The Knights of Labor and "the color line", Richmond, 1886

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THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR AND "THE COLOR LINE":
RICHMOND, 1886

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

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Claudia Miner
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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the National Convention of the Knights of Labor, which was held in 1886, in Richmond, Virginia. It was at that convention that the Knights, the most important industrial union of the nineteenth century, directly confronted the question of organizing blacks within their union.

The convention proved to offer a microcosm of the problems that the Knights and other organized labor groups would face continually in the South. The Knights were charged with breaking the "color line" and tampering with the "traditions" of Richmond when a black member was given a key speaking position at the opening of the convention.

The Knights were also accused of foisting "social equality" onto their Southern membership, which caused constant outcries from journalists throughout the South.

The repercussions of the convention seem somewhat incongruous in relation to the convention itself, however. Despite repeated racial slurs, the Knights' organization attracted a growing number of both whites and blacks in the South, until strikes resulted in its eventual demise.
THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR AND "THE COLOR LINE":
RICHMOND, 1886
INTRODUCTION

The Knights of Labor was founded by Uriah S. Stephens in 1869. The organization was based in Philadelphia, and, in the beginning, it functioned as a small, secret, working-class brotherhood. By the late 1880s, however, under the aggressive leadership of Terence V. Powderly, it had become a national organization with a steadily growing popularity and membership. In 1885, the Knights had slightly over 100,000 members; by the middle of 1886, the Knights had increased their total membership to 700,000 and had become by far the largest labor organization in the United States during the nineteenth century.

The growth of the Knights of Labor was a direct result of changes developing within the late nineteenth-century American industrial order. The growing factory system de-emphasized the importance of skilled workers and, instead, relied more and more heavily upon semi-skilled and unskilled labor. That labor proved readily available from new immigrant populations and the increasing number of Americans moving from rural areas to urban industrial centers. Employers enjoyed a surplus of labor, which, of course, caused a reduction in wages that threatened the economic position of the working class in the 1880s. Moreover, and perhaps more important
in relation to the Knights, the factory system cut off
many employees from any contact with their employers,
and workers were left with no way to voice their increas­
ing grievances.

When conditions failed to improve, many American
workers, for the first time, began to fear the possi­
bility that they were destined to be relegated to a
permanent position of repression. Under such circum­
stances, it was "not unnatural for workingmen to seek to
redress their unfavorable condition through organized
action." ¹

As an alternative, the Knights of Labor offered an
especially appealing vision to American workers. The
Knights emphatically opposed the developing industrial
order in America and sought to "abolish the wage system
and re-establish the simple master-workman relationship
of an earlier era where employer and employee performed
similar functions." In Terence Powderly's words, "the
aim of the Knights of Labor--properly understood--is
to make each man his own employer." ² The Knights'
utopian prospect attracted thousands of workers during
the 1880s, but numerical strength could not alleviate
the problems that were inherent in the Knights' vision.

¹Gerald N. Grob, Workers and Utopia (Chicago:
²Terence V. Powderly quoted in ibid., p. 38.
In retrospect, historian Melton McLaurin has commented that the Knights were "among the most naive, most incongruous labor organizations in American history."³

The Knights' naiveté and incongruousness stemmed from the fact that the Order proved to be more deeply rooted in antebellum reform movements than in modern labor unionism. The leaders of the Knights believed that cooperation was the best means of abolishing the wage system, and they channeled their efforts toward working for the establishment of a cooperative society. That philosophy, however, ignored the American workers' desire for more immediate material improvements. For example, while the Knights supported the popular eight-hour movement of the early 1880s, the General Assembly, the governing body of the Knights, never provided a definite plan for its implementation.⁴

The Knights' leadership alienated even more of the Orders' members by opposing the use of the strike. According to the General Assembly, strikes were "deplorable in their effect and contrary to the best interests of the Order."⁵ All wage and hour demands, in fact, were

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⁴Grob, Workers and Utopia, p. 74.

⁵Ibid., p. 50.
believed to detract from the Knights' primary objective of a cooperative society. While the leadership of the Order believed that their policies were philosophically consistent, more and more members of the union began to feel that the Knights' promise of a new and more humane society was, in fact, void of substance.

The structure of the Knights of Labor was designed to accommodate its leaders' philosophy of organization, and it proved to be as naive as the Order's philosophy. While trade unions of the period restricted membership to skilled craftsmen, the Knights consolidated all labor: trade unionists, the semi-skilled, and the unskilled. The Order excluded only lawyers, politicians, clergymen, bankers, stock-brokers, gamblers, and liquor dealers. 6

6 Most authorities merely note the exclusion of lawyers, bankers, gamblers, stockbrokers and liquor dealers. Contemporary spokesmen also noted the exclusion of politicians, clergymen and doctors. Clergymen were excluded from the Order because they might "introduce sectarian feelings, unconsciously without any intention of doing so," and also because the Knights protested against the "slightest reference to anything denominational" since it was acknowledged that "workingmen belong to all denominations." Politicians were excluded because "in the general condition of politics [a politician] is a dangerous person. . . . The working classes regard the politicians, especially those engaged in local politics, to be men who might induce into their organization elements which would tend to render them asunder." U. S. Congress, Senate, Henry Blair Committee Report of the Senate upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital and Testimony Taken by the Committee, Vol. I, 1885, pp. 884-886.
According to the Knights' plan, skilled laborers were organized in locals of a given trade, and the locals were, in turn, organized into National Trade Assemblies. In their effort to reach the entire labor force, the Knights were equally concerned with organizing unskilled workers. For those workers, the Knights' basic organizing unit became the mixed local assembly, which accepted anyone eligible for membership, regardless of the person's trade. By 1886, the majority of the Knights' locals were mixed assemblies. Within the Order, the mixed assembly was proudly proclaimed to be

not a mere Trade Union, or beneficial society, but something "more and higher." . . . While it retains and fosters all the fraternal characteristics and protection of the single trade union, it also, by multiplied power of union, protects and assists all. It gathers into one fold all branches of honorable toil, without regard to nationality, sex or color."

In reality, because of the diverse elements within the mixed assembly, it quickly became evident that it could never be truly representative of all of its members, nor could the mixed assembly adapt itself to meet the problems of a specific industry or trade. Ineffective as the mixed local assembly was, however,

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7 "A local assembly of the Order of the Knights of Labor shall be composed of not less than ten members at least three-fourths of whom must be wage-workers or farmers, and this proportion shall be maintained for all time." Article I, Section 1, Constitution for Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor. Sterling Spero and Abram Harris, The Black Worker (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1951), pp. 40-41.
the Knights' basic aim to organize all labor "without regard to nationality, sex or color," was surprisingly successful. In particular, the Knights of Labor's attitude toward organizing blacks, far from being "backward looking," proved to be truly visionary, and the Knights' activities in that sphere provided an important legacy of both success and failure to the American labor movement.

The Knights confronted the question of organizing blacks most directly in 1886 at their national convention in Richmond, Virginia. The convention proved to offer a microcosm of the problems that organized labor would face continually in the South. How the white people of Richmond reacted to the convention could well be viewed as the white Southern attitude toward organized labor and racially integrated labor organizations in particular. More important, the way that black workers viewed the Knights' organizational efforts suggested that they were not the docile labor force that the New South purported them to be. Finally, the Knights' efforts to effect a balance between white and black Richmond are largely indicative of their organizational efforts in the South, in general.

The convention, however, has largely been overlooked by historians, except for a few "local" historians. For example, in 1912, in Richmond: Her Past and Present, W. Asbury Christian noted that October, 1886, had been
"reception month in Richmond," and the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor had "met in the Armory the 4th. Grand Master T. V. Powderly presided. Governor Fitz Lee delivered the address of welcome." Christian went on to say that the Knights had a big parade with nearly three thousand in line, and had planned a ball, but an unlooked-for trouble arose; the negro delegates claimed equal rights and demanded that they be allowed to attend the ball. After much discussion on the subject of social equality the ball was abandoned.®

Unfortunately, between 1886 and 1912, the facts of the convention had become distorted. Christian's portrayal is, in part, excusable, however, for the work was not purported to be "historical," but merely entertaining and somewhat informative.

No historians, however, have really made an effort to go much beyond the sort of investigation Christian made in 1912. Their tendency has been to make a cursory study of the convention and then dismiss the event as still another example of the race issue thwarting labor organization in the South. That portrayal of the convention is also incorrect, most notably because the Knights of Labor in the South did survive the Richmond Convention, and, for a time, the Order prospered in that region, mainly as a result of increased black membership.

