The Corinthian

Volume 14 Article 4

2013

The roots of organized resistance: African American political mobilization in southwest Georgia, 1918-1945

John H. Cable
Georgia College & State University

John Henry Cable

Faculty Sponsor Dr. Mark Huddle

THE ROOTS OF ORGANIZED RESISTANCE: AFRICAN AMERICAN POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN SOUTHWEST GEORGIA, 1918-1945

"The whole land seems forlorn and forsaken… This is the Land of the Unfenced, where crouch on either hand scores of ugly one-room cabins, cheerless and dirty. Here lies the Negro problem in its naked dirt and penury. And here are no fences."

-W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903[1]

"Albany was beginning to stir now. The Youth Council of the NAACP, the Baptist Ministers' Alliance, other Negro groups, were meeting, talking, arguing, but agreeing on one basic fact: it was time to act… With the coalescing of all forces into a united and militant movement it meant that massive reinforcements would be ready to act when the next reconnaissance action took place."

-Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 1964[2]

Following World War I, a new, militant spirit of resistance and activism burgeoned among African-American citizens across the United States. Empowered by the sense that blacks had played a crucial role in the conflict, the descendants of freedmen returned home to fight for their own rights only to find persecution; this dire situation called for immediate, decisive action. During the interwar years, African Americans in the southwest Georgia Black Belt fought for community empowerment and, through the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and numerous other political and labor-oriented groups, established a significant organizing tradition, thereby laying the foundation for the modern civil rights movement in the area.

At the onset of the 1960s civil rights movement, when activists and demonstrators descended on southwest Georgia en masse, the local white power structure sought to disseminate the idea that African-Americans in the region had been largely content, even docile since emancipation. Sheriff Z.T. Matthews of Terrell County, interviewed by Claude Sitton of the *New York Times* in 1962, stated, "We want our colored people to go on living like they have for the last hundred years."[3] The implication was clear enough—black southwest Georgians had always been relatively satisfied with the racial climate and did not feel as though any significant reforms needed to be effected. Even if these people had not been entirely content, or so conventional wisdom had it, certainly no one had dared resist until the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had led the community in mass demonstrations the previous year. Indeed, almost every historian who has dealt with the southwest Georgia movement has made a similar assertion. However, such a notion could not be farther from the truth. The organizing tradition amongst oppressed African-Americans involved a sustained working-class struggle over several decades that was both tenacious and politically heterogeneous.

In order to more fully understand the agendas and motivations for this political activity in southwest Georgia, one must first have some clue as to the nature and scope of their economic options. In 1935, noted statistician Charles E. Hall, under the supervision of Z.R. Pettet of the United States Bureau of the Census, published an exhaustive study of the social and economic characteristics of African-America entitled *Negroes in the United States.* Based upon information gathered by the Census Bureau, the work provides invaluable insight into the lives and movements of black Americans in the early part of the century. One crucial inference that may be drawn from Hall's compilation is the overwhelmingly rural composition of the African-American population in southwest Georgia counties as late as 1930. For the purposes of the

study, Hall employed the terms "urban" and "rural" in accordance with the meanings assigned those terms by the Census Bureau; an urban population was considered to be "that residing in cities or other incorporated places having 2,500 inhabitants or more," and the rest were considered rural.[4] Out of the twenty-three counties that composed the southwest Georgia region under scrutiny here, only three contained populations whose African-American constituencies were more heavily represented in urban areas. In the rest of the counties, fifty percent or more of the African-American population resided in rural areas in which they mostly lived and worked on farms.[5] Therefore the social and political concerns that informed black southwest Georgians' various forms of resistance were almost entirely those of the rural agricultural laborer.

In the years preceding the publication of Hall's compilation, representatives from the United States Bureau of Chemistry and Soils conducted soil surveys in nearly all twenty-three of the counties in question. Not only did such surveys provide soil profiles, data on regional climate patterns, and recommendations for improving land husbandry in the various locales, but they also contained useful information on the makeup of the rural, farm-working population. For instance, in Randolph – a typical rural, southwest Georgia county with a small county seat in Cuthbert – while most white farmers raised enough hogs to supply their own families, African-American tenant farmers almost universally had to rely upon others for their meat supply.[6] Additionally, while nearly all of the hired laborers in the county were African-Americans, the Great Migration had somewhat reduced this number. Such a decline in the black population in Randolph County between 1920 and 1930 is evident, as well, in Hall's Census Bureau figures.[7] Similarly, in Clay County, laborers were "mostly negroes," while in Worth County (which boasted six UNIA divisions), not only were black workers almost solely relied upon for farm labor, but their wives and children were often forced to work alongside them performing other

"light tasks."[8] Therefore, as the authors of the early soil survey reports indicated, a majority of black southwest Georgians – trapped in a cycle of rural poverty and dependency and constantly wary of the possibility of falling into peonage – had to learn to resist oppression and virtual re-enslavement while being held in the lowest possible economic caste.

