

Cleveland's Role in Black Resistance and Civil Rights

Shortly after [Cleveland's formation](#), black freepersons and fugitives alike trickled into the burgeoning city. In 1820 there were only 54 black residents in Cleveland and the surrounding areas. By 1850 the small hamlet reached city proportions with a population of 17,034 and a small black population of 224-barely 1% of the population. In 1861, the black population reached 800 and in 1870 slowly multiplied to 1300.¹ Despite the black population's small size, some of the most dynamic abolitionists, black conventioners, speakers, and writers of their time arose in the city.

Described as "a decidedly militant lot," Black Clevelanders gained a reputation for their readiness "to hold a meeting, call a convention, circulate a petition, or pressure a legislator at the slightest provocation."² Anti-Slavery activism was prevalent, and the city became the site of many famous black abolitionists, including community leaders [John Malvin](#), famous for his autobiography, *North to Freedom*; [John Brown](#), a black barber, real estate investor and wealthy business owner; and the short lived resident [William Wells Brown](#), well-known for the first African American novel *Clotel*; and [William H. Day](#), who gained national notoriety in nineteenth century as publisher of the *Aliened American*, Cleveland's first black newspaper. Although not as well documented, black women also played active roles in the abolitionist movement, including detailed accounts of participation in aggressive forms of resistance from fugitive committees to anti-slavery protests.

Black Clevelanders also joined free black residents across the state to challenge Ohio's Black Codes, which prohibited the right to vote, testify in court against whites, serve in the militia, or attend school. Black residents participated and led many of the protests, and regularly petitioned the state legislature to end its discriminatory laws. Among Ohio's black community,

educational access and voting rights had particular importance. Cleveland's black parents, for example, petitioned for public school access in 1843. However, the city council voted against it. Prohibitions in school integration inspired self-help movements to establish a school for black children in Cleveland.³

Self-help, mutual aid, and "group consciousness" among Black Clevelanders, developed throughout the 1840s. By 1845, self-help and educational societies developed among Cleveland's 160 black residents. They formed literary groups, Negro militias, and fraternal organizations like Young Men's Union Society (1839), Masons (1855), and Odd Fellows (1858). During the Civil War, black women of Cleveland formed the Colored Ladies Auxiliary Soldiers' Aid Society (1863).⁴

Nationally, Black Clevelanders became part of a larger movement to challenge both slavery and discrimination in Free states. The [National Negro Convention Movement](#) first met in 1831 in Philadelphia, but soon spread across the United States. Free people of color organized on various national and local issues including: Black Laws, slavery, deportation schemes by the American Colonization Society, voting rights, and educational access. Access to education became a seminal point over which to begin the call for a Negro Convention, inspiring Black Clevelanders to participate in the first Ohio Negro Convention in Columbus, Ohio in 1835.⁵

The emigrationist impulse also insinuated itself into convention debate, and many considered the establishment of international Black American colonies. Emigrationist supporters reflected early prototypes of Black Nationalism. [Black Nationalist philosophy](#) developed ideologically as far back as the eighteenth century, but reached its fullest formation during the 19th century. Negro conventioners debated the emigration movement- with its emphasis on

black pride, self-empowerment, and liberation through all black settlements domestically and abroad- appeared in almost every other convention meeting.⁶

Significantly the emigration argument for establishing independence and self-reliance differed from white American colonization visions of black removal. For example, Black Clevelanders twice participated in the Columbus 1849 and 1851 conventions to protest public funding attempts by the state legislature for the Ohio American Colonization Society. However, the 1848 Cleveland Convention separately included a report on Michigan as a possible frontier Black settlement location. By 1854, delegates gathered at the Congregational Church on Prospect Street for the first [National Emigration Convention](#), which advocated for Black liberation, self-respect, and nation building. Led by [Martin R. Delany](#), the emigration representatives selected Cleveland as their convention city, because “Cleveland is now the centre to all directions.”⁷

