

57. Ibid., 21.
 58. "Business in Bronzeville," 70.
 59. Ibid., 72.
 60. Thompson, *Kings*, 156, 160, 161.
 61. Ibid., 162.
 62. "Business in Bronzeville," 72.
 63. Thompson, *Kings*, 163.
 64. Ibid., 126.
 65. Ibid., 160; "Business in Bronzeville," 71.
 66. Thompson, *Kings*, 141.
 67. "Chicago: Money Capital of Negro America," *Our World* 6 (September 1951): 15.
 68. Ibid., 15, 16, 19.
 69. Thompson, *Kings*, 331–34.
 70. Harris, *The Negro as Capitalist*, 195.
 71. Elijah Wald, *Riding with Strangers: A Hitchhiker's Journey* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2006), 206.
 72. On the boycott of Fuller's company, see John H. Johnson, *Succeeding against the Odds: The Autobiography of a Great American Businessman* (New York: Amistad Press, 1992), 129.
 73. Ben Burns, *Nitty Gritty: A White Editor in Black Journalism* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 166–68.
 74. Robert E. Weems Jr., *Business in Black and White: American Presidents and Black Entrepreneurs in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 74, 127, 217.
 75. "Billion Dollar Businessman Dave Steward Shares Success Secrets," Carolyn M. Brown, accessed December 19, 2016, at <http://www.blackenterprise.com/small-business/billion-dollar-businessman-dave-steward-shares-success-secrets/>; "BE 100s 2014," accessed December 19, 2016, at <http://www.blackenterprise.com/lists/be-100s-2014/>.
 76. "Best Places for Black-Owned Businesses," Jonathan Todd, accessed December 19, 2016, at <http://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/small-business/best-places-for-black-owned-businesses/>.
 77. Spear, *Black Chicago*, 226.
 78. Black, *Bridges of Memory*, vol. 2, unnumbered photograph captioned "Woodson's Shoe Store."

CHAPTER 1

Early Black Chicago Entrepreneurial and Business Activities from the Frontier Era to the Great Migration

The Nexus of Circumstance and Initiative

CHRISTOPHER ROBERT REED

I have frequently consulted with many of our leading citizens and well-thinking people upon the great need of a work of this kind, and they have earnestly admitted with one accord that a directory of the business, professions and prominent occupations of the enterprising colored people in the city of Chicago would be a work of vast importance, and a reliable medium of authoritative information, while its many advantages would be highly appreciated by all lovers of our race progress . . .

—Isaac C. Harris, *Colored Men's Business Directory*, 1885

To the credit of black initiative and indomitability of spirit, early black Chicago's entrepreneurial and business evolution proceeded along a parallel, yet somewhat submerged, track with the city's overall economic growth and development. This was the case even though black business operations in a frontier setting scarcely forecast the twentieth century's partially realized "Dream of the Black Metropolis," where African Americans exerted some control over their residential and commercial district. Nevertheless, black Chicagoans' nineteenth-century entrepreneurial pursuits served as a bridge and precursor to more accelerated commercial activity during the next millennium.

Chicago's pre-Civil War Era featured incipient African American entrepreneurial pursuits along with established business operations. Black initiative produced and thrived at a time when Chicago accelerated its transformation from a "home

market" to a metropolitan economy. As historian Bessie Louise Pierce described this process, Chicago's *town economy*, based upon the coming of the railroads at midcentury, became an *economy of the city*.¹ Existing businesses rested on a base of entrepreneurship and acquisition that reflected the quickening activities of the market revolution. With early black Chicagoans embracing the entrepreneurial and business spirit pervading the nation, white hostility seemed surmountable in this sphere as compared to the area of wage employment where racial constraints restricted black pursuit of material stability.

Despite the odds facing a group held in low esteem and legally recognized bondage nationally, African Americans in Chicago entered fields most readily accessible, such as barbering and personal upkeep. In fact, they operated (and possibly owned) two of the three bathhouses in the city by 1842, while Nelson P. Perry provided spirited entertainment on his violin for "assemblies, balls, and parties."² Importantly, an accompanying pattern of business involvement emerged beyond such scattered examples as Abram T. Hall, who owned the first black-owned barbershop by 1844, or the grocer O. G. Hanson, who amicably extended the entrepreneurial John Jones family credit of \$2 to ensure their survival when they arrived in the city in 1845. J. W. Norris's *General Directory*, an early combined business list and census, listed four other African American barbers in antebellum Chicago: Oliver C. Henson, John Dixon, Henry Knight, and John Johnson.³

Horse-drawn wagons, carts, carriages, or stagecoaches kept mid-nineteenth-century Chicago moving, both inside and outside its borders. While primitively conquering space and time, these conveyances prevented the complete social isolation of Chicago's African American residents. The livery stable business afforded the entrepreneurial Harry Knight the distinction of operating the largest in the city in 1852.⁴ Entrepreneur Isaac Atkinson began operating his own stagecoach business by 1858, carrying passengers over fewer and fewer muddy streets and ground-level debris as plank roads miraculously made their appearance. In fact, one late nineteenth-century recollection claimed that "in the early 50's Isaac Atkinson ran a bus which was a rival of Parmalee (the leading transporter of people)."⁵ Constituting an essential cog in the fledgling town's transportation network, Atkinson clearly demonstrated that blacks with daring were not to be totally restrained in their quest for economic advancement.

Hauling and distributing Lake Michigan water to the city's residents afforded Isom Artis a comfortable livelihood.⁶ Lake water provided Chicagoans a healthier supply than the polluted water from the Chicago River, filled as it was with debris of all types. Artis and other water haulers became known as water men, taking their two-wheeled carts to the foot of the lake at Randolph Street and filling barrels from pails with nature's thirst-quenching nectar. By 1842, the water men faced their first major competition as the Chicago Hydraulic Company began its operations.⁷

Early cattle keeping appeared on the city's periphery, at Thirty-First Street on the south, and Fifth Avenue and Crawford on the far west, a precedent to Chicago's later lucrative livestock industry. An unnamed, yet documented, African American demonstrated his business astuteness in this realm during the early 1850s. Boldly settling with his family away from the crowded city in the vicinity of Racine (then Ann Street) and Lake Street on the city's somewhat isolated West Side, this ambitious African American herded perhaps as many as several dozen cattle.⁸ The patriarch of the family had lived an unusual life under bondage in Kentucky. He had been trusted to drive his master's cattle alone into free territory, negotiate the sale, and return to his wife and children with the master's portion of the sale. He eventually bought his own and his family's freedom and settled in 1854 on the western boundary of Chicago.

The most successful and highly publicized African American entrepreneur during this period was "John Jones[, who] conducted his business so well that he was able to purchase important property, including the location at 119 Dearborn Street—now occupied by a prominent Chicago department store—where he set up a merchant tailoring establishment."⁹ His worth was listed as being at least \$10,000 by 1860, and by the time of the Great Fire of 1871 it had possibly reached an estimated \$85,000 to \$100,000.¹⁰ As the city's leading black businessman, Jones assumed the mantle of civic and political leadership, as well. He guided the legal fight to end the Illinois Black Codes in March 1865 and became the first African American to be elected to a municipal office in Illinois history in 1872. As a Cook County commissioner, he served two terms in office as Chicago recovered from the conflagration of the previous year.

As post-Civil War Chicago moved into the Gilded Age of the 1880s and 1890s, both white and black enterprises experienced business growth and development. To be sure, the growth and financial successes of black businesses was diminutive when contrasted with the city's economic "Big Three" of merchandiser Marshall Field, meat-packer Philip Armour, and hotelier Potter Palmer. The fact emerged that while white Chicago was developing within its leadership structure a highly discernible upper class based on wealth accruing from impressive gains in both commercial and industrial production, Black Chicago was prevented from building a comparable wellspring for economic advancement. Nonetheless, the proportional growth of Black Chicago commercial enterprises following the Civil War clearly attested to African American entrepreneurial and business vigor, perseverance, and acumen. This awareness prompted Marsha Freeman Edmond, whose correspondence from the period of 1885–89 was later published in a 1930s *Chicago Tribune* series, to write contemporaneously that "dawn has come for the Negro here. When I hear people complain because their progress economically is slow, I feel rather impatient, for it seems to me that, on the contrary, they have accomplished a great

deal in the twenty-five years since emancipation. In spite of the heavy handicap of poverty and lack of education, there are many of the race who are property owners. Some of the Negroes of the city are quite prosperous."¹¹

In a city basking in the reflected glory of its growing industrial might, the exclusion of African Americans from the manufacturing sector by the 1890s relegated blacks to an economic position of both circumscribed opportunity and limited expectations. This condition persisted despite a perceived prosperity in the eyes of some observers like Marsha Freeman Edmond. Moreover, the potential for Chicago African Americans to amass a fortune through meat-packing, steel production, transportation, or merchandising existed only in the realm of the impossible.