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The convention has been misrepresented because historians have failed to view the event in the context of its times. As Merle Curti has noted, events do not occur in a vacuum. They are influenced by "the time and place to which they have belonged, the current of ideas about then, and the social and economic tensions which have touched [people's] interests and aroused their sympathies or antipathies."^9

This thesis will attempt to use Curti's standard as a basis for studying the 1886 Richmond Convention of the Knights of Labor. Although local historians are at times prone to exaggerate essentially local discoveries and attribute to them unwarranted significance, I do not believe that I am overstating, in any way, the importance of the 1886 Richmond Convention. While the Southern blacks anxiously awaited the outcome, the Richmond Convention pitted the New South against the Knights of Labor, the strongest industrial union of the nineteenth century, in the most direct confrontation of the period.

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CHAPTER I

ATTITUDES TOWARD BLACKS IN THE LABOR FORCE

The Knights of Labor soon found that coincidental to the problem of organizing unskilled labor was the unsatisfactory relationship that existed throughout the country between black and white workers. Early in its history the Order attempted to resolve that problem, and organizing blacks became the Knights' accepted and official policy. The acceptance of blacks into the ranks of the Order was made easier by the early attitudes of its two most important leaders, Uriah Stephens and Terence V. Powderly. Stephens, educated for the Baptist ministry and a strong supporter of the abolitionists, envisioned an ideal organization of "men and women of every craft, creed and color." It was Powderly, however, who served as Grand Master Workman during the years of the Order's active organizational drive to include blacks.


Powderly, a complex man, has been called by his most recent biographer, Vincent Falzone, a "microcosm of the Gilded Age, . . . a product of the middle-class crusades of the post-Civil War decades, and a precursor of the twentieth century." While Powderly served as Grand Master Workman, the Knights of Labor mirrored his attachment to the causes of civil rights, land reform, women's rights and temperance. According to Falzone, Powderly was "an effective spokesman for social justice toward Negroes and women alike," but like so many other reformers of the period, Powderly was far-removed from the reality of the causes he supported. Although he had advocated black rights for many years, it was not until February 6, 1885, that Powderly recorded in his diary that he "was in a nigger log hut for the first time."

Powderly's racial attitudes, like Uriah Stephen's, often displayed a strong religious bent. In 1880, he warned:

\begin{quote}
in heaven's name, let not our foolish prejudices keep us apart when our enemies are so closely allied against us. Does anyone suppose that the universal Father will question our right to heaven
\end{quote}

\footnotetext[4]{Ibid.}
\footnotetext[5]{Ibid., p. 239; Terence V. Powderly Diary, 1885, Terence V. Powderly Papers, Catholic University, Washington, D. C.}
because of our color? If the color of the heart is right, no matter about the color of the skin. Powderly's support of racial equality was not based solely on moral and religious grounds, however. In hard economic terms, Powderly saw the growing importance of black labor. He believed that the labor potential of the free black was essential to the welfare of the ever-expanding American economy, for "no human eye [could] detect the difference between the article manufactured by the black mechanic and that manufactured by the white mechanic." Powderly was also aware of the danger to the organized labor movement from the actual and potential use of blacks as strikebreakers. More than any other union of the period, the Knights of Labor, under Powderly's direction, realized that the self-interest of its white members would be enhanced through the organization of black labor. As one historian has noted, "the Knights opened their doors to the Negro as much because of the fear of Negro-white competition as the good-will of its leaders."

During the late 1870s and the 1880s, it became increasingly obvious to Terence Powderly, as leader of

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7 Terence V. Powderly quoted in ibid., p. 241.

the Knights of Labor, that a weak Southern labor movement might prove to be a dangerous handicap in a developing market that transcended regional lines. Conditions in the South seemed to bear out Powderly's fears. In 1885 a witness before the Blair Committee, a Congressional investigative committee on relations between labor and capital, succinctly noted the discrepancy between Southern wages and wages in other parts of the country:

The artisans and laborers in the cities of the South fare better [than rural Southerners] but the wages they receive would be spurned by the white artisans and the day laborers of any Northern or Western city. Masons and carpenters average not $2.50 to $5. . . but $1.50 to $3.25; other laborers receive from 75 cents to $1.25 per diem.  

For Powderly it was also clear that the formation of a strong and effective labor movement in the South would be largely dependent on an adjustment of the difficulties and racial animosities that divided white and black workers.

The Knights of Labor was not the first labor group to admit blacks. At its initial session in 1866, the National Labor Union had declared that the interests of the labor cause demand that "all workingmen be included within its ranks, without regard to race or

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9Henry Blair Committee, Report Vol. I, p. 527. The records of the Blair Committee, a generally untapped documentary source, will be cited frequently throughout this work. The records provide rich documentation of labor conditions, attitudes toward labor and capital, and the entire industrial scene in the United States during the late nineteenth century.
nationality."10 But the race issue proved to be too controversial for the NLU's leadership to insist upon integration of blacks, and the NLU's action toward blacks has been characterized by blacks as no more than a "benevolent gesture with only moral force at its back that might be easily disregarded and nullified by either a national or local union disinclined to favor organization among Negroes."11

The widespread exclusion of blacks from the organization of white workers led to the development of the independent black labor movement, most notably the formation of the Colored National Labor Union in December, 1869. Isaac Myers, president of the CNLU, believed that "the watchword of the colored man must be Organize! Labor organization is the safeguard of the colored man." But Myers also realized that for real success, separate organizations would not suffice. In 1870, he told an audience in Norfolk, Virginia, that "white and colored mechanics must come together and work together. . . . The day has passed for . . . organizations based on color." Myers joined Powderly in the belief

11 Ibid.
that "the condition of the white laborers will be materially advanced by a cooperation with the colored laborers."\textsuperscript{12}

Few Americans shared Powderly and Myer's convictions, however, for few Americans regarded black labor as any kind of problem. During the 1870s and 1880s, paternalistic racial rhetoric was an important part of the New South propaganda which pervaded the country. Of the various tenets of the New South Creed, the claim that blacks were making slow, but steady, progress, with the help and encouragement of Southern whites, was aimed directly at Northerners who might have lingering doubts about Southern racial policy.\textsuperscript{13} In a spirit of national unity, Northerners willingly acceded to the Southerners' portrayal of the blacks' "new" image. And, according to historian Thomas Clark, that image convinced many Northerners that "the Negro was good as long as he behaved like a 'good old southern darkey'; he was questionable when he behaved like a free man and southerners had an inborn and intimate understanding of the Negro."\textsuperscript{14}


In 1877, *The Nation* sent one of its reporters to Virginia to report on the situation in the New South. His observations illustrate the general willingness in the North to overlook obvious problems in the South and, instead, accept pronouncements that the black problem would soon be solved. On an egalitarian note, the reporter noted that blacks were "wandering about loose," and "nobody seemed to care anything about [them] anymore than about any poor man." In general, rather than "the stereotyped orthodox view" of the blacks' place in Southern society that he had expected, the reporter was pleased to note that he found "a great variety of opinion—... mostly depreciatory, it [was] true." The fact that there was a "variety," however, was enough to suggest to the reporter that Southerners were being "brought into intellectual and moral relations with the rest of the world."^15

The image of the black worker as a part of the Southern work force was another important tenet of the New South Creed. In keeping with the New South ideal, Southerners presented an idyllic picture of their labor force. One Southern spokesman claimed before the Blair committee that there were "no strikes ... no rebellions of the laborers, no disposition on the part

of labor to combine against capital, and no disposition on the part of capital to oppress labor." The state of harmony in the South was based quite simply on "a good feeling" that existed between employers and employees--both black and white--which was "not equaled in any other section of the country, or in Europe either." 16

Despite such glowing rhetoric, problems within the Southern labor system were evident, and many of them stemmed from the degraded position of black labor. As early as 1869, a reporter for the New York Times noted that throughout his investigation of the Southern work force, he found "the most startling evidences of the powerful effects of prejudice." Blacks were always hired last, paid least, and had to work hardest. While working on a job, they were frequently victims of physical attacks and practical jokes. After the withdrawal of federal protection, blacks were exploited even more and further intimidated in their economic relationships with whites. In some instances, according to historian Peter Daniel, their condition descended almost to a state of peonage. 17 An exchange between an


The investigator for the Blair Committee and a black worker offers insight into the black man's position in the Southern labor force in the year 1885:

A. They (black workers) are not permitted to get the value of their labor.
Q. In what way does that come about?
A. Suppose I was a journeyman working for a contractor, he would give me $2.50 a day, and a white man would come along, and if the contractor wanted another man and employed him he might give him $3.50 or $4.00 a day.
Q. For doing the same work?
A. Yes, sir; and sometimes the white man might not be as good a workman as I was. The highest wages a colored man gets now is $2.50 a day, while the white men get $3.00 or $4.00 a day. They always get 50¢ or $1 a day more than colored men, even though the colored man be a better workman.
Q. How does that come to be so?
A. Well, we look at it that it is all on account of color.
Q. They discount your color?
A. Yes, sir; it is not worth a great deal to be black...
Q. What reason do you give for that discrimination?
A. Some give the reason it takes more for the white man to live on than the colored man, and that, consequently, they pay him higher wages, so that he may live better.18