The National Emigration Movement, however, was waylaid by the advent of Civil War in the United States. The federal government initially denied Black Americans entry into the military, but dynamics changed drastically in 1863 when Massachusetts received the authority to form all black units. Led by abolitionist John Malvin, Black Cleveland residents immediately responded to the call. Malvin organized Cleveland’s first black military company to join the [54th](#) and [55th](#) Massachusetts regiments. Meanwhile, Black Cleveland women formed the Colored Ladies Auxiliary of the Soldiers’ Aid Society of Northern Ohio in 1863 to send supplies for sick and wounded soldiers.⁸

The post-Civil War period marked a slow intensification and solidification of segregation in the city. Increases in immigrant groups and migration from Southern Black populations led to overcrowding in the city, and early residential segregation. In 1880, the black community was still only 1.5% of the city. The Black population increased in 1900s as Cleveland became the

largest city in Ohio and the fifth largest city in the United States. By 1910, black population numbers rapidly went from 8,448 to 34,451 in 1920, and 71,899 in 1930. Over 90% of the Black residents settled on the east side of the city, and most arrived from the upper south of North Carolina, Virginia, and Kentucky or from the deep southern states of Georgia and Alabama.⁹

The early post-Civil War period marked the rise of a black elite, many of whom shifted from street protest to activist politics. Black male leaders like Ohio State Legislator Jeremiah A. Brown, State Senator [John P. Green](#); newspaper editor and writer [Harry C. Smith](#) and wealthy businessman [George Myers](#) were stalwart integrationists and major political players and fundraisers in the Republican Party. These black political elites, and other black republican leaders laid the groundwork for Ohio's earliest civil rights law, which served as the foundation for legal challenges to discrimination in the 1960s. Smith for example played an instrumental role in the passage of the 1896 anti-lynching law as an Ohio State legislator before becoming the editor of the [Cleveland Gazette](#). Myers and Green were both Republican movers and shakers who played significant roles in the election of Ohio senator [Marcus Hanna](#), and support for the United States president, [William McKinley](#).¹⁰

Black elites, however, declined in standing during the 1900s. New southern residents reflected earlier Black Clevelander proclivities for self-help and street protest. These distinctions increased after 1910 as Cleveland witnessed an uptick in discrimination, formalized structures of segregation, and the early formation of the ghetto. City officials failed to enforce the Ohio Civil Rights anti-discrimination laws in hotels, restaurants, retail stores, and transportation. Discrimination in hospitals, educational institutions, social welfare organizations, and amusement and recreational facilities became a normal aspect of life. The city also failed to

manage basic services like garbage pick-up and street car maintenance, and ignored complaints about police harassment.¹¹

Additionally, residential segregation and over population on the east side forced many southern arrivals to live in railroad cars, tents, abandoned buildings, and shacks. White homeowners became landlords as they converted houses to multiple rented rooms, and grossly overcharged. Those black Clevelanders who attempted to leave and live in white neighborhoods faced racial housing covenants, or violent attacks by white neighbors. Large population density also led to much higher disease and mortality rates than in white communities.¹²

While black Clevelanders encountered discrimination at every turn, they also developed complex friend and kinship networks which infused the city with a highly visible southern black culture. Black neighborhoods set the stage for all black political wards, and Black religious institutions, welfare entities, and businesses grew exponentially. Increased population spurred a closer relationship between residents and black leadership, sustained economic independence, and spurred the expansion of a professional class in the black community.¹³

These developments stimulated a burgeoning political and cultural power that defined a generation, which the *Cleveland Gazette* early presaged as the coming of the “[New Negro](#).”¹⁴ [Thomas Fleming](#) became the city’s first black councilman by 1916. [Lethia Fleming](#), Thomas Fleming’s second wife, assisted black self-help charities in the city and led the National Association of Republican Colored Women founded in 1920. Lethia Fleming, in many ways, reflected the nexus of the black political and social experience in Cleveland. She also served various charity groups including the Cleveland Home for Aged Colored People and the Negro Welfare Association. She was also an active member of the Cleveland NAACP, the Phillis

Wheatley Association founded by [Jane Edna Hunter](#), and a life member of the Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World.¹⁵