By 1918, sporadic African American political mobilization and protest in southwest Georgia was occurring – and had been occurring since the reconstruction period – despite a long and tragic history of intense racial violence in the region. The 1868 Camilla race riot, an incident in which heavily armed white Democrats massacred a group of freedmen and several white Republicans in broad daylight, set a precedent for the slew of similarly vicious attacks that were to occur in southwest Georgia up to (and well after) the conclusion of World War I. As Lee W. Formwalt contends, it also offered an early display of the resolve of the Democratic Party in the region with regard to stifling any and all radical Republican activity.[9] Lynchings, politically motivated and otherwise, continued to occur with startling frequency following the Camilla riot in the decades immediately leading up to the interwar period. African-American Communist lawyer Benjamin J. Davis, who had been raised in rural Dawson, Terrell County in the early 1900s, later acknowledged the severity of violent oppression in the region, stating that the "lynch rope and intimidation were the 'rule of law' that governed black men and women."[10] On January 20, 1916, a mob of "forty or fifty," acting "with precision indicative of carefully laid plans," lynched five African American men in Starkville (near Leesburg, Lee County).[11] *The Crisis*, the monthly newsletter of the NAACP, included in its April 1916 issue an etching from a photograph it had received of the five men dangling from a tree with a proud white citizen posing nearby.[12] Such crimes were typically justified in the newspapers of the small South Georgia towns in which they occurred, and, most of the time, the perpetrators were never punished.

There is no evidence to suggest that African-Americans in southwest Georgia ever allowed such events to render their communities politically inactive. Indeed, some in the late 19th century set an important precedent by joining the growing number of freedmen across the South who sought to return to Africa. On June 14, 1890, Thomasville, Georgia native Joseph Jones departed New York City for Monrovia, Liberia. Jones later stated that Joseph Campbell, a Liberian-American preacher, had first planted the idea of emigration in his mind at a service in Monticello, Florida (23 miles from Thomasville) where Jones attended church. Campbell had allegedly urged the congregation to "'pull up stakes' and go [to Liberia] to live," promising great riches to all who would agree to follow him.[13] In an interview with a Thomasville reporter, Jones stated that he knew many in the Thomas County area who were interested in relocating to Liberia and that his intention was to travel there first to assess the legitimacy of Campbell's claims.[14] Joseph Jones returned to the United States less than a year later with nothing but complaints about his experience in Africa. Nonetheless, the shared impulse to emigrate would remain in the region – albeit in a state of dormancy – until it was reignited in the 1920s by a completely new political movement.

The first major outlet for African-American political expression to emerge in southwest Georgia following World War I, however, was the NAACP. The association's early mission entailed the "completion of the work which the great emancipator [Lincoln] began," and it purported to render African-Americans "physically free from peonage, mentally free from ignorance, politically free from disfranchisement and socially free from insult."[15] The NAACP worked mostly through the courts in attempts to effect the eventual collapse of Jim Crow-era discrimination, and, in the years leading up to and immediately following World War I, the association grew exponentially. Membership figures from 1919 indicate that the number of

branches more than doubled nationwide in 1918 alone.[16] Growing numbers of middle class black citizens sent their two dollars to the association's Fifth Avenue office in New York in return for a year's membership and a 12-month subscription to *The Crisis*. Just as E. Franklin Frazier later wrote that the NAACP clung to a "middle class outlook and… middle class values," those southwest Georgians most able to afford the dues and most inclined to become members of the association were typically not agricultural toilers or members of the lower classes.[17]