While few people admitted the actual condition of the black worker in the South, fewer still imagined that the black man would ever unite with white labor in an

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effort to advance beyond his inferior position. When questioned about strikes in the South, John Caldwell Calhoun, of Chicot County, Arkansas, confidently noted that "there is really very little conflict between labor and capital. The conflict in my section, if any should come in the future, will not assume the form of labor against capital, but of race against race." ¹⁹

Southern whites also considered black organization unlikely for another reason: blacks supposedly had "no disposition to do it." It was the black's nature to "submit to authority," and no black wanted "money or property badly enough to undertake to rise in rebellion against capital." ²⁰ Most Southerners seemed to agree that the marked disposition of black workers was simply amusement and idleness. While they would never be a particularly good labor force, Southerners did acknowledge the fact that black workers had a redeeming quality: they caused little trouble. William D. Chesterman, a Virginia industrialist, believed that urban blacks appeared less susceptible to "the contagion of communism" than white workers, and a Chattanooga iron manufacturer, H. S. Chamberlain, noted that it would be almost impossible for blacks to organize because they were "probably not secretive enough." They would "expose their plans and

all that sort of thing." John W. Capsley, a Birmingham lawyer and planter, spoke for many Southern whites of the period when he observed that

he [the black worker] does not care anything about money. . . . All the negro asks of you is to keep out of his sunshine. Give him plenty of cornbread and sunshine and he ain't going to be very unhappy.22

In spite of the prevailing notion that blacks were shiftless, prone to idleness, and unstable workers, blacks continued to do most of the hard labor of the South. Sixty per cent of the black population were farmers, and of these, most were tenants on the land of white men. Thirty per cent were employed in domestic and menial service. Others worked as unskilled laborers in mining, industry, and transportation, and an ever-diminishing number still earned their livelihoods as skilled artisans.23 With blacks constituting such a large part of the labor force in the South, the position of free black labor concerned the white worker almost as much as the black. Particularly in the cities, whites and blacks were rivals in the same occupations, skilled and unskilled. For the Southern labor force,

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22 Ibid., p. 163.

the "questions which wanted solution were how far employers might extend the stigma and penalties of colored to white labor, and to what lengths by way of reaction the latter would dissociate themselves from the former."²⁴

When the Knights of Labor turned toward organizing Southern labor, they were faced with the fact that black workers were often used as strikebreakers, and blacks were also willing to work at substandard wages. In light of these facts, the attitude of many white workers toward blacks, particularly in the skilled trades, seemed to have grown steadily more hostile after Reconstruction, especially when economic conditions in the region remained depressed. Few trade unions in the 1880s offered support to black workers, and most were generally unwilling to accept blacks as members, despite the fact that the lack of organization among black workers usually undermined the objectives of white labor.²⁵


²⁵Gerald N. Grob, "Organized Labor and the Negro Worker," p. 164; Gerald N. Grob, Workers and Utopia, pp. 52-53. One black worker noted that "with regard to our race, generally, I can say that it is making some advancement in many respects, and would make more if the trades were open to our young men. The entrances to the different trades seem, however, to be closed against them to a very great extent. There seems to be a disposition to shut our people out. While some colored parents, fathers especially, are anxious to have their sons learn trades, believing that to be the best means by which they can provide for their future usefulness, there are very few trades outside the barber's occupation of which
Given such conditions, few black leaders publicly favored labor unions, although Frederick Douglass did urge that "the labor unions of this country should not throw away this colored element of strength." Only T. Thomas Fortune, who was considered by his contemporaries to be "the most noted man in Afro-American journalism," crusaded for organization—more specifically a united black and white organization:

The hour is approaching when the laboring classes of our country, North, East, West and South, will recognize that they have a common cause; a common humanity and a common enemy; and that, therefore, if they would triumph over wrong and place the laurel wreath upon triumphant justice without distinction of race or of previous condition they must unite! And unite they will, for "a fellow feeling makes us wond'rous kind." When the issue is properly joined, the rich, be they black or be they white, will be found upon the same side; and the poor, be they black or be they white, will be found on the same side.

our young men have a chance to acquire a knowledge, and therefore, they are mostly engaged about here in mining and doing other subordinate work; very few of them are learning trades. There are some labor organizations here which, while they have no definite rules forbidding men to enter, yet do practically exclude them. Of course, all this is very discouraging, not only to the young people, but to parents." Henry Blair Committee, Report, Vol. IV, pp. 374-375.

Necessity knows no law and discriminates in favor of no man or race. 27

As Fortune pointed out, necessity, more than any other factor, shaped Terence Powderly's attitude and the corresponding policy of the Knights of Labor which sought to unite all workers—black and white. Labor organizers had long recognized this necessity, but as W. E. B. DuBois correctly noted, "it was not . . . until the organization of the Knights of Labor that workingmen began effective co-operation." 28


CHAPTER II
BLACKS IN THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR

In 1884, the general Secretary of the Knights of Labor reported that "numerous letters have been received from parties in Florida, Alabama and North Carolina, asking instructions how to form Assemblies," and it was officially noted that there seemed to be "increasing interest on the part of the Southern worker in the Order."¹ In January, 1885, Terence Powderly and Richard F. Trevelick, veteran labor agitator and national organizer for the Knights of Labor, made a short tour of the Southern United States to investigate the situation. Both men were surprised and gratified by their reception. In Richmond, the first stop on the tour, Powderly spoke at Monticello Hall to a "meeting of white [Powderly's emphasis] Knights only," and the following night, January 26, he spoke at Old Market House to a "meeting of 1500 black and white people."² Stopping next in Raleigh, North Carolina, Powderly recorded in his diary,

²Terence V. Powderly Diary, 1885, Terence V. Powderly Papers, Catholic University, Washington, D. C.
"addressed first labor meeting in Raleigh; had 1000 people—more black than white." The rest of the trip was equally successful, and Powderly and Trevelick returned to Philadelphia convinced that the Knights should launch a full-scale Southern organizational campaign with particular emphasis on organizing blacks.

Before 1885, organizational work in the South had been done by native Southerners. Those men had had little success and had managed to organize only a few locals in isolated areas. Now, however, the Knights' national leadership stepped in, and the standard organizational procedure was followed. Powderly assigned a number of professional organizers to the area who then placed advertisements in labor papers and held initiating meetings in key areas. A resolution was passed in the General Assembly calling for separate black organizers in each of the Southern states, but no further action followed, and blacks were generally initiated by white organizers. There were, however, a few black organizers like W. J. Campbell of Warrior, Alabama, who established black locals at Huntsville and Montgomery.

Wherever possible, organizers formed assemblies in which both blacks and whites participated, but in

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3 Terence V. Powderly Diary, 1885.

areas where racial feelings were too strong to be easily surmounted, separate black locals were organized. Both forms of organization were evident in the South and the North, and, in general, policy varied according to the community, for local assemblies were practically self-governing. In the South, where black workers were most heavily concentrated, "the black local was a familiar sight," and more prevalent than assemblies including blacks and whites.

Initially, the Knights' organizers were forced to contend more often with opposition from black leaders than from whites. Some black leaders argued that if blacks joined the Knights they would no longer be able to work for lower wages than whites, and would therefore be discharged by employers. Others urged blacks to fill the places of striking white workers, on the grounds that blacks were usually denied the opportunity to work, but could, as strike-breakers, gain entrance to formerly closed occupations. Despite such arguments, blacks continued to join the Knights in growing numbers.


The Knights' strength among blacks came as a surprise to many people. In the past, trade unions that had been willing to admit blacks had met with very little success in organizing black workers. But the Knights were able to attract blacks for a number of important reasons. The reform programs of the Knights, stressing land distribution and workers' cooperatives, had a special appeal for blacks, many of whom were agricultural workers and aspired to land-ownership. The Knights also provided blacks with social functions—picnics, banquets, and socials—which trade unions had usually neglected, but which had always been a part of the blacks' experience in their own churches and fraternal groups. Finally, the Knights offered blacks a chance to rise to leadership within the Order, and, in general, the Knights' organizational efforts convinced blacks that the Order was sincere in its principles of labor solidarity and interracial unity.  

It is impossible to tell from available records how many black assemblies the Knights established, or how many blacks became members of the Order. Jonathan Garlock, who has done the most accurate survey of local assemblies in the Knights of Labor, has found documentary evidence of only one hundred sixty-one assemblies that

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8Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, pp. 56-57.
included black members, but Garlock acknowledges that there may have been many more. In 1885, John Swinton, the publisher of John Swinton's Paper, a weekly dedicated to labor reforms, made a much less scholarly estimate that "there were hundreds of colored assemblies in the South." Swinton's figure, however, fails to take into account the fact that while most of the black assemblies were in the South and border states, almost every industrial section of the nation contained at least one black assembly.