Other community groups in Cleveland included: [Cleveland Association of Colored Men](#) (a National Negro Business League affiliate), which consisted of black businessmen and politicians; [Negro Welfare Association](#) (later becomes the Urban League of Greater Cleveland in 1940), which focused on employment, housing, and training sessions on basic city services; [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) (NAACP) Cleveland chapter established in 1912, which developed an early racial consciousness among its middle class leadership; and the [Universal Negro Improvement Association](#) (UNIA), which played a role in radicalizing the early NAACP chapter, and reflected black nationalist philosophy of Marcus Garvey.¹⁶

Although there were a number of other organizations, the above groups proved to be the most recognized black community associations. Their philosophy and organizing principles indicated varied strategies and approaches to community building, along with distinctive protest styles. However, the NAACP played a particularly significant role in Cleveland's black activism. It aggressively attacked discrimination policies in public accommodations, school segregation, unfair housing, and job inequality. Their New Negro leadership style and aggressive stance against discrimination turned the local NAACP into a formidable organization. The Cleveland branch became one of the largest chapters in the United States by the late 1930s. Its assertive activism was unequal until the advent of the more aggressive Future Outlook League.¹⁷

All these institutions illustrated distinctive approaches to black community empowerment. Conversely, diverse membership within civil rights and social service organizations acutely intensified differences and heightened these tensions. Groups following

the [Booker T. Washington](#) model accommodation to segregation operated in tandem with organizations who advocated integration or groups who resided in the middle. Yet, no matter the organization's mission or style of engagement, all formed out of the need to serve an increased black population arriving from the south.

Churches and newspapers also played pivotal roles of advocacy, organizing, and civil rights leadership. Black Churches like [Cory United Methodist Church](#), which formed in 1875, and [Antioch Baptist Church](#), established in 1893, became central institutions for leadership in civil rights activities.¹⁸ Additionally, newspapers like the [Cleveland Journal](#) advocated self-help ideology. The *Cleveland Journal* published its last paper in 1912, but soon after the [Cleveland Advocate](#) followed.¹⁹ Originally considered a moderate paper, the *Cleveland Advocate* became the longest running paper from 1914 until 1924 until the emergence of [Cleveland Call and Post](#).

Cleveland Call and Post began as two separate newspapers, the *Cleveland Call* and the *Cleveland Post*, during the 1920s. The two struggling papers merged in 1927. The arrival of [William O. Walker](#) in 1932 set both the newspaper (and later black civil rights and activism), on a new and successful course. Walker eventually took over ownership of the paper growing its subscription to include city editions in Columbus and Cincinnati. By the 1940s, Editor William O. Walker had turned *Call and Post* into a major force of social protest well into the late 1970s. Walker represented a strongly empowered southern black middle-class leadership, but they too would be usurped by a growing militancy rising from the economic bottom.

The years leading up to and following World War II proved difficult for Black Americans. The period between 1930 and 1960 witnessed an exacerbation of the economic, political and social oppression. Still, local black communities from south to north—including Cleveland—galvanized and protested against these inequalities. The NAACP spent much of the

decade pushing civil rights bills and anti-lynching legislation. The chapter was particularly active in local civil rights cases, including the house bombing of Edgar Dixon, a Black veteran who built his home in Cleveland Heights. However, employment discrimination and hardship during the 1930s and 1940s engendered the rise of communist-supported advocates and direct-action protests who differed from the NAACP's legal approach.

Black southern workers became the foundation for a new kind of black activism that combined direct action and self-defense. The Great Depression period inspired Black Clevelanders to join organizations who critiqued capitalism and embraced socialism. The Cleveland [Council of the National Negro Congress](#), for example, drew national members for the annual conference meeting in Cleveland. The National Negro Congress was an umbrella organization for black civic, religious, and labor organization. Founded in 1936 in Chicago, the organization spread throughout north and Midwest United States. Its focus included equal housing and fair employment, along with an end to lynching and police brutality. Cleveland Council of NNC tended to focus on public accommodation, particularly public parks and the swimming pool at Woodhill Park.