On August 8, 1918, the Georgia General Assembly approved an act requiring all able-bodied persons between sixteen and fifty-five years of age to "be regularly or continuously engaged in some lawful, useful and recognized business, profession, occupation, or employment" or else face punishment for non-compliance.[18] On the surface, such laws – commonly known to Georgians as "work-or-fight" orders – were intended to force into military service any male who was deemed unproductive on the home front. However, in most cases, the "work-or-fight" orders simply provided law enforcement officers with an easy way to earn money by arresting innocent African-Americans on the charge and selling them into the service. In Pelham, Mitchell County, under the enforcement of "work-or-fight," black insurance agents were coerced into finding other work deemed more appropriate for wartime.[19] Nevertheless, as John Dittmer has shown, the middle-class black civic league in Thomasville, Georgia defiantly organized an NAACP branch after having successfully halted local enforcement of the order in 1918.[20] As of March 1919, the new Thomasville branch contained 52 members, an impressive number for such hostile territory.[21] On a tour through several Southern states in May 1918, NAACP Field Secretary James Weldon Johnson also helped establish a branch in nearby Albany.[22] These NAACP branches enjoyed a certain degree of prestige for having been the first

and, thus far, the only serious post-war African-American political organizations in southwest Georgia.

For a short time, the NAACP showed signs of continued growth and popularity in southwest Georgia. Members of the various branches throughout the state, including those from Thomasville and Albany, attended the Cleveland and Atlanta NAACP national conventions in 1919 and 1920, respectively. The enthusiasm engendered by news of the 1920 convention in Atlanta provided the impetus for African-American citizens in Cordele, Crisp County and Americus, Sumter County to form branches in time to send three representatives as well[23]. Most notably the formation of the Cordele branch came on the heels of intense racial strife in the community. Enraged mobs had destroyed three African-American churches just months before.[24] No sooner, however, had southwest Georgia shown its support for the organization than distressing circumstances hit the Thomasville branch. Previously, on September 12, 1919, *Thomasville Times-Enterprise* editor H.R. Banister had published his own scathing critique of the NAACP and its national goals. Banister had warned readers that the organization – coupled with the new ideas of social equality and equal rights that black veterans were bringing back from France – was incendiary and should be checked. Of the new political freedoms that African-Americans (particularly veterans) hoped to gain, Banister stated that these "mistaken idea[s] must be removed."[25] Within months of the editorial's publication and the 1920 Annual Convention, whites threatened to kill the local NAACP president, after which the branch disbanded.[26] Despite an attempt in 1924 to organize the timid former-members into a new branch, white resistance forced black citizens to find other means of resisting oppression for the remainder of the decade.

Meanwhile, another major avenue through which African-Americans in southwest Georgia organized themselves during the early interwar years was the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Founded by Jamaican immigrant Marcus Garvey in 1914, the organization's purpose was to "promote the spirit of race pride and love" as well as to "promote a universal confraternity and strengthen the bonds of brotherhood and unity among the race."[27] Garvey idealized Africa as a "Motherland" for members of the diaspora worldwide and advocated a wholesale black re-colonization of the continent, "as Europe is by the white race."[28] Although Garvey had been an admirer of Booker T. Washington – indeed a meeting with Washington at Tuskegee had been his reason for making an initial voyage to the United States – his ideas of race pride and separatism rendered him at odds with established leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson.[29] It is not difficult to conceive of such a radically provocative leader blossoming in the urban North (which Garvey certainly did); however, a significant number of African-Americans – perhaps tens of thousands – followed Garvey's teachings and espoused his unique ideology in the rural South.

For all practical purposes, South Georgia's first contact with Garveyism occurred as a result of UNIA organizer Rev. J.W.H. Eason's early-1921 tour through the state. Eason began in Glynn County, on the east coast, where he met with "triumph after triumph."[30] Navigating his way around the southeastern portion of the state with the help of the region's tightly-knit network of African-American Missionary Baptist preachers, Eason had success organizing divisions in both Brunswick and Brookman. At the behest of the Georgia UNIA organizer, the Rev. F.W. Ware, within months of Eason's initial tour divisions sprang up in Waycross and Gardi as well.[31] J.C. Wilson, Executive Secretary of the Brunswick 67th Division, wrote in a letter to the *Negro World* that Garveyites in the area were meeting regularly and were anxious to

make "the 67th Division an unbreakable link in this world-wide Negro movement."[32] For most of 1921, the Garvey movement gathered strength in the southeastern portion of the state but did not spread westward beyond the already established divisions.

In January and February of 1922, Garveyism took hold in southwest Georgia. Under the guidance of local organizer and UNIA State Commissioner S.V. Robinson, divisions and chapters steadily sprang up in Newton, Baker County; Fitzgerald, Ben Hill County; Moultrie and Center Hill, Colquitt County; Adel, Cook County; Damascus, Early County; Camilla and Pelham, Mitchell County; Ty Ty, Tift County; Coverdale, Turner County; and Sylvester, Charity Grove, Shingler, and Oakfield, Worth County.[33] Such was the enthusiasm in that part of the state for Garvey's message that Commissioner Robinson, speaking at the Second Baptist Church in Camilla on February 13, 1922, proclaimed that "even if the Hon. Marcus Garvey should die this movement will still go on."[34] Leaders of the southwest Georgia UNIA divisions, typically pastors or other church leaders that were already pillars of the community, wrote regularly to the *Negro World* that their respective congregants were unreservedly devoted to Garvey's cause and would follow his leadership unconditionally – despite never having laid eyes on the man.