Black membership figures are even more difficult to determine than black assembly figures. Herbert Aptheker sets the national figure at "about 75,000 in the 1880s," while Frederick Meyers believes that total black and white Southern membership in 1886 may have been only "around 30,000." The figure most often cited is 60,000 black members in 1886, an estimate made by John W. Hayes, Secretary of the Order.

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11 Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, p. 49.


According to Philip Foner, black workers constituted half of Virginia's 10,000 to 15,000 members, half of the 3,000 Arkansas and 4,000 North Carolina Knights, and a high percentage of the membership in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Louisiana. Even South Carolina and Mississippi, with fewer than 2,000 Knights, included blacks in the Order. Overall, Foner estimates that black workers made up between one-third and one-half of the Southern membership. 14

The Knights' drive for racial solidarity attracted favorable attention from a number of labor commentators. John Swinton noted that "this is a grand stride, the organization of the Knights of Labor has done much for the South. When everything else had failed the bond of poverty unites the white and colored mechanic." 15 George McNeill, one of the founders of the American Federation of Labor, praised the Knights' action in his contemporary study of the movement, saying that "the skilled and the unskilled, the high paid and the low paid, all join hands. The color line has been broken and black and white workers were found working together in the same cause." 16

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14 Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, p. 49.
15 Ibid., p. 50.
To say that the Knights had broken the color line in the labor movement is to exaggerate their power, but it is probably true that, as Sterling Spero and Abram Harris have noted, "the Order attacked the problem with greater determination than any of its predecessors." Two tendencies soon became apparent in the attitude of the Knights of Labor toward blacks. One was the "widespread evidence of unity in strikes, labor demonstrations, picnics, assembly halls, and the election of blacks to office in predominantly white locals." The other tendency was the reluctance of Powderly and the leaders of the Knights to antagonize members who would not grant equality to blacks, and also their unwillingness to help to eliminate restrictions barring blacks from industry and apprenticeships. Some Southern Knights, for example, continued to discriminate against blacks economically. In Richmond, white Knights in the building trades succeeded in denying employment to black laborers in municipal construction projects. Even such influential men as the editors of official Knights of Labor papers in the South agreed with the national order in the need to improve blacks economically, but then refused to

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18 Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*, p. 52.
endorse equality and, at times, portrayed blacks in a very unflattering manner.  

The Order's major problems with regard to race were not in the economic sphere; rather, the problems arose most often over the question of social equality. The Order's leadership was confronted with the fact that whites who were willing to work along side blacks and organize with them into locals of the Knights of Labor would not even consider social equality for blacks. In 1883, John W. Lapsley, former president of the Shelby Iron works in Birmingham, Alabama, commented to the Blair Committee on the situation in the South. When asked whether there was any evidence of "aversion" to the two races working together, Lapsley replied,

No, . . . Now, if this man . . . had been asked to sit down at table with a negro he would have considered it a gross insult, but he did not feel at all insulted at being asked to work with him in the field. . . . Anything but social equality the laboring white man of this country will stand. They won't stand that; but they have no objection to associating with the colored race as laborers, as far as my observation extends.  

"Social equality," then, became something of a code word of the times. It was a broad and nebulous term with different implications for different individuals, but

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basically, social equality was considered by whites to be but a prelude to racial intermarriage, and from intermarriage came the greatest of all evils, racial amalgamation.

The Knights of Labor, in fact, had no clear-cut policy in regard to the social equality question, and, for as long as possible, the leadership simply ignored the problem. Before 1886, neither blacks nor whites demanded that the Order deal with the issue and its relationship to the principles and policies of the Knights. Certainly, white Southerners, with only a very few exceptions, had no desire to disturb the status quo that they had established, and most black leaders agreed. In 1880, in *Negro Civilization in the South*, Charles Edwin Robert, a black, advised whites that with regard to the social equality issue, "there is no need of alarm. . . . no right-minded, high-toned, cultivated colored man or woman would think of forcing their society any sooner than a refined white person would." And a black worker, in 1883, told the Blair Committee,

> We do not want social equality here. You may find some fool somewhere that wants it, or says he wants it, but no sensible colored man wants it and the white people understand that very well. I think the white people in this town will tell you that

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21 Most notably Lewis H. Blair and George Washington Cable.

no sensible colored man wants social equality for one reason: because he knows he cannot get it.  

Most people believed that neither race wanted "social intermingling," for separation was a product of basic racial "instincts" and a manifestation of the desire of each people to preserve its purity and essential character. Forcing blacks and whites together would only arouse antagonism and open the way to miscegenation and race war.

Whenever possible, the national leadership of the Knights overlooked inconsistencies associated with the race question in both the economic and the social spheres in the South, and the Order's successful membership drive there led to increased interest in the area. That interest was best demonstrated at the 1885 General Assembly of the Knights when the membership decided that the 1886 session would be held in Richmond, Virginia. A Southern site seemed to have been pre-determined, and the final vote was between Richmond and Little Rock, Arkansas, with Richmond winning the convention by a vote of 70 to 52.

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William H. Mullen, editor of the Richmond Labor Herald, and a member of the Knights' Executive Board, played an important role in bringing the convention to the city, but a Richmond site appealed to the Knights' leadership for a number of other reasons. In 1885, Powderly had been warmly received by both whites and blacks there, and the Knights' leadership generally acknowledged that black Knights were best organized in Richmond, where there were 3,125 members in 21 local assemblies and a separate black district assembly. More important than the size of the membership, however, was the fact that the Knights' Executive Board thought race relations were better in Virginia than elsewhere in the South. As moderate white supremacists, the Virginia Conservatives had managed to keep race relations more stable and less violent in Virginia than in the other Southern states. Even Lewis H. Blair, who generally attacked the lowly position of blacks in an industrializing South, pointed out that "Virginia is much ahead of her Southern sisters in acknowledging the rights of the Negroes." Virginia

26Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, p. 49.

was "nearer to the world, and . . . therefore more affected by its enlightening influence than were the more remote states," and eventually, according to Blair, "what comes to pass in Virginia will also, under enlightening influence come to pass later in the other states, till finally distinction of race and caste will disappear."  

When the General Assembly voted to hold the 1886 convention in Richmond, the Knights were confident that they had chosen the best possible locale in their effort to convince Southern Knights--black and white--that they were recognized as an important part of the Knights' national program.

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CHAPTER III
THE 1886 RICHMOND CONVENTION OF
THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR

The Richmond General Assembly of the Knights of Labor was a direct result of the spectacular growth of the Order between 1885 and 1886 (see Appendix). The Knights discovered at their 1885 meeting in Cleveland that the Order had outgrown its constitution, and a Revision Committee was appointed to report at the next session—Richmond.¹ Since the Cleveland Assembly, new problems had arisen for the Order—the loss of the Southwest strike, the failure of the eight-hour movement, and the Haymarket bomb²—and observers agreed that Richmond "for many reasons should be the most important convention held by the Knights of Labor."³ The New York Times went so far as to warn that "if the Richmond assembly does not perform its work more wisely than

¹The hope was to change the emphasis from District Assemblies to a centralized state organization that would deal with a national board only as a last resort.

²The Southwest strike was a railroad strike in sympathy with workers on the Wabash line who had been laid off because of their membership in the Knights of Labor.

³The New York Times, 3 October 1886.
its Cleveland predecessor, the Knights of Labor will run down hill even faster in 1887."

Battle lines were drawn long before the convention began, and the Knights' leadership knew that the major debate would be between the infamous Home Club of New York, District Assembly 49, which advocated strong local and district assemblies, and those delegates who favored the new idea of centralized state organization. While the Order's leaders feared that Assembly 49 would be a disruptive force at the convention because of its stand on that constitutional question, in fact, it became notorious for quite another reason: its radical position on the race question. The members of Assembly 49 were not content merely to voice their racial beliefs; instead, they caused an uproar in Richmond, and the South in general, when they openly disregarded local Jim Crow taboos, or as Southern papers referred to them, "the local customs of Richmond."

The first inkling of an impending problem came in September, 1886, when a Richmond hotel keeper, John Murphy, learned that one of Assembly 49's delegates was a black man. Murphy refused to lodge the delegation as previously arranged, and to counter this, Assembly 49 let it be known that rather than desert their black delegate, Frank Ferrell, the entire delegation would

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lodge with black families in Richmond. Actually, the
delegates arranged to stay at Harris' Hall, a black-owned
hotel, but their point had been made. The State, a
Richmond newspaper, presaged coming problems when it
ran an editorial stating that

the attempt of District Assembly 49 . . . to
obtrude its offensive notions of social equality
upon the people of the city may make the assembly
conspicuous in the coming convention but the
distinction will not be an enviable one.5

Assembly 49 was not alone in dealing with the problem
of segregated quarters for blacks. When the proprietor
of the St. Charles Hotel informed the Baltimore delegates
that he would not accommodate Joseph W. Edmonds, a
black delegate, the white delegates resolved that the
entire delegation would lodge together somewhere else.6

From the beginning of the convention, in October,
1886, newspaper attention in Richmond focused on the
social equality question, and Assembly 49 was intent
upon making the most of the attention. In preparing
the program for the opening exercises of the Convention,
Assembly 49 suggested that, as a radical statement of
the principles of the Order, Frank Ferrell should be
permitted to introduce Governor Fitzhugh Lee of Virginia,
who was to present the opening speech of the Convention.