Across the United States, other kinds of activism took root in economic boycotts known as Don't-Buy-Where-You-Can't-Work campaigns. These campaigns protested companies that refuse to hire black workers appeared sporadically during the 1920s. However, during the 1930s the Don't-Buy-Where-You-Can't-Work campaign spread from New York to Chicago. In Cleveland, the campaign eventually came to Cleveland via [John O. Holly](#), a black southerner and founder of the [Future Outlook League](#) (FOL).²⁰

February 1935, a group of black Clevelanders gathered at the home of John O. Holly to discuss the status of black Cleveland's jobless poor and the formation of a direct-action

organization that could address their employment need. Out of this small cadre, a group formed at the first meeting. Under the direction of John Holly, the organization's motto became "the future is yours", and its membership grew to over 10,000+ members. The Future Outlook League utilized confrontational language, direct action protest, boycotts, social pressure, and self-defense to challenge discrimination in employment and violence by the police. Holly eventually gained support from W. O. Walker who advertised the activities of the Future Outlook League. Although FOL began its decline in the 1940s, Holly became a powerbroker in the local and state Democratic Party and this influence led future black mayor, Carl Stokes to seek him out for apprenticeship.²¹

As FOL slowed its activities during the 1940s, another small direct-action organization established its headquarters in Cleveland, Ohio. The Executive Director, recently departed from Chicago, re-established the national headquarters of the [Congress of Racial Equality](#) (CORE) in Cleveland. The early CORE years signaled a different kind of activism—originally based in non-violent direct action and mass action—but eventually becoming more militant. Together FOL and CORE defined 1940s protest in Cleveland, Ohio culminating in the "[Euclid Beach Riot](#)." The protest included an interracial group of CORE and FOL members who challenged segregation in Euclid Beach Amusement Park. The ensuing scuffle with local police ignited a high degree of pressure from civil rights groups, leading the city of Cleveland to outlaw discrimination in amusement parks.

Meanwhile, the population concentration in the [Central Avenue](#) area of Cleveland continued to grow. In the post WWII period, the black city population steadily increased from 10% in 1940 to 16% in 1950 to 32% by 1960. Between 1940 and 1960, Cleveland experienced its greatest influx of black southern migrants in the city's history. The majority settled on the

east side where approximately 99.9% of the black population resided.²² Simultaneously, the white population in the city declined. One fifth of the white population of Cleveland abandoned the inner city for suburbia. From 1960 to 1963 an additional 44,500 departed and left only Cleveland's west side and the ethnic enclaves on the east side as the last areas of white residency.²³

The resultant population change enhanced black political power from 1930 to 1950. The black vote determined the winner of the mayoral race in 1933, 1935, and 1937. Beginning with the election of city councilmen, [Clayborne George](#), Thomas Fleming, and Dr. Eugene Gregg in 1927, the Central Avenue area kept a steady slate of three black council members until the 1950s when the number went from three to eight in 1959 out of a total of thirty-three council members.²⁴

Though black politicians and organizations, addressed some of the black community's problems, their efforts failed to substantively transform the everyday lives of the black working and poor. This was due, in no small part, to the focus on social welfare as a major panacea for poverty. Charitable giving, northern matriculation services, food, and clothing efforts out-measured work that addressed poor housing or overcrowding.

Overcrowding and white flight created an even harsher division of residential segregation. Despite circumscribed suburban boundaries, the white exodus from the inner city expanded the black community's ability to spread outside the traditional areas of the Central Avenue corridor. Previously all white areas turned into all black neighborhoods almost overnight. [Kinsman](#), [Buckeye](#), [Hough](#), [Glenville](#), and [Mt. Pleasant](#) transformed from traditionally white hands to black middle-class hands to black working class and poor hands.²⁵

Home ownership increased, but only in the oldest sections of Cleveland, one third of which classified as deteriorated or dilapidated.²⁶ Most of these homes were fifty years old or more and located in the oldest sections of the city. Subsequently, the houses were also less likely to have been fitted for in-door plumbing or running water. In fact, for every dollar spent on homeownership, the black community was four times as likely to live in homes of bad quality. In one area of 1200 dwellings, Urban League researchers found that 99% of the housing fit the above condition.²⁷

Renters also faced economic problems. For every dollar spent on rent, black Clevelanders were twice as likely to receive poorer quality housing. White Clevelanders who abandoned the city for suburbia, garnered substantial profit by charging exorbitant rent. Former one or two-family homes became rental property for three or more incoming southern black families. Thus the continuum of overcrowded housing that began in the Central Avenue area during the early 1920s spread in the 1950s and 1960s to neighborhoods such as Glenville and Hough, in particular. More importantly, the concurrent effort to “clean up” slum areas translated into massive urban renewal in which the city removed dilapidated housing but never replaced it. The city of Cleveland exacerbated black people’s housing circumstances by its refusal to end segregation in public housing and its allotment of fewer public housing units for black residents.²⁸