Although the locations of such rural divisions appear on the surface to have been random, the interdependence of politics, geography, and the burgeoning transportation systems of South Georgia served to dictate the nature and scope of African American community mobilization. Worth, the southwest Georgia county boasting the highest concentration of UNIA divisions in the region, was dissected by the Albany and Brunswick branch of the Atlantic Coast Line – a railroad that connected the county seat of Sylvester with Albany to the east and Tifton, Waycross, and Brunswick to the west.[35] The layout of the Albany and Brunswick line, as well as that of the other Atlantic Coast Line branches, helps to explain the seemingly random locations

in which the UNIA flourished; small, rural towns and settlements that might not have otherwise had nearly as much social or political dialogue with one another were connected by the line and its offshoots. Other towns in which the Garveyite message took hold – and through which an offshoot or main line of the Atlantic Coast Line ran – included Camilla, Fitzgerald, and the now nearly nonexistent Ty Ty.[36] Given the notoriously poor condition of the roads in Worth, Mitchell, and other southwest Georgia counties, the railroad would have provided UNIA organizers Eason and Robinson with a reliable means by which to traverse the southern portion of the state and proselytize residents with Garvey's radical gospel.

Accordingly, it is then helpful to compare the findings in Charles E. Hall's comprehensive collection of data to the incidents of varying forms of black resistance in different counties. Based on such a comparison, no county that is known to have supported an NAACP branch between 1920 and 1930 contained an urban black constituency of less than twenty-five percent of the total black population. Between one quarter and one half of the black citizens in NAACP-organized counties (Crisp, Dougherty, Sumter, and Thomas) resided in urban areas. Conversely, during the same period, southwest Georgia counties with UNIA divisions – with only two exceptions – contained African-American populations that were majority rural. One of the exceptions, Muscogee County, can be explained by the sustained military presence and rapid growth of Fort Benning in the Columbus area during this time period.[37] Therefore, exceptions notwithstanding, the presence of UNIA in southwest Georgia was largely a rural phenomenon, while that of the NAACP was a decidedly urban one.

Virtually the only extant indicator of the general makeup of UNIA membership in southwest Georgia is the *Negro World* periodical. Each issue of the newspaper contained a list of contributors to the organization's various funds, most notably the African Redemption Fund – a

collection for the "liberation of Africa" to which willing donors were asked to give five dollars or more.[38] The prestige that accompanied one's name being printed in an internationally distributed publication was likely the impetus for most donations, as the only stated objectives for said offerings were such ambiguities as "worldwide race adjustment… and the freedom of Africa."[39] Nevertheless, just as they would later give to the annual Convention Fund (which helped subsidize the UNIA's yearly gatherings) and Garvey's Legal Defense Fund, southwest Georgians contributed what little they could for African Redemption, thereby ensuring that their names would be listed – alongside others from New York, Honolulu, Bocas Del Toro, Port Limon, and Tela Spa – for all to read and admire. Considering the particularly scant paper trail that southwest Georgia Garveyites left behind, such a record of supporters, listed alongside their place of residence, is invaluable.

Historian Mary G. Rolinson maintains that UNIA members in southwest Georgia were mostly poorer, middle-age farmers from rural areas; by examining census data for individuals listed in the *Negro World* as having given money to the various UNIA funds, it is possible to substantiate such an assessment.[40] One of the earliest such contributors from southwest Georgia for which definitive census data exist was Emma Boyed, a native Georgian living in Poulan, Worth County; approximately 58 years old when she gave her five dollars to the African Redemption fund, Boyed lived with her husband in a tiny settlement containing less than one thousand inhabitants.[41] Major Holmes, also married and living in rural Poulan, was 41 years old when he made his five dollar contribution.[42] Jonas Odom, a widower approximately 53 years old in 1921 when he gave to the UNIA, lived in Newton, Baker County with his fifteen year-old daughter, Ezella.[43] These men and women – rural, married, and middle age – typified the rank and file of the Garveyite movement in southwest Georgia in the 1920s. Although a fair number

of members and supporters might have been financially self-sufficient – indeed, enough so to be able to afford a generous five dollar contribution – they were clearly not of the relatively well-to-do middle-class whose members filled the ranks of the local NAACP chapters.