5The Richmond Dispatch, 28 September 1886.

Powderly objected, stating that the action would be a violation of the recognized rule of the community. As a compromise, however, Powderly suggested that he would "consider it an honor to have himself introduced to the Convention by Ferrell."  

Governor Lee opened the Convention on October 3. Lee, a Bourbon by birth, was, in attitude, a product of the New South, for he acknowledged that Virginia's glory—and the South's—lay not in the past, but in new policies and new interests. He specifically noted that he was in favor of "liberal laws that would bring labor and capital into the state and prosperity to its people."  

Lee's speech was politely received by the delegates. As Lee took his seat, however, the Convention was jolted by the appearance of Frank Ferrell, who presented Powderly and the Knights in glowing terms that certainly could not have assuaged any of the Southern delegates' fears:

As Virginia has led in the aspiration of our country in the past, I look with much confidence that she will lead in the future with the realization of the objects of this noble Order which include the abolition of those distinctions which are maintained by class, by creed, by color, and by nationality.

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I believe that I present you with a man whose mind is above the superstitions which are involved in these distinctions. Here we stand as brethren and equals. My experience in the noble Order of Knights of Labor and my being in the district to which I belong have taught me that we have advanced very far towards the culmination of these unfortunate and regrettable distinctions.

The introduction was followed by a rather tame speech by Powderly, with the exception of an unfortunate comparison of the "old slavery" and what Powderly termed the "new slavery":

The lash in the hand of the old slave owner could strike but one back at a time, and but one of God's poor, suffering children felt the stroke. The lash of gold in the hand of the new slave owner falls not upon one slave alone, but upon the backs of millions. . . . The lash was stricken from the hand of the slave- owner of twenty-five years ago, and it must be taken from the hand of the new slave owner as well.

After concluding his speech, Powderly explained to the Convention that he had requested that Perrell introduce him, to show that the Order was carrying out the fundamental principles of the Organization. He praised Assembly 49 for "standing by Ferrell," but he also referred to customs that "could not be obliterated in a day."

On the whole, press reaction to the two speeches was favorable, and very little mention of Ferrell was made. In Richmond, The State did not overlook the "new slavery," however, and stated editorially that

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9Powderly, Thirty Years of Labor, pp. 653-654.
10The New York Times, 4 October 1886.
11Ibid.
it is to be regretted that the speaker made what must seem an unnecessary reference to the days of slavery. Slavery is a dead issue, one on which the wide awake American people should turn their back; and to quicken the rememberance [sic] of it can only recall bitter feelings that should be suffered to return to none.\(^\text{12}\)

That criticism was tame, however, compared to the commentary that appeared during the course of the remainder of the convention.

On the evening of October 5, delegates from Assembly 49, together with twenty other Knights, again called attention to their goals when they attended a performance of Hamlet at the Richmond Academy of Music. The group bought the tickets in a block, and entered the theater en masse: "Thither they winded their way, the Negro sitting between two of his white conferes, near the end of the row."\(^\text{13}\) Reaction to the event was immediate. Assembly 49 was soundly denounced in all reports, and both the Dispatch and State wrote that "it is safe to assume that 49 walked into the Academy in a body last night to make a test case."\(^\text{14}\)

The goals of the Knights' Convention, its very presence, in fact, was forgotten in the excitement created by the action of Assembly 49. The general clamor, for the most part, was aimed at the delegates of Assembly 49, but Powderly, too, began to be censured

\(^{12}\)\text{The State, 4 October 1886.}\n
\(^{13}\)\text{The Richmond Dispatch, 6 October 1886.}\n
\(^{14}\)\text{Ibid.}\n
for giving the assembly an excuse for outraging public sentiment by allowing Ferrell to introduce him and sit on the same stage as Lee. Very few people blamed Ferrell; for the most part, censure was leveled at his fellow white delegates.

Newspapers in no way aided in cooling the sentiments of the people of Richmond. Sensationalism was rampant, with the most blatant example appearing in The State. A State reporter was sent to interview Ferrell, but not being able to see him, "reported" instead on Harris Hall, where Assembly 49 was staying:

There (Harris Hall) a peculiar scene presented itself. There could be seen social equality in its richest phase. In the room were several white men and four young colored women, one seated at an organ playing, was the source from which emanated the soprano notes. Another was seated by her side, turning the music for her. In the room on a sofa, was seated a bright mulatto girl, talking and laughing with a white man while in another part of the room were another colored girl and a white man chatting, the man holding or playing with the girl's hand.¹⁵

The people of Richmond anticipated other test cases, and they prepared for a confrontation the following night at another theater.¹⁶ The police force was doubled, and a crowd estimated from "several hundred"

¹⁵The State, 6 October 1886.

to "thousands" gathered to stop the assembly.\textsuperscript{17} There was no test case at the theater that night, nor were there any more instances during the convention, but enough rancor had already been aroused. Newspapers throughout the country commented upon the appearance of Ferrell at the Academy of Music.\textsuperscript{18} In the North, editors praised the action as an assertion of the Knights' non-discriminatory racial principles. The \textit{Pittsburgh Dispatch} lauded 49's actions, and, at the same time, chided the people of Richmond:

The practical demonstration that the workingmen are making of their determination to override the color line provoke comments among the F. F. V.'s of such solemnity that would be pathetic if it were not amusing. . . . This work may take some time, but we may be sure that the present meeting of the Knights of Labor will convince the Richmond people the world has moved on in the last twenty years.\textsuperscript{19}

Southern newspapers, as might be expected, characterized the action as "in exceedingly bad taste" and "hurtful to the Order." The \textit{Atlanta Constitution} offered a harsh warning to the Knights:

The conduct of the Knights of Labor delegates from District 49, of New York, in carrying a negro delegate virtually by main force into the place set apart for the whites, at the Richmond Academy

\textsuperscript{17} "Several hundred," \textit{The State}, 7 October 1886; "thousands," \textit{The New York Times}, 7 October 1886.


\textsuperscript{19} Quoted in \textit{The State}, 9 October 1886.
of Music, can not be too strongly condemned. This agitation over the color question is a side issue, but it is big enough to wreck the Knights of Labor. In Richmond, both The State and The Dispatch claimed that only a few of the "most rabid Republican journals" applauded the course of the Assembly.

The Richmond press also collected statements of delegates from the Richmond area. The Dispatch asked one white delegate, "How do the Knights of Labor of Richmond regard the action of their visiting brethren in this respect?" The delegate replied that

the Knights of this city are justly indignant and their position of host only restrains them from an outburst of righteous contempt. Most of them earnestly hope that Master-Workman Powderly will avail himself of the first opportunity to administer the rebuke they merit and justly deserve. The action of will cause a great many to leave the Order. I have yet to meet the first man, white or colored, Knights of Labor or otherwise who has expressed anything but the severest condemnation of the action of . Indeed all have some respect for Ferrell; for the others contempt.

The reporter went on to ask, "Does the Constitution of the Knights of Labor require social equality? If it does not, upon what ground does rest its claim upon this point?" The delegate answered:

I cannot find anywhere in the constitution, by-laws and "work" of the Knights of Labor anything upon which can lay claim for social equality

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21 The State, 9 October 1886.
unless it is the quotation from the Declaration of Independence—"All men are created equal."  

The State focused on an interview with Giles B. Jackson, "a well-known colored politician of Richmond-Henrico." He was asked, "What do you think of Ferrell's course on the social equality question?" And he replied, "I think it is all tom-foolery. . . . Suppose I went up to New York do you think I would push myself where I wasn't wanted and try to break down the customs of the place?"  

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22 The Richmond Dispatch, 7 October 1886. The delegate was right regarding the constitution of the Order and the social equality question. The constitution makes no mention of equality except Article XX which reads "To secure for both sexes equal pay for equal work." Carroll D. Wright, "Historical Sketch of the Knights of Labor," The Quarterly Journal of Economics 1 (January 1887): 159.  

Finally, both papers called for Powderly to make a statement:

In a word, did Mr. Powderly mean by what he said last Monday in introducing the Negro Ferrell that he holds that our hotels ought to put white and blacks upon an equality? Is Mr. Powderly a man of this sort?  

Powderly did issue a statement on October 11. He released a long letter to the press which stated that the Knights "in the field of labor and American citizenship . . . recognize no lines of race, creed, politics, or color." He pointed out that he did not refer to social equality in his opening speech, only an "equal share of the protection afforded to American labor." Social equality, on the other hand, could not be "regulated by law."