In this restricted economic environment, African Americans, in pursuit of wealth, labored either as employees of others or as small-scale entrepreneurs or businessmen. Of the 14,271 Black Chicago residents enumerated in the 1890 census, 8,080 held employment in the following areas, along with their percentage as part of the city's total working population: domestic and personal service, 4,972 (34%); manufacturing and mechanical, 1,376 (1.9%); trade, 474 (1.3%); transportation and communication, 395 (2.2%); clerical services, 133 (0.4%); professional services, 115 (1.3%); public services, 48 (1.6%); and, agriculture, 7 (2.2%). Five hundred and sixty workers were listed as unclassified workers. Of the total black workforce, 61.5 percent earned their living in the area of domestic and personal services.

Strategically, the city's black entrepreneurs began to focus on the notion of promoting a group economy, in a similar manner to how other groups in America had accomplished their goals. Once again, conditions for success in the North exceeded those in the South with its legal and customary constraints.¹² Moreover, as Chicago's black population grew in both size and consciousness, it was accompanied by an increasing commitment to an ideology of intraracial support for community businesses. In fact, contrary to the popular notion that blacks did not support their own businesses during this period, a major piece of contemporary evidence in Chicago shows otherwise. The following observation, which appeared in Isaac C. Harris's 1885 *Colored Men's Business Directory*, attested to this growing tradition: "There seems to be a great degree of race pride, inspiring the better class with an inordinate desire to see each other succeed in whatever pursuit they may perchance engage in. This fact is demonstrated in many instances by the large patronage and co-operation which they received from one another, it being occasionally sufficient enough to support different branches of business where the trade is entirely colored."¹³

Proponents of racial solidarity and self-help were found not only among businesspersons themselves and a portion of the masses, but also among the ranks of the clergy, as well as community and elite civic leaders. As reported in the December 18, 1886, edition of the *Conservator*, "Is there race pride? Then patronize those

that patronize the race. Go buy where they invite you through your *own* newspapers [emphasis added]."¹⁴

An additional set of circumstances, which affected African American work and wage earning, increased entrepreneurship's allure among blacks. Because of blatant racism, black workers earned their living outside the industrial sphere, so a sense of labor consciousness and workers' solidarity was less likely to be nurtured. Moreover, in the spheres of work, family, and friends, self-employment carried a heightened status and mobility unachievable by the worker whose work was tightly regimented. Entrepreneurship made one truly a master over individual exertions and creativity, and this type of freedom appealed to a group of people whose collective history featured their forced labor for others. Thus, by 1885, Black Chicago counted 110 businesses, with 46 located in the retail sector and 64 in service-related areas.¹⁵

One early sector of Black Chicago business activity, the print industry, provided uneven financial benefits to its pioneering entrepreneurs. Yet local African American newspapers and directories ultimately provided a major catalyst for business formation.

When Ferdinand L. Barnett launched Chicago's first African American newspaper, the *Conservator*, in 1878, he believed this initiative provided a modicum of financial opportunity. With a growing base of subscribers and readers, he believed this venture could be potentially profitable. Yet the *Conservator* became a financial challenge that prompted Barnett to return full-time to his law practice and pension cases, where greater financial success existed.¹⁶

In 1885, entrepreneur and businessman Isaac Counsellor Harris, seeking to capitalize from growing black pride and growing black entrepreneurship compiled and published Black Chicago's first business directory, *The Colored Men's Professional and Business Directory*. As the most significant publication since the establishment of the *Conservator*, it represented a newer, more energized promotion of entrepreneurial and business success. Harris, in compiling his directory, observed that Chicago's most assertive, enterprising, and successful African Americans achieved through their own efforts and deserved attention because "none were to the manor born."¹⁷

By the late nineteenth century, as chronicled in *The Colored Men's Professional and Business Directory*, the diverse ways that Chicago blacks were accumulating wealth had expanded greatly from the pre-Civil War era. African Americans had now moved into such areas as real estate, retail furniture, undertaking, catering, saloon ownership, and the professions. Lewis Bates, who arrived unheralded in the city as a fugitive slave during the Civil War, went on to amass a small fortune in real estate. Uneducated after an early life of uncompensated toil, but determined to achieve the utmost in life, Bates moved steadily upward in his quest for wealth production.

He first toiled in a foundry under the direction of others; then he worked independently as an express man, delivering essential items in a society hungering for the goods necessary to meet its rising consumer needs.¹⁸ He became known for "his excellent judgment, and nearly all his investments are gilt-edged." As chronicled by historian Rayford W. Logan, Lewis Bates, "a former slave in North Carolina lived alone in a dingy room at 400 Dearborn Street . . . [while he] amassed a fortune of some \$500,000 through shrewd real-estate dealings. One of his holdings was 'an elegant, new seven-story pressed-brick and terra cotta apartment house worth \$80,000 on State Street which he rented to white tenants.'"¹⁹

The firm of Platt & Goode was a partnership run by the son of J. F. Platt, a man who had prospered in the lumber business and who, on his own, combined his talents with those of a carpenter to prosper in the furniture and lumber business.²⁰ Later, Platt Place, a street on Chicago's West Side, was named for this successful businessman.²¹

During the late nineteenth century, undertaking became an important business endeavor among Chicago blacks. George T. Kersey, a native of Chatham, Ontario, Canada, reached the city in 1888 and soon went into business with Daniel Jackson, the son of prosperous saloonkeeper Emmanuel Jackson. Later, David McGowan joined them for a brief time before Kersey and McGowan withdrew to form a partnership with another young enterprising risk-taker named Morsell.²²

The catering trade offered opportunities for African Americans, especially among the growing wealthy North Side white elite. Charles H. Smiley and his wife arrived from Virginia in 1880 and quickly established themselves as ambassadors of service par excellence. Smiley distinguished himself among black caterers during this period and into the new century, earning the sobriquet "Chicago's colored caterer" as well as "a sort of Vanderbilt with a darker hue." "No affair on the Gold Coast was considered properly cared for unless handled by the Smiley establishment."²³

The liquor business offered another avenue to obtain wealth for enterprising late nineteenth-century Chicago blacks. For instance, an August 6, 1885, *Chicago Daily News* article included the following: "you may be surprised to hear that in the liquor business alone upward of \$200,000 worth of stock and saloon fixtures are owned by Colored men. In fact, this business seems to be the best adapted of any to the abilities of the Colored man who has saved enough out of his earnings to invest in any kind of business."²⁴ One such person was Daniel "Uncle Dan" Scott, who arrived in the city in 1872 and immediately joined his brothers in the saloon business. He shrewdly converted his profits into a cartage business solely under his control. When Daniel Scott died in 1895, his worth had reportedly reached \$100,000.²⁵ Later, men such as John "Mushmouth" Johnson, Henry "Teenan" Jones, and Robert T. "Bob" Motts enhanced their successful saloons with the addition of profitable gambling activities.²⁶

Not to be overlooked was Black Chicago's professional community, which contained physicians, dentists, and lawyers. Their prominence in the operating rooms and arguing before the bench extended beyond any limitations imposed by race. Notable names included Dr. Daniel Hale Williams, the first American surgeon to successfully operate on the human heart; Dr. Charles E. Bentley, who developed such skills in dentistry as to become the "father of the dental hygiene movement" to the nation's schoolchildren; and attorney Edward H. Morris, whose legal acumen won him acceptance with some of the city's leading business firms. Attorneys Ferdinand L. Barnett and S. Laing Williams began an acquaintance at the University of Michigan that blossomed into a law partnership of some length. Breaking the glass ceiling to join the professional ranks was the nation's first black female dentist, Ida Gray Nelson, who began her practice in Chicago in 1894. The following year, Ida M. Platt became the first African American woman lawyer in Illinois.²⁷

According to 1890 census data, 61.5 percent of Black Chicagoans worked in the relatively noncompetitive areas of domestic service. Nevertheless, friction between African American workers and the city's organized labor movement remained high. Conditions were exacerbated beyond repair in 1892 when members of the supposedly color-blind Knights of Labor in Chicago endorsed the deportation of African Americans to Central Africa in an effort to reduce labor competition. The city's African American workers responded by staging a protest meeting followed by circulating a letter of indignation that attracted sizable coverage in the white press. Psychologically American to the core, Chicago's African Americans reacted with words of indignation, suggesting that "if this country is too small for the Knights of Labor and the Negro, then let the Knights leave."²⁸