In fact, as both Rolinson and Steven Hahn emphasize, it is entirely likely that many southwest Georgia Garveyites were too impoverished to have even been able to afford the twenty-five cent membership fee required of all new members.[44] As one *Negro World* Legal Defense Fund listing shows, more than twenty-five residents of southwest Georgia towns like Meigs, Pelham, and Ray City made individual contributions of five cents, twenty-five cents, and, in select cases, an entire dollar.[45] Even if such rural Garvey supporters lacked money, it is clear that they managed to regularly obtain copies of the *Negro World* and likely relished the privilege of being able to see their names in print. In one of the last issues of the newspaper to contain evidence of the southwest Georgia Garveyites, the letters of Terrell County residents Octavia and Brimmer Lee Knighton were published in their entirety. While Octavia wrote that she had "heard a long time ago that Africa was the home of the Negro race and [that] this is the nearest I ever heard of Negroes going to Africa," sixteen-year-old Brimmer Lee lamented that she could not "be one in that number to go to Africa September 1924" due to her age.[46] The Knightons' impassioned letters provide a glimpse into both the renewed emigrationist impulse in the years following World War I and the importance of the *Negro World* in proselytizing the poverty-stricken masses that Garvey was never able to reach personally.

The impact of such a pronounced UNIA presence in these small communities is difficult to judge mostly due to the nearly nonexistent paper trail that area division leaders left behind. One event, however, might provide some clue as to the white reaction to radical black resistance in the area. The *Negro World* reported that, on May 10, 1922, UNIA leader J.W.H. Eason

addressed an audience of 10,000 Garvey supporters at Summerhill Baptist Church (off of Liberia Street) in Pelham, Mitchell County. That evening, while Eason's main speaking point was "Africa for the Africans," the familiar Garveyite refrain, he also stressed the fact that African-American political agitation rarely made the white press. If, however, "a negro stole a chicken, the white newspapers would play it up in big headlines."[47] As if to prove Eason's point for him, the *Pelham Journal* made no mention of the gathering that might have nearly doubled the population in tiny Pelham that night. The *Journal* did, however, document the white population's sudden collective change of heart with regard to the establishment of a Ku Klux Klan chapter. While Pelham's citizens had previously disapproved of the Klan's intentions to establish a foothold in Mitchell County, in the months following the massive UNIA gathering, a prominent spokesman for the Klan addressed a crowd that included the mayor, the men's bible class, and the Business Men's Club.[48] By December of that year, the town contained at least one Klan chapter – No. 153, Realm of Georgia Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.[49] It would not be out of the question, therefore, to conclude that – as had been the case with local NAACP branches – the UNIA presence caused the white community to close ranks in militant opposition.

Just as the UNIA ceased to exist as a serious outlet for black political engagement in southwest Georgia sometime around the late-1920s and early-1930s, one man attempted to fill the gap. Dr. Joseph Winthrop Holley of Albany, who had also founded the Albany Bible and Manual Training School (later Albany State College), organized the Negro Farmers' League of Georgia. Born in Winnsboro, South Carolina in 1874, Holley was the son of former slaves; his father had been a leatherworker and had specialized in making "fine whips… [used] to emphasize orders given to slaves."[50] After completing both undergraduate and seminary coursework at Lincoln University, Holley read and absorbed W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of*

Black Folk, particularly the two chapters covering the author's forays into Dougherty County. While commuting to Macon to serve as pastor of the Washington Avenue Presbyterian Church (for forty dollars per month), Holley labored to establish his school in Albany in order to "strike a blow at the ignorance portrayed by Mr. DuBois."[51] As editor Robert W. Ramsey comments in a recent reprint of Holley's memoir, given Holley's source of inspiration for the establishment of the Albany institution – and due to his ultimate espousal of accomodationism with regard to Southern race relations – Holley was effectively an ideological hybrid of DuBois and Booker T. Washington. Certainly Holley's leadership philosophies were a far cry from those of the radical Marcus Garvey.

