures


11 Pinkney, op. cit., 55-56.
of the civil rights era was in attacking the enduring problem of economic disparities between blacks and whites.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant have re-examined the persistence of racial inequality in the United States following the successful mobilisation of black institutions and resources during the legal destruction of Jim Crow segregation in the 1960s. In their theory of 'racial formation', it is argued that the American nation was initially conceived and founded as a racial dictatorship. The ruling white hegemony was able, in successive historical periods, to establish its own racial domination over the continent's non-white peoples. These people have included Native Americans, Mexicans and African Americans. After a brief period in which the nation experimented with racial democracy in the Reconstruction era, this last group was granted citizenship and civil equality with whites. However, biological theories of race, racial inferiority and white supremacy have been used by the 20th century American state to deny blacks this equality.\(^\text{12}\) Omi and Winant have rescued the concept of race in history from its mere reductionism as an offshoot emanating from class-based inequalities within a capitalist order. Classical Marxism postulated that class solidarity would lessen racial and ethnic divisions when the proletariat rose in defiance of bourgeois economic domination during heightened periods of industrialisation. Marx offered an optimistic view that the American working classes would find the concept of racial dictatorship as equally offensive as capitalist domination and therefore, to secure its own interests, would overcome racial cleavages. Apart from a brief phase in working class interracial solidarity during Reconstruction, the white worker in America has tended to hold ideologies confirming the inferiority of blacks more closer to his heart than destroying the tyranny of his capitalist employer by joining forces with his black counterpart.\(^\text{13}\)

The new labour history of the 1960s took this affirmation of the ruling elite's ideology of white supremacy as an avenue for exploring how race superseded class in the formation of American working class identity. Racial democracy was not a goal for most Southern white workers and a significant proportion of the North's. The maintenance of racial divisions was actively encouraged by this group despite the benefits it procured for the


\(^{13}\) Roediger, *ibid.*
South's ruling white oligarchy in terms of maintaining an artificially cheap labour supply and a restricted franchise.\textsuperscript{14} The most influential black Socialist scholar of his day, Du Bois, postulated the best way of explaining this phenomenon to date. Along with helping to keep his oppressor in power, white workers refused to ally with blacks to forge a racial democracy because whiteness bestowed upon the former, a 'psychological wage' in every aspect of his public life which distinguished him from the latter group.\textsuperscript{15} This 'wage' reaped huge rewards in terms of status in everyday relationships that outweighed the costs of oligarchic rule in the South. What did this mean for black workers? They could not turn to readily the labour movement to improve their exploited condition and neither could they rely on those in political office to deliver their constitutional rights.

In its various guises, race has assumed the important role of assuring power for an elite while simultaneously perpetuating class and artificial social divisions among the economically and racially less privileged. When linked to the theme of power, the maintenance of social divisions on account of race has transcended traditional class-based alliances in the American South. This is especially true of the Deep South states which shared a common heritage borne out of a slave economy and the post-emancipation legacy of excluding blacks from political activities.\textsuperscript{16} In their quest for freedom, African Americans have had to overcome the obstacles presented by the interplay between race, class and citizenship in determining their position in the social order, a status that was inextricably linked to the central issue of access to power in the region's political economy.

\textit{The Social Construction of Race in Alabama}

It is not surprising that Alabamians found themselves thrust on to the centre stage at key moments during the Southern Civil Rights movement. Race has been a fundamental factor in the shaping of a distinctive political economy in the state.\textsuperscript{17} The preservation of white supremacy has been a source of motivation for political developments in Alabama since

\textsuperscript{14} Roediger, \textit{ibid.}
Reconstruction culminating in the Constitution of 1901 which effectively barred the majority of blacks and poor whites from voting until 1944. Birmingham is the most powerful example of how race and its social construction have placed extreme barriers to black economic advancement in Alabama's major industrial heartland. A citadel of white supremacy in its various forms, the city's white leaders were determined to keep blacks in a permanently subordinated status, exploiting them for their labour. Birmingham's racial customs spawned largely from its economic origins as part of Alabama's drive for industrial expansion during the New South era. Growth of the steel and coal manufacturing industries at the start of the 20th century, led to the creation of the first free black proletariat in the South. Economic competition between poor whites and black in-migrants to the city set the stage for a political culture which regarded the preservation of white supremacy as a high priority to perpetuate the city's racial hierarchy.

V.O. Key and subsequent generations of scholars interested in Alabama's political culture have identified particular trends which rendered the state unique within the former Confederacy. Sectionalism, the maintenance of elites, rural versus urban cleavages, localism combined with transient factions and personalities were all visible in Alabama politics in this period. The Black Belt Counties, primarily Jefferson County, formed a powerful section comprising the old planter class and the urban bosses created by the New South era in Birmingham and Mobile. The presence of large black populations in the former cotton-producing areas resulted in a very different form of race prejudice compared to that found in Mobile and the rural counties of South Alabama. Always fearful of the threat to their economic elite status, whites in these regions tended to be more inclined to resort to overt means of maintaining the racial submission of the non-

22 Key, ibid., 42, 44.
white majorities. In addition to this, slavery and emancipation had created a situation where blacks functioned as a caste resembling Russian serfdom, economically dependent upon the minority white population.23

Alabama politics was controlled and manipulated well into the 1960s by the Black Belt alliance and its counterpart in the urban areas, known as 'Big Mules'. Such elite dominance of the state legislature has been regarded as one of Alabama's major political 'lags' in the 20th century by leading scholars on the subject.24 The Civil Rights movement, therefore, had to contend with a political culture that denied full participation to the democratic process to not just blacks but also to whites who were located outside of the Black Belt-Big Mule alliance. It is the lag in civil rights, according to Grafton and Permaloff, which presented Alabamians with the most dramatic challenge after World War II. Among the important consequences of African American protest mobilisation, was the disintegration of the elite alliance in the mid-1960s, a process that had already been set in motion since the 1930s as population gradually moved out of the Black Belt and into the cities of Mobile, Gadsden and Huntsville during the 1950s.25

The civil rights struggle in Alabama was waged within the context of sectional politics and a powerful conservative bloc in the state legislature which refused to countenance, at times, even the most basic of social and political reforms that would have improved the lives of all Alabamians. James Folsom found this out to his cost when he attempted to challenge the elite factions by promoting civil liberties for blacks and poor whites along with a range of federal measures including modification of the poll tax, enlarging state support for public education, vetoing segregation bills, and opposing the Dixiecrat split.26 Organised labour’s efforts to reform Birmingham’s municipal system during the New Deal offered the hope of an interracial, class-based alliance to challenge planter dominance, however, this was a brief episode soon to be dissolved by the power of the

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23 C. Eagles, *Outside Agitator: Jon Daniels and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Chapel Hill, 1993), 90-117.


25 Ibid., 5-7, 13-19.

former.\textsuperscript{27} Challengers to Alabama’s system of political, social and economic relations continually came up against the granite force of the Black Belt-Big Mule Alliance which utilised the ‘filibuster’ as an effective means to destroy legislative reforms until the mid-1960s.\textsuperscript{28} It is within the background outlined so far, that this study of the civil rights struggle in the state’s only seaport and oldest urban area will be examined.

\textit{Writing Civil Rights History}

When approaching a potential study of the Civil Rights movement, one is faced with many choices. The focus can be devoted to either the national, state or local levels, to well-known personalities and organisations or to specific events that have had an important impact upon the movement’s success. The current balance sheet in civil rights historiography indicates that all approaches have been tried. However, an important overriding theme has been the quest for a broader analysis of the movement in terms of its class, gender and local characteristics. Such features have characterised the recent outpouring of scholarship in what is clearly one of the most hotly contested fields of modern United States social history. This study is a response to calls from several leading scholars, both American and British, to reassess the movement’s chronology, participants, protest organisations and local dimensions in light of the continuities in black protest. This timescale encompasses the New Deal era through to World War II and the 1950s when direct-action was harnessed by Montgomery’s blacks to invalidate the segregation law on public transit.\textsuperscript{29} The expansion of Southern industrial capacity after World War II also provides an essential economic context for assessing the racial struggles of the latter 20th century. Studies from the late 1960s onwards failed to consider such linkages or to place much weight on the economic and demographic changes influencing the South’s political economy.

During the first two decades since the climax of the Southern movement, civil rights historians employed a ‘top-down’ approach which focused on the major personalities of the era such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and their role in the dominant black protest

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\item Fairclough, \textit{ibid}.
\end{itemize}
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organisations of the 1950s and 1960s, a trend which still continues to influence the historiography of the period. Thus, we have several biographies of King, path breaking studies of the SCLC, the Student Non-Violating Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). While such studies are indeed valuable they should not preclude historians from directing their attention towards the local ramifications of the black struggle and assessing the contribution of local people who, like King risked their lives in assuming leadership roles during the civil rights struggle.

Robert Norrell, William Chafe and David Colburn have pioneered what August Meier has broadly referred to as a 'Synthesis of the Civil Rights Movement' where the problem of the inconsistencies between the local and national movements are still to be fully resolved. All three scholars have produced important case-studies of the local struggle in three of the movement's crucibles of confrontation between militant blacks and whites: Tuskegee, Alabama, Greensboro, North Carolina and St. Augustine, Florida. The search for a wider understanding of the nature and dynamics of black protest in the latter half of the 20th century can be enhanced by local studies which place an exclusive focus on the diversity of local conditions. Chafe's examination of Greensboro revealed how an established culture of civility provided a sobering background to the student radicalism of the sit-in movement born in that city in 1960. Yet, Greensboro's blacks also transformed a movement previously dominated by middle-class, older blacks into a genuine, mass social movement. Robert Norrell's examination of Tuskegee, an Alabama locality


where a majority black population had created a distinct political culture supported by an 
educated black elite, demonstrates what could be achieved in a city where the towering 
figure of Booker T. Washington undoubtedly influenced race relations. David Colburn's 
choice of St. Augustine is a departure in that the area was an Old South community where 
racial etiquette was more firmly entrenched and where the outward civility of black-white 
relations masked an extremely racially violent and racially divided city. Taken together, 
these historians have paved the way for more local studies of the Civil Rights movement 
in the South which consider the history of race relations within a given locality and the 
specific urban culture which fostered it.

Glenn Eskew and Stephen Tuck have proved that Meier's hope of a synthesis is far from 
an elusive goal. Within the framework of local studies, the city of Birmingham has 
received its fair share of analysis and commentary from both scholars and activists alike. 
In playing a pivotal role during the struggle of the 1960s, Birmingham was a microcosm 
of the forces that destroyed Alabama's caste system and leading to the first presidential 
measures concerning civil rights since Reconstruction. Eskew's recent study of 
Birmingham has added a further dimension to scholarship on the local struggles: the need 
to identify where the local and national leadership merged and, by implication, where 
they failed to inter-link. Successful African American economic coercion, white violence 
and the intransigence of the reactionary municipal elite combined, according to Eskew, to 
end federal impotence in the field of civil rights once and for all. Birmingham's blacks 
paid a heavy price during the violent racial confrontation of 1963 but in so doing, they 
ensured an historic role in aiding the convergence of the national and local movements achieving spectacular success in a remarkably short space of time. In the same vein, 
Tuck's examination of the Savannah movement is a welcome revision of the assumptions 
surrounding the Old South. Unlike in St. Augustine, black protest in Savannah displayed 
a remarkable independence from the mainstream civil rights leadership achieving

33 W.H. Chafe, Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black 
34 R.J. Norrell, Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee, Alabama 
(New York, 1985).
35 D.R. Colburn, Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine Florida, 1877-1980 
(Gainesville, 1991).
36 G.T. Eskew, But For Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights 
Struggle (Chapel Hill, 1997), 2-9.
integration without much violence or the need for outside help. The example of Savannah also invites civil rights historians to consider why direct-action as a technique was noticeably absent from some Southern communities but readily adopted by others. Tuck's work is also an important call to address how the history of race relations in a community from its settlement to the time of the Civil Rights movement, influenced the pattern and outcomes of black protest in the era.37

The top-down approach has simultaneously obscured our understanding of the local scene and blighted an examination of the black freedom struggle in terms of the class and gender dynamics which influenced it. According to Clayborne Carson, the common assumption that the movement was dominated by middle-class, conservative, male blacks in the 1940s and 1950s until student radicals and black nationalists transformed the tactic of direct-action to overthrow segregation after 1961, fails to address the development of black resistance within the framework of class solidarity and class-conflict. Carson urged historians to look for ideological continuities between the Black Power and King-led non-violent phases. SNCC embraced civil disobedience after it had already been practiced by CORE and the SCLC in the 1940s and 1950s. All three groups shared King's radical espousal of social resistance influenced by the Ghandian model in India.38 Within a Marxist framework, Robin Kelley's scholarship has re-examined working class black resistance, a subject often relegated to the margins by scholars. Protest from the poorest and least-educated sections of African American communities usually fell outside the traditional spheres of organised labour and formal organisations. Just as Southern whites aligned themselves in response to class-based interests, so too did their black counterparts. Kelley convincingly argues that working class protest assumed many faces, both formal and informal and, therefore, should be regarded as equally important.39

Historical analysis of working-class resistance against Jim Crow segregation in the South, can be located within a wider concern among civil rights scholars to assess the grass-roots contribution of countless people who did not tend to occupy positions of leadership in

37 S. Tuck, 'A City Too Dignified to Hate: Civic Pride, Civil Rights and Savannah in Comparative Perspective,' *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 33 (Fall 1995): 539-59.

38 C. Carson 'Rethinking African American Political Thought in the Post-Revolutionary Era,' in *The Making of Martin Luther King*, 115-127.

formal protest organisations such as the church and labour unions. These local people, nonetheless, challenged the racial status quo. Women have played an important role in the struggle proving that they were indeed able to challenge the triple constraints imposed upon them by their race, class and gender in order to join a radical social movement that was primarily dominated by men.40 Black women activists have assumed a wide variety of leadership and organising positions within a society where male attitudes had been shaped considerably by the patriarchal structures of the segregated church.41 Charles Payne's examination of the Mississippi civil rights struggle is invaluable for recovering from total obscurity, the contributions of radical black women civil rights activists in the mold of Fannie Lou Hamer.42 Hamer’s bold efforts on behalf of rural blacks in Mississippi, one of the South’s most racially-oppressive states, was indicative of not only her own courage but also the advantage women had over men. Although she was harassed and beaten, white males tended to be less willing to inflict violence on female civil rights workers.43 Septima Clark’s leadership of the South Carolina Citizenship Education Project mirrored that of Ella Baker’s stints as first, Director of the NAACP branches and then as part of SNCC. Having reached important positions of leadership in these capacities, both women were fully aware of the nascent sexism in the male-led civil rights coalitions. They preferred 'group-centered' leadership to the authoritarian character of the SCLC.44


43 Cook, op. cit, 242; for a detailed study of Hamer’s life and background in Sunflower County, Mississippi see K. Mills, This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer (New York, 1993).

Introduction

The Montgomery Bus Boycott was one of the leading examples of female participation during the major political mobilisation of a local black community. Rosa Parks and Jo Ann Gibson Robinson of the Women’s Political Council provided vital contributions to the development of the boycott in 1955. These women were representative of a section of Montgomery’s blacks anxious to reform the city’s racial practices and had been politically active in this respect prior to the birth of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). In examining a grass-roots social movement which drew its strength from mass bases of participation, historians now place a stronger emphasis upon gender and class. When combined in civil rights history, both categories offer a powerful medium for assessing the movement’s diverse contours at the local level.

The framework of the local study, therefore, provides a useful way in which to examine the Civil Rights movement in Mobile. However, since Mobilians tended to be more conservative than most Alabamians in their approach to social reform and political action, women’s participation on the scale evident in Montgomery or Birmingham was lacking in the city. Hence, gender has not proved fruitful in assessing the impact of black protest in Mobile and has been omitted. Similarly, the class structure and elitist nature of black leadership since World War II offered little room for the inclusion of working-class black Mobilians within the NPVL and therefore, the emphasis is primarily upon middle-class blacks who involved themselves in civil rights agitation. To summarise, the uniqueness of Mobile’s local civil rights struggle in comparison to other areas in Alabama renders this study an important addition to the historiography of the Southern movement which fills an obvious void in this state’s civil rights history.


Introduction

*The Changing Historical Context of W.E.B. Du Bois' Colour Line*

A central theme of the African American experience during this century has been on the one hand powerlessness and on the other, the quest for political and social empowerment. In 1902, Du Bois conceptualised the problems confronting his race in terms of a 'color line' that had conferred upon them, second class citizenship. As Americans of African origin in the nation they were denied equal protection of the laws, full access to political representation and granted only limited opportunities to determine their lives in a society which was originally founded upon the principles of democracy and constitutional liberty. Citizenship rights gained during Reconstruction through the 14th and 15th Amendments had been eroded, at the turn of the century, by the rise of Jim Crow legislation resulting, in the words of one scholar, in a 'braided citizenship.' African Americans who remained in the South after the Great Migration (1910-30), suffered racial proscriptions imposed upon them by the institution of segregation which had gained its legal validity from the Supreme Court in 1897, in the landmark case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Through *Plessy*, the court permitted racial segregation on the grounds that it must be 'separate but equal' and therefore did not violate the equal protection clauses of the 14th Amendment.

The ascent of Jim Crow laws at the turn of the century touched almost every aspect of public life in the South's urban areas. In large cities such as Mobile, African Americans were segregated in schools, public accommodations, transport and in employment. Segregation however, meant inferior schools, limited economic opportunities and a racial etiquette that presumed the inferiority of blacks in their day to day contact with whites. At the heart of this system of racial oppression was the use of terror involving lynching, police controls and a discriminatory judicial system which successfully intimidated and upheld the racial submission of the black population in the South. The African American struggle for racial equality, although not new to the 1950s and 1960s, sought to eradicate both the legal and ideological basis of racial discrimination. The generation of

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activists who reached maturity in that era launched the struggle from within the rich culture of resistance fostered by the segregated world itself. Their essential weapons eventually became the courts, the ballot and the political deployment of grass-roots community mobilisation.51

Various forces have contested the intellectual and moral validity of second-class citizenship within the context of a political creed that espoused freedom and liberty. In the half century since Du Bois' telling prophecy on the future of race relations in the United States, these forces had their greatest impact upon the South where race had shaped the development of political institutions and culture under de jure segregation. The small town of Scottsboro, Alabama was a classic citadel of the plight of rural blacks in the Deep South during the 1930s. The sentencing of nine black youths for the alleged rape, on account of the inconclusive evidence of two white women during a train journey from Huntsville to Montgomery, attracted widespread controversy. An extreme example of the South's racially-biased criminal justice system, liberals brandished the case a tragic manifestation of the region's perverted racial dogmas and conservatives linked it to the spectre of Communist insurgency in which the NAACP had reputedly soiled its hands.52 The event also took place during a time of severe economic depression which brought the issue of civil rights to the attention of the presidency for the first time since Reconstruction as part of the New Deal programme for economic recovery. A major shift in the political alliances of African-American voters in the North and Midwest ultimately transformed the national Democratic Party for decades to come. Franklin D. Roosevelt's re-election to the presidency in 1936 could not have been secured without black votes. Hereafter, the Democratic party found itself split between its powerful Southern pro-segregation bloc in Congress and the need to retain its black voters in marginal electoral areas outside the South.53

Economic forces have also been at the root of some of the major social and political changes affecting African Americans in their quest for freedom and justice since the


launching of the New Deal. The growth of federal power, rural to urban migration, the
enlargement of labour unionisation and wartime economic mobilisation between 1940 and
1945 have left long-term legacies on race relations in the urban South. Migration of
blacks to the North and Midwest fuelled the process of urbanisation among a
predominantly rural people who traditionally occupied the lowest section of the region’s
economic ladder as sharecroppers and domestic workers. Political consequences of such
a major demographic shock included a rise in the number of blacks registered as voters
and as members of segregated local unions outside the South. Armed with higher incomes
and a race-consciousness borne out of life in the early ghettos of the North, urban African
Americans began to place pressure on the federal government and the New Deal coalition
which culminated in the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), organised by A.
Philip Randolph, leader of the largest black-controlled union in the country, the
Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP).

Alabama has been particularly affected by the twin forces of industrial growth and
demographic change which, during the 1960s, brought the state out of its previously
largely rural economy into a diversified area containing one of the South’s largest
concentrations of industry and population located in Jefferson County. Like many other
parts of the region, the transition from a rural to an industrial economy created large-scale
changes in the state labour force which forced Alabamians to reassess the racial traditions
of their society during the second half of the 20th century. Underpinning these
structural changes in the region’s political economy was one very significant
development: the rise of African American militancy and protest against the injustices of
Jim Crow segregation. Although aided at times by economic shocks such as the Great
Depression and the severe labour shortages of the two world wars, black resistance and
aspirations for a better quality of life are the persistent factors which ultimately led to the
success of the Second Reconstruction.

54 M. French, *US Economic History Since 1945* (Manchester, 1997), 153-6; A. Badger, 'The
New Deal and the Localities' in (eds.) R. Jeffrey-Jones and B. Collins, *The Growth of

55 J.W. Trotter (ed.) *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of
Race, Class and Gender* (Bloomington, IA., 1991).

56 For a detailed account, H. Garfinkel, *When Negroes March: The March on Washington
Movement in the Organizational Politics for the FEPC* (New York, 1969).

While the oppressive system of segregation fostered a positive spirit of resistance among African Americans, such resistance was by no means ideologically uniform for most of the 19th and 20th centuries. Scholars have asserted that the major feature of black leadership and protest strategies has been the shifting allegiance toward integration and separation as a means of achieving the goal of freedom. Ideological disputes concerning the future of the race in a predominantly racist political economy, have characterised the development of resistance movements from slavery to the present day. However, at the turn of the century, the bitter intellectual battle between Booker T. Washington's accommodationist leadership and Du Bois's rival Niagara Movement, forged a new political consciousness among the Northern, educated black elite. Stressing integration and assimilation through the courts, Du Bois and the Niagara Movement pioneered what became the vanguard of middle-class black political agitation with an interracial character.  

In 1909, the Niagara Movement gave way to the birth of the NAACP, arguably the major black civil rights agency of the 20th century. Conceived during the era of Progressive reforming zeal and rising white violence towards blacks, the NAACP has withstood challenges from other civil rights organisations during periods of declining membership and financial instability to emerge as the most tenacious of black political institutions this century. With there being no major study of the organisation currently available, the NAACP's role in the black freedom struggle remains far from a clear-cut issue. However, it is with the NAACP that we must begin any examination of the role African Americans themselves played as the agents of racial change. As already stated, historians can approach class and ideology to interpret the nature and form of black protest in the South prior to the radicalisation of the movement during the 1960s a development which coincided with the outlawing of the NAACP activities by several state legislatures. The NAACP was initially created by middle-class whites and blacks outraged at the rise in violence against the latter, particularly in Springfield, Illinois in 1906. Promoting the goal of securing the constitutional citizenship rights guaranteed by the 14th and 15th


Amendments for all Americans, the NAACP was an interracial venture from the very beginning depending heavily upon white philanthropic donations to sustain its early activities. While its national leadership in the North was dominated during the early stages by whites, by the 1930s, Southern NAACP membership and local branch leadership was almost exclusively black. In fact, Southern membership had exceeded that of the North by 42,588 to 38,420 as early as 1919, thereby creating a network of local supporters able to foster the organisation's founding principles in the region where black civil rights had been most violated.60

The NAACP's essential weapon was litigation, a strategy which has been described as a social process conducted in the public interest. Litigation represented a way of attacking racist institutions from within the American court system. This stemmed from the organisation's commitment to working within a traditional, legal framework which in turn helped to protect its staff and its program of expanding black civil rights from white retaliation. The tactic was first used successfully in the realm of segregated education. A bureaucratic and formalised communication structure provided the NAACP with an 'organizing protocol' through which the legal strategy for attacking racial discrimination was disseminated.61 Moreover, the branches provided opportunities for local leaders to acquire organising skills and establish networks which were to prove vital during the 1960s era of desegregation when the traditional dominance of the NAACP's approach was eroded by other civil rights groups. Although, the NAACP structure did not encourage mass participation and according to Harold Cruse, a leading black intellectual during the 1940s, attracted 'a certain type of Negro', it represented the only organised challenge to racism with a national network in the South until the 1950s.62

In the cities, middle class blacks were able to channel resources from church and civic groups into the NAACP.63 Within the context of Southern social relations and class

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60 A. Meier and J. Bracey, 'The NAACP as a Reform Movement,' Journal of Southern History 59 (February 1993): 4, 6-7; Morris, Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, 15.
63 Morris, ibid.
structure, the NAACP was, for a time, the only agency able to address the problems of a racial group reduced to almost a caste status that was upheld by disfranchisement and police controls. During World War II the organisation entered its most prosperous phase in terms of membership and public recognition for its civil rights work. It was able to meet the new economic challenges of the war years and incorporate these into its main agenda. At the end of the war, the NAACP had been transformed into a lobbying agency which successfully mobilised the resources of numerous civic, labour and religious organisations. Local branches were instrumental in ensuring that federal officials were informed of racist employment practices in the South’s defense industries. These branches also launched local black civil rights activists into leading spokespersons for their race. Adam Fairclough’s state study of Louisiana found that the NAACP branches formed the backbone of the movement during the 1940s and helped establish the black leadership that was to carry the battle for civil rights through to its conclusion in the 1960s.64

Litigation was the essential core of the integrationist ideology within black liberation strategies. This approach gave the NAACP its share of victories and handicaps during the upswing in black radicalism between 1955 and 1968. Having served in a pioneering political group specifically organised to challenge Jim Crow segregation, NAACP members could rejoice in the legal victories won by the cadre of Howard University-educated black lawyers appointed to the Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDEF), in 1939. The 1940s spectacularly demonstrated that the litigation tactic was effective when, in 1944, the Supreme Court declared the white primary in Texas unconstitutional in the NAACP-sponsored case, Smith v. Allwright.65

The LDEF also launched several important cases testing the constitutionality of the separate-but-equal doctrine in voting, higher education, racially restrictive covenants and inter-state travel. Since voting constitutes the very essence of democratic society, denial of the franchise in the South was placed high on the NAACP agenda. Victory came in 1944 when the Supreme Court invalidated the Democratic Party’s right to operate the white-only primary in Texas after African American, Lonnie Smith was refused the


opportunity to vote in this election. The court argued that in deciding nominees for the house of representatives, the Democratic party was an agency of the state and therefore could not discriminate on the basis of race in violation of the 14th amendment. The Smith ruling immediately facilitated a rise in black voting across the South and established Thurgood Marshall as one of the country’s leading black lawyers.66

NAACP legal efforts to prove that separate but equal was rarely upheld in the field of education began as far back as 1925. In 1938 and 1948, however, two landmark cases set the stage for the later watershed created by Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. In Missouri Ex. Rel. Gaines v. Canada, (1938) and Sipuel v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma (1948), the Supreme Court held that Gaines and Sipuel should be admitted to the state law schools reserved for whites since there was no separate institution for blacks. As adjunct cases, McLaurin v. Oklahoma Regents for Higher Education (1950) and Sweatt v. Painter (1950) extended this principle when the court declared that segregated education deprived McLaurin and Sweatt equal protection of the law since the separate institutions that they attended were found to be qualitatively inferior. All these cases provided the background for the NAACP’s monumental victory in Brown. Social engineering through litigation created the potential legal revolution necessary for overturning separate-but-equal in the South's de jure system of segregation.67

The NAACP’s legal assault on segregation coincided with the emergence in the South of new local civil rights coalitions and leaders. Local African-American leadership was crucial to the success of the Second Reconstruction in the region. The success of a political reform movement rests, to a large degree upon spokespersons willing to take responsibility and face the risks associated with working for the advancement of a minority group denied full access to the political system. Historians have identified some important features and common focal points to explain the particular dynamics that have influenced black leadership both in the national and local context. From the outset, the majority of blacks have had limited opportunities to select their own leaders and such


leaders have then been dependent upon white as well as black support for their work. On becoming a leader, he or she still has had to contend with a caste system which limited access to the crucial centers of power. Denial of the franchise or membership of the major political parties have tended to place African American leaders in a vulnerable and tenuous position from the very start of their careers. According to Gunnar Myrdal, such features have led to two broad types of black leadership in the 20th century: the 'accommodationist' and the 'protest' types. The former works within the traditional framework of American democracy and institutions and seeks legal redress of the discrimination faced by his race. In contrast, the protest leader is less willing to accept American society and institutions arguing that neither could ever give equality to blacks and hence, calls for the building of self-sufficient black communities.

However, the common thread between them has been the desire to improve the condition of American blacks via economic, educational and psychological progress. An important long-term factor that has shaped black leadership, particularly on the local level, is the authoritarian and patriarchal structure of the black church. Alongside the NAACP, the segregated church was the key institution rooted in the community able to finance and provide a political focus for the Civil Rights movement. Several scholars have noted how the church operated as a vital intersection point where social and political activities in the African-American community merged. It was not surprising that the churches tended to foster a conservative, male-dominated, authoritarian style of race leadership in the South. It was one of the few arenas in which black men could learn the skills of oratory, leadership and organising political activities within the safety of a segregated institution shielded from white oppression.

Informal training in leadership as branch secretaries gave civil rights activists an opportunity to experiment locally with the NAACP ideology of liberation that was rooted in the quest for racial integration. Branch leaders were instructed by the NAACP headquarters to initiate legal suits whenever the opportunity arose. However, recent scholarship has argued that the integrationist strain of the NAACP strategy was by no means uncontested by African American intellectuals. In its founding year, the NAACP

White, *Black Leadership in America*, 1-3.

Ibid.

was a radical departure from the accommodationist politics espoused by Booker T. Washington. Du Bois, William Monroe Trotter and the Northern black intelligentsia stressed the aggressive pursuit of political and constitutional rights but Du Bois also emphasised the nationalist intellectual theories of black liberation in the United States dating from the era of slavery. His 'Close Ranks' essay and public calls for blacks to build economic self-sufficiency through the fostering of black-owned enterprises linked the cause of racial oppression in America with the economic exploitation of blacks across the world. Pan-Africanism was largely rejected by the mainstream NAACP leadership and integration ideology gained its dominant status only after the Depression. However, Du Bois had drawn attention to the economic problems of American racism and, therefore influenced NAACP policy in this direction during the 1930s.71

Membership in a national organisation could not protect Southern African American leaders from the terror and economic threats which blacks faced from whites on a regular basis. Myrdal observed that violence towards blacks, while not an everyday occurrence, could be inflicted at any time and civil rights activists were particularly vulnerable.72 Local leaders also could not expect white law enforcement officials to protect them in such cases. This may help to explain the relative weakness of black leadership in the South from the end of Reconstruction to World War II when protest was usually indirect and channelled through white intermediaries. The styles of race leadership, however were transformed during the 1960s and 1950s. While the NAACP provided important resources and networks it could not mobilise the masses or create the grass-roots radicalism which characterised the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the sit-in movement led by student radicals.

After 1955, black leadership can be conceptualised as conservative, militant and accommodationist. Each had a degree of effectiveness due to the local conditions determining race relations. Both the accommodationist and conservative style sought access to and acceptability from whites. In that sense, moderate black leaders' success lay in their effective dealings with their white counterparts. Conservatives tended to reject the


72 G. Myrdal, An American Dilemma (New York, 1944), 530.
direct-action strategy charging that it raised the 'community blood pressure' and hardened the lines of communication. Needless provocation of whites through demonstrations was regarded as counter-productive to the freedom struggle. Militants in the black leadership after 1960, however, embraced direct-action as central to race advancement. Boycotts, protest meetings and selective picketing became their hallmarks. In forcing the desegregation of public accommodations, militants found ultimate vindication for this tactic. However, certain commonalities linked all these types of black male leaders. Recent scholarship argues that the church fostered an authoritarian style of political leadership symbolic of the social and class relationships found in the black community at large. These leaders served in political organisations that were modelled on church-influenced rigid, patriarchal hierarchies where women were largely confined to subordinate organising roles. They were elevated to the status of visionaries committed to race progress operating from a position above that of the masses. While broadly conceived as radicals due to their political activities within the context of their times, this did not necessarily preclude them from adopting a gendered approach to leadership in the movement.

It is generally assumed that the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56 inaugurated the successful direct-action phase of the Civil Rights movement. The less-publicised boycott staged by blacks in Baton Rouge, Louisiana one year earlier proved that the boycott tactic of withdrawal and economic coercion was being experimented with outside of Montgomery. Yet it is the 1955 example which has been studied by sociologists and historians in an effort to explain the success of the MIA in helping to strike down Jim Crow on local bus services. Aldon Morris has used the theory of resource mobilisation to stress that blacks in Montgomery were able to draw upon their own community and church groups to wage an economic war against the city's bus companies. The publicity attached to Montgomery was important in inspiring other localities to consider the boycott

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73 E. Carll Ladd, Jr., _Negro Political Leadership in the South_ (New York, 1966), 42.

74 Ibid., 155, 163, 186-7; M. Marable, _Black Leadership_, ibid. J. James, _Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals_ (New York, 1997); K.K. Gaines, _Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century_ (Chapel Hill, 1996), xiv.

technique later espoused by King within his campaign of civil disobedience based upon Ghandian theories of non-violent resistance.\textsuperscript{76}

Transformation of black protest strategies after 1955 gave the Civil Rights movement its vital opportunity to influence American society with a degree of intensity that finally wrought the federal government's support for stronger civil rights measures in 1964 and 1965. Boycotts were combined with sit-ins bringing the momentum of protest to its true revolutionary potential with the entrance of student radicals in the Greensboro movement. Confrontation and open acts of disobedience had not been a part of the NAACP strategy but by the 1960s it had become the hallmark of such civil rights groups as CORE and SNCC. Direct-action scored its biggest success in forcing federal action designed to curb civil rights violations in the racially-polarised city of Birmingham where the intransigence of police commissioner Eugene 'Bull' Connor and the extremism of local whites, bestowed upon the South an unfavourable reputation which it did not want. Race had consumed the city to a degree which proved ultimately damaging to the economic interests of the white community. Birmingham proved that the South could not keep its racial order intact against the new tide of black militancy.\textsuperscript{77}

Birmingham was only one focal point for the climax of the Civil Rights movement in the South in the crucial period between 1963 and 1965. Charismatic leadership, high-profile campaigns designed to provoke white reaction and mass mobilisation of various sections of the black population combined to wrench federal and presidential intervention. This was largely the work of a movement that had secured a mass following which regarded integration as the means of achieving equality that had been long deferred. Students, college faculties and members of the black professional classes who joined the movement after 1960 were united by a fundamental respect for American values and political institutions.\textsuperscript{78} Federal guarantees of civil liberties were particularly important after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The pressure placed by King, the SCLC, CORE and SNCC upon cities targeted for racial confrontation successfully concluded one phase of the movement: the government's re-affirmation of black civil rights and their protection through the agencies of the state. Kennedy and

\textsuperscript{76} Morris, \textit{Origins of the Civil Rights Movement}.

\textsuperscript{77} Termed as 'Act Two' by Fairclough, \textit{op. cit}.

\textsuperscript{78} Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 9.
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Johnson made their mark in history by presiding over the most stringent measures concerning civil rights since Reconstruction. But this would not have been possible without the mobilisation of Southern blacks who risked a great deal to force their region to face its social problems.

Sustained black protest was crucial to the eventual success of the movement in the 1960s but to what extent did changes in the Southern economy and the region’s experience of wartime mobilisation transform the context in which this struggle was fought? This is a question raised by scholars who see a link between industrial expansion in the South after World War II and the gradual acceptance among certain whites, that the perpetuation of segregation was an inefficient way to manage the resources of the region. The starting point for the role that economic factors have played in the racial history of the South has now been extended further back to the New Deal when labour radicalism and an enlarged responsibility of the state to provide economic relief to its citizens during times of crisis, set in motion liberal attitudes towards race and poverty in the country’s most racially conservative region. It is during Roosevelt’s New Deal administration that national policy addressed race and civil rights for the first time since Reconstruction. Roosevelt intended his relief programs to include blacks although this was not always successfully carried out at the local level. The appointment of Mary Mcleod Bethune and Robert Weaver to government positions was symbolic of the Roosevelt administration’s cautious commitment to eradicating poverty across the colour line. However it was in the South, home to the great majority of African Americans, where the New Deal era ultimately bequeathed promises of a more racially egalitarian state. In strengthening the power of organised labour and placing New Dealers in Southern state governments, Roosevelt created a period of state-sponsored initiatives designed to foster regional economic recovery. Aubrey Williams in Alabama, Frank Smith in Mississippi and Kerr Scott in North Carolina were a new brand of Southern liberals who linked the progress of their region with enlarging participatory democracy for the Southern working class. They advocated the extension of the franchise and the right of organised labour to operate the closed shop. During the New Deal, regional economic progress was given a higher priority than the maintenance of traditional class and racial distinctions.79

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For these reasons, it is now necessary that future civil rights scholarship focusing on black protest and racial change in the South, includes some reference to the 1930s in the time-scale. Recent scholarship by labour historians has already begun this trend. Focusing on the increased influence of unions during the New Deal, these studies argue that black protest found new allies during the Depression. This was by no means confined to the South's industrial heartland's such as Birmingham but also extended to the region's ports when the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), targeted Southern black workers for a new recruitment drive to challenge the dominance of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), most notably in New Orleans and Mobile. A similar pattern took place in the rural economy. There the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union emerged as a latter-day fusion of Populist interracial labour solidarity and agrarian radicalism. In all cases, efforts were being made in the field of labour to mobilise blacks as well as whites in the quest for greater economic benefits.\textsuperscript{80}

Yet the arrival of World War II shattered any illusion Americans may have had of their society remaining unchanged after 1945. The economic boom of the war years transformed the South. A predominantly agrarian region suffering disproportionately high levels of illiteracy and poverty, Southerners found themselves catapulted into an era of unprecedented industrial growth. The Southern landscape was dramatically altered by urbanisation, population movements and the growth of municipalities which benefited from the massive federal military expenditures of the war years. Most significantly, these changes became the key issues of the post-war period and the task of scholarship is to identify and examine the links between Southern economic growth, the attack on its caste system and the roles played by blacks, organised labour, the federal government and white liberal groups in this process.\textsuperscript{81}

America's military involvement in World War II was the biggest single challenge to the prevailing racial order in the South and in the nation at large during the first half of the


\textsuperscript{81} N.V. Bartley, \textit{The New South: The Story of the South's Modernization: 1940-1980} (Baton Rouge, 1996), Ch. 2; J. C. Cobb, \textit{Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1980} (Baton Rouge, 1982); Sullivan, \textit{New Directions}, Ch. 3 on the impact of World War II.
Introduction

20th century. Accordingly, this event has attracted a great deal of scholarship. Like a bolt of lightning, the nation's economic mobilisation for war in Europe travelled across a dilapidated South still only just recovering from the worst depression in its history. Coming largely in the form of federal military contracts and installations, the arrival of the wartime economy bestowed upon Southern cities and ports a great opportunity to expand their traditional functions as well as to help increase the region's capacity for industrial production. However, with such benefits came new people, new ideas and heightened black demands for participation in the national war efforts. Inter-regional migration, the growth of municipal areas and the displacement of rural agricultural workers (both black and white) from their traditional occupations due to mechanisation, provided fertile ground for a new testing of the South's caste system.

An important political cost of Southern wartime mobilisation was the reversal of the labour radicalism characteristic of the 1930s. In the scramble for wartime wages, cities became the melting pot for rural newcomers and established urban dwellers. White immigrants were hostile to black demands for inclusion in defence employment on an equal footing particularly visible in the resurgence of interracial violence among the key defence locations of the country. While the federal government was placed under increasing pressure from the NAACP to draw up a fair employment practice bill, northern NAACP leadership generally distanced itself from allying with labour radicals for fear of being brandished pro-Communists. Early on in the 1940s Du Bois was a casualty of this policy and was removed from the organisation on account of his Socialist leanings. The problem of the colour line, however, particularly rang true in the nation's defense production centres during the war when Southern refusal to relinquish segregation led to severe labour shortages and losses in output of ships, missiles and contracts.

In the crucible of wartime economic mobilisation, the nation's leading production centres became the testing ground for established orthodoxies governing gender, class and race relations. Shipyards and munitions factories were host to a sharpening of the colour line as the introduction of white women into the labour force intensified the necessity to uphold strict racial segregation among workers. The Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), was established in 1941 by President Roosevelt after mounting pressure from Randolph, the NAACP and the National Urban League (NUL), requesting that blacks be employed in skilled defense jobs. The FEPC's responsibility for ensuring that local war production plants were making full use of the manpower resources available to them inevitably tampered with the delicate balance between race and gender. Outbursts of interracial violence during the war years involved white women who refused to ally with blacks in order to advance their newly-acquired economic position. In older Southern cities, class tensions characterised relationships between established workers and the arrival of rural-in-migrants in search of 'war wages.' Ultimately, the FEPC forced a revision of Southern employment practices in a number of shipyards including Mobile, San Francisco and Baltimore, by ordering the promotion of blacks to skilled categories.85

On return to peacetime, burdens imposed upon both black and white Southerners by rigid adherence to the colour line begin to create changes in attitudes toward race among the latter. Changing perceptions of race were crucial in shaping the course of black protest in the region. Diversity characterised Southern white political cultures from World War II until the rise of Massive Resistance movements after the Brown decisions. Race played a tactical role in the political careers of many Southern statesmen. They could be made or unmade if they failed to gauge accurately the racial attitudes of their constituents.86 The flowering of liberalism during the New Deal continued after the war within the intellectual context of Myrdal's diagnosis of the American race problem. Military experiences during the war wrought changes in white servicemen who had noted the patriotism and loyalty of their black counterparts in the theatre of war. Their contact with


the anti-democratic governments of Europe made the racial conditions at home appear to
be even more of an inconsistency in the nation's democratic culture. Even white
servicemen from the hard-line state of Mississippi returned from the war with a desire to
improve social and economic conditions at home.87

In terms of regional politics and the race question, World War II aligned the national
Democratic Party behind the enforcement of civil rights for blacks as part of a salient
tactic to improve America's moral standing against Cold War hysteria and pro-
Communist movements elsewhere. In 1948, President Truman took the courageous step
and split his party by establishing the Committee on Civil Rights which declared that
segregation should be ended in the armed forces and in all government departments. It
was radical departure for a Democratic president and forced the Southern members'
sectional alienation in Congress.88 The Dixiecrat revolt of 1948 was a stern warning to
race liberals that the South was not adverse to invoking the states' rights principle and
taking drastic action to safeguard the region's racial practices. Southern officials
continually faced the dual burden of defending their racial views and pursuing economic
modernisation for their region. As a consequence, they rendered themselves vulnerable to
the race issue giving blacks the opportunity to appeal to the more moderate white
Southerner conscious of the need for regional progress. It came as no shock that the
business community was the pioneer in some cities in forging peaceful desegregation for
the wider goal of economic stability. The drive for industrial expansion rested to a very
significant degree on the decisions of Northern companies to relocate in the South or
expand existing operations. Southern state legislatures, anxious to secure new industry,
orered tax exemptions and bond flotation to encourage this type of investment.89

The Civil Rights movement's mission to spread the libertarian principles of the
constitution in the South was ultimately stifled by white reaction to the Brown cases.
Liberal coalitions came up against a granite force of white conservatism after 1954 which
effectively gagged optimistic plans for improving race relations. As Tony Badger has

cit; 67.

88 To Secure These Rights, President's Commission on Civil Rights, Washington, D.C.,
1947.

89 M. Sosna, In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue (New York,
1977); D.R. Colburn and E. Jacoway (eds.), Southern Businessmen and Desegregation
(Baton Rouge, 1984); Cobb, The Selling of the South.
argued, the liberal path for regional economic and social progress espoused since the New Deal was seemingly lost in the politics of hysteria that gripped Southern state legislatures desperate to overrule the Supreme Court's order requiring that public school segregation must be ended with 'All Deliberate Speed.' Hereafter, the maintenance of segregation and the continued subjugation of blacks lest they score any more legal victories assumed a greater importance. The re-emergence of sectional alignment in the South which had its roots in the Truman era, successfully imposed a degree of conformity that provided a dangerous political backdrop to the rising black freedom movement.90

The backlash triggered by the Brown case has been re-examined by Michael Klarman. Costs incurred by the Civil Rights movement included the political mobilisation of Southern whites in defence of white supremacy and continuing segregation in the public schools. The NAACP became the first casualty in some states including Alabama. On the positive side, such an impasse led to the continuation of black protest through indigenous local movements such as the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), and the Tuskegee Civic Association.91 However, the importance of Brown in directing the future of the Civil Rights movement lessened, to a certain degree, among key Southern cities which had expanded economically since the war and where business leadership was anxious to attract Northern capital investment. In Atlanta, Birmingham and Savannah business elites assumed leadership roles in civil rights mediation. As much a direct consequence of black protest mobilisation in the South, in particular the boycott movement which threatened the economic well-being of a locality, it was also a response to the growing realisation that plans for continued industrial progress were incompatible with a repressive racial caste system.92

Had businessmen been able to solve the South's racial problems then there would have been little justification for the continuation of the black freedom struggle after 1965. It is tempting to emphasize the power of this section of the white establishment to effect changes in a political economy where racial exclusion had been perpetuated for over a


century. The radicalism of Black Power, a slogan which began in Lowndes County in 1966 when it was first uttered by SNCC member Willie Ricks, took the freedom struggle to a new platform which caused King, the SCLC and the NAACP to be seen as more moderate in their aims. Within the context of ghetto riots in Watts, Detroit, and Chicago, the ideological break established by militant black leaders such as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and Huey P. Newton, was both a reflection of new class-based expressions of black protest and a cultural rejection of mainstream white American values which diluted black identity.93 Up until the rise to prominence of Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party and other black nationalist organisations, the Civil Rights movement had been largely framed within the political cultures and institutions of white America. Carmichael and Hamilton's treatise on the goals and strategies of Black Power published in 1967, was a call for blacks to build their own institutions and reaffirm the struggle for equality within the context of a shared heritage borne out of oppression and cultural solidarity from the vantage point of centuries of white domination.94

The Black Power movement boldly attempted to succeed where the NAACP, King, the SCLC and CORE had failed: to wrench control of black lives from the hands of whites. Implicit in this was the mistrust of the latter to deliver justice for African Americans. The struggle was re-framed as one where black citizens mobilised themselves for politics without the help of white intermediaries but through independent organisations rooted in the black community. An early model for this stance was provided by the Lowndes County Freedom Organization and the Highlander folk schools designed to educate rural blacks in preparation for their responsibilities as voters. In the long-term, this was to be translated into local representation via elected officials on county and city governments, on school boards, in the court system and in the media. The main thrust was that blacks no longer had to earn the rights of citizenship because they had already been granted those rights. The task was to exercise those rights without fear and through the use of violence if necessary to achieve certain goals.95


95 Carmichael and Hamilton, *ibid.*
Important achievements of the Black Power ideology were political and cultural. It was an important stage in the development of black self-determination in white America. In the rural Deep South, followers of the movement proved that they could begin the steps toward independent black politics, particularly in terms of preparing citizens for presenting themselves as candidates for election. Outside the South, the Black Panthers Party sent a powerful message to the white establishment informing them that a sizeable proportion of African Americans did not ascribe to King's assimilationist, permanently non-violent goals. In revealing how oppressed lives shaped by the walls of the ghetto could not find solace in mainstream political parties and leaders, the Panther repudiated ministerial leadership of the struggle. Black Power advocates across the board re-embraced their difference in the American polity. Despite the very limited success of their political mobilisation, they brought to light a radicalism and impatience with the economic status quo which had been lacking in the Southern movement led by King and the SCLC up until 1965. Black Power found its bases of support at a time when the consensus built around the Civil Rights movement was rapidly disintegrating. Presidential measures, two world wars and the remarkable success of the direct-action phases of the 1960s had failed to eradicate the economic and institutional roots of African American exclusion from the benefits of democracy. This theme became even more evident in the post-civil rights era as the nation edged towards a conservative resurgence on the issue of race during the 1970s and 1980s.96

However, it is in this period that racial progress due to the movement became visible in the lives of black Americans, particularly in the South which emerged as the most integrated region in the nation. The Voting Rights Act opened the gates to mass electoral participation among blacks and facilitated a dramatic rise in the number of black elected officials in Southern cities.97 Segregation was no longer a legal institution and blacks who had not participated in the struggle of the 1960s were able to enjoy the freedom of an integrated society with equal access to public accommodations and a right to send their children to better schools. Symbolic of the gains of the movement was the enlargement of class divisions among blacks. A middle-class strata was able to enter higher-paid, white collar occupations and own their homes while an underclass remained trapped in the poverty of isolated inner-city areas enlarged by ‘white flight’ to the suburbs as court-

96 Van De Burg, op. cit., 45; Cook, Sweet Land of Liberty?, 258-60; Carson, op. cit., 122.
ordered school integration began to encompass more and more localities. Once given the legal and political chances to enter the mainstream of national life, African Americans still faced class barriers preventing certain groups within that minority from truly reaping the benefits of the sacrifices made by the activists of the previous decades. The historical manifestation of race in its formal and less formalised nature continued to present a more powerful block to the prospects of greater black life-chances from emulating that of whites during the 1980s.98

The Second Reconstruction in Mobile

Despite a wealth of secondary literature on the Civil Rights movement in Alabama during the 1950s and 1960s, there has been no study of how the struggle for black equality was experienced in the southern part of the state where the influences of Gulf Coast culture and early European settlement gave the port of Mobile a unique character linking it with other Southern cities such as New Orleans, Savannah and Charleston. The absence of scholarship on Mobile's civil rights struggle may be attributable to the dominant roles played by other cities in Alabama during the racial turmoil of the 1950s and 1960s. Segregation and racial oppression in Birmingham, Selma, Montgomery and Tuskegee provided the SCLC with an ideal context for high-profile civil rights protest demonstrations offering the potential for attracting federal and national media attention. Moreover, these localities became battlegrounds for bitter confrontation between white defenders of the racial status quo and black radicals who, on occasion, welcomed the intervention of King and the SCLC to further their goals. In this sense, all four localities played a crucial role as points of intersection where the national and regional movements converged with spectacular success and hence are very attractive topics for historians.