Reaction to Powderly's statement came immediately from all parts of the country. Northern newspapers that previously had praised the Knights now commented on Powderly's "straddling":

This looks very much like a somewhat abject and un-knightly surrender of the master workman and the white-skinned Knights to the local prejudices of the late Confederate capital against "niggers." In other words, the man-and-brother idea is let slide in a way that is not likely to commend the order of the Knights of Labor to the good opinion of considerate persons outside of it.

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24 The Richmond Dispatch, 9 October 1886.
26 Philadelphia Telegraph quoted in "Knights of Labor and the Color Line," p. 3.
Even John Swinton's paper, which was pro labor, noted the paradox that "the Knights as a body stand up for the equal rights of their colored brethren according to the principles of the order, but most of the colored delegates from the Southern states are quartered with colored families."^27

At the convention, a group of Southern delegates answered Powderly's statement with their own statement on social equality, entitled "What We of the South and the Knights of Labor of the South Believe":

We believe that the negro is inferior to the white man automatically, morally, intellectually, cutaneously, phonographically and that, God having made him so, he is not to blame for it.

We believe it is the sacred duty of every race to maintain its integrity, and to resist to the death any attempt to be reduced to a lower level; that national extinction is better than permanent natural degradation.

We believe that a people who will consent to their degradation is unworthy of liberty and will not long enjoy it.

We believe that those whom God in his wisdom has so wisely put asunder let no man in his folly attempt to bring together.

We believe that the time will never come when the whites of the South will submit to social equality with the negro. It has always been the opinion of white men in the South—and of the intelligent negro, too—that when a white man puts himself on a level with the negro he is "meaner than a negro."

Finally, we not only believe, but we know that while the negro was forced on us by the North, we have done more to elevate and moralize him than all the missionaries of all the Churches in Christendom put together; that thousands, and we hope millions, have been taught religion (better

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^27 Quoted in Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, p. 54.
than letters), and have gone to Heaven. We do not deny that the negro has done much for us.28

The Dispatch, which printed the statement, gave no indication of the number of delegates who stood behind the document. Whether the position was widespread, or merely that of a minority, is unknown, but it is known that there was talk among Southern delegates of withdrawing from the Order and organizing their own group. Instead of secession, however, the Southern delegates caucused and selected W. H. Barrett of Philadelphia, who sympathized with their stance on the racial issue, to present to Powderly and the convention a resolution containing their views on the question.29

Powderly, displaying a remarkable lack of tact, refused to meet with Barrett and the white Southern delegation, but he did meet the same day with a group of Southern black delegates. The object of the conference was the formation of a bureau of black Knights in the South for the purpose of gathering accurate statistics relative to the conditions of black people and their relation to white laborers. The statistics were to include everything in connection with the hours of labor, the treatment that blacks received from employers, their wages, and the cost of living. Powderly told reporters

28 The Richmond Dispatch, 14 October 1886.
29 The New York Times, 14 October 1886.
that it was his purpose to learn whether blacks received the full rights to which they were entitled, but he stressed that the question of social equality was not one of the objectives of the bureau.\textsuperscript{30}

Aside from this conference, there is almost no mention of the black delegates and their attitudes toward the whole social equality question. A young black woman named Scott had been appointed to represent a Richmond local, but it was reported by The Dispatch that "for some reason she will not act."\textsuperscript{31} The only black delegate who did make a statement was an unidentified black man whom The Dispatch interviewed. He supposedly "deplored and deprecated the course of 49 in stirring up the race issue," and he was also afraid that the issue "could only work harm to the negro." He concluded by pointing out that "the colored people of the South understand and appreciate the situation and don't want the question agitated."\textsuperscript{32}

Outside the convention, a number of black groups voiced their approval of 49's action. In a telegram, J. M. Townsend, secretary of a black organization that was in session in Richmond, Indiana, asked Powderly

\textsuperscript{30} The Richmond Dispatch, 15 October 1886; The New York Times, 16 October 1886.
\textsuperscript{31} The Richmond Dispatch, 6 October 1886.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 9 October 1886.
to "accept my humble thanks and congratulations for the
dignified stand you have taken in behalf of equal and
exact justice." The Library Society connected with
the African Methodist Episcopal Church also sent a
telegram to the Convention, congratulating Powderly
for his "manly stand" taken in behalf of Ferrell.

Black opinion, however, seemed to matter very little
at the convention. An Arkansas delegate went so far
as to propose an amendment "that the word 'color' in
the Preamble of the Constitution for the government of
local Assemblies be stricken out, and the same be made
to read, 'without regard to nationality, sex or creed.'"

Another delegate from Massachusetts did offer a resolu­
tion endorsing Powderly's press statement, but that
resolution was quickly tabled. In the end, the
convention agreed to the Southern delegates' demands
by accepting the Barrett resolution:

Whereas reports have been circulated and
impressions have been created by the press of this
country regarding the position of the Order of
the Knights of Labor upon the question of social
equality; and whereas we believe the welfare of
the Order in the South required that the General
Assembly take such action as will dispel these
wrong impressions therefore.

33 The Richmond Dispatch, 6 October 1886.
34 Knights of Labor, Record of Proceedings of the
General Assembly of the Knights of Labor of America
36 Ibid., p. 238.
Resolved. That the organization of the Knights of Labor recognize the civil and political equality of all men, and in the broad field of labor it recognizes no distinction on account of color, but it has no purpose to interfere or disrupt the social relations which may exist between different races in any part of the country. 37

In spite of passage of the Barrett resolution, it was too late to salvage the work of the convention. By October 12, The New York Times was referring to the convention as "a farce." 38 Many delegates began to run short of money and were forced to leave before they could vote on the major issues of the convention. With the opposition's numbers dwindling, the Home Club manipulated the debate and vote on the constitution and emerged triumphant, "in firm control of the Knights of Labor." 39

The Home Club had come to Richmond hoping to prevent any changes in the Order's constitution that might endanger the strength of the district assembly. In Richmond, resolutions defining new principles and objects for the Order were much discussed, but because the convention became preoccupied with the race issue, there was very little legislative or constitutional change. Certainly, it is not inconceivable that Assembly 49 planned to disrupt the convention, first with their insistence that

37 Knights of Labor, Record of Proceedings, p. 254.
39 Ibid., 21 October 1886.
Ferrell introduce Lee and later with their theater "test case." In that way, they were able to shift attention from the Home Club-constitutional question to another, even more heated, argument. At least one newspaper, the Springfield Republican, suggested such a "plan" when it noted that "the Knights of Labor convention at Richmond has been making the color line a hotter issue than any that is likely to come up in the convention itself unless it be the disposal of the Home Club."\textsuperscript{40}

It is interesting to note that after the Barrett resolution was passed and the social equality issue had died down, Thomas Quinn, the leader of Assembly 49 brought up still another explosive issue that the Knights had hoped to avoid: the Haymarket bombing. Quinn suggested a resolution stating that "this General Assembly regards with sorrow the intended execution of seven workingmen in Chicago and appeals for mercy in behalf of the condemned."\textsuperscript{41} No action was taken on the resolution.

At Minneapolis, in October, 1887, Powderly opened the convention there with the remark, "We shall undoubtedly have a long and interesting session, lasting two weeks or over; there is a great deal of unfinished business that was left over from the Richmond session that must

\textsuperscript{40}Quoted in "Knights of Labor and the Color Line," p. 1.

\textsuperscript{41}Proceedings, p. 288.
be attended to."  But, by 1887, it was too late because membership in the Knights had fallen off drastically (see Appendix). As early as 1887, in fact, Carroll D. Wright, the first commissioner of the Bureau of Labor, observed that the Richmond convention could be seen as marking the epoch of the Order's decline and eventual dissolution.  

42 The New York Times, 3 October 1887.

CHAPTER IV

REPERCUSSIONS OF THE RICHMOND CONVENTION

Historians have generally painted a bleak picture of the Knights of Labor in the South after the 1886 Richmond Convention. The reason they cite most frequently for the Order's decline is the Knights' stand on the race question. That portrayal is inadequate for several reasons. First, as James Gross has noted, "to write of one group merely as a problem for another is to end up with little or no history at all,"¹ and, in fact, few historians have focused on the growing number of blacks who were attracted to the Order after the Richmond Convention. Second, historians such as Melton McLaurin have too quickly concluded that "the Knights were never able to overcome the white South's basic fear of the Negro."² That conclusion fails to take into account the fact that for a short period after the convention, despite mounting problems and opposition to organized labor, the Knights did manage to achieve a brief era

¹ James A. Gross, "Historians and the Literature of the Negro Worker," Labor History 10 (Summer 1969): 540.
of good will and cooperation among black and white workers in the South.

The Richmond Convention offered blacks the new hope that with the help of the Knights of Labor, their submerged status in society could be raised. Powderly received congratulations from many people, including a letter from Charles Douglass, who promised to "show your speech to my father [Frederick Douglass]." Douglass believed that the speech would "awaken in his [father's] breast grateful emotions to you, and the order you . . . represent." Blanche K. Bruce, a leading black politician who had served from 1875 to 1881 as Senator from Mississippi, congratulated Powderly and prophesied that "a cause so championed deserves and will achieve success."