J.W. Holley established his Negro Farmers' League of Georgia (also known as the Georgia Farmers' League) on September 25, 1931. Functioning during the early years of the Great Depression, the NFLG purported to assist its members in employing thrift as well as proper, more efficient land husbandry in order to overcome financial hardships.[52] The organization's stated goals borrowed much from the philosophies of Booker T. Washington. Indeed, Holley assured the group that "the Negro is getting back to the farm, where he has his best chance for economic independence and development."[53] Such sentiments echoed Washington's belief that success in agriculture could lead directly to the uplift of one's posterity.[54] At a January 1933 meeting in Albany, Holley and other officers made plans to obtain government crop loans for the farmers in the coming year. Despite the ambition and seemingly widespread acceptance of Holley's program of uplift through agricultural education, there is no record of the group's having assembled a large meeting of any significance after 1933 – although the organization technically functioned through county units organized by congressional districts and could conceivably have been continuing on the local level for several more years.

Nevertheless, despite the apparent incapacity of the Negro Farmers' League of Georgia to effect a lasting impression on the African-American community in southwest Georgia, the effort did represent the determination of hundreds of citizens who, in the wake of Garvey's deportation, no longer had the UNIA to help them organize. The League signified an entirely different approach to resistance – one tailor-made for the Depression era – whose goals were both practical and tangible. No longer did it seem possible to organize the sort of capital needed to emigrate to Liberia or to buy bonds for a fledgling shipping line (both of which, incidentally, were important linchpins of the southern Garveyite program). Moreover, Holley tenaciously attempted to organize African-American farmers again in 1937 at a large gathering in Albany. He sought to address issues such as the dearth of vocational schools for African-Americans in the area and widespread black unemployment as a result of employers' tendency to only hire whites during hard economic times. Unlike the NFLG, which had apparently collapsed after only a few years, the group that assembled in Albany in July 1937 aimed to actually become decentralized enough over time to allow for relationship-building on the community level between black leadership and "the job giving element."[55] Whether or not the endeavor succeeded is difficult to determine, but Holley's persistence in spite of the dire economic climate is evidence of his important role in the sustenance of African-American organization in the inter-war years.

J.W. Holley was definitely not a direct philosophical facsimile of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, or, by any means, Marcus Garvey. Indeed, he serves as a perfect example of a historically under-analyzed hybrid of several of the leading black voices of his generation. Thomas V. O'Brien asserts that, while his quest to build an institute for African-Americans in southwest Georgia was directly inspired by DuBois, Holley was in fact "more Booker T.

Washington than Booker T. Washington."[56] In other words, while many have accused Washington of holding accommodationist views, Holley actually did so to a fault. While such views – which entailed advocacy of racially separate societies with an emphasis upon agricultural and industrial skills for African-Americans – were common amongst the founders of black colleges in the early part of the century and could arguably serve the better interests of educators in the pre-World War I Black Belt, they eventually became anachronistic. O'Brien maintains that Holley did far too little to adapt his philosophies of race, education, and organization to the changing times.[57] In the early 1940s, his longstanding alliance with Georgia Governor Eugene Talmadge generated plenty of negative press, and, in the mid-1950s, an aging Holley denounced the National Council of Churches (NCC), the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and the NAACP as conduits for the infiltration of Communism.[58] Despite his having been somewhat of an eccentric, Holley's adoption of such seemingly contradictory views evinces the wide-ranging ideologies and organizational strategies of black southwest Georgians.

Also particularly active in the Black Belt during the Depression era was the Communist Party USA. The Party's official interest in African-American resistance struggles arose as early as the late 1920s; in the 1928 *Comintern Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States*, Moscow Party officials acknowledged that the "Negro working class," while living mostly in rural areas of the South, possessed the potential to "play a considerable role in the class struggle against American imperialism."[59] While the drafters of the resolution conceded some degree of "white chauvinism" present in the American Party, their long-term goals actually entailed an interracial class struggle.[60] A 1930 Comintern resolution reiterated and updated key themes from the 1928 resolution while drawing parallels between the plights of the rural, Black Belt

southerners and their urbanized, northern counterparts.[61] The main organ of the southern wing of the American Communist Party was the *Southern Worker* newspaper, of which three thousand copies were first printed on August 16, 1930 for sale at three cents apiece in Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, and the Carolinas.[62] The *Southern Worker*, along with the better-known *Daily Worker*, kept sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and white leftists abreast of labor and trade union news as well as the latest incidents of lynching (in a regular section entitled "Lynch Law at Work").[63] In Black Belt laborers, the Party hoped to find fertile soil for the establishment of a Communist stronghold in the American South.