The story of civil rights protest in Mobile is no less worthy of scholarly attention despite the city's limited role in the radicalism of the 1960s. Beginning with the Depression, this study will reveal that the Second Reconstruction, as experienced by Mobilians, shatters many of the assumptions that historians have made about the era both in the South and in Alabama itself. Located within the framework of the local study, Part One conforms to the enlarged time-line for examining black protest prior to the end of World War II,

focusing specifically upon the development of the NAACP in Mobile within the changing economic and social context of the period. Chapter 2 begins the study with a detailed examination of the nature of racial discrimination and how it shaped the lives of Mobile's segregated black community. Chapter 3 is a broad assessment of the economic and social impact of World War II in Mobile focusing upon race relations and the development of black political consciousness. Chapter 4 will examine how, until 1968 the Mobile struggle came to be dominated by the personality and ideological persuasion of one man whose career typified that of the middle-class black elite in the South. Part Two turns our attention to the next stage of black civil rights mobilisation during the aftermath of the Brown decision and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the political context for which differed from the rest of the state due to the election of white liberal city commissioner, Joseph Langan in Mobile. Chapter 5 examines the generational and class-based character of the local civil rights movement in Mobile revealing how black civil rights agitation remained independent from the mainstream Southern civil rights leadership but was, at the same time, heavily influenced by the integrationist goals and legal strategies of the NAACP. Chapter 6 will argue that in contrast to political developments concerning race elsewhere in the state during the Cold War era, Mobile's blacks continued to conduct the movement with the aid of a post-war liberal consensus that linked race to regional progress. Blacks and whites of varying backgrounds and religious persuasions shared a faith in the American democratic system to deliver justice to all its citizens. With this in mind, they worked together despite the rise in racial confrontation and white supremacist attitudes in Alabama during the 1950s and 1960s, to further the goals of gradualist racial reform and social progress for all Mobilians. Part Three is an analysis of how the limitations of the Second Reconstruction in Mobile presented African Americans with serious shortcomings during the post-Civil Rights era. The lack of confrontation between blacks and whites, and the failure of civil rights leadership to utilise the tactics of direct-action, had largely left racist political institutions intact. In 1968, relative isolation of the Mobile movement from the militant wing of the regional movement coalesced with class divisions in the black community after King's death. Such factors delayed the arrival of African Americans into local politics until the 1980s when Mobile lagged behind other Alabama localities which had already begun to reap the political rewards of the previous decades. Chapter 7 assesses the impact and long-term political legacies of the Black Power movement in the city and Chapter 8 compares racial conditions in Mobile since the climax of the Southern Civil Rights movement of the 1960s with other comparable cities.
concluding that racial inequalities in the public schools, in housing and in employment continued to afflict Mobile's African-American population in contemporary society.

Note on Sources

The major source material for this study is provided by the records of formal black political organisations: the NAACP and the NPVL in addition to the municipal papers of Mobile's city commissioners. Such records inevitably mean that the analytical focus is largely restricted to middle-class efforts to further the civil rights reform in the city and by implication, the stress is placed upon local elites. State records have proved to be of little value in a study which concentrates primarily upon local African American civil rights mobilisation and therefore have been omitted. Another area which, due to time constraints has been omitted is the participation of black women. NAACP and NPVL records failed to report significantly on this section's activities and locating such evidence is intended during future publication of the thesis. Other sources include the records of the federal government during World War II and contemporary news reporting from Mobile's major white-controlled newspapers: the Mobile Press Register and the Mobile Press in addition to the only black newspaper, the Beacon. An initial problem encountered during the drafting of Chapters 7 and 8 which examine the Black Power and post-civil rights eras, was the lack of evidence due to the seizure of NOW's records by the Federal Bureau for Investigation in the 1970s. These records are yet to be released to the public. I have overcome this pitfall by consulting the papers of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), an organisation which appointed two fieldworkers in 1968 to mediate the peaceful integration of Mobile County schools. Their reports are currently the only contemporary accounts of NOW's protest activities. A collection of oral accounts (in videotape format) from former participants in the struggle was produced by the University of South Alabama Archives in Mobile in 1996 and has been extensively used in this study. Other oral sources have been obtained from the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina Davis Library and a series of interviews completed by a member of the faculty of the University of South Alabama with LeFlore prior to his death in 1976. Chapter 8 is intended to serve as a postscript to the main body of the thesis and therefore does not aim to be as fully comprehensive as the preceding chapters.
PART ONE: Origins
Source: Taken From Charles G. Summersell, Mobile: History of a Seaport Town (Tuscaloosa, 1949), 31.
Chapter 2:

The Configuration of Race, Class and Citizenship in Mobile, 1925-40

Here in America is Mobile, Alabama, a city in the Deep South immersed in its Southern hospitality and white supremacy. In its smugness, the Negro is still shackled with the chains of discrimination in housing facilities, in schools, in recreation, in justice and in employment.

_Father Albert Foley c.1930_¹

African Americans who lived in Mobile at the turn of the century occupied an ambivalent position in the port-city's social and political order. While imposition of the colour line defined the limits of their citizenship rights, the actual practice of Jim Crow segregation presented white Mobilians with a moral dilemma that became a recurrent theme throughout the 20th century. Religion and the presence of a free black population had been major moderating influences since slavery which had softened the more crude elements of Southern racism bestowing upon the area a reputation for racial tolerance at the end of the 19th century. Within this context, African Americans cohabited with whites as both a class and caste that emulated the social structure of the latter.² Relations between the two were governed by a paternalistic racial etiquette, characteristic of the Old South, which initially helped minimise violent conflict after emancipation and later grew to maturity during the New South era. A major aspect which distinguished Mobile from Birmingham, Alabama’s largest industrial region, and the rural counties of the Black Belt, was that race had never functioned as the fundamental requirement to the preservation of white supremacy. Blacks did not form a numerical majority at the polls and neither did they pose a serious economic threat to white workers as part of a large, unionised,

¹ A. Foley, 'Negro Employment in Mobile,' Box 2: Race Relations, Spring Hill College Archives, Mobile, Alabama, 1.

industrial labour force. Prior to World War II, the struggle for civil rights in Mobile originated in an urban locality where a relatively freer racial climate prevailed.

That struggle also took place in a community where Catholicism had fostered a moral critique of segregation and where Roosevelt’s New Deal liberalism influenced municipal leadership during the later 1940s. Mobile’s blacks were better prepared than most black Alabamians to resist the degradation and economic restraints of segregation. Consequently, the resources available to an urban black population and a middle-class elite able to assume leadership roles aided the development of an NAACP chapter in the city as early as 1919.3 The chapter became the focal point for civil rights activities throughout the 1930s and more significantly, was the only source of protection of black civil liberties in Mobile signalling the first major change in race relations since the rise of Jim Crow segregation. While the Depression and the New Deal programmes for economic recovery may have challenged racial customs elsewhere in the United States, they did not do so in Mobile. African Americans remained trapped within the confines of both class and caste elaborated by their legal exclusion from economic and political mobility. Disfranchisement, virtually no representation in local legislative bodies, an oppressive system of justice, fear of white violence and an economic concentration in low-paid, unskilled occupations had upheld the racial submission of Mobile’s black community prior to World War II. Cultural enslavement in the institution of segregation, which served as a constant reminder to the black citizenry of their racial inferiority, defined a sense of group identity in the same way as it had in the rest of the segregated Deep South.4

The Function of Caste and Class in Mobile

Sociologists have defined the concepts of caste and class as ways in which society is divided into racial and ethnic sub-groups. In the South, both categories have been used to replace slavery and perpetuate a racial order in which African Americans were legally barred from pursuing the same degree of social advancement as their white counterparts. Caste was utilised further to serve as a form of social control whereby blacks could be regulated through the behaviour expected of them in their dealings with whites. Based

3 Autrey, ‘The NAACP in Alabama,’

4 Davis et. al, *op cit.,* 483.
upon biological theories of racial inferiority regardless of a person's social value, caste status was an effective means of limiting competition for the highest social rewards in the Deep South cities. Long-term effects of this limitation were the development of a distinct psychology among African Americans, a consequence of their social isolation from the mainstream of public life. Economic barriers preventing black mobility within the social order meant that both class and caste became powerful weapons with which whites could enforce and uphold their racial superiority.5

Within the white caste, it was dangerous for anyone to break the solidarity associated with membership of a privileged race. Sympathy shown towards blacks by whites would invoke the label of 'Nigger-lovers' usually accompanied by social ostracisation from the larger community. However, caste divisions tended to run contrary to the democratic mores which underpinned the nation's founding and, therefore, shrouded whites in a moral dilemma regardless of the rewards of racially subordinating one race to the benefit of another.6 In Mobile, blacks were forced to adjust to their caste status and address the behaviour expected of them as a marginalised racial group. Although this was directly experienced via the institution of segregation and the majority of blacks were unable to speak out aggressively against it prior to 1940, there were a few lone white voices in the city courageous enough to confront the inconsistencies of racial discrimination. Roman Catholics had formed a small but significant, religious minority in Mobile since Spanish and French settlement during the 18th century. Their moderating influence stemmed from the Catholic perception of slaves as moral beings equal to masters.7 Catholic education began with the founding of Spring Hill College in 1830 by French Jesuits. By the 1930s the privately-funded college had achieved an enviable record in academic performance and had on its faculty, Father Albert Foley, a newly-ordained priest who had received his training in New Orleans and had moved to Mobile in 1926 to take up his appointment at the college.8

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5 J. Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New York, 1949), 61, 63.
6 Ibid., 67.
7 Autrey, 'The NAACP in Alabama,' 78.
Foley was an atypical white Southerner born in 1898 in New Orleans. Although accustomed to the racial practices of his community, his strong religious beliefs could not be comfortably equated with the moral degradation of blacks in Jim Crow society. For this reason, he had begun to question his country’s racial customs at a time when discrimination against African Americans had been intensified by the Deep South climate of lynchings, the Scottsboro case and the severely limited economic opportunities available to blacks within Alabama’s political economy. He wrote one of the few moral critiques of the plight of the latter during the 1930s representing a key element among non-Baptist whites which regarded with contempt the Klan’s violent tactics to impose racial terror upon blacks, not only because the organisation was anti-Catholic but also because its tactics were perceived as undemocratic. Foley demonstrated an inability to reconcile the more immoral aspects of segregation with his love of humanity as part of a religious order.9

In 1930, blacks numbered 24,514 out of a total population of 68,202. A portrait of black Mobilians during the 1930s reveals the extent to which they lived on the margins of society limited by access to restricted employment opportunities, dilapidated housing, inadequate schools and recreational facilities. The cornerstone of barriers to advancement was disfranchisement. Politically blacks had few, if any, options to improve the quality of their lives resulting in a general condition of apathy for gaining voting privileges among the majority, particularly since the Democratic Party effectively barred blacks from the primary until 1944. The ballot seemed a distant symbol of equality, more pressing in the every day lives of black Mobilians was the need to gain secure employment, better schools for their children, and decent living conditions. According to Foley, ’employment is the key to a better economic, social and cultural way of life [hence] employment discriminations against the Negro in Mobile poses a serious menace’.10 In his survey of black employment in the city, Foley identified a pattern characteristic of the Deep South. For the most part, blacks were economically concentrated in the domestic, labouring, service and unskilled sectors of the economy. Few worked in semi-skilled or white-collar occupations. Aware that blacks were the victims of racial exploitation perpetuated to

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9 A. Foley, 'Discovering the New Negro,' Box 3: Race Relations, Spring Hill College Archives, Mobile, Alabama.

10 Foley, 'Negro Employment in Mobile', *ibid.*, 1
Aspirations on the part of blacks to enter skilled employment were hampered by racial discrimination in vocational training administered by employment agencies, labour unions and private companies. All tended to restrict their services to blacks in one way or another. However, the denial of apprenticeships presented the most persistent problem since this virtually closed off the doors to skilled work in industry and access to union representation.12

In 1930, the Census Bureau reported 13,147 black workers in Mobile out of a total labour force of 31,178. Of this total, 7,354 were males and 5,793 were females. The largest single employed group was black women, numbering 4,570 or 34.8%. The distribution of employment among black males confirmed Foley’s statements. Over 75% were employed as labourers, household servants and gardeners.13 These jobs provided little financial security preventing black males from being able to plan for the future. Those that managed to secure semi-skilled work in fields such as carpentry, engineering and painting, were only marginally better off but, could at least ‘obtain credit to purchase goods to better his standard of living’.14 Although a minimum wage of $1.00 applied to blacks who worked in industries participating in interstate commerce, other factors made their economic position vulnerable. Mechanisation was the chief cause of the declining number of black stevedores15 who had previously commanded a stable income from the state docks. When the Mobile port reduced the levels of export-import tonnage, the lack of regular income increased during the Depression years, affecting poor whites as well as blacks. Families headed by unskilled black males were forced to have both parents working in order to survive.16

Black women in Mobile traditionally took up jobs as domestics, nurses, cooks, laundresses and charwomen. In 1930, they were the largest employed category. Employment in the domestic sector offered a certain measure of security for mothers and wives. They could either work full-time for one employer or part-time for several

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
14 Foley, op. cit., 3.
15 Cargo and freight handlers employed by the Mobile docks.
16 Ibid.
employers and the demand for such workers often exceeded supply. Wages for a household domestic ranged from $2.00 to $3.50 for an 8-10 hour day, five days a week, or a weekly salary of between $10 and $17.50. Although a meagre income it was. nonetheless, valuable in supplementing the income of the black male. An important social cost of black mothers being forced to work, according to Foley, was rising cases of divorce and separation from the strain of two parents working and the dropping out of school of children ready to take up work to aid the family. These children then with their 'limited education and opportunities [were] restricted to jobs like those of their parents,' thus continuing the pattern of poverty.17

Local industries which blacks turned to for employment included the shipbuilding and paper plants. The major shipyard in Mobile at this time, the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company (ADDSCO) founded in 1916 on Pinto Island, had a more relaxed hiring policy than the paper companies, Southern Kraft and International Paper. As early as 1917, the yard hired blacks in skilled positions in charge of all-black crews. Born in 1899, Arthur Knott was employed as foreman. He was paid only 20 cents an hour but, when work at the yards became slack, he was able to supplement this by working at the home of the company's president, David Dunlap. Knott's family life reveals important details about the economic and social conditions enjoyed by the skilled shipyard worker. He and his wife lived in the Davis Avenue area of town which was largely inhabited by blacks, in a three-room house. Knott's wife was unable to work due to illness but since they had no children this may not have caused too much of a financial burden. By 1938, as wages improved at the yards, the Knotts were able to move 'into a new house complete with refrigerator, lights, and water.'18 Arthur Knott was also a member of the local Baptist church and attended regularly. This, it seems was his only social pursuit.

Knott's position at the shipyards was unusual. The lack of skilled employment opportunities for the majority of his race was reflected in the quality of housing and neighbourhoods that they inhabited. David Alsobrook's research on the origins of segregation in Mobile found that the two main black residential areas were located to the northwest of the downtown business district and south of the city limits, in a suburb

18 B. Kuehn Loftin, 'A Social History of the Mid-Gulf South: Panama City-Mobile, 1930-1950,' unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi, 1971, 244-45, hereinafter cited as, 'Loftin, A Social History'.
considered part of Mobile. He also found that black residential clusters emerged as early as 1865 in the location where free blacks and Creoles traditionally lived. These areas then expanded to accommodate the influx of freedmen after the Civil War. By 1900, blacks represented 44% of the city’s population although this figure was to decline somewhat by the 1930s to 35%.

Concentrated into three wards out of a total of ten (Table 1), the distribution of black homes in 1910 was the pattern that continued until World War II. In 1930, the percentage of the total black population resident in Ward 7 was slightly less than the figure for 1910 at approximately 45%. The major factors which determined the pattern of black housing were the close proximity to place of employment and that these areas were deemed unfit for whites to inhabit lacking in adequate water supply and drainage with only the most rudimentary municipal services being provided. Attacks of malaria, yellow fever and diphtheria were also frequent.19

Davis Avenue, located in the centre of Ward 7 was the main thoroughfare of the black community on the eve of the Depression. It was serviced by its own bus line which enabled domestics residing on streets nearby to commute to work into the white neighbourhoods. The line also provided access to the city’s commercial districts in the second, third and fourth wards. Described as the 'Mecca' of the community, Davis Avenue was home to various black businesses including grocery stores, barber’s shops, doctors surgeries and beauty parlours serving the local clientele. By the 1940s, the area developed a cultural scene which gave black Mobilians their only access to cinemas and night-clubs, although such buildings were 'often no more than long wooden shanties with space allotted for drinking and dancing'.20 Recreational facilities in general, were limited to blacks. There were no parks specifically for children to play in and the main public park, Bienville Square in the heart of the city's business district, was closed to blacks unless they were engaged in child-care duties for white mothers. Hence, Davis Avenue was a place relatively free from the weight of segregation blacks faced in the city at large.21

19 Alsobrook, 'Mobile in the Progressive Era,' 127-129.

20 B. Austin Presnell, 'The Impact of World War II On Race Relations in Mobile, Alabama, 1940-1948,' M.A. thesis, Atlanta University, 1972, 3-5, hereinafter cited as 'Presnell, The Impact of World War II'.

21 Ibid.
Table 1: Mobile’s Black Population by Wards, 1910

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<th>Black Population</th>
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<td>632</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>5,146</td>
<td>1,266</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3,244</td>
<td>824</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The standard of black housing was significantly lower than the average white home. Often dubbed as 'shotgun', the typical black home consisted of three rooms: a bedroom, kitchen and living room. Post-Civil War demand for cheap housing created some integrated neighbourhoods in Mobile where black families lived in the same streets as poor white families.\(^{22}\) Although this type of housing was occupied largely by Mobile’s working classes both white and black, only 10% of black homes had access to running water, and those that did had only access to cold water.\(^{23}\) The lack of bathroom facilities led to a reliance on outdoor shared toilets which ran the risk of spreading diseases since they were not regularly checked by sanitation officials. These buildings were usually owned by whites who then rented them out at a median rental charge of $11.95. In 1930, 5,154...

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\(^{22}\) J.S. Sledge, 'Shoulder to Shoulder: Mobile’s Shotgun Houses,' *Gulf Coast Historical Review* 6 (Fall 1990): 56-64.

\(^{23}\) Presnell, *ibid.*, 4.
homes were rented by black residents. Inhabitants could not expect repairs to be undertaken on these homes and so the quality remained the same for much of the ensuing decades. However, a significant proportion were financially secure enough to own or build their homes. Of the 6,711 homes owned by Mobilians, blacks owned approximately 21% of the total stock. This was a higher percentage than Birmingham blacks who owned only 18% of city housing. While these homes were in better condition, with running water and indoor toilets, they were built on run-down streets usually unpaved and lined with open drains. However, of the three largest Alabama cities in 1930, Mobile had the highest percentage of black-owned homes indicating the relative affluence of some black Mobilians compared to their counterparts elsewhere in the state.24

Education for blacks in Mobile was first introduced during the ante-bellum period when in 1833, schools for Creoles were provided by the state legislature. By 1851, Mobile had five such schools catering for its large free black population. During Reconstruction, the Freedmen's Bureau helped finance more schools for Mobile's former slave population. Creoles lost their special status at this time and were apportioned to 'coloured' schools. These schools were funded by state taxes and local taxes from blacks but since the incomes of freedmen were low, black schools tended to be considerably under-financed. However, through the efforts of the Freedmen's Bureau, Mobile had 157 black schools with 150 teachers of whom 126 were white and 24 were black in 1867.25

By the turn of the century, Alabama had adopted the New South ideology of training blacks for vocational and industrial occupations. The founding of Tuskegee Institute in 1881 was a major force in expanding this type of education, particularly at the college level. Most Southern cities did not provide public schools for black children prior to 1915 but Mobile had two schools for white children and none for blacks even though they represented 42% of the total school age population. Enrollment for whites was considerably low at 951 out of total 2,787 in that year. The expansion of Mobile's economic functions and the influx of rural black settlers after World War I led to increasing pressure upon the municipal authorities to provide schools for black youth so that they could be prepared for absorption into new technical and industrial trades.


However, this trend was less progressive than it first appeared resting upon New South ideas of how blacks should be best prepared for their economic role in the urban areas and not as citizens given the opportunity to progress in the same way as white children. In 1899 the Supreme Court ruling in Cummings v. School Board of Richmond County, had helped Georgia to dilute the effectiveness of separate but equal inaugurating an era in black public education that was woefully under-financed and inadequate to meet the needs of a predominantly rural social background.26 By 1940, 13 of Mobile’s 39 public schools were allocated to black children. One of these schools was the Ella Grant Elementary school in Prichard. The recollections of Anna Byrd, born in 1885 and a teacher at the school during the 1930s, reveal the kind of problems found in black schools. Byrd felt that the school had survived financially mainly due to contributions from the Rosenwald fund rather than from federal funds. Because there was no provision for sudden increases in enrollment, Byrd was forced, on one occasion, to teach in a nearby church. The black schools around the Davis Avenue area were not as effectively managed as the white schools. Teachers at these schools were often still in the process of gaining their college degrees and were not called upon to administer achievement tests as were their white counterparts.27

The statistical record for black education in Mobile during the 1930s reflected the poorer standards of black schools. For example, in 1930, of the 7,280 black children enrolled in Mobile public schools approximately 65% were recorded as non-attenders. Across all age groups, overall attendance ran at 61% with 2,377 students not attending. A better rate was recorded among 7-13 year olds at 91% with only 246 truants. A much higher number of 14-17 year olds (669) did not complete their education at all. These children were among the rising number of students forced to drop out of school early due to economic pressures at home which led them to enter into full-time employment. Illiteracy among blacks in Mobile ran higher than in Birmingham. In 1930, 19% were classed as illiterate in the former compared to only 15% in Birmingham. On the other hand, white illiteracy stood at 0.7% for Mobile and 1% for Birmingham. The figure for black illiteracy in Mobile when set against the urban percentage of 14.8% in the East South Central region, showed that black Mobilians were less educated than their other urban counterparts. State authorities regarded the high levels of black adult illiteracy as an economic problem and


27 Loftin, 'A Social History,' 269.
launched the Alabama Illiteracy Commission in 1915. The first organised efforts to eradicate illiteracy took place in Mobile County in June of that year when the Commission appointed a committee of black citizens to oversee the reduction of illiteracy among male and female adults.28

**Class Structure and African American Protest in Mobile**

Mobile’s reputation for racial tolerance stemmed considerably from the class structure of its non-white population. In 1860, Mobile County was home to the largest number of free blacks in Alabama totalling 1,193. A small percentage were manumitted slaves and a significant proportion came to be known as Creoles, descendants of slaves who had intermarried with French and Spanish settlers to the area. They formed the earliest elite in the black community and secured a variety of skilled and semi-skilled labouring positions, the major occupation being in the building trades. By 1851, Mobile had five schools specially assigned to Creoles and free blacks. They were able to exercise the benefits of their privileged status by forming their own benevolent and social associations, the most famous being the exclusive Creole No. 1 Fire Company created in 1829 with the permission of Mobile’s aldermen.29 During Reconstruction, members of the Creole class took up key positions in local and state government. Ovid Gregory was appointed chief of police by mayor Gustavus Horton in 1867. L.S. Berry served as an alderman after 1865 and black Mobilians were also employed as an inspector of weights, assistant chief of police, circuit judge, alderman, deputy sheriff and state senator.30

By the 1890s, descendants of the free black population, although now stripped of their former privileges and placed in segregated schools, merged with the new middle class of professionals who thrived on patronage from the black community during the Progressive era. Black Progressives in Mobile included the new bourgeoisie of postal workers, newspaper editors, insurance agents, physicians, Baptist ministers, attorneys, dentists and retailers. Like their white counterparts they participated in schemes to aid the
development of the city's economy but preferred to pursue industrial and vocational education as the path to self-improvement in Jim Crow society. Their response to Alabama's disfranchisement and Jim Crow movement at the turn of the century exemplified the accommodationist leadership of Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute. A high priority was fostering peaceful race relations. Moderation, deference to the white political structure and a reluctance to wage confrontation with those in power regarding the inequities of segregation, informed their conservative rationalisation of the rise in racial proscription enforced by the state constitution of 1901.31

Prior to the adoption of the new state constitution which effectively disfranchised the majority of the black voting-age population in Alabama and a large proportion of poor whites, political bosses in Mobile had, in 1896, moved to limit the power of black voters by passing a resolution to bar them from all future Democratic primaries. Edward C. Cato, a black boilermaker had received 1,188 votes for state representative in 1890, but after 1896 blacks became much less active in politics and could not legally hold office again until the 1970s when passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 effectively removed these racial barriers.32 After adopting the state constitution, Mobile like many other Southern cities, experienced a dramatic drop in the number of blacks eligible to vote from 11,091 in 1896 to 4,572 in 1903. As a consequence, the implementation of Jim Crow segregation was achieved with minimal protest.33

Streetcars had been one area in which blacks and whites participated in a degree of social equality as citizens paying for a public service to which they were entitled. The city's streetcars were privately-owned and had not been segregated by municipal ordinance until 1902. Following the lead of Montgomery's city council which passed an ordinance requiring segregation in 1900, Mobile prepared its own provisions in October 1902. Although the prominent black newspaper editor, A.F. Owens, initiated a public discussion of the proposed action in the Mobile Register in June of that year, the clergy's attitudes precluded any vociferous opposition or use of boycotts to prevent the adoption of the new

31 Alsobrook, ibid., 192, 193, 199, 234.
32 The 1901 Constitution signalled a revolution in state politics that affected all Alabamians but it carried special property, literacy, good character and poll tax clauses to legally exclude those deemed unsuitable for exercising voting privileges during this period, see M.C. McMillan, Constitutional Development in Alabama, 1798-1901: A Study in Politics, the Negro, and Sectionalism (Chapel Hill, 1955), 363; Alsobrook, 31,
33 Alsobrook, 126.
law. Even though they deplored segregation, ministers were also careful to stress that coloured citizens must act responsibly on public transit and that the community should also accept any reforms introduced by the city to improve conditions for all. However, a boycott did go ahead and was maintained for some months under the leadership of Owens and against the wishes of the clergy. It failed, however, to prevent the 1902 law from altering seating arrangements in trolleys with whites occupying the front sections and blacks assigned to the rear. Similar boycotts were staged in other Southern cities but in Mobile, the clergy's failure to support the proposed boycott influenced the generally mild reaction to the event, foreshadowing this group's conservative role in political leadership of the black community until the 1960s.\textsuperscript{34} They were used by whites to control and influence blacks and acted as principal spokespersons in most dealings with the municipal authorities. Mobile's black clergy would be a powerful conservative force as the civil rights struggle unfolded in the city during the latter half of the 20th century.

As the New South era came to an end, it was clear that the clergy would provide both the leadership and vital resources for the development of the NAACP. Unlike New Orleans and Atlanta, Mobile lacked a large business class and an established tradition of organised protest against racial discrimination. In 1919, an NAACP chapter was formed in response to the disappearance of local labour leader Rafe Clemmons, an event that was probably linked to the KKK. In 1921, Dr. T.N. Harris, George W. Lovejoy, Dr. William F. Brown and other members of the clergy re-established the chapter yet nothing tangible resulted from this until LeFlore applied for a new branch charter in 1925. Before much could be accomplished, the black community had to first survive the Depression and try to secure a foothold in the New Deal measures for economic recovery during the 1930s.\textsuperscript{35}

The impact of the Depression in Mobile was not as severe as might have been expected. While Alabama's farming community, which had experienced a decline in income throughout the 1920s, suffered severe economic hardship as a consequence of the Great Crash, Mobile was at an advantage as one of the state's major urban localities with a diversified economy that included the state docks. Birmingham faced high unemployment with the closure of the U.S. Steel mills after 1928 but conditions in Mobile were


\textsuperscript{35} Alsobrook, 234, Autrey, 'The NAACP in Alabama,' 31-32.
relatively more stable and the city survived the Depression better than the rest of the state. World War I had boosted the local economy by triggering a burst of industrialisation between 1919 and 1929. The war increased the number of industrial plants, expanded existing plants and more than tripled the number of industrial wage-earners. Shipbuilding accounted for more than 50% of the total value of manufactured products. That Mobile had also escaped the post-war slump was indicated by the rise in export activity at the docks and the establishment of new paper mills during the 1920s.

As the state's only seaport and trading gateway to regional and international markets, Mobile was well-connected to major commercial routes by the Louisville and Nashville railroad constructed in the 1870s. The city's prosperity rested significantly upon the port. In the early 1920s chief exports included lumber, iron and steel, cotton, coal, and naval stores. Major imports included bananas, molasses, manganese ore, potash and manufactured goods. Another boost to the local economy came in 1923 when the state legislature financed development of the port under the administration of the newly-established State Docks Commission. An extra $10 million was appropriated to expand facilities and the docks re-opened in 1927 symbolising a new era of progress for Mobilians. By 1929, the port had 50 separate ocean facilities with a capacity of handling 600 tons per hour.

In the six years between 1924 and 1929, gross earnings from the State Docks totalled $1,626,992. With the onset of the Depression, a sharp decline was recorded until 1938 yet the docks survived this period of economic instability avoiding closure of its operations. Employment however, increased from 13,500 in 1932 to 19,000 in 1940. Given the stiff competition from other nearby ports such as New Orleans and Houston, the State Docks gave Mobile the foundations for future metropolitan growth particularly in terms of its unrivalled specialisation in shipbuilding and repair along the Gulf Coast. Another important cause of Mobile's ability to weather the effects of the Depression was

38 *Ibid.*, 44.
the abundant forests in Southern Alabama. Approximately, 80% of the land within 100 miles of the city was forested providing an ideal location for paper production. In 1928, International Paper, a division of Southern Kraft, chose Mobile as the location for its new paper mills. Operations began in 1929 (coinciding with the crash) yet the benefits to the city included employment for 500 people resulting in an annual payroll of over $1 million. International even managed to purchase new equipment in 1932, the worst year of the Depression.40

Table 2: Occupational Breakdown of the Labor Force in Mobile, 1930

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent of Total Labour Force</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing and Mechanical</td>
<td>7,794</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation and Communication</td>
<td>4,810</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>4,894</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic and Personal</td>
<td>7,250</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>3,256</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>1,965</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Services</td>
<td>826</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Compared to Montgomery, Mobile had a more diversified economy which, combined with its port facilities, had earned the city the title of the 'Baltimore of the South.'41 Three years into the Depression, the breakdown of employment revealed the relative prosperity of Mobile compared to other areas in Alabama and other Southern cities of


comparable size (Table 2). In Montgomery manufacturing employment accounted for 24% and in Jacksonville, Florida, for 22% of the total labour force. A similar pattern was the case in transportation and communications where employment in those cities accounted for 10% and 13% respectively.42

Oral recollections compiled by the New Deal agency, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the early 1930s confirmed that Mobile was an attractive location for rural migrants in search of employment and shelter. One such recollection was that of Sharon Cousins, a poor white woman labelled as a 'hobo' since she had been travelling continuously from Canada. Having arrived in Mobile from Pensacola in February 1939, she was able to find lodgings at a cost of 25 cents a night until she decided to move on.43 The young James Folsom, future governor of Alabama also recounted that during the Depression years, he was advised to go to Mobile from his native Coffee County where there was good chance of securing work at the docks.44 Another important indication of the local impact of the crash was indicated by the Mobile Register and Mobile Press's rather deliberately muted reporting of the event. The Press carried a front-page headline which claimed "Business Leaders Predict Good Year" and the editorial pronounced that 'There is no sure way of driving money out of circulation and of curtailing expenditures by the rank and file than by talking hard times.'45 This bold statement was not without some validity. Three principal banks had withstood the Depression although savings and bank clearings did hit an all-time low in that year.46 The impact of economic retrenchment did little to dampen Mobile's upper classes from continuing the revered tradition of annual Mardi Gras celebrations in the 1930s. According to Alfred Staples, Mardi Gras king in 1916, the financing of the event by Mobile merchants during hard times reflected the city's progress since the turn of the century. It also indicated that Mobilians had found a distraction from their troubles that was combined with the Mobile

42 Ibid., 79.

43 'Sharon Cousins, 'Knight of the Road, Rooming House, South Royal Street, Mobile, Alabama, Week Ending February 3, 1939,' 14, Life Histories from the Works Progress Administration, 1930-38, Southern Historical Collection, Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

44 J.E. Folsom, Transcript of an Interview by Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, Southern Oral History Project, Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1978, hereinafter cited as 'SOHP'.

45 Mobile Press, January 1, 1930, 1, 4.

46 Loftin, 'A Social History,' 225.
Carnival Association's organisation of five days of parades and exclusive social gatherings in the city.47

Other less privileged Mobilians did suffer the economic consequences of the Depression arising from a decline in retail sales by 11.5% between 1935 and 1939. Tom Dodd, owner of Tom Dodd Nurseries almost faced closure. Life in the cotton mill community of Crichton located on the northern fringes of western Mobile was harsh for the predominantly white residents. These families usually worked six days a week, 12 hours on weekdays and 5 on Saturdays just to survive in the early 1930s. They earned between $6 and $8 weekly as spinners and boiler operators. During periods of extreme hardship, they supplemented their income by taking in lodgers for $2.50 per week. or offering laundry services to other families.48 In Mobile's 156 manufacturing plants in 1929, production workers escaped the prospect of long-term unemployment six years later when the number of plants had declined to 124. In 1929, a total of 6,955 had been employment by those plants. In 1935 a reduced number of plants employed 7,220 workers but by 1939, as several new plants had located in Mobile, total employment rose to 8,819.49 These plants included the Terminal Paper Bag Company which established its plant in 1935, the Aluminum Ore Company in 1937, Meyercord Company and National Gypsum in 1938, Pan American Cyanamid and Chemical Company in 1939.50

Blacks, however, were the most economically disadvantaged Mobilians during the Depression era. They were squeezed out of their traditional occupations as domestics, gardeners, proprietors of shops, stevedores, longshoremen. Postal employees received a 15% salary cut and a three-day lay-off once a month. LeFlore's recollections of the 1930s confirmed that previously, blacks had been able to live on the grounds of their affluent white employers as servants. These employers began to release their servants thereby ending the paternalistic economic relationship which blacks had benefited from for decades. They were now unemployed, ineligible for relief from the Social Security Act and forced to seek new avenues for employment without the advantage of having

48 Ibid., 243, 246-7.
49 Ibid., 243-4.
experienced industrial occupations in common with poor whites.\footnote{Loftin, 252-3.} New Deal relief agencies excluded the largest category of employed blacks who were domestic workers and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of Mobile County, in line with other Southern camps, operated a white-only recruitment policy. The WPA launched a major project on Three Mile Creek in 1935, an area that separated Mobile from Prichard, a predominantly black, small town located to the northwest of the city. The project employed hundreds as part of a drainage and malaria control project. Blacks were taken on in small numbers but found it extremely difficult to secure a strong footing. In 1938, the Fair Labour Standards Act gave many of Mobile’s industrial workers a national minimum wage for the first time, but the concentration of black workers in unskilled and seasonal occupations largely prevented them from enjoying this benefit.\footnote{B.G. Hinson, 'The Civilian Conservation Corps in Mobile County, Alabama,' \textit{Alabama Review} 45 (October 1992): 243-56; M. Thomason and M. McLaurin, \textit{Mobile: The Life and Times of a Great Southern City} (Northridge, CA., 1982), 115.}

The only tangible efforts to counteract the economic and social problems of African Americans in Mobile was the establishment of Mobile’s NAACP chapter. Alabama blacks played a significant role in the expansion of the NAACP in the Deep South between 1918 and 1930. The first branch was formed in Montgomery in the autumn of 1918 and others followed in Decatur, Birmingham, Emsley, Blocton, Anniston, and Tuscaloosa during this period. A recent survey of the Alabama NAACP branches has concluded that various factors motivated the growth of the national civil rights organisation in a state noted for its hard-line attitudes towards race. A heightened race-consciousness resulting from the Great Migration, a realisation that blacks had to promote self-help and organise themselves properly in order to improve conditions that directly affected them and the increase in threats to their personal safety on account of Klan terror, combined to fuel the growth of new NAACP branches across the Southern states.\footnote{D. Autrey, "Can These Bones Live?" The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Alabama, 1918-1930,' \textit{Journal of Negro History} 82 (Winter 1997): 1-2; for a fuller discussion of the impact of the Great Migration, J.W. Trotter, Jr., \textit{The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class and Gender} (Bloomington, IA., 1990).}

W.L Bolden, B.G. Johnson, F.E. Williams, John L. LeFlore and R.E.L Eastland took the courageous step of recruiting branch membership during a time when the KKK was launching a new, but short-lived, wave of terror across Mobile County. The white
supremacist organisation experienced a significant revival in Alabama between 1916 and 1926. When Klan chapters were revived in Mobile, Birmingham and Montgomery, the Mobile chapter staged dramatic parades and rallies in 1926 as part of a wider campaign against the influx of immigrants to the city since World War I. Prior to the Klan revival, an NAACP report had concluded that 276 lynchings had taken place in Alabama between 1889 and 1918. Of these, five had taken place in and around Mobile. The cause was mainly suspected rape of a white woman by a black male.

Despite the dangerous circumstances surrounding the formation of the NAACP, the Mobile branch quickly distinguished itself as one of the most active and efficient chapters of the national organisation. Central to this was LeFlore, an energetic and tenacious believer in the right of blacks to pursue self-advancement through the protection of a national civil rights organisation. He did not allow potential problems incurred by his NAACP work to sully his commitment even though W.E. Morton, Secretary of the previous branch in 1921, had been arrested and fined $250 which enabled him to escape a prison sentence while visiting Wilcox County. An assessment of activities administered by the branch prior to 1940, reveals that Mobile's African-American community had reached a new level of determination in their struggle against the injustices of Jim Crow segregation. A 1942 report prepared by LeFlore for the NAACP headquarters in New York, claimed that the founders had hoped that from the very beginning, the branch would be:

'...a unit of the great organization which stands as a vanguard in the Negro's struggle for common justice and defense against racial proscription.'

Little is known about the background of the founding members except for LeFlore, who was one of the few blacks to successfully pass the civil service entry examinations and

54 Ibid., 3.
57 Autrey, 'The NAACP in Alabama,' 32.
joined the Mobile Post Office as a mail carrier in 1922. It is likely that the others were connected to the church since over 50% of Black Mobilians were members of either a Baptist or Methodist congregation.\textsuperscript{59} LeFlore's strong commitment to rejuvenating the NAACP was triggered by an incident involving the city's segregated streetcar service. When a white man tried to prevent him from riding on the car LeFlore resisted, was arrested and subsequently fined for misconduct. He later became Secretary and assumed responsibility for most of the civil rights activities of the branch until the 1950s.\textsuperscript{60}

The emergence of the NAACP in Mobile also reflected a desire amongst black citizens to support an agency that would safeguard their interests in a society where white supremacy, in varying degrees, entailed an almost constant threat to physical safety. Original branch membership in 1919 was 40% working class which according to the only study of the NAACP in Alabama until 1956 demonstrated that:

\begin{quote}
'in an area known for its agitative [sic] middle class blacks, this high representation of from the working class points to the sense of need for a civil rights organization among a wide segment of blacks.'\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

Crucial to the financial viability of the early years of the branch was the black middle-class, a group afflicted by their caste status but also economically secure enough to afford their membership dues. Black doctors, teachers, nurses and ministers prospered prior to the Depression by serving their own community. Doctors were forced to serve blacks since whites usually refused to treat these patients. The former two groups also benefited from working in segregated schools and hospitals where a certain degree of autonomy and freedom from white hostility prevailed. But of greater significance was the fact that professional groups were able to own homes and 'enjoy a relatively high social and cultural life.'\textsuperscript{62} Barriers to further advancement for these groups were similar to that faced by the majority of black workers. Until the 1950s, most clerical and administrative positions were usually closed to blacks since they were either not able to sit for the federal examinations necessary for entry in the civil service or were unable to pass

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{59} Autrey, 80.
\bibitem{60} Autrey, 82.
\bibitem{61} Autrey, 82-3.
\bibitem{62} Foley, \textit{ibid}.
\end{thebibliography}
Origins

them.63 The Mobile Post Office repeatedly turned down applications from blacks claiming that they had not scored highly in the Civil Service entry examinations. The few who were successful in gaining employment were often the targets of white hostility because they had become more visible after putting on postal uniforms. Only black-owned businesses in Davis Avenue could offer a degree of control and management skills.64

By 1925, the branch had become preponderantly middle class. The majority of the new members reported in March 1926, were government workers, clergymen and businessmen who prospered in the Davis Avenue area. Few came from working class backgrounds. While membership did not reflect a true cross-section the black community, the large middle-class element did make the young branch safer from economic retaliation from whites. One year after being re-organised, the Mobile branch reported $29.30 in membership dues increasing over the next two years by more than eight times to $239.80.65 Unlike the Birmingham branch which remained inactive for most of the 1920s, LeFlore managed to oversee a period of remarkable growth in the Mobile NAACP's activities. Mass meetings were well-attended and the commitment of women was demonstrated by the establishment of a Ladies' Auxiliary. An important symbol of the confidence created by the branch in the community was the contributions it received from fraternal social groups such as the Easter Star which pledged $500 in life membership. Successful fund-raising drives conducted to recruit membership in 1929 attracted the attention of the national office which called it 'the one vigorous branch [it had] in Alabama.'66 The New York office requested Mobile's assistance in re-organising defunct NAACP chapters in the state. Two members travelled to Montgomery and Blocton earning much respect as a result.67

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63 J.L. LeFlore interviewed by M. McLaurin,
64 Autrey, 'NAACP in Alabama,' 82-3.
65 Autrey, 84.
66 J.L. LeFlore to Robert Bagnall, February 11, March 19, April 21, June 23, 27, September, 14, October 14, 1929; Bagnall to LeFlore, September 15, 1927; November 30, 1928; LeFlore to Walter White, September 14, 1929; "Activities of Mobile, Alabama Branch for the Last Year" (1928), Series I: NAACP, box 1, files 3-4, John L. LeFlore Papers, 1926-1976, University of South Alabama Archives, Mobile, Alabama, hereinafter cited as 'LeFlore Papers, USA Archives'.
67 Ibid.
One of the most striking characteristics of the Mobile branch setting it apart from the others, was the desire to deal with cases of civil rights violations beyond its geographic location. Cases taken on during the 1920s and 1930s reflected LeFlore’s widespread concern regarding racial discrimination in Mississippi, on interstate rail travel and in other parts of rural Alabama. In 1927, he led an investigation into housing allocated to black victims of a flood that ravaged Mississippi during that year. He discovered that a black man, made homeless when the flood destroyed the plantation he worked on, had been held in virtual slavery for 15 years. LeFlore passed on this evidence of the continuation of debt-peonage in Mississippi to the national office.68 In 1929, LeFlore directed his attention toward the problem of unequal facilities for black railroad passengers using the routes run by the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company. The company had refused to comply with the separate-but-equal law and did not provide blacks with access to separate toilets, clean and ventilated coaches or Pullman dining car services. After investigating whether Alabama’s separate-but-equal law could be invoked to prosecute the company, LeFlore was successful in obtaining a promise from the L and N to upgrade such facilities.69 A similar promise was also obtained from Mobile’s local streetcar company which ran segregated routes across the city. Both cases highlighted the problems blacks faced in the realm of transportation, a problem which affected them across the urban South. The work of the Mobile branch was important, at this stage, not for achieving immediate results, but for being able to expose violations of the state law concerning segregated transport and, moreover, recording such violations for future civil rights litigation in this area.70

LeFlore also targeted the notorious use of all-white juries to prosecute black criminals. Blacks at this time could not be called upon to sit on juries where cases involved whites. Even when the courts were sentencing in cases where only blacks were involved, they still could not be jurors. 'Lily-white' juries were the norm in Alabama at this time as was the case in most Southern states. In 1927, the branch found that a white man had been freed after being tried for the murder of a black Mobilian but it was forced to drop the

69 LeFlore to Bagnall, October 30, 1927; April 4, 1928; LeFlore to James Weldon Johnson, May 14, 1928, LeFlore Papers.
70 Autrey, 87-8.
case due the lack of black law firms in Mobile and the refusal of white lawyers to take up the case. During the next year, a white man was charged with the rape and attempted rape of seven black girls. LeFlore feared that he would escape punishment when the court, after hearing the evidence of a doctor, ruled that the defendant was insane. As a result, a full trial and sentencing was delayed until he was deemed to be in a fit mental state.\textsuperscript{71}

While the branch was unable to successfully intervene in either of the above cases, it did become heavily involved in another case in 1929 where three black Mobile men, Jerry York, Bill Lang and Carson Lewes, had been sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of a white man, C.C. Coffee, form Grove Hill, Alabama. It was revealed that police torture had led to forced confessions from York, Lang and Lewes. After seeking assistance from the national office, LeFlore was able to hire a local white law firm to bring the case to appeal before the Alabama Supreme Court on the basis that coercion had produced the confessions and, that inconsistencies in the evidence required a new trial. Although the court rejected this request, the branch had helped to articulate a legal principle which was, in later years, to be accepted as a constitutional prohibition since forced confessions altered the defendants' right to due process of the law.\textsuperscript{72}

These cases were significant, for the Mobile branch had gone some way to prove its commitment to the organising principles of the NAACP and furthermore, gave credence to LeFlore's statement that 'nothing within the grasp of our opportunity will be left undone in trying to make the Mobile branch all that it could be.'\textsuperscript{73} The sentencing of 12 black boys for the rape of two white women in Scottsboro in 1933, affected black Mobilians very deeply. LeFlore claimed that "People in this section are much aroused over the verdicts brought against the boys."\textsuperscript{74} Despite financial setbacks due to the Depression, and reported apathy from some members, the branch began a decade of increasing activity after 1930. These activities signalled the origins of certain strategies that were to blossom into a wide-ranging challenge to Jim Crow discrimination during and

\textsuperscript{71} LeFlore to William T. Andrews, March 12, 25, 1928, LeFlore Papers.

\textsuperscript{72} LeFlore to Andrews, July 9, 30; August 7, 1929; Andrews to LeFlore, September 24, 1929, box 2, file 4; LeFlore to R.W. Bagnall, January 28, 1930; Q.W. Tucker to the Mobile Branch, June 29, 1929; Press Release, Mobile Branch "To Seek Grounds for Appeal from Life Sentence," February 7, 1930, box 2, file 5, LeFlore Papers.

\textsuperscript{73} LeFlore to Bagnall, February 11, 1929, LeFlore Papers.

\textsuperscript{74} LeFlore to Mary White Ovington, May 8, 1931, \textit{ibid}. 

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after World War II. The primary focus was to begin the long process of dismantling the legal and institutional barriers to black assimilation into the economic and political system. In this respect, the branch financed legal cases dealing with racial discrimination in voting, federal employment, lynching and railroad travel.

In 1936 and again in 1938, LeFlore initiated two test cases dealing with Alabama's voting laws. To raise political awareness of the importance of suffrage rights among apathetic black citizens, the branch held a forum on the issue and opened a 'school' on civil government in a local black Baptist church. The forum attracted a large audience and the branch pledged financial support to those aged 21 years and over to help pay their poll tax fees through planned fund-raising projects. The ultimate aim was to challenge Alabama's white primary laws. In that effort, the Mobile branch began a legal strategy that would mature and eventually yield significant results in 1944 with the Supreme Court's invalidation of the white primary in Texas in the case *Smith v. Allwright*. After Mobile blacks were denied the right to vote in the May 1934 Democratic primary, the branch contacted the NAACP national office to seek advice on whether a court injunction could be secured so that blacks could be included under the terms of the 15th Amendment. The New York office replied that only individuals could bring suits to challenge the primary. Several affidavits from blacks who had testified that they had been prevented from voting in 1936 and 1938, despite being duly registered to do so were prepared. Arthur Shores, a notable black lawyer from the Birmingham branch who would later play an important role during the Civil Rights movement in Alabama, was consulted in the preparation of the 1938 affidavits. LeFlore, however had to wait until after the Supreme Court ruling in *Smith* in order to see these efforts lead to a victory.

Discrimination by one of Mobile's largest federal employers proved to be a serious problem for blacks who wished to obtain jobs as clerks, delivery men and janitors at the city's post office. One of the main reasons why the post office refused to employ blacks even after they had passed the Civil Service examinations was the hostility of white

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75 Branch News Report (BRN), Mobile Branch, March 15, 1935; LeFlore to Roy Wilkins, May 24, 1937; LeFlore to Thurgood Marshall, November 2, 1938.

76 LeFlore to Walter White, July 13, 1935, BRN.

77 LeFlore to Charles Houston, August 8, 1936; January 8, 1938; LeFlore to Marshall, December 7, 1938; Arthur D. Shores to Marshall, December 8, 1938, box 2, file 7, BRN.
workers who resented the sight of the former in postal uniforms which elevated them to an equal status in the office. However, black postal workers were relatively immune from local white reprisals because they were federal employees and, therefore, protected while carrying out official business. As a consequence, LeFlore felt more secure than most and could keep up the work of the NAACP in his community. During the Depression, the Post Office was a vital source of employment. After seeking the help of the NAACP national office, he was able to argue that the Post Office, as a federal employer should be prepared to open up additional carrier jobs to blacks since it was a federal agency and should not discriminate on the basis of race under the terms of the 14th Amendment. In 1932, five blacks were taken on in this capacity. It was in the area of employment discrimination that LeFlore continued to direct branch activity during the 1940s, but his work in the 1930s revealed an important realisation that the black citizenry had to prepare themselves for occupations which afforded some measure of economic security.

Lynching was another area in which the branch attempted to counteract the lack of a federal law against one of the South's most gruesome methods of intimidating and controlling its black population. The NAACP national office had already begun lobbying the government to draw up an anti-lynching bill which would recognise the fact that many of the perpetrators of this crime went unpunished due to the laxity of local law officials in this area combined with the use of all-white juries. Both the Birmingham and Mobile branches responded to the lynching of Claude Neal by a Florida mob in 1934 by bombarding United States senators with telegrams requesting them to support the Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill. Duplicating the NAACP's national office, the branch also took the bold step of conducting its own investigations into several lynchings around the Mobile area. The investigation of an attempted lynching at Citronelle, a locality to the north of Mobile was particularly important in that it yielded the names of seventeen participants in the mob which attacked the blacks.

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78 Autrey, 'The NAACP in Alabama,' 153.

79 For a detailed overview of the role lynching played in Southern race relations, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Alabama, 1880-1930 (Urbana and Chicago, 1993).

80 LeFlore to M. White Ovington, December 8, 1934; LeFlore to W. White, May 2, 1935; LeFlore to William E. Borah, Senator from Idaho, January 24, 1936, box 2, file 6, LeFlore Papers; other Senators who received telegrams were G. Nye, H. Shipstead, R. LaFollett, A. Capper, G.N. Norris and R.S. Copeland, ibid.

