Days of Jubilee

Emancipation Day Celebrations in Chicago, 1853 to 1877

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ON THE MORNING OF JANUARY 1, 1863, Quinn Chapel swelled with anticipation as hundreds of black Chicagoans crowded into the church and filed into its pews. Unlike previous years, the crowd had not gathered in the city's African Methodist Episcopal church to mark the beginning of a new year. Instead, they had come together to give thanks to God for the Emancipation Proclamation, which President Abraham Lincoln was scheduled to sign later that day. The congregation filled the church with jubilant song and scripture. Leading the group in prayer, Quinn's pastor Reverend Dare offered up praises "to the Most High for the manifestations of Divine interposition in behalf of the down-trodden and oppressed slaves." At another meeting held later that day, the reassembled crowed vowed to preserve that momentous date for posterity, resolving that they would "ever hold this day, the first day of January, 1863, as . . . the day that four millions of African-Americans were redeemed from the thraldom of American slavery and into the noonday of universal life."[1]

For the next four decades, the city's black community held true to the promise expressed in that 1863 New Year's Day resolution. But January 1 was just one of many dates black Chicagoans celebrated as critical moments in the struggle for universal emancipation. The festivities held on these dates came to be known as Emancipation Day celebrations or jubilees. Before and even after the Civil War, black Chicagoans observed Emancipation Day on August 1, which marked the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834. Beginning in 1860s, Emancipation Day festivities were organized around two dates: September 22 and January 1.

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The former date referred to September 22, 1862, when President Abraham Lincoln announced that he intended to issue a proclamation emancipating slaves held by Confederate states that remained in rebellion against the Union. The latter date referred to January 1, 1863, when Lincoln's proclamation went into effect. After the Civil War, black Chicagoans also embraced March 30, the date when the Fifteenth Amendment was added to the Constitution, as another emancipation. Although slavery had been legally abolished well before it was ratified in 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment extended the franchise to black men, providing blacks with the tool—the ballot—that would help them defend their freedom.

Through the latter half of the nineteenth century, Emancipation Days remained major if unofficial holidays for African Americans throughout the country. In Chicago, Emancipation Day celebrations consistently attracted crowds that numbered in the hundreds or thousands. Black Chicagoans could fill their social calendars with these commemorative festivities, which stretched across entire days and frequently occurred multiple times in a single year. A typical celebration would begin with a grand procession that carried participants through the city's streets and terminated at Quinn Chapel. Once inside, the crowd would offer thanksgiving to God for abolishing slavery. Following the early morning service, the crowd would depart from the church to a train station where they would pack into passenger cars that transported them to a secluded grove in a nearby town. Joined by members of that town's black community, the crowd would be treated to oratory, recitations of poems and historical documents like the Emancipation Proclamation, and music. Following a picnic and dancing, the party would return to the city and might regroup at a meeting hall. There they would enjoy additional oratory and a formal banquet, and top off the day with more music and dancing. Through these multilayered activities, Emancipation Day celebrations combined the secular with the spiritual, the public with the private, the formal with the festive, and the political with the social.

In recent years, Emancipation Day celebrations have begun to attract more attention from scholars of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American history. The scholarship of three particular scholars has been most helpful in understanding the magnitude and multiple dimensions of Emancipation Day celebrations. First, Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie situates the festivities surrounding British emancipation in the context of

the Black Atlantic. Kerr-Ritchie's work not only indicates the global significance of British Emancipation Day in early nineteenth-century black life but also suggests the ways that these celebrations helped to forge a pan-African identity.[2] Second, Mitch Kachun has argued compellingly that Emancipation Day celebrations functioned as sites where black communities across the United States could bridge social gaps, construct a usable past, and voice political opinions, or as sites to "congregate, educate, and agitate" as he so succinctly put it.[3] Kachun's expansive survey and analysis has provided an invaluable framework for understanding Chicago's Emancipation Day celebrations. Third, Leslie Schwalm echoes much of Kachun's analysis in her discussion of commemorative events organized by African American communities in the Upper Midwest. Schwalm adds an incisive interpretation of gender dynamics and the role of women in Emancipation Day celebrations, challenging the notion that sexism rendered black women invisible in public commemorations.[4]