In the midst of a devastating economic depression, the World's Columbian Exposition, popularly known as the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, became an economic stimulant for established businessmen as well as entrepreneurs. Interestingly, it also served as a magnet for prospective laborers who would expand the city's growing African American consumer market. Importantly, the event attracted the economically zealous who sought to become entrepreneurs. It afforded rising entrepreneurs an opportunity to make their fortunes in the next century, men such as future real-estate magnate and banker Jesse Binga.²⁹

On the cusp of a new century, black Chicago's expanding business community fulfilled the necessary functions essential to building viable community life along economic lines. Active business growth was evident up and down the lengthy South State Street Corridor. Still, an analysis of this thoroughfare during 1905 and 1906 revealed a plethora of small businesses engaged in various economic activities, but with limited capital.³⁰

Subsequent expansion along the emerging State Street Corridor reflected African Americans' continuous interest in their economic destiny. Black business acumen carved out State Street (adjacent to the Dearborn Street residential corridor),

south of Twenty-Second and extending to Thirty-Ninth Street, as the major commercial, retail, and service thoroughfare of Black Chicago. Early on, its recognized epicenter was "the corner of Thirty-first and State where business and professional men had their offices."³¹

The new century's African American business leadership was composed of assertive and imaginative men who possessed a style that contrasted dramatically with the nineteenth-century pioneers, such as the merchant-tailor John Jones. While Jones worked congenially with whites, this newer set of entrepreneurs and businesspersons acted as competitors to white merchants and service producers for the constantly growing African American market. Black dependency on white paternalism gave way to assertiveness and a push for independence. Matching the rapidity with which whites were expanding their businesses operations in all fields at the turn of the century, the more capitalist-minded and risk-taking African Americans did likewise. The names of Jesse Binga, Robert Abbott, and Anthony Overton were destined to become household names mainly due to their actualization of black initiative and the implementation of effective business operations. Moreover, Chicago black businesspersons reflected the national mood of aiming for commercial and retail success. Consequently, a very active branch of Booker T. Washington's National Negro Business League (NNBL) operated throughout this period in Chicago and with widespread appeal and support. For instance, Chicago hosted the NNBL's national convention in 1912. Within a decade, the Associated Business Clubs (ABC) evolved as another manifestation of Black Chicago's interest in maximizing its business and economic potential.³²

During the late nineteenth century, the news field and publishing offered somewhat limited opportunities for financial success. Still, the excitement of supporting the workings of the fourth estate with its control over popular thought intrigued a new cadre of Black Chicago journalists during the early twentieth century. If nothing else, the self-image of blacks could be presented in a positive fashion, reinforcing group pride and cohesion. In publishing, when the enterprising D. A. Bethea saw fit to tell the story of black business in early twentieth-century Chicago, he compiled the first business directory since Isaac C. Harris's in 1885. Bethea's Celerity Print Shop, located farther south along the State Street Corridor at 4926 State Street, was the publishing home of his *Colored People's Blue Book and Business Directory of Chicago* (1905 and 1906). Concurrently, the prescient Robert S. Abbott started his soon-to-be famous *Chicago Defender* in 1905.

At this time, African Americans depended on news from the major Chicago white dailies as well as from their own black weeklies. The daily *Tribune*, *Herald Times*, *Daily News*, and *Inter Ocean* provided general information on happenings in the city. The latter was extremely popular among blacks because it featured extensive coverage of black activities, liberal editorials and commentaries, and

generally a pro-black stance on interracial matters. But with the 1900 census showing twelve African American journalists residing in Chicago, subsequent efforts to expand black publications seemed natural.³³ Frederick G. Detweiler best explained the role of the black press: "It is not surprising if the Negro turns with more than ordinary devotion to the printed page. To him it is an institution peculiarly embodying his group life, something like his church or his lodge, but even more like some public work of art symbolizing his aspiration."³⁴

As a rule, Black Chicago's newspapers, before the *Defender*, were small and not especially profitable. Thus they became dependent on partisan reporting. For instance, Julius F. Taylor moved his *Broad Ax* from Salt Lake City in 1899, and once in Chicago it served primarily as an unprofitable shill for the Democratic Party and sounding board of anti-Tuskegee sentiment until 1910. The *Illinois Idea* was run by Sheadrick B. Turner and had a weekly circulation of at least one hundred issues. It countered Taylor's influence by promoting the G.O.P.³⁵

Considering its later prominence, Robert Abbott's *Chicago Defender* had a rather inauspicious debut. During the paper's early days, Abbott literally peddled his four-sheet product door-to-door during the daytime hours. In the evening, "he visited every south side barbershop, poolroom, night club, saloon, drugstore and church, indeed anywhere Negroes assembled, selling papers and gathering news and advertisements. He often was made the butt of coarse jokes, but he merely turned his head aside."³⁶ Importantly, he set out to excel in journalism but made money along the way, eventually becoming a millionaire and a national voice of black advancement in all spheres of endeavor.

During the *Defender's* early years, Abbott closely observed the success of the *Chicago Tribune* and copied its layout, use of features, and placement of headlines as he set out to revolutionize African American publications both culturally and financially.³⁷ He also recognized the value of printing sensationalistic, lurid headlines and news of little-known persons from throughout the country, not just reporting on topics of interest locally to Black Chicagoans. Under bylines from Dayton, Ohio, to Mobile, Alabama, to Los Angeles, California, the *Defender* circulated personal, society, and institutional news from across America.

As he transformed himself from an obscure Georgia farm boy into a dominant figure in Black America, Robert Abbott's persona was partially built around his character traits of stubbornness and tenacity to pursue his business aims. His chief biographer, Roi Ottley, commented:

Though sensitive and sometimes standoffish, he had a magnetic personality and could be suspiciously urbane. He was basically a friendly person with a touch of the common man. He talked with every and anybody . . . His appearance of humility, bordering on the apologetic, was disarming to whites as well as Negroes. But few people ever touched him sufficiently to develop any intimacy . . . He was no

rabble-rouser or backslapper, but he deeply loved the rank and file of his race, and conceded, though he did not wish to have intimate associations with them, "It's the little man who digs ditches in the streets, who is paying me my salary."³⁸

An important manifestation of Abbott's business acumen was his use of Chicago Pullman porters, who accounted for 20 percent of the black male laboring force, to bolster the *Defender's* circulation. This group had the potential to bring quick distribution and recognition for the *Defender*. Abbott was keenly aware that these railroad workers played an influential role in the economic and social currents of Chicago's Black Belt and throughout the nation. Their influence rested in their numbers within the labor force and access to money (limited as it would have been relative to white middle-class and skilled working-class earning power). Since Pullman porters considered themselves a privileged group with expansive fraternal ties within their ranks, Abbott allowed an active porter to write a weekly column about railroad concerns beginning in 1910. The rail columns contained information regarding their ideas about life and racial advancement, details on their labor activities, and advice on social concerns, such as purchasing homes to improve their status. Reciprocating for recognition of their organizational status, the porters distributed copies of the *Defender* free of charge and solicited annual subscriptions.³⁹

By 1913, the *Defender's* growth attracted Booker T. Washington's favorable attention. Subsequent communication between Abbott and Washington centered on developing a journalistic arrangement aimed at telling the Tuskegee story that would be profitable for both parties. For instance, in a December 19, 1913, letter to Abbott, Washington declared, "I am glad that your paper is taking this sensible view." Evidently Abbott, like Washington, a graduate of Hampton (where industrial education was promoted), had commented favorably on that educational focus. Washington mentioned "another thing we must learn sooner or later, and that is, that no matter how much a certain type of white people may promise to do for us in the way of securing 'rights' in the last analysis, we have got to help ourselves."⁴⁰ Washington's insistence on pushing for economic self-reliance always found receptive ears in Chicago's black business community. It would be left to Abbott, who was adept at pleasing his readership as well as at splitting ideological hairs (between activist integrationists and gradualists), to show black publishers and journalists the way to financial success.