The most crucial aspect of the Mobile NAACP's early years lay in the realm of leadership. LeFlore was a committed and respectable Secretary who was more than willing to incur tremendous personal risks while carrying out NAACP work. A real threat to his livelihood came in 1935 when the Mobile Post Office, in a joint effort with the local press, attempted to discharge him unfairly on account of his civil rights agitation in the city. Upon his return from an NAACP meeting in St. Louis, Missouri called to discuss problems facing blacks in the New Deal, LeFlore was accused by the Mobile Daily Register of espousing radical proposals to prevent discrimination under Roosevelt's economic programme in Mobile. This position conflicted with that of the other delegates who wished to continue sober legal action. The article was worded in such a way as to depict LeFlore as a militant rabble-rouser who jarred with the moderation of the national NAACP.82

On the strength of this article, the Mobile Post Master perceived one of his employees to be a partisan political activist whose views could be damaging to other employees at the office contrary to the rules of employment. He informed LeFlore that he would have three days in which to explain the situation or else he would be dismissed. LeFlore vehemently denied the claims made by the article and was particularly scornful of an anonymous letter sent to the Daily Register which alleged that he was linked to the Communist Party calling it

'a cowardly act--the work of a small group of negrophobes [sic] in and out of (the) post office...who (were) opposed to colored people's efforts to secure an improvement in conditions affecting the Negro group in America...'83

The charges against LeFlore were only dropped after the NAACP headquarters rose to his defence and sent a strong letter to the Postmaster General, James A. Farley, arguing that he had been the victim of a conspiracy to 'persecute one of our loyal and efficient members.'84

82 "Mobilian Leader at Negroes Meet: Left Wing Program Adoption Differences Aired at St. Louis," Mobile Daily Register, June 27, 1935, ibid.

83 Robert S. Cartledge to LeFlore, July 26, 1935, ibid.

Conclusions

The development of the NAACP was an important first step toward African-American militancy prior to the emergence of the Civil Rights movement in the South after 1945. Symptomatic of a new sense of race-consciousness borne out of their exclusion from the political reforms of the Progressive era, the Mobile NAACP was at the vanguard of resistance to the continued oppression of segregation. The conditions in which the less privileged blacks lived prior to World War II, confirmed that the establishment of an NAACP chapter was a major radical departure from Booker T. Washington’s moderate programmes for racial uplift. Within the racially-oppressive 1920s, the rise to prominence of the Mobile branch in Alabama informed a new period of black self-help framed within the ideological commitment of the national organisation to the aggressive pursuit, via the courts, of first-class citizenship. However, a far greater catalyst for racial change in Mobile and in the nation at large, was to accompany the United States’ entry into World War II following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941.
Map Sketch of the Mobile Area, 1940

Source: Adapted from Bernadette K. Loftin, 'A Social History of the Mid-Gulf South (Panama City-Mobile), 1930-1950,' unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi, 1971, 216.
Chapter 3:

White Supremacy Challenged: The Economic and Social Transformation of Mobile, 1940-1945

On the night of Tuesday, May 24th 1943, Roosevelt's newest of wartime agencies, the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), scored a major victory at ADDSCO following months of negotiations concerning the employment of African Americans in skilled occupations. In a serious attempt to solve the manpower shortages that had accompanied the shipyard’s dramatic expansion since the outbreak of World War II, twelve African Americans, all employed as labourers at the plant, made history by being chosen to work as welders in a company which had systematically denied persons of their racial origin access to such skilled positions since 1919. In order to cushion the potential white backlash due to such an unwarranted retreat from the colour line during a period of economic mobilisation for war, FEPC officials and ADDSCO management decided to order that the newly-promoted welders work a segregated nightshift to prevent unfavourable publicity. The next morning, however, their worst fears were realised as the shipyard erupted into the most vicious race riot to ever befall the sleepy Southern port of Mobile. Black staff were beaten and attacked by white men and women resulting in the closure of the plant for four days. 27,000 workers walked away from their jobs. In one of the nation's crucial centres of defence production, strict adherence to the colour line proved incompatible with the objectives of a government consumed by the demands of total war. The ADDSCO riot was a symbolic event in its vivid illumination of the extent to which the war was transforming the lives of all Southerners, black and white, rich and poor, urban and rural. 1

World War II offered unrivalled opportunities for economic modernisation in the predominantly agrarian South. Defence mobilisation, requiring the full use of national resources, transformed key municipalities stimulating the dramatic enlargement of

organised African American militant protest in the struggle for justice. Demographic change, rapid urbanisation and the dramatic expansion of the local economy caused a major disruption to the social structure which had remained intact in Mobile since the emergence of the New South. In 1941, Mobilians were brought a step closer to the leading domestic problem confronting the nation: race. Efforts to cope with the enlarged role of the federal government, the spectacular rise in black militancy in the North and the accelerated pace of industrialisation, wrought the biggest single challenge to white supremacy in Mobile this century. Only one thing was guaranteed as Mobilians entered the decade of the 1940s: that a society which had clung to the glories of cotton-trading and Mardi Gras celebrations within a relatively static social hierarchy and the restraining influence of segregation, would never return. By the war's end, the stage had been firmly set for a new era in race relations where Mobile's black citizenry were no longer prepared to passively accept the economic and social injustices of Jim Crow.

**The Economic and Social Impact of World War II**

No other Alabama locality benefited as much from the nation's economic mobilisation for war than that of Mobile between 1940 and 1945. The city became a major boom town almost as soon as hostilities were declared in Europe and America had pledged its support for the Western democracies in their fight against Nazism. After 230 years of relative tranquility Mobilians were thrust unceremoniously into the shock of sudden, unplanned growth with all its accompanying social costs. The stimulus of war boosted the local economies of several other Southern cities such as Newport News, Charleston, Norfolk, and New Orleans, bringing to these areas an explosion in population, urbanisation and industrial expansion. In Mobile, economic forces yielded both class and racial conflicts eventually resolved by the intervention of the federal government, organised labour and the Mobile NAACP branch.

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2 For a fuller overview of the impact of the war on the South, P. Daniel, 'Going Among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II,' *op. cit.*


4 McLaurin, *ibid.*
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Between 1940 and 1944, Mobilians experienced the greatest single era of economic and social transformation in any period of their city's long history. Federal military expenditure in the South surpassed that of any other region in the United States totalling $5 billion and 17.6% of total defence contracts. The region also became host to a significantly larger number of the nation's military bases and training centres. Decentralisation of war plants by the War Production Board and the National War Labor Board, aided wage increases and helped to elevate localities in the South and the West from the periphery to the heart of the nation's economic mobilisation for war.5 As Bruce Schulman has argued, the Roosevelt administration hoped that wartime investment would deter future depression and aid prosperity in the region. The Office of Production Management confirmed that Alabama ranked 17th in the nation in terms of defence spending totalling $600 million in contracts and orders.6 Mobile was one of the key cities along the Gulf Coast which reaped the potential benefits of such a policy objective. Its state docks, ranked 15th in that nation in 1940, shipped wartime goods to various U.S. military outposts resulting in a burgeoning labour force at Angus Cooper and T. Smith stevedoring companies and at the Waterman Steamship Corporation founded at the turn of the century.7 In the long-term, war triggered the development of new industrial functions, the management of skilled production workers, capital investment, the growth of financial institutions and the blossoming of a previously limited consumer market in the city.8

Whereas the New South and New Deal eras had failed to fuel such rapid industrial growth, World War II proved to be a point of no return for all Mobilians and especially for 35% percent of them who were African Americans. Within the chaos of massive in-migration, urban congestion and interracial violence, the Mobile NAACP was able to mount a successful assault on the exclusion of African Americans from defence employment. Aided by the FEPC beginning in 1942, the promotion of blacks to skilled jobs in the shipyards struck a crucial blow to the advocates of white supremacy who found that in the struggle to establish order during a period of immense uncertainty, the war had created changes of a far greater magnitude than they could ever have imagined.

5 G. Brown Tindall, Emergence of the New South (Baton Rouge, 1979), 172-5.
6 A. Cronenberg, Forth to the Mighty Conflict, Alabama and World War II (Tuscaloosa, 1995), 1-2
7 Ibid., 54.
An unprecedented retreat from the colour line that had been maintained to secure economic privileges for the white majority through the racial exploitation of blacks was the result.9

Modernisation accompanied wartime growth in the local economy. In early 1939, the Roosevelt administration identified Mobile as an important location for wartime investment in the state. Noted for its port facilities, specialisation in shipbuilding and repair, and access to five major railroads, the area was quickly targeted by the Maritime Commission's programme of sponsoring and enlarging several shipyard facilities in the nation.10 Supplementing this, largely due to the efforts of representative Frank Boykin, the Army Air Corps chose Mobile over Tampa to begin construction of a major military base at Brookley Field, a site located to the south of the city. The base was to modify B-24 and B-29 bombers and serve as an ammunitions depot.11 The potential for an expansion in local employment opportunities was immense. Brookley created an estimated 11,000 new defence jobs at the start of the war, rising to 17,000 by 1943, while the shipbuilding industry experienced a massive rise in the demand for skilled production workers that initially could not be met from the existing supply of local labour.12

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9 The impact of World War II is the only period of Mobile's economic and social history during the 20th century to have received systematic examination from historians. Most scholars agree that the war fundamentally shaped the city's future development and launched the Civil Rights movement during the latter half of the century. For example, McLaurin and Thomason, *Mobile: Life and Times of a Great Southern City*, 123-130; on politics and race relations, McLaurin, 'Mobile Blacks and World War II: The Development of a Political Consciousness,' 47-56, *op. cit.*; Presnell, *op. cit.*, Ch. 3; B. Nelson, 'Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile,' *op. cit.*

10 Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 2.


Economic mobilisation for war catapulted Mobile into the dubious position of the nation's fastest growing metropolitan area according to population in 1944. However, this was growth without the structural capacity to allocate resources equitably nor to sustain social peace. Municipal authorities were faced with an urban crisis of huge proportions. The city's population of 78,720 in 1940 had jumped to an estimated 106,001 by 1944, one year after peak levels of in-migration of whites and blacks from rural Alabama, Mississippi and west Florida was recorded by the Committee for Congested Production Areas (CCPA). In the city suburbs, a population increase from 36,186 to 95,368 was recorded while in the areas designated by the Census Bureau as the Metropolitan District, an increase from 114,974 to 233,891 was confirmed, (Graph 1).

The writer, John Dos Passos' description on a visit during March 1943 clearly indicated the speed at which wartime population growth had taken place; according to him, Mobile

13 "Fastest Growing City: Mobile, war industry and service center, has population of 230,000," *Businessweek* 113 (25 February, 1944): 40, 70.
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was 'trampled and battered like a city that's been taken by storm.'\textsuperscript{14} A \textit{Washington Post} reporter, Agnes Meyer, assigned to Mobile during 1944, produced a detailed study of the economic and social consequences of the war. She summed up the situation vividly as 'the extreme example of what happens in a large but poorly organized community when it is overrun by warworkers.'\textsuperscript{15} A \textit{Fortune} report which had appeared previously in October 1942 emphasised the inadequacy of the local infrastructure to cope with the sudden increase in demand for housing, hospitals and other municipal services.\textsuperscript{16}

Mobile's outwardly genteel and socially harmonious image was severely disrupted by immigration of settlers lured by the prospects of wartime wages. These settlers were also the product of large-scale structural changes in the agricultural economy of the South. Mechanisation had increased the rate of displacement among rural workers by introducing labour-saving equipment such as the grain harvester and the tractor. Former sharecroppers and farm proprietors traditionally located at the lowest end of the region's economic ladder, looked to cities such as Mobile to secure for themselves, and their families a slice of wartime prosperity. Nowhere was the impact of this prosperity more visibly felt in Mobile than in the influx of thousands of people seeking accommodation and employment. Studies of national migration trends classed the city as one of ten major locations for war-induced congestion. Numerous other surveys of conditions were prepared by the War Manpower Commission (WMC), the CCPA and the FEPC.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} J. Dos Passos, \textit{State of the Nation} (Boston, 1944), 92.


\textsuperscript{16} "Housing For War," \textit{Fortune} (12 October, 1942): 193.

Table 3: The Resident Population, By Race and Gender for Mobile and Metropolitan District*, 1944 and 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>1944</th>
<th>1940</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>1944</th>
<th>1940</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>1944</th>
<th>1940</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>106,001</td>
<td>78,720</td>
<td>48,293</td>
<td>17,160</td>
<td>57,708</td>
<td>41,552</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>69,391</td>
<td>46,606</td>
<td>32,263</td>
<td>23,898</td>
<td>37,128</td>
<td>25,708</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>36,610</td>
<td>29,114</td>
<td>16,030</td>
<td>13,270</td>
<td>20,580</td>
<td>15,844</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD*</td>
<td>201,369</td>
<td>114,906</td>
<td>94,843</td>
<td>55,005</td>
<td>106,526</td>
<td>59,901</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>143,997</td>
<td>72,388</td>
<td>69,272</td>
<td>33,403</td>
<td>74,725</td>
<td>36,985</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>57,372</td>
<td>42,518</td>
<td>25,571</td>
<td>19,602</td>
<td>31,801</td>
<td>22,916</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Congested Production Area Report for Mobile Labor Market Area, May 1944, War Manpower Commission, Washington, D.C., National Archives, Record Group 228.

The above table details the numerical breakdown of the population increase across Mobile County, city and the Metropolitan District in 1940 and in 1944. Surrounding suburbs experienced the largest percentage increase (163.5%), followed by the Metropolitan District (75.2%), the county (64.7%) and the central city (34.7%). The disproportionate increase reported in the suburbs can be accounted for by the availability of war housing financed by the federal government beginning in 1942. $800,000,000 was allocated to Mobile for this purpose which resulted in 650 public and 2,850 private units mainly for white settlers only. The loss of employees at Gulf Shipbuilding to other yards in Mississippi was a major reason for federal support of new housing construction under the jurisdiction of the WMC.  

18 “Housing for War,” op. cit.
Neither the federal authorities nor Mobilians themselves could have prepared adequately for the explosion in population that took place in the county and metropolitan areas between 1940 and 1944. Over 89,000 migrants arrived in Mobile between 1940 and 1943 thereby trebling normal rates of in-migration. In 1940, city commissioner, Charles C. Baumhauer called his jurisdiction 'a Madhouse.' Along with his two fellow commissioners, Baumhauer faced a municipal nightmare caused by limited personnel, an increase in complaints regarding utilities, demonstrations outside city hall, and a dangerous rise in crime. Overnight war-boom towns such as Mobile were not unique in 1942; others could be found in the upper East and West coasts. The principal features of these areas was the expansion of existing economic functions and the diversification of their respective industrial bases. In Mobile, the local shipbuilding industry in particular benefited significantly from the war. ADDSCO had been the product of Mobile's New South industrialisation but had operated a minor labour force until 1942 when the yard was enlarged 'from a struggling ship repair operation with about 1,000 irregularly employed workers to one of the major war production facilities, employing 30,000 employees.' ADDSCO was just one of Mobile's wartime employers and was joined by Gulf Shipbuilding, Brookley Field and the Aluminum Ore Company. These plants employed more than 55,000 workers between them in early 1944. However, demand for production workers had exceeded supply two years previously despite the levels of in-migration of blacks, whites, men and women, (Table 3).

The breakdown of the aggregate population by race and gender reveals some important information about the patterns of in-migration. The proportion of blacks to whites actually decreased despite a numerical increase from 29,114 to 36,610 in the city and from 42,518 to 57,372 in the Metropolitan District detailed in Graph 2. The dramatic rise in the white population from 78,720 to 106,001 and 114,906 to 201,369 respectively, was a major contributing factor. The profile of these in-migrants provided by census returns,

19 Mobile Register, January 6, 1944, 1; War Comes to Alabama, University of Alabama, Bureau of Public Administration (Tuscaloosa, 1943), 16. Calculations were based upon War Ration Books One and Two and Census Bureau estimations undertaken during this period.

20 Loftin, 'A Social History,' 297.

21 Ibid., 297-8, 304.


23 "Fastest Growing City," op. cit., 40.
suggested that Mobile would not have experienced such a dramatic rise in population had it not been for its role in World War II as a defence production area. Some 83,839 of the 89,000 people who settled in Mobile County after 1940 originated from nearby rural counties and neighbouring states. 46.1% came from within Alabama, 46.4% from Mississippi, Georgia and Florida and the remaining 7.5% from the North and West or foreign countries. Over one quarter confirmed that they had occupied farms prior to 1940.24 These people consisted of both unattached individuals and family groups. 20% of all married male migrants were reported to be living apart from their spouses. The majority settled in the suburbs of the city and within commutable distance to locations of defence employment. Only 30,093 were living within the city limits in 1944.25

The typical in-migrant differed significantly from residents of the county prior to 1940. They were divided equally between the sexes and many were taking up manufacturing employment with an hourly wage for the very first time. Their arrival produced a

Graph 2: Change in the African American Population of Mobile County, City and Metropolitan Area, 1940-1944

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\[\text{Graph 2: Change in the African American Population of Mobile County, City and Metropolitan Area, 1940-1944}\]


\[\text{24 Wartime Changes in Population and Family Characteristics, Mobile Congested Production Area: March 1944, Bureau of the Census, Department of Commerce, Series CA-2, No. 1, July 7 1944, 3.}\]

\[\text{25 Ibid.}\]
significant increase in the number of children under five years, a process already set in motion by the rise in birth rates across the county from 12,500 in 1940 to 217,692 in 1944.\textsuperscript{26} This proved to be a major problem in the following decades as Mobile's under-financed public school system was faced with a higher proportion of school-aged residents than in the nation as a whole. The physical impact of these settlers provided fertile ground for the flaring of tempers. Existing housing, municipal and educational provisions were stretched to its limits. In 1940 there were 21,083 dwelling units in the city and 37,134 in the county figures which clearly reflected the inadequacy of housing provision two years later. Although the great majority rented rooms in private households or rented an entire dwelling unit, (78.8\%), trailers and tents reminiscent of 'Hoovervilles' sprouted across the city's landscape as temporary housing for newcomers.\textsuperscript{27} There was an increase in housing construction for whites mainly in the suburbs, but doubling up still continued.

James C. Williams and his wife moved to Mobile from DeFuniak Springs, Florida in the summer of 1940. A young couple in their twenties, they had an infant son and were consequently in desperate need of housing. Williams, an experienced sawmill worker, was able to obtain employment as a foreman initially at Gulf Shipbuilding and then in 1941 moved to ADDSCO. Between 1940 and 1943, the Williams family relocated three times before they found a suitable home. Unable to find an apartment to house a family in the central city, they occupied two rooms in Plateau, an area described by a community study prepared by the Red Cross as a 'suburban section with a moderate to low standard of living and a large colored population.'\textsuperscript{28} In the unusual circumstances of the war years, white families were forced to reside, involuntarily, among African Americans. As a result, the Williams family were forced to suffer the indignities of a community toilet and the lack of running water. After a few months, they rented a four-room house on the same street but following disputes with their landlord over a rent decrease ordered by the Office of Price Adjustment in 1942 from $20 to $16 a month, they had to leave. This time they rented two first-floor rooms in a reconverted jailhouse located in Daphne on the eastern shores of the bay. Water and bathroom facilities were available on that floor but when Mrs. Williams' parents arrived from Geneva County, Alabama, they had to share

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. 2.

\textsuperscript{27} 16th Census of the United States, Housing I, Bureau of the Census, Department of Commerce, 1941, 37, 63.

\textsuperscript{28} Mobile County Chapter American Red Cross, Community Study (Mobile, 1946), 23.
these rooms after failing to find separate housing. Only when Mr. Williams claimed housing priority by way of his status at ADDSCO as a foreman, was his family able to occupy one of the three-bedroomed units constructed in a wartime project called Alabama Village. When he received a telephone, Williams recalled that this event was an indication that they 'had really arrived.'

Yet James Williams and his family were newcomers in a community which desired progress without any disruption to the social order or to the traditions that gave Mobilians a sense of cultural superiority over Birmingham and Montgomery. The middle to upper class white citizenry on the eve of World War II, were reported to be extremely proud of their city and particularly those aspects that bestowed upon it a sense of 'Southern plantation beauty', such as the yearly Azalea Trail Festival and the historic preservation of Oakleigh, one of Mobile's most beautiful of ante-bellum homes. Wartime modernisation, however, was cautiously welcomed by the business leadership indicated by the Chamber of Commerce's efforts to improve municipal services in Mobile during 1940. The opening of Bankhead Tunnel in that year facilitated automobile passage under the Mobile river. Dauphin Island was redeveloped into a tourist attraction consisting of white-sanded plains barred to African Americans. In conjunction with the federal government, Mobile's business groups added an ocean terminal to the aircraft modification centre at Brookley Field making it the only Army Air Force installation in the country with deep water facilities.

Wartime Mobile offered few signs that modernisation could go hand in hand with no change to the social structure and the status quo in race relations. This was a Southern community undergoing the painful transition from a medium-sized, port-city to a strategically valuable metropolitan area vital to the resourcing of United States military strength in Europe and the Pacific. The clinging to past customs and accepted norms of behaviour suddenly became anachronistic as the stimulus of war unsettled virtually every realm of interaction between old Mobilians and newcomers and also between urban blacks and rural migrants. War cities increasingly became host to rising social tensions manifest

29 Loftin, 'A Social History,' 285.
30 Presnell, 'The Impact of World War II,' 1.
particularly in the form of interracial violence between the races, juvenile delinquency, prostitution and a sharp rise in alcohol consumption.\(^\text{32}\) According to a government report, the rise in racial conflict in and around the Mobile area was the consequence of rural settlers to the county and city. These settlers had migrated from areas with sparse black populations where intense anti-black feeling had traditionally prevailed. Visitors to Mobile in 1944 described the city's in-migrants as the 'worst type of war workers to be found anywhere' who according to Nelson, brought with them a distinct brand of 'class and cultural prejudice' based on myth and folklore.\(^\text{33}\) One Mobile teacher graphically described her impression of these white migrants as

\begin{quote}
'\text{the lowest type of poor whites, these workers flocking in from the backwoods. They prefer to live in shacks and go barefoot...Give them a good home and they wouldn't know what to do with it. They...let their kids run wild on the streets. I only hope we can get rid of them after the war.'}\(^\text{34}\)
\end{quote}

Rural whites not accustomed to the sight of urban blacks going about their business on the transit system, in the workplace and in their neighbourhoods were particularly struck by not only their physical presence, but by the competition they presented in the scramble for wartime employment. The first signs came early on in 1942, when a spate of clashes between blacks and whites dangerously set the tone of a new period of racial instability. Not only were they more frequent than before, their form assumed a more violent character. According to the federal authorities, the trouble started primarily in the city's overcrowded transit system from the 'enforced contact of whites and Negroes.'\(^\text{35}\) The increase in black workers requiring transportation across town to their places of work, led to occasions when segregation ordinances for seating arrangements were violated. The potential for clashes was furthered by the new bus drivers who:

\begin{quote}
'\text{had recently migrated into Mobile from Upper State Mississippi and Alabama...fresh from the rural areas and...[were]...extremely anti-Negro.'}\(^\text{36}\)
\end{quote}

\(^\text{32}\) Daniel, 'Going Among Strangers,' \textit{op. cit.}

\(^\text{33}\) Nelson, \textit{op. cit.}, 971.

\(^\text{34}\) \textit{Some Problems of the Negro in Mobile}, undated, author not known, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Record Group (RG), 83, National Archives, 1-2; Meyer, \textit{Journey Through Chaos} (New York), 1944), 197, 199, 210; remarks of a Mobile teacher quoted in McLaurin and Thomason, \textit{Mobile: Life and Times of a Great Southern City}, 127.

\(^\text{35}\) \textit{Ibid.}
The majority of incidents involved the charging of blacks for disorderly conduct on the buses for failing to adhere to the prescribed seating arrangements or if they were verbally abusive towards the drivers. Interestingly, none were charged with violation of the segregation law which would have entailed greater penalties and prolonged investigations.

The extent to which wartime racial tensions had been fuelled by the rise in black disobedience and white newcomers' intolerance in responding to this development was symbolised in the death of Private Henry Williams. A black serviceman, Williams was shot by a white bus driver on a journey across town following a heated verbal exchange between the two. Racial clashes on the transit system foreshadowed the kind that was to erupt in Montgomery during the 1950s. In Mobile, the sudden increase in the working population represented a severe strain on the segregated transit system. Robin Kelley’s work on the nature and causes of black resistance to segregation in public spaces such as the municipal transit system, helps to explain this in terms of market forces. Urban transit companies, especially in cities like Mobile and Montgomery, relied significantly upon black patronage. Although blacks were charged the same fare as whites, they were rarely given equal access to the bus service. As customers paying for a service they were entitled to fair treatment but instead, black passengers faced humiliation, violence and a limited service based upon the arbitrary decisions of white bus drivers. This was a good reason as any for disobeying the custom on public transit.37

An impending crisis in race relations was even more vividly manifest in the new air force base at Brookley Field. At the peak of its military construction operations in 1943, the base employed a civilian workforce of 17,000 to cope with the demand for weapons, munitions and other war supplies. Black male workers represented approximately 9% of the total labour force. Black soldiers stationed at the base were housed in a segregated facility known as the Old Mobile County Fairgrounds. These barracks were isolated from the main military site and lacked basic facilities such as lighting and glass windows. LeFlore at the NAACP branch had complained about this and the fact that the base had only a limited postal service to this area.38 In 1944, clashes broke out between white and


38 LeFlore to the Adjutant General, Brookley Air Force Base, November 13th, 1942, Series I: NAACP, box 2, file 4, LeFlore Papers, USA Archives.
coloured soldiers following a shooting incident involving the latter and the military police. There were no casualties, but the cause of the shooting indicated that racial tensions had reached a dangerously volatile point. On May 26, the *New York Times* reported that 'the trouble started after a white civilian employee complained to the military police that he had been robbed by a Negro soldier and was escorted to the barracks to identify the assailant.'

It was then that the blacks troops opened fire in an exchange lasting for nearly two hours. Nine black privates including: Clarence Rogers, Garfield Thomas, Jr., Willie Fleetwood, Willie Wright, Edward C. Roose, John E. Grant and Willie Lane, were court-martialed under sections 66, 67 and 89 of the Articles of War which required punishment for attempted mutiny and sedition. None of the statements given by the black privates protesting their innocence affected the final decision of the military authorities at Brookley Field. All those involved were temporarily discharged from their duties.

Another incident in June began in much the same fashion with a white soldier charging that he had been robbed and beaten by a black serviceman. But on this occasion, when the military police entered the black barracks to identify the assailants, the shoot-outs which followed resulted in the wounding of a white sergeant and the dismissal of several blacks without compensation. In the latter incident, an inquiry revealed that the allegations made against the black soldier were unfounded. Like the situation on the buses, it seemed that the slightest argument or misunderstanding could erupt in armed conflict at Brookley Base. However, interracial tensions in army camps and on military installations, although widespread, were only a mere prelude to the biggest progenitor of racial conflict in the wartime South.

*The Challenge to White Supremacy in Wartime Mobile*

With its vast land and mineral resources, cheap labour supply and a government eager to acquire federal military contracts, Alabama inevitably played an important role as supplier of metals, aircrafts and warships during World War II. During the peak years of the war, ADDSCO was producing one ship a week having won contracts for 20 Liberty

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39 *New York Times*, May 26 1944, Press Intelligence Clipping, box A331, Group II, Papers of the NAACP.

40 Presnell, 'Impact of World War II,' 38.

41 *Baltimore Afro-American* and *Chicago Defender*, June 3 1944, Press Intelligence Clipping.
ships, 102 T-2 tankers and 2,800 vessels for the Army, Navy and War Shipping Administration. Gulf Shipbuilding managed contracts for 29 minesweepers, 7 Fletcher class destroyers and 30 tankers.\footnote{Cronenberg, \textit{op. cit.}, 52-3.} Wartime industrial growth represented an important consolidation of accelerated capital investment which had taken place since the New Deal. By 1941, one year into the war, 55 non-defence plants had opened in Alabama with a total investment of $27 million and a total employment of 3,000.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 1.} Along with representative Boykin of Mobile, Governors Frank Dixon and John Sparkman were strong supporters of state industrial development. Dixon was particularly keen to seize opportunities to assist local communities in this respect. Boykin had also leaned heavily upon Sparkman to persuade the Maritime Commission to consider Mobile for its defence expenditure plans.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 60, 64, 72.}

However, none of these men countenanced a change in the place of African Americans within their state's political economy on account of wartime mobilisation. Advocates of the interests of the Big Mule-Black Belt alliance influential in Jefferson County, Dixon and Sparkman were linked to the conservative wing of the Democratic Party. According to one scholar of Alabama's role during World War II, the Depression and New Deal brought the state into the centre stage of national politics for the first time in its history. Henry Steagall and Lister Hill, were prominent members of Roosevelt's New Deal coalition in Congress. However, one of the major problems of a larger political influence beyond that of the state-level was the Roosevelt administration's commitment to racial equality, first in the New Deal relief programmes and then after the MOWM, in the form of Executive Order 8802. Dixon, like his contemporaries elsewhere in the South, soon became troubled by racial issues symbolised by the unravelling of the New Deal plank in the state government by 1943. Furthermore, while he may have been an ardent supporter of modernisation, he could not ignore the culture from which he hailed. His uncle, Thomas Dixon had written \textit{The Clansmen}, the novel which inspired D.W. Griffith's white supremacist film, \textit{Birth of a Nation}.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 60, 65, 70.} Herein lay the biggest problem to confront Alabama in the 1940s: how to protect white supremacy while also extending the
prosperity created by the state's enthusiastic support of the nation's economic mobilisation for war. Like other segregated Southern cities, Mobile had a tradition of employing blacks for the majority of unskilled and semi-skilled sectors of the labour force. According to Donald Dewey, 'a rigid division of labor is a striking feature of everyday business' in most Southern towns.\textsuperscript{46} These towns tended to divide work into "white" and "Negro" jobs. The latter were jobs that whites would not usually perform. More importantly, Dewey identified four main rules of conduct concerning the employment of African Americans:

'...(a) Negroes and whites cannot be worked together; (b) Negro men and white women cannot be worked together; (c) Negroes cannot be employed in jobs where they face a white public (e.g. as waitresses or clerks); and (d) Negro workers are found only in subordinate posts in mixed work groups...'\textsuperscript{47}

Although Dewey was largely referring to the post-war situation, these rules help to explain the pattern of employment in Mobile during World War II. Dewey offered further 'virtual "laws" of labour use in the Southern economy': the rarity of blacks holding jobs which require them to give orders to whites and of either group working side by side on the same job.\textsuperscript{48}

Dewey's hypothesis applied particularly well to the labour patterns at Mobile's local shipyards. Prior to May, 1943, none of the yards had blacks employed in skilled positions. However, long-term changes in the Southern economy and the displacement of agricultural workers from depressed rural areas undergoing mechanisation, soon presented a serious challenge to the system of racialised labour in cities such as Mobile. The gradual shift from a cotton economy to the diversified production of ships, steel, iron and aircraft combined with the availability of rural migrant workers had the effect of destabilising traditional employment patterns in the South.\textsuperscript{49}

Manpower shortages and the problem of retaining war workers in one particular plant for more than a few months at a time had loomed large in Mobile by 1942. None of the


\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid.}, 81.

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}, 283.

\textsuperscript{49} Nelson, 'Organized Labor,' 968.
wartime federal agencies anticipated the dramatic rise in manpower shortages between 1943 and 1944. Since in-migration had failed to overcome all these shortages, management at the plants were forced into the difficult position of considering the employment of blacks. In February 1942, the National Resources Planning Board temporarily designated Mobile and Baldwin counties as a single local labour market area. Within this area, employment was broken down into the following categories: shipbuilding, 50%, Brookley Field, 16% other manufacturing, mining and transportation, 10% and the remainder in trade and services.\textsuperscript{50} According to the report, the principal war industry and population was located in the county with the main products being ships, ship and airplane repair, paper, building materials, alumina, textiles, farm and fishery goods.\textsuperscript{51}

In March 1940, there were only 58,681 persons in the county labour force, 41,270 males and 17,411 females, (Figure 1). By March 1944, this was estimated to have increased to 101,822, 69,971 males and 32,151 women now constituted the new, expanded labour force. The rise in male workers contrasted with the trend in the nation as a whole which experienced a decline in the number of males available for employment due to conscription. Mobile's labour force was subjected to an increase in males of both races and also the availability of single white women, who were eligible for defence employment. The racial composition of the labour force had changed significantly from pre-war conditions. In 1940, blacks had represented 39.6%; by 1944 this position had declined to 28.1% a major cause being the lower percentage of blacks who had migrated to the area since the beginning of the war, (14.4%). In-migration largely accounted for the growth in the local labour supply. Since 1940, newcomers had added 44,506 workers. Existing residents in the county had accounted only for only a minor percentage.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{50} Report on Mobile Defense Area Alabama, Office of Defense, Health and Welfare Services, Region No. VII, Birmingham, Alabama and the National Resources Planning Board, Region No. III, Atlanta, Georgia, 1 February 1942, Record Group 228, 1.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 3.
Expansion of the principal war industries in the region quickly demonstrated the inadequacy of the local labour supply. Several federal surveys of the employment situation in Mobile were prepared between 1941 and 1945. A report dated September 1942, identified the specific problems that were going to affect local war plants. It was confirmed that major employers had, by 1942, converted to war production. While material shortages and curtailment orders had not posed a serious problem at this stage, the demand for labour was continually exceeding supply. A sudden increase in demand at the shipyards had been caused by the introduction of a three-shift operation system and the acquisition of additional contracts.\textsuperscript{53}

Table 4 details the supply of employees and estimated increases for the respective industries as of May, 1943. The Federal Security Agency predicted that some 11,908 workers would have to be drafted in from outside Mobile on May 15th in order to meet production schedules. Shipbuilding had the highest percentage of the workforce in 1943. The two major companies, ADDSCO and the Gulf Shipbuilding Corporation employed a total of 36,372 workers between them. Another pressing problem identified by the report was the issue of high labour turnover. Those in-migrants lured to the city in search of higher earnings found that such wages often did not

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'counterbalance the increased cost of living and all the inconveniences...of transportation, crowded public spaces...And so they move on back home, to the army, to other defense areas.'

Table 4: Employment in Mobile's Principal War Industries, May 1943

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employer</th>
<th>Total Employees</th>
<th>Estimated Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADDSCO</td>
<td>25,792</td>
<td>8,701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulf Shipbuilding Co.</td>
<td>10,580</td>
<td>3,095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brookley Field:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilian Personnel</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>Nil (50% Decrease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction Personnel</td>
<td>1,960</td>
<td>Anticipated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALCOA*</td>
<td>1,001</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trades and Services</td>
<td>8,700</td>
<td>3,761</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper Manufacturing</td>
<td>2,120</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>61,153</td>
<td>15,908</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Available Local Labour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forecasted In-Migration</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Estimated Employment</td>
<td></td>
<td>11,908</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated Increase</td>
<td></td>
<td>77,061</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 5 below reflects the traditional colour line at work in Southern industry at the start of 1943. Black males were heavily under-represented across all plants forming 10% of total employment. Black women were not able to enter into wartime industrial employment at this point whereas white women had made remarkable gains, forming 9%. Rather than break this pattern, the WMC advised management at ADDSCO and Brookley to consider solving their manpower problems by enticing white women into paid employment. The agency had conducted frequent recruitment drives among women which were successful in two very important respects: easing the burden of labour supply and

maintaining rigid adherence to the barriers placed upon black promotion into skilled categories.\textsuperscript{55}

Table 5: Racial Breakdown of Industrial Employment in Mobile, January 1943

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>White Males</th>
<th>White Females</th>
<th>Black Males</th>
<th>Black Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADDSCO</td>
<td>16,980</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulf</td>
<td>9,750</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brookley Field</td>
<td>8,980</td>
<td>2,482</td>
<td>1,498</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>35,710</td>
<td>4,002</td>
<td>4,528</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% of Labour

| Force | 81 | 9 | 10 | 0 |


Prior to 1940, Alabama women had very few opportunities to gain positions in industrial employment. The majority of women who were married were expected to raise a family and look after the home. The acute labour shortages of the war years gave white women in Mobile the first chance to enter occupations which had been previously closed to them.\textsuperscript{56} The federal government confirmed in September 1942 that the employment of women in the shipbuilding industry had begun as a temporary measure. Welding was the first occupation to recruit women followed closely by ship-fitting, acetylene burning and other general work. There was a reluctance to employ them on ship construction due to the racially-mixed crews that worked in that department. Advertisements specified that potential applicants should be of between 18 and 35 years of age, a weight of between 100 and 140 pounds and physically fit.\textsuperscript{57} On the prompting of the WMC, the Mobile Air Service Command (MASC), issued frequent advertisements in the local press urging

\textsuperscript{55} Cronenberg, op. cit., 41.

\textsuperscript{56} M. Martha Thomas, \textit{Riveting and Rationing in Dixie: Alabama Women During World War II} (Tuscaloosa, 1987), 2-8.

\textsuperscript{57} 'Resurvey,' op. cit., 3.
women to apply for positions at Brookley Field. Trainees would receive a remuneration of $90 monthly rising to $120 after completion. In 1943, white women constituted 11% of Mobile's total war employees. MASC's efforts produced staggering results between 1942 and 1943 when the number of women at Brookley rose from 2,300 to nearly half of the base's total employees of 17,000. When compared to the total black male share of war employment (16%), Table 5, for the same period, it was clear that war industry was more willing to tap the pool of female workers. White women now formed a vital source of labour which could be harnessed to supply the shipyards and Brookley Field, the two places where manpower shortages were most acute.

Wartime employment of women in major defence industries had important economic and social consequences for a society accustomed to racial segregation. The weakening of gender divisions which had kept them out of manufacturing employment brought to this particular social group, the material benefits of wartime participation. One woman recounted that prior to the war, she was earning $20 for a 40-hour week as a clerk in a department store; at the shipyards, she earned $46 for a 70-hour week. Women achieved their greatest fame in the craft of welding where they proved themselves equal to male workers. The Mobile Chamber of Commerce provided training courses for white women who wished to become welders in the summer of 1943. At the base, white women moved from their traditional clerical positions into aircraft riveting and repair. The Mobile Press Register photographed one such riveter by the name of Rosie in a series of articles which praised the arrival of women war workers and their commitment to Alabama's war effort, indicating that, to various sections of the white establishment, former gender orthodoxies concerning the type of work women were fit for, could be suspended for the sake of wartime pressures which called upon all Alabamians to do their utmost for their country. In a 1943 statement entitled The War Comes to Alabama, Governor Chauncey Sparks mentioned nothing about the unprecedented use of women in the labour force but instead heralded this period as a golden time of full employment and prosperity for the state.  

58 Cronenberg, 41.

59 Nelson, 'Organized Labor,' 959-961. Nelson found that women achieved greatest fame in the welding craft which was a rapidly expanding area, but the majority of ADDSCO's female workers were confined to the traditionally female clerical positions which had been closed to them in the shipyards before the war. Wages for women in these positions were reported to be in the region of $61.20 for a 70-hour week compared to $12.50 for a 48-hour week in a department store.
Interestingly, a significant percentage of white women were still not reported to be in employment. In March 1944, 25,032 women were reported to be available for work but not in the labour force. Of the 24,871 mothers in the county, 4,000 were working and only 3,000 of these were doing so full-time. It was unlikely that these women would be freed from childcare and other domestic duties to make themselves available for work, hence the shipyards could not reasonably expect them to aid labour shortages. It was also estimated that by May 1943, the total number of white men could not be increased by more than 10% across all war industries.61

One of the most important consequences of the expansion of the shipbuilding industry for blacks, was the possibility of promotion to welding or to clerical positions. In spite of unprecedented labour shortages local employers had failed to use the pool of under-utilised African Americans willing and able to work. Were they to use this pool, black workers would have access to the higher wages that accompanied promotion to skilled employment detailed by occupation in Table 6. In March 1942, 1,500 black males were classified as unemployed in the city and there seemed little likelihood that any of them would fill the numerous openings for skilled positions at the shipyards, especially since the introduction of a sizeable white female labour force.

The policy of the second largest shipbuilding company, Gulf Shipbuilding, was to rigidly refuse blacks employment where whites could be recruited instead. In 1942, all but ten of Gulf's 5,000 employees were white. ADDSCO, however, had a more lenient policy towards blacks and hired them in minor occupations such as dock men, janitors, scalers and spray painters. Welding was the only shipyard occupation for which the training of blacks was considered. However, most of the city's training courses in this craft were closed to black applicants.62 Estimated earnings of white in-migrants for a 40-hour week at the shipyards ranged from $26 for unskilled positions, to a high of $58 for skilled positions. Such higher-than-average wages had manifested itself in the rise in alcohol consumption, the pursuit of leisure and a general increase in disposable income for the

60 Thomas, Riveting and Rationing in Dixie, 9, Nelson, ibid.

61 Report on Mobile Defense Area, 3

62 Memo to Lawrence Cramer, Executive Secretary, FEPC from Field Representative John Beecher, Subject: Field Report on Mobile, Alabama with special reference to the employment of Negroes in the Shipyards, February 13, 1942, Records of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, RG 228, National Archives.
skilled shipyard worker. However, labour turnover reached between 25% and 30% between 1942 and 1943.63

Table 6: Wage Scales in Mobile Based on a 40-Hour Week, 1943

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Skilled</th>
<th>Semi-Skilled</th>
<th>Un-Skilled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shipbuilding</td>
<td>$48-$58</td>
<td>$30-$48</td>
<td>$25-$30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aluminium Ore</td>
<td>$48</td>
<td>$29</td>
<td>$22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper Mills</td>
<td>$36-$44</td>
<td>$24-$36</td>
<td>$18-$22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>$22-$28</td>
<td>$18-$21</td>
<td>$16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilities</td>
<td>$36-$60</td>
<td>$24-$32</td>
<td>$16-$20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The decline in the proportion of black workers at ADDSCO from 20% to 15% in 1942, was one indication that the chances of promotion were slim for the majority of black shipyard workers. State Supervisor of Trade and Industrial Education, E.S. Plowden, made this point at the annual meeting of the Alabama Committee for the Commission on Interracial Co-operation held in Birmingham in 1942

"the metal trades in Alabama were effectively closed to Negroes and it was but the most elementary realism to accept the fact Negroes...were caught in an "inverted spiral" with respect to employment opportunities in Alabama, with but two large fields remaining open to them, namely mining and domestic service..."64

Plowden restated what was already an established fact. ADDSCO had on numerous occasions refused to promote blacks during the increase in production between 1940 and 1942. But what was most striking about the situation in Mobile when compared to other war production locations on the West Coast and in the Northeast was the rigidity of this pattern in black employment at the local shipyards. Other yards in the country had, for one reason or another, been forced to have at least some blacks in service, skilled and

63 Ibid., 3; Nelson, ‘Organized Labor,’ 981; Daniel, ‘Southern Reactions to World War II,’ 68.
64 Ibid.
semi-skilled occupations, thereby gradually moving to an integrated labour force. This, of course, had done little to balance the overwhelming preponderance (88%) of blacks in unskilled positions. In the same vein, blacks did not hold any of the clerical or management positions. Overall, Table 7 confirms the traditional role blacks played in Southern industry.

Table 7: The Distribution of Blacks Across Skill Levels in National Ship Repair and Conversion Yards, 1944

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational Group</th>
<th>% of Blacks to Total Employment</th>
<th>Distribution of Blacks</th>
<th>Distribution Across Skill Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional and Managerial</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-Skilled</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>88.0</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Division of Occupational Analysis and Manning Tables, FEPC, Office Files of Wilfred C. Leland, July 1944, Record Group 228, National Archives, 21.

Dewey’s ‘laws’ governing black-white relations in Southern industry were an important consideration for local companies wishing to safeguard their operations in Mobile. The fact that both ADDSCO and Gulf were locally-owned plants rendered them particularly vulnerable to local custom and practice. To run integrated lines at either yards would have constituted a major abandonment of the colour line, particularly since the yards now employed large numbers of white women. However, the federal government’s unprecedented intrusion into the economic management of defence centres such as Mobile under the jurisdiction of various specially-commissioned wartime agencies, rendered it extremely unlikely that either company could continue to avoid tapping the pool of African Americans in the local labour supply indefinitely. In this particular respect, a change in direction was also induced by the impact of Randolph’s MOWM, Roosevelt’s
Executive Order 8802 which created the FEPC and the rivalry between the AFL and the CIO over shipyard workers in the Gulf Coast region.  

Since Mobile was one of ten major war production locations and the site of considerable federal defence investment, the WMC inevitably kept a close eye on developments in the shipbuilding industry there. In 1940, the commission provided vocational training for blacks in anticipation of the increase in war production. However, the Mobile Chamber of Commerce decided to bar most blacks entry into courses such as welding, machine shop work and mechanical drafting. The explanation for this policy was that, in Mobile, such employment opportunities did not exist for blacks and therefore, it would be futile to train them. After much pressure from WMC officials, Plowden agreed to open up the courses to blacks provided that Alabama industries were willing to hire them. Events outside Mobile appeared to favour the opening up of defense training and employment to blacks in 1941. African-American leaders campaigning vociferously for equality of opportunity included A. Philip Randolph whose proposed MOWM had forced Roosevelt to consider some measure to combat the problem of racial discrimination in the nation's war production facilities. Previously, in July 1940, a broad consensus had been achieved within the United States government to establish a committee dedicated to ensuring that while the nation was at war, the full and equitable use of all available manpower and resources were being fully utilised, particularly in federally-supported production plants. The National Defense Advisory Commission was to form part of the FEPC, a wartime agency charged with the responsibility of eliminating discrimination against black workers and aiding their integration into training programs and industry. Local defense contractors such as ADDSCO, were sent letters on behalf of President Roosevelt requiring that, under the provisions of Executive Order 8802, they had the duty 'to utilize the labor of all qualified workers regardless of race, creed, color or national origin.' The rationale for this order was not so much the issue of African American demands for equality, but that 'total and global war required the fullest mobilisation of the entire production potential of the arsenal of democracy.'

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66 Presnell, 'The Impact of WW II on Race Relations,' 9.

67 *Report of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, May 1943, op. cit.*
Origins

The formation of the FEPC was the first federal intrusion into the management of local race relations since the Freedmen's Bureau during Reconstruction. It had the effect of placing the issue of employment discrimination against African Americans on to the national political agenda. Given the blanket refusal of both ADDSCO and Gulf to promote existing black shipyard employees to skilled positions, management at both yards were not only failing to consider all options to solve manpower problems but, more importantly, after the creation of the FEPC, were continuing to act in violation of Executive Order 8802. Such a position was typical of a number of shipyard operators across the South bound by local economic and social customs to avoid the 'intermingling of the races on skilled jobs.'\textsuperscript{69} ADDSCO president, David Dunlap, indicated concerns that racial violence at his yards would severely disrupt production if the company complied with federal orders. To him, the economic viability of promoting blacks was minimal especially when weighed against potential work stoppages and walkouts by angry white workers.\textsuperscript{70}

Having discovered a pattern of racial discrimination in the South's industries, the FEPC was obliged to establish a series of public hearings in Birmingham between June 18th and 20th, 1942. Similar hearings had been organised in Chicago, Los Angeles and New York. In Mobile, numerous complaints from black shipyard workers were aired forcing the admission of discrimination by ADDSCO and Gulf resulting in promises to remedy the situation as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{71} The initial success of the hearings was supplemented by a deadline of November for management at both yards to follow up their promises. However, by May 1943, it was obvious to FEPC officials that neither yard had moved to upgrade any of its black workers to skilled positions despite acute labour shortages. By now, the Maritime Commission had joined the FEPC in urging the upgrading of blacks. Anticipating the possibility of racial conflict, the WMC suggested that skilled blacks work in segregated lines. ADDSCO's management, in a desperate bid to avoid any such course

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\textsuperscript{68} For the background to the formation of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice and the origins of Executive Order 8802, see M.E. Reed, \textit{Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946} (Baton Rouge, 1991).

\textsuperscript{69} For the local pressure to maintain segregated labour in Southern shipyards, M.E. Reed, 'The FEPC, the Black Worker, and the Southern Shipyards,' \textit{op. cit.}, 446-7.

\textsuperscript{70} Dunlap quoted in Reed, 453.

\textsuperscript{71} Reed, 452.
Origins

of action, ignored this suggestion in the hope that the WMC would give them more time. When the WMC stepped up the pressure, the company replied that 2,500 additional welders were needed and that there simply were not enough blacks available. Realising that such an argument would not appease the WMC or the FEPC, ADDSCO's management suddenly took the drastic decision to integrate the welding force without warning. 

On the night of Tuesday, May 24th, 1943, the FEPC's partial victory against ADDSCO led to the upgrading of 12 blacks to welding positions. All 12 men managed to work the segregated night shift without causing any problems, thus confirming the value of the WMC's suggestion of racially separate lines. The next morning, however, rumours spread across the yards that white workers faced the possibility of being displaced by blacks resulting in the worst race riot to ever take place in the city of Mobile. White mobs beat, clubbed and verbally abused black workers in scenes which apparently had been predicted by the ADDSCO management who had taken the precaution of calling in the Alabama National Guard to occupy the city before the riot had begun. Over 50 blacks, male and female, were seriously injured after being attacked with crow bars, steel rods and wrenches. White women were equally brutal towards their black co-workers, the majority of which were unskilled and had not retaliated. Over 27,000 workers walked out until order was restored by the Alabama National Guard. Production did not resume until four days later. Thousands of black workers refused to return to their jobs for some weeks after the riot and many filed for transfers or left town altogether.

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72 Reed, 454-5.

73 R.H. Nicholls, 'Summary of a Report on the Race Riots in the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company Yards in Mobile, Alabama,' June 25 1943 op. cit.; V. Bernstein, "The Story of a Race Riot: Women Joined Men in Clubbing and Stoning Negro Ship Workers," PM, May 31, 1943; D. Hirschfield, 'Gender, Generation, and Race in American Shipyards in the Second World War,' The International History Review 30 (February 1997): 132-143, differences of gender were compounded by differences in race hence, no white woman could engage in 'normal' everyday relations with black men at the yards without causing a near race riot. Furthermore, they could not share the experience of exclusion with blacks even if they had wanted to nor could they have equated racial discrimination with sexual discrimination since that would have presented even more difficulties with white male workers. African Americans did not benefit from the shipbuilding boom until late 1942 and early 1943 when labour became scarce, the addition of 'Okies' and 'Arkies' added to racial tensions and the scapegoating of blacks for all crime at the yards and in the city in some cases.
The riot was one of the most meticulously documented episodes of wartime interracial violence in the nation. The FEPC, the NUL and several newspapers sent investigators to Mobile to report on the causes and results of the racial trouble at the yards. All reports confirmed three things: that rumours had caused the flaring of tempers among white workers, that the ADDSCO management had acted irresponsibly and that black workers had not been guilty of inciting the riot or retaliation. The NUL’s investigator, R.H. Nicholls, made clear at the start of his report the importance that the organisation attached to the Mobile riot since it had been followed in quick succession by similar interracial disturbances in Detroit, Michigan and Beaumont, Texas, thus establishing a dangerous pattern for wartime race relations.  