Though these scholars have begun to explore the place of commemorative holidays in African American communities, scholars of black Chicago history have generally overlooked Emancipation Day celebrations. This omission derives mostly from the limited scholarship on the city's black population in the nineteenth century. Only a few scholars have explored the topic in depth, beginning with Horace Cayton, Jr. and St. Clair Drake's seminal sociological text *The Black Metropolis*, continuing with Allan Spear's historical analysis *Black Chicago: The Making of the Negro Ghetto* and later Christopher Reed's sweeping survey *Black Chicago's First Century*, and extending most recently to Margaret Garb's *Freedom's Ballot*, which examines the rise of Chicago's black political leadership prior to the Great Migration. Of these four texts, Emancipation Day celebrations warrant only brief and sporadic mention in the works of Reed and Garb.[5]

This article aims to help fill this gap in scholarship. As some of the most visible and popular functions of their time, Emancipation Day celebrations no doubt hold valuable information about the social, cultural, and political dimensions of nineteenth-century black Chicago life. How did blacks create and sustain social networks both inside and outside the city? What place did the memory of slavery hold among black Chicagoans? What role did black Chicagoans envision themselves playing in the civic and public spheres?

This article argues that Emancipation Day celebrations provided black Chicagoans with forums to come together and bond as a community, fashion a distinct racial identity based on a collective memory of slavery, and assert an equal place for themselves in civic and public life. As social gatherings, Emancipation Day celebrations brought together the black community's rich and poor, old settlers and recent migrants, educated elites and common laborers, free-born men and women and freedmen and freedwomen in communion to commemorate the dawn of freedom for the entire race. The celebrations likewise facilitated the formation of social networks between Chicago's black community and other African American communities throughout the country. As commemorative events, these celebrations presented a progressive narrative of the African American past that frequently countered mainstream representations of black history and culture and provided a proud foundation for a new racial identity. Finally, as political assemblies, emancipation jubilees gave black Chicagoans a public platform to insert themselves into the civic and public spheres as well as to demand greater rights for themselves.

This study focuses on Emancipation Day celebrations in the period between 1853—the date of the earliest reported jubilee—and 1877—the end of federal Reconstruction. Black Chicagoans continued to organize Emancipation Day celebrations regularly through the 1880s and 1890s, infusing the jubilees with new meaning and social functions as the possibilities of Reconstruction gave way to even more entrenched anti-black racism. The festivities organized during this later period deserve further study and analysis in the future. This article is divided into two sections. The first section, "'The Blacks Will Remember Jamaica': Antebellum and Early War Years," examines the quiet festivities organized around British Emancipation between 1853 and 1862, when Lincoln issued his preliminary proclamation abolishing American slavery. The second section, "'The Day of Deliverance': Emancipation Proclamation through Reconstruction," focuses on the period between 1863 and 1877. During this period, Emancipation celebrations exploded in number, magnitude, and visibility.

Finally, it is important to note that virtually all of what survives from these Emancipation Day celebrations comes through reports printed in white-owned newspapers. Thus, any understanding of these events is

necessarily filtered through the lens of a white press whose views ranged from being sympathetic to black suffering, as typified in early *Chicago Tribune* articles, to unabashedly racist, as reflected in later *Chicago Times* articles. Nonetheless, these newspaper reports provide incredibly detailed accounts of the all-day festivities, including rich descriptions of parades and banquets, full programs of church services, copies of commemorative resolutions, and dutifully summarized or transcribed debates and speeches. Moreover, these reports serve as valuable records of the heightened scrutiny that black Chicagoans were subjected to and how their demands for an integrated civic, political, and public sphere were received. Most importantly, these news reports provide traces of the joys, hopes, and frustrations of a community struggling to be heard and remembered.