In the financial arena, successful realtor Jesse Binga served as the archetype for the modern plunge into moneymaking. He was one of six other enterprising African Americans who identified their activities in the 1900 U.S. census as banking and brokerage.⁴¹ Shortly thereafter, in 1908, Binga established the first of his (and the race's) two banks in Chicago (and he proposed to open a third in

1930 as a nationally chartered venture). The first of Binga's three institutions was located on the southeast corner of State and Thirty-Sixth at city lot 3637. Initially, Binga's operation was small. Nevertheless, it reflected his entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen to satisfy Black Chicago's need for reliable financial services. At the time, similar bank openings were occurring throughout the city's immigrant neighborhoods.⁴²

An examination of the origins of Chicago's black banking system reveals the first institutions started as private ventures that possessed positive communal implications as neighborhood stabilizers. The establishment of the Binga Bank was followed by the R. W. Hunter & Company Bank, which had both South Side (at Forty-Eighth and State) and West Side (along the main commercial corridor on Lake Street) facilities. Soon, the A. W. Woodfolk Bank began its operations at 3201 South State Street. Black Chicago now had three banks and had laid the foundation for economic penetration into the competitive, lucrative, and tumultuous world of high finance.⁴³

That Binga possessed adequate capital to begin his venture made him a rarity among many enterprising African Americans in Chicago and indeed the nation. According to a popular myth, the most obvious source would have been his real estate holdings and his wife Eudora's inheritance of somewhere between \$200,000 and \$250,000. Moreover, rumor linked his wife's inheritance to the Johnson family fortune in gambling, Mrs. Binga being one of several siblings of the wealthy gambler and political boss John V. "Mushmouth" Johnson.⁴⁴ A popular researcher on Chicago observed, "He was the [local black] kingfish of the policy and numbers [racket], gambling, dice games, poker, and faro as played in the Bad Lands and Little Cheyenne Districts [of the white, crime-ridden Levee District]."⁴⁵

Contradicting this belief as to the source of Binga's access to capital is the fact that he had opened his bank in 1908, four years before his 1912 marriage to "Mushmouth" Johnson's sister. Historically, Binga had proven himself a shrewd businessman by his acquisition and sale of western lands in the 1890s and profitable huckstering on Chicago's streets at the time of the world's fair. Just as real estate holdings and sales had created frontier-era Chicago's economy, they continued to play a major role as an economic resource and in wealth creation. Once established in Chicago, Binga acquired real estate along State Street and rented exploitatively to fellow African Americans at a rate advantageous to his accumulation of personal wealth. Jesse Binga's holdings were so extensive that an entire block on State Street from Forty-Seventh to Forty-Eighth carried his imprint as "the Binga Block." Operating from his first major office at 3331 South State Street, he acquired and sold property throughout the South Side, extending his reach even into all-white neighborhoods. In 1905 and 1906 he advertised boldly in the *Chicago Tribune*.⁴⁶

A businessman through and through, Binga had experienced the exuberance of success in the marketplace as a youngster while accompanying his thriving parents in Detroit. Unfettered by the southern tendency to pay deference to whites, Binga envisioned the entire Chicago landscape as having potential from which he could make money. For instance, during the Binga Bank's first days, 80 percent of his customers were white and only 20 percent were African American.⁴⁷

Binga's entrepreneurial exuberance combined public spectacle with economic advancement aimed at sustaining self-reliance. In 1912 he proposed the formation of a permanent local black business association with a capitalization of \$150,000 to support an annual carnival resembling a gigantic fair or exposition along State Street. As Binga commented at the first of such community business expositions held that summer, "I want to see *my* people in every line of business there is. I want to see them in neat, clean stores. I want to see them dealing in fruit stores, fish markets. Just think of small Chicago, with 100,000 of us, [and] there is not a fish market, and we eat fish, too. Who is getting the bulk of this money? And still you wonder why we can't get work. You are not making it for yourself. They place their money in banks where their children are not given a chance to learn banking" (emphasis added).⁴⁸

Binga was not alone in sensing the possibilities of amassing profits in the real estate arena. T. W. Champion in 1912 formed a business bearing his name, T. W. Champion Realty Agency and Loan Company, and later the Pyramid Building Company. He thus followed a path in pursuing wealth trod by Chicagoans since the city was first platted. The immediate model of these activities might just have been Jesse Binga as he embarked on his three-decade climb to financial success.⁴⁹

In 1911 a very ambitious Anthony Overton left Kansas City to start a business in Chicago exploiting a growing women's market in grooming aids. Imbibing Chicago's infectious nectar of racial pride and economic possibility, Overton contributed to the newest economic surge within the Black Belt. Thinking as Jesse Binga did about African American advancement, Overton committed himself to business excellence and financial success. A recent researcher uncovered another truth about Overton: he "held firmly to a vow that his firm would be composed 'entirely of Negroes.' He made it a point that he would not employ a single white person 'in any capacity' and insisted that 'not a dollar of white capital would be used either directly or indirectly.'"⁵⁰

Overton was born to slave parents in Louisiana in 1864, so he spent only one year and fourteen days in bondage. Overton's attitudes and dreams were shaped by his family's example: "His father was a merchant and it was from him that he inherited the ambition to make good in business."⁵¹ From producing his first product, baking powder, he expanded his business operations to include fifty-two products related to female grooming. The company employed a small salaried work staff and

claimed contractual relationships with four hundred commissioned door-to-door salesmen.⁵² By 1915, the Overton Hygienic Company expanded its operations and opened a branch office at 3519 South State Street. He listed the company's capitalization at \$268,000 (or possibly \$286,000) and claimed to be manufacturing sixty-two different items, including baking powder, extracts, and toilet articles. Overton now commanded a workforce that had risen to thirty-two employees.⁵³ As to his attitude toward his chosen path, he was committed to business as an end in itself. As one observer assessed his approach to business, "It's a game and he likes to play it: it's a test of his skill and his ability; it gives him a chance to match wits with his competitors, to overcome complicated and perplexing problems and mould living institutions to his will."⁵⁴

The field of beauty care and personal upkeep presented opportunities to become successful and prosperous, as evidenced by Overton's chief competitors, Annie Turnbo Malone and her Poro College in St. Louis, and Madame C. J. Walker and her thriving operations in Indianapolis. Consequently, beauty shops and barbershops operated throughout the Black Belt and appeared fearless in competition with whites, whose interest would not fully develop in the field for another seventy-five years.

Directly linked to personal grooming, dressmakers and seamstresses listed in the 1900 census numbered 404 (4 being men) and 147, respectively, indicating that a solid market existed in this area also.⁵⁵ Grooming for men provided a profitable business path, as Bethea's *Colored People's Blue Book* listed forty-five barbershops located on State or within a block of State and a dozen or so to be found half a mile away.⁵⁶ Bathing facilities were included in several of the establishments, with cigars and tobacco provided, as well.⁵⁷

Paralleling Binga's move into finance, former Pullman porter Sandy J. Trice introduced the black presence into enhanced retail trade when he opened a department store in a partnership at 2918 State Street.⁵⁸ The business enjoyed a short life span, from 1905 through 1909, but a meaningful one in that it demonstrated what possibilities of success could lay ahead for others.⁵⁹

Speaking of success, Charles Smiley's catering company, by the early twentieth century, had expanded its commercial influence in the Windy City. Smiley reportedly began his career in late nineteenth-century Chicago with a mere fifty cents in his pocket. But as Booker T. Washington later commented, Smiley "possessed . . . several assets more valuable than mere money. He had a resolute character, good powers of observation, ambition, and brains."⁶⁰ At 2111 South Indiana Avenue, three short city blocks east of the State Street Corridor, Smiley's catering prospered by meeting the needs of a selective white Gold Coast clientele. Smiley's innovations and level of service allowed him to prosper at a time when other African American entrepreneurs were experiencing a decline in white

clientele throughout the North. Full service from Smiley's Catering meant that the proprietor assumed total responsibility for an affair, a rarity in that business. This included the most essential goods and services for any wedding—the cake, floral arrangements, canopies, ushers, “security guards who were placed discreetly to watch the gifts,” and even delivery of invitations. Smiley ensured safe and timely deliveries by owning the sixteen horses that pulled his wagons.⁶¹ With the death of husband and son, Mrs. Smiley continued the business operations as a sole proprietor until her death.⁶²

In the scramble for commercial success in Chicago's growing Black Belt, entrepreneur and gambling czar Robert T. Motts made history in 1905 when he opened his Pekin Theater. Remodeling the site of his original smaller gaming establishment at Twenty-Seventh and State Street, Motts constructed “a little bijou theater, complete in all its details, with a balcony, boxes, fire exits, red axes and all the other attributes of a regulation playhouse.” At the same time, an orchestra was formed to accompany an assembled stock company. As a venue for topflight black entertainment that soon appealed to both races, one white newspaper billed it as “the only theater in the country—probably the only regular playhouse in the world—owned, managed and conducted by colored people, presenting with a stock company of colored artists original musical comedies, farces and plays written and composed by colored men . . . in this city.”⁶³

Controversial among members of the black pulpit, white newspapers, and the white elite, the Pekin Theater represented another African American “first.”⁶⁴ Motts “demonstrated the ability of the Negro in the trades as well as in the theatrical profession” to operate a business successfully.⁶⁵ Still, despite Motts's historic accomplishment in the realm of entertainment ownership, the bulk of theater and club life within the Black Belt remained in white hands throughout the 1920s jazz and blues era.