Nicholls’ investigation was a valuable example of a growing consensus among labour unions, African-American groups and federal officials that the riot may have been deliberately instigated by the ADDSCO management most probably to scupper the FEPC’s role in contravening Southern race relations by trying to open up skilled defense employment to blacks. The report laid the blame on a number of groups including the Maritime Commission and the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers (IUMSWA), but major responsibility was attached to the ADDSCO management who had failed to adequately prepare its white workers for the promotion of blacks to welding jobs. Not for the first time did the explosive power of rumours and rumour-mongering cause racial strife in the South during the early 1940s. The region’s most distinguished sociologist at the time, Howard Odum, produced a detailed study of the impact of white racial fears surrounding the activities of African Americans in their midst entitled, Race and Rumors of Race. Whites were terrified of a militant surge among this group as the pressures of war freed them from the traditional constraints of racial subordination. Their worst nightmare was the fear of mass interracial relationships between white women and black men. When viewed in the social context of the wartime South, the ADDSCO riot was the culmination of the potentially explosive and volatile intersection between race, gender and the defence of white supremacy. The one rumour which added particular fuel

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75 Nicholls, 4.

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to the riot was the possibility that white women would be working alongside black men, thereby breaking long-established Southern taboos concerning interracial sex and strict social separation of the races. To white workers this also represented an ultimate betrayal on the part of their employers adding to their part in the breakdown of order at the yards.77

There was also reason to believe that ADDSCO's management, having been forced to promote blacks by the FEPC despite their many warnings about the possibility of serious racial conflict, would have welcomed an incident that proved the wisdom of their earlier refusal to promote African Americans. Nicholls reported that during the riot, company guards were reluctant to intervene and quell the violence. Responsibility was eventually discharged to troops from nearby Brookley Field base to restore order.78 The FEPC's prolonged investigations of other war locations across the South indicated that ADDSCO was by no means unique in resisting federal orders which contravened local employment practices. Alabama's political establishment was scornful of the FEPC's meddling in local race relations during the war. Governor Dixon claimed that the federal government had adopted 'policies to break down the principle of segregation under which the white and Negro races have lived in peace together since Reconstruction.' 79 In retrospect, the ADDSCO riot was a vivid reminder of the danger in upsetting this 'peace' between the races.

Yet that peace was unlikely to survive the transforming effects of World War II upon the state. If the fear of sexual contact between white women and black men had been a potent force in fuelling Mobile's race riot, so was the fear of economic competition. Reports had stressed the pro-active role of women in the beating of black co-workers. One black man recalled that 'a white lady hit me over the head with a broom handle.'80 These women came largely from the in-migrant population originating from rural areas and were most probably engaged in industrial employment for the first time. They shared a desire to

77 'Summary of a Race Riot...', 2; Nelson, 'Organized Labor,' 979-80 which examines in greater detail the justification for segregation based upon sex and the fear of the black male sexuality.

78 'Summary of a Race Riot...'' 5.


80 Bernstein, 'Story of a Race Riot,' op. cit.
Origins

safeguard their economic position with their male counterparts. Their presence at the yards in increasing numbers since 1941, made the promotion of black males even more difficult to countenance. However, Nicholls stated clearly in his report that it was not the rumours of an integrated workforce which essentially motivated the rioters. The real problem was economic: that blacks would be performing tasks previously closed to them alongside whites thereby establishing a dangerous precedent for the future. Promotion also meant that white welders would now have to compete with blacks for their jobs. When this was translated in terms of the 7,000 black employees at ADDSCO, the spectre of opening up skilled jobs to African Americans appeared like a devastating blow to white supremacy. According to Victor Bernstein, the violence was mostly perpetrated by the younger sections of the workforce. An ADSCO vice-president told FEPC investigators that the older craftsmen at the yards were not participants in the violence but rather the 'young bucks'. These younger male shipyard workers formed part of the newcomers who had recently arrived to Mobile to find a city where overcrowding had taken its toll on housing, welfare and municipal services leading to a significant rise in racial tension during the war. Anxious to take full advantage of the new economic opportunities of the war years, they were particularly prone to extreme opposition regarding the promotion of African Americans.

Compared to the particularly vicious race riots that occurred at the turn of the century, the ADDSCO riot was mild considering that no blacks were lynched and none of the injuries reported was fatal. Its psychological significance, however, would far outweigh the violence. Nicholls indicated that the Mobile area was not well-known for such racial disturbances and in fact, had a good record for race relations. Only 200 of the 7,000 black workers returned to their jobs the day after the riot. About 1,000 made applications to the WMC for transfers to other jobs in Mobile or to leave the city altogether; most were denied such transfers. Many feared for their safety and left before they had even received their wages. Production was severely curtailed for days by the combination of reduced black labouring staff and white walkouts. Racial conflict had led to the temporary closure of production in a major shipbuilding centre during a period of crucial national

81 Hirschfield, *op. cit.*

82 Nelson, 'Organized Labor,' 965.

83 'Field Investigation Report,' FEPC; Victor Bernstein, 'Story of a Race Riot,' *PM*; Nicholls, 'Summary of a Report...,' 3.
economic mobilisation for war. The situation was a source of embarrassment to all concerned, from the FEPC to the Maritime Commission to native Mobilians, shocked by such an occurrence in a city which was renowned for its dignified culture and long heritage. Editor of the local Mobile Press Register, William Chandler, wrote of his belief that black workers at the yards were 'entirely free from blame'. This embarrassment manifested itself in various gestures to Mobile's black community intended to reassure them that it was still safe for them to live and work in the city.

In an unusual situation, some native white citizens in Mobile had made a concerted effort to acknowledge the need to protect innocent victims of a riot which was the consequence of newcomers to the area. Several statements were made by the local IUMSWA officers, ADDSCO management, federal troops and the local police that blacks wishing to return to work would be given adequate protection. In addition to this, the IUMSWA arranged a public hearing with African American leaders in the city in a bid to restore confidence among the black community. However, few black workers demonstrated their willingness to return to the yards. This, in turn caused whites to walk out because black labourers were not available to do the unpleasant tasks. The effect on production and morale at ADDSCO required immediate action to remedy the situation. On Friday 27th May, a six-hour meeting was held by ADDSCO representatives, the IUMSWA and federal agencies. High on the agenda was the resolution of problems created by the promotion of the twelve black men. Various opinions were put forward ranging from total opposition to the employment of skilled African American welders to the creation of four separate 'shipways' where blacks would work under the supervision of white foremen on all the crafts associated with bare-hull construction. Unskilled blacks would continue to work as labourers and helpers but had the opportunity of promotion to skilled jobs in the segregated shipways. The FEPC and military officials made it clear that, considering the need for skilled workers, it was essential that blacks were hired in this capacity. Although, the use of segregated lines was not the ideal solution in the eyes of FEPC officers, given the consequences of the ADDSCO riot, they were forced to endorse the

\[84\] Nelson, ‘Organized Labor,’ *ibid.*; Nicholls, *ibid.*

\[85\] *Mobile Register*, May 28, 1943, sec. 1, 1, 12.

Responses from within the black community were unsurprisingly negative. Civil rights leaders did not welcome the principle of segregation underpinning this compromise. Even though working in a segregated line as a skilled employee meant an increase in pay from $.63 to $1.20 an hour, Walter White of the NAACP headquarters in New York, called the plan 'a step backward' while the NUL, having spent so much time and funds on a detailed report of the riot, criticized it as 'unsound and unrealistic.' The view from the African-American voice in the north via the Pittsburgh Courier reiterated that of White and the NUL, the plan being 'proof' that 'segregation ALWAYS means discrimination.' Local opinion was provided by LeFlore who regarded the plan as having completely overturned the FEPC's basic purposes. He maintained his earlier stand that full integration was a necessary and just solution all round. Given the situation one year after the plan had been adopted, LeFlore was justifiably outraged. A 1944 survey of the distribution of blacks in the workforce at ADDSCO found that two years after the FEPC had ordered the upgrading of blacks to welding positions 'although Negroes are employed as carpenters, electricians and welders in the yards surveyed, they are generally denied employment in many skilled and unskilled occupations.' Views from a black IUMSWA official and the FEPC chairman who approved the plan, Francis J. Haas, were more positive. Both contended that much progress had been made at the yards in the ten months after the plan for segregated lines was adopted. In all four lines, blacks were hired without difficulty and, more surprisingly, 'a considerable number

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87 FEPC, 'Field Investigation Report,'; Francis J. Haas to Walter White, July 5, 1943, box A331, Group II, Papers of the NAACP.

88 Nelson, 982.

89 Pittsburgh Courier, June 19, 1943, 8.

90 Walter White to Paul McNutt, June 9, 1943, box A331, group II, NAACP Papers; National Urban League, 'Summary of a Race Riot,' 12; Pittsburgh Courier, June 19, 1943, 8.

91 Industry Manning Table for Ship Repair and Conversion Yards, Division of Occupational Analysis, July 1944, 21, War Manpower Commission, Bureau of Manpower Utilization, RG 211, National Archives.
of blacks were doing skilled work alongside whites in other parts of the yard. Whatever the drawbacks of the plan, it was a major step forward as far as Mobile’s black shipyard workers were concerned. Never could they have imagined that they would now be in a position to enjoy the same wages as their white counterparts, albeit in a segregated line.

The NAACP in Wartime Mobile

The ADDSCO race riot temporarily eclipsed one of the most important developments concerning race relations in Mobile during the World War II era. If the war had unsettled the economic and social order among the vast majority of Southerners, it also induced a phenomenal period of advancement for the organisation at the forefront of black political militancy in the nation: the NAACP. The Double V campaign was an important motif of the NAACP’s two-pronged attack on the discrimination faced by African Americans during the course of the war. On the one hand, officials strongly encouraged blacks to offer their full support of the defence programme at home and abroad while on the other, to demand the full rights of citizenship in the American polity. In 1944, Roy Wilkins wrote a detailed essay entitled *The Negro Wants Full Equality* which explained the NAACP’s militant, yet conservative stance in the 1940s. In the struggle of first-class citizenship, Wilkins warned that black Americans would no longer accept the humiliation of segregation and racism. Equality had to be translated into access to the ballot, the right to earn a fair wage and freedom to seek the full benefits of the democratic system.

According to Wilkins, the war presented an historic opportunity for his race forcing blacks to challenge Jim Crow openly and had, therefore, created a suitable environment for the NAACP to spearhead a major period of mobilisation. However, this rested to a large degree upon the efforts of local branches and the people who led them on a voluntary basis. These branches, although guided by national NAACP protocol and civil

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92 Haas to Malcolm Ross, March 6, 1944, box 386, Division of Review and Analysis, FEPC quoted in Nelson, ‘Organized Labor,’ 982.
94 R. Wilkins, *The Negro Wants Full Equality* (1944), box A73, Group II, Papers of the NAACP.
95 Ibid., 1-2.
rights strategies, were heavily influenced by local leadership and conditions. Nor, in many cases, did they adequately represent a true cross-section of the different classes which constituted the Southern African-American population. Historian Robin Kelley has argued that working class blacks, the poorest of all, who did not join the NAACP or other formal protest groups, utilised other means of resisting Jim Crow segregation. In Mobile, the NAACP branch managed to cut across class lines and its Executive Secretary, LeFlore, fashioned a leadership style during the war years that was simultaneously bold and conservative, considerably echoing that of the national NAACP’s Double V stance. He presided over the greatest rise in membership ever experienced by the branch since its founding. In 1944, more than 1,500 members were reported representing an increase of over 1,000 since 1939.

Such a rise in membership indicated a greater willingness among Mobile’s black citizenry to finance and pledge their support for a local civil rights agency. Conditions faced by this section of the population steadily worsened as the war progressed. The absence of a federal agency to deal with problems concerning housing, employment, education and white violence on the buses, was ample justification for rallying support behind the NAACP. In October 1942, a federal report confirmed that since the defence boom began in Mobile, the number of African Americans had risen from 25,000 to 38,000. New migrants were reported to be arriving every day from rural Alabama but local authorities had made virtually no provision for these settlers, forcing them into the existing housing stock. No new housing for blacks had been constructed since the Depression despite the allocation of federal resources for this purpose by the WMC. The Mobile Chamber of Commerce did, however, make a recommendation for 500 new units to house black settlers in June 1942. Only 100 of these were eventually approved by the public housing agencies. A particularly troublesome consequence of this was rent profiteering. Black families faced a 20% rise in rental rates across the city compared to only 17% reported for the majority of white families. The local NAACP made the shocking claim that blacks were

96 R.D.G. Kelley, ‘We Are Not What We Seem: Re-thinking Black Working-Class Resistance in the Jim Crow South,’ op. cit., 41.

97 Lucille Black to LeFlore, November 6, 1944, box C3, group II, NAACP Papers; Nelson, ibid., 963.

98 ‘Some Problems of the Negro in Mobile,’ Bureau of Agricultural Economics, RG 82, National Archives, 1.
"being forced to live in two-room houses "Which are not fit for animals to occupy," and rents are so high "They can't go any higher." 99

The housing situation had been compounded further by the blanket refusal of local industry to hire blacks in any of the skilled positions until the FEPC's intervention at ADDSCO in 1943, thereby severely curtailing rental options. Furthermore, the CIO and AFL had not been particularly helpful to shipyard workers other than a resolution passed by the Mobile Metal Trades Council condemning discrimination against African Americans in local defence plants. 100 An increase on black school-aged children was one major social consequence of in-migration affecting blacks. Total black enrollment in the public schools had risen from 6,770 in September 1940 to 7,123 in January 1942. Overcrowding had led to double sessions at several black as well as white schools. For example, the Mobile County Training School reported an increase in enrollment from 910 to 994 in this period. 101

One of the most unsettling features of black life in the war years was the sharp rise in racial violence on the city's bus system, an area not particularly noted for such friction in Mobile despite its size. In addition to the wrath of drivers, blacks from all walks of life faced humiliation and a limited service on the buses upon paying the full fare. Within the space of a few months, two black servicemen, one a private and the other a sergeant, were brutally attacked by white bus drivers. Henry Williams had arrived from Birmingham to take up a position at Brookley Field. He met his death on account of a heated verbal exchange with a bus driver who then shot him several times. The sergeant, who was visiting friends in Mobile, found himself hurled into court before the NAACP was informed, was fined $100 for disorderly conduct and had also narrowly escaped being assaulted by the driver. LeFlore was keen to have this incident investigated by the Army by an impartial board consisting of black and white officers. The murder aroused deep feelings among blacks in Mobile. It particularly reminded them of the real threat to their lives in an urban, overcrowded transit system from armed bus drivers. 102

99 'Excerpts From a Report of Field Representative for Alabama Dated February 24, 1942,' Office of War Information, Record Group 211, National Archives, 2.

100 'Some Problems of the Negro in Mobile,' op. cit., 2.

101 'Excerpts From a Report... ' ibid., 1.

102 ibid., 3. Nelson covers the rise in racial friction on Mobile's transit system in detail, 964.
Even a cursory examination of racial conditions in wartime Mobile warranted the considerable expansion of the NAACP's work in the city. Black Mobilians were blessed with a highly active branch managed by a man who was well-respected among his community and who was also particularly adept in accurately gauging the temper of his constituency. LeFlore was also chairman of the Regional Conference of Southern Branches of the NAACP. Hence, the work of LeFlore and the Mobile branch attracted publicity fuelling an interest in the problem of racial discrimination. A symbol of renewed black militancy in the nation was Randolph's MOWM, however, in certain localities the challenge to Jim Crow did not necessarily involve the use or threat of direct action. LeFlore was as committed as Randolph to the pursuit of equal opportunities for blacks not only in defence employment but also in defense training, in housing, in public transportation, health clinics and hospital provision and in school facilities. He chose to pursue these goals according to one historian of Mobile, 'in a language of courtesy and restraint' preferring to approach the relevant authorities directly rather than propose an inflammatory march or protest movement.

Prior to the arrival of the FEPC in 1942, LeFlore had spent many long nights and weekends seeking opportunities for Mobile's African Americans. Realising that the war would inevitably create an unusual period of economic growth for his city, he moved quickly to channel NAACP resources behind a comprehensive programme to widen employment opportunities for his race. In conjunction with other important activities concerning voting, police brutality and railroad travel, LeFlore was successful in aiding the employment of two black females as Census Enumerators, a first for Alabama in 1940. One year later, the branch began a concerted effort to aid the inclusion of blacks in the economic mobilisation for war resulting in the opening up of defence training courses and jobs in the construction trade. Dealings with the AFL, gave LeFlore his first big victory when in 1942

'Despite [the] opposition of those in charge of [the] training program [the branch] was able to get [a] training school opened for Negro workers in Mobile County in connection with national defence training program. More than 200 welders of each school went to

103 Ibid., 1.
104 Ibid., 1-2; M. McLaurin, 'Mobile Blacks and World War II: The Development of a Political Consciousness,' op. cit., 54.
105 'History of the Mobile Branch of the N.A.A.C.P,' box C3, Group II, Papers of the NAACP.
LeFlore’s efforts to open up defense employment to blacks in 1942 was part of a strategy that ultimately had helped raise the pressure on the local shipbuilding companies to revise their hiring practices. He also aided FEPC representatives over a period of 12 days in June, 1942, in preparation for the Birmingham hearings on discrimination in the Mobile yards. By acquiring the testimonials of several black workers, the NAACP was able to greatly assist the FEPC’s investigation of ADDSCO and Gulf. Prior to this, LeFlore had also managed to disprove one of the ADDSCO management’s main justifications for not having any skilled blacks on its payroll in 1942: that blacks were not acquiring the necessary skills for such work and hence, they were not available for employment. By securing the training of 200 welders LeFlore had proved that a skilled, black local supply of labour was indeed available. The fact that these men went on to work in the shipyards of Pennsylvania was a symbol of black Mobilians’ desire to participate in the defence of their nation.

Yet support for the war among black Mobilians was by no means uniform. An interview conducted in March 1942 by George Davis, state director for the FEPC in Alabama, during a meeting of the Mobile Longshoremen’s union, the largest all-black union the area, revealed not only the attitudes of some black citizens, but also the struggle LeFlore faced on many fronts to promote action for equality of opportunity. Davis was particularly interested in LeFlore’s summary of local opinion towards the war. The latter made it clear that African Americans were indeed patriotic citizens being ‘the original American [who] had been in America 300 years before the white man ever set foot upon it.’ However, their experience of democracy had meant that they had little to fight for during the war. LeFlore confirmed that three fifths of all the black men he had spoken to on this issue, ‘felt they had no part or interest in the war.’ Until democracy was delivered to his people, the struggle against segregation had to continue.

106 'It is Our Job-Yours and Mine to Help Make Democracy Live-You Can't Win by Yourself----Join the NAACP Today---Some of the Highlights of the Mobile NAACP’s Work Deserving of Your Support,' c. 1950, box 8, Newsletters, LeFlore Papers.

107 Memorandum To: The Executive Officer From: State Director, Alabama Subject: Racial Relations, George L. Davis, Chief, Division of Review and Analysis, FEPC, March 11, 1942, 2.

108 Ibid.
Of the many factors which aided the black protest movement in Mobile during World War II, none would outlive the end of the war to such an important degree as the initiatives taken by the city’s black citizens themselves to further the quest for equality. The climax of wartime demands for ships, missiles and aircraft had produced unprecedented pressures to integrate the local labour force, principally at ADDSCO, with disastrous economic and social consequences. The FEPC, given responsibility by the Roosevelt administration to oversee equality of opportunity in the nation's war plants, found itself in similar territory to that of the Freedmen's Bureau during another period of emergency, Reconstruction. In attempting to guide the peaceful inclusion of African American men into defence industries, the agency fuelled a major break in the colour line that had kept blacks and whites socially separate and economically unequal in Jim Crow society. Although very much a temporary and partial break, the legacy of the FEPC would be seen in the challenges to segregation after 1945. The transforming aspects of the war in the South and in Mobile would become increasingly visible during the continuation of the organised protest movement against white supremacy through John LeFlore and the local branch of the NAACP.
In May 1946, war veteran Elliot Battle, returned to his native city of Mobile eager to cast a vote in that month's Democratic primary. On May 10th, Battle, a registered voter, joined the line outside the Board of Registrars at 8 a.m. By 5 p.m. he was dismayed to find that while all the white registrants had passed through the queue with relative ease, the fifteen black registrants in the queue, including himself, were left standing and told to return the next day. Since daily records of waiting lines were not usually kept by the Mobile County Board of Registrars, Battle's account cannot be substantiated. However, in an affidavit prepared for the Mobile NAACP swiftly after his failure to register his vote on May 8th, Battle confirmed that only two blacks had been processed on that day. ^1^ Elliot Battle's testimony of attempting to participate in the democracy that he risked his life to save was typical of the many thousands of Southern black men who regarded the historic opening of the white primary by the Supreme Court in *Smith v. Allwright* (1944), as an important opportunity to challenge their long denied access to the ballot. Although unsuccessful at first, he eventually became one of the first African Americans in Mobile to cast a vote in the municipal elections of 1949. This breakthrough was a direct consequence of the war demonstrating clearly that the growth of black militancy and political consciousness had been more than just a fleeting phenomenon. ^2^ 

World War II bestowed upon the NAACP and its local branch secretaries an unprecedented opportunity to expand the national struggle for black civil rights. However, the return to peacetime signalled the ending of a brief period in which the federal government had become reluctantly drawn into local race relations. In a region accustomed to the economic and social system of segregation, the future of the black protest movement depended, to a large extent, upon the ability of local and national

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^1^ Affidavit of Elliot James Battle, May 10th 1946, box 31, file 2, LeFlore Papers, USA Archives.

leaders to consolidate the temporary gains wrought during the war. In the post-1945 period, the leadership of Mobile native, John LeFlore was crucial to the continuation of organised civil rights protest in the city. Bound by the social experiences of Southern race relations and the political relegation of blacks to the margins of public life, LeFlore nonetheless successfully continued to build upon the achievements of the war years as Executive Secretary of the Mobile NAACP. Thrust into the position of an un-elected race leader, he inevitably did not represent every viewpoint in the black community regarding the problem of segregation. Nor was the Mobile NAACP branch immune from rival local civil rights organisations such as the Negro Veteran’s and Voters’ League founded in 1945, and the capitulation of state power which effectively disbanded the NAACP in Alabama until the mid-1960s.³

Smith vividly symbolised a major focus of the NAACP in post-war America: enlarging the scope of democracy for all citizens. Yet this quest was in many areas heavily dependent upon the co-operation of whites. Two of the most important wartime developments to affect Mobile after 1945 was continued prosperity and the racial liberalism of Joseph N. Langan. Langan’s return from military service ushered a new era in Mobile’s racial politics. A supporter of Roosevelt’s New Deal and elected to the Alabama house of representatives in 1946, Langan was one of the few white Alabamians to risk his political career in an effort to promote democratic government by advancing the cause of blacks. Within the context of Truman’s presidential pledges to promote equality of opportunity for all Americans regardless of race and the brief, yet important, flowering of post-war liberalism in Alabama with the election of ‘Big’ Jim Folsom to the governorship, Langan eschewed attempts made by racial conservatives to block the democratic process.⁴ Wartime military service alongside African Americans transformed the attitudes of many white Southerners toward race and region. Langan’s political career after 1945 set him apart from the conservative elites who had traditionally controlled Mobile municipal politics.

One member of this elite was Gessner T. McCorvey, a leading architect of the Boswell Amendment to the state constitution passed in 1946 to block the anticipated rise in black

³ M. McLaurin, ‘Mobile Blacks and World War II,’ Gulf Coast Historical Review, op. cit.: 49-55.

voting on account of the *Smith* case. McCorvey, an experienced lawyer, was typical of Mobile’s industrial and commercial interests, a coalition which harboured long-standing economic and political ties with the Big Mule-Black Belt faction of the Birmingham area. As Mobile’s representative, he was also an ardent supporter of the states’ rights bloc in the Alabama legislature during the height of the Dixiecrat Revolt following Truman’s civil rights stance in the 1948 presidential elections. The fragility of black aspirations to reap the political rewards offered by the opening of the white primary in *Smith* was powerfully illustrated by McCorvey and his sympathisers in the state legislature. However, it was Langan and LeFlore who made a real impact in local race relations in the period up to the *Brown* decision. Despite being members of two socially separate races, they forged an alliance that was to last until the late 1960s. Both men shared a commitment to promoting the American democratic creed which complemented their faith in the institutions of the nation to deliver full citizenship to all. The major difference was that they did not fit into the standard categories of black and white Southerners as defined by the caste system. Langan, a Catholic who espoused racial policies which went against the grain a factor which ultimately incurred the wrath of white supremacists in Mobile. LeFlore, on the other hand, assumed various roles both in his own community and in his dealings with the white establishment. Among his many guises, he was a race leader, administrator, legal advisor, fund-raiser, federal employee and chief spokesperson for all issues connected to the problems faced by African Americans. As a consequence, his safety and livelihood remained under constant threat. By 1956, however, LeFlore proved beyond any reasonable doubt that he was indeed Mobile’s civil rights pioneer.

**The Making of Mobile’s Civil Rights Pioneer**

Adam Fairclough’s detailed examination of the civil rights struggle in Louisiana revealed how the NAACP had provided the backbone of the early movement in the state. Most importantly, branch secretaries, usually middle class, educated African Americans gained their training for future civil rights leadership through the management of local branch

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The origins and development of Mobile’s black protest movement was significantly shaped in this manner. Central was the emergence of LeFlore, a gifted organiser who quickly established himself as not only Mobile’s most committed activist but also a civil rights pioneer. Between 1940 and 1944, he had worked tirelessly to investigate areas where the NAACP could make a difference. He requested information on the cost of equalising the public school system and offered NAACP assistance to black teachers in Mobile wishing to raise their salaries on a par to that of whites, he filed a suit in the state courts charging that the Gulf and Ohio Railroad operators did not provide separate and equal dining facilities for its coloured patrons and looked into ways that blacks could gain entry into the civil service.

John Luizine LeFlore was the accommodationist leader blessed with the skills to guide Mobile blacks in their quest for justice and economic progress. Born on May 17, 1903, LeFlore was the youngest child of Dock and Clara Barbour LeFlore. When John was just 9 months old, Dock LeFlore died leaving Clara to raise John and his four siblings by herself. She was able to support the family by doing the laundry for white families close to her home in an area of Mobile known as ‘Down the Bay’. From an early age, John and the rest of the LeFlore children were expected to work and help pay for bills. John’s first job started at the age of five when his brother, George took him the offices of the Mobile Press Register and helped him become a newspaper seller by the waterfront. It became routine for John to sell papers after school and during the holidays. Regular access to the papers enabled him to practice his reading and after having sold his quota every day, he would purchase a newspaper for himself. A product of the Mobile County public school system for blacks, John was taught at Council Elementary school where he met his wife, Teah Beck. After graduating from Owen Academy in 1920, he took up a position at the U.S. Post Office, becoming one of the few blacks in Mobile to successfully sit for the civil service entry examination for federal employees. He was encouraged to do so by

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Teah's father who was also a postal worker. In 1922, John married Teah and from his income as a postal clerk, was able to save enough to buy a house on Chatague Avenue where they both lived until his death in 1976. He continued his education by attending night classes and completing distance-learning courses at the University of Chicago.9

LeFlore was born during an era in state politics when Alabama lawmakers had begun to disfranchise black voters through the Constitution of 1901 which sanctioned the 'Grandfather Clause' and other voting qualifications. Jim Crow segregation had been extended to include public spaces in Mobile by the time LeFlore had started high school. A wave of terror swept the state during the 1920s as the KKK revitalised its violent crusade in defence of white supremacy. LeFlore recalled in the 1970s that one of his earliest childhood memories of the brutality inherent in Southern racism was connected to a lynching. He vividly remembered the cries of a man who was being lynched while he was selling newspapers by the waterfront.10 When World War I broke out, there was much opposition to blacks being drafted into the armed forces especially since the Wilson administration proved less than willing to further black civil liberties at home. In 1915, John's older brother Meshak, decided to join the war because he believed that black men would have to fight for America even though they would be subjected to segregation while doing so. This was supported by the NAACP which argued that black military participation in national defence would help to improve conditions at home. Although John himself was never called to fight, he was made well aware of the dilemmas facing his race through the letters he received from Meshak complaining of the poor treatment he suffered in the U.S. army. This led to doubts in John's mind as to whether anything would ever change in Alabama. Meshak's death in 1918 after being discharged from service may have strengthened John's interest in the NAACP which, at the time had just been founded as a national organisation committed to protecting black civil rights.11

LeFlore's first experience of racism took place during his late teen years. As a newspaper vendor, he liked to sit by the river and read regularly. On one such occasion, an older white man reportedly snatched the paper and threw it into the river claiming that 'niggers'
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were not supposed to be reading. He also warned him that it was in his best interests not to be caught doing it again. On the insistence of his mother, he agreed to read at home but this first encounter with racism left a lasting impression on LeFlore’s young mind. The incident was a powerful moment of racial awakening particularly in terms of how society could place limits on a man’s aspirations on account of his colour. Another incident in 1920 was to affect him even more. After finishing work one evening, he decided to take the bus home. Having boarded the bus and paid his money, a white passenger walked up the aisle and asked him to move to the back so that he could sit down. A fight broke out after LeFlore refused to obey the white man’s order and the bus driver eventually intervened by placing a gun to his head ordering him to release the white passenger. Afterwards, John was charged with disorderly conduct and 'failure to surrender his seat to a white person.' He was jailed for one night and released after paying $100 bail. The incident and LeFlore’s imprisonment, was the guiding force behind his later life-long commitment to civil rights activism initially as a member of the NAACP. Furious that the law had treated him so unfairly despite the fact that he had paid his full fare to board the bus, the white driver’s actions nonetheless meant that, in LeFlore, Mobile found its civil rights pioneer. In 1925 upon leaving jail, LeFlore applied for a new branch charter and reorganised the Mobile NAACP.

As secretary of the Mobile NAACP, LeFlore established himself as a highly active and unfaltering advocate of black economic and social progress. LeFlore believed that the problem of racial discrimination was caused by 'a dual system of laws that were almost inflexible' delivering one justice for whites and another for blacks. This was supplemented by the intransigence of white attitudes which severely curtailed interracial co-operation on the race question. In Mobile, many whites who could have aided blacks were held back by the fear of being socially ostracised or of being brandished ‘Negro-lovers’ in Jim Crow society. Hence, the struggle had to be waged from entirely within the black community until white attitudes showed signs of flexibility. According to Bruce Nelson, LeFlore ‘distinguished himself as a man of great commitment, energy and intelligence with an ironclad sense of his own rectitude’.

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12 Quoted in Autrey, ‘The NAACP in Alabama,’ op.cit., 86.

13 Ibid.


A deep conviction that justice should prevail for all members of society and that racial proscription of any kind was immoral gave LeFlore the motivation he often needed in the face of possible danger on account of his civil rights agitation in Mobile. In 1939, LeFlore received anonymous letters threatening that he would be 'taken for a ride' if he did not abandon his civil rights activities. At the Mobile Post Office he was constantly issued with notices of misconduct and bad time-keeping despite possessing an enviable record of service.\textsuperscript{16} He believed that it was the task of the NAACP to use the legal system to redress the consequences of Jim Crow segregation by proving the existence of racial inequalities and arguing for its removal under the terms of the 14th Amendment. This became the essential framework for LeFlore's civil rights leadership during the second half of the 20th century. Unlike other black leaders of his time, he chose to turn directly to the federal government instead of the AFL or the CIO to further black economic aims after World War II. He was convinced that a better result could be achieved if one went directly to the relevant authorities. While he tended to direct his attention more to the local situation in Mobile, he was also committed to widening the work of the branch by becoming involved in regional and national NAACP activities. By 1956, he had served as chairman of the Regional Conference of Southern Branches, (1936-45), worked as staff correspondent for the \textit{Chicago Defender} until 1952, served as Vice-President of the Conference of Alabama NAACP Branches, (1945-51) and was elected to the Board of Directors between 1952 and 1953.\textsuperscript{17}

By choosing to join the NAACP, LeFlore benefited from access to a national, interracial civil rights organisation that protected itself from white reprisals by working within the traditions of American political democracy, vigorously espousing the rights guaranteed to all U.S. citizens by the constitution. As branch secretary, he forged networks with a variety of labour, civic and government agencies in an official capacity. In 1950, blacks who had worked with LeFlore sent a request to the NAACP headquarters in New York asking that he be congratulated for his dedication to civil rights which had made him well-known in the United States. Public recognition gave LeFlore access to the centres of power and an opportunity to place pressure on local agencies to include blacks in their policies. The strategy of litigation to overturn racist laws was very much in line with his

\textsuperscript{16} F. Douglas Richardson, Tape LF-18, in \textit{Mobile's Civil Rights Pioneer: An Oral History}.

personal belief that black progress could be achieved in the courts and not through violence and demonstrations. Lacking a large, unionised black proletariat at his disposal in Mobile, LeFlore preferred to work behind the scenes in communication with whites rather than follow Randolph's example of rousing the masses in the North.18

LeFlore's strict, moral upbringing may have influenced his attitudes to the black predicament and how the quest for justice should be conducted. Brandished a 'radical' agitator by contemporaries very early on in his career, many whites feared what LeFlore might do to incite Mobile's blacks into rebellion against segregation.19 Yet radicalism was just not his style either in his personal or public life. He maintained his day job as a mail carrier and worked without pay during the evenings to inform the NAACP headquarters in New York of the conditions facing blacks in Mobile. In an interview conducted by a representative of the FEPC in 1942, LeFlore categorised Mobile's black community into three broad sections. Those like himself, formed a cadre of 'educated' and self-disciplined activists taking charge of a passive, even 'frivolous' majority and at the lower end of the scale, a dangerous underclass which had become the victims of the violence and coercion of segregation itself.20 Well aware that not all blacks in Mobile shared his dedication for civil rights agitation, LeFlore rapped their apathy in the local press, implying that the 'docile and satisfied' type of 'Negro' would do more to hinder racial progress than the KKK.21 The fact that he had to make such criticisms only led him to greater activism.

Unfortunately, LeFlore found it difficult at times to cope with the NAACP's bureaucratic nature which on more than one occasion, fell short of his own high public standards. In being part of the organisation's network of Southern branches, he had to compete for NAACP resources and financial help with other cities such as Birmingham and Montgomery. Sometimes his appeals for help were not responded to as quickly as he would have liked. In August 1942, the President of the Mobile NAACP, M.J. Jackson, informed Walter White that the Civil Service Commission (CSC), had begun investigating

18 McLaurin, 'Mobile Blacks and World War II,' 49; letter to Roy Wilkins from A.S. Crishon Chair of the Committee for Arrangements, Mobile NAACP, August 14, 1950; telegram from Walter White to LeFlore, August 17, 1950, box C3, Group II, Papers of the NAACP.

19 Quoted in Nelson, 963.

20 Ibid., 965.

21 Mobile Beacon, December 17, 1948.
LeFlore. According to Jackson, the Commission’s representative for the Fifth District, Lyndon E. Slaton, was sent to Mobile to establish grounds for LeFlore’s dismissal from the Post Office.\textsuperscript{22} Prior to this, LeFlore had informed the NAACP in New York about threats made by whites to orchestrate his removal if he did not cease his civil rights work. It became apparent that Slaton’s arrival in Mobile may have been the result of a collusion between the Federal Bureau for Investigation (FBI), the CSC, the local postmaster and certain white civic leaders in a bid to remove LeFlore from the postal service altogether. Assistant Special Counsel for the NAACP in New York, Prentice Thomas, summed up the situation in a letter to Jackson claiming that the association could not defend LeFlore because there was no concrete evidence that the CSC and the FBI were genuinely investigating LeFlore for that purpose. LeFlore responded with a stern warning to the NAACP headquarters:

'I’m afraid that many loyal NAACP members may be driven to...cooperate with other militant Negro advancement movements and drop the NAACP, unless the Association manifests its interest in the welfare of those who are enduring hell for the cause in a more tangible way.'\textsuperscript{23}

Whether LeFlore had intended it or not, by the 1940s he had set himself an immense task: that of offering his services to the civil rights struggle in Mobile for the remainder of his life. He quickly set about challenging the racial status quo in Mobile by launching initiatives to increase voting, improve municipal services and expand employment opportunities for blacks. An important context for the expansion of the early civil rights struggle in Mobile was the long-term economic and political legacies of World War II.

\textit{Post-War Mobile: Liberalism, Race and Prosperity}

The South was a chief benefactor of the nation’s remarkable prosperity following World War II. Trends which had begun to wrench the region out of its isolation and economic backwardness in relation to other parts of the country continued to foster regional progress in the post-war decade. Three features of the South’s post-war prosperity had particular relevance for Mobile and other Gulf Coast cities such as New Orleans, Houston

\textsuperscript{22} M.J. Jackson, President Mobile NAACP Branch to Prentice Thomas, August 8, 1942, box C3, Group II, Papers of the NAACP.

\textsuperscript{23} M.J. Jackson to Walter White, August 5, 1942; Prentice Thomas to M.J. Jackson, August 12, 1942; LeFlore to Prentice Thomas, August 16, 1942, box C3, Group II, Papers of the NAACP.
and Galveston: the enthusiastic recruitment of new manufacturing business, the receipt of federal funds for military and civilian projects and the blossoming of a more diversified consumer market. Per capita incomes tripled during the 1940s rising to almost three quarters of the national average in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{24} While economic and demographic changes enlarged these modernising trends, socially, the conservative white South was not ready to embrace the new black militancy demonstrated during the war. In fact resistance to changes in race relations considerably intensified soon after 1945 with the death of the FEPC in Congress, mob violence against blacks in several towns, and a sectional distrust in national politics forged by the emergence of civil rights as a national issue in 1948.\textsuperscript{25}

The return to peacetime was accompanied by the withdrawal of the federal government as defender of civil rights with the Justice Department imposing a degree of 'strict self-limitation' upon itself.\textsuperscript{26} The task of continuing the struggle for racial justice in the courts and in local communities was left largely to the major black civil rights groups. In this respect, the Supreme Court aided the cause of the NAACP in cases concerning interstate transportation, labour unions and in the white primary system of elections. The potential danger of the court's efforts to strike down Jim Crow laws was the effect it had on white determination to preserve traditional racial practices. In the prelude to \textit{Brown}, civil rights activists faced a far less racially liberal climate than was the case during World War II, however white resistance to their demands did not solidify into a monumental obstacle until after 1954.\textsuperscript{27}

Mobile demonstrated that the city was often in its own world. Liberalism, race and prosperity continued to occupy centre stage in local politics but the spirit of change was ambivalent, to say the least, just as it was reflected in state politics with the election of Jim Folsom to the governorship in 1947. Folsom, a native of Coffee County located in

\textsuperscript{24} D. Grantham, \textit{The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds} (N.Y., 1995), 194.


\textsuperscript{27} A. Badger, 'Fatalism, Not Gradualism: The Crisis of Southern Liberalism, 1945-65,' in \textit{The Making of Martin Luther King}, \textit{op. cit.}, 80-81.
Southern Alabama, was arguably one of the state's leading neo-populists in 1946 when he delivered his campaign speeches. He believed that the Alabama legislature had been controlled by a small number of the wealthiest corporate and agricultural leaders who had consistently dominated all decision-making, refusing adamantly to enlarge electoral participation to Alabamians. As governor, he proposed to remedy this situation by establishing one-man-one vote, advocating abolition of the cumulative poll tax and improving educational resources. Among Mobilians however, there were states' righters, racial conservatives, racial liberals and an outspoken future city commissioner, Langan who aligned himself with the Folsomites after the 1948 Dixiecrat revolt. Mobile's Catholic establishment was also a contributing influence to the relatively fluid tone of race relations in the city prior to Brown, promoting interracial efforts to solve problems created by the unequal system of segregation. Three trends of the wartime era continued to shape the civil rights struggle in Mobile during the late and early 1950s: federally-sponsored prosperity, a highly organised, militant local civil rights leadership and the racially progressive policies of Langan.

Mobile's war boom officially ended in the Spring of 1945 and by May, employment across the city had dropped to 92,000 from a previous high of 120,000. ADDSCO completed its last ship in October and had begun laying off staff at the rate of 5,000 a month between May and August of that year. By the end of 1945, nearly 40,000 war jobs had disappeared. Both ADDSCO and Gulf reported a total of only 8,500 employees engaged in repair work at the yards. However, such a loss in jobs had been anticipated by the Committee on Economic Development which surveyed local industry and business estimating a possible 50,000 post-war jobs. This was echoed in the U.S. Employment Service's announcement that Mobile would begin 1946 with 58,000 jobs.

Unemployment increased from 4,500 in October 1945 to 8,500 in January 1946. This took into account approximately 15,000 discharged men who had returned to civilian life after the war. Reports concluded that the city's well-established industries were relatively small and these included pulp, paper and lumber products which combined were a large

29 W. Flynt in Alabama: The History of a Deep South State, op. cit, 534, 538.
30 'Mobile after the Storm', Fortune, March 1946, 110
source of post-war employment. International Paper Company, Hollingworth and Whitney, National gypsum and Mobile Paper Mill expected to employ 3,700 workers in 1946. Ship repair and the Aluminum Ore Company would employ a further 6,000. The $12 million state docks in Mobile was to be a further source of employment for the city. Its capacity to berth 22 ships and loading facilities lifted the docks up from 25th to 15th in the United States for import-export tonnage. The docks also brought in approximately $32 million in state industrial investment which led to the expansion of the Waterman Steamship Corporation, the biggest single user of the port facilities. Another sign of Mobile's post-war prosperity was the announcement that the city had $2,500,000 in surplus revenue that 'it could not spend wisely during the war'.

E.A. Roberts, chairman of the Waterman Steamship Corporation was among the businessmen in Mobile who were hopeful that at least some of the wartime prosperity would continue in the 1940s. He wanted 'Mobile to wash its face without borrowing any sort of federal washcloth'. Aware of the assets that his city already possessed, Roberts was adamant that Mobile could continue to confidently build upon its wartime prosperity:

'We have our port and we propose to make the most of it. We have no need for a labor force such as that we had to import during the war. We have jobs or prospects of jobs for at most 50,000 workers in the next few years.'

His hopes were not unfounded. Although growth in shipbuilding had been temporary and was difficult to sustain after the war, the key element in Mobile's industrial development would be the skills acquired by workers in war manufacturing jobs. This was particularly important for the corporations already operating in the city wishing to enlarge production and also for new companies which chose to locate to Mobile during the 1950s. A vital cornerstone of Mobile's post-war modernisation was the Truman government's decision to renew defence expenditure during the 1940s and 1950s.

In 1953, Businessweek took the example of Mobile's longshoremen, the majority of whom were black, as symbolic of the city's transformation since the war from 'a sleepy-eyed southern steamboat town into a hustling city bursting its economic seams.'

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31 Ibid., 113
32 Ibid., 116.
longshoremen in Mobile now had a labour union membership card and a generous wage slip in their pockets. The population of 137,000 reported for this year enjoyed access to one of Mobile’s ‘wartime presents’ Brookley Field. Brookley Air Force Base employed a peak of 18,000 civilians at the end of the war. It continued to employ around 15,000 workers with an annual payroll of $54 million thus becoming Mobile’s largest single employer during the 1950s as the Korean War further warranted the base’s operations.\(^{34}\) Yet the major thrust of Mobile’s prosperity also came in the form of new industry. The discovery of a large salt dome in the northern outskirts of the city spurred a chemical boom which excited businessmen to the point of future predictions that Mobile would grow to a population of 200,000. Mathieson Chemical Company’s construction of a $10 million caustic chlorine plant next to the dome brought in several other companies including Geigy Chemical Co., Alabama Power Co., and Courtaulds Ltd. The arrival of Courtaulds was a major boost leading to the construction of a $25 million rayon fibre producing plant. The general consensus was one of great optimism that this was only the tip of the iceberg.\(^{35}\)

A prime mover in Mobile politics after 1946 was Joe Langan, an Alabamian of Irish descent whose Catholic childhood was experienced in the lower-middle class, racially-mixed neighbourhoods of Mobile. Like his counterparts elsewhere in the South, he grew into adulthood within a society that regarded blacks as inferior to whites. However, military experiences while stationed in Arizona transformed his attitudes toward his country and his black counterparts. On return from service in 1945, he wrote a controversial letter to the Mobile Press Register condemning the unequal treatment afforded to African Americans in the city claiming that it echoed the world of Hitler and the Nazis.\(^{36}\) One year later, he won the Mobile County state senate seat supporting the Folsom administration. In 1953 he was elected to the three-man Mobile City Commission with the help of votes from the predominantly black wards. He later controversially announced that he was ‘happy to accept the vote of any man.’\(^{37}\)

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 186.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 188, 194.

\(^{36}\) Mobile Press Register, November 19, 1945, sec. A.

Langan's victory at the polls in 1953 was an important barometer of race relations in Mobile. It was the first election where a white city commissioner secured a majority through the help of black voters. That there were a significant number of registered blacks in the city was a consequence of the Smith ruling and Langan's previous support of efforts made by the Negro Veteran's and Voters League to prevent the state from barring the newly-opened white primary. Since the war, Langan had remained committed to the idea of furthering participatory democracy for all Mobilians regardless of race. He later recalled that Mobile never suffered from the extreme dislike between the races as elsewhere in the South. The city also did not have clearly defined 'black' and 'white' areas so many people, including himself, grew up in neighbourhoods where black children played outside with white children. During the New Deal, he served in the state house of representatives where he supported abolition of the cumulative clause of Alabama's poll tax laws, free school textbooks and other welfare reforms to aid the state's poor. After the war, Langan quickly cemented a mutually respectful political alliance with LeFlore. This became an alliance that significantly shaped the Mobile black protest movement well into the 1960s.38

Blacks who voted for Langan in 1953 had good reason to believe that he would do more to further their interests than any other candidate. In 1946, he had made a very important gesture to the black community by pledging his support of the newly-formed Negro Veterans' and Voters' League of Mobile. Three years later, that group successfully invalidated the Boswell Amendment to the Alabama constitution designed to block, through literacy tests and other means, the anticipated rise in blacks attempting to register on account of the new Supreme Court ruling in Texas. Langan provided funds and an office for the League. When the Mobile Board of Registrars proved unwilling to aid the quick and smooth registering of black voters in time for the May 1947 Democratic primary, Langan appointed E. Gonzales to the board. Gonzales was a Folsom supporter and more flexible on the issue of enlarging the electorate to include literate blacks. This move was later regarded by LeFlore as symbolic of the element in Mobile society which favoured extending the democratic system if only to preserve it. In 1949 Langan aided LeFlore's successful efforts to persuade the Mobile County School Board to equalise

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black and white teachers' salaries by threatening to withdraw school revenue from a new
1% tax on cigarettes. Under such pressure, the board equalised salaries in that year.39

As City Commissioner in a three-man commission, he helped run one of the most honest
and efficient municipal governments in the state launching several key capital projects
designed to modernise and improve services for poorer citizens. A major annexation in
1956 enlarged the city's geographic size from 30 square miles to 92 square miles which
increased the population by 25,000. The procurement of approximately $2.5 million in
federal funds through the 1949 Housing Act helped the City Commission to launch a
major urban renewal program in run-down black neighbourhoods completed during the
early 1960s. In 1953, Mobile became the first city in Alabama to hire black police
officers under Langan's influence. Such moves rapidly bestowed upon him the dangerous
political label of racial liberal. He then became the target of the White Citizen's Councils
and the Klan. The latter group set alight crosses in his front yard in 1956.40

Racial liberals were often the targets of hostility from within their own communities.
They have been described as 'round pegs' who, by tradition, did not fit neatly into the
mould of the 'white Southerner'. They usually loved their native region deeply but were
sufficiently aware of its shortcomings to take up the hugely unpopular task of linking
regional progress with positive changes in race relations. Virtually every Southern state
had its liberals and outspoken advocates of reform but how they were received differed
according to local conditions.41 Although race has always played a dominant role in
Alabama social relations, according to a recent study, never was it as ambivalent as
between 1940 and 1954. For example, in Birmingham, white businessmen and black
citizens tried to create a local chapter of the National Urban League. In Mobile, Langan
found a powerful ally in the Catholic church. During the 1940s, several Catholic colleges
in the South were at the forefront of liberal thinking on racial issues having been
awakened by the moral and religious implications of segregation. Father Albert Foley had
been an outspoken critic of segregation since the 1930s but in 1954 he took a leading role

39 Presnell, 'The Impact of World War II on Race Relations in Mobile,' op. cit., 32;
LeFlore interviewed by McLaurin, op. cit., Mobile Press, April 20, 1949, sec. A.; Dow,
"Langan: Mobile's Racial Diplomat," 12-14; McLaurin, "Mobile Blacks and World War
II," op. cit., 53; Mobile Register, September 15, 1997, 3.

40 Dow, ibid., 20-26, 31, 45; Mobile Register, November 18, 1953.

41 M. Sosna, In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue (New York,
1977), vii.
in establishing the Mobile chapter of the Alabama Council on Human Relations (ACHR). Originating from the state Division of the Southern Regional Council, the ACHR was one of the most active of liberal white groups in the state with five local chapters. Foley was appointed secretary and kept a record of all meetings convened at Spring Hill College. LeFlore and other black citizens were frequent attendees at these meetings as were invited guest speakers from elsewhere.42

Post-war racial liberalism was precarious at the best of times. Always susceptible to the defensive strategies of powerful industrial and political elites who did not favour enlarging grass-roots political participation to either African Americans or poor whites. As a consequence, Langan remained a rather isolated figure. While his efforts to aid Mobile's blacks cannot be overlooked, he could not do what the NAACP, a local organisation rooted in the black community and controlled by blacks themselves, could do to address the problems incurred by them in a racist political economy.