"The Blacks Will Remember Jamaica": Antebellum and Early War Years, 1853 to 1862

In the early and uncertain days of the Civil War, the Republican-leaning *Chicago Tribune* published an editorial on the roots of slavery and emancipation, harkening back to biblical times when Moses delivered the Hebrew slaves in Ancient Egypt. When the focus shifted to the present, the author could only lament that "much remains to be written and developed on the subject" of American slavery. "Each year, however," the article concluded optimistically, "the blacks will remember Jamaica."[6] Indeed, the abolition of slavery in Jamaica and throughout the British Empire in 1834 remained a powerful memory among many African Americans in the antebellum and early war years. Nearly a decade before President Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, black Chicagoans began to organize public celebrations on August 1 to commemorate the anniversary of British emancipation. This first wave of Emancipation Day celebrations proved vital for strengthening local and regional social networks, forging a transnational black identity, and vocalizing blacks' hope for an interracial civic sphere.

The anniversary of British emancipation provided an occasion for Chicago's black citizenry to come together on common ground for a common cause. August 1 celebrations held tremendous power to draw large portions of the city's black residents as indicated by attendance figures provided in newspapers. An estimated three hundred people assembled

at Quinn Chapel to participate in an early morning procession led by the Chicago City Band for the 1857 celebration.[7] Attendance at the 1860 festivities, according to the *Daily Journal*, "numbered some eight hundred."[8] These figures stand out as incredibly remarkable given the fact that the city's black population numbered only 323 in 1850 and 955 in 1860. These antebellum jubilees certainly drew a small number of sympathetic or curious whites, but early Emancipation Day celebrations were organized by and largely for an African American audience.

As the most visible and popular events on the black Chicago social calendar, August 1 celebrations encouraged all of the city's black residents to worship, travel, eat, and dance together. These celebrations transcended economic and social differences, bringing into contact blacks dispersed throughout the city and hailing from states as near as Kentucky to as far as Virginia and even some British colonies.[9] In the process, emancipation celebrations helped to bond the city's black residents together as a community. Moreover, emancipation jubilees encouraged Chicago's newly formed black community to extend its social network outside city limits. Black Chicagoans connected to similar communities in neighboring cities through excursions, which quickly became key features of August 1 and later emancipation celebrations. Through excursions, black Chicagoans joined in leisure activities and bonded with their counterparts in Knightsville, Des Plaines, Waukegan, and especially Evanston.

But emancipation jubilees were more than just opportunities for Chicago's African American residents to congregate and socialize. August 1 celebrations were primarily organized to reflect on the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834. Organizers of the 1860 emancipation jubilee heralded the abolition of slavery in Britain's colonies as "an event which has given liberty to a people who, for nearly two centuries, were the vassals and serfs of British tyrants and oppressors." To mark the auspicious occasion, the celebration began with a service at Quinn Chapel where attendees "return[ed] thanks to the Great Ruler of the Universe for blessings bestowed upon an enslaved race."[10] Jubilee organizers also encouraged participants to reflect on the deeper political and social significance of August 1 by incorporating the reading of the Emancipation Act into the regular order of exercises.

Through these reflective and commemorative activities, black Chicagoans became psychically linked to the African diaspora. The

emancipation jubilees in Chicago were just a few of the more than 150 such celebrations taking place in the United States between 1834 and 1862, according to figures provided by Kachun.[11] Thus, African Americans in Chicago joined in a commemorative process, taking place simultaneously from New England to California.[12] August 1 celebrations also linked Chicago's African American community to black communities in other countries, including West Canada, the United Kingdom, and the British Caribbean. As Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie has argued persuasively, West India Day celebrations in the Atlantic World helped forge a "pan-African consciousness based on slavery [and] abolition."[13] These transnational commemorative holidays helped to psychically reunite people of African descent who had been separated and spread out across distant lands.

By commemorating August 1, black Chicagoans signaled that they felt bound to the African diaspora by a common heritage and experience of slavery. By extension, Chicago's Emancipation Day celebrations also reflected their hope that blacks still enslaved in the American South would share in the destiny of their British brethren. This hope was expressed most directly by orators selected to speak before jubilee crowds. The keynote address at the 1860 celebration was delivered by "the distinguished orator" John Mercer Langston, a free black abolitionist based in Oberlin, Ohio.[14] The following year, organizers selected the fiery H. Ford Douglas to address the celebrants. Douglas, who had escaped slavery in Virginia as a teenager and briefly lived in British West Canada, held a reputation as a militant radical for endorsing a violent end to slavery and emigration of black Americans abroad.[15] Unfortunately, newspaper reports did not contain copies of these keynote addresses as reports of later Emancipation Day celebrations would. However, it is impossible to imagine that Langston or Douglas would forego the opportunity to share their demands for liberty and equality on as large a stage as Chicago's August 1 celebrations.