On the eve of the Great Migration (1916–18), which transformed the economic potential of the Black Belt into the prosperous reality of the Black Metropolis of the 1920s, Black Chicago had visibly demonstrated its ability to fit into the mold of modern America.⁶⁶ The nexus of circumstance, found abundantly in the milieu of frontier freedom and later in the laissez-faire spirit of the post-Reconstruction era, continued into the early twentieth century. Moreover, the underlying principle of personal initiative, drawn derivatively from the spirit of Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable's historic example, produced an impressive entrepreneurial and business history heretofore overlooked, but now recorded and documented.

Notes

1. Bessie Louise Pierce, *A History of Chicago, Vol. II: From Town to City, 1848–1871* (New York: Knopf, 1940), 4.

2. Bessie Louise Pierce, *A History of Chicago, Vol. I: The Beginning of a City, 1673–1848* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), 201, 210.
3. Christopher R. Reed, *Black Chicago's First Century, Vol. I, 1833–1900* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 74.
4. Abram L. Harris, *The Negro as Capitalist* (1936; repr., Gloucester, MA; Peter Smith, 1968), 11.
5. Letters, Marsha Freeman Edmond to Julia Boyd, June 20, 1887, in Herma Clark, “When Chicago Was Young: The Elegant Eighties,” *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, June 28, 1936, n.p., in the Atkinson Family Collection, Chicago Historical Society.
6. Frederick H. H. Robb, ed. and comp., *The Negro in Chicago, Vol. I: 1779–1927* (Chicago: Washington Intercollegiate Club, 1927), 227.
7. A. T. Andreas, *History of Chicago, Vol. I* (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1885), 185, 186.
8. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 140.
9. Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, *They Seek a City* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1945), 47.
10. The 1860 figure comes from Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York: Twayne, 1998), 110; the 1871 figures are from Charles R. Branham, “John Jones,” in *Encyclopedia of African American Business History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 344.
11. Letters from Marsha Freeman Edmond to Julia Boyd of New York, June 20, 1887.
12. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, 150.
13. Isaac C. Harris, *The Colored Men's Professional and Business Directory* (Chicago: 1885), n.p.
14. “Note,” *Conservator*, December 18, 1886, 3 (photocopied version in author's possession).
15. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1945), 434.
16. Reed, *Black Chicago's First Century*, 205–8, 263–64.
17. Harris, *Colored Men's Directory*, n.p.
18. H. F. Kletzing and W. H. Crogman, *Progress of a Race, or the Remarkable Advancement of the Afro-American* (Atlanta, 1897; repr., New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 276.
19. Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York, 1965; orig. publ. as *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901*; New York, 1954), 233, 234.
20. “Colored Lights in Chicago: Citizens of Dark Hue Who Are Prominent in Business and the Professions,” *Chicago Daily News*, August 6, 1885, 1; and letters, Martha Freeman Edmond to Julia Boyd. See also Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 433.
21. Robb, *The Negro in Chicago*, 2: 227.
22. “Story of Old Settler Reads Like Fiction,” *Chicago Defender*, May 3, 1930, 23. Also see Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, 178.
23. “Chicago Colored People: The Race Problem Is Solving Itself in This City,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1890 (Pro Quest version), 33. Also, “Old Citizens Are Culinary Experts,” *Chicago Defender*, May 13, 1933, 16.

24. "Colored Lights in Chicago."
25. Perry R. Duis, *Challenging Chicago: Coping with Everyday Life, 1837-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 262.
26. Christopher Robert Reed, *Knock at the Door of Opportunity: Black Migration to Chicago, 1900-1919* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014), 90-91.
27. Reed, *Black Chicago's First Century*, 383.
28. "Opinion of the Chicago Colored Women's Club," *Chicago Inter Ocean*, March 13, 1894 [unlocatable], cited in Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, eds., *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present, volume III, The Black Worker During the Era of the Knights of Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 282.
29. See Christopher Robert Reed, *The Rise of Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1920-1929* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).
30. D. A. Bethea, comp., *Colored People's Blue Book and Business Directory of Chicago* (Chicago: Celebrity Publishing, 1905); *The Colored People's Blue Book of Chicago* (Chicago: Celebrity Publishing, 1906). Data accumulated from both publications are the source of this analysis. Significantly, conditions had not changed by 2007 in terms of the small size of black businesses where an owner usually had no more than a single employee. See "'A Seat at the Table' for Black Firms," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, Business Section, September 16, 2007, 1, 6.
31. Harold M. Mayer and Richard C. Wade, *Chicago: Growth of a Metropolis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 252.
32. Reed, *The Rise of Chicago's Black Metropolis*, 110-12.
33. Richard R. Wright Jr., "The Negro in Chicago," *Southern Workman* 35 (October 1906): 560.
34. Frederick G. Detweiler, *The Negro Press in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), n.p., quoted in Roi Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior: The Life and Times of Robert S. Abbott* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1955).
35. Reed, *Black Chicago's First Century*, 232, 339.
36. Ottley, *Lonely Warrior*, 93.
37. Harold F. Gosnell, *Negro Politicians: The Rise of Negro Politics in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), 102.
38. Ottley, *Lonely Warrior*, 3-5.
39. Reed, *Knock at the Door of Opportunity*, 147, 171.
40. Booker T. Washington to Robert Sengstacke Abbott, December 19, 1913, in Harlan and Smock, *Booker T. Washington Papers*, vol. 12.
41. Wright, "Negro in Chicago," 562. Interestingly enough, no mention is made of such a grouping in Bethea, *Colored People's Blue Book* (1905/1906).
42. Perry R. Duis, *Challenging Chicago: Coping with Everyday Life, 1837-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 299.
43. Reed, *Knock at the Door of Opportunity*, 172.
44. Henry Brown, "Binga Downfall Ends Spectacular Career," *Chicago Defender*, June 10, 1933, 10.

45. Stephen Longstreet, *Chicago: 1860-1919* (New York: David McKay, 1973), 214, 215; Madrue Chavers-Wright, *The Guarantee: P. W. Chavers—Banker, Entrepreneur, Philanthropist in Chicago's Black Belt of the Twenties* (New York: Wright-Amstead Associates, 1985), 365.
46. *Chicago Tribune*, September 3, 1905, G14; *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, 1906, G11.
47. Louise de Koven Bowen, *The Colored People of Chicago*, n.p. (unpaginated 8, 9). Also see "Mr. Jesse Binga," *The Broad Ax*, December 25, 1909, 2.
48. "The State Street Fair and Carnival Association," *Chicago Defender*, September 7, 1912, 4; Major [and Saunders], *Black Society*, 304.
49. Reed, *Knock at the Door of Opportunity*, 176.
50. Adam Langer, "Black Metropolis," *Reader* (Chicago's free weekly), April 9, 1993, 12.
51. Deton J. Brooks Jr., "Empire Builder: From Slave to Wealth Is Story of Overton," *Chicago Defender*, December 26, 1942, 13.
52. "Anthony Overton, Born Entrepreneur," *Issues & Views* (Spring 1997), <http://www.issues-views.com/index.php/sect/1000/article/1006>.
53. [W. E. B. Du Bois], "Colored Chicago," *The Crisis* (September 1915): 242.
54. "Daughters," *Chicago Defender*, March 13, 1915, 4; Brooks, "Empire Builder."
55. Wright, "Negro in Chicago," 561.
56. Bethea, *Colored People's Blue Book*, 27, 29-39.
57. Reed, *Knock at the Door of Opportunity*, 181.
58. *Chicago Defender*, September 24, 1932, 7.
59. Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 113.
60. Juliet E. K. Walker, ed., *Encyclopedia of African American Business History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 132. See also "Charles Smiley—Going against the Grain," *Issues & Views* (Fall 1994), <http://www.issues-views.com/index.php/sect/1000/article/1004>.
61. "Charles Smiley—Going against the Grain," *Issues & Views* (Fall 1994), <http://www.issues-views.com/index.php/sect/1000/article/1004>.
62. "Old Citizens Are Culinary Experts," *Chicago Defender*, May 12, 1933, 16.
63. Clipping, "Colored Peoples Theater . . . Proves a Success," unknown Chicago newspaper, n.d. (c. 1906) [author's personal possession].
64. See Alfreda M. Duster, ed., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), chapter 34, "A Negro Theater."
65. "The Event of the Century[, But] Not [the] Year," *The Broad Ax*, July 7, 1906, 1.
66. See Reed, *Knock at the Door of Opportunity*.