Black Clevelanders encountered employment difficulties as well. Cleveland was among the first cities to pass a Fair Employment Practices law in 1950. In the same year, the city ranked black unemployment in Cleveland at an average of 25%. In 1960, it reached 31.5%. The bulk of black labor concentrated in manufacturing and industrial unskilled occupations. Though these industries provided higher income than other occupations, the labor was hard and intensive. Even

further, Black Clevelanders faced additional job loss as industrial and manufacturing corporations left the area in the 1950s and 1960s for cheaper labor in the south.²⁹

Although industrial jobs provided an opportunity for slight upward mobility, it hardly mitigated the overall deleterious effects of poverty. Among Cleveland's welfare recipients, three out of four cases appeared in low-income black communities. Welfare cases were 2/3 likely to be located in Hough, Glenville, and Central. In fact, one newspaper article noted that Cleveland had more Alabamans on welfare relief than any other state but Alabama. Cleveland-born welfare recipients only managed to top the former number by forty. Additionally, 3/4 of the dependent child cases were in the previously noted areas. Meanwhile, 30% of the AFDC recipients came out of Hough alone.³⁰

Education failed to provide a pathway out of poverty. The average education of a black adult in 1950 Cleveland approximated one year of high school. In 1960, the statistic barely moved to only two years of high school for the average 25-year-old. The Cleveland School Board's decision not to build additional schools drastically curbed educational opportunities from childhood to adulthood. It also created massive overcrowding where the average teacher to student ratio went well over the recommended thirty. Some of the schools went without proper facilities, including school libraries and playgrounds. For every \$500 spent on white students in Cleveland schools, black students received \$379.³¹

The greatest civil rights activism in Cleveland centered on the recurrent issue of unequal education. Since the antebellum period, Black Clevelanders fought for equal education and even developed their own schools to ensure their children's education. The grievances massively increased with the first and second great migrations to Cleveland. As far back as 1933, the NAACP sent a complaint regarding the reduction in curriculum, the low number of students

taking math at Central, and the replacement of foreign language and bookkeeping with home economics and manual training classes like laundry instruction. Complaints again focused on the recurring placement of black children in low achieving, dumping schools that earned the moniker of “dumbbell schools” or the “penitentiary”. Additionally, the number of black southern children classified for “special classes” continued to rise.³²

By the 1950s these issues were exacerbated as the school board added police to schools. Further, buildings grew old, students struggled with poor equipment, schools operated with inefficient playground and library facilities, and forced overcrowding. The School Board of Education made matters worse when it refused to update or build new schools, while it authorized construction of new schools in white communities where population was dropping.³³

Meanwhile, black school population from 1950 to 1965 went up from 98,000 to 149,655 with elementary schools experiencing the worse overpopulation. From 1931-1950, schools in the Central Avenue area became overwhelmingly black. School districts were deliberately drawn to maintain segregation. White neighborhoods closer to the black school district were designated optional zones and white students who fully fell within black school districts were granted “special transfers” out of predominantly Black schools. Again, the NAACP lodged complaints in the 1950s and 1960s with the Cleveland School Board of Education, but to no avail.³⁴

Tensions around education became the primary foci of black activism during 1950s Cleveland. Black parents initiated action when the school board began relay classes. Relay classes relegated black students to half days, approximately a period of only 3 ½ hours a day. Hough and Glenville were the first neighborhoods to feel the impact of relay classes starting in 1955. While white classes stood empty and more schools were built in white neighborhoods,

black children attended school in overcrowded dilapidated surroundings. The school board refused to add schools to black neighborhoods, but argued a philosophy that “neighborhood schools” served as the best foundation for public education. The “neighborhood school” policy justified its crowding of black children into fewer schools as well as its refusal to transfer black students to white schools. The policy also allowed the Cleveland Board of Education to claim it did not discriminate and was thus in compliance with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision.³⁵