Working on Many Fronts: The Last Years of the NAACP in Mobile

The cataclysmic reaction from Southern pro-segregationists to the Supreme Court's ruling in Brown which ordered the desegregation of the nation's public schools, severely curtailed the emerging Civil Rights movement triggering. Among other things, it triggered a white political backlash of a greater magnitude than at any time since the Civil War. Symptomatic of the sudden change in the direction of race relations on account of the court's landmark order was the rapid deterioration of the NAACP's position in Alabama. The order to implement school integration implied a social revolution in the South at a pace that most white citizens resisted in a multitude of ways for decades to come.43 From hindsight, the years prior to Brown were a crucial period of unfettered NAACP local activities in the state. Branches in Montgomery, Birmingham and Mobile continued to undertake a wide variety of programmes, all involving as many members of the community as possible. The Mobile branch was noted on several occasions for being


one of Alabama's most active and successful having earned a long list of credits to its name by the 1950s.44

Denial of the franchise was perhaps the most fundamental way in which segregation had bound African Americans within a caste status unable to improve economic and social conditions because they could not exercise their political rights. LeFlore had not tackled the problem of voting rights since the early 1930s, but after the Supreme Court's decision in the Texas primary case, the Mobile branch launched what turned out to be a highly influential attack on Alabama's white primary voting laws which had excluded African Americans from the ballot. The Alabama Constitution of 1901 had set out the following qualifications for voters:

i) must be male, of 21 years or over ii) must be resident of the state for at least 2 years, the county of one year, the precinct or ward of three months immediately preceding the election iii) must be of good character and must understand the duties and obligations of citizenship iv) must have the ability to read and write out any article of the constitution in the English language v) must be the wife of or husband of the owner of forty acres of land, real estate or personal property estimated at the value of at least $300.45

These same qualifications were legal in 1940 when the number of blacks in the state aged 21 and over numbered 521,000, of which about 200 were black Mobilians registered to vote in the county. In addition to prohibitive qualifications which affected blacks as well as poor whites, the cumulative poll tax was a strong barrier against registration. Initiated in the post-bellum era, the $1.50 yearly tax was charged to anyone wishing to cast a vote. The tax was allowed to accumulate every year until 1953. A voter over the age of 45 was no longer liable to pay the tax but, before being able to cast his vote, he had to pay up all taxes applicable to him between the ages of 21 and 45. This sum was usually too high for most blacks or poor whites to pay and hence, was successful in disfranchising the vast majority of both groups.46


45 Constitution of the State of Alabama, 1901, Article 8, secs. 177, 178.

46 Mobile Register, April 15, 1942, 6; F.D. Ogden, The Poll Tax in the South (Tuscaloosa, 1958), 33; Presnell, 21.
The state constitution of 1901 remained the essential impediment to black voting rights throughout the first half of the 20th century. In April 1943 however, the NAACP Legal Defense section filed a case in Texas concerning its primary elections. Led by Thurgood Marshall, Smith v. Allwright became a landmark case in which the exclusion of blacks from party primaries was finally ended by the Supreme Court. Plaintiff, Lonnie Smith filed suit for damages after being denied the right to vote in the 1940 Texas Democratic primary despite being a qualified voter. The lower courts dismissed Smith’s claim arguing that the Democratic party was a private organisation and could, therefore, deny membership on account of race. The case was then passed on to the Supreme Court which delivered the following decision:

'‘the selection of party nominees for inclusion on the general election ballot makes the party which is required to follow these legislative laws an agency of the state insofar as it determines the participants in the primary election.‘'

In deciding that the Democratic Party was an agency of the state, the court had rendered the primary system in Texas in violation of the 14th and 15th Amendments which guarantee to all U.S. citizens equal protection of the law. In playing the role of determining the participants in a primary election, the Democratic party then was not in a position to restrict voters without contravening the Constitution. The NAACP’s victory in Texas proved very quickly to have important consequences for blacks in other parts of the South.

Marshall had already indicated the implications of the case to the Mobile branch in April 1943. Two months later, he issued a memorandum to all the other branches to test the decision of the Supreme Court as swiftly as possible by asking qualified voters to present themselves at the polls in the May 1946 primary elections. If refused, they were to draft affidavits and send them to the NAACP national office in New York. Marshall believed that the decision in Texas ‘authorizes the voting of Negroes in all primary elections both federal and state’ and the more attempts made by blacks at the local level to cast their votes would greatly strengthen the campaign. LeFlore responded by organising 12 black qualified voters willing to register to vote in the May Democratic primary election.

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48 For the full account of the Texas ruling, D. Clark Hine, Black Victory: The Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas (Millwood, N.Y., 1979).
49 Quoted in Presnell, ‘The Impact of World War,’ op. cit., 39.
Origins

Anticipating that the move would be of public interest, he used his press contacts to have the exercise photographed and covered by *Time* and *Life* magazines. All 12 voters were turned away at the polls and their affidavits were filed with the Justice Department in a case that later declared the Alabama white primary laws as unconstitutional.\(^{50}\)

Affidavits received by LeFlore from Albert Davis, Frank Davis, Taylor Burroughs, Raymond Perry and James Battle were used by the Mobile NAACP branch to attack Alabama’s voting laws in the courts. Despite being on the list of qualified voters in 1944, Frank Davis was told that he could not cast his vote. Burroughs, Perry and Battle were physically prevented from doing so by the Deputy Sheriff, Frank Pryor in the predominantly black 7th ward of the city. On arrival at the polling station at 8 a.m., Elliot Battle witnessed 20 blacks waiting in a segregated line. By the end of the day, only two had been able to vote while many whites had been processed without much delay. Daily records of waiting lines were not kept but the large increase in the numbers of blacks attempting to vote was atypical for Mobile and attracted considerable press attention. The chairman of the Mobile County Board of Registrars, Milton Schnell, claimed that 'unusually large numbers' presented themselves at the polling station and that 'many of the groups could not be reached before the office closed.'\(^{51}\) Of the 296 registered voters on January 16, 1946 only 20 were black even though Battle had confirmed that the waiting lines had contained equal numbers of blacks and whites.\(^{52}\)

In April 1946, the Mobile NAACP branch estimated that black voting strength in the city’s precincts and wards combined, numbered 709, (Table 8). This figure represented the number of black males qualified to vote in the May elections. In January 1946, out of a total of 19,000 registered voters in the county at large, only 275 were black, the majority coming from the city wards. Some of these did vote for the first time on the May 7 elections. By now, LeFlore's campaign had attracted the attention of the newly-formed Negro Veteran's Association. Mobile was on the verge of striking a huge success in Alabama in the wake of the Texas case. Several returning veterans expressed a keen desire to participate in the democracy that they had risked their lives to save. The

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50 Memo from Thurgood Marshall to NAACP branches from NAACP Legal Defense Department, New York, May 8, 1944, LeFlore Papers; McLaurin, *op. cit.*, 49.

51 Presnell, *op cit.*, 26-7.

52 Affidavits from Frank Davis, Albert Davis and Elliot Battle, Mobile, May 6, May 9, 1946, box 3, file 2, LeFlore Papers, *Mobile Register* January 17, 1946, sec. 1-A.
Origins

association attracted over 800 members by the end of 1946. Within the local black community, the NAACP branch was able to not only rally the support of willing potential voters, but also to collect important funds to finance what became the first major voting rights campaign in the city. The issuing of an Emergency Appeal asking for a $10 donation from individuals and for $50 from organisations in May, 1946 was particularly successful demonstrating that LeFlore had found a cause which could mobilise the local black community to raise expectations for change.53

Table 8: Black Voting Strength in Mobile County as of April 8, 1946

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Precinct</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Not Available</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>586</td>
<td></td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NAACP, Mobile Branch, box 3, File 57, May 1946, LeFlore Papers, USA Archives.

Developments in black voting struck a note of serious apprehension among white conservative opinion in Mobile. The Democratic representative for Mobile County, McCorvey indicated a growing consensus in the white establishment that the recent growth in black voter registration should be curtailed by an amendment to the state constitution. McCorvey’s argument for such an amendment to the State Democratic Executive Committee ran contrary to the opinion delivered in Smith v. Allwright. He told the committee that it was

‘entirely proper...[for it]...to lead the fight to maintain the traditions of your party in this State by adopting the proposed amendment to our constitution and endeavoring, as far as it

53 NAACP Newsletter, Mobile Branch, May 16, 1944, box 2, file 7, LeFlore Papers; McLaurin, 'Mobile Blacks and World War II,' 51-52.
In keeping with this philosophy, McCorvey made public his strong support for State Representative, E.C. Boswell's proposed 55th Amendment to section 181 of the Alabama Constitution which read as follows:

'After the first day of January, nineteen hundred and three, the following persons, and no others, who if their place of residence shall remain unchanged, will have, at the date of the next general election, the qualifications as to residence, prescribed in section 178 of this article, shall be qualified to register as electors provided they shall not be disqualified under section 182 of this constitution: those who can read and write, understand and explain any article of the Constitution of the United States in the English language and who are physically unable to work and those who can read and write, understand and explain any article of the Constitution of the United States in the English language and who have worked or been regularly engaged in some lawful employment, business, or occupation, trade, or calling for the greater part of the twelve months preceding the time they offer to register, including those who are unable to read and write if such inability is due solely to physical inability: provided, however, no person shall be entitled to register as electors except those who are of good character and understand the duties and obligations of good citizenship under a republican form of government.'

The Boswell Amendment was approved by the legislature in late 1945 and then was ratified by state voters in the November 1946 general election. It soon proved to be an effective stumbling block against the rise in black voting strength. Despite the doubling of the county's black voters in December 1946 to 1,300, two years after the passage of the Boswell clause, the local board reported that it had registered 2,800 whites and just 104 blacks. Despite this setback, LeFlore had acted on Marshall's advice and seized the opportunity to capitalise on the Texas decision. The 12 affidavits and the significant, if limited, rise in black voting strength symbolised a new political consciousness among the black citizens of Mobile. The decision of the State Democratic Executive Committee to open the party primary to all 'qualified voters' on January 12, 1946 showed it was becoming widely recognised that Alabama's voting laws could be attacked in the courts. Attempting to challenge Alabama's archaic rules governing voting rights revealed that the NAACP was susceptible to the influence of other black groups that had formed after the war. It was the Veteran's League and not the NAACP which ultimately invalidated the

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54 McLaurin, 51; Barnard, *Dixiecrats and Democrats*, 61-63.
55 Alabama, Constitution, 1946, amendment LV, sec 181.
56 McLaurin, *op. cit*.
57 Barnard, *Dixiecrats and Democrats*, 122.
Boswell Amendment in the courts. LeFlore complained to the NAACP headquarters in 1949 that he detected there was a 'determined effort of the reactionary-type Negro to weaken the NAACP's influence.' This was partly in response to a criticism made by the Reverend U.J. Robinson, pastor of the Franklin Street Baptist Church that the NAACP should not have allowed the Boswell suit to slip through its fingers. At a meeting held in January, Robinson told a group of NAACP followers that Mobile did not need 'outsiders' to fight their battles and urged them to stop sending money to New York until the situation improved.

However, the Mobile NAACP proved itself to be one of the most successful in the South attracting public recognition and membership during the early 1950s when Cold War hysteria linked civil rights activism of any kind to Communist insurgency. In 1952, the New York office called it one of the most vigorous branches in the South and LeFlore attended an NAACP-sponsored banquet to honour his career since 1925. Statewide membership of the NAACP had declined since the 1940s when in 1950, the association reported a total of 4,795 members split between the Mobile, Birmingham and Montgomery branches. Only the Mobile branch reported 50% increase in members in 1952. Although the NAACP had failed to halt the investigation of LeFlore by the CSC and the Post Office in 1942, the Mobile branch continued to tackle problems affecting blacks in municipal services, housing and employment.

Denial of the franchise when translated into the lack of African American representation in local and federal government agencies led to situations where the uneven delivering of municipal services continued unabated. LeFlore found that Mobile blacks suffered from police brutality, abuse while travelling on city buses and poor housing conditions. This was a reflection of the failure of municipal policy to cater for blacks equally as it did for whites. With no black representation on local policy-making boards during this period, it was up to the NAACP to oversee such problems. Overcrowding of Mobile city buses became most apparent during the war when the unexpected influx of war workers led to a

58 LeFlore to Gloster B. Current, Director of Branches, January 24, 1949, box C3, Group II, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

59 Ibid.

60 On the weakness of mass popular protests for desegregation during the period 1945-54, M. Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America* (Jackson, MS., 1990), 18; D. Autrey, 'The NAACP in Alabama,' *op. cit.*, 251.
huge increase in patrons using the buses to travel to work. Such problems of overcrowding in urban transit were typical of Southern cities which owed their growth to World War II. The working classes, both black and white were most affected by rising tensions on the buses. Blacks, however, were requested by law to observe the segregated seating arrangements which often meant that they had to stand when seats were empty if they were located in the 'White' section of the bus. Since urban transit was a service that they paid the same price for as whites, it was not unusual for blacks to resist the segregation laws in fury at being short-changed by the low level of service they were entitled to. Open acts of disobedience in this realm increased after 1945 and can be placed within the context of working-class black resistance to Jim Crow.61

The injustice of segregation on Mobile buses took a more insidious tone with the murder of Private Henry Williams by a white bus driver in 1942. The incident shocked many Mobilians both white and black and prompted the branch to send a report to Byron E. Pickering, Superintendent of the Mobile Light and Railroad Company concerning the rise in 'race friction' and the lack of 'proper protection to colored patrons against humiliation, insult and injury' committed by drivers, police officers, civil guards and fellow passengers.62 The report went on to make the following recommendations so as to ensure that incidents like Private Williams' death did not occur again:

1) the immediate disarming of all drivers
2) impartial enforcement of the segregation law i.e. that blacks do not have to give up seats at the front when seats are not available in the rear
3) immediate use of black drivers in predominantly black areas Cedar-Davis Highway Lines
4) require drivers to be courteous and treat all patrons fairly
5) end abuse and unprovoked attacks on blacks
6) displaying of names of drivers
7) dismissal of the driver charged with the murder of Private Williams.63


62 Mobile NAACP to Byron E. Pickering, August 26, 1942, box C3, Group II, Papers of the NAACP.

63 Ibid.
The company partially responded to these recommendations and had agreed to disarm bus drivers in 1942. This was an initial victory for the Mobile NAACP but proved rather incomplete when in 1948 violence erupted once again on Mobile city buses in November of that year. Mrs. Marie Gayle of Prichard, a majority black area of Mobile, was brutally attacked in the face with a metal ticket puncher by white bus driver, Clarence J. McCarn when she refused to give up her seat for a standing white passenger. LeFlore regarded McCarn, who was charged with disorderly conduct by the police and then found not guilty by the Circuit Court, as typical of the irresponsible "poor white trash" that was employed as drivers by the bus lines.64 Mrs. Gayle required several stitches to her head and a fellow white passenger, Mrs. Mae Farr, testified in court that the former had not provoked the attack and was within her rights to remain seated despite having whites standing on the bus. Perhaps what might have infuriated LeFlore and other black citizens was the revelation that Mobile City Bus Lines represented McCarn in court even though around one-third of the company's revenue was usually obtained from black passengers. Mrs. Gayle's injuries were a vivid reminder of the inequities of segregation law in Mobile when McCarn, after the charges against him had been dropped, told the court that he was simply enforcing the ordinances requiring segregated seating on the buses.65

Other factors indicated that the year 1948 was a volatile period in the field of race relations and this may have contributed to the sudden rise in tensions between blacks and whites on the buses. LeFlore had written an article in the Pittsburgh Courier describing what he considered to be the 'powder keg "civil rights" situation' that had been created in Mobile by a series of race incidents following the Dixiecrat Convention and the murder of a white taxi driver a week before that event.66 He attributed this to the wild rumours that had been circulating since the Democrat split over civil rights. The rise in racial violence included the mugging of a white man, the rape of a white woman and the murder of Monroe Jackson, a 32 year old white cab driver, all committed by blacks. LeFlore was not convinced whether blacks were implicated in all three incidents and suspected that certain 'ignorant' whites have been 'misled' by the 'venomous and perverted anti-civil

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64 LeFlore article in Mobile Beacon, 'Bus Driver Who Beat Woman Down In Her Own Blood Dismissed of "Disorderly Conduct" Conviction,' November 20, 1948, Series IV: Editorials and Articles, box 7A, file 70, LeFlore Papers.

65 Ibid.

rights propaganda of Southern political demagogues' who were waging an assault on Truman's civil rights proposals. The upshot of LeFlore's opinion was that the racial violence of 1948 was not usual for Mobile. Yet what was made clear to all blacks is that the law would not treat them neutrally if they were accused of crimes against whites.

The problem of police attitudes towards blacks loomed large in most Southern cities during the 1940s. While lynching may have proved to be an adequate method of controlling and intimidating rural blacks into subservience when they came into contact with white authority, it was not so useful in the large cities which had an urban population. Within the context of Southern social relations, policing became a necessary function of the state to not only maintain law and order but also to enforce the rules of conduct between the races. This led to instances when blacks became the victims of arbitrary decisions taken by the police to punish their public conduct if it violated prevailing assumptions surrounding racial etiquette. Postman, Robert Carter found this out in October 1948, when he was arrested for winking at a white woman while seated in his car and was charged with disorderly conduct. Although Carter denied the charge and provided several whites as character witnesses, he was still charged with an offence that the police had no way of substantiating other than with the white woman's claim. The eventual dropping of charges did not lessen his experience of being harassed by a white woman, whose position in Mobile society made it possible for the police to take her false claims seriously. Carter was just one of the many victims of a legal system which refused to recognise the civil rights of blacks in cases where whites were involved. In 1946, LeFlore led an NAACP investigation into the lynching of four black males in Monroe, Georgia. He was unable to bring the whites involved in this crime to justice and even if he had, the chances are that the local police would have refused to press charges against them. Mobile whites did not tend to engage in lynching as a method of controlling the black population but it was clear that the law did not protect the latter from various forms of police abuse and unfair criminal charges.

An NAACP press release in July 1945 had made public the 'apparent extreme emergency in race relations confronting Mobile at this time.' The cause of this statement was that

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67 Ibid.

68 Mobile Beacon, 'Postman Dismissed of Charges That He Winked at White Woman,' October 23, 1948, Ibid.
in the last two months four cases of serious race friction had taken place in the city. This included the unprovoked murder by a member of the police of black war veteran, Napoleon Rivers and the rape by a police officer of a young black woman. In May 1946, LeFlore issued a special message from the branch to NAACP members concerning the issue of police brutality towards the coloured citizens of Mobile. Rivers' death on May 6th was particularly tragic since he was trying to register his vote as a war veteran at the Board of Registrars when the police officer shot him down. LeFlore warned that unless the issue was investigated further by the branch, police brutality may continue unabated. He backed up his concern by writing to the state Governor and the federal authorities asking them to consider probing police brutality in Mobile. Coinciding with this, LeFlore planned to prepare affidavits from victims which then would be presented by Thurgood Marshall to the Justice Department on behalf of the NAACP Legal Defense section.70

Launching a court fight with the support of the NAACP's premier black lawyer, Marshall was one way in which LeFlore sought to place pressure on municipal authorities in Mobile to punish and prevent police violence. Another solution to the problem was, of course to have black policemen in the city. Southern cities did not tend to hire blacks as policemen since the rules of conduct between the races established by segregation would have been completely undermined if blacks were given the authority to arrest and monitor whites who committed crimes. LeFlore quickly approached the City Board of Commissioners following Rivers' death and argued that it would be in everyone's interest if they hired black patrolmen not least because reports from other Southern communities had revealed that they demonstrated a 'high degree of efficiency in law enforcement'.71 Furthermore, blacks could arrest other blacks without resorting to violence. LeFlore then sent a telegram to Roy Wilkins at the NAACP headquarters in New York requesting that the whole issue of policing in cities such as Mobile be added to the upcoming national conference agenda.72

Employment discrimination was the most serious problem faced by blacks in the Jim Crow South not least because it kept them in relative poverty, but also because it was

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69 Mobile NAACP Press Release, July 12, 1945, Series I, box 2, file 8, LeFlore Papers.
70 Memo to Branch Members, May 1946, box 2, file 12, LeFlore Papers.
71 LeFlore to the Board of City Commissioners, May 1946, box 2, file 12, LeFlore Papers.
72 Ibid.
particularly difficult to eradicate. The 1950 Census revealed very clearly the economic inequalities between black and white Mobilians. Out of a total population of 231,105 (including the city, suburbs and annexed areas), blacks numbered 77,999. This figure included 36,881 males and 41,118 females. The median school years completed by those 25 years and over was 6.2 in Mobile County compared to the white average of 8.8. 18,409 black males over the age of 14 were reported to be in the labour force in 1949 of which 2,973 were listed as unemployed. Since the war, Mobile had experienced a higher ratio of women to men across the racial divide with black women in the labour force numbering 11,378. This group suffered a lower rate of unemployment of 988. The majority of black workers were classified as private wage and salaried earners. In 1949, the median income for white families was $2,870 in the city and $2,174 in the county. Black incomes were considerably lower at approximately 55% and 46% of white incomes respectively. The actual distribution of income is a more reliable indicator of the relative poverty of blacks. In Mobile, 28% of all black families earned less than $500 compared to 11% of all white families. However, the census also revealed that a black middle-class had been considerably enlarged since the 1940s since 11.8% of families were earning between $2,000 and $2,499, a figure higher than the median income.73

The occupational profile of black Mobilians had changed little between 1940 and 1950. 285 males were classified as employed in professional occupations split across teaching (83), the clergy (94) and musicians (20). The majority were employed in unskilled and semi-skilled categories. 5,722 were listed as labourers, 1,488 as craftsmen and foremen, 4,340 as operatives and only 388 had been able to gain management and supervisory positions, none, however, were in heavy industry. Although unemployment among black women was considerably lower than that of their male counterparts, the main source of income for the former was in household and service work. Of the 10,384 females over 14 actively working, 5,319 were employed as domestic servants and 2,118 in service establishments as waitresses, cooks and charwomen. Those that had managed to complete their education and gain a college degree went on to become teachers (433). These figures revealed that black males had largely been unable to follow the temporary elevation of workers at ADDSCO in 1943 to skilled positions by 1950.74

74 Ibid., Table 77.
One of the main factors preventing blacks from gaining skilled employment in Mobile in the post-war period was that the federal government had become the largest single employer. Despite Truman's presidential order outlawing segregation and discrimination in government departments in 1948, federal agencies proved themselves to be quite unwilling to enforce the order. Recent scholarship on the role of the federal government as an employer in furthering the South's denial of equal opportunities to African Americans prior to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, has concluded that government agencies colluded with the proponents of white supremacy to help continue the economic subordination of the latter. In 1950, Brookley Field Army Base and the Mobile Post Office were the two largest employers in the city. After 1945, continued defence apportionments by the Truman government helped to create approximately 15,000 federal jobs at Brookley Field. Blacks had never represented more than 10% of the total number of employees at the base since its opening in 1940. Reports conducted by the Mobile NAACP indicated that black staff at both places were repeatedly the victims of unfair dismissal, lower wages and minimal opportunities for promotion. In addition, black applicants for new jobs advertised in the local press were more often than not, either refused entry into the civil service qualifying tests or after having passed them, were refused employment on other grounds.

Several cases of suspected discrimination at Brookley Field were investigated by LeFlore between 1953 and 1954. Prior to this, the NAACP branch had decided to launch an attack on the base when it heard that management had issued an urgent call for 1,500 additional workers in the local press. Anxious to see that blacks would gain the chance to fill at least some of these new posts, LeFlore personally wrote to Brookley's personnel department on behalf of those who had been the victims of discrimination. A letter from Vernon Gamble in December 1954 was typical of a black war veteran who had returned from military service having incurred 30% disability. The loss of his left eye had already restricted his employment opportunities. After seeking the assistance of the Veteran's Administration, he was able to gain a position at Brookley as a motor pool service checker in 1946. After only a few months service, Gamble was dismissed on the grounds...
that he had punched the wrong clocking in card one morning. Almost eight years after the event, Gamble requested the NAACP to help him regain his job on the charge of unfair dismissal. He was also confident that his three years in the armed forces would count in his favour. LeFlore wrote to the base asking for an inquiry into the Gamble case but did not hear from the base until 1955. He was finally informed that Gamble’s discharge was not regarded as a case of unfair dismissal and that no further action would be taken by Brookley’s management.\textsuperscript{77}

Earlier, in November 1954, LeFlore was approached by Nannie Cook, an employee at Brookley, who claimed that after having passed her civil service entry examinations required for promotion, she was offered the position of clerk. After only 30 days of employment, Cook was informed that she was no longer required even though she had been employed since November 1952. LeFlore immediately wrote to the Chief of Civilian Personnel requesting that he look into what appeared to be a case of unfair dismissal. The reply from the base was that other candidates were better qualified and thus selected for employment and no reference was made as to whether Cook could return to her previous job.\textsuperscript{78}

Such cases are too numerous to cite. By 1956, LeFlore had already realised that the branch needed to prepare a legal attack on discrimination in federal government under the terms of the anticipated 1957 Civil Rights Act. The revelation of overt segregation and discrimination by his own employer was particularly infuriating to LeFlore who had previously survived various attempts by the CSC to oust him from his job. In July 1953, he wrote to Arthur Summerfield, Postmaster General informing him of the perpetuation of segregation in Alabama post offices. He enclosed a detailed breakdown of the pattern of segregation in Montgomery, Mobile and Birmingham. Despite changes in the law, blacks and whites were kept separate in the main work floor and given separate toilets and canteen facilities. In another letter to Summerfield in January 1954, LeFlore expressed his disappointment that the CSC had failed to abolish segregation since his previous communication in 1949. The only option was to secure sworn affidavits in support of a

\textsuperscript{77} Vernon Gamble to Mobile NAACP, December 4, 1954, box 2, file 30, LeFlore Papers.

\textsuperscript{78} Nannie D. Cook to Mobile NAACP, November 2, 1954, \textit{ibid}. 

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legal suit against the Mobile Post Office, though results from these efforts did not could not be realised until after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.79

Conclusion

Fears that the return to peacetime would bring mass unemployment and a halting of the new black militancy in the struggle for justice in the South were unfounded in Mobile. A buoyant local economy able to absorb the loss of wartime jobs and manpower particularly in the shipbuilding industry, enabled Mobilians to enjoy the rising prosperity of their region throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. With economic benefits came a new era in racial politics inaugurated by the entrance of blacks for the first time since Reconstruction, as potential voters in county and city elections. Ordinary African Americans in Mobile proved beyond a doubt that they would indeed seize every opportunity to chip away at the institution and culture of segregation. Beginning with the ballot, NAACP branches across the South made several important strides in education, employment and litigation thereby suggesting that the Civil Rights movement did in fact gain its first major thrust forward during World War II. That momentum, however uneven in the localities, had to withstand an even greater challenge in 1954: the Supreme Court's historic decision to order the integration of the nation's public schools.

PART TWO: Towards A New Racial Settlement
Chapter 5:

'An Old Man's Organisation': The Non-Partisan Voters' League and the Local Civil Rights Struggle in Mobile, 1956-63

Eight years after the Supreme Court ruling in Brown II (1955) requiring Southern states to begin desegregation of the public schools ‘with all deliberate speed,’ not a single school had been integrated in Alabama.\(^1\) By autumn, however, Murphy High School in downtown Mobile accepted the transfer requests of the parents of two black students for entry into the new academic year and, therefore, became the first previously all-white public school in the state to comply with the court’s order. Despite many years of consistent opposition toward demands for integration, the Mobile County School Board, led by Dr. Cranford Burns, was forced to reconsider its position by local civil rights leaders and black parents whose persistence finally integrated Murphy through the courts in a major legal case, \textit{Birdie Mae Davis et. al. v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County} (1963). On the first day at their new school, Henry Hobdy and Dorothy Davis, both aged 17, faced the bitter fury of fellow classmates. A white student recalled that Henry was never spoken to and had witnessed another student emptying a milk carton of urine into his locker. During gym classes, Henry was subjected to bullying and verbal abuse, yet neither he nor Dorothy ever retaliated or returned an insult. Such exemplary behaviour was not unusual for black teenagers who knew the importance of maintaining a calm exterior in the battle against segregation. In Deep South communities such as Mobile, no other public activity aroused as much resistance and reaction from whites than the forced integration of their public schools. For conservative white Southerners, racial mixing in the classroom constituted a severe threat to the cultural heart of white supremacy. Yet in 1963, Mobile blacks led the state in their struggle to see the Supreme Court’s order gradually implemented revealing that the local Civil Rights movement had continued to flourish in the port-city despite the backlash caused by \textit{Brown} and the temporary closure of NAACP operations in Alabama in 1956.\(^2\)


\(^2\) \textit{Birdie Mae Davis et. al. v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County et. al.}, Civil Action No. 3003-63, 1963, Series I: Casework, box 6, file 8, NPVL Records; Mobile
Towards a New Racial Settlement

The Supreme Court's school desegregation decision heralded a major turning point in Southern race relations at both the state and local levels. In Alabama, state officials refused to endorse the court's ruling and began steps to resist integrating the public schools. For black Alabamians the first casualty of the hostile racial climate triggered by Brown was the temporary closure of the NAACP in 1956 when, following the organisation's refusal to disclose its membership lists, state authorities successfully barred all its operations via a court injunction. Future Alabama governor, John Patterson, an outspoken opponent of school desegregation who based his political fortunes upon racist electoral appeal, played a key role in the demise of the NAACP in his state.3 However, Patterson's move had a positive effect upon the black protest movement in the localities. Prior to 1956, the NAACP had maintained active branches in all of Alabama's major cities and was arguably the most dominant civil rights agency in the region. With the void left by the NAACP's sudden withdrawal, blacks in the cities responded by forming new or enlarging existing civil rights groups to continue the struggle against Jim Crow. At the local level, Patterson's assault on the NAACP was more of a turning point than the impact of Brown because it could have signalled an impasse in local black-led civil rights protest. Proving beyond any doubt that urban, black Alabamians possessed the determination, resources and leadership to overcome the perils associated with racial protest in the late 1950s, the NAACP was replaced in Montgomery, Birmingham, Tuskegee and Mobile by distinctive civil rights groups firmly rooted in the culture and local conditions of each area.4


4 Local movements in Tuskegee, Birmingham and Montgomery have been examined in detail by historians, however Mobile has been largely neglected, except for K. Nicholls' account, 'The Non-Partisan Voters League of Mobile, Alabama: Its Founding and Major Accomplishments,' Gulf Coast Historical Review 8 (Spring 1993): 74-88. R. Norrell's Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee (New York, 1985) is the standard account of Charles Gomillion and the Tuskegee Civic Association's efforts to enfranchise the black voting majority of Macon County; G.T. Eskew, But for Birmingham: The Local and National Struggles in the Civil Rights Struggle (Chapel Hill, 1997) is the most recent and, historiographically useful analysis of Fred Shuttlesworth's dynamic, militant grass-roots civil rights organisation, the Alabama Christian Movement.
Towards a New Racial Settlement

The Montgomery Bus Boycott, followed in quick succession by the formation of the SCLC in 1957 signalled the enlargement of grass-roots black protest in Alabama. These developments set the stage for the expansion of the goals and strategies of civil rights reform during the 1960s. The boycott, though not new to black strategies for self-improvement, symbolised a new defiance among African-American communities in the South to be quickly mirrored by the student sit-ins. Alabama became the birthplace of the direct-action phase of the Civil Rights movement in an era in which the intensity of white social and political resistance to public school integration was nourished by Cold War Communist hysteria. According to one scholar, ‘Montgomery was a portent of things to come,’ characteristics now associated with the 1950s and 1960s movement began with that event. Black protest in this era assumed the forms of religious revival, cultural expressions of the struggle in music and prayers, non-violent confrontation, an appeal to American democratic values emphasising racial unity in the battle against white oppression. This is the classic rendering of the Southern movement after the emergence of King and the SCLC, yet it is a rendering only relevant to some areas of Alabama.

The Non-Partisan Voters League and Racial Politics in Post-Brown Mobile

In Mobile LeFlore and other local blacks formed The Non Partisan Voters’ League (NPVL), an organisation which eventually assumed the NAACP’s mantle and continued the legal battle against Jim Crow well into the 1980s. From 1956 until his death in 1976, the NPVL was led by LeFlore. By now a veteran civil rights activist and race leader, LeFlore instigated and financed a broad programme of economic and social reform through the League’s resources. The guiding force in all its activities was the link between citizenship and the aggressive pursuit of constitutional rights within the law. A


6 For example, A. Fairclough, To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr., (Athens, GA., 1987) and D.J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (London, 1993).
secular organisation, the NPVL leadership included a number of influential black clergymen but, nonetheless, did not adopt King's radical brand of Christianity and strategies for social activism. Neither did the NPVL choose to affiliate itself with the SCLC. Reverend John Echols Lowery, a prominent local preacher attended the SCLC's organisational meeting in Atlanta and was the only member of both organisations. The legacy of the New Deal, Mobile's Catholic culture and the racially moderate city commissioner, Joe Langan who was re-elected in 1957, gave Mobile's African-American civil rights leadership little incentive to break with traditional patterns of racial protest in favour of the more militant styles evident elsewhere. The prospect of school integration was bitterly opposed by a large proportion of white Mobilians and led to both the brief resurgence of the Klan in Mobile County and the formation of a White Citizen's Council chapter. However, this was counterbalanced by a significant number of influential white citizens who, after hearing of the racial problems in Montgomery and Birmingham, were determined to prevent a corresponding schism between blacks and whites in their city. It was for these reasons that during the peak years of the Southern Civil Rights movement (1961-65), Mobile did not host any major demonstrations, nor was King invited to deliver a single speech or to organise a non-violent protest rally. Such factors enabled the city to remain relatively aloof from the national and Southern movements.

LeFlore was not particularly inspired by events in Montgomery or the student sit-in movement after 1960. It is likely that he was more preoccupied with the fate of the civil rights struggle in his own city once the NAACP had been outlawed. The voice of civil rights protest until 1968 was dominated by the NPVL. The most striking feature of the organisation was that its arrival did not signal a break in traditional black protest in the manner that the emergence of the ACMHR did in Birmingham. From the very beginning the NPVL committed itself to an agenda that sought economic and social integration for blacks within a language and strategy imbued with patriotism, respect for the American democratic ideal and the rejection of second-class citizenship status in the South's racial hierarchy. Inclusion into the political and economic life of the city was to be achieved through accommodation and alliances with liberal white officials, a deferential stance that was characteristic of the middle-class black leadership in the 1940s. By 1963, the NPVL

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7 'The Non-Partisan Voters League of Mobile, Alabama: Its Founding and Major Accomplishments,' *Gulf Coast Historical Review*, op.cit., 75-83.

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had quickly proved itself to be one of the most persevering local civil rights groups in the state achieving a fair degree of autonomy and respectability in the Gulf South.9

Exactly when and how the NPVL was founded are important issues still clouded in historical confusion. It is not clear from available NAACP records dated prior to 1956 whether LeFlore had anticipated Patterson's move against the NAACP and had investigated ways in which civil rights activities could be continued in Mobile. Since being outlawed was a real possibility, the League kept minimal records of specific members until the early 1960s. Existing evidence conveys conflicting accounts of the precise timing of the NPVL's birth. Interviews with past members and contemporary newspaper reports indicate that the League was founded in 1956 as a direct response to the outlawing of the NAACP to continue the latter's litigation work. Other sources suggest that the League's existence stretched as far back as the 1940s where it operated as the political arm of the NAACP.

For the purposes of this study Keith Nicholls' conclusion that it is unlikely the NPVL was in operation alongside the NAACP during the 1940s since it would certainly have attracted the attention of the state authorities when the NAACP was outlawed, will date the beginning of the NPVL's operations at 1956. Nicholls points to another fact supporting this conclusion. There is no reference to the NPVL nor its activities in any of the LeFlore NAACP documents dated prior to 1956. Although this may have been a tactical manoeuvre to avoid state surveillance of the NAACP branches, it seems logical to assume that once NAACP operations had closed in 1956, the NPVL emerged as a new organisation with a name that suggested a narrow political focus for its activities to protect it from being associated with the former.10

Within the shifting spectrum of black collective action inaugurated by the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the NPVL stood firmly in the conservative tradition of the NAACP. The original NPVL constitution of 1956 declared it to be largely a political organisation which would aid blacks in securing the ballot. In 1959, a special amendment to this constitution was passed by a two thirds majority which established an office for the Director of

9 Eskew, *But For Birmingham*, 140; LeFlore interviewed by Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, January 1972, A-17, SOHP, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

10 Nicholls, 'The Non-Partisan Voters League,' 76-7 and 'The NAACP Outlawed in Alabama, 1956-1964,' 7, *op. cit.*
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Casework. The amendment also made explicit that the NPVL would pursue equality 'by petition, court proceedings or any other lawful means.'¹¹ LeFlore moved from his previous position as Executive Secretary of the Mobile NAACP branch to the office of NPVL’s Director of Casework. He had specific duties assigned to him which included the task of undertaking 'investigations and surveys related to social, political and economic questions' and responsibilities for instituting court proceedings to ensure that the League assumed its role as 'an integral entity of the civil rights movement.'¹² Notably lacking in this statement was the use of direct-action to help blacks secure their citizenship rights. Also absent was the tone of impatience with the racial status quo which had infused the formation of the ACMHR two years previously. It appears that the founders of the NPVL did not regard King and the SCLC’s strategy of non-violent resistance to unjust laws as central to their struggle against segregation, LeFlore believed that non-violent social change could be achieved in Mobile without taking protest to the streets.¹³

League membership was drawn largely from Mobile’s traditional black middle-class although it did recruit people from the lower middle to working classes as plaintiffs and defendants in several legal suits. Mobile’s black bourgeoisie had considerably supported LeFlore and the NAACP during and after World War II. Exact figures for the total number of members are not available but it is possible to estimate that at least 900 persons pledged donations or had their names listed as members in 1960.¹⁴ Judging from the various addresses supplied to the League by these people, those who supported a local civil rights organisation in Mobile did not come solely from the traditional African American areas of the city but from almost all over, including areas annexed in the 1950s. Those appointed to the Executive Board were charged an extra $1.00 per week in addition to annual membership dues to finance special projects. The President, A.S. Crishon was empowered to authorise up to $100 in emergency situations involving the League’s casework. The task of 'eradicating discrimination' would be conducted by

¹¹ H.H. Haines, Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream (Knoxville, 1988), 31; ‘Constitution and Amendments, 1956-59,’ Series V: Operating Files, box 12, file 8, NPVL Records

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Eskew, 138; Purifoy, in Mobile’s Civil Rights Pioneer: An Oral History.

¹⁴ 'Membership, 1960-61' Series V, box 16, file 19, NPVL Records. The only way of estimating the League’s membership after 1960 was by counting the number of names and addresses supplied in lists detailing donors and those who pledged funds for specific campaigns. No master list was maintained.
weekly meetings held in Davis Avenue where the League's offices were located and by hosting special banquets to raise funds. Unlike its counterparts in Birmingham and Tuskegee, the League had no plans to use the economic power of the black community to force action from the city authorities.

The NPVL's strategy inaugurated by the 1959 constitution was shaped by the class and social relationships which cut across Mobile's black community. The Civil Rights movement in Mobile was ultimately led by a generation of African Americans who had lived through the Jim Crow era and formed their visions of what being a black American in the South entailed within the institutionalised system of segregation. Recollections from past members indicate that the average age of the NPVL leadership was between 40 and 50. LeFlore, O.B. Purifoy, A.S. Crishon, John Randolph, Reverend Tunstall and Reverend E.B. Goode were key figures in the League's progress during the 1960s. Purifoy ran his own insurance business, Crishon was a businessman and Randolph also worked in insurance. They shared middle-class accommodationist aspirations and strategies for black liberation. LeFlore was particularly keen to place civil rights demands in the context of American democracy and values but he did not adopt the traditional character or style of the race leader who had gained his training from the church as a preacher. He preferred not to speak at mass rallies but on carefully planned radio shows aired in Mobile once a week or during personal meetings at the NPVL offices in Davis Avenue.

Through the NPVL LeFlore was able to establish himself further in his career as a Southern, moderate black political leader. Political scientist, Everett Carll Ladd, Jr., identified certain features attributable to this type of race leader. He was less likely to favour direct-action strategies to further the group's goals, more likely to espouse respectable civil rights protest within the legal system and, have a disposition to forge alliances with liberal whites by directing the black bloc vote towards them in local elections. Unlike Shuttlesworth's ACHMR, which had the hallmark of militant grassroots radicalism in its strategies of protest, the NPVL mirrored the patriarchal,

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16 Geraldine Clark, former secretary to LeFlore, Tape LF-12, Mobile's Civil Rights Pioneer: An Oral History.
authoritarian structures of the black church and operated primarily within a formal bureaucratic structure that bestowed upon its officers certain responsibilities. The personalities which constituted the NPVL leadership made the local civil rights struggle a predominantly male affair. None articulated a role for black women or youths other than as plaintiffs or witnesses in federal investigations initiated by the League. Purifoy later described the NPVL as 'an old man's organisation' that emulated the white gentlemen's clubs found in Mobile society at large.¹⁸

The NPVL's name confirmed the nature of the civil rights struggle in Mobile. Formulated by LeFlore in the context of the post-Brown white backlash, it acted as a bulwark against any suspicion of links with the Communist Party. The insertion of 'Non-Partisan' was a tactical move designed to promote an impartial civil rights organisation that did not ally with any specific political movements. The aim was to present the League as the voice of the respectable black citizenry in Mobile which rejected violence and disruptive tactics to achieve its goals. Shuttlesworth had added the word 'movement' in the ACMHR to stress the radical nature of Birmingham's grass-roots struggle for integration.¹⁹ Though not a 'classic' black bourgeoisie himself, LeFlore was committed to the generational slant of accommodationist civil rights leadership forged by the NAACP in the preceding decades. He could not have duplicated Shuttlesworth's militant public posture in Birmingham. He was adamant that segregation could be ended through the courts by presenting a strong moral case for including blacks in the life of the city as respectable, law-abiding Americans. Hence, his ideological outlook had changed little since the 1940s.

Politically, the League harnessed the continuity provided by LeFlore's former leadership of the NAACP when he had canvassed newly-registered black voters during the 1953 elections which helped elect Joseph Langan to the city commission. It was easy for LeFlore to disregard the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott because he had already managed to involve blacks in local politics where they were instrumental in supporting a city commissioner at the polls. More significantly, and in contrast to the situation in Montgomery and Birmingham, LeFlore opened a dialogue with white officialdom. In forging an alliance with Langan, LeFlore had demonstrated his ability to capitalise on the changes in white attitudes to racial issues evident since the New Deal and World War II.

¹⁸ Purifoy and James A. Randolph, former NPVL member, Tapes LF-4 and LF-6, op. cit.
¹⁹ Purifoy, ibid; Eskew, But for Birmingham, 141.
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This became an essential part of the NPVL expanded strategy for black freedom during the 1960s. Such a dual nature set it apart from the voter leagues that mushroomed across the South during World War II and in response to the NAACP victory in Smith v. Allwright (1944).

The municipal election of 1957 was a good example of early League efforts to pursue civil rights reform by supporting whites deemed liberal on the race question. Such liberals, however, were few and far between after 1956 when Alabama politics became gripped by the fear of public school integration and where the forces of resistance to this prospect gave rise to the resurgence of the KKK in selected counties. As C. Vann Woodward has argued, a certain 'panic seized many parts of the South' during 1956 after which the voices of moderation faded into the distance over the school integration crisis.20 In February of that year the White Citizen's Council was formed in Mobile County and the Klan stepped up its activities in the city with a series of cross burnings and public meetings. Langan was aware that the city had done little to curb Klan violence. Given the Klan's outspoken anti-Catholicism, it was not surprising that Langan sought the help of the chief of police, Dudley McFayden. In his bid for re-election Langan found himself competing against a current city commissioner, Charles E. Baumhauer and E.C. Barnard, imperial wizard of the Gulf KKK. The NPVL moved quickly to canvass registered black voters numbering approximately 2,500 in 1956 with the aim of securing Langan's re-election. To LeFlore, it was important not to alienate the 'good whites' in Mobile who had demonstrated their flexibility towards race after World War II for they had the power to aid blacks in an age when large-scale political representation was still a distant hope. In September 1957, black voters were sent a sample ballot with the names of candidates endorsed by the League. They were requested to 'cast their ballots in the interest of good government for all people.'21

Very little publicity was attached to this aspect of NPVL activities for fear of white reprisal and the loss of impartiality. However, Langan publicly announced that he would be 'glad to accept the vote of any man' and was re-elected with the support of Mobile's


black wards.\textsuperscript{22} The municipal election officially cemented LeFlore's alliance with Langan. Despite the formation in that year of the SCLC which called for a mass of 'educated volunteers' to join the direct-action wing of the Civil Rights movement in the South, the NPVL refused to break with the accommodationist tradition of black leadership in Mobile.\textsuperscript{23} While the ACMHR and the MIA joined the SCLC, the NPVL remained aloof and made no public moves to join this new confederation of black civil rights groups. However, the defeat of Barnard was symbolic of Mobile's ambivalent attitudes towards race. It was a crushing blow to the KKK since the majority of Mobile voters had rejected their violent methods to maintain the racial status quo. Barnard later resigned from the Klan.\textsuperscript{24}

Klan presence in Mobile combined with the breakdown in communication between the races in Montgomery had a positive effect upon the local civil rights struggle. The fostering of a new bi-racial coalition in local race relations led by Langan and Father Albert Foley at Spring Hill College in March 1956 was a major step forward, unparalleled in any other Alabama city. Langan was one of the few Catholic City Commissioners in the state who had a vision for Mobile as one which should seek to expand the economic benefits of the post-war era rather than to blindly adhere to the racial status quo. This determined his attitudes to black demands for revision of the Jim Crow system. During the mid-1950s he was supported by Mobile's Catholic establishment and various white representatives from labour, business and education.\textsuperscript{25}

Leadership during the rising tensions of the civil rights era was crucial in preventing economic and social disruption in Mobile on the scale experienced in Birmingham. What united Langan and LeFlore was a respect for American democracy and values. Neither

\textsuperscript{22} W. Flynt, \textit{Alabama: The History of a Deep South State}, 548; Dow, 'Joseph N. Langan: Mobile's Racial Diplomat,' 31, 37; Purifoy, \textit{op. cit.}

\textsuperscript{23} J.M. Washington preamble to 'Nonviolence and Racial Justice,' in \textit{A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writing and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.} (New York, 1986), 5. In fact there is no mention in any of the League records regarding this or what its members thought of the SCLC's aims apart from a few telegrams from LeFlore to government officials stating his support for the 'valuable' work Dr. King was doing in the South.

\textsuperscript{24} A.S. Foley, 'KKK In Mobile, Ala.,' \textit{America} December 8, 1956: 298; \textit{Mobile Press}, February 25, 1956, 1; Dow, 66.

wished to see Mobile degenerate into the racial polarisation that gripped Montgomery in 1956. Both wanted to bring blacks and whites together to discuss the opportunities for change in light of recent events. The national press commented on this tone of moderation claiming that the city was 'an exception to the hardening of racial views in Alabama.'\textsuperscript{26} Langan was greatly aided this trend. His background and outlook did not match the harsh pro-segregationist stance of other legislators during the 1950s. In the era of mass protest, Mobile had no Bull Connor and in common with other Southerners, Langan was keen to see his homeland uphold the democratic values he had fought to save in World War II.\textsuperscript{27} During Langan's periods of office, he ran one of the most honest and efficient municipal governments in the state launching several key capital projects designed to modernise the city and improve services for poorer citizens. A major annexation in 1956 enlarged the city's geographic size from 30 square miles to 92 square miles which increased the population by 25,000. The procurement of approximately $2.5 million in federal funds through the 1949 Housing Act helped the city commission to launch a major urban renewal program in run-down black neighbourhoods during the early 1960s. In 1953, under Langan's influence, Mobile became the first city in Alabama to hire black police officers. Such moves rapidly bestowed upon Langan the dangerous political label of racial liberal, from which point he became the target of the White Citizen's Councils and the Klan. The latter group set alight crosses in his front yard in 1956. Another important symbol of Langan's commitment to black electoral support came after the construction of a new municipal auditorium financed through tax bonds. In the summer of 1964, the auditorium opened its doors to an integrated audience of 6,000, an event that was accompanied with little hostility from white citizens.\textsuperscript{28}

The formation of the Mobile BI-Racial Commission in March 1956 was Langan's first effort to maintain communication between the races during a period of rising confrontation elsewhere in Alabama. However, this was actually preceded by the voluntary integration of Spring Hill College where Father Foley was based. In 1955, the college admitted twelve African Americans without much conflict. In fact, the move was supported by the institution's faculty as a legitimate response to recent changes in the law.

\textsuperscript{26} New York Times, March 13, 1956, 6.


\textsuperscript{28} Dow, ibid., 2-26, 31, 45; Mobile Register, November 18, 1953.
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Spring Hill thus became the only higher education institution in the state to desegregate its student body soon after the Supreme Court’s order in Brown II.²⁹ Langan’s connections at the college, particularly Foley, helped him to assemble a list of people, both black and white, who would be potentially willing to offer their services and volunteer to join a commission dedicated to investigating local issues facing the community with the object of making recommendations. A special town meeting was convened by Langan on March 2 which brought together several citizens drawn from the list suggested by Foley for this purpose. Throughout March, Langan corresponded with several people personally requesting them to support his initiative. Among those contacted were black clergymen, Catholic and Baptist, local businessmen, the Mobile County Chapter of the American Red Cross and the Mobile Public Library.

It is likely that Langan may not have contacted all of the above but this list confirms Foley’s knowledge of several people in the community willing to join the proposed committee. By April the commission had met and various subcommittees were entrusted to investigate housing, recreation, education and political rights. The total number of appointees included 17 whites and 13 blacks along with the notable exception of LeFlore. Had the commission been linked with him it would have placed the NPVL’s work in jeopardy and incited retaliation from whites who did not share their city commissioner’s views on interracial co-operation. However, word soon spread about Langan’s enlightened handling of the racial situation. Among the several commendation letters he received, one came from a group of Methodist ministers in Pensacola, Florida, one from a white employee recently arrived from Irvington to work at Brookley Field and the Reverend Robert E. Hughes, Executive Director of the Alabama Council on Human Relations in Montgomery.³⁰

Unfortunately, the BI-Racial commission failed to deliver much in the way of real racial progress, suffering closure in 1958 after fears of Klan violence. From the outset, Langan


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was careful to stress that he intended to use it not as a vehicle to launch an attack on Jim Crow, but to ensure that segregation in Mobile was separate and equal. Since the committee kept no minutes, it is difficult to gauge exactly what it did manage to achieve other than keeping the channels of communication open between blacks and whites. The political cost to Langan and other whites who supported him would have been immense if the commission had made immediate integration its objective. Despite the strength of religious moderation and the history of racial tolerance in Mobile itself, there still existed a very significant conservative, pro-segregation element. Langan placed his committee in jeopardy by the single act of annexation which tripled the geographic size of the city from 30 square miles to 92 square miles. He later recalled that by doing so, he added approximately 25,000 to the population and brought in racially 'hostile whites' within the city limits which ultimately restricted community-wide support for the BI-Racial Commission.31

The spirit of interracial co-operation on the issue of desegregation did more than just keep the peace in Mobile. When the student sit-in movement began targeting public accommodations in Greensboro, another militant turn had begun in black protest. Despite various Supreme Court rulings banning segregation on interstate buses and other public facilities, unequal access was generally the rule in 1960. Direct-action, already rejected by the League was key to opening up lunch counters in North Carolina. Langan and LeFlore shared a common concern that such activities should not be encouraged in Mobile. Drawing upon the principles which formed the BI-Racial Commission, Langan offered to personally write to managers of leading retail outlets in Mobile regarding the issue of access. Such a gesture would have been quite unrealistic in Birmingham, where the Big Mule-Black Belt alliance that dominated political power in Jefferson County until 1963 had consistently emasculated hopes that blacks could be given a fair hearing by the city authorities. Given that Mobile businessmen had supported Langan's Commission, LeFlore was justifiably hopeful that his own communication with regional offices would at least put desegregation as a priority on their agenda in a relatively calm city.32


As with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the student sit-ins failed to make any lasting impact on the black leadership in Mobile other than stiffen their resolve to keep confrontation out of the city. While Langan’s conciliatory approach may have aided this, it was also due to the educational background of the black community. Mobile had no traditionally black institutions of higher education similar to the Alabama State College in Montgomery or Morehouse College in Atlanta. The only colleges open to them were the privately-funded Spring Hill College and the Mobile Vocational Training School which offered courses in selected trades. Even if SNCC had tried to solicit members in the city it would have had a difficult task. The lack of young, educated blacks with upwardly mobile aspirations was an important moderating context for protest in Mobile during the 1960s. Hence, LeFlore was able to continue tackling the problem of unequal access to public accommodations without sanctioning the use of civil disobedience. At first, this policy was rather slow. The headquarters of stores with outlets in Mobile, H. Kress, F.W. Woolworths and Joseph Neisners sent courteous replies agreeing in principle to Langan’s proposal that store managers meet representatives of the black community but refused to commit to any firm decision regarding integration of their facilities. It was clear that any positive decision affecting areas such as restrooms and lunch counters would overturn prevailing racial etiquette in the Deep South and for business reasons, could not be taken lightly. LeFlore, therefore, urged the companies to consider desegregation before blacks were forced to resort to confrontation as they had done elsewhere in the South arguing that Mobile was an historic city with a good record on race relations and, furthermore, was the only city in the state to have an integrated college of higher education. This was to become a recurrent theme in LeFlore’s handling of the desegregation era. He would use Mobile’s racially-non-violent past as a moral argument for white authorities to exercise flexibility in their attitudes.33

The city of Mobile emerged in the press and in LeFlore’s mind as a place able to make concessions to a minority committed to racial reform. Intransigence on Langan’s part may have forced the NPVL to consider alternative methods to achieve the goals of first class citizenship. Despite the rather transitory nature of the 1956 BI-Racial Commission, it was an important message from the city authorities to black Mobilians: reject violence and confrontational tactics, exercise patience and you will be rewarded. In 1963, such a

message was accepted by the NPVL, an organisation which since 1956 had managed to make a phenomenal expansion in its efforts to eradicate second class citizenship in Mobile.