Black Chicago's First Century

Chapter 5

Fair and War, 1893-1900

No one who has not seen it, can form any idea of the immensity and grandeur of the exposition; nor can I give any adequate description of it. It has been very fitly called 'The White City,' and one standing under the Peristyle and looking down the Court of Honor . . . might easily imagine himself in a fairy city.

James Weldon Johnson, 1893

If we fail [in military operations in Cuba] the whole race will have to shoulder the burden.

Colonel John R. Marshall, Eighth Illinois National Guard, United States Volunteers, 1898

The relationship of the Negro community to this event [the world's fair] throws some light on Negro-white relations and the strength of Negro institutions during the nineties.

St. Clair Drake, 1940

A major reconfiguration of the African American community was readily observable between the opening of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and the immediate aftermath of the Spanish American War, a period during which Chicago laid claim to being the nation's "Second City." This transformation kept pace as best it could with the city's growth and development and a discernible class structure was becoming recognizable, but now it rested on the accumulation of wealth rather than cultural attainment and status. At the same time black Chicago's institutional base expanded with far more diversification and covered more varied interests than ever before. Interracial relations in the main still rested on amiability and demonstrated that fluidity existed in a city committed to individualized competition and civil order throughout the greater community.

While the world's fair of 1893 represented Chicago's affirmation of its Phoenix-like ability to rise from physical disaster to world class municipal status, one based on its technological progress in architecture, transportation, merchandising, and major areas of industrial production, African Americans claimed and won a meaningful role as workers, patrons, lecturers, performers, artists and visitors despite a widespread historical misperception indicating their exclusion. Persons of the African Diaspora who arrived in Chicago as visitors included Nubians and New Yorkers, Zulu from South Africa and energetic and curious "New

Negroes” from elsewhere in the Midwest, the Eastern seaboard and the American South. As white America looked forward, Frederick Douglass’s black America could never forget slavery, so it also looked backward to a period of national shame hoping that white America would respond with contrition. To many blacks the fair held the symbolic importance of being an important ritual of possible white racial redemption and black acceptance into the nation’s body politic and social fabric.

Five years later, war afforded Chicago and the nation an opportunity to demonstrate their readiness for global involvement in trade, diplomacy and empire. Conflict with an effete Spanish Empire moreover afforded African American males their first opportunity since the Civil War to demonstrate their manhood on the field of battle. While not all African Americans agreed with the nation’s latest imperial foray, this conflict allowed blacks the chance to reestablish the black martial tradition and confirm a powerful claim to citizenship rights. Once again, African Americans demanded the right to get involved as full-fledged citizens, this time as front-line combatants at the beginning of the conflict.

The foundation for another century’s realization of a dream of inclusion neared as the fair triggered an increase in migration of the talented and confident. Community corridors of opportunity and success emerged, from the South Side along State and Dearborn streets to the West Side along Lake street and into pockets of settlement in between. Within these enclaves, cultural and ideological transformation accompanied social reconfiguration and marked the character of this generation of “New Negroes” – able, optimistic, unrelenting and successful.

I.

Demography: The Arrival of The Masses and The Talented Tenth

The migration of the masses as well as the Talented Tenth to Chicago continued, spurred in part by economic opportunity and by the stories of the fabled “White City,” the sobriquet for the world’s fair of 1893 (which was officially designated as the World’s Columbian Exposition). St. Clair Drake found "the great influx of Negroes coming to the World's Columbian Exposition served to introduce the Negro community of Chicago to Negroes in other areas, resulted in some persons staying in the city, and increased the interest in church and associational life. The trends originating during this period found their full expression in the [new century] which followed."

Monroe Nathan Work fixed the size of the black population in 1896 at 22,742 out of the city’s total of 1,626, 635 persons based on a recent school census. Fellow researcher Richard R.

Wright, Jr. reported that the population of 1900 experienced an increase of 2000 persons in two months because of violence in New Orleans that induced their flight. As to the relevance of the young within this population, African American children constituted only a small proportion of this mass of laboring class persons. When Work examined the 1900 census and focused on the emerging Black Belt's Third Ward, he found very few children and an average family size of two to four persons in approximately 60 percent of the households. Two-headed families continued to dominate the community landscape. Single-parent families were present, but they constituted a small minority of all black families and tended to be incorporated within extended family networks and headed by middle-aged women who usually were widowed, separated, or divorced.

As dynamic as the migrants of past times had been, additional adult newcomers brought with them an even higher level of human dynamism to the benefit of black Chicago and the city in general. Most notable were civic activist Ida B. Wells, along with the activist, learned clergy, Reverends Reverdy Ransom and Archibald Carey of the A.M.E. Church. Wells made Chicago her permanent home in 1895, then Ransom arrived in 1896 and Carey shortly thereafter the next year. Not to be overlooked were Robert Sengstacke Abbott, Julius F. Taylor and Jesse Binga. Abbott visited the city during the fair, sang on the fairgrounds in 1893 as part of the Hampton Quarter and fell in love with Chicago. He returned for a permanent residence in 1897. Two years later, Taylor, an acerbic newspaper publisher from Salt Lake City, returned eastward over the Rockies and settled permanently in the city. In the process, he brought with him political ambition and the tool for its realization, his newspaper, the *Broad Ax*. Binga came to Chicago with ideas and a hunger for wealth. Never a person to relent in his personal quest to achieve a goal, he soon would own extensive plots of real estate and implement a plan to own his own bank.

The city, no doubt, gained reciprocally from the short presence of a young Mary McLeod Bethune in 1894. Her early interest and commitment to humanity led her through the doors and into the classrooms of the Moody Bible Institute where she studied various aspects of home and foreign missionary work. Another Southerner of rising prominence, Booker T. Washington, attended the world's fair and returned frequently late during the decade as a visitor just as the peripatetic Frederick Douglass had done until his death in 1895.

II

Topography: An Expanding City Landscape

The physical and human landscape of black Chicago continued to undergo dramatic changes during the decade that significantly molded its social and economic configuration for generations to come. Fortunately, this transformation and framing were documented contemporaneously by an African American researcher, Monroe Nathan Work, who inaugurated a social science approach that included examining the city's black population with microscopic precision. Operating from the campus of the fledgling University of Chicago during the early 1900s, Work, in his role as participant-observer conducted street level surveys that had him examining each of the three major sides of town – North, West and South – rather than just focusing on the most densely populated section south of Twenty-second Street that was to become the famed “Black Belt.”

The pattern of settlement assumed a complexity of its own and the ghetto of historical and sociological construction did not exist at this point in Chicago's history. The work of Allan H. Spear is especially useful at this point because he pioneered in separating legendary housing patterns from documented, census-based patterns. The primary thesis tested in his *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* concerned itself with linkage between when an African American population became concentrated enough to establish its presence and possible control over housing and designated public space within the city *and* what that demographic hegemony meant to the quality of life of the population involved. The historical pivot in his study and others like it in Harlem, Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee and Buffalo became the “Great Migration” of 1915-1918 which attracted 50,000 new workers to Chicago amid the 500,000 it drew to the entirety of the North.¹ Although a major issue for examination, it is beyond the purview of what is to be covered in volume one of this study.

The distribution of the African American population over the city's landscape in post-annexation Chicago (after 1889) found many African Americans living in high concentration in the midst of their own group, such as along the Dearborn Street Corridor. Others were isolated from this heavy concentration in predominantly white communities such as those found on the West Side and North Side. Then there were African Americans residing in small clusters of what were statistically—but not in actuality—socially, racially-mixed areas such as Englewood, Hyde Park and the far South Side's Morgan Park neighborhood. Home owning rose dramatically in

these areas as manifestations of claims to higher social status and economic protection of property investment.

On the West and North Sides of the city, the smaller enclaves produced a distinct experience for African Americans. There was social isolation at times if the community were predominantly white along with their limited social acceptance. If the neighborhood or cluster were predominantly black, there was social camaraderie with blacks and some social acceptance from and mingling with whites. Importantly, there was a semblance of racial peace. The dispersion of the African American population throughout the city represented the natural demographic contours expected in an area when restrictive housing agreements were nonexistent and exclusionary racial policies lacked the strength of custom.

On the West Side, with an image usually conjured up with its vast working class in mind, there resided families representative of various other segments of the African American population. The Johnson-Hudson and Cherry families belonged to the growing cluster of entrepreneurs and businessmen. Jesse Johnson left his native Tennessee where he had been born after slavery and journeyed to Chicago in 1900 with his family. He distinguished himself as a master carpenter, quickly putting his skills to work he built nine houses over several years. James Hudson was a Tennessean who was born in 1889 and arrived in Chicago as a child in 1892. Once he reached adulthood, Hudson would marry the Johnson's daughter, Willie Dee, and make Providence Baptist their church home.