Beyond advocating for abolition, black Chicagoans used emancipation jubilees to promote the idea of interracial civic and public spheres. August 1 celebrations had been interracial affairs from the start. In 1853, the ladies sewing circle of Quinn Chapel AME called on "the public to assist them" in the kick-off for their three-day festival.[16] The *Chicago Tribune* noted that a "large number of persons both black and white joined in the celebration" in 1857.[17] The organizers of the 1860 festivities must

have hoped to attract a similar interracial crowd when they requested that "all the friends of Freedom and Humanity" attend. They even reserved a special place in the day's procession for "citizens and strangers."[18]

As models of an integrated civic and social sphere, Emancipation Day celebrations inspired confidence among some of the city's white residents that blacks were worthy of being included as equals in an interracial society. A reporter for the *Tribune* applauded the organizers of the 1857 festivities for the "admirable manner in which the arrangements were planned and carried out."[19] The success of the 1860 celebration caused the *Tribune* to praise the city's black community even further:

> Our colored residents are many of them persons of large intelligence, and members of our community valued for the exercise of those talents of enterprise and sagacity. . . . When residents of this class go in for a day's enjoyment, commemorative of an occasion received by all as a large stride taken in the elevation of their race, they can hardly fail to secure for it, features worthy of any intelligent portion of society.[20]

By holding their interracial celebrations in public spaces, black Chicagoans helped to reassure sympathetic white Chicagoans and perhaps persuade others that they deserved to be included in the city's public life as equals.

As emancipation slowly unfolded in the U.S. and Chicago's black community expanded, Emancipation Day celebrations grew as well. The start of the Civil War intensified and transformed black Chicago's traditional August 1 celebrations. On the first Emancipation Day since the outbreak of war, the *Tribune* announced that, "the 28th anniversary of emancipation in British West India, is to be observed by the colored people of Chicago with more than usual *éclat*."[21] The *Chicago Times* added that the festivities would "rival the more common programmes of the anniversaries of American independence."[22] Chicago's black community was more hopeful and celebratory than ever on the eve of Lincoln issuing his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

After the proclamation, August 1 celebrations would be overshadowed by freedom jubilees centered on the abolition of American slavery and the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment. Blacks in Chicago and elsewhere no longer had to borrow an emancipation day from distant shores; they now had their own days of jubilee to commemorate. Nonetheless, black Chicagoans continued to observe August 1 into the

1860s and 1870s. The quiet celebrations that began in 1853 when the ladies sewing circle of Quinn Chapel organized a festival in the church's basement were replaced during the war with increasingly public and elaborate celebrations. Nonetheless, early August 1 celebrations provided a nearly decade-long tradition of community building and political activism that the next generation of Emancipation Day exercises would take to unprecedented levels.

"The Day of Deliverance": Emancipation Proclamation through Reconstruction, 1863–1877

When Abraham Lincoln unveiled the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, the news divided the city's white citizens along partisan lines and even forced some who had initially supported the Union to reconsider. The reaction among the city's African American community, however, was decidedly supportive. The Emancipation Proclamation added two new dates to what Mitch Kachun has called the "African American commemorative calendar": September 22, the anniversary of Lincoln issuing his preliminary proclamation, and January 1, the anniversary of the proclamation going into effect.[23] During the war, Emancipation Day celebrations allowed Chicago's African American residents to collectively give thanks to God and publicly support the Union effort. After the war, Emancipation Day celebrations were expanded to include March 30, the anniversary of the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment. Postwar celebrations helped black Chicagoans to congeal as the community expanded and diversified, fashion a new collective memory and history, and advance a militant agenda for full political and social equality.