The area of the United States designated by the Party as District 17 included Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida, and Tennessee. In summer 1932, the CPUSA set as its initial goal for the district the establishment of "30 [Share]croppers [Union] locals, 2 CP units," as well as a "permanent organizer" by October of that year.[64] As evidenced by the actions of black workers in West Point and Rome, Georgia, African-Americans in west Georgia had been moving farther and farther toward the political Left, and, if the Party did not act soon to organize locals, the workers would leave it behind.[65] With the depression in full force, however, District 17 headquarters in Birmingham, Alabama could offer very little in the way of funding for propaganda campaigns in Georgia. Atlanta Communist Angelo Herndon wrote to Party leader Earl Browder and District Organizer Harry Jackson that Georgians were prepared to expand Party activism across the state but did not even possess sufficient funds to purchase stamps with which to mail leaflets.[66] Furthermore, as far as the establishment of locals across the Alabama border and into southwest Georgia, the Party was wholly unsuccessful.

Nevertheless, District 17 organizers were correct in their assumption that the area would be conducive to the spread of Communist ideology. Copies of the *Daily Worker* began to

circulate amongst African-American workers in southwest Georgia, and Communism gained a sort of underground popularity. Thomasville sympathizer John H. Cobb was an avid reader of the *Daily Worker*, as were several of his coworkers – many of who only felt safe reading the newspaper at night and in private.[67] He informed Party leaders that many prospective Communists were being dissuaded by the local black pastors from organizing themselves; Cobb also stated that the Party need not attempt to convince white workers to espouse communist ideology as whites would "agree with you[,] then reite behind your back th[ey] will have you linched (sic)."[68] Thomasville readers of the *Daily Worker* also expressed their willingness – were a Communist candidate to run for local political office in the area – to vote Communist.[69] Unfortunately for these sympathizers, no Party candidate attempted to run for local office south of Pike County in middle Georgia, and, for the time being, Communism seemed to have run its course in the Georgia Black Belt.

By the early 1940s, it was clear that organized Communist Party units would not flourish in southwest Georgia; additionally, the UNIA was effectively dead in the region (although Garveyism would continue to have an influence on African-American resistance ideology for several more decades). While Garvey's deportation to Jamaica certainly accounts for the cessation of UNIA organization, the failure of the Communist Party to establish functioning units in the area is best explained by the utter distrust with which white southwest Georgians historically had viewed leftist labor organizers and political movements. On separate occasions in 1916 and 1920, while African-American citizens in Thomas County and Colquitt County had responded favorably to representatives of the Socialist Labor Party and the American Federation of Labor, respectively, neither representative was able to make much organizational progress. While the Socialist worker was able to sell a few copies of the *Weekly People* before leaving

Thomasville permanently, the AFL representative was "invited to leave Moultrie" by local white planters.[70] Based on the Communist Party's subsequent failure to pick up the pieces during the Great Depression, it is likely that white resistance remained the chief deterrent.

African-American resistance in southwest Georgia during the interwar years, despite many obstacles, galvanized the community around the ideas of uplift, advancement, and civil rights. In the 1940s, local NAACP leaders revived somewhat moribund branches in support of worthy causes like the investigation of the lynching of Robert Hall by Baker County Sheriff Claude Screws (in the notorious "Screws Case") as well as the defense of murder suspect Rosa Lee Ingram, a Sumter County resident.[71] Moving forward into the modern civil rights era, the NAACP and its local offshoots – in addition to the all-important Missionary Baptist and AME churches – took the lead in southwest Georgia as the main conduit for black resistance. In 1959, the Albany NAACP branch set up a Youth Chapter that would encourage moderate political engagement for several of the younger protestors in the 1961-62 mass demonstrations in that city.[72] Likely representing less of a choice than a lack of options for the majority of black southwest Georgians, the NAACP nonetheless received support from a stable, centralized office at the national level – more than could be said for the UNIA or any of the other organizations that had flourished for brief periods in the 1920s and 1930s.

Despite Marcus Garvey's fall from grace, his message was hardly lost on the rural Georgians who had once formed such an active pocket of southern Garveyism. The Rev. Earl Little, an African-American man raised in Carsonville, Taylor County, Georgia (near the UNIA-organized counties of Webster and Muscogee) in the 1890s and 1900s, held firm in his belief that blacks would have to return to Africa in order to find "freedom, independence, and self-respect."[73] After Little moved north, he became a committed organizer for the UNIA and, later,

as president of the International Industrial Club of Milwaukee, petitioned President Coolidge to pardon Garvey and release him from prison in Atlanta. Little's son, Malcolm X, espoused similar separatist beliefs as part of his own radical philosophies of race pride. Another southwest Georgian, Elijah Poole of Cordele, Crisp County (bordering heavily organized Worth County), left the South after a brief stint as a bricklayer and railroad worker in Macon, moved north to Detroit, and, as Elijah Muhammad, led the Nation of Islam with a program of intense black pride as well as separatism – agendas that Garvey had previously promoted.[74] Clearly the impact of southwest Georgia Garveyism was significant with regard to the formative ideological underpinnings of a new generation of black radicals that would become highly influential in the post-World War II era.