Another entrepreneurial family was that of patrician father Wiley Cherry, who arrived in Chicago from Colrain, North Carolina in 1893. His wife Margaret, and daughters, Mattie and Lovie, soon followed. While it is unknown whether their coming to the city of broad shoulders was linked directly to the advent of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 which clearly symbolized Chicago's call to opportunity to the adventurous and enterprising, the entrepreneurial spirit of the age inspired Mr. Cherry in a city that catered to the independent-minded individual. Corroborating business chronicler Isaac Harris's description of the acquisitive mood of many African Americans Wiley Cherry soon started a grocery, which within a short span of time had given way to a masonry and plastering business on Lake Street where through the years, the Cherrys prospered financially. Earlier, after the birth of Wiley and Margaret Cherry's first son, Jim, in 1895, the family rented or owned a frame home at 442 South Western Avenue. Living on Western Avenue, the city's westernmost boundary until 1869, placed the Cherrys on the city's

West Side, which was home to 200,000 people of mixed ethnic and racial backgrounds in 1890. Most were newly arrived immigrants from southern and central Europe who were joining Germans and the Irish from previous decades, who in turn, were pressing on the heels of wealthier native white Americans. Racial pride and a sense of racial solidarity being what they were, the Cherry family sought cultural affinity among fellow African Americans. The Cherrys quickly affiliated with the expanding African American community found along a mixed residential and commercial corridor on either side of Lake Street. This family also established membership at the Providence Baptist Church.

Among the professionals, the history of the Lewis family gives some insight into typical family life among this stratum. Before Dr. John W. Lewis, Sr.'s entering the medical profession during the second decade of the twentieth century, he had opened a pharmacy along the Lake Street Corridor. This occurred after he arrived in Chicago in the late 1890s from Oskaloosa, Iowa where he had worked as a pharmacist's assistant. Then he pursued medical training at Rush Medical School. Dr. Lewis' wife arrived in Chicago from Virginia in the 1900s. Their son, John, Jr. followed in his father's footsteps into medicine later in the century. The West Side had its members of the city's black elite with the Frenches and the Hancocks retaining the status they had established in the previous decade.

Life for young Lovelynn Miller Evans unfolded on the far North Side of the city. Born on March 9, 1893 in Chicago's Lakeview community, she grew up in a bi-racial household in a racially-mixed neighborhood where she recalled fondly how she enjoyed her childhood. As a child in the era before the dominance of combustible engines, she enjoyed riding her pony-drawn cart along the lake front with an air of complete freedom. Her African American father had arrived from Louisiana in 1888 and shortly after his daughter's birth, Joseph Miller and his German American wife, Elizabeth, were on the verge of seeing the fruits of their labor blossom as his moving and storage business seemed well on the way to success. Lovelynn Miller Evans attended the Horace Greeley Elementary School where one of her classmates was future journalist Westbrook Pegler. She concluded her education with graduation from Lakeview High School.

An older Charles Liggett reached Chicago before the dawn of the new century and headed far north near the lake front where he quickly found housing among whites. The son of slaves who spent his childhood in Mobile, Alabama also among whites, once in Chicago he

replaced segregation with social acceptance and remained a North Sider late into his retirement years. His neighborhood was sparsely settled and reached by horse-drawn cars, offering serenity and peace, and finally, a boon to physical mobility in cable cars. The few African Americans who lived in the area shopped where they lived, but when they sought a traditional African American religious experience, they found themselves heading to the South Side.

Native-born Chicagoan Gertrude Davis was another North Sider and the fifth of twelve children born to a former slave father of unmixed racial ancestry and a free mother with a triple heritage of Native American, West African and Irish bloodlines. At the time of her birth on November 12, 1873 the family lived along the “Plank Road” (now known as Milwaukee Avenue). They were among the first settlers in the area, their arrival pre-dating most whites. As she recalled during her mature years, when my father “settled over on the northwest side of Chicago there were no white families at all, only a few Colored families, but by the time I was able to remember white people began to come into this section of Chicago. All of the Negro families were well established. The white immigrants would ask for shelter, food and work and my father, like other settlers, would house the white men in his barn and hire them out as farm hands for their board and keep. This section of the city at that time was known as Avondale It was not until I married that I came to know the South Side of Chicago.

For a younger Martha Dawson, life began in 1899 in the North Side house her father built in the sparsely settled north west section of the newly annexed Jefferson Park Township. Her parents were early settlers in the area during the post-Civil War period and enjoyed the company of their white neighbors. Her life continued to revolve around this area ever when she reached her mature years as she accommodated herself to life apart from the cultural and social orbit of African Americans.

With almost 20,000 persons concentrated along racial lines, the famed “Black Belt” was assuming its legendary form. It was here that the population increase among African Americans assumed its most impressive dimensions within this Dearborn Street Corridor, which encompassed a small number of businesses along State Street and many family-owned homes along Dearborn, Armour, Clark and Butterfield Streets. Life patterns along the Dearborn Street Corridor produced their own rhythm for the bulk of the city’s “respectables” as well as for most of the refined element. The area represented an expanding African American racial enclave which seemed to be in thick of everything of importance in the city. It was situated in close

proximity to the downtown section, the famed Millionaire's Row on the South Side's Grand Boulevard where the homes of the wealthier Chicagoans lay directly to the east, the notorious vice district known as the "Levee" which overlapped its northern boundary, and even the fairgrounds of the World's Columbian Exposition when it opened on May 1, 1893.

Transportation abounded with major thoroughfares traversing through as well as running nearby, with north-south streetcars available on State Street and Wentworth Avenue. Accessible by streetcar and elevated trains, carriage traffic, or by foot, this community sat about two miles south of the heart of the central business district and five miles north of Jackson Park where the world's fair was taking place.

The Corridor anchored an expanding African American community extending from Twenty-Second Street roughly southward to Thirty-ninth, and from Wentworth Avenue on the west to State Street (and later Wabash Avenue) on the east. Importantly, it was home to about one fourth of the city's 20,000 African Americans, the bulk of its biggest and most influential churches and black-operated Provident Hospital. Its impressive growth meant that building a successful commercial strip along State Street, one block east of Dearborn Street, entered the realm of the probable as African Americans expanded their economic options. While professionals such as Dr. Charles C. Bentley practiced in downtown offices by the 1890s, his close friend and confidant, Dr. Daniel Hale Williams maintained offices on Thirty-First Street as did so many others. Williams' offices were located at the edge of the Corridor in neutral racial space. There, he shared space in a magnificent building that housed white and black professionals on the northwest corner of Michigan Boulevard and Thirty-First Street. The better residences, as well as the poorer homes, were located along its streets. A substantial portion of home ownership was also found here, so this area qualified as the locus of social influence, cultural expression and economic stability for the Black Belt. Yet many African Americans sought to invest permanently in housing found outside its perimeters. While this diverse section witnessed the construction of some new edifices, overall, they paled in comparison with more substantial white and black housing immediately to the south and east. Basically, the housing construction of approximately 3700 structures within the Corridor had reached a point of completion and saturation by 1895. Heavily brick but with some wood framed, one- and two-story structures dominated. Many homes were substantial but there were no mansions.

Contemporary descriptions told the story in all its complexity. When newspapers such as the *Broad Ax*, *Appeal* and *Indianapolis Freeman* reported on the activities of “society,” the addresses cited were more often than not Dearborn and Armour Avenue sites. Attorney and Mrs. Edward H. Morris resided at 2712 Dearborn, indicating that it was more than a case of where you lived to attain status, rather it was the manner in which you lived. In the case of the Morrises, they lived well as manifested in their summer itinerary of 1899 which had them returning home from a grand Eastern tour of Boston, Newport, New York and Philadelphia.ⁱⁱ Along with Attorney Morris’ rarefied status among black lawyers, Mrs. Morris’ socialite mother, Mrs. Montgomery, added prestige to the family and their presence in the community. The elder socialite was remembered as “a stately woman of pale [smooth] complexion who wore a gray coiffure that had a close resemblance to that of Mrs. Potter Palmer.”

Dr. A. Maurice Curtis and his wife called 3543 Dearborn Avenue home which was located seven blocks from his office at 2942 Armour Avenue. In the same locale, but at the other end of the time spectrum and in a newer generation, newborn Annetta, the child of Charles and Mildred Taylor, entered the world on March 1, 1899. She would call this area home until almost the end of her 101 years as a resident of Chicago.