On the day that the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, black Chicagoans gathered together to celebrate the auspicious occasion. The *Tribune* called the jubilee at Quinn Chapel "one of the prominent events of New Year's Day."[24] After a prayer by J.F. Bolden and a song led by the choir, the congregation joined in reading and listening to scripture, Psalms 114 and 116.[25] Few passages fit the occasion better than Psalms 116, which reads in part:

> I love the Lord, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications. . . . The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow. Then called I upon the name of the Lord; O Lord, I beseech thee, deliver my soul. Gracious is the Lord, and

> righteous; yea, our God is merciful. . . . For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling.[26]

For many of those packed inside the church, the Emancipation Proclamation represented a dream that had been realized, a prayer fulfilled.

Even as black Chicagoans celebrated, they also recognized that much work remained to be done. Speaking from the pulpit, Mr. Anderson of Canada traced the roots of the Civil War back forty-three years to the Missouri Compromise, which had reignited fierce debate over the future of slavery. Anderson concluded that "slavery has been the first, great and only cause of the war, and that consequently the only way to end the war was to remove the cause." Anderson's remarks implied that the proclamation alone did nothing to end the war and abolish slavery; instead, it would take military action to enforce and make real the promises of the proclamation. Taking the pulpit shortly after Anderson, Reverend J.L. Newbern echoed these remarks about the unfulfilled promises of Lincoln's proclamation. Newbern compared black slaves in the American South to the Hebrew slaves in Ancient Egypt. Just as Moses had led the Hebrew people out of bondage, Newbern declared, "The day of deliverance must come" for those still enslaved in America.[27] While Newbern expressed certainty of slavery's eventual abolition, he carefully located this day of deliverance not in the present but in an undetermined future.

Though cautiously optimistic about the real impact of the proclamation, black Chicagoans used the first wartime emancipation celebration to voice their support for the Union. At an evening celebration at Witkowsky Hall, celebrants approved a resolution that was at once commemorative and political. Calling themselves "good and loyal colored Americans," the group praised President Lincoln as a "Christian Patriot and honest man" whose freedom proclamation one day would be exalted alongside the Declaration of Independence. The group also acknowledged the sacrifices of Union soldiers, resolving that "amidst our happiness, we reflect with sadness upon the fact that so many soldiers of freedom have fallen in the struggle, but their cenotaph will ever be in the hearts of a grateful people." But black Chicagoans who had assembled were not content to be passive supporters of the war. Instead, they concluded the resolution with a call to arms, declaring: "We will 'pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor' to sustain the true declaration of Jefferson and Adams. . . . To this we will not sheath the

sword of truth until we have unfurled our banner, dipped in the blood of millions, on the Gulf coast, and proclaim to the bondman, your chains are severed, every yolk is broken."[28]

Later wartime emancipation celebrations appear to have been more subdued or at least failed to garner as much attention from the press as the 1863 festivities. Perhaps black Chicagoans lost their optimism as the fortunes of the Union Army waxed and waned over the next few years or as public opinion turned against the Republicans. Whatever the cause, black Chicagoans organized smaller, quieter festivities after January 1863. For instance, in August 1863, celebrants traveled to the Forest Bay Grove where they celebrated the anniversary of British emancipation as well as "the recognition of Hayti and Liberia, and, what is of still more importance to them, the consummation of their hopes and prayers during many long years past, as accomplished by the Freedom Proclamation."[29] They gathered again in January 1864 for a special four and a half hour church service at Quinn Chapel.[30]

Though festivities were tempered during the war, postwar Emancipation Day celebrations that followed more than made up for the lapse in terms of magnitude and popularity. This increase in magnitude corresponded with the rapid growth of the city's African American population following the Civil War. On the eve of war, there were roughly one thousand African Americans living in Chicago. By 1870, the population had tripled in size to three thousand. A decade later, the population exceeded six thousand.

The rise in the city's black population was attended by a proliferation of social, religious, fraternal, military, and mutual aid clubs organized by and for African Americans. Antebellum celebrations were organized mostly by ad hoc committees and often originated with Quinn Chapel. However, after the war, the responsibility for organizing Emancipation Day celebrations was assumed by fraternal organizations like the Colored Association of United Fellows and the Odd Fellows, military clubs like the Hannibal Zouaves, and churches like Olivet Baptist Church. Just as earlier August 1 festivities had helped to connect individuals, postwar Emancipation Day celebrations provided an occasion for disparate organizations to work together and develop into a support network within the black community.