On a more local level, Hubert Thomas, a Thomasville resident and second-generation Garveyite, lived long enough to serve as link between the era of intense UNIA organization in southwest Georgia and the modern civil rights struggle. In the 1960s, Thomas worked with Frances Freeborn Pauley of the Georgia Council on Human Relations as the council's Rural Field Director.[75] Thomas was said to have "hated white people" and to have been reluctant even to sit down to a meal with Pauley.[76] However, despite their differences in background and worldview, the two shared a mutual admiration for one another's work, and, through Thomas's extensive efforts in Worth and Baker Counties organizing integrated groups to advance the cause of the GCHR, they struggled together to assist southwest Georgians in making the transition to a more racially progressive society. Not only does the unconventional partnership illustrate the extent to which such activists were willing to make concessions to one another in order to realize common goals, but it also conveys the persistent heterogeneity of protest ideology amongst the black southwest Georgia community as late as the 1960s. That remnants of radical Garveyism

existed alongside Ghandian nonviolence and moderate accommodationism further exemplifies the extraordinary long-term success, as well as the incredible philosophical diversity, of widespread community mobilization in the southwest Georgia movement.

The variety of African-American resistance in southwest Georgia evinces, above all, the people's ability to form patchwork ideologies – ones that reflected the specific political, social, economic, and religious demands posed by their respective experiences of oppression and everyday life – out of the philosophical trends with which they were already familiar. Such a long and vibrant history of resistance belies Sheriff Z.T. Matthews' 1962 public statement about the prior complacency of area blacks and forces historians to reconsider the ways in which they conceptualize local movements. In the case of southwest Georgia, local people made the transition from DuBois's "land of the unfenced" to Zinn's exuberantly determined community by forming a cohesion of seemingly contradictory forces whose common thread was a willingness to struggle.

Appendix

African-American population statistics in southwest Georgia, 1930*[77]

	1930 Pop.	(1920 Pop.)	Urban	Rural	Rural-Farm	Rural-Nonfarm	Percent Rural	UNIA Divisions
Baker	4,794	5614	0	4794	4082	712	100.0	1
Ben Hill	4,449	5560	2260	2189	1799	390	49.2	1
Berrien	2,352	4005	0	2352	831	1521	100.0	1
Calhoun	7431	7020	0	7431	6013	1418	100.0	0
Clay	4533	5074	0	4533	3713	820	100.0	0
Colquitt	7739	8457	3078	4661	3303	1358	60.2	2
Cook	3,077	3,276	0	3,077	1,456	1,621	100.0	1
Crisp	**8369**	**9849**	**3490**	**4879**	**4486**	**393**	**58.3**	**0**
Dooly	10,064	12,279	0	10,064	8,242	1,822	100.0	0
Dougherty	**12,816**	**13,370**	**7,394**	**5,422**	**3,344**	**2,078**	**42.3**	**0**
Early	9,737	11,090	0	9,737	8,236	1,501	100.0	1
Grady	6,627	7,354	1,286	5,341	3,856	1,485	80.6	0
Lee	6,489	8,977	0	6,489	5,590	899	100.0	0
Mitchell	11,862	14,067	852	11,010	9,116	1,894	92.8	2
Muscogee	20,667	16,251	14,157	6,510	2,371	4,139	31.5	1
Randolph	11,547	11,009	1,963	9,584	8,579	1,005	83.0	0
Sumter	**17,390**	**19,862**	**4,627**	**12,763**	**11,477**	**1,286**	**73.4**	**0**
Terrell	12,982	14,055	2,209	10,773	10,018	755	83.0	0
Thomas	**15,856**	**17,263**	**6,074**	**9,782**	**7,759**	**2,023**	**61.7**	**0**
Tift	4,874	4,290	651	4,223	1,843	2,380	86.6	1
Turner	3,866	4,924	0	3,866	2,414	1,452	100.0	1
Webster	3,038	3,080	0	3,038	2,655	383	100.0	1
Worth	9,575	12,548	0	9,575	7,434	2,141	100.0	6

*Counties listed in bold were NAACP-organized by 1922.

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