The Rev. Reverdy Ransom, a Social Gospel community activist, saw the area through a different set of spectacles. He understood its varied rhythms and would write that African Americans were “housed for the most part in flimsy, frame houses on Dearborn Street, Armour Avenue, and adjoining streets extending to the Chicago River. The condition of the streets was appalling. Not surprisingly, Rev. Richard R. Wright, Jr. remarked in a similar vein that “only a few of these streets are paved, 33rd street being the only one with asphalt and cedar block paving.”

Yet, misery and deprivation in the midst of splendor and elegance was nothing new in urban living. Many of the veterans of the Civil War, along with their families, friends and acquaintances who resided in the area inhabited some of the least desirable housing units. By virtue of their occupation and income, they struggled in their daily living as part of the lower end of black Chicago’s respectable element. Among the ranks of the veterans, residential mobility reached alarming rates with some individuals or families moving every year as they struggled to make ends meet.

Many joined the ranks of the lodgers, the non-family related renters who moved into a

household until they could get established, acclimated to big city living and afford independent rental or self-purchased housing. The feature of the lodger was not an unusual factor, and not one necessarily negative, in housing and family life in Chicago among the laboring class. Single persons who came to the North and settled on the West Side were absorbed into the households in which they lived, becoming honorary members of those families. Dr. Daniel Hale Williams arrived in Chicago and immediately joined the household of Mrs. Mary Richardson Jones until he became solidly established. Unattached persons, and sometimes childless, recently married couples, lived with families both because of a shortage in housing and the institutional protection this arrangement provided. Not only was the rent or mortgage payment shared but also the valuable social life of the family, something European immigrant groups also enjoyed. There can be no doubt that the bane of the urban family was bad housing. By the same token, with opportunities for African American to secure decent housing for rental purposes or purchase were limited, so securing the scarce funds needed to survive loomed as paramount also. The city's worst housing and acknowledged slum, "Packingtown," was located significantly to the west of the Dearborn Corridor and inhabited by European immigrant.

As a locus of creativity, the Dearborn Corridor was becoming the geographical and cultural core of the Chicago African American community. So, it should not have been surprising to find that the excitement and bonding of 1893 found in activities on the fairgrounds and stimulating discussions in the meetings held inside the world's fair boundaries and at the Art Palace neither ended at the fairgrounds' perimeter nor did the activities held at the downtown Art Institute. They resumed or were replicated in parallel activities taking place continuously in Chicago's African American churches throughout the duration of the fair, of which more will be said later.

The residential landscape south of the Dearborn Corridor revealed that a number of the more prominent and socially rising African American families made their homes in racially-mixed areas of the South Side. These were in near proximity to heavily black settlements such as those found usually south of Fifty-First Street and parallel to State Street. The Gibbs family and recent Howard University graduate, Grace, lived at 5023 Armour. Club woman Mrs. L. A. Davis, who was vacationing in summer, 1899 at Mackinac Island, lived at 5017 Armour Avenue. She planned to return to the city in time for the annual convention of the National Association of Colored Women where she would deliver the welcoming opening address.

Far southward of the Dearborn Corridor lay the diverse, predominantly white neighborhoods where numerous other African American families lived. When Richard R. Wright, Jr., University of Chicago student and son of the president of Georgia State Industrial School, reached the city, he resided with Rev. D. W. Jones who lived at 5520 Ingleside Avenue in the Hyde Park community. A mile southward, Professor William and Mrs. Fannie Emanuel made their home at 6352 Rhodes Avenue in the Washington Park subdivision of the Woodlawn community. The story was similar in other residential pockets in Englewood, Lilydale, Morgan Park, and the steel-producing Southeast Side.

A world apart from these experiences were those of the socially-dispossessed African Americans who lived immediately north and northwest of the Dearborn Corridor. Monroe N. Work identified twin cores of slum life where the bulk of them established their homes. One extended between Lake Michigan on the east, the Chicago River and Clark Street on the west, Twenty-Second Street at the south end, and Van Buren on the west, laying within the boundaries of the infamous Levee district which housed the city's vice amid slums. It was the area and the population that Rev. William T. Stead examined for his work on degenerate behavior, If Christ Came to Chicago. It also housed "darkest Africa," derisively named and recognized by whites and by African Americans living to the south of the area.

Across the river rose the western version of these slums. Its boundaries were Grand Avenue on the north, Madison on the south, Jefferson Street on the east, and with Ann (Racine) Street as its west extremity. While the Levee was home to 4,900 African Americans; 800 lived in the western division. Unfortunately, the former was home to too many Civil War veterans and their families. The first in war had become the last served by the benefits of society in peacetime. One federal pension examiner wrote of the conditions under which one veteran lived in this area, making this observation: "He lives in a dive which is almost worth a man's life if I go into it. So I didn't." Their presence in these economically depressed areas indicated, moreover, that all of the residents of these enclaves possessed different lifestyles so no wholesale classification for them as criminals is reasonable. In addition to their economic needs being denied, there were no major churches located in these areas to serve the spiritual needs of these Chicagoans, only missions and store front religious activities. Nationally, these slum dwellers represented the largest concentration of any the larger cities, including New York, Philadelphia or Baltimore.

The “Pamphlet” – *Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition*

A major point of contention arose over the issue of whether a pamphlet on grievances should be written and distributed at all, or should grievances and constant dignities be ignored and activities proceed forward despite injustices encountered? The famed pamphlet written by Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, I. Garland Penn and Ferdinand L. Barnett, *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in The World’s Columbian Exposition* framed the argument over the years. The argument in the pamphlet fit into a belief system that racism was stronger in the past than in the 1940s, or the 1960s, or the late 20th century. Historian Rayford W. Logan’s *The Negro in The Nadir of American Life* (1945) sealed the legitimacy of the debate by exploring the entirety of the Columbian period as an era of racist domination.

Contemporary opposition was quick in coming with the *Indianapolis Freeman* of May 6, 1893, publishing a rebuke under the title, “Condemns The Pamphlet Idea: Too Much Upon The Order of a Whine.” It read:

After watching with unusual interest the discussion which has been carried on through the columns of *The Freeman* for some weeks past, regarding the proposition known as the “Pamphlet Idea,” I have ventured a few remarks on the subject. I am free to confess I cannot discern just what benefit could be derived from such a display of the wrongs which have been inflicted upon the race. The world likes heroism, and it appears to me that the proposed masses of noted visitors expected at the World’s Fair, if, however, it is unknown, then all of our efforts to publish the same in the last twenty years, by newspapers, magazines, and lectures, have been worse than useless. But I do not think they have been useless and the result is that the American Negroes is [sic] an object of commiseration the world over. Apropos of the “pamphlet Idea,” would it not be to greater purpose, to call the attention of the race to the importance of making exhibits and encouraging them to put forth their last efforts to make a more lasting impression upon the minds of the sightseers at the World’s Fair, by showing that while they are denied the right of suffrage, that while they may be crushed down and oppressed, that they still have the spirit, and the manhood to apply themselves diligently and successfully to the various arts

and sciences? They should show that there [sic] are as capable of understanding, adjusting and operating various mechanical devices as their more favored brethren and their oppressors. This I believe would be the most correct manner in which the race could go upon record in their connection with the World's Fair, not as mendicants suing for a cold worlds [sic] sympathy but as exhibitors a part and parcel of this great Commonwealth though they may not be recognized as such here.

Thos. H. Stuart

Pine Bluff, Ark.ⁱ

With opposition to the distribution of a pamphlet, Ida B. Wells replied in the *Cleveland Gazette* of July 22, 1893. The dignities were too frequent and flagrant. Wells replied:

EDITOR GAZETTE: -- So many write to ask me to send them an explanation of what the world's fair pamphlet is intended to for, that I beg space to say in a few words what we are trying to do.

There is no appropriation for stamps, secretary, etc., hence it comes very hard to answer every personal letter I get on the subject.

It was thought that as the intelligence, skill and every civilized people on the globe was to be represented at the fair, and that many would come expecting to see something of the Afro-American; that as he had been so studiously kept out of the representation in any official capacity and given menial places, it was only the race's duty to tell why this is so. Especially does this seem necessary when the foreigner, knowing nothing about the kind of prejudice prevailing in this country, will be told all manner of things to the Afro-American's discredit as a race by the white American. The pamphlet is intended as a calm, dignified statement of the Afro-American's side of the story, from the beginning to the present day; a recital of the obstacles which have hampered him; a sketch of what he has done in the twenty-five years with all his prosecution; and a statement of the fruitless efforts he made for representation at the world's fair.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ *Indianapolis Freeman*, May 6, 1893, page 7.

ⁱⁱ "Miss Ida B. Wells Informs Our Readers as to Condition of the World's Fair Pamphlet Movement," *Cleveland Gazette*, July 22, 1893, 1.