Postwar celebrations also helped to connect black Chicagoans to a robust social and political network of African Americans that stretched

across the entire nation. Prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, the community's network had been largely confined to small towns immediately surrounding the city. After the war, black Chicagoans continued to foster this regional network such as when Thomas L. Breckenridge of Joliet was invited to speak at the New Year's Day celebration in 1866 or when "11 car loads from Chicago" traveled to Aurora for the August 1 festivities in 1872.[31] Through Emancipation Day celebrations, black Chicagoans gradually began to expand this network outside of Illinois. For instance, the keynote speakers at the August 1 celebration in 1869 were P.B.S. Pinchback and C.C. Antoine, who had both been recently elected to Louisiana's state senate and would both go on to serve as the state's lieutenant governors.[32] In August 1873, Chicago's Hannibal Zouaves were invited to perform military maneuvers at Detroit's Emancipation Day gathering.[33] George Washington Williams, who had established the *Commoner* journal in Washington, D.C. and briefly served in the Ohio state legislature, was a featured speaker at the September 1875 celebration.[34]

By fostering local and national unity, Emancipation Day celebrations facilitated the construction of a collective memory and history of the African American past. At emancipation jubilees, black Chicagoans—many of them freedmen—came together to perpetuate a memory of slavery. Rather than focusing on the brutality of the slave experience, Emancipation Day speakers turned their attention to the ubiquity of racism and proslavery support throughout American history. Speaking from the pulpit of Quinn Chapel in January 1866, Reverend Richard DeBaptiste, the founding pastor of Olivet Baptist Church, recounted the centuries-long struggle of antislavery activists "against . . . the power produced by great wealth and almost infinite influence." Later that day, Thomas Breckenridge expanded this indictment to include everyone from politicians to reporters to clergymen, recounting that "slavery took possession of the land. It took possession of Congress; it shot down Senators. It silenced free speech, and muzzled the freedom of the press. It entered and possessed the pulpit dictating to the preacher who he must and what he must preach."[35]

Echoing the sentiments of both DeBaptiste and Breckenridge, John Jones later charged that the history of the black race had been "kept in obscurity by a pro-slavery Government, a pro-slavery press, and . . . a pro-slavery people." Jones retraced that suppressed history back through

the American Revolution and into colonial times, "when the May Flower landed at Plymouth Rock and Dutch galleon landed a cargo of Africans in the James River." For Jones, the danger was not just that blacks' contributions to American history had been silenced in the past but that a false narrative of history might be used to deny blacks opportunities in the present. He argued, "A chief charge against the colored was the absence of what is called a history to back them up. A people without a history were of no consequence in the eyes of those who ruled the country."[36] Jones certainly would have agreed with historian Mitch Kachun's assessment that "collective memory matter[ed]" to the crowds who gathered to commemorate emancipation.[37]

At postwar jubilees, black Chicagoans were especially concerned with constructing a historical narrative that asserted the centrality of slavery and African Americans to the Civil War. Many celebration speakers sought to enshrine Lincoln as a martyr for the antislavery cause. Celebrants at an 1870 jubilee passed a resolution declaring Lincoln "the great champion of the right, the emancipator of our race, the Christian statesman, [and] the unsullied patriot." "Our beloved President Abraham Lincoln," the resolution continued mournfully, "was martyred by the slave power for his devotion to his country and to humanity."[38] Five years later, Reverend Malone declared that "the name of Lincoln had been rendered immortal by the single act of Emancipation. . . . A stroke of his pen knocked the corner-stone from under the vile institution of slavery, and buried it so deep that all the trumpets ever blown by Secessionists, North or South, could not resurrect it again."[39] In public commemorations, black Chicagoans elevated Lincoln to a place alongside—and even above—noted abolitionists like John Brown, William Lloyd Garrison, and Elijah Lovejoy.