The black press was equally laudatory. At the 1886 convention of the National Colored Press Association, blacks were urged to join unions, and the Knights of Labor was specifically endorsed:

Resolved, that the establishment of amicable relations between the two races can be best secured through the mediums of such organizations as the Knights of Labor and kindred bodies that have evinced an interest in the welfare of the Afro-American, and have expressed the desire to include

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3 Charles Douglass to Terence Powderly, October 2, 1886.
4 Blanche K. Bruce to Terence Powderly, October 6, 1886.
him in the general plea of justice for the wage worker.⁵

Most of the black press followed the convention's lead, and characterized the Order in glowing terms. The Washington Bee called the Order "one of the most worthy and liberty loving groups in the Union," and the New York Freeman editorialized that "nothing short of a potentiality like the Knights of Labor can ever force Southern capitalists to give their wage workers a fair percentage on the results of their labor."⁶

Even before the prodding of the press, blacks from many parts of the South began to write to Powderly and request information about the Order. A letter from Thicketty, South Carolina, is typical:

We want an organization. We want to be connect to the Knights of Labor band because we are bond to you. . . . I read of your convention in Rich­mond. Makes me feel more interested in it. We need such conventions in the South. Your speech in the tenth annual convention has been red with grate delite in the South.⁷

While the Knights were, overall, losing ground from 1886 to 1888, blacks were joining in increasing numbers, especially in the South. In 1887, the New York Sun reported that there were over 400 all-black locals in


⁶Ibid., p. 273.

⁷C. R. Alexander to Terence V. Powderly, October 14, 1886.
the Order with a total black membership, in both mixed and all-black locals, in excess of 90,000. The Sun went on to comment that black membership in the Knights was "growing at a rate out of proportion to the increase of white members."\(^8\)

All the time that black membership was growing, however, the Order was facing increased problems, especially in the South. In addition to the standard blacklists, lockouts, "iron-clad oaths" and general intimidation of organizers and members that the Order encountered in the North, the Order faced problems endemic to the South. One Knight, in 1887, wrote to the *Journal of United Labor*, the Knights' major publication, that "we are not progressing as fast as we might be were this place not overfilled with convict labor, which crowds out free labor."\(^9\) There were also "political" problems of several kinds. A member from Danville, Virginia, wrote to the *JUL* in 1887 that

\[\text{we have in the past suffered from enemies inside the Order. . . . There are men here who were placed by the Knights of Labor in municipal positions of honor and trust, who have violated every promise and used their positions to further}\]


\(^9\) *Journal of United Labor*, 27 August 1887.
dishonest practices for their own aggrandizement, to the detriment of the people.\textsuperscript{10} The "old party leanings" also caused the Order problems in the South. One South Carolina Knight reported that "the whites are in greater dread of their old political masters than colored men. The whites have never been free from old party slavery."\textsuperscript{11} Finally, there was the race issue. The issue was agitated so much by those who opposed the Order that, in 1887, an Oxford, North Carolina, member reported that in his area, "Nigger and Knight have become synonymous terms."\textsuperscript{12} Andrew McCormack summed up the Southern situation when he reported to Powderly in December, 1887, that

the greatest difficulties to be met all over the South are the old party leanings and color prejudice. These two are so mixed up and played upon by unscrupulous self seekers of every kind, some so called knights,—that a harmonious coming together of the divided elements will be little short of a modern miracle.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite the tensions, white and black labor in some places did unite in the Knights of Labor. The greatest concentration of membership was around such industrial cities as Birmingham, Knoxville, Louisville, and

\textsuperscript{10}Journal of United Labor, 27 August 1887.
\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 1 October 1887.
\textsuperscript{12}Quoted in McLaurin, Paternalism and Protest, p. 74.
New Orleans, but there were locals throughout the South. The real power of the Knights in the South may be illustrated by the extent of their participation and success in politics in the region. In 1887, the Knights claimed to have elected a Congressman and eleven out of fifteen city council members in Lynchburg, Virginia, as well as a majority of the city and county officers and two out of three state legislators in Macon, Georgia. In the same year, an alderman was elected in Statesville, North Carolina, along with several city officials in Mobile, Alabama. The next year, the Knights claimed to have elected mayors in Jacksonville, Florida, and Vicksburg, Mississippi. In Anniston, Alabama, in 1888, a mayor and seven councilmen were elected with the help of the Knights.¹⁴

Secretaries of Southern locals wrote glowing letters to the JUL telling of "progress in the land of cotton."¹⁵ Several commented on the fact that their locals had started as "colored" locals, but were now receiving white applicants, and had, therefore, become mixed locals, "so far as color is concerned."¹⁶ In Warrior Station, Alabama, the two locals were segregated, but

¹⁵Journal of United Labor, 12 November 1887.
¹⁶Ibid., 17 September 1887.
the secretary noted that "the fraternal visits to each other are productive of much good and encouraging to our members."17 One Knight went so far as to claim that "one advantage that the Knights of Labor have already brought to the South is breaking the color line among laborers,"18 but a more realistic appraisal came from North Carolina, where the local secretary noted that "we had a very hard time at first as our white friends opposed us strongly; but they are now beginning to sympathize with and assist us and I think our battle will not be so hard to fight."19 Finally, a letter from Graniteville, South Carolina, illustrates both the type of opposition the Knights could expect in the South, and the extent to which the members were able to rise above it, for the sake of the Order:

I guess you would like to hear from this part of the Sunny South. We are about to have some trouble here with the trustees of the Masonic hall, owned by the Masons and the Odd Fellows. The trustee said we could not have the hall any more if we permitted the negroes to meet with us. This is their excuse, but I know better. I see through their little game--they want to break up the Knights of Labor here, but we intend to have the Knights of Labor in spite of all opposition, for we know our noble order is right, and God is on our side, and when he is on our side I don't care a straw who is against us. You will

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18 *Southern Workman*, January 1887.
see what kind of people we have here. We are going to carry on our work without the fear or favor of anyone.20

The new membership in the South grew increasingly militant in the late 1880s. Industrialists and other spokesmen for the New South frequently advertised the docility of their labor force, but strikes by newly organized members of the Knights of Labor demonstrated that unskilled workers—both black and white—were prepared to resist the "place" assigned to them. The Knights were involved in numerous strikes in the South during the latter years of the eighties. These conflicts broke out in the coal mines of Alabama and Tennessee, in the cotton mills of Augusta, Georgia, and Cotondale, Alabama, among the sugar workers of Louisiana, and among the lumber workers of Alabama.21 The Louisiana sugar plantation strikes are perhaps the best example of the outcome of the strikes and their effect on the Order.

In Louisiana, blacks working on sugar plantations had flocked to the Order, and by 1887, 5,000 blacks were reported to have joined D. A. 194 of the Knights. The local prestige and power of the Order, however, was destroyed in 1887, by the disastrous strike in the

20Journal of United Labor, 19 November 1887.  
Teche sugar fields. On November first, at the height of the growing season, black Knights refused to work because planters would not increase their wages. To the white people, however, the strike was not a question of wages, but of black organization, and the strike was generally regarded as a racial insurrection. Eight companies of state militia, whose expenses were privately defrayed by the Planters' Association, policed the county while proprietors evicted workers from their cabins, and arranged to import strike breakers of both races. At one point, the state militia opened fire on black strikers, killing four and wounding five. Two black strike leaders were arrested and imprisoned and soon afterwards taken from their cells by a mob of whites and lynched. The strikers appealed continually to the national leadership, but they received no answer. The white Knights of New Orleans condemned the proprietors' actions and also appealed to the national, but no assistance came. The national had never sanctioned strikes, and Powderly, especially, burdened by the uncontrolled expansion of the Order, admitted that he wished that the Knights would "throw strikes, boycotts, lockouts and such nuisances to the winds." Finally, strikers were forced to return to work on old terms.

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The Order in Louisiana was, for all practical purposes, destroyed by the strike.\textsuperscript{23}

Although there were different circumstances associated with each of the strikes in the South, one thing was the same: the national gave strikers no assistance. In May, 1887, for example, H. F. Hoover, a white organizer, was shot and killed in Warrenton, Georgia, as he was addressing an audience composed predominantly of black workers. The Knights' local assembly denounced the shooting and appealed to the General Executive Board "to consider the matter and take proper actions." At the Minneapolis Convention, in October, 1887, the black delegates requested, and the convention passed, a similar resolution. But the General Executive Board simply sent the request to the district assembly in Georgia to investigate and report.\textsuperscript{24}

Throughout the country, the Order was experiencing grave difficulties, and the General Executive Board focused its attention on futile efforts to keep the organization together. Perhaps no area was more hurt by the decline than the fledgling Southern organization, where hopes had been so high such a short time before.