Black parents pushed school board to expand educational spaces. Classrooms were set up in churches, libraries, and portable classrooms - all of which were located in the black community. Parents additionally pushed for the purchase of a school bus that could transfer students to less crowded classrooms in black schools. As protests mounted over the relay classes, the school board sought passage of school building levies, but the referendums failed, and no new schools were built. When community action waned, the school board allowed the problem to grow. However, the school desegregation protest of the 1950s would shape activism in Cleveland in the first half of the 1960s, and define the advent of black power in the latter half.³⁶

As the 1960s civil right movement began, Cleveland’s black communities also joined the fray and sought to redress the de facto segregation and poverty that circumscribed much of their life in the North. A community with a history of antebellum abolition mobilization and self-help organization in the Progressive Era, Cleveland’s militant black direct-action protests started in full swing with local small groups demonstrating for educational and employment opportunities. Organizations like the Freedom Fighters, Save Our Schools, local parent associations, and the Job Seekers appeared in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and worked alongside older

organizations like the Urban League, NAACP, and CORE who continued to advocate on behalf of the black community.

1960s civil rights activism and the failure to end school segregation, eventually inspired black political power. Activists began in earnest to remove Cleveland Board of Education members and the mayor, who had sided with segregationist policies. From this firestorm emerged the first black mayor of an urban city, [Carl Stokes](#). Stokes and his brother, Congressman [Louis Stokes](#) played pivotal roles in local and national politics, including co-founding the national Congressional Black Caucus.

Under Stokes, Black Cleveland sought to challenge the economic deprivation that led to two city riots in Hough (1964) and Glenville (1968), and financially depressed the whole city. Despite the political and economic energies that galvanized Cleveland's black community, the economic depression and environmental issues continued to plague Stokes' efforts to revive the city. As Cleveland entered the 1970s, the 1960s suppression of black activists by police, the emergence of stagflation, and the departure of Stokes killed efforts to revive the city.

Meanwhile, school segregation emerged again as a firestorm in Cleveland that eventually culminated in the famous 1976 [Reed v. Rhodes](#). The Rhodes was brought by the NAACP and 12 complainants who sought to redress the hole left by the Supreme Court *Brown* decision which failed to address the combination of de jure and de facto segregation in northern urban spaces. The NAACP successfully litigated the case, and Rhodes federal district court case finally ended segregation in Cleveland drawing the civil rights movement to a close. Although civil rights activism in Cleveland, Ohio did not end with the 1970s, civil rights activism would not coalesce again into a mass movement again until decades later with the rise of the [Black Lives Matter movement](#).

END NOTES

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- ⁵ Nikki Taylor, "Reconsidering the "Forced" Exodus of 1829: Free Black Emigration from Cincinnati, Ohio to Wilberforce, Canada," *The Journal of African American History* (2002), 295; Malvin, 65.
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- ¹⁰ For larger discussion of other new elite black leaders and their activities in Cleveland see Davis' *Black Americans in Cleveland*, 131-34 and Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape : Black Cleveland, 1870-1930*, 118-20; Larry Cuban, *A Strategy for Racial Peace : Negro Leadership in Cleveland, 1900-1919*, (*Phylon* (1960) 305. Kim Carey, "Straddling the Color Line: African American Elites in Cleveland, 1877-1915," PhD diss (Kent State University, 2013) 5, 43;
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- ³³ Whyte, *African American Community*, 55-56. 86-88.
- ³⁴ New Comer's Committee minutes, April 22, 1957, Box 7, Folder 3, NAACP Papers, WRHS. Leonard Moore, "The School Desegregation Crisis of Cleveland, Ohio, 1963-1964: The Catalyst for Black Political Power in a Northern City," *Journal of Urban History* (January 2002), 135-136. Whyte, *African American Community*, 77-81
- ³⁵ Whyte, *African American Community*, 104
- ³⁶ Students for Civil Rights at Western Reserve, "Cleveland Education Chronology," April 13, 1964, *The informer* article, Box 1, Folder 1, Bruce Klunder Papers (hereafter Klunder Papers), WRHS; also in Box 29, Folder 2, NAACP Papers; Whyte, *African American Community*, 16, 105-106, 135.