_The NPVL'S Achievements, 1956-63_

While violence marred civil rights efforts in Birmingham during this period it also worked positively by strengthening the black community's resolve to fight for a more equal and just society. In Mobile, violence played an insignificant role. The NPVL shrouded its activities in secrecy therefore shielding itself considerably from the threat of white reprisals. The bombing of Shuttlesworth's home in 1957 was a grave reminder to all civil rights leaders of the courage and determination required to continue the battle against Jim Crow. It was also a catalyst which according to Eskew, galvanised future action on the part of Birmingham's blacks. LeFlore faced no such event and rather, it was his decision to take up the defence of a young Mobile citizen by the name of Willie Seals, Jr. in 1958 which mobilised large sections of the black community behind the League for the next decade. Seals, aged 27 and from Prichard, a majority black area to the north of Mobile, was one of the many men of his race in the Jim Crow South who became the victims of a legal system that weighed heavily against them where white women were involved. Seals was convicted and sentenced to death in the electric chair on the charge of raping a white woman in December by the Mobile County circuit court jury. Another black Mobilian, 23-year-old Arthur Lott, was also accused of raping the woman on the same night in June 1958. A testimony from the woman stated that the attack took place after her car had swerved off a main highway onto a side street. Seals 'steadfastly denied the charge' and protested his innocence in a letter to Governor Patterson. His plea to have his life spared 'fell on "deaf ears"' according to LeFlore. Lott received a life sentence in the case on the basis of a confession he had apparently made to the police soon after the incident.34

LeFlore was well aware that the Southern jury system resolutely excluded blacks from its rolls and had been looking for a test case such as this to expose the discriminatory element in jury selection. In 1959, one year after Seals was sentenced to death, he found that 2,239 whites and no blacks had been sworn to serve as jurors in Mobile County even though a small number had been included on the original lists. It thus seemed logical for

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him to contest Seals' sentence on the grounds that blacks were systematically denied the opportunity to act as jurors in cases where whites were involved. How could an-all white jury pass a fair verdict in a controversial case where two black youths were charged with the rape of a white woman? The Scottsboro case and Emmett Till's brutal murder by whites in Mississippi cast a long shadow over the likelihood of black men receiving fair trials for alleged sexual misconduct towards white women. The use of all-white juries enabled the Southern justice system to deliver a strong message to black men regarding their behaviour towards white women; that they would pay a heavy penalty if they violated racial etiquette in this area. Till's murderers benefited from the extreme harshness of such a system while the Scottsboro boys suffered its undue costs. In Mobile Seals was fortunate to have the support of the NPVL and LeFlore who was experienced in handling cases where the miscarriage of justice was suspected. In 1948 he had taken up the defence of Nathaniel Taylor who had also been convicted and sentenced to death for rape, but on this occasion a black woman was the victim. The Mobile NAACP raised more than $1,200 to finance the case and Taylor's sentence was reduced to life imprisonment in 1950. In 1953, LeFlore saved Henry Lee Brown, an 18-year old black Mobilian, who had been accused of murdering a white woman from Saraland, from the electric chair.  

In order for Seals' conviction to be overturned by the Alabama Appeals Court, the League had to finance a test case proving that he had been denied 'due process' of the law and therefore, suffered violation of his constitutional rights upon racial grounds. Charles S. Conley, a respected black lawyer from Montgomery with NAACP connections, was enlisted to take up Seals' defence in November 1960. Time was severely limited for both Conley and the League to prepare an initial plea for clemency and the issuing of a habeas corpus writ to save Seals from the electric chair, scheduled for April 7th, 1961. On December 18th, 1960 the NPVL held a civic mass meeting at a local AME Zion Church to rally support for Seals' defence which, unbeknown to most of the African Americans present at the time, would eventually become a case of major judicial significance. A

35 D.T. Carter, Scottsboro: Tragedy of the American South (Baton Rouge, 1979); S.J. Whitfield, Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till (Chicago, 1988); 'Jurors legally drawn and sworn to serve,' February 1962, Series I, box 1, file 24, NPVL Records; 'Along the Non-Partisan Voters' League - Citizen's Committee Civil Rights Front,' Series V: Operating Files, box 12, file 1.
petition with over 2,000 signatures was signed demonstrating the League's success in generating support for its first major legal battle of the decade.\textsuperscript{36}

This mass meeting signalled the start of a long commitment to save Seals' life that lasted until 1963. On January 6, 1961 Governor Patterson granted Seals a reprieve of 90 days in which time his lawyers had to prepare a petition laying out the basis of the appeal charge. At this point, LeFlore made clear his personal interest in the case calling it the 'most important matter confronting the community'.\textsuperscript{37} Financially, the League's resources were being rapidly depleted. Although the Citizen's Committee had spent over $3,000 on attorney's fees with another $800 pledged by individuals and churches, a further $2,200 was required urgently. Eventually a petition was completed by Arthur Kinoy, a black lawyer from New York city who, on hearing about the case and its potential wider judicial implications, personally contributed his services and an extra $100. The petition summarised the reasons why Seals should be spared from the electric chair. Kinoy argued that he could not have received a fair trial given the systematic exclusion of blacks from the jury rolls, the unfavourable press publicity surrounding the case and the revelation that several of the witnesses who had helped convict Seals in 1958, including Lott, may have lied. All involved at this stage were quietly hopeful that if the Appeals Court granted a rehearing on these grounds then the NPVL was on its way to securing a major legal assault on the constitutionality of the Southern jury system.\textsuperscript{38}

A rehearing was granted only after a writ of habeas corpus was secured raising specific constitutional issues in September 1961. The issues raised were whether a black citizen could, under the provisions of the 14th Amendment, be tried in a segregated courtroom before an all-white jury and receive equal protection of the laws. By November LeFlore and Kinoy's efforts to enlist the NAACP to finance counsel for the case had fallen through. Jack Greenberg of the LDEF replied to LeFlore that the 'NAACP had widespread commitments involving school desegregation, freedom riders etc. throughout the South,' and therefore would be unable to provide support at this time.\textsuperscript{39} LeFlore was determined that the League continue to finance Seals' defence, his faith in

\textsuperscript{36} 'Willie Seals, Jr.,' Series I, box 1, file 8, NPVL Records.
\textsuperscript{37} NPVL call for donations to the Seals campaign, January 4, 1961, file 10, \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{38} Willie Seals, box 1, file 10, \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{39} Jack Greenberg to LeFlore, October 11, 1961, file 19, \textit{ibid.}
the constitutionality of this case may have played a crucial role in this. When the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals accepted that Seals' affidavit did indeed raise important questions regarding the exclusion of black jurors it duly removed the death sentence in July 1962. A major victory for the League had resulted. Yet the battle was to last yet another year.40

Despite the Appeals Court ruling, state prosecutors, were able to re-indict Seals for the original charge on March 27, 1963. This was a serious setback to the League's efforts. By now Charles S. Conley, Arthur Kinoy, Morton Stavas of Newark, Martin Bradley of Buffalo and Vernon Z. Crawford, Mobile's only black lawyer, were all involved in the case, the cost of which had risen to over $10,000. As a matter of great urgency, LeFlore issued a public statement alongside a photograph of Seals requesting that donations be made to the Seals fund at the League's offices between 2 and 8 p.m. daily. He signed the statement with 'Yours for justice and full equality under the law'.41 A statement which made explicit the NPVL's role in the community as an agent of respectable black efforts to aid the victims of an unfair criminal justice system.

A press report in the Montgomery Advertiser-Journal covered the judicial significance of the Seals case bringing prestige to the League two days before LeFlore issued his statement. If the Seals appeal was to be upheld by the Supreme Court, it would 'revolutionize the jury system throughout the South' signalling that the federal courts would no longer be satisfied with "token integration" of the jury system.42 Statistics showed time and time again that although blacks constituted nearly 38% of the Mobile population less than 2% were able to sit in the jury box. Should there be a hearing following Seals' re-indictment, this would have to be conducted

'by a grand jury from which Negroes have not been systematically excluded and any such retrial must be before a jury from which Negroes have not been systematically excluded.'43


43 Ibid.
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Funds poured in from individuals and organisations in Montgomery and Mobile after this publicity. Clearly the case had attracted a great deal of attention and the League’s efforts were finally rewarded to some extent when the Supreme Court let stand the ruling on the grounds that it was originally fought. In effect, this ruling had nationwide application. Every Southern county was now legally required to raise the number of blacks serving as jurors or otherwise future convictions would also be subject to reversal on this principle. Furthermore, the case showed that the NPVL had upheld its promise to seek racial equality through the courts and successfully fund a lengthy battle. Victories such as these were painfully slow but the lawyers involved eventually overcame the NAACP’s failure to support the case. Of wider significance for the local civil rights struggle in Mobile was that it appeared as though LeFlore’s faith in the American legal system perhaps would one day deliver full justice to African Americans.44

In the same year as the Seals victory, the League mounted a test case intended to force the Mobile County School Board’s compliance with the Supreme Court order in Brown II (1955). The Mobile County and city public school systems were the largest combined system in the state yet not a single school had been desegregated in 1963. Alabama was not alone in devising various mechanisms to prevent or stall integration in the public schools beginning with the Boswell Amendment in 1955. State authorities did, however, anticipate the Supreme Court ruling and began equalisation in early 1954. Black and white teachers’ salaries were equalised across the board in 1953 but in Mobile, Langan had aided equalisation in 1949. The black community had presented several formal petitions to the school board between 1955 and 1963, as initially directed by the NAACP, but no moves were made by the former to even begin token desegregation. The League decided to recruit suitable black plaintiffs to supply affidavits in support of a complaint that was named the Birdie Mae Davis case. Davis was the first plaintiff to be assigned and hence the suit carried her name. It was clear that neither the state nor the local authorities were willing to act within the law and begin a plan for desegregation. Of course immediate integration was neither a practical nor a realistic option given the strength of opposition against abolishing the dual school system. However, the Davis suit began the League’s longest legal battle and pushed the integration of schools in the late 1960s into the realm of federal compliance where some progress was eventually made. Murphy High

School, one of the city's largest white schools admitted blacks in September 1963. Further litigation was required by the League in 1967 before the Mobile County Board of School Commissioners were forced to devise a unitary school system to make way for large-scale desegregation of the city's public schools.\textsuperscript{45}

Economic conditions in the black community was one area in which the League's alliance with liberal whites failed to make a significant impact upon racial progress was. Post-war prosperity was hardly visible among the poorest sections of the 136,886 African Americans who resided in the 1960 Mobile Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (see map, on page 156). The median income for white families in 1959 was $5,452 compared to $2,959 for black families. Personal per capita income had been steadily rising across the state since 1940 and now stood at $1,227 compared to $282 in 1930. The significantly lower incomes of black families in Mobile was mainly due to the rigid discrimination enforced by the city's major employers which effectively denied these workers the possibility of moving into skilled and supervisory posts. The upgrading of 12 blacks to welding jobs at ADDSCO in 1943 was a mere distant memory in the 1950s for the local shipbuilding industry had returned to pre-war practices concerning lines of progression and seniority.

\textsuperscript{45} Nicholls, 'The Non-Partisan Voters League,' 45; \textit{Birdie Mae Davis v. Mobile County School Board}.
Census Tracts in the Mobile Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, 1960

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The racial breakdown of employment in the city at the start of the 1960s indicated that LeFlore and the NPVL faced an uphill battle against the lack of economic mobility discernible in the non-white labour force, (Table 9). Forming 28.9% of the total labour force, black workers constituted 94% of private household workers, 55.3% of service workers, 46.9% of farm labourers and 71.1% of all labourers. A more potent symbol of restricted employment opportunity was that they also represented 50.9% of the total listed as unemployed in 1960. Housing conditions reflected this occupational pattern. In the majority black wards, housing was usually of a lower standard without electricity and adequate plumbing facilities. Home values were on average 25% less than that of whites. In the public housing projects assigned to blacks during the 1950s, 'shameful living conditions' were reported by the Alabama Civic Affairs Association in a letter to the city's board of commissioners from the Reverend Joseph E. Lowery.46 Lowery also urged that the city appoint blacks to the Housing Board, Water Services Board and Planning Board given that they represent approximately one-third of citizens and are denied a voice in these agencies. The allocation of federal and municipal funds had been uneven in terms of housing since before World War II and the surest way to ease this was to have black representatives in key municipal decision-making bodies.

Federal employment was the largest source of new and existing job opportunities in Mobile. Brookley Field Air Force Base had been the leading employer since its construction during World War II. Civilian jobs rose to over 15,000 in 1960 constituting 13% of the area's total employment. Wages and salaries accounted for 15% of the Mobile SMSA's total personal income. Approximately 12% of employees were black at this time and very few opportunities to progress beyond labouring and semi-skilled positions were provided, even to those who had gained college degrees via the G.I. Bill. Fully versed in the new measures against discrimination in federal employment or plants in receipts of federal contracts created by Eisenhower's Executive Order 10595 (1957), LeFlore stepped up his long-standing investigation of the base in early 1957. This resulted in an investigation carried out by the Department of the Air Force in Summer 1958.47


Towards a New Racial Settlement

Table 9: Racial Breakdown of Employment in the Mobile SMSA, 1960

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>% Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male Employed</td>
<td>70,001</td>
<td>17,846</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Employed</td>
<td>36,210</td>
<td>12,881</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>106,211</td>
<td>30,727</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10,476</td>
<td>1,441</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>633</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>10,242</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>16,740</td>
<td>1,172</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>7,055</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled</td>
<td>16,219</td>
<td>2,333</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operatives</td>
<td>16,291</td>
<td>6,073</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Household Workers</td>
<td>6,596</td>
<td>6,203</td>
<td>94.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Workers</td>
<td>10,023</td>
<td>5,544</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm Labourers</td>
<td>663</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>46.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourers</td>
<td>8,422</td>
<td>5,991</td>
<td>71.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2,851</td>
<td>741</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>106,211</td>
<td>30,727</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>6,927</td>
<td>3,528</td>
<td>50.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


LeFlore’s handling of the Brookley investigation, although having achieved no immediate success did, however, define the League’s role in future campaigns to widen employment opportunity in Mobile during the 1960s and 1970s. Black employees who suspected that they were the victims of racial discrimination in federal employment could approach the League and request an investigation with the former acting as an intermediary. Acquiring the sworn testimonials of individuals was no easy task since retaliation from whites was a threat for any black who spoke up in such cases. Due to LeFlore’s courage and determination to see that Mobile employers complied with presidential orders, the League launched a wide-ranging investigation into practices at ADDSCO and at the Ingalls
Shipyard in Pascagoula, Mississippi to where a number of Mobile blacks had moved in search of work. The investigations began in the late 1950s but did not take-off fully until after 1960 when the Department of the Navy agreed to send officials down to the plants to see if compliance was being pursued as a required by the federal directives.48

The shipbuilding industry was a useful area to direct League efforts towards eradicating discrimination in the 1960s. It was an industry that was heavily influenced by government and almost entirely unionised. African-American employment in the industry was affected by fluctuating demands for, inaccessibility of the shipyards to city dwellers and, patterns of union restrictions which denied this group effective representation based on past custom. However, the industry had been subject to government review after 1957 when compliance became a federal responsibility charged to the Department of Defense and Navy. In 1960, blacks represented 29% of the total shipbuilding employment in the state. Reviews conducted between 1957 and 1960 by the President's Committee on Government Contracts created under Executive Order 10479 found that in semi-skilled and unskilled categories blacks constituted 46.2% and 52.9% respectively. Average earnings were significantly higher than that of manufacturing and hence, this explains why Mobile shipyard workers were willing to either commute or relocate to Pascagoula. In 1961, average hourly earnings for shipyard workers were $2.93 compared to $2.32 in manufacturing, translating into a weekly wage of $117.20 compared to $92.34.49

Both management and union policy worked against expanding the number of black employees. They also worked to severely restrict the lines of progression available to blacks. By refusing full membership, the unions could influence company management to relegate them to the more menial tasks such as labouring and helping on repair teams. Beginning in World War II, shipbuilding unions presented the most powerful barrier to equal opportunities by sowing the seeds of a seniority structure that discriminated against African Americans. Challenges to these practices in the 1930s and 1940s from the IUOMSWA, a CIO-affiliated union had petered out by the 1950s when it lost membership to the AFL's Metal Trades Department which now more or less controlled shipyard union organisation. The long-term significance for minority employment of this trend was the


institutionalisation of organised labour in the shipyards leading to craft orientation. Aside from the restrictions placed on African Americans by the unions themselves, seniority based on craft specialisation was the strongest barrier against their advancement in the shipyards.\textsuperscript{50}

Unlike the NAACP branch in the 1950s, the NPVL reached deeper into the realm of economic opportunity by filling the vital void created by inadequate union representation and entrenched patterns of discrimination in the Gulf shipyards. It initiated formal investigations of racial practices at ADDSCO and also the Ingalls Shipyard. The extent of discrimination was particularly shocking given that the industry had been periodically in receipt of federal contracts arising from the Korean War in the 1950s. One of the first complaints came from Johnnie McGaskill of Cedar Street, Mobile. He had been employed at ADDSCO for 30 years in the capacity of anglesmith helper. He filed his affidavit in August 1959 by which time he had moved to the plate shop, an area in which the company had not hired an African American since 1947 when Sam DuBose was also employed as an anglesmith helper. McGaskill made the point that even when black employees left due to death or retirement, ADDSCO did not usually replace them. White employees were protected by an understanding between the unions and management to maintain the status quo.\textsuperscript{51}

McGaskill was one of the few blacks willing to speak out and aid the League’s investigation at ADDSCO. At the Ingall’s yard several complaints were handled by LeFlore which revealed that the extent and nature of discrimination warranted a federal investigation. L.M. Bridges, Jessie Bell, Jr., M.L. Chambers, Willie Murphy, Alphonse Ellis and Lamar Turnipseed were all employees at Ingalls during the 1950s. All men confirmed that management and unions used an elaborate system of controls to deny black employees equal occupational mobility at the yard. Blacks were prevented from working in at least 56 different capacities from painting to repair work even though many had been at the yards for years and had the relevant experience. Those fortunate enough to gain positions such as spray painting were paid on average, 12 cents an hour less than whites. The case of Lamar Turnipseed was particularly tragic since, on account of his testimonial to the League, he was threatened by white co-workers and was virtually hounded out of

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.; 54, 26-27.

\textsuperscript{51} Affidavit of Johnnie L. McGaskill, August 11, 1959, box 4, file 1, NPVL Records.
Towards a New Racial Settlement

the area since no shipyard would hire him. He later moved to Washington, D.C. where he and his family hoped to make a fresh start. However, Turnipseed had confirmed that another barrier to black advancement was that apprenticeships in welding were closed to them in violation of Executive Order 10925 which specifically forbade this. He had filed a complaint to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), to this effect in December 1961. 6 months later, he was discharged by Ingalls for the alleged offence of 'insubordination' which involved a verbal exchange with his white foreman.52

The League's work at Ingalls showed that LeFlore was interested in civil rights battles outside of Mobile particularly where government orders were being flagrantly ignored. Launching a federal investigation was, however, a painstaking process often involving communication at various bureaucratic levels. Telegrams were sent to Jacob Seidenberg, Executive Director of the President's Committee on Government Contracts and to William B. Frank, Secretary of the Navy Department. LeFlore made explicit that since the Ingalls plant had received more than $23 million in federal contracts to build a nuclear-powered submarine in 1960, it was imperative that an investigation be made forthwith. A reply from Seidenberg's office was reassuring and promised an investigation providing that the NPVL followed all necessary procedures. The Navy department was unclear in its stance. LeFlore also noted that black employment had dropped to 10% of the total since the League aided a federal investigation in 1959 so in effect, he was taking a further risk at Ingalls. The pay differentials were enough to deter LeFlore from abandoning League efforts in this realm. As labourers blacks earned $1.97 per hour. If allowed to progress to bridge crane operators, they could hope to earn $2.46 per hour in addition to a weekly bonus. In December 1961, LeFlore was supported in his work covering the Mississippi yards by contributions from individuals at an Emancipation Day celebration. A local black Baptist church also helped the League purchase a photocopier in connection with the Ingalls investigation.53

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52 Ingalls Shipbuilding Co., 1960-68, box 5, file 78, ibid.
53 Telegram from LeFlore to Jacob Seidenberg, Executive Director, President’s Commission on Government Contracts, and LeFlore to William B. Frank, Secretary of the Navy, August 29, 1960; Margaret Gamity for Seidenberg to LeFlore, August 31, 1962; R.K. James, Admiral, Department of the Navy to LeFlore, September 9, 1960; Telegram from LeFlore to Department of Government Contracts, October 2 and October 26, 1962; LeFlore to W.L. Wiley, 26 December 1962; Ibid., file 79, Ingalls Shipbuilding Co., 1960-68.
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A breakthrough was visible in March 1962, when the NAACP agreed to protect blacks by aiding the investigation at Ingalls. One month later, the EEOC gave the yard’s management 90 days to substantially revise its employment practices so as to abide by the non-discrimination clauses of the Executive Orders. By this point, LeFlore had outlined what was necessary for compliance to Peroy Williams at the U.S. Maritime Commission. The 300 or so black employees at Ingalls should be given equal access to job training and opportunity. He also furnished at Williams’ request, valuable information on the available supply of black workers and their occupational skills. The intervention of the Maritime Commission led directly to Ingalls taking steps towards compliance. The EEOC confirmed to LeFlore in July 1962 that six blacks had been promoted to skilled jobs and similar upgradings were to follow. The management also promised to remove signs requiring racial segregation in employee facilities and advertise training opportunities to black employees. Willie Murphy, one of the original complainants was reclassified as a spray painter in November 1962. On account of the League’s successful mediation at Ingalls, the Navy Department decided to subject the yard to periodic reviews. The Governor of California, Edmund Brown, having been contacted by LeFlore regarding conditions in the West Coast yards also praised LeFlore’s work saying that it has given him an ‘additional argument for more contracts’ going to his state where they had complied with the federal directives.54

Conclusion

Langan’s efforts at the City Commission were an important factor which enabled the NPVL to maintain its independence from other regional civil rights coalitions. Although Mobile had its fair share of die-hard segregationists, the rejection of Barnard at the polls in 1957 proved that the majority wished to preserve the caste system through respectable means. A desire to maintain racial peace and avoid confrontation kept the Langan-LeFlore alliance strong in Mobile which bestowed upon the NPVL a fair degree of freedom to pursue its own economic and social agenda. Behind the veil of respectability, LeFlore continued the League’s heavy litigation load. Outward signs indicated that in Alabama, a state in which race had played and continued to play a crucial role in politics

and society, one locality appeared to be taking its own course in the 1950s and early 1960s. Mobile did not wish to open itself up to 'outside agitators' and neither did it wish to be seen as incapable of finding local solutions to local problems. The fact that Mobile’s middle-class black leadership shared these sentiments was to be shown time and time again when Alabamians found themselves embroiled in a bitter struggle to embrace the important economic and social changes propelled by World War II while also attempting to maintain the racial status quo. The mid-1960s would prove to be crucial years not just in Alabama but also in almost every area where the Civil Rights movement had taken root.
Chapter 6:
Mobile During the Era of Desegregation, 1963-68

In July 1963 the Wall Street Journal described Mobile as 'an island of tranquility in a region seething with racial unrest'. This compliment from a leading business periodical coincided with the climax of the Southern Civil Rights movement in Alabama where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., aided by Shuttlesworth's ACMHR, had waged a successful strategy of non-violent direct-action to coerce the integration of America's most 'thoroughly segregated city'. By courageously invoking violent reaction from local white citizens, Birmingham's blacks ended federal impotence concerning national civil rights enforcement prompting President John F. Kennedy to draw up the 1963 Civil Rights Bill. A similar occurrence took place in Selma in 1965 when King led an SCLC march in the city which led to President Johnson signing the historic Voting Rights Act. Previously in 1961, the interracial civil rights organisation CORE had targeted the Magic City for its 'Freedom Rides' designed to integrate bus terminals, an occasion which also invoked white violence and led to a successful result.

The presence of CORE, the SCLC and King's brand of non-violent resistance to unjust laws was noticeably absent in Southern Alabama. Mobile did not welcome the forces of radicalism and reaction that engulfed other parts of Alabama during the 1960s. Black protest and municipal leadership had retained a remarkable degree of continuity with the spirit of post-World War II liberalism throughout this period. Two local political leaders whose public careers typified the 1930s New Deal-influenced liberal alliance in the South which had espoused that black and white Southerners shared a common destiny in promoting regional progress, were instrumental in keeping Mobile 'respectable' during...


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Brown, the rise of massive resistance politics to thwart public school desegregation and the disbanding of the NAACP in Alabama did not destroy the idealism of regional and racial progress in Mobile politics during the 1960s.5

Though the challenge of desegregation was as serious in Mobile as elsewhere in the state, the brunt of the burden was lifted from the city by the courage and militancy of African Americans in Birmingham and Montgomery, leaving Mobile with a more favourable racial climate.6 This is not to say that black Mobilians did not play a significant role in the Second Reconstruction but rather that the vanguard of civil rights leadership in Mobile remained committed to the moderate espousal of racial progress through white intermediaries during the era of desegregation. Class was a dominant factor in the direction of black protest. In 1963, the NPVL was the movement operating within the culture and outlook of Mobile's middle class community, a community which had benefited from access to the municipal power structure through Langan but was hopeful that many other white Mobilians of his outlook would further the goals of peaceful desegregation. Experience of black municipal voting since the opening of the white primary, the creation of the BI-Racial Commission in 1956 and Langan's flexibility on the issue of race since the war, were key developments which delayed the eruption of black militancy in Mobile. Here, as William Chafe observed in Greensboro, civility between the black and white establishments muted hostile confrontation in the city. Whereas intransigence and the absolute refusal of the white power structure in Birmingham to countenance racial reform greatly facilitated the need for direct-action among the city's predominantly lower middle to working class black community, this was not the case in Mobile.7

An early illustration of Mobile's attitudes towards desegregation concerned black efforts to gain access to the main library. On November 8th, 1961, two dozen black men entered the main branch of the Mobile public library in small groups and demanded service. Orderly and respectable, the men simply requested that they be given equal access to the


7 ·Ronald Hoffman, "Pushing the Limits: Joe Langan's Mobile," Mobile Register, September 15, 1997, sec. 1-A.
library's resources as whites. They were turned away and forced to continue to use the Davis Avenue branch which had been reserved for black patrons. In a move to halt demands for integration of the downtown branch, the city had spent over $60,000 on improving the Davis Avenue facility a few months previously. The men who presented themselves on November 8th were determined to prevent any further expenditure on that branch because it perpetuated segregation in a public facility. They repeated this action the next day but an immediate change in library policy was less than likely. But on November 13th, after discussions between the library director, chairman of the board and the city commissioners, an emergency meeting was held to consider the demands of the protesters. It was eventually decided that the policies of the library be temporarily altered to admit blacks on a limited basis. Commissioners Langan, George Hackmeyer and Henry Luscher supported this move although blacks were only granted the privilege of using reference materials and could not use the lounges or reading rooms. By March 1962, Mobile had partially integrated its library and kept the matter out of the federal courts and most importantly, off the streets. The original temporary policy was continued for months with only minimal protest from whites. Hailed by the Library Journal as 'the first such advance in Alabama public libraries,' the episode was symbolic of the manner in which the challenge of desegregation was eventually handled in the port-city. Such concessions enabled Mobile to thrive on a positive media image as one of Alabama's most racially progressive cities.

Mobile's delayed rise to the status of a New South industrial city provided an economic backdrop to the struggles of the 1960s which complemented the progressive attitudes of the city commission and the conservative nature of black protest. Despite being the state's second largest concentration of urban population and industry, Mobile had lagged behind Birmingham during much of the twentieth century in industrial expansion and suffered considerably from the growth of New Orleans, its rival port on the Gulf Coast. Between 1930 and 1960, the city's industrial base was closely linked to the activities of the port. Some of the largest industries such as the Waterman Steamship line and Ryan-Walsh Stevedoring Company, Inc. owed their fortunes to the volume of trade which regularly passed through the port of Mobile. World War II, however, had been the defining event in the city's economic history triggering a path of almost continuous growth in federal employment, the service sector of the economy and in manufacturing industry. In 1950,
on account of extensive commuting of workers from neighbouring Baldwin County into Mobile, the Census Bureau added the former to the Mobile Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA), see map of Alabama Counties on page 168. The decade of the 1960s was characterised by municipal improvements launched by commissioner Langan since his re-election in 1953 which contributed to Mobile's prominence as a South Alabama city noted for tourism, international trade and its role as a major producer of paper products. Growth in every sense of the word was visible in the Mobile of the 1960s in population, employment and economic diversification.9

Mobile in the 1960s

Visitors to Mobile in the 1960s found a city still reaping the benefits of post-war prosperity. A stable economy and an image of racial peace distinguished the area from other Alabama cities in 1963, particularly Birmingham where the local economy had suffered a considerable decline in manufacturing employment. As residents of the only seaport in Alabama, Mobilians had access to an important cultural symbol which kept the city constantly open to the foreign influences that had shaped its early settlement. A healthy racial image was crucial to Mobile's economic future since the port provided Alabama with its only 'gateway to the outer world' and Mobilians with an asset that was more or less guaranteed to attract state investment.10 Yet it was neither business nor industry that played an instrumental role in pacifying racial unrest as was the case elsewhere in the South during the 1960s. That role was assumed by a long-standing racially liberal element among white Mobilians which included the Catholic community, Joseph Langan, one of the state's few Catholic city commissioners, and a sprinkling of prominent white citizens who shared Langan's moderation during a period of heightening racial polarisation. Langan's standing among the city's black leadership was also a crucial factor in the 1960s which kept black protest in Mobile off the streets. LeFlore knew he

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could approach Langan on many issues and that the commissioner would at least give him a fair hearing.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite the powerful forces of economic modernisation since World War II, Mobile remained an 'intensely Southern city.'\textsuperscript{12} The grace of her ante-bellum past resonated in its downtown streets. Mardi Gras celebrations with black and white parades, restored plantation mansions and azalea trails in the spring brought Mobile its fair share of visitors eager to soak in the characteristic charm of the Old South.\textsuperscript{13} Yet the clearest demographic sign of Mobile’s post-war growth lay in the number of people who continued to migrate to the county and city during the decade of the 1950s and 1960s. Mobile County almost doubled in size with an increase of 169% from a population of 181,006 in 1950 to 354,009 in 1960. The rate of urbanisation in Mobile County was one of the highest in the state between 1950 and 1960 rising from 79% to 86% respectively. Urbanisation was more rapid among whites than blacks in the state as a whole. In 1950, 29% of white Alabamians lived in urban areas compared to 15% of the state’s black population. A decade later, 38% of whites and 17% of blacks were classified as urban dwellers. Employment opportunities was the largest factor in attracting new settlers to the county. The federal government and Mobile’s two major paper producers provided the largest source of employment in the post-war era remaining relatively secure during the 1960s. Personal incomes at the start of the decade increased from $90,702 in 1959 to $112,780 in 1962. A greater increase was noticeable in income derived from state and local government employment. Between 1959 and 1968, there was an increase from $29,690 to $71,435. Another indicator of prosperity was the rise in personal income from the retail industry which increased from $55,617 to $90,680 over the nine year period.\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} J.N. Langan, in \textit{Mobile's Civil Rights Pioneer: An Oral History}, \textit{op. cit.}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Graves, ‘Mobile: City in Motion,’ 369.
\item \textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, 376.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Lacking the gleam of cities such as Atlanta and Houston, Mobile could not be classed as a 'classic' Sunbelt city. Primarily a government service centre and commercial port, manufacturing accounted for only 18% of the total labour force in 1961. The 1963 Census of Manufactures reported a total of 18,551 employed in this category across 343 establishments. Mobile's close proximity to New Orleans and Atlanta made it difficult to seize a key place in consumer manufacturing and distribution. The county contributed 10.6% of Alabama's value added by manufacturing in 1958 and this percentage remained unchanged well into the 1960s. Mobile was a leading world producer of paper products drawn from abundant South Alabama forests shipped by the Tombigbee and Mobile waterways. Scott Paper Company which acquired the Hollingsworth & Whitney mills in October 1954, launched a number of multi-million dollar expansion projects that incorporated tissue and paper towel production thereby greatly diversifying Hollingworth's original operations. International Paper Company, founded in 1898 in New England and New York had maintained operations in Mobile since the late 1920s. By the 1960s, International had become a leading manufacturer in the forest products
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industry. Despite a healthy tourist trade indicated by an expansion in hotels and motels, Mobile was severely behind in cultural resources compared to other cities on the Gulf Coast. Little had been done to improve the dilapidated sections of the downtown area which housed a concentration of poverty that was becoming more visible as the decade progressed. The 1960 Area Audit concluded that for a community of its size, Mobile had a 'poor retail service,' with only one recently opened shopping mall and three medium-sized department stores offering a limited range of consumer products. Springdale Plaza was not easily accessible to the population being located in low-cost land on the outskirts of the downtown area.

However, the need to secure a foothold in the South's economic diversification since World War II remained an important objective among Mobile's business and municipal leadership. In 1960 Langan increased his city's land area to 152.9 square miles from 112 square miles including 25 miles of water thus making Mobile the 11th largest city in the nation measured by geographic area. Complementing this move, a master plan for Mobile's future growth was jointly prepared by the City Planning Commission which coincided with the launching of the Mobile Housing Board discharged with responsibility for managing urban renewal contracts secured from the federal government. The plan included issues such as land use, street layouts, transportation, historic preservation and downtown redevelopment based upon projected population trends. Urban renewal programs funded by the federal government aided the creation of four historic districts in the downtown areas. A year later, the first Industrial Development Board (IDB), of Mobile County was established in response to the statewide scheme to use longterm tax-free bonds as a means to attract branches of national corporations to relocate in Alabama (Wallace-Cater Acts, 1949-51). The IDB was most successful between 1965 and 1968 in cushioning the loss of jobs caused by President Johnson's decision to phase out Brookley Field as part of a long-term defence cutback programme. In conjunction with the local Chamber of Commerce, a campaign to recruit $200 million in industrial capital investment during the next five years was launched. This was achieved one and a half years ahead of the schedule and the IDB's tax-free bonds were largely used to recruit chemical manufacturing plants. In 1965, the First National Bank reported that more than

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15 Donelson, Mobile: Sunbelt Center of Opportunity, 143, 152.

16 Mobile Civic Index: A Cooperative Effort, Chamber of Commerce of the Mobile Area, City of Mobile, County of Mobile, Mobile United, University of South Alabama, Draft (2), September 1994, 13-17.
$100 million had been invested by national manufacturing firms to establish new plants or expand existing facilities. Such companies included Geigy Chemical, Union Carbide, Courtaulds and Diamond Alkali.\textsuperscript{17}

Politically, Mobile was not as solidly Democratic as the black belt counties located above it. Ranked fourth in the state in terms of Republican strength, local voters elected George E. McNally, Mobile's first Republican city commissioner since Reconstruction, in 1961. County voters also supported Barry Goldwater in the 1964 elections. While 40% of lower-income Mobilians supported Goldwater, approximately 65% of the middle to upper income voters did so in this election which revealed particular class alignments among the electorate.\textsuperscript{18} Langan, who by now was regarded as a racial liberal, secured re-election with the help of newly-registered black voters in 1957 and again in 1963. Free from the taint of corruption, he was one of the most clean-living and honourable Alabama statesmen of the era. He helped lead a city commission that was free of scandal and financial ineptitude enabling him to deliver much-needed municipal improvements such as an auditorium constructed in 1964, street paving, slum clearance and annexation of suburbs outside the city limits. The 1956 annexation tripled the size of Mobile at a stroke. Langan was a prime mover in local politics not just because he cared about his community but also due to his respect for those representing the 138,006 African Americans in Mobile. Langan's efforts helped the city earn a reputation for racial harmony after 1963 when he launched an interracial Special Advisory Commission to investigate matters concerning desegregation. As city commissioner, he witnessed some of the most important changes concerning race relations since Reconstruction.\textsuperscript{19}

**Facing the Challenge of Desegregation**

Mobile's reputation for racial harmony owed a great deal to the diversity of its native white population. Catholics had demonstrated a long-standing active role in civic affairs since the Depression. Unlike the predominantly Protestant and Baptist whites of Montgomery and Birmingham, Mobile's Catholics regarded people of colour as equals.

\textsuperscript{17} Mobile Civic Index, 20, 25.


\textsuperscript{19} Dow, 'Langan: Mobile's Racial Diplomat,' 31, 56; J.N. Langan, Tape LF-1 in Mobile's Civil Rights Pioneer: An Oral History; Mobile Civic Index, 14.
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before God as part of a universal brotherhood of humanity. Father Albert Foley, a member of the faculty at Spring Hill College published God's Men of Color in 1948, a lengthy treatise which stressed that the love of humanity necessitated a love of all men regardless of skin colour. In 1958, Foley outlined the type of Southerners whom he regarded as the real forces for desegregation in the region following the white backlash against Brown. Clergymen, educators, school teachers, public officials such as mayors, police commissioners, district attorneys and judges had helped to stamp out the Klan's violent activities in many communities. Above all, these were white Southerners who believed in the power of racial co-operation to alleviate their region's social problems. Foley had the strong belief that

'...more and more of the democratic forces of the middle-of-the-road variety will emerge to take over the leadership of better human relations movements in the South.'

Mobile's Catholic churches had long been active in various interracial programmes dedicated to resolving the racial problems of the day most notably through the statewide Alabama Council on Human Relations (ACHR), founded in 1954 in response to the desegregation crisis in public education. Interracial co-operation was not new to Mobile. In the aftermath of the ADDSCO riot, the Mobile Students' Spiritual Union Central Council, established in the 1920s sponsored a youth rally at Bishop Toolen High, one of the city's largest Catholic schools. The rally was opened by Father James Fitzpatrick who announced that the 'Negro Problem' would be the subject of an open forum discussion. Father Fitzpatrick was a member of the Society of St. Joseph, an organisation of Catholic priests which devoted itself to pastoral work in the African-American community. At the time of the rally in January 1946, he was serving as pastor of a church in Prichard, an area which became overwhelmingly black in just one decade later. Students from Mobile's four Catholic high schools, trainee nurses from the Providence Hospital school of nursing and other invited members were present at this rally. The comments of Charles Broun, a white Spring Hill College student recently discharged from military service


22 . Ibid., 98-99 (quotation, 99).

23 W. Flynt, Alabama: The History of a Deep South State, 546.
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summed up the ethos of the rally and more importantly, that element in Mobile society which valued African Americans as patriotic, religious, law-abiding citizens. Brouan paid tribute to a black fighter in the squadrons who protected him on his bomber flights:

'They were mighty good, if it hadn't been for them, I wouldn't be here today. We felt relieved whenever we reached our rendezvous with these escort fighters and had their protection against the attacks of the German fighters.'

The 1946 rally was held in the context of the optimism of the mid-1940s when many white liberals and African Americans hoped that President Truman and the his Commission on Civil Rights would steer the nation toward greater democratic participation for all Americans regardless of race. Such optimism soon faded into the distance after the Brown decision of 1954. Yet Broun's sentiments were shared by influential Mobilians in the 1960s as they had been shared after World War II. Langan, Foley and LeFlore were all optimistic that a racially unjust society could be dismantled by aiding the inclusion of blacks as respectable American citizens. This lay at the core of interracial co-operation in Mobile during the crucial climax of the Southern Civil Rights movement in Alabama.

Class-based leadership also gave Mobile political and racial stability in this period. Langan and LeFlore were experienced manipulators of the public concern for order and respectability. Through an extensive network of contacts in the community both men were able to build coalitions in local politics which temporarily eclipsed the racial divide. A top priority was advancing their middle-class strategies for racial progress. Langan's hope was that desegregation according to the law could be achieved if the city of Mobile gave blacks a fair hearing for their grievances. Supported by leading whites and blacks representing business, labour, community and church groups, he realised his plans for an official commission to investigate racial matters in 1963. LeFlore later recalled that 'before Joe Langan came on the scene, it was very difficult,' for blacks to make 'any progress at all toward achieving certain desirable goals.' The turmoil in Birmingham hardened Langan and LeFlore's resolve to lead the local movement in Mobile with a strong hand that espoused moderation.

24 'Other Interracial Projects and Investigations,' September 1947, report prepared by Albert Foley, box 4, Race Relations, Spring Hill College Archives, Mobile, Alabama, 43-45.

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'To provide the City Commission with a readily accessible group of informed citizens to which the Commission may refer for discussion, advice, and recommendations concerning the problems of general public concerns.'

Under the terms of the ordinance, officers were to be elected for a one-year term including a chairman, vice-chairman, secretary and vice-secretary. This committee would meet at least once every two months but special meetings could be arranged by a written petition to be signed by a minimum of fourteen presiding members. In addition to this, several sub-committees were assigned to investigate housing, employment and welfare. Perhaps the most important symbol to the black community was Langan's commitment keeping communication open with them since the city itself would pay for the expenses of running the committee. Members were expected to serve without compensation. Initially, eight whites and four blacks were appointed reflecting the racial proportion in Mobile itself, (Table 10). Langan was an ex-officio member and often recorded the minutes at meetings which were held in rooms provided by the city and by George Denniston at the American National Bank offices in downtown Mobile.

Outwardly, the Commission gave Mobile a positive media image. Inwardly, it was a reversal of the strategy being adopted by the black leadership in other Southern cities where King was invited to organise an SCLC demonstration. Like the Bi-racial committee of 1957, Langan's choice of members was tactical. LeFlore was conspicuously absent but it is extremely likely that he was relied upon informally for advice and information. Certain local businessmen and the black clergy could be trusted not to stray from the gradualist path toward racial reform preferred by Langan. George Denniston, president of the Mobile American National Bank was a friend of Langan's and also had established contacts with LeFlore when he had advised Denniston of blacks wishing to apply for jobs at the bank. He agreed to hire Mobile's first female African American bank teller in 1965.

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27 Ibid., Dow, 42; "Pushing the Limits: Joe Langan's Mobile," Mobile Register September 15, 1997, sec. 1-A.

28 LeFlore interviewed by McLaurin, 62; Hoffman, "Pushing the Limits: Joe Langan's Mobile," Mobile Register, September 15, 1997, sec. 4-A.
Table 10: Members Appointed to the Special Advisory Commission, 1963

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martin Johnson</td>
<td>Chairman</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Denniston</td>
<td>Vice-Chairman</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.T. Arendall</td>
<td>Store Proprietor</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carr Smith</td>
<td>Businessman</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John McConnell</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.A. Evans</td>
<td>City Employee</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfred Delchamps</td>
<td>Chain Store Owner</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Strauss</td>
<td>Businessman</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. R.W. Gilliard</td>
<td>Assistant Secretary</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishop W. Smith</td>
<td>Clergyman</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morris Alpert</td>
<td>Labour Leader</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev. C.A Tunstall</td>
<td>Vice-Secretary</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Called the Special Advisory Commission (SAC), the initiative was at the forefront of interracial efforts regarding racial progress in Alabama's cities. Langan went further than any other commissioner in establishing the SAC via an unprecedented municipal ordinance. The aim was to:
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But what did the SAC actually achieve? In terms of giving blacks a chance to sit down and present their demands to the people who made the decisions in Mobile, it was a remarkable step forward. Monthly meetings followed a set pattern and were guarded in secrecy since it was widely agreed that public debate would hamper progress. In a typical meeting, representatives from both communities were invited to attend and discuss specific issues. High on the agenda was employment and housing. Mobile had a long-standing tradition of excluding African Americans from white-collar jobs and occupations where face to face contact with whites was involved. Hence in a city of its size, blacks were excluded from taking up employment as automobile salesmen, bank tellers and various positions in utility companies. Eventually, the SAC aided the hiring of Mobile's first black telephone operator in 1965 which paved the way for further appointments. The strategy was not successful in the case of manufacturing employment where the solid wall of resistance to upgrading black employees required the filing of complaints under the terms of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission established by the Johnson administration as part of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.29

The Commission was however, important in the desegregation of public accommodations after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In an effort to promote compliance with Title VI, it met with the owners of 10 of Mobile's drive-in restaurants to discuss the issue. Langan's influence aided the peaceful and unfettered integration of these stores. But here, the NPVL also played a pivotal role by having completed surveys of over 90 restaurants, cafes, snack bars, theatres and bowling alleys in Mobile since the signing of the civil rights bill. Regarded by the Citizen's Committee as the 'most extensive fight for implementation of the new Civil Rights laws in Alabama,' this particular project cost the League nearly $1,000.30 These surveys were carried out by a specially-commissioned Junior Civic League consisting of younger African Americans entrusted to inform LeFlore of the extent of segregation in public accommodations. An adjunct to this was the introduction of 'test-ins' designed to uncover whether Title VI was being complied with in Mobile establishments. LeFlore recruited volunteers to go to individual restaurants and wait to be served. Blacks were expected to enter most restaurants through the rear, a

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30 Reverend Ed Williams, Conrad Deane and Raymond Scott, Citizen's Committee to NPVL Executive Board Members, August 28, 1964, Series VI: Printed Materials, box 17, file 12, NPVL Records.
degrading symbol of white supremacy that continued until 1965 when the NPVL’s numerous test-ins forced managers to change this policy.\textsuperscript{31}

In June, 1964, after a protracted investigation lasting for over five years, LeFlore was successful in forcing ADDSCO to promote blacks to skilled categories for the first time since the FEPC upgradings during the war. This led to the first violent response from whites for decades when shots were fired into his home and also that of Mayor Charles Trimmier between 9 p.m. and midnight on March 1, 1965. Although Trimmier had not proved himself a racial liberal to the degree that Langan had, it is likely that his attendance at a welcome meeting for Roy Wilkins of the NAACP had contributed to the fury of the White Citizen’s Councils. The incident was a reminder that racial peace could be suddenly broken by the more extremist elements of Mobile whites. Underneath the calm was a growing sense of anxiety among pro-segregationists who had witnessed the NPVL’s remarkable successes in expanding opportunities for blacks. By no means a unified social movement, pro-segregationists formed the Mobile County Unit of the National States Rights Party chaired by Bob Smith who was also leader of the Mobile White Citizen’s Council. They were sickened by the betrayal that was going on at the city hall where ‘rights were being snatched away’ leading to interracial dating and the ascendancy of ‘hoodlums’ such as King bent on grinding ‘the white people of the South into the dust.’ Decent, law-abiding white citizens were urged to fight integration in education, expose the communist conspirators in their midst, to invite ‘intelligent’ speakers like Governor Wallace and Bull Connor to attend public meetings and to destroy the myth of ‘Negro buying power’.\textsuperscript{32} Smith, however never detailed just how this was going to be achieved other than through openly racist rabble-rousing.

Langan’s role in maintaining racial peace during the 1960s was noted by the local and national press. Birmingham \textit{News} claimed that ‘his period of office heralded the greatest change in Mobile’s history.’\textsuperscript{33} By all accounts, he was one of Alabama’s rapidly

\textsuperscript{31} K. Nicholls, ‘The Non-Partisan Voters’ League of Mobile, Alabama,’ \textit{Gulf Coast Historical Review} op. cit., 67; Geraldine Clark, Former Secretary to LeFlore, Tape LF-7 in \textit{Mobile’s Civil Rights Pioneer: An Oral History}.


\textsuperscript{33} Quoted in Dow, 49.
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diminishing post-war liberals who had managed to resist the race-baiting trend upon which governors James Patterson and George Wallace based their political careers. He dared to win public office with the help of newly enfranchised black voters not just once but three times. In 1961, Langan carried all 32 of the city’s wards receiving a total of 17,929 votes, a figure that was double that of his four challengers. It was not a surprising result. Langan attributed his success to economics, an issue upon which Mobile was united across racial and class lines. Whether black or white, Mobilians wanted progress as much as respectability during these turbulent times. Capital improvements and annexation had the potential to benefit all residents and Langan had promised both to the electorate when he stood for re-election in 1957. In the summer of 1964, a new municipal auditorium financed through bonds, was opened. A testimony to Mobile’s positive media image regarding race relations was visible on the first night when the show was watched by an integrated audience of almost 6,000 despite calls from the White Citizen’s Councils to boycott it.