In their narrative of Civil War history, speakers at emancipation celebrations also stressed the importance of black loyalty and military service during the conflict. Reverend DeBaptiste recalled that only African Americans had remained "wholly true" to the Union cause. He similarly claimed that black soldiers had been partially responsible for Union victory. While rejoicing that "the glorious star-spangled banner now waved in triumph over the land," DeBaptiste reminded the audience that "in all [of the] great struggle the black man had lent the aid of his brawny arm."[40] William Wells Brown, an African American abolitionist and author from

Massachusetts, recalled to great applause the eagerness of black men to serve in the military from the outset of the Civil War. He pointed to the heroism of unsung black men who aided Union soldiers despite being barred from service and ended with the glorious story of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry.[41]

Through emancipation day celebrations, black Chicagoans began to craft a new narrative of American and African American history. They constructed a history that placed blacks at the heart of the American past and was drenched in the blood of antislavery martyrs like Lincoln and black Civil War veterans. This counter narrative contrasted sharply with mainstream views of America as the land of liberty. As public sentiment turned against Reconstruction in favor of reunion, the subversive narrative proved especially useful in challenging dominant histories that sought to recast the Civil War as an issue of states' rights, downplay Lincoln's antislavery viewpoints, and erase blacks' contributions to the Union cause. Through emancipation celebrations, blacks in Chicago and elsewhere began to create a usable past that kept the memory of slavery alive, honored black sacrifice, and offered hope for the race's future.

Black Chicagoans also used Emancipation Day celebrations as platforms to advance their political agenda. Immediately after the war, this city's black population began pressuring the federal government to extend the franchise to black men. At the first documented postwar jubilee, Reverend DeBaptiste warned, "It was for the safety of the Union to allow the black man to vote. Rebellion was not dead; it was only vanquished. . . . Negro ballots were necessary to bury it forever."[42] John Jones echoed DeBaptiste's concerns later that night at Witkowsky Hall, saying, "Slavery is not yet quite removed, and will partially exist until [the black man] has the right to suffrage, to gain which end they must now work."[43] Jones urged the crowd to organize themselves into suffrage associations to demand the right to vote. Once the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified in March 1870, black leaders turned their attention to other national issues. At their Fifteenth Amendment celebration in 1872, black Chicagoans passed a resolution endorsing Charles Sumner and his contentious Civil Rights Bill with "hearty support and earnest gratitude."[44] At an 1874 address, John Jones pressed for labor equality, asking that blacks "be paid the regular market price for our work."[45]

Through their public speeches, Jones and other black Chicagoans joined a national movement for black equality. At the same time, Emancipation Day celebrations allowed African Americans living in Chicago to assert themselves into state and local politics. Black Chicagoans twice endorsed Illinois' 1872 temperance law, which had been supported by the state's Republican Party. Speaking in 1872, John Jones claimed that black Chicagoans' "hearts were bound in bonds of gratitude to the party that had led them to liberty."[46] Though Jones suggested that blacks were indebted to the Republican Party, other black Chicagoans sought to leverage their newly won votes to change local politics. The organizers of the 1872 Fifteenth Amendment celebration passed a resolution threatening that "the support of the colored people of this city should be withheld from any man who may refuse to recognize their rights to receive every accommodation which he may afford other citizens."[47] Even as support for Reconstruction waned, emancipation celebrations proved to be consistent forums for black activism and mobilization for political, economic, and social equality on both the federal and local levels.

Emancipation jubilees also provided black Chicagoans with opportunities to debate the notion of integrated social and civic spheres. This debate came to a head in 1870, when a committee gathered at Olivet Baptist Church to begin planning a mass meeting to mark the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment. Mr. Freeman, a member of the committee, motioned that whites be barred from participating in the celebration because there "was eloquence enough under dark skins to do their own talking." Once some applause subsided, John Jones countered angrily, "White men took their [black] lives in their hands and fought for them and for the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. . . . Was this a black man's country, or a white man's country, or a people's country?" Some in the crowd responded heartily, "the people's." Another committeeman, Mr. Johnson, sided with Freeman, arguing that he "respected white men, but thought the time had come when it was necessary for them to prove that colored men could mount the rostrum and talk as well as white men." After arousing heated comments on both sides, Freeman's contentious motion was adopted.[48]