\textsuperscript{24}Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, p. 54.
Some organizers refused to give up. Powderly received a poignant letter from Alabama in February, 1888, telling him that "we are in a critical condition financially, the State Assembly is balanced between life and death, 'but we will not down.'"\textsuperscript{25} Another local secretary wrote the \textit{JUL} from Rogers' Store, North Carolina, to reassure the national that "we are not yet dead in this part of the country, although we have for sometime been under a cloud."\textsuperscript{26} But after 1888, the strength of the Order declined steadily. The Knights of Labor became more a political organization than a labor organization, and in the South, it became predominantly a farm group, closely allied with the Populist movement.\textsuperscript{27}

As the Knights of Labor declined, all efforts to enforce the principles of racial brotherhood halted. In 1889, Powderly informed the St. Louis farmers' convention that the Knights "believe the Southern people are capable of managing the negro."\textsuperscript{28} For all practical purposes, by 1891, the majority of blacks had left the organization.\textsuperscript{29} In 1894, after the Knights had ceased

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{25}Foner, "Documents: The Knights of Labor," p. 74.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{26}\textit{Journal of United Labor}, 22 October 1887.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{27}Meyers, "The Knights of Labor in the South," p. 485.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{28}Quoted in Gerald N. Grob, "Terence V. Powderly and the Knights of Labor," \textit{Mid-America} 39 (January 1957): 53.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{29}Foner, \textit{Organized Labor and the Black Worker}, pp. 61-62.}
to be a force to be reckoned with in the labor movement, the Order issued one more statement on the black question. John Hayes, who had replaced Powderly as Grand Master Workman, announced that the only solution to the black problem in the United States was to raise federal funds and deport blacks back to the Congo basin, Liberia, "or some other part of Africa." The New York Times reported that a poll of white locals revealed "overwhelming sentiment in favor of the idea."\textsuperscript{30} So far as the majority of blacks were concerned, according to Philip Foner, it was

\begin{quote}
final proof that the once great Knights of Labor, the one organization in American life to have challenged the pattern of discrimination and segregation, had joined all other institutions in relegating black Americans to an inferior status.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

When they lost the support of the Knights of Labor, blacks also lost their last hope for white aid in solving black economic problems. Many, as a consequence, began to turn away from organized labor. In the 1890s, and into the twentieth century, Booker T. Washington came to represent the anti-labor point of view among blacks.\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[31]Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, p. 63.
\end{footnotes}
In 1913, in an article entitled "The Negro and the Labor Unions," Washington went so far as to claim that "the Negro is naturally not inclined toward labor unions." He also noted that "there seems to be no doubt that there is prejudice against Negroes among the members of labor unions and that there is a very widespread prejudice against labor unions among Negroes." In 1913, Washington was probably right. In spite of many pronouncements that recalled the idealistic policy of the Knights of Labor, the A. F. of L. proved to be no serious hindrance to the practice of racial exclusion and separation among its affiliated unions.

But what Washington failed to acknowledge was the fact that relations among blacks and whites in labor unions had not always been so antagonistic. Thousands of blacks had joined the Knights of Labor in the late 1880s, and although circumstances and fears of internal conflict within the Knights had compelled Terence Powderly to speak and act cautiously on the black issue, he and the Order had accomplished much for the black worker. During the 1880s, it seemed at last as though "a new day were dawning for the Negro." As Gerald Crob has pointed out, for the first time in American


history, "a great labor organization was not merely wooing him with words but was in many instances admitting him to full membership."^35 Although hostile feelings were never totally wiped out, for a short time, it did seem as though things could eventually be changed for the black worker.

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CONCLUSION

In the years after the Civil War, the South was preoccupied with what Roger Shugg has described as "a four-fold quest for home rule, the restoration of agriculture, industrialization and—underlying all the others—a practical definition of free labor."¹ The quest was not an easy one, and the Reconstruction era provided few answers, especially in regard to the free-labor question. As C. Vann Woodward has noted,

> It remained for the New South to find what Reconstruction had failed to find: the measure of the emancipated slave's freedom and a definition of free labor, both black and white, for the white worker's place in the New Order would be vitally conditioned by the place assigned the free black worker.²

The Knights of Labor, the most prominent labor organization of the nineteenth century, under the leadership of Terence Powderly, was keenly interested in the Southern labor situation and its evolving role in the national labor picture. The Order realized very quickly that successful organization in the South depended

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upon successful organization of black workers. For that reason, in their efforts to organize Southern workers, the Knights attempted, throughout most of their history, to promote equalitarian policies.

The Knights encountered strong opposition throughout the South for several reasons. First, in the age of New South rhetoric, the Knights implicitly challenged the portrait of blissful labor relations throughout the South. Second, the Knights' major organizational efforts came at a time when Southern whites were fighting unyieldingly for control over the race question, a problem they insisted was domestic in nature, and one which they claimed must be solved with no outside interference. The Knights' racial policies seemed to be an example of just such outside interference, and, to the chagrin of New South advocates, the Knights increasingly called attention to the fact that as far as race relations were concerned, the New South was not the idyllic society its supporters purported it to be.

Despite opposition, however, black Knights of Labor acted jointly with their Southern white brothers in many strikes and, according to Sidney Kessler, established the union as the outstanding vehicle of black-white unity in the 1880s and early 1890s.

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Foes of the organization in the South, especially
the press, obviously agreed that the Knights were making
inroads, for they spent an inordinate amount of time
attacking the Order. Many of those attacks focused on
the race issue. The Order was portrayed as not merely
wanting economic equality, but also social equality
for its black members. The issue exploded in 1886, at
the Richmond Convention of the Knights of Labor. At
that convention, Terence Powderly issued a statement
on the Order's position on the "social equality" question.
In his statement, Powderly expressed a willingness to
defeer to local customs on racial matters--other than
economic issues. That statement, in the context of
modern times, was illiberal, if not reactionary, but
in the context of the 1880s, it was a pragmatic gesture
to preserve labor solidarity in the South by concentrating
first on economic issues, and later, perhaps, on the
social question. Nevertheless, after the statement,
the Order was criticized from all sides. Northern
liberals attacked Powderly and the Knights for doing too
little, for straddling the social equality question.
At the same time, in the South, the Order continued to
be criticized for doing too much for black labor.
Increased black membership after the convention, however,
suggests that black laborers believed that Powderly
and the Knights of Labor were doing just right: the
Order was making a genuine effort to include them in its organization and improve their economic situation.

Ultimately, the Knights of Labor in the South, as well as the rest of the country, came to an inglorious end. Yet, the passing of the Knights did not mean that all of the things the Order had stood for were dead or forgotten. In his study of black workers and labor unions in Birmingham, Alabama, Paul Worthman found that despite the rapid spread of racial conflict at the beginning of the twentieth century, "the heritage of interracial cooperation in the Knights of Labor . . . lingered among many white and black workingmen." Even more important, to future labor leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, and the CIO, the Knights of Labor offered proof that the South could be organized and that blacks could play an important part in that organization, if only they were given the chance.

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## APPENDIX

### OFFICIAL NATIONAL MEMBERSHIP OF THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Members in Good Standing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1879 (Oct. 1)</td>
<td>9,287</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880 (Oct. 1)</td>
<td>28,136</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881 (Oct. 1)</td>
<td>19,422</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882 (July 1)</td>
<td>42,517</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883 (July 1)</td>
<td>51,914</td>
<td>49,458</td>
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<tr>
<td>1884 (July 1)</td>
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<td>60,811</td>
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<tr>
<td>1885 (July 1)</td>
<td>111,395</td>
<td>104,066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886 (July 1)</td>
<td>729,677</td>
<td>702,924</td>
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<tr>
<td>1887 (July 1)</td>
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<td>259,518</td>
<td>221,618</td>
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<tr>
<td>1889</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
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<tr>
<td>1891</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td></td>
<td>74,635</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Manuscript Sources:

One of the principal sources of material on the subject of the Knights of Labor is the Terence V. Powderly collection in the Department of Archives and Manuscripts of the Catholic University of America.

Among the documents in collection are the General Assembly Proceedings which covered the following General Meetings of the Knights of Labor:

- Hamilton, Ontario (1885)
- Cleveland and Richmond (1886)
- Minneapolis (1887)

Public Documents:


Newspapers:

- The Journal of United Labor
- The New York Times
- The Petersburg Lancet
- The Richmond Dispatch
- The Richmond Planet
- The Southern Workman
- The State
- The Virginia Star
Unpublished Sources:


Articles:


Gross, James A. "Historians and the Literature of the Negro Worker." Labor History 10 (Summer 1969): 536-46.


"Knights of Labor and the Color Line." Public Opinion, October 16, 1886, pp. 1-5.


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"Mr. Powderly at Richmond." The Nation, October 7, 1886, p. 285.


"Some Recent Observations in Virginia." The Nation, September 13, 1877, pp. 163-165.


Books:


VITA

Claudia Ann Miner