Previously, in the spring of that year, the newly-established University of South Alabama admitted blacks for its first schedule of classes. Four freshmen, all male, were able to read for degrees at the institution and a number of teaching staff also set up a ‘Title VI Center’ to undertake collaborative research on the meaning and implementation of the new law. In this, Mobile was not only ahead of the times, but benefited from the violence that accompanied James Meredith’s attempt to enroll at Mississippi and the sensational media coverage that accompanied Governor Wallace’s efforts to block Autherine Lucy’s enrolment at the University of Alabama. Few people in Mobile wished to see a similar occurrence in their city regarding higher education and besides, Spring Hill College’s integrated student body had already proved that racial mixing was indeed possible at this level having successfully graduated more than two dozen black students since 1954.34

Yet Mobile’s liberal whites were only part of the reason why the Civil Rights movement’s radicalism barely touched the city while it was transforming other parts of the state. The ideological thrust of black protest in Mobile did not change in the forty years between 1925 and 1965, the year in which the legislative aims of the Civil Rights movement achieved greater influence nationally. Leadership of the struggle was dominated by a type of ‘old guard’ class of blacks referred to by sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier as the

34 Dow, 35-37, 45; Wall Street Journal, op. cit.; Graves, ‘Mobile: City in Motion,’ 385.
traditional black bourgeoisie of the South. They had to be distinguished from the new middle-class of blacks created by economic and social progress in the region since 1945. More importantly, these blacks regarded themselves as aristocrats and racial intermediaries of whom certain standards of behaviour were expected in their dealings with whites.\footnote{E. Franklin Frazier, 'The Negro Middle Class and Desegregation,' in \textit{E. Franklin Frazier on Race Relations: Selected Writings} edited by G. Franklin Edwards (Chicago and London, 1968), 300.} During the upswing of SNCC radicalism, LeFlore typified this kind of black bourgeoisie attitude calling the student sit-in movement a

\begin{quote}
'a spurious and reactionary attempt on the part of feeble-minded individuals to incite the race into needless antagonisation [sic] against whites'.\footnote{LeFlore to Eurette Adair, February 15, 1962, Series I, box 1, file 24, NPVL Records.}
\end{quote}

Frazier owed such a response to the continuation of habits, beliefs and patterns of behaviour acquired by the bourgeoisie within a segregated world. Furthermore, LeFlore was not unusual in his derision of black radicalism since men of his class and social background tended to conform most to the norms of American society and values. Outward respectability enabled them to enjoy a standard of living usually out of the reach of the masses of working class blacks.\footnote{Frazier, \textit{op. cit.}, 303-304.} His analysis of this particular black social strata in the South could not have been more apt than for the men who had managed Mobile's premier civil rights agency since 1956.

\textit{The Golden Years of the NPVL}

Mobile's NPVL reached a level of maturity as a premier civil rights organisation in the South during the 1960s. Through a carefully crafted mantle of respectability, the League significantly extended its legal assault on Jim Crow segregation. Politically, League members continued to pledge their support for Langan until 1968 when he lost his seat to Lambert Mims. The Citizen's Committee launched direct attacks on the loci of power in Mobile from the School Board to leading employers to the Board of Registrars. In the five years between 1963 and 1968, LeFlore's leadership of the Civil Rights movement in Mobile adhered to the integrationist ideological strategy for racial uplift forged by the NAACP. Accommodation, deference to the existing power structure and the shunning of adverse publicity shaped LeFlore's battle against segregation. Admittedly, this task was
rendered relatively easier by Langan's refusal to follow the examples of Bull Connor in Birmingham and Sheriff Jim Clark of Selma, where heavy-handed tactics contributed to a breakdown in civil order. As a community, Mobile faced its problems with insight combined with a determination to live up to the image of racial tolerance acquired during the Civil Rights era. LeFlore was proud to be working in such a community and therefore was reluctant to ask for King's help as other local black leaders did. He was also very conscious of the fact that the NPVL had been allowed to continue its work despite the activities of the Klan and the Citizen's Councils. He did not wish to risk the NPVL's position by rejecting alliances with liberal whites and inviting King to lead high profile civil rights demonstrations. LeFlore found himself in a very different environment to that faced by the Reverend Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR where racial progress was scuppered by a reactionary Big Mule-Black Belt alliance that refused to reform Birmingham's political system.38

Having isolated himself from the SCLC and other direct-action civil rights coalitions in the 1950s, it was no surprise that when King made a brief visit to Mobile in 1962, LeFlore met him at the recently-constructed municipal airport for a few hours after which both men decided that it would be unnecessary for the SCLC to target the city for a civil rights demonstration. LeFlore reported to King that progress was already being made by the NPVL in key areas such as education, employment and public accommodations. Although LeFlore respected King's strategy for racial equality he did not think it would work in Mobile given that Langan had proved his flexibility on race matters and the NPVL had successfully canvassed black votes to keep him in power. Besides, LeFlore had been rather public about his opinions on the various direct-action movements which spread across the South after 1960 calling them exercises that only helped to 'raise the community blood pressure.' In one sense, LeFlore was the true Mobilian well versed in his city's rich heritage and good record on race relations. He did not want to alienate Langan and he was willing to admire the 'good whites' of which Mobile had its fair share.39

The decision not to invite King was crucial in defining the nature of black protest in Mobile until 1968. The civil rights struggle was essentially a local affair governed

38 LeFlore interviewed by Melton McLaurin, Mobile, July 1970, op. cit., 76; Purifoy, Tape LF-2 in Mobile's Civil Rights Pioneer: An Oral History; Eskew, But for Birmingham.

39 Purifoy, ibid.; LeFlore interviewed by Melton McLaurin, 78, op. cit.
predominantly by the middle-class black elite. In some respects, the NPVL was at the forefront of civil rights litigation and in other areas, it lacked the grass-roots radicalism required to break the white power structure in Mobile. Tensions in Alabama reached a climax in the Spring of 1963 when Governor Wallace obstructed the integration of the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa with his infamous ‘Schoolhouse Door’ speech. In Birmingham, bombings, riots and police brutality confirmed Alabama’s future role in the Civil Rights movement as an intersection point for federal intervention to enforce integration. Meanwhile, behind a veil of respectability, the NPVL was busily enlarging its influence at the local and state level in a number of significant ways. In addition to undertaking pioneering legal suits, LeFlore assumed responsibility for testing compliance with the latest civil rights acts, recruiting ‘sober-minded’ individuals to serve as volunteers in NPVL surveys and ‘test-ins’, counselling prospective black applicants for new employment openings and maintaining an extensive record of civil rights violations in Mobile after 1964.40

In the field of litigation, the NPVL’s influence as a black organisation stretched beyond Mobile. Few commentaries of the civil rights struggle in Alabama mention the League’s recruiting of Vivian Malone as one of the two black students who attempted to integrate the state university at Tuscaloosa. Malone and James Hood faced scenes of public outcry at their presence in the city. Malone hailed from a respectable, middle-class family and was courageous enough to present herself at Tuscaloosa in 1963. Yet she was just one of the many individuals to be taken under LeFlore’s wing for he knew as well as any other local leader that in order for the black community to progress, the responsibility for enforcement of civil rights laws lay squarely on its shoulders.41

The most protracted and slow-moving legal battles of LeFlore’s entire career was that concerning the integration of Mobile County public schools. Racial peace in Mobile enabled the NPVL to quietly begin the arduous task of forcing the Mobile County School Board to commence steps for integrating the largest public school system in the state. In 1963, Governor George Wallace made a public statement regarding the legislature’s attitude towards public school desegregation in which he brandished the Supreme Court’s

40 Purifoy, Tape LF-4 in Mobile’s Civil Rights Pioneer: An Oral History.

order an unwarranted intrusion into a matter that was primarily a local concern. An effort to reassure concerned citizens that no school would be forcefully integrated in the city of Mobile, this statement was a mere confirmation of the minimal progress that had been made in this field in Alabama since the 1954 decision. It is not clear whether LeFlore knew that the size of the Mobile County system would make it a suitable pilot project for court-led integration in the state but that is what it became after the NPVL organised and financed a legal suit still unresolved today known as Birdie Mae Davis v. Mobile County Board of School Commissioners.\(^{42}\)

The presence of the historic Spring Hill College and its exemplary integrated student body did little to cover up the fact that Mobile County public schools were generally under-financed and were qualitatively inferior to the city’s well-resourced private and parochial schools. The latter were seen as assets to the community but the majority of Mobilians, black and white, were not satisfied with standards in their schools. Segregated schools for blacks lacked even the basic facilities for instruction and sports activities. On June 13, 1964 one year after the NPVL launched the Birdie Mae Davis suit, the county had a total of 74,941 students on its rolls at the end of the 1963-64 term. This included 45,526 white students and 29,415 black students. Of these, 43,833 attended school in the city and 31,108 in the outlying suburbs. The city itself administered 26 elementary schools, 9 middle schools and 9 high schools while the county had 26, 12 and 9 respectively.\(^{43}\) None of these schools was integrated prior to 1963 when Murphy High, in accordance with the state laws governing freedom of choice, accepted the transfer requests of two black students, Birdie Mae Davis and Rosetta Gamble. The filing of these requests was one of the few ways in which African-American parents and students could place pressure on local school boards to comply with the integration order but this rarely proved to be very successful. Most parents were denied the chance to send their children to a previously all-white school. On January 29th, 1963 Lemuel Taylor, principal of St. Elmo High School, informed Helen Mae Bolton that her request to have her daughter, Mae Warnie transferred to Baker High had been rejected. The grounds for this decision were that ‘all pupils are required to attend school in the district where their parents...reside’ and ‘each

\(^{42}\)‘Executive Order Number Twelve of the Governor of Alabama, September 9, 1963,’ Series I: Casework, box 6, file 8, NPVL Records.

\(^{43}\)Birdie Mae Davis et. al. v. the Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County, Civil Action No. 3003-18, 1963, 8-10, Series I, box 6, file 8, NPVL Records.
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school should have its separate...district. Since Mae Warnie lived outside of the district assigned to Baker High, she could not be transferred from the all-black St. Elmo located in another district.

The denial of transfer requests provided an effective means for the School Board to seriously impede the rate of integration. Despite numerous petitions from LeFlore since 1954, the board was resolute in its stance. A petition signed by 27 black parents on November 13th, 1962 brought forth a statement from the board in January 1963 claiming that in the midst of current building programmes 'it would be counter-productive to start integration procedures.' Furthermore, approximately 50% of capital outlay had been allocated to the task of improving black schools and 'forced integration would hamper current school expansion for blacks.' Realising that the board would not exercise any flexibility on the issue some nine years after the Brown case, LeFlore looked to the courts to force the former to draw up a plan for desegregation. In this he was advised by Derrick Bell at the NAACP LDEF to 'prepare a motion for further relief in the Mobile school case.' In January 1963, 10th grade student, Birdie Mae Davis, was enlisted by the NPVL as one of the first black students to act as chief plaintiff in the forthcoming suit. Regarding school integration as 'a great moral issue causing divergent views in the community' LeFlore put special emphasis on the wider significance of this case and it soon took on a life of its own in the way that the defence of Willie Seals had.

On account of the Davis affidavit's call for the school board to revise and expand its transfer procedures and set up an estimated schedule for faculty desegregation by grades, U.S. District Court Judge for Southern Alabama, Daniel Thomas, ordered that the latter file 'an expanded school integration plan to the court by July 17th, 1964.' Despite the Board's defiance and declaration that it intended to resist 'through every possible means' the new federal order including filing proceedings for a rehearing, Judge Thomas made it

44 Mobile Civic Index, 14; Lemuel Taylor to Helen Mae Bolton, January 29, 1963, Series I, box 6, file 10, NPVL Records.
45 LeFlore to Mobile County Board of School Commissioners, November 13, 1962; Mobile County Board of School Commissioners to NPVL Citizen's Committee, January 15, 1963, box 6, file 17, NPVL Records.
46 Derrick Bell to LeFlore, October 17, 1964, box 6, file 53, NPVL Records; Nicholls, 'The Non-Partisan Voters League,' 71.
47 Birdie Mae Davis et. al. v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County, op. cit., 11.
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clear that the new plan must provide for the desegregation of the 1st, 10th, 11th and 12th grades by September of that year. Full integration was expected to take place by the 1969-70 school year. In advance of this schedule, the Board had managed to integrate the 12th grade by the end of the 1964 school year but this was not satisfactory to the parents who had testified in the suit. By March 1967, the board found itself engaged in further defence proceedings when the original plaintiffs sought a complete change in the plan adopted and approved by the court.48

The 1967 court hearing revealed the extent of racial discrimination being practised in the Mobile County and City school systems. Since 1964, only nine children had actually experienced desegregated education. Rosetta Gamble and Birdie Mae Davis and other 12th graders at Murphy High testified that they had been the victims of harassment and violence at the school since they began attending. In addition to unfairness in the execution of pupil transfer requests, the Board applied the rule that all students enrolled in the dual school system including newcomers, must remain where they were until a transfer had been authorised. These practices were in adherence to the new Alabama Pupil Placement Act. In its defence, the Board claimed that the Constitution did not actually require integration but forbade discrimination. The lack of desegregated education was also caused by residential patterns leading to the situation where many rural residents were unable to attend an urban school. Furthermore, current districting of school zones hampered racial mixing. These factors would weigh heavily on any future plans for attendance. Such a vision was not consistent with the way school integration was progressing nationally. The federal government stepped up the pressure on several school systems to force compliance through bussing and redrawing districts to aid racial mixing. A suit arising from Jefferson County in 1967 from black parents in conjunction with the Davis suit, led to the first occasion when an entire state was put under injunction to integrate. Previously, parents had to present a suit to the individual school boards for compliance. Mobile County was exempted from this order and this was largely due to the success of the Davis case in revealing the lack of progress being made by the authorities.49

48 Mobile Press, June 1, 1964; NPVL Editorial, ‘Civil Rights Leaders, Students Seek Complete Integration in Mobile Public Schools,’ March 1, 1965, Series VI: Printed Materials, box 17, file 3; Birdie Mae Davis et. al. v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County, et. al., Civil Action No. 3003-63, Brief of Defendants Opposing the Motion, 1967, Series I, box 6, file 28, NPVL Records.

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Although the battle was far from over, the NPVL had scored a significant victory by March 1968 when League lawyers had been in and out of the courts for five years. One result of the School Board’s decision to file for a rehearing was that the federal judges involved in the case were duty bound to tie the former down with a definite and wide-ranging plan for swift desegregation. The opinion of Circuit Judge Thornberry summed up the position of the court:

'school boards in this district have an affirmative duty to effectuate a transition to unitary racially nondiscriminatory school systems. This means integration of faculties, facilities, and activities as well as students.'

Never before had the courts been so critical of the Mobile County School Board. Thornberry added that the plans adopted by them had been ‘deficient in many respects’ where ‘less than two-tenths of one percent of Negro children in the system are attending white schools.’ In 1966, the Davis case had forced the board to draw new attendance zones, to offer the chance for students to attend school outside their residential zone, and to take steps towards faculty integration. The court attached specific importance to the fact that Mobile County had the largest school system in the state with 93 schools enrolling approximately 43,000 whites and 31,000 blacks in the 1967-8 school year. Developments here would certainly influence other localities. In 1968, Mobile had 38% of its students experiencing desegregated education while two-thirds of its schools remained totally segregated. Only 6.5% of the total number of black students were in the former category with the majority attending schools with as little as four white students. In these respects, Mobile was far behind other school districts of its size, for example, in the state of Texas where voluntary integration had taken place almost six years previously. LeFlore had made this point to the school commissioners in 1962 but it went unheeded which is why they eventually found themselves the subject of considerable scrutiny by the courts.

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51 Ibid.

52 Ibid. *Birdie Mae Davis et. al.*, 5th Circuit 1966, 364 F. 2d 896, 901; LeFlore to Mobile County Board of School Commissioners, November 13, 1962, box 6, file 53, NPVL Records.
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The eventual decree permanently enjoined the Mobile County School Board from discriminating on the basis of race in the operation of the school system. Of greater significance, and a reward for the perseverance of the NPVL in the Davis suit, was that the board was also ordered to 'take affirmative action to diestablish...[sic]...and eliminate the effects of the dual school system.' Such a sweeping mandate required moving to a unitary system thereby making racial integration a priority. It also meant that the board could not continue to perpetuate segregation and transferred the burden from black parents to the commissioners. The Mobile Beacon triumphantly announced that the new ruling would help put a 'block on new school construction in racially determined areas' and admitted that the NAACP had given financial assistance to a case initiated locally in Mobile but which ultimately had wider application in the nation. On a more sombre note, the NPVL also informed the community that the costs of segregated education had weighed heavily on educational achievement and expenditure in all-black schools. Black students were on average, three years behind in scholastic achievement at graduation level. Despite the steps taken for equalisation during the 1950s, in 1968 the state spent $607 annually for every white pupil but only $295 on each black pupil a rather serious deficiency which the success of the Davis case could not do much to overcome.

Equally as intransigent as the board of School Commissioners was the Mobile County Board of Registrars, an agency which had never been the friend of blacks attempting to register as voters after the ending of the white primary in 1944. Such boards consisted of three members selected by the county's legislative delegation, were charged with full responsibility for accepting or rejecting voting applicants and operated largely free from state supervision resembling a mini-government in itself. The Mobile Board met from October 1st to February 1st in any given year and was able to fix its own hours of opening, usually between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. daily. In 1951, the state adopted a Voter Qualification Amendment which devolved upon the board even greater powers regarding the administration of voting in a seaport town with a transient population.

53 Birdie Mae Davis et. al., Appeals Decision, 1968, box 6, file 30, NPVL Records.
54 Mobile Beacon March 1968, Series VI, box 17, file 5, NPVL Records.
55 D.S. Strong, The Registration of Voters in Alabama (Birmingham: Bureau of Public Administration, 1956), 1, 4, 12, 18-19, 46.
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LeFlore’s success in raising the number of black voters since 1944 had paid some dividends. By 1963, the number of blacks registered to vote (county residents) had risen from 9,840 in 1960 to 11,366, (Table 11). The city of Mobile now had 7,651 qualified voters, many of whom were canvassed by the NPVL to re-elect Langan in 1963. Such figures seemed rather weak when it was announced that the Johnson administration, in response to the violence at Selma, was planning a new voting rights bill that intended to open the way to mass enfranchisement in the South. It became clear in 1964 that the Mobile County Board of Registrars had systematically employed a range of unfair practices designed to severely hamper blacks attempting to qualify as voters or to register their votes. In June of that year, LeFlore informed the Commission on Civil Rights and the registrars that the NPVL intended to challenge what it considered a ‘deplorable’ and arbitrarily imposed policy which effectively denied hundreds of black citizens the right to the franchise under the terms of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.56

Table 11: Qualified Voters in Mobile County and City, 1963

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>%Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobile County</td>
<td>62,118</td>
<td>11,366</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Mobile</td>
<td>42,562</td>
<td>7,651</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Precincts 1-38</td>
<td>12,330</td>
<td>1,438</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prichard Wards</td>
<td>6,055</td>
<td>2,229</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saraland Wards</td>
<td>1,171</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Less than 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Probate Court Qualified Voter Figures as of June 1, 1963, Box 3, File 35: Voter Registration, NPVL Papers.

A list of actions to be taken by the board was presented and included the alternating of registrars in dealing with blacks on an equal basis, a uniform system of oral interrogation and desegregation of the board’s downtown polling offices. It was revealed that in the last area, the Board had failed to comply with the Supreme Court decision in Bailey v. Patterson (1962) which ruled that 'state enforced segregation in public facilities' was

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unconstitutional. The cost of these charges was that many blacks who did not live close to
downtown were unable to get to the board's offices and those able to do so usually could
not attend between 9 and 5 p.m. due to work commitments. In addition to this, registrars
were considerably slow in processing their applications leaving many standing in line for
hours only to be told to return the next day.57

Unable to force a change in the Board's policy prior to the first elections scheduled after
the enactment of the new bill, the NPVL conducted a survey in 1966 which was passed
on to the Department of Justice for a federal investigation. A record now existed of the
problems blacks faced in trying to exercise their voting rights in Mobile County. Victims
of 'de facto political disfranchisement' arising from the board's refusal to schedule
registration periods which did not conflict with working hours and its failure to provide
meeting places for black citizens from areas such as Citronelle, Prichard and Bayou La
Batre, left a significant proportion of potential registrants in a difficult position. An
interim measure adopted by the board to open its offices on Saturday mornings was to
little avail since registrants could not pay their poll tax on that day. Besides, LeFlore
knew that the only way to really eliminate unfair practices was to have blacks appointed
as registrars and clerks. No African American had ever been able to serve on the Mobile
County Board of Registrars but this did not deter the NPVL from threatening a legal suit
under the terms of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.58

Economic conditions facing the African-American community in the decade of the 1960s,
however, required a different path that combined litigation with investigations, surveys
and a strong hand in preventing damaging racial confrontation. The latter was an
important theme in Mobile especially after violence and urban disorder in Birmingham in
1963 and in Selma in 1965, brought home the gravity of the problems that some Alabama
communities were facing in the struggle for civil rights. Even a cursory examination of
the economic and social status of African Americans in Mobile indicated that a significant
proportion had been unable to escape the cycle of poverty created by institutional

57 LeFlore to Jessie H. McConnell, Susie Kuffskie, Gregory R. Evans, Mobile County
Board of Registrars, June 16, 1964; NPVL Telegram to the Alabama Conference for
Social Justice, September 13, 1965; LeFlore to Richmond Flowers, Attorney General,
August 2, 1965, ibid.

58 LeFlore to Mobile County Board of Registrars, June 25, 1966; Board of Registrars to
LeFlore, February 3, 1966, Vernon Jansen, U.S. Department of Justice to LeFlore,
February 3, 1966; Series II, box 8, file 4, NPVL Records.
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discrimination. Until 1966, when Langan appointed LeFlore to the Housing Board, no blacks were represented in any of the local municipal authorities. Victims of residential segregation that dated from Reconstruction, Mobile's African Americans lived in areas close to the waterfront and central city in housing that reflected the considerably lower median income of this group. In 1959 the median family income for whites in the city was $5,452 compared to $2,959 for blacks. Of the total 13,595 black families, 1,761 earned less than $1,000 and 913 families earned the median level. There was however, a visible middle to upper class bracket numbering 1,539 families which brought home between $6,000 and $10,000 or more annually. The growth of Mobile's city boundary through annexation of surrounding areas in 1960 led to the movement of affluent whites into the western part of the city near the municipal airport. This enlarged predominantly black neighbourhoods in the central city and concentrated poverty into areas where incomes from middle-class whites once contributed to the tax base and retail sector.59

Throughout much of the 20th century, except for a brief period during World War II, Mobile's leading employers used racial segregation as a means of denying blacks entry into skilled and supervisory categories. Patterns of racial discrimination were particularly entrenched in Mobile's oldest manufacturing industries: shipbuilding and paper production. In both cases, prewar lines of racial progression continued during the 1960s. But more disturbing for African Americans than the problem of occupational mobility was the trend in layoffs and unfair dismissals that continued in an era when the Korean and Vietnam wars had supplied a steady percentage of federal military contracts. Despite the NPVL's previous efforts to expand employment opportunities, LeFlore found that ADDSCO, Brookley Field and the International Paper Company still failed to effectively enforce the executive orders of Eisenhower and Kennedy which had outlawed segregation in plants receiving federal contracts. Little progress had been made to challenge the concentration of Mobile's non-white labour force in unskilled and low-paid service employment between 1950 and 1960. Almost 50% of black women worked as domestics in white households and 45% of black males were employed as operatives, craftsmen, service workers and labourers. New jobs were announced by Brookley Field, Mobile County Personnel Board and the Mobile Post Office between 1964 and 1966. LeFlore scrutinized these openings and prepared to liaise with each employer with the aim of counselling qualified blacks on how best to apply for these jobs. His substantial

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experience of dealing with discrimination in federal employment both as a postal worker himself and in initiating formal proceedings on behalf of the NAACP, was widened further under the terms EEOC which co-ordinated the complaints procedure for various federal employment agencies. After 1964, LeFlore made compliance a top priority for the NPVL. His aim was to legally bind ADDSCO and International Paper so that upgradings of African Americans could take place swiftly.60

Title VII was regarded by the NPVL Citizen's Committee as an important landmark in the civil rights struggle. A mass meeting was held at the Adams Street Holiness Church on July 12, 1964 where LeFlore and Joseph Meissner a white lawyer from Cleveland, Ohio offered interpretations of the new law which had come into effect on July 2. The meeting was a vehicle to inform everyone of their 'rights and responsibilities' reiterating the NPVL's theme that the black citizenry must not only be well-versed in such matters but also willing to act responsibly in helping to enforce changes in the law. Or in other words, the NPVL would act as a formal intermediary between local employers and black jobseekers providing assistance, information and guidance to both parties. The aim was to generate as many qualified black applicants for specific openings as possible. LeFlore worked tirelessly to collate all the relevant details and could hardly have failed to consider the potential economic impact of this strategy. Among the new vacancies advertised by the civil service were for clerks, typists, stenographers, card punch operators, sheet metal workers and hospital porters. As employees of the U.S. Army Engineer District for Southern Alabama, typists could expect to earn between $3,620 and $3,880 per annum, stenographers up to $4,215 and card punch operators up to $4,005 located at Brookley Base. Meanwhile, at the Mobile County Personnel Board successful applicants for nursing and police vacancies could expect to earn up to $5,604 and $6,120 respectively. Furthermore, all these openings fell under the EEOC broad rubric governing fair employment practice.61

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60 Ibid., 3; Series I: Casework, box 5, file 10: Employment Announcements (Civil Service) 1964-66 and file 14: Employment Announcements (Mobile County Personnel Board) 1966-74, NPVL Records.

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Soon after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the NPVL stepped up its previous investigations at ADDSCO and International Paper in anticipation of the Title VII clause with the hope that this new measure would not only aid the elimination of segregation but also assist occupational mobility for African Americans at the plant. ADDSCO in the 1960s was a very different place compared to the ADDSCO of the war years when its management had been forced to upgrade black workers following the FEPC's 1942 investigation. The ensuing riot and presence of the CIO unions had faded into the distant memory of the employees now working at the plant. Rigid job discrimination and lack of union representation still prevented African Americans from gaining supervisory positions and transfers to over fifty skilled positions. The major black locals, Kraft No. 12 and Local No 18 of the IUMSWA were more or less redundant in the face of entrenched racial segregation at the facilities which extended from the cafeterias to the policies governing promotion. Even those blacks who had worked at ADDSCO for several years could not be assured of occupational mobility in the 1960s.62

By March 1964, LeFlore was in regular contact with J. Paul Keefe, Director of Industrial Relations at ADDSCO and John Heneghan, representative of the Navy Department and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. He charged that ADDSCO had failed to comply with Executive Order 10925 and assembled several affidavits from black employees that were filed to the EEOC. In June 1964, Keefe informed LeFlore that if there should be new openings in skilled categories then he would consider employing blacks. LeFlore confirmed that the NPVL would volunteer its services to find qualified black applicants for such positions. Little progress had been made as of July when LeFlore sent a copy of a telegram to Keefe to the EEOC confirming that there no upgradings had taken place since work began on USS Cugle, a new federal contract secured by ADDSCO. Once LeFlore reported this situation to John Shannon at the Department of the Navy, Keefe acted decisively by overseeing the promotion of 4 black employees, James Jones, Daniel Davis, J.B. Marsh and Lee Carter to Outside Machinists. This resulted in a pay increase for each of the men from $2.55 per hour to $2.98. Keefe also promised to hire blacks as engineers and draftsmen if suitable applications were received.63

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63 J. Paul Keefe to LeFlore, June 2, 1964, ibid.
Typically, LeFlore continued to keep up the pressure on ADDSCO by informing Keefe and the Department of the Navy that work on the latest battleship Cugle, a contract acquired by the company a few months previously, had begun without the promised promotion of blacks to skilled jobs. A copy of the telegram was also sent to the EEOC. By August, a possible solution was suggested by way of transferring existing employees to skilled grades at the yard. This was supported by the Navy Department and on August 13th, four black males, James Jones, Daniel Davis, J.B. Marsh and Lee Carter had been transferred to the Outside Machinist section. Their wages subsequently rose by 43 cents from $2.55 per hour to $2.98. Keefe also made it clear that he was waiting for suitable applicants for the engineering section where blacks could earn far more. Though few in number, the transfers established a precedent at ADDSCO. LeFlore had forced the company to uphold its new responsibilities under the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the NPVL had greatly assisted the EEOC’s role in overseeing contract compliance. Director of the EEOC’s Field Services, Ward McCready sent LeFlore a letter stating that the agency fully appreciated his ‘interest in the effective administration of our program.’ Unlike the FEPC upgradings of 1943, LeFlore’s victory at ADDSCO in 1964 did not result in violence or work stoppages. It appeared as though that the NPVL’s legal manouevering had made a great moral stride in persuading people that the law must be respected if it was to protect all American citizens. By September, Keefe was able to confirm that nine of the applicants sent by the NPVL had been accepted as welders and 20 other existing employees had been temporarily assigned to the welding department for training.

International Paper was one of Mobile’s oldest paper producers. Like ADDSCO, the company had a policy of racial segregation at its plant. Following an investigation by LeFlore in 1963, it was confirmed that 56 different jobs had been closed to blacks in the Bag Factory Division. A survey undertaken by the local black union, Kraft 412 revealed that lines of progression for International’s staff in Mobile were different to that found in other plants. Notification of new job openings were not easily available to blacks and the union had little power in forcing the company to adopt more racially egalitarian polices. The core of the problem concerning progression was that apprenticeship programmes

64 Ward McCready, EEOC, June 5, 1964, ibid.

65 Telegram from LeFlore to Keefe, July 19, 1964, Copy to Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; LeFlore to John Shannon, Department of the Navy, August 12, 1964; Keefe to Shannon, August 14, 1964; Keefe to LeFlore, August 17, 1964, ibid.; Keefe to LeFlore, September 14, 1964, box 4, file 2A, ibid.
excluded blacks and hence they could not acquire the necessary skills to move to skilled positions. This practice was so entrenched that the plant now had what was widely regarded by the management as "white" and "negro" jobs. In 1962, LeFlore was shocked to find that International's management had introduced a new testing system called 'Wonderlic Tests', a series of oral and written competency tests designed to weed out potential black applicants for upgrades. In a scathing attack, LeFlore claimed that the test was being used 'as a repressive instrument to flagrantly impose discriminatory job conditions and contain Negro workers in limited lines of progression.'66 A decision had was made by the NPVL in April 1963 to recruit black plaintiffs in the preparation of a formal petition against International. This petition charged that discrimination was being continued by the company's management in violation of Title VII after extensive correspondence with the EEOC had proved futile.

The bureaucratic nature of the EEOC meant that LeFlore not only had to administer the correct procedures concerning complaints but also had to find persons willing to offer themselves as plaintiffs in any suit. Fears of white reprisals kept many black workers at International from committing themselves as plaintiffs but they were vital for the EEOC to become involved in any subsequent investigation. In April 1963, after months of hard work, LeFlore supplied the names and addresses of seven black males employed at the plant who were willing to testify regarding segregation and discrimination to Peroy H. Williams at the EEOC. Alphonso Williams, Clarence Hytower, Willie J. Blanks, William Edley Edwards, Percy D. Johnson, Robert Chapman and F.C. Newberry, all from Mobile, also gave LeFlore written permission to legally represent them in Washington, D.C. After this, the EEOC began an investigation of International and requested that management make all necessary preparations for compliance as soon as possible. However, as with many an EEOC investigation, progress was slower than expected and it was only after the 1965 NPVL Petition for Abolition of Job Discrimination and Wonderlic Tests that International finally began to open up skilled jobs to blacks.67

66 'Jobs in which no Negroes are Employed Primarily Because of Race or Color, 1963'; W. E. Edwards of Kraft Local 412 to V.J. Williams of International Paper, January 7, 1963; LeFlore to John G. Field, EEOC, February 12, 1963; LeFlore to Peroy H. Williams, EEOC, April 17, 1963; Petition for Abolition of Job Discrimination and Wonderlic Test/Segregation in Facilities against International Paper Company, Southern Kraft Division, Moss Point, MS, 1963, Series II, box 5, files 92-93, NPVL Records.

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An area in which the NPVL defined its flexibility to encompass various aspects of breaking employment discrimination was providing individual assistance to blacks wishing to apply for jobs. LeFlore kept detailed records of curriculum vita, names and correspondence with Mobile employers for the objective of counselling prospective employees. He was added to the mailing list of the Post Office for details of upcoming clerk/carrier examinations and matched up individuals with suitable skills with job openings.\(^{68}\) He also personally introduced several hundred men and women to local employers between 1966 and 1973. A typical example was that of Helen M. McDowell who was described to Western Auto Stores as an 'affable person' with 'other prerequisites which would enable her to meet your requirements for employment.'\(^{69}\) A statement of support from LeFlore, the most respected and influential black man in Mobile was extremely useful in one’s job search. The public name of the NPVL was also important in the area of service employment were resistance to hiring blacks as counter sales staff and airline stewardesses was particularly strong. After receiving several complaints, LeFlore wrote strong letters to local department store managers urging them to change their hiring policies given that a substantial amount of business came from the black community. He made some progress with Eastern Airlines a company which serviced Mobile and the Gulf Coast. Ground hostesses received a generous salary of $475 per month and although the company confirmed to LeFlore that it had employed 26 African American stewardesses in its other major Southern terminals, none were employed in Mobile. The company’s New York head office pledged its support of an ‘aggressive recruiting program designed to attract a larger number of qualified minority group applicants.’\(^{70}\) It was requested that LeFlore forward the names and details of suitable candidates for future job openings. On November 24, 1967, Eastern Airlines recruited Bonnie Love and Brady Newberry as ground hostesses in Mobile. LeFlore was proud of the confidence the company had placed in the NPVL on this occasion.\(^{71}\)


\(^{69}\) LeFlore to Western Auto Stores, December 3, 1966, Series II, box 4, file 35, NPVL Records.

\(^{70}\) LeFlore to Eastern Airlines, New York, January 18, 1967; Marvin C. Amos to LeFlore, February 3, 1967; LeFlore to Amos, February 14, 1967, box 4, file 39, NPVL Records.

\(^{71}\) Patricia A. Kelly to LeFlore, November 24, 1967, ibid.
Conclusion

In 1967, two events shattered the image of Mobile’s racial peace. The homes of influential League members were bombed and set on fire, not by white extremists but by black militants. LeFlore and Bishop Smith were the targets in what appeared to be serious signs that the NPVL’s authoritarian leadership of the movement was not accepted by all sections of Mobile’s black community. Yet these events had a contradictory effect on the public. Langan quickly condemned the acts and co-ordinated efforts to raise funds to rehouse the LeFlore family to a new home as soon as possible. Foremost in his mind was to show that the city appreciated LeFlore’s achievements at the NPVL and his moderate leadership of the civil rights struggle in Mobile. The attacks were the responses of black extremists in the city disgusted with what they regarded as LeFlore’s ‘Uncle Tom’ leadership: deference to whites, refusal to invite King and general moderation when militancy was desired. Signs of a backlash against the SAC and the clergymen who served on it were visible as early as March 1965 when Martin Johnson informed the city commissioners that the pressure was on the black members of the Commission ‘for demonstrations, boycotts and the importation of outside elements’ to further job opportunities in the city.

A review of the Commission’s achievements since 1963 revealed that it was indeed necessary to place blacks on the Mobile Housing Board, Hospital Board, Welfare Board and in the Chamber of Commerce. Langan decided to reward his longtime partner in public service by appointing LeFlore to the Housing Board in February 1966. The dismal record in employment also forced the SAC to raise $16,000 to hire Charles Tunstall as job co-ordinator. Media admiration for Langan’s progressive leadership of the civil rights era in Mobile relayed a story of racial progress in the city of which both blacks and whites were proud. Yet the psychologically-empowering aspects of direct-action and civil disobedience had been delayed and not prevented. The NPVL’s accommodating disposition and the overwhelming respect and power commanded by LeFlore painted a

72 Mobile Register, July 16, 1967; Mobile Beacon, July 17, 1967.
75 Dow, ‘Langan: Mobile’s Racial Diplomat,’ 45, 47-8, 50.
picture of Mobile race relations that was soon altered by responses to Martin Luther
King, Jr.’s assassination in 1968.76

76 Langan and Judge James Strickland in Mobile’s Civil Rights Pioneer; Richardson, Genesis
and Exodus of NOW, 3.
PART THREE: The Quest For Political Power
Chapter 7:

Message from the Grass-Roots: The Neighborhood Organization Workers of Mobile, 1966-71

'compared to other large Southern Cities, the peculiar structure of race, class and political relations in Mobile delayed the fruition of the civil rights movement'.

Frederick Douglas Richardson, *The Genesis and Exodus of NOW*, 1996

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s death on April 3, 1968 was a devastating blow to the Southern Civil Rights movement. In several cities, violence and bitter demonstrations accompanied the tragic loss of the nation’s foremost African American political leader. In Mobile, Alabama’s only metropolitan area which did not host a major civil rights demonstration during the 1960s, King’s assassination was a remarkably transforming event which fuelled the emergence of the Neighbourhood Organization Workers (NOW), a local civil rights group influenced by the grass-roots mobilisation politics of Black Power and direct-action. NOW’s rise to prominence from relative obscurity abruptly ended decades of mainstream, accommodationist black protest. Psychologically, it removed the veneer of racial peace upon which the city’s traditional leadership class had based its civil rights strategies during the years of violent racial confrontation in Alabama. In the long-term, NOW represented an important stage in the development of political consciousness among black Mobilians since World War II which radically altered the ideological dimensions of the civil rights struggle in one of America’s oldest localities.

While historians have given the phase of the Civil Rights movement led by King its fair share of commentary and scholarship, they have often relegated the Black Power phase to the margins, treating it as a postscript to one of the most influential social upheavals of this century. One major problem encountered by historians of Black Power’s contribution African Americans’ quest for equality is the lack of accessibility to sources.

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Most organisations which conducted protest activities under the Black Power slogan attracted widespread federal surveillance, since authorities regarded as potential threats to the preservation of law and order or as Communist insurgents. The Federal Bureau for Investigation (FBI), had a long-standing role in this kind of surveillance even of more ‘respectable’ organisations such as the SCLC, and its leader, King. From its very beginning, NOW’s activities and leaders were the subjects of FBI monitoring, and several documents pertaining to the group are currently not available to researchers. Until the FBI releases these documents to the public, only a partial but, nonetheless, valuable examination of the Black Power era in Mobile through the records of the American Friends Service Committee’s (AFSC), community outreach projects in the South during the late 1960s, NOW’s correspondence with other civil rights groups and recollections of former participants in the city’s civil rights struggle.

In the years following the legislative successes yielded by the Civil Rights movement in the South, political power in Mobile was still firmly located in the white community. African-American representation in local government was almost totally absent. In 1968 critics regarded the achievements of the Langan era in local politics as mere tokenism. None of the gains since the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act had actually managed to dislodge the historical legacies of institutionalised racial discrimination and political exclusion of blacks from the branches of local government. To achieve real power in the nation’s democratic system, African Americans had to secure political representation and economic parity with whites. Charging that the leadership of blacks in Mobile had been controlled by an elite which had remained largely unchallenged until 1968, NOW activists took several bold steps to expose the myth of ‘good race relations’ upon which the NPVL had based its support of Langan since World War II.

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The Origins and Impact of NOW in Mobile

NOW was originally formed in the home of David Jacobs a black schoolteacher and Mobile native, in June, 1966. The initial meeting was attended by fifteen to twenty people who were interested in fostering an organisation to rival the NPVL. Their major objective was to create an independent platform for community action to seek economic, social and political justice for the black citizenry. Nothing came of that particular meeting but according to former treasurer, Frederick Douglas Richardson, the activists who eventually joined in April 1968 wanted to see Mobile finally experience the direct-action phase of the Civil Rights movement where blacks initiated the public debate on racial matters through planned campaigns targeting specific issues. Central to this was taking protest directly to where it would have a real impact. Richardson later charged that the NPVL was not a genuine social movement. After the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, League members organised ‘test-ins’ involving selected black youths to force local establishments to comply with Title VII of the new law. They were largely staged affairs effecting no spontaneous change. NOW was interested in becoming a genuine movement in that respect. Meetings, held regularly after King’s assassination in Warren Street Methodist Church, were usually attended by approximately 200-400 people but were subject to considerable FBI and police surveillance. A stark contrast to NPVL meetings which were held in the private surroundings of its own offices without a federal official in sight. A charter was drawn up leading local black lawyer, Vernon Crawford setting forth NOW’s aim ‘to fight for justice and promote human dignity.’

NOW activists sought to use the strategies and militant focus of the generation that made the 1960s a spectacularly successful era in African-American protest not only to eradicate second-class citizenship status but also to exercise the citizenship rights already conferred upon blacks. NOW activists broke from the NPVL’s conservative methods deploying confrontation in a way that produced dramatic results in a remarkably short space of time. NOW was basically Mobile’s counterpart to SNCC. Jacobs became NOW’s first president and then was replaced in 1969 by Noble Beasley, a newcomer to Mobile who had previously been a postal worker, merchant seaman and army recruit. He owned one of

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the most popular night spots for African Americans in downtown Mobile, the Sabre Club, and was married to a local school teacher.\(^6\)

NOW members were influenced by a combination of King's non-violent civil disobedience and the Black Power strategy espoused by SNCC's Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in 1966. Members believed African Americans could achieved real economic and political power through such methods as boycotts, rent strikes, and pressure-group bargaining. Their ultimate aim was to propel blacks into positions of leadership. Historian, Clayborne Carson refutes the popular view that Black Power, as defined by Carmichael and Hamilton, represented a clear ideological break from the mainstream civil rights activities of the SCLC. Instead, he urged scholars to examine Black Power not only in terms of its radical nature but also the strains of continuity it had with King's strategy of non-violent civil disobedience.\(^7\)

In Mobile, NOW offered a reinterpretation of the United States Constitution to challenge the NPVL's insistence that blacks should be ready and willing to prove at all times through the content of their character that they were deserving of citizenship rights. As far as Jacobs, Beasley and Richardson were concerned, blacks had already been granted rights equal to that of whites and therefore, should begin to exercise those rights \textit{en masse}. Bureaucratic organisations fashioned in the mould of the NAACP failed in one fundamental area: to stir the emotions of the masses. NOW's starting point was to raise community awareness in weekly rallies followed by special guest speaker events and the organising of an independent political voice for the majority of black Mobilians. While LeFlore had been committed to changing unjust laws within the legal and federal system, Beasley was influenced by the SCLC's moral argument that such laws should be disobeyed until they were revoked. This was an ideological difference which gave NOW's short-lived existence both the power to undermine the NPVL and to bequeath an important long-term political legacy in Mobile.\(^8\)


\(^8\) C.E. Silberman, \textit{Crisis in Black and White} (London, 1965) also raised the important question, should blacks prove their equality?, 124, 134; Richardson, Tape LF-20;
NOW made its presence widely felt rather quickly. Between 1968 and 1969, its leadership threatened to 'burn Mobile down' if changes did not occur soon to alleviate the economic distress and indignities of continued racial discrimination.\(^9\) To dissuade anyone who might have thought that this was mere rhetoric, a series of fire bombings on white-owned businesses and homes in Davis Avenue, was linked to NOW. Conflict had arisen regarding the refusal of these stores to hire black sales staff. Previously in June 1968, Operation Ghost Town had been launched where blacks were urged to withdraw their patronage from certain stores in a given area until they were willing to hire them as sales clerks and supervisors. Local businesses then began hiring blacks in large numbers for the first time. The name of this particular campaign itself brought the tone of Northern Black Power protest to Mobile, a city which possessed a media image steeped in respectability and racial peace. However, it was in the political arena where NOW significantly shifted the balance of power in the black and white communities.\(^10\)

Contemporary reporting of NOW’s activities came from a new independent source: the AFSC. In April 1968, a team of officials, Barbara Moffett, Wil Hartzler, Jim Harvey and Winifred Green made a visit to Mobile with the purpose of examining whether the AFSC’s expertise in social justice programmes could be effectively utilised to ease racial tensions surrounding integration of the public schools. A lengthy report detailing local racial conditions was prepared which later secured financial approval from the organisation’s headquarters in Philadelphia for the establishment of a pilot project in Mobile. Jacobs was appointed to the directorship of the Mobile Education Project in May 1969 and Bill Rosser, a white native of Michigan was hired as his co-worker. The initial AFSC report concluded that in April 1968, NOW certainly intended to be more than a temporary movement. NOW leaders informed the visitors of plans to stop blacks from voting in the next municipal election since none of the candidates were considered to be truly dedicated to advancing their demands and that an invitation would be extended to Carmichael to speak at the municipal auditorium. Two new publications entitled the *Call*
and Post would be circulated to report issues specifically relating to their community and to articulate the aims of the movement. Previously, Mobile had only one black-owned newspaper, the Beacon established by Frank Thomas in 1943. LeFlore had written many articles for this more moderate paper.11

In 1969 NOW sent an upsetting message to all Mobilians who believed that blacks really had gained expanded opportunities. Politically, NOW intended to seize a key place in the electoral process by informing blacks that they had a right to not exercise their voting privileges if no nominated candidates were worthy of their support. NOW thus rejected the NPVL’s voter registration methods over the last decade. Most whites standing for election had assumed that an endorsement from the League on their official ‘pink sheets’ would more or less guarantee the bloc vote from blacks.12 When Langan was defeated in the 1969 municipal elections, both the NPVL and LeFlore experienced a devastating blow. The loss not only removed one of Mobile’s consistent white liberal reformers, but also represented a personal indictment of LeFlore’s painstaking efforts to endorse racially liberal candidates.13

Richardson later recounted that NOW was inspired to work against Langan because it believed the NPVL had seriously limited an independent black voice by dictating voting patterns. According to him, Mobile’s clergy had helped to conduct politics in the city and in the majority black town of Prichard to the north of Mobile, behind closed doors where white candidates could influence voting through the aid of the NPVL’s pink endorsement sheets. NOW did not regard this situation as true democracy and made it very clear that blacks had a right to withdraw their voting privileges to force whites to concede their historic role as speakers and representatives acting on behalf of blacks.14 Successful picketing and pamphleteering in predominantly black, Ward 10, helped to keep 9,000

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12 Richardson, Genesis and Exodus of NOW, 55.


14 Ibid.; Silberman, Crisis in Black and White, 215.
voters away from the polls in the 1969 election. LeFlore and Dr. Richard Gilliard, a League board member, pleaded with NOW followers to exercise their hard-won right to vote that August 19th, but their calls went unheeded. Hurricane Camille’s powerful strike on the Gulf Coast earlier that week also kept voters away from the polls. Langan was defeated, while the more conservative Mayor Lambert Mims was re-elected.\textsuperscript{15}

The reaction to NOW’s sudden emergence as a major political force in the black community illustrated how the NPVL’s dependence on white intermediaries to advance the cause of civil rights had retarded the growth of independent black protest in Mobile. LeFlore had already publicly rejected the ‘so-called black power format’ in 1966 when the slogan and ideology was launched by SNCC workers in Lowndes County.\textsuperscript{16} He and fellow NPVL members, Gilliard, Bishop Smith and the Reverend Charles Tunstall, were at that time heavily committed to what was widely regarded as a great symbol of Mobile’s racial harmony: Langan’s Special Advisory Commission.\textsuperscript{17} Not surprisingly LeFlore came to fear NOW more than the Klan having witnessed the removal of his long-time friend and political ally from office in 1969. The NPVL represented the old vanguard of black leadership which had remained economically secure during most of the twentieth century. Restrained by a racial etiquette formed within the era of Jim Crow’s ascendancy, this elite conducted its public dialogue with the white establishment had been characterised by a language of deference and servility.\textsuperscript{18}

Richardson, on the other hand, was the face of a new black, middle-class created by the economic prosperity of the post-war decades. This class consisted of teachers, school administrators and federal employees. They lived in new housing developments and commanded stable incomes. To them, economic justice was the main issue facing the community; therefore, they could easily abandon moderation in favour of direct-action inspired by the controversial language of Black Power. Richardson charged that Mobile

\textsuperscript{15} 'Visit to Mobile,' \textit{ibid.}, 4; Memorandum to Winifred Green from David Jacobs and Bill Rosser, Subject: Weekly Report, August 19, 1969, AFSC Papers, 4; LeFlore to Noble Beasley August 11, 1969, Series IV: Printed Materials, box 11, file 123, NPVL Records; Richardson, \textit{ibid.}, 8; Dow, 54-6.


\textsuperscript{17} 'An Alabama City Builds Racial Peace,' \textit{Wall Street Journal}, July 18, 1963.

\textsuperscript{18} Dow, 'Langan: Mobile’s Racial Diplomat,' 54-6.
had not progressed socially since the Civil War, an allegation which rested, to a certain extent, upon the view that the black middle-class elite had perpetuated this by refusing to open their city to the radicalism of the Civil Rights movement in the early to mid-1960s.  

NOW’s membership was a surprise to the AFSC visitors. Rather than consisting of students, labour leaders and other radical ‘types’ associated with the movement after 1961, the majority were local businessmen, teachers and sons of ministers. Dr. James Findley, a future NOW president, was typical of African Americans who had benefited from post-war rises in black educational achievement and incomes. He held a college degree and was the owner of a chain of drugstores in Mobile that relied solely on patronage from the Davis Avenue black community. A highly respected professional, he was independent of the white power structure. Ocie Wheat was the son of notable Mobile builder, S.W. Wheat and a graduate of Tuskegee Institute. Michael Tunstall, the son of Reverend Charles Tunstall broke from his father’s support of LeFlore and was a leading participant in various NOW sit-in demonstrations. Richardson himself was well-educated, having attended Carver State Vocational Technical School and Bishop State Junior College in Mobile. He earned a B.A. degree in political science at the University of South Alabama. He was especially enraged that even educated black men in Mobile often had to work at menial jobs. Richardson escaped this menial trap, passing the civil service examination to become a postal worker like LeFlore. Unlike his older colleague, however, Richardson represented a radical voice in Mobile’s black community that mirrored the aspirations of the radical student activists who joined SNCC in the quest for a brighter economic future free from the restraints imposed by the segregation’s social legacy.

To this end, NOW targeted 1969 as a year for expanding employment opportunities for Mobile’s blacks. NOW leaders hoped to force the inclusion of blacks in economic sectors to which they had traditionally been denied access: city government, sales jobs involving

19 ’Visit to Mobile,’ 6; Richardson, *Genesis and Exodus of NOW*, 3-4, 24.


face-to-face contact with whites, and management. NOW hoped to accomplish this goal by confronting specific employers directly with pickets and boycotts. Operation Ghost Town and a similar holiday boycott, Operation Black Christmas had opened sales jobs to blacks in white-owned stores on Davis Avenue. The subsequent picketing of the Greater Gulf States Fair became an occasion of particular importance. This annual trade fair had never employed blacks as ticket clerks and counter assistants, but after NOW’s peaceful demonstration, the Chamber of Commerce requested a meeting with the group’s leaders. A number of blacks were permitted to work at the following year’s fair for the first time.22 Another part of NOW’s employment agenda was a campaign to attack cultural symbols of white supremacy in Mobile and to use televised coverage of these events as a means of free publicity. Beasley organised protests at specific annual events which had traditionally given the city its national and civic reputation of a positive cultural heritage which in reality totally excluded African Americans. The Azalea Trail, Mardi Gras celebrations and the televised Junior Miss Pageant, were according to NOW, events used to sell Mobile’s image for racial peace and respectability which only glossed over the lingering racism of the city.23

In bringing the language and strategies of Northern-style Black Power protest to Mobile, NOW reflected the growing dissatisfaction a segment of the black community felt toward Langan and LeFlore’s policies. They had in Richardson’s words, ‘retarded racial progress’.24 Particularly frustrating for Richardson was the fact ‘Mobile [had] stood still racially while the rest of the country marched forward.’25 The time for marching in Mobile only came after 1969 when it had previously arrived for many localities in the early to mid-1960s. When that time arrived, Richardson articulated a bold, dismissive critique of the two local personalities who were convinced that their methods to secure social and political reform were the most effective to avoid the racial schisms that had polarised other communities in Alabama. He deemed Langan a paternalistic city.

22 Richardson, *ibid.*, 51, 55, 58; Whatley, ‘Institutional Racial Discrimination in Mobile,’ 77-80.

23 Noble C. Beasley to Junior Miss (all states), February 24, 1969, AFSC Papers; W. Graves, ‘Mobile: Alabama’s City in Motion,’ *National Geographic* 133 (March 1968): 386-97.

24 Richardson, Tape LF-20 in Mobile’s Civil Rights Pioneer: An Oral History.

commissioner who had deliberately made black professionals dependent on the *status quo* by placing them on conservative interracial committee designed to 'control minorities'.

Langan's definition of a 'good city,' again according to Richardson, was one in which the black citizenry did as they were told and where the black clergy could be to keep their community in order.

The city's attempt to control free expression and its daily operation provided important examples of the limited nature of Mobile's racial progress during the 1960s. In July 1969, the city commission following Mayor Mims' lead, refused to grant NOW officials a permit to hold a rally in the municipal auditorium during Stokely Carmichael's visit. Carmichael's address was then held in a local African-American church. FBI officials attended the meeting, and Carmichael was escorted by city police for the duration of his stay. Richardson also claimed that Mobile's newspapers, television stations and radio broadcasts were largely dominated by a small, conservative elite. Reporting consistently failed to convey positive stories concerning the black community with the exception of NBC's Channel 10. In the late 1960s, other Southern cities such as Birmingham and Atlanta had at least some black elected officials in municipal government whereas Mobile only had LeFlore at the Housing Board. The AFSC and NOW both clearly saw that real change required bolder black leadership in local politics.

The context of NOW's sudden emergence itself provided ample justification for its continuation during the post-Civil Rights era even after its triumph over LeFlore and Langan in 1969. NOW was the first genuine grass-roots movement which arose independently of the white power structure. It was determined to bring Mobile out of its *status quo* philosophy which according to the AFSC, was the biggest obstacle to the alleviation of discrimination in the city.

NOW believed Black Power politics were particularly important for bestowing upon Mobile a sense of urgency in race relations and rejected token integration was rejected as legitimate reform. Rising racial polarisation,
backlash and the declining economy at the end of the 1960s, showed that much was left to be done if the city was to move beyond stagnation and alienation and move toward equality.\(^{30}\)

At the heart of Mobile's racial problems on the eve of the 1970s was the long-standing failure of the Mobile County Board of School Commissioners to comply with several court orders arising from class action suits initiated by the NPVL since the *Birdie Mae Davis* case in 1963. As the nation moved toward bussing and re-zoning of school districts to achieve racial balance in education, Mobile became a pilot project for the AFSC because conservative whites proved their determination to preserve the cultural and economic heart of American racism by uniting to form Stand Together and Never Divide (STAND). This parent-teacher group specifically aimed to block court-ordered integration of their schools. In fact, more controversy accompanied the attempts to integrate Mobile's schools than any other issue connected to race since World War II.\(^{31}\) This example also had wider significance for the state of affairs created by the historic absence of black representation in politics and in the economic institutions of Mobile. The AFSC then concluded that a right to self-determination for African Americans could only be achieved if they were a part of the urban decision-making process and were elected as city commissioners, school board members, and state legislators. A voice in politics could offer solutions to the problems of residential segregation, neighbourhood decline and a flawed municipal institutional framework.\(^{32}\)

The economic and cultural decline of Davis Avenue, once the vibrant heart of black community activities during the first half of the twentieth century, some of the demographic changes that has occurred in Mobile by the late 1960s.\(^{33}\) Population and jobs had moved to the new suburbs of West and North Mobile since the 1950s and the construction of the municipal airport, but the effects on Davis Avenue became particularly acute in the 1970s. Urban renewal programmes funded by the federal government as part

\(^{30}\) 'Visit to Mobile, Alabama,' 2-4.


\(^{33}\) B.A. Presnell, 'The Impact of World War II on Race Relations in Mobile, Alabama, 1940-1948,' M.A. thesis, Atlanta University, 1972, 3-5.
of the Johnson administration's War On Poverty campaign had practically destroyed Davis Avenue between 1965 and 1969 as upwardly mobile blacks had little incentive to stay. As racial restrictions in housing were gradually removed and affirmative action opened up new job opportunities, the growing numbers of black Mobilians followed whites to the suburbs. Those blacks who remained in the central city faced school closures and bulldozing of houses to make way for a major traffic connector and the campus of what became Bishop State Community College. The Mobile Housing Board reported that 3000 structures were removed in this period, many of which 'were dilapidated fire-traps, eye-sores, and hide-outs for criminals.' The majority of displaced residents were black but relocation and assistance was given to 2,174 families. Only 327 families opted to enter public housing indicating that a fair degree of those who relocated owned their homes and sold them on to the housing board. Hence, an area that once supported numerous black enterprises and some white, was now significantly reduced in size and economic function.

The fate of Davis Avenue was symptomatic of a city in which economic retrenchment and a conservative resurgence in local politics shaped the prevailing debates surrounding municipal racial reform. The phasing out of Brookley Field industrial-military complex was a major blow to Mobile's economy. Since its construction in 1939 as part of the Roosevelt administration's defence mobilisation for World War II, it had been the city's largest single employer with an annual payroll of $54 million during the 1950s. The city lost 13,000 jobs in 1969 when the Johnson government finalised plans for its closure as part of a series of domestic defence cutbacks. No significant expansion in the shipbuilding companies seemed likely to make up for this loss as many federal contracts were not renewed in the 1970s. New jobs were available predominantly in the service sector and high-tech industries that chose to locate in Mobile during the 1960s. Blacks found it difficult to secure a strong footing in either of these sectors because significant training for these industries was needed under the Manpower Development and Training Act which tended to help blacks gain such training on a sufficiently wide-scale.

Another difficulty for unskilled blacks was the apparent racial barrier at local paper plants, where unfair dismissals were continually reported to the NPVL from black

34 Mobile Civic Index, 22.
employees. In the face of Mobile's shrinking industrial base in the 1970s, few business leaders in the city were willing to tackle the racial problems that had accompanied NOW's emergence. The AFSC identified Mobile's problems as part of the 'urban crisis' prevalent in most American cities, where racism and poverty afflicted growing proportions of the population.

To outsiders, Mobile was a city of contrasts. The city had one of the highest church attendance rates in the nation and conservative cultural attitudes continued to inform the lack of progress in school desegregation fostering greater polarisation between the races. The local press reported ninety-six firebombings in 1969 alone, claiming that 'arson, vandalism and terrorism remain unabated.' Six year earlier LeFlore's home was firebombed in what Richardson deemed as response to his crusade for school desegregation. Public housing projects and black residential clusters resembling ghettos contrasted sharply with restored plantation houses on oak tree-lined streets. Mobilians interested in change had to contend with other citizens who, like those in STAND, firmly supported the status quo. Reformers often feared reprisals if they attempted any meaningful change.

Bill Rosser maintained the AFSC's commitment to change, however, when he met with bosses at International Paper and Scott in an effort to encourage them to include blacks at their plants. A lack of training at the high school and college levels prevented many blacks from gaining appointments to management and supervisory positions. Rosser was surprised to find that both companies regarded any proposed involvement in community affairs 'a new idea for Mobile' and viewed the AFSC's initiatives with suspicion. Neither company was willing to commit to any plan. These companies' resistance to

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37 'Visit to Mobile, Alabama,' op. cit., 1; Mobile Civic Index, 21; Memorandum to Wil Hartzler from Winifred Green, Subject: Visit To Mobile, Alabama January 15-16, 1969; Beth Binford, Fighting Racism and Poverty in Mobile, AFSC Pamphlet, n.d., 1-2.

38 Ibid.

39 Memorandum to Wil Hartzler from Winfred Green, ibid.
change reflected white Mobilians’ conservatism which was also illustrated by Governor
George Wallace’s 6-to-1 margin of victory in the 1968 presidential election. NOW’s
success in ousting Langan could not curb the power of Lambert Mims, a man whose
views on social progress were typical of the new class of white Mobilians created by
wartime in-migration. They brought with them, in the AFSC’s words a ‘puritanical’
attitude fostered in rural areas that was combined with an insecurity borne out of their
status as a relatively new middle-class. Maintaining racial segregation in schools was
therefore to them a high priority; they approached racial reform was approached from at
best a gradualist point of view which conflicted with NOW’s demands for swift action.40

Mims was already prominent in Mobile as a church layman and represented the growing
number of Christians who wished to play a greater role in public affairs. He later became
identified by civil rights leaders as ‘a leading force in white resistance to racial
integration.’41 Mims publicly circulated his views on race and politics and these issues’
relation to the future of Mobile in his 1969 work, For Christ and Country. Mims argued
that the majority of blacks were law-abiding and peaceful people who had helped to make
Mobile one of the South’s most integrated cities where public school desegregation began
in 1963 and lunch counters were opened in 1962. He regarded NOW’s activities as
unnecessary expressions of militant protest which had led to the invitation of Stokely
Carmichael to a closed meeting with NOW leaders. Carmichael’s visit was quickly
followed by a series of mysterious fires in local stores and in the municipal mental health
building. That building had been the proud achievement of the city’s United Fund which
community action groups had sponsored for municipal developments. The cost of damage
to the facility was high. Citing these calamities, Mims claimed that the city had justifiably
refused NOW a permit to have Carmichael speak in the city auditorium since ‘a trail of
fires and riots had followed him across the country’.42 NOW’s picketing outside the
auditorium after the decision only served to limit access for everyone. Mims concluded
that militants only damaged the foundation of good race relations in Mobile. He was also
not as willing as Langan had been to appoint blacks to local governmental positions,

40 Ibid., Addendum to Weekly Report (Bill Rosser), March 10, 1969; Memorandum to
Winifred Green from David Jacobs and Bill Rosser, Subject: Weekly Report, August 19,
1969, 4.

41 Ibid.

preferring to exercise restraint and deal with each demand independently. Several members of the school board shared this gradualist path to reform. Yet ironically, it was NOW's political mobilisation against Langan and the NPVL which had brought Mims into power proving that black rights to free political expression incurred a heavy price in Mobile.

Conclusion

NOW's spectacular rise to prominence in Mobile's racial politics was equally matched by its sudden decline and ultimate disappearance from local civil rights activism. An organisation characterised by the FBI as a potential threat to law and order was never regarded by the city's white establishment as a genuine social reform movement. Since the organisation was repeatedly denied permits to hold marches, rallies and meetings in municipal buildings, some NOW followers turned to more violent and confrontational ways to convey their demands. These actions, in turn, only further justified FBI repression. Scandals also burdened NOW's leadership just two years after its involvement with the AFSC's project began. In July, 1970, Rosser reported that three of NOW's members including, Beasley and Findley, had been indicted for murder following the attempted assassination of Beasley by local man, Jimmie Perine. Beasely, Finley and another man were charged with Perine's murder in what emerged as a political trial closely tied to the district attorney's efforts to secure re-election by 'hanging the leading civil rights leaders in Mobile.' In 1975, Beasley was convicted in the local courts for drug trafficking by the Mobile courts and is still serving his sentence.

With its quick success, NOW ironically became politically vulnerable. By removing Langan from the City Commission, NOW in fact created a vacuum in local mainstream civil rights leadership which the new organisation could not readily fill. Lacking in formal organisation and experience compared to the NPVL, which had conducted its civil rights programmes since 1956, Beasley and other NOW members faced a considerable

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43 Mims, 61-7; Mobile Civic Index, 26, 28.

44 Memorandum from David Jacobs and Bill Rosser to Wil Hartzler, Winifred Green and Barbara Moffett, Subject: Addition to the Weekly Report, Comments on Barbara's Memo, Comments on a Strategy for Confrontation, April 11, 1969, 1, 3; Memorandum from Bill Rosser to Winifred Green, Subject: Weekly Report, July 27, 1970, 2; Richardson, Tape LF-19, in Mobile's Civil Rights Pioneer: An Oral History.
handicap. However, Beasley's style of leadership surely stole the limelight from LeFlore and warned the white political establishment that Mobile's blacks were not a passive, docile minority. Beasley had dared to write several controversial letters to Mims threatening that equal access would be achieved 'by any means necessary'. In these letters he charged that the city's auditorium was funded by taxpayers' money, blacks were neither hired there nor given equal access to stage its meetings and rallies. In an impatient tone, Beasley signalled to the white community that the NPVL no longer controlled the consciousness of militant blacks, who were determined to act decisively and independently for substantial change.

The crisis of the mid-1960s was as much a reaction to powerful whites' failures to deliver full justice to blacks as it was a protest of the black masses against political domination by the black the middle-class. In 1971, however, NOW was basically inactive. But since 1968, the group had clearly affected the operation of the city's power structure, which had not changed for decades. After filing complaints with the Justice Department against two local radio stations, WKRG and WALA hired more African Americans improved their news coverage of the black community. With Langan's defeat, NOW's political activities in Mobile became served as an awakening to all local politicians who had regarded the 1960s as a period of racial progress, when co-operation between white and black leaders had prevented violent conflict. The militant rhetoric and violent political activities sanctioned by its leadership set the stage for the greater inclusion of black Mobilians into the political and economic structure of a city marred by racial exclusion and denial of opportunities.

45 Noble Beasley to the Board of Commissioners, City of Mobile, July 10, 1969, file: Human Relations, Lambert C. Mims Papers, Mobile Municipal Archives.


48 Dow, 'Langan: Mobile's Racial Diplomat,' 52-3; Richardson, Genesis and Exodus of NOW, 128; David Jacobs, 'Final Report on the Mobile Education Project of the American Friends Service Committee,' September 20, 1971, AFSC Papers, 7-8.
Chapter 8: 
Race, Class and Citizenship in Mobile During the Post-Civil Rights Era, 1971-85

Although NOW was very committed to securing economic justice for African Americans, the message it sent to the city of Mobile had been largely political. Not surprisingly, political battles continued to occupy centre stage in Mobile’s journey toward racial integration. Disunity of the black community both in terms of civil rights leadership and economic factors, the absence of interracial efforts to promote racial progress (a characteristic of the previous two decades) and the fact that nearly twenty years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, African Americans in Mobile still awaited the election of their first black city commissioner underpinned this theme. Yet elsewhere, this era was regarded as one of racial healing and the arrival of blacks into mainstream political life on an unprecedented scale. Cities such as Birmingham and Tuskegee were described in the black national media as models of racial progress since the climax of the Southern Civil Rights movement. The future appeared favourable in both places. African Americans were represented in municipal government, in school boards and in financial institutions. In Tuskegee, a revolution had truly occurred where almost a century of domination by a white minority elite was replaced by the enfranchisement of the black majority. In Birmingham citizens of both races had gone a long way to bury the violent scenes of racial hate that had marred the city’s reputation in the national context. Having elected its first black mayor, Richard Arrington in 1979, the Magic City boasted a remarkable transformation in the years following the Second Reconstruction.1

This last chapter will assess the extent of progress in Mobile in the post-Civil Rights era. Having acquired an image of racial peace during the 1960s, Mobilians still had much left to achieve before they could earn the compliments bestowed upon Birmingham and Tuskegee by Ebony magazine. In March 1981, teenager Michael Donald was lynched while on his way to the grocery store. The NAACP’s official periodical, the Crisis described the event as a classic unresolved case of racial violence in the context of

Mobile’s history. All three of Donald’s assailants were released by a local court shortly after their arrest. The victim’s family did not see justice delivered for over a decade after the event when convicted murderer, Henry Hays became the first white man to be executed by the state of Alabama since 1913 for his involvement in the Donald killing. Aside from this particular tragedy, other issues presented a gloomy picture for the future. Under court-ordered desegregation since 1963, Mobile’s public school system was an embarrassment to those who had believed that the federal government could adequately enforce the original Supreme Court decision of 1954. In 1970, Governor Albert Brewer’s New Freedom of Choice Bill was welcomed by the Mobile School Board to further delay racial integration of the schools. A public statement issued by the NPVL declared that it would fight this new bill in the courts on the grounds of its unconstitutionality. However, until the courts had invalidated this, the NPVL’s efforts could not effectively deter the Board’s plans. In fact, it was revealed that it had defied a recent district court deadline for integration by school zone and had made no moves to rectify the situation. In April 1971, LeFlore sent a statement to the Board of School Commissioners which clearly outlined what he regarded as the greatest single problem Mobilians had encountered in the area of race relations:

‘...the effort to establish a unitary public school system was initiated nine years ago. However, we have not yet achieved that goal, respecting the dignity of the individual. Our community cannot soberly disregard the fact that it has experienced a significant deterioration in race relations for more than a decade. This can be attributed in the main, to an extensive degree of resistance to change...’

LeFlore believed that the main obstacle toward the assimilation of blacks in Mobile was the intense resistance to change symbolised most vividly in the local School Board’s obstinance. However, other problems also plagued the efforts made by local civil rights groups to continue the reforms begun during the Civil Rights era. Further litigation was required before Mobile’s blacks could truly enjoy the benefits promised by the legislative changes enacted in 1964 and 1965. In order for them to exercise control over their lives,

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3 ‘Mobile School System Subject to Will of Court, Bureaucrats,’ *Mobile Press*, June 11, 1969.
three stages of racial progress were necessary: political power through representation, a lifting of all barriers to equal employment opportunities and access to a decent standard of educational provision. In these areas, the NPVL proved beyond a doubt, that it had the tenacity and determination to continue its pursuit of first-class citizenship rights for African Americans two decades after its original founding in 1956. The organisation's influence continued to indicate that the middle-class black leadership of civil rights was the hallmark of Mobile's twentieth century racial struggle.⁵

Evidence of Mobile's delayed progress toward opening the path for black political power was visible in the example of Prichard an incorporated town located to the north of the city. In 1973, Prichard was the seventh largest urban area in Alabama. Its population of 41,578 was 51% black, an indication of white out-migration over a period of two decades for in the 1960s, it had only been 40% black.⁶ Although demographically regarded by the Census Bureau as urban, the locality resembled a rural community in many respects. In terms of custom and outlook, residents were close-knit, interrelated through marriage and suspicious of outsiders. A very conservative culture and life-style also characterised its citizens. Election of mayors and five members of its city council took place every four years. Voters participated in an 'at-large', non-partisan election which generally returned white officials to the Prichard city commission. No African American had ever been able to hold office until August 1972 when A. "Jay" Cooper, candidate for mayor received 3,587 votes to 1,763 for the white incumbent, V.O. Capps in an election where over 7,646 votes were cast in total. Cooper received the largest number of votes ever given to an African American running in a municipal election against a white candidate in Alabama. In a field of six whites, Cooper also received over 45% of the total vote. In a run-off held on September 12th, Cooper was elected mayor by a margin of 5,601 votes to Capps' 5,057. Such an event made history for this was the first time since Reconstruction that a black candidate for the city council was successful. John Langham also became the first black member of Prichard's five-member council.⁷


Cooper's candidacy signalled the beginning of a new level of political awareness in a black community which lacked a history of organised action in this respect. Prior attempts at black candidacy for municipal office in Prichard had yielded little success; none of the candidates received more than 1,700 votes. This was underpinned by a general absence in local black civil rights and social action organisations to help propel African Americans into key players in the political process. The cost of this over time had been apathy toward voting among Prichard's blacks. Politics was viewed as 'the business of white folks' and those blacks who did vote were told in advance which candidate to support. Algernon Jay Cooper however, was no ordinary person. Born in Mobile and a graduate of the University of Notre Dame in 1966, he had been a political activist as a student. While studying for his second degree at the New York University school of law, he helped found the National Black American Law Students Association. After graduation in 1969, Cooper worked at the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund offices in New York and was also a member of Robert Kennedy's campaign staff. At the age of 28, he was dismissed as too young to be a serious contender for political office-holding by both blacks and whites in Prichard. His challenge to the white establishment was not regarded as a real threat but rather as futile. Older black Prichard residents viewed him as a precocious young man who threatened to reduce their status and a man who most probably lacked necessary political sophistication. They were also suspicious of a Northern-educated lawyer who had returned to the city with great plans to change things.

Yet Cooper's election meant that a candidate who during his campaign had promised to confront the economic and social problems of a large, urban black community in Alabama could at least be partially realised. Historically, blacks in certain cities had to rely on white racial liberals to support their demands leaving them with no direct experience of making municipal policy decisions in Prichard. Cooper promised to prepare 'an extensive platform for the rehabilitation' of the city. Poverty was rife among whites as well as blacks. In 1960, 5,793 people left the area (mainly whites) because of economic decline. The city commission was $121,000 in debt, 60% of its residents lived in substandard housing, over 40% of black families were reported to be living on an income below the

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8 Ibid., 3.
9 Ibid., 2.
10 Ibid., 4.
poverty level and 53% of all Prichard families were on welfare. Politics, however, had never touched the average black voter until Cooper came onto the scene which resulted in 1,500 new voters on the rolls in 1972.\textsuperscript{11}

The example of Prichard was particularly important for Mobile, a much larger city which had a long history of organised black social and political action. In fact, it could be said that expectations were far higher among African Americans who had directly benefited from increases in voter participation since the outlawing of the white primary in 1944 followed by the 1965 Voting Rights Act. In 1960 not a single black or Hispanic was elected to public office but by 1985, the nation had 27 black and three Hispanic legislators. While the Civil Rights movement lost access to national governmental circles in the 1970s, this was matched by a rise in the number of minority officeholders nationwide, a development that largely replaced the politics of mass mobilisation.\textsuperscript{12} In Mobile, NOW’s attempts to control the black vote in 1969 had succeeded in breaking the historic model of minority politics that had developed through bloc voting. But NOW’s efforts had largely stopped there failed to extend to the level of sophistication evident in Cooper’s campaign strategy of 1972. Black Mobilians had still to gain experience in the organisation and selection of independent candidates for municipal office although three Africans Americans from Mobile were elected to the Alabama House of representatives in 1974: LeFlore, Gary Cooper, and Cain J. Kennedy. Unlike in Prichard, Mobile’s blacks had made no attempts to put forward such candidates for municipal elections during the 1960s. NOW’s disappearance from local civil rights activism however, restored the influence of the older organisations in Mobile. In 1975, one year before LeFlore’s death, the NPVL launched its last major court case concerning racial discrimination in the class-action suit, \textit{Wiley Bolden v. The City of Mobile}.\textsuperscript{13}

Since 1911, Mobile had elected its three-member commission through an ‘at-large’ method of voting. In an at-large system, all voters elect all the potential candidates for

\begin{enumerate}
\item[Ibid., 4-5.]
\item Other plaintiffs in the case included NPVL members: Reverend R. L. Hope, Charles Johnson, Janet LeFlore, John L. LeFlore, Ossie B. Purifoy, Raymond Scott, Reverend Ed Williams and Mrs. F.C. Wilson, F. Douglas Richardson, \textit{Genesis and Exodus of NOW}, 167.
\end{enumerate}
government and not by individual districts or representatives from those districts. The cost to minority voting was particularly heavy since this system diluted the black percentage of the vote by preventing the creation of majority black districts which could then elect its own black candidates. Over the course of the century, a pattern had developed in Mobile where at-large voting had enabled white majority voters to neutralise concentrations of black population in the districts. In any election, whites could simply 'out-vote' blacks and render the success of a minority candidate virtually impossible since the black share of the total vote was not counted by individual district.\(^{14}\) Mobile was one of many Southern cities which operated the at-large voting system. In Shreveport, Louisiana a local group called Blacks United for Lasting Leadership, initiated a class-action suit which charged that this system was unconstitutional in terms of intent and application running contrary to the provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. In April, 1974 black plaintiffs in the case stipulated that the city's voting methods firstly, diluted the strength of racial minorities and therefore also violated the equal protection of the laws clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and, secondly, denied such persons the right to vote on account of race. They proposed an injunction to prohibit further at-large elections urging the defendants to submit a plan for five-member districts. The latter party requested that the complaint be dismissed on the grounds that the city of Shreveport was not a 'person' to be charged by a local group of blacks who were neither qualified electors of the city nor proper class representatives.\(^{15}\)

Despite the filing of the defendant's final brief on June 1, 1976, Louisiana's district court delivered the following decision which gave the green light for African Americans elsewhere to put forward a similar legal challenge:

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\text{...we find that the evidence and applicable law support only one conclusion: that the commission-council form of municipal government in Shreveport, requiring at-large elections of all commissioners, within the framework of facts and circumstances peculiar to this city, operates impermissably [sic] to dilute the minority voting strength of black electors. Members of this class have "less opportunity than [do] other residents in the [city] to participate in the political process and to elect legislators of their choice."}^{16}
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\(^{15}\) City of Shreveport v. Blacks United for Lasting Leadership report by the NPVL, April-June 1976, Series I: Casework, box 1, file 4, NPVL Records, 1-3.

\(^{16}\) Opinion of Judge Ben C. Dawkins, June 19, 1976, Ibid.
Like Mobile, Shreveport was the second largest city in the state and had adopted the at-large voting system in 1910. However, the latter was also one of the few larger cities to which federal registrars were assigned under Section 6 of the Voting Rights Act to bring about compliance with the law. The case was also of particular significance to other large urban areas due to the demographic and institutional polarisation of its African American population. Shreveport had the highest index of racial segregation in housing across 109 cities and ninety per-cent of its black citizens lived in census tracts of eighty-five per cent black or more. The move to a district-by-district system of elections offered the potential of returning minority candidates. 17

On account of *Bolden v. The City of Mobile*, United States District Judge Virgil Pittman reviewed Mobile’s record in electing its commissioners and declared the system unconstitutional. 18 A class-action suit almost identical to the Shreveport one, *Bolden* however, was also supported by a number of leading white citizens: former commissioner, Langan, Melton McLaurin a member of the faculty at the University of South Alabama and local attorneys, James Blacksher, Larry Menefee and Gregory Stein. 19 Langan and McLaurin both offered evidence in defence of the NPVL’s brief. Pitmann directed the city to revert to a mayor-council form with elections via local wards which would return their own representatives. This was on the basis that Mobile’s blacks were indeed heavily discriminated against as voters since no black candidate had ever been able to hold office in a city that was approximately one-quarter non-white. In 1978, the district court of appeals upheld Pitmann’s order and acknowledged that proof of intent to discriminate was necessary under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. 20

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17 Ibid, 7; In 1971, the *Mobile Press* reported that ninety-five percent of the city’s African Americans lived in segregated neighbourhoods according to a survey completed by the NPVL. The population of 1970, according to the Census Bureau, was 190,025 of which roughly sixty-four per cent were white and thirty-five per cent were black, March 10, 1971.


Following a rehearing after the city of Mobile appealed in October 1979, Pitmann's other bench members did not share his view when the case was decided on April 22, 1980. A majority in the Supreme Court disagreed with his opinion arguing that '[The Constitution] does not entail the right to have Negro candidates elected'. The import of this statement being that just because some Mobile whites favoured a commission plan which had kept blacks out of government, this in itself did not require an overhaul of the system. Justices Thurgood Marshall and William J. Brennan, Jr. denounced the court's ruling since it appeared to represent a retreat from earlier voting cases which had dealt with racial discrimination. As far as blacks and civil rights groups were concerned, the decision was a blow to efforts to reform Mobile's racially-biased elections. The ramifications however were very important. Elsewhere, African Americans were elected very quickly in municipalities which had switched voluntarily or by court order to the ward-by-ward election. The Supreme Court's decision in Mobile influenced four cities in Mississippi which initiated court cases to preserve their at-large system.

Yet black Mobilians were finally able to make an historic break with past tradition in 1985 when the city elected its first African Americans to the commission since Reconstruction. In the wake of Pitmann's positive ruling in *Bolden*, the city decided to hold an open referendum whereby citizens could choose a new form of government. Led by the Mobile County Legislative Delegation, the referendum was held on June 7, 1983. The proposed bill offered a city with a population of 200,452 two options of government: the mayor-council and the council manager. Representative Mary Zoghby, head of the County Delegation said that the bill would also try 'to keep the districts balanced' ranging in size from 27,746 to 29,420. When the terms of the incumbent commissioners, Lambert Mims, Gray Greenough and Robert Doyle ended in 1985 Mobile had moved to the mayor-council format. African Americans, Irmatean Watson (Mobile's only female commissioner), Charles Tunstall and Reverend Clinton Johnson, were returned from Districts 1-3 respectively in the City Council elections held on July 30, 1985 while Arthur

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23 ‘City Government Bill Drafted,’ *Mobile Register*, June 1, 1983.
Outlaw (white), became the first mayor to be elected under the new system to a 7-member council.\textsuperscript{24}

Politics aside, the Mobile County school desegregation challenge continued to mar race relations in the 1970s. In 1969, the local press reported that Toulminville High had been beset by arson attacks, adverse court rulings and student unrest leading to damage estimated at $7,000 to $8,000. Despite the school board’s plans to construct a new building at an estimated cost of $2.5 million, Judge Thomas Daniels decided to block such plans until the former was able to devise a suitable plan to redraw school districts in order to achieve racial balance.\textsuperscript{25} Daniel’s new decree of March 1969 required the advice of experts from the department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) in the preparation of such a plan upon which according to Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Cranford Burns, the court had removed

\begin{quote}
'all freedom-of-choice in Mobile County and required attendance areas in all grades throughout the entire system...and call [ed] for another complete reorganization of our entire school system.'\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

The Board failed to act decisively in light of these pressures and singled out the issue of forced bussing as the major problem. Only after Thomas threatened fines did the commissioners yield to the court’s order.\textsuperscript{27} Local press reports were then able to claim that school desegregation in Mobile was completed once freedom of choice had been replaced by attendance zones and widespread transfers were used to achieve racial balance. The result was that seventy-one integrated schools and only nine all-black and five all-white schools now constituted the system.\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[24] The predominantly black District 1 comprised Toulminville, Trinity Gardens and Crichton, District 2 on the north side included Davis Avenue and District 3 on the south side included LeFlore’s childhood haunt, Down the Bay and Maysville, Richardson, Genesis and Exodus of NOW, 168.
\item[26] Mobile Press, July 9, 1969.
\item[27] Mobile Press, March 18 and July 11, 1969.
\end{footnotes}
In 1972, however, Toulminville High's Parent Teacher Association sent a letter to the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department requesting that it investigate the Mobile County Board's disastrous efforts to close down predominantly black inner-city schools and relocate them in majority white areas and its use of bussing to place black pupils into white schools without a reciprocal bussing of whites into black communities. Even Murphy High, the first previously all-white public school to be integrated in Alabama in 1963, was the site of considerable racial strife. In November 1971, the NPVL reported that sixty-nine of Murphy's black students had been recently suspended without due reason, the cause of which was suspected discrimination in the school's disciplinary policies. In a system which was responsible for approximately 76,000 pupils, such problems seriously undermined efforts to institute a workable plan for desegregation. Previously in October, 1971 4,000 whites had marched in protest of that year's 'massive' desegregation of public schools. However, new Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Harold R. Collins had been far more optimistic in a local press interview and promised to see that the court orders did not hamper the quality of educational provision in his new constituency.

The crux of the problem continued to be the absence of black representatives in the Mobile County School Board whose members were also elected by the at-large method. At the same time as the Bolden suit, the NPVL initiated another case aimed specifically at the county commission and school board. In Brown v. Moore (1975), League lawyers contested the constitutionality of the elections which returned officials to these local government institutions. Although unsuccessful at first, the courts eventually ruled in their favour and ordered that candidates for each institution be elected by district instead of at-large. In 1978, two African Americans, Dr. Robert W. Gilliard and Norman Cox

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30 LeFlore to Dr. Harold R. Collins, November 2, 1971, box 6, file 53, NPVL Records.


were duly elected to a 5-member County Board of School Commissioners and in 1980, the first black Mobilian was elected to the 3-member Mobile County Commission.33

Although the future for school desegregation in Mobile looked brighter after these developments but in the 1970s, progress was still very patchy. In 1971, the Birdie Mae Davies case was still far from being settled and many changes had yet to be made by the Board. In an effort to end the prolonged litigation of the 1960s, school commissioners submitted a comprehensive plan to create a unitary school system in time for the 1973-74 academic year. Student assignments, faculty and staff transfers, transportation, school construction and extra-curricular activities were some of the main features of the plan. Underpinning its potential however, was the use of forced bussing to meet the guidelines for integration set out by the HEW and the courts. Two press articles in 1974 appeared to cast a shadow over this plan. Four students were seriously injured during an outbreak of racial violence at the previously all-white, Theodore High School. Many hoped that the Mobile County school system would not continue to suffer such conflict and urged that all citizens make a concerted effort to prevent it. In another article, Birdie Mae Davis, now a mother herself was interviewed. Her comments were surprising

'I feel that in the past ten years, there has been a relaxing of tension between the two races...I think people have just come to accept the idea they have to go to certain schools.'34

Results did not come easily even though the Board implemented the last in the series of court decrees affecting its jurisdiction in 1974. Mobile’s public schools, however, remained under the threat of further litigation for decades to come. In fact, Birdie Mae Davis is the longest school desegregation case in American history still to be concluded by the courts.35

What emerges from an assessment of race relations in the city since the climax of the Civil Rights movement is that Mobilians had made uneven progress. But on reflection, in

33 Mobile Civic Index, op. cit., 102.
the six decades since the re-organisation of the local NAACP chapter in 1925, they had also made tremendous advances which would have appeared impossible during the rise in racial proscription at the turn of the century which followed the failure of Reconstruction. In June 1970, twelve years after Seals was charged with the rape of a white woman and the NPVL’s arduous commitment to his legal defence began, Willie Seals, Jr. was finally released from prison upon having his conviction quashed by Mobile Circuit Court Judge William D. Bolling. LeFlore scored both a public and personal victory with this event, his faith in the justice system vindicated when Seals’ wrongful conviction was upheld by the courts.36

Perhaps the most significant indication of the extent to which black and white Mobilians themselves had experienced racial progress during this period, lies in their personal recollections. Former commissioner, Langan interviewed in 1996, believed that good or bad, Mobile had always possessed a different outlook toward race in which extreme dislike between the two groups was lacking. After appointing LeFlore to the Housing Board, Langan felt that the former was able to bring many changes to African-American housing in that capacity. Ossie Purifoy added that in Mobile, some blacks simply were not interested in the Civil Rights movement or what it represented. In fact, when the city helped the LeFlore family to move to a new house after the bomb attack, this made many African Americans view Mobile itself as a better place than most. John Randolph, former NPVL treasurer echoed Purifoy’s sentiments confirming that LeFlore had many white friends without whom he simply could not have accomplished so much.37 In 1985, almost a decade after LeFlore’s death a political revolution had taken place in his city. This was a revolution he had pioneered and one which he personally experienced upon election to the Alabama House of Representatives in 1974. When interviewed in 1970, LeFlore stated that ‘just twenty years ago black people were not permitted to take city and county civil service examinations’ yet now, Mobile had the most black police officers of all Alabama cities.38 Even Mobile’s most ardent critic of race relations, Fred Richardson, in his conclusion to The Genesis and Exodus of NOW admitted that real progress had been made in his city claiming


38 Transcript, LeFlore interviewed by McLaurin, op. cit., 66.
'From 1978 to 1994, we have witnessed a political revolution. The word “revolution”, derived from the word “revolve” or...a “complete change”. Certainly for a political system [in Mobile] which denied African Americans and women the basic right to participate, from 1702 until 1985...we must conclude a revolution has occurred.'

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the Civil Rights struggle in Alabama’s second largest urban area. Certain assumptions concerning this era in Southern race relations have proved to be irrelevant to Mobile, a port-city which defies conventional categorisation within the vast historiography of the topic. The interplay between race, class and a limited application of citizenship rights, lay at the core of the freedom struggle in Mobile. Its outward manifestation prior to the late 1960s bore the important hallmarks of autonomy, moderation and cultural distinctiveness. Beginning with the formation of the NAACP’s network of Southern branches at the turn of the century, black protest in Mobile experienced a long gestation prior to the birth of the modern Civil Rights movement. Within that period, a leadership class of relatively affluent, educated black Mobilians gained control of the battle against the political economy of Jim Crow racial discrimination. Early elite efforts towards racial uplift were modest but based upon sound legal principles, organised protest and Booker T. Washington’s model of racial accommodation. After surviving the economic shock of the Depression, black Mobilians were able to take unprecedented steps forward during the nation’s mobilisation for World War II, an event which also transformed Alabama’s municipalities by launching them into a path of modernisation and expansion.

In post-war Mobile, racial confrontation and violence characteristic of the movement in other Southern cities was delayed by moderate civil rights leadership, liberal whites, the Catholic establishment’s involvement in race relations and the cohesive nature of organised black protest until 1968. In the post-Civil Rights era, however, Black Power politics overturned decades of elite efforts to improve racial conditions in the city at a stroke. Split along class and ideological lines, African-American protest never regained its unity in the battle against racial discrimination thereafter. But by the 1980s, the fruits of the Second Reconstruction and the perseverance of one man in particular, John L. LeFlore, finally became visible in Mobile. Black Mobilians had finally overcome the limitations previously imposed upon them. They had forced the integration of public schools, were free to walk in any part of the city, served on juries, cast votes and stood as candidates in county and municipal elections, and took up employment in the police force and in local government. Such political and economic gains for a racial minority which had suffered the humiliation and discrimination of second-class citizenship since the
demise of Reconstruction in the South, would have been virtually unthinkable prior to World War II.

Analysis of the Southern Civil Rights movement has tended to portray the 1950s and 1960s as an era of radicalism in African-American protest which had its roots in the New Deal and World War II eras. The bus boycott and other direct-action strategies were deployed with success in the South’s major cities bestowing upon them, according to sociologist, Aldon Morris, the title of ‘movement centres’. In these urban centres of civil rights protest mobilisation blacks used economic and political pressure to force important concessions from whites, most notably in the field of transportation and in employment. These concessions were often reluctantly granted by white authorities following bitter racial confrontation and violent responses from the defenders of segregation. Alabama itself was home to two of these centres: Montgomery and Birmingham. Moreover, both cities were important intersection points where the national and local Civil Rights movements merged to spectacular effect. To speak of Mobile as a movement centre would be inaccurate for the city’s blacks did not conform to the classic characteristics of such centres. Yet to ignore the struggle in a city without a Bull Connor or a Rosa Parks to fuel the events which made this era the source of much media and historical attention, would also severely limit our understanding of the local complexity of the Second Reconstruction.

This study has tried to assess Mobile’s racial past in light of the unique cultural heritage which shaped the city throughout its long history. A very important aspect of this was the complexity of the black and white people who lived in the state’s seaport. Several accounts of race relations in Mobile have attached special reference to the spirit of harmony and peaceful co-operation that existed despite the disfranchisement of black Mobilians at the turn of the century, the rise of Jim Crow segregation and the violent scenes which accompanied the Civil Rights movement in many other localities. White Mobilians did not regularly engage in the more brutal and crude forms of Southern racism despite the brief resurgence in Klan activity during the 1920s and 1950s, and the ADDSCO riot of 1943, the causes of which were rooted more in the responses of newcomers to Mobile rather than from the native white population. Indeed, the early Mobile NAACP branch conducted investigations of lynchings usually outside of the city

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and county and the last suspected Klan-related lynching in Mobile itself, was that of Rafe Clemmons in 1919. Roman Catholic influence in Mobile was deep-rooted and preserved in the form of educational institutions and in daily worship. The presence of this Catholic minority diluted somewhat the religious and racial perspectives of native white Mobilians. From slavery onwards, Catholics in Mobile, though not racial liberals at any point in the modern sense of the term, nonetheless represented a moderating influence in terms of race, an influence that would grow to maturity with the election of Mobile’s first Catholic city commissioner in 1953, Joseph Langan. Similar to Montgomery’s Jews, Mobile’s Catholics did not always tow the line in racial matters. The voluntary desegregation of Spring Hill College in 1955 was symbolic of the diversity which informed white Mobilians’ responses to changes in race relations. Joe Langan’s period of office contrasted sharply with that of other Alabama legislators. He courageously aided blacks when many whites would not have dared to do so not least because of the potential political costs but, particularly after 1954, also due to the heavy burdens imposed by racial conservative upon such liberals. That Langan was removed by militant blacks in Mobile only served to prove that few generalisations about the Second Reconstruction in this city can ever be made by historians.

Blacks in Mobile were more privileged in certain respects compared to the predominantly rural African American population of Alabama prior to World War II. Within a class structure that mirrored the larger white society, this racial minority in Mobile enjoyed the freedoms offered by urban life in the Jim Crow South. Despite limited educational opportunities, a small, but significant middle-class stratum of black Mobile was able to assume the burden of leading their race in the quest for political and economic betterment. Espousing the racial uplift theories of their day, this class ultimately dominated black protest for the majority of the 20th century conducting the struggle for racial equality within a deferential and highly legalistic tone that strongly appealed to whites. But unlike middle-class blacks elsewhere, they did not turn toward the radicalism which informed the founding of the SCLC in 1957. Nor were they open to the shifting ideological currents which underpinned the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Focused mainly upon the NAACP’s assimilationist model of black progress within the larger American polity, Mobile’s civil rights leaders, and in particular, John LeFlore, rigidly adhered to the principle of organised, legal efforts to eradicate racial discrimination. During the climax of racial confrontation in Alabama in the 1960s, LeFlore led the civil rights struggle in his city within the guise of a moderate race leader. The bitterness, disillusionment and
mistrust which informed black and white responses in Birmingham was not readily apparent in Mobile. In the latter city, black protest had yet to break from its long period of ideological continuity since the founding of the NAACP branch in 1919 through to its eventual outlawing by the state in 1956 which led to the emergence of the NPVL.

The theme of continuity was both Mobile’s major asset and handicap in the decade of the 1960s. Despite the economic downturn of the Depression years, outbursts of racial conflict during World War II, and the political repression of black civil rights activities in Alabama following the Supreme Court decision to order the integration of public schools, those involved in pursuing racial reforms in Mobile demonstrated a remarkable level of tenacity. When the NAACP was replaced by the NPVL in 1956, black protest expanded steadily in Mobile but was nonetheless resistant to the more radical efforts being made elsewhere to promote the cause of civil rights. Contained within a formal institutional structure dominated by middle-class black males, the NPVL was one of Alabama’s most dynamic and active of local civil rights groups yet, its contribution to the Second Reconstruction has been virtually ignored by historians. Its dynamism as an organisation was implicit in its autonomy from the regional confederation of protest activities coordinated by the SCLC. Its ability to cover a huge number of cases dealing with race discrimination was confirmed in many areas: public school desegregation, the jury system, federal and private employment, voting, police brutality and a myriad of other issues affecting the lives of black Mobilians. By 1985, the NVPL had been active for nearly thirty-five years. In 1975, the organisation was also the leading force reforming Mobile’s municipal system to aid the greater inclusion of African Americans.

Yet the NPVL could not have achieved what it did without the sheer persistence, commitment and determination of one man: LeFlore. From relatively humble origins, this postal employee emerged as the city’s civil rights pioneer after World War II. He guided Mobile’s black protest movement through all its highs and lows until his death in 1976. During most of that time, he earned an unparalleled degree of respect from whites as well as blacks. That the local Civil Rights movement in Mobile survived during the 1950s and 1960s was largely due to LeFlore’s ability to convince whites that they had nothing to fear from him nor the NPVL and what it stood for.² Behind a mask of respectability, the League’s public aims were stated in every letterhead used by LeFlore in his often

² Richardson, Tape LF-19, Mobile’s Civil Rights Pioneer.
painstaking and, at times, frustrating battles to open up economic opportunities to his race: 'FREEDOM COMES TO THOSE WHO EARN IT' was the motto etched upon every sheet of paper used for carrying out official NPVL business. Nowhere in the NPVL's political language did LeFlore project the bitterness and racial hostility with which some blacks framed their leadership of the struggle. To whites, he appeared as the ultimate black representative and racial intermediary: one who was proud to be an American and proud to be a 'servant of the people'.\(^3\) His faith in the legal system's power to reconstruct American society upon colour-blind principles was fully in tune with the gradualist path that many white liberals believed to be the only non-violent way to achieve equality for blacks. By eschewing direct-action and militant posturing in his career, he typified an old guard black civil rights visionary who did not value this method of producing results. In it he saw the potential for violent white backlash, the loss of 'good whites' who were willing to risk their lives and political fortunes for the higher goal of extending democratic participation to all citizens. Moreover, he feared that it would undo all that had already been achieved by African Americans in Mobile since the rise of Jim Crow segregation.\(^4\)

For the above reasons, Mobile may have avoided the psychological and material costs associated with the violent and bitter periods of racial confrontation that besieged Birmingham, Selma, Anniston and Tuscaloosa. Yet the city was by no means as integrated or as socially unified as media images had suggested in the 1960s. LeFlore and his ally in the city's white establishment did not represent a true cross-section of the Mobilians they took liberty to speak on behalf of. The Bi-Racial Commission of 1956 and its successor, the Special Advisory Commission of 1963, were, in the context of Alabama's racial past, novel experiments which reflected the fact that since the NAACP victory in \textit{Smith}, black Mobilians had managed to help keep in power a racially moderate city commissioner through the bloc vote. These commissions were Langan's reward to those who had supported him at the polls and particularly to his long-time friend, LeFlore. Although they achieved relatively little to improve economic conditions facing blacks, they cultivated an atmosphere in which racial progress at least appeared to be in the making compared to

\(^3\) Borrowed from L. Williams' recent study of African American civil rights leadership, \textit{Servants of the People: The 1960s Legacy of African American Leadership} (Basingstoke, 1998).

\(^4\) Langan, Tape LF-1, \textit{op. cit.}
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other cities where blacks had been forced to turn to more confrontational ways to gain a fair hearing from municipal authorities.

However, it was this image of racial harmony that in fact stunted the growth of black militant, independent political action in Mobile. The city's leadership class, across the racial divide, saw no reason to abandon its gradualist path toward reform. Both LeFlore and Langan believed that Mobile had done well to avoid racial confrontation but in doing so, had also seriously miscalculated the mood of discontent that was brewing beneath the surface. LeFlore became the target of the new 'Negro Revolt' identified by Lewis Lomax in 1962. A younger generation of African American reformers, many of them from middle-class backgrounds, found the NPVL and its members too patient and too trusting of whites to grant them freedom that had already long been deferred. Ironically, it was not conservative whites who launched the political assault on Langan, but militant blacks in Mobile. Both leaders were left almost powerless in 1969 when the previously unknown local civil rights group, NOW, which espoused the ideological goals of Black Power, kept thousands of black voters away from the polls. This single event did more to overturn relations between the races than anything else in Mobile's long history. Among its many costs were the removal of a man who had placed racial issues on the local agenda since 1945, Joe Langan, the diminished status of Mobile's veteran and most respected civil rights activist, John LeFlore and the resurgence of racially conservative forces in local politics typified by Lambert Mims.

NOW's activities in Mobile on the one hand, set back decades of efforts toward racial accommodation but on the other, in the space of just one year, fundamentally broke the historic pattern of black dependency on white-controlled political and economic institutions. The 1969 election breathed new life into the way in which black voting had been conducted in Mobile largely through white intermediaries. NOW proved that there were indeed demands for a real change to the way that blacks had been systematically denied political representation in local government from the city commission through to the School Board, the County Board of Registrars and other federal institutions. by LeFlore and Mobile's black clergy had, since the World War II, perpetuated middle-class domination of civil rights leadership. In the late-1960s, newer middle-class black Mobilians aspired to claim greater autonomy in determining the quality of their lives. This

\footnote{L. Lomax, The Negro Revolt (New York, 1962).}
Conclusion

required black elected officials in the city who could represent the demands of a minority group that had suffered systematic exclusion. Token integration in public accommodations and in employment could not satisfy this class. In establishing the principle of autonomy, NOW left a lasting legacy in Mobile race relations that would yield significant benefits in the 1970s and 1980s.

During the post-revolutionary era, blacks in Mobile had much work left to do before they could truly accrue the goals of a non-racist society. That the city had experienced a relatively incomplete Civil Rights movement was borne out by the explosion of direct-action and militant grass-roots radicalism in the NOW organisation. The lack of racial confrontation in the early to mid-1960s shielded Mobile from the violence and social disruption faced by other communities but its absence also fostered an image of racial harmony that proved by and large to be a myth. Almost a quarter of a century after the landmark Supreme Court order to integrate the public schools, Mobile’s black pupils had only just begun to experience racially integrated education and only following years of protracted litigation which continued beyond the chronology covered by this thesis. While the number of black voters had expanded steadily since the 1940s, Mobile had to wait a long time before an African American was elected to the city commission. While other localities had black mayors and elected officials (a trend significantly aided by the impact of the 1965 Voting Rights Act), it was only after further litigation that an African American commissioner was finally elected in Mobile in 1985.

In terms of the actual goals of the Civil Rights movement, the revolution in race relations did not truly occur in Mobile until the 1980s, two decades after the main legislative climax of the movement. The preponderance of poverty within the black community however, continued to blight the legacy of the Second Reconstruction as it did elsewhere in the nation. Welfare dependency, high youth unemployment and inequalities in incomes between blacks and whites afflicted certain sections of contemporary black Mobile. However, when judged against the racial situation which LeFlore had tackled through the early NAACP branch in the 1920s, remarkable progress had been achieved by African Americans in his city, proving beyond doubt that black agency was an important contrast between the First and Second Reconstructions.6

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6 A point made by C. Vann Woodward, already cited on p.3 of this study.
Yet many questions still remain unanswered about the Second Reconstruction in Mobile. The role of women, the legacy of Black Power and the different responses of white citizens to the racial problems in their city still need further elaboration. One major drawback has been the lack of sources for such topics. Mobile was one of America's most conservative and European-style cities for much of this century. Class, privilege and cultural traditions may have restrained many women (black as well as white) from fully participating in the movement, compared to the significant involvement of this group elsewhere in the state and in Mississippi. Archives have not proved very useful in explaining why participation among women was so low and for what reasons. This is an area in which oral history may help during future publication of the thesis. Coverage of the Black Power era in this study has been largely dependent upon the sources of the AFSC and it, therefore, remains only a partial analysis until the FBI releases its files on NOW and its jailed former leader, Noble Beasley, to scholars. It is very difficult to generalise about white Mobilians at any point in this period. Religion and class have certainly been important in shaping their responses to the demands of the Civil Rights movement in the South but, what is not readily explainable, is why so many native white Mobilians did not vent their frustrations more forcefully in any area concerning race relations other than the integration of the public schools. Intransigence among whites of varying socio-economic backgrounds elsewhere, gave civil rights activists a moral and emotional rallying point which ultimately aided the destruction of Jim Crow segregation. This never happened in Mobile. Whether that was a good or bad result in the long-term, can only be assessed when sufficient time has past since the entry of blacks into municipal and state government from Mobile.
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