By the time the celebration was held on April 7, the committee must have reversed its decision. Prominent speakers at the mass meeting in

Farwell Hall included Charles V. Dyer, a white abolitionist, William Bross, the former lieutenant governor of Illinois, and Francis Lawlor, an Irish Republican from Baltimore. Whites were ultimately allowed to participate as speakers, but white visitors were mostly relegated to the hall's upper galleries.[49] Though the committee ultimately voted in favor of including whites in the festivities, the debate that preceded the event suggests that some black Chicagoans viewed the idea of totally integrated civic and public spheres as less desirable than they had been during the antebellum period.

Political discourse was not limited to committee meetings or the speeches of prominent orators. After the war, public processions became larger and more intrusive, rendering Chicago's emancipation jubilees more visible and popular. Attendance figures for postwar celebrations dwarfed reports from antebellum August 1 gatherings. In August 1869, five thousand people joined in a parade from Olivet Baptist Church to the Central Depot, where they boarded trains to a second celebration in Haas's Park.[50] The January 1870 celebration drew one thousand people to "parade through the principal streets of the city."[51] Less than four months later, five thousand people participated in a two-mile procession through the city, which the *Tribune* described as a "salvo of artillery [and] energetic movement among the entire colored population of the city."[52]

Through these boisterous public processions, black Chicagoans began to project a militant image of themselves to their white neighbors. Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie has described these processions as part of a "militant public politics of the street."[53] Procession bands mixed traditional patriotic tunes like "America" and "The Star Spangled Banner" with songs like "John Brown's Body," which glorified violent struggle against oppression. Most notably, black Civil War veterans and members of military clubs like the Zouaves occupied prominent places at the head of processions. The spectacle of armed and uniformed black men marching through city streets certainly suggested blacks' patriotism and devotion to their country. But militarism also had double-edged meaning, serving as a visual reminder of blacks' readiness to bear arms in defense of their freedom.

Public parades likewise allowed black Chicagoans to project softer messages about the women in their community. Black women who participated in processions occupied places of honor and respect. Women who were members of social and mutual-aid clubs, namely the Daughters

of Zion and Daughters of Union, marched behind black soldiers and veterans. At the 1870 Fifteenth Amendment celebration, female participants were recast as guardians of the country resembling Columbia. A reporter observed, "One of the notable features [of the parade] was a car, drawn by eight horses, on which were seated a number of young ladies, representing the various States of the Union. They were all dressed in white and were seated so as to present the appearance of a pyramid, upon the apex of which was a representation of the Goddess of Liberty." Through these public displays, black Chicagoans implicitly asserted the purity, virtue, and dignity of black women.[54] In many cases, Emancipation Day celebrations confined women to serve as symbolic figures rather than as vocal participants. These presentations likewise masked how many black men chose to advance the cause of black male suffrage and manhood rights while ignoring issues affecting black women. However, as Leslie Schwalm has noted, public processions allowed black women to enjoy "a privileged womanhood" normally denied to them by the white public.[55] By limiting how black women could participate, black men might have also hoped to shield black women from criticisms that accompanied participating prominently in the public sphere.

Newspaper coverage suggests that such concerns were warranted. The high visibility of postwar emancipation jubilees left black Chicagoans vulnerable to increased scrutiny from their white counterparts. Reporters frequently mentioned the pressure and potential criticism blacks faced from white onlookers. For instance, a reporter on the August 1, 1869 celebration remarked, "There were very few white people on the ground, a circumstance which was apparently not regretted, since it left [black Chicagoans] to the unbroken enjoyment of their pleasures without having to listen to the condescending criticisms usually bestowed by the pale faces."[56] A newspaper report for a celebration organized the following year noted that white Chicagoans looked on the procession with judgment and "surprise at the fine appearance which the procession made."[57]

While describing the festivities, newspaper reporters oftentimes joined onlookers in judging black participants. Black speakers were subject to criticism for everything from the clarity of their message to their elocution. Reporters seemed especially interested in surveilling and criticizing blacks Chicagoans' behavior. In an 1869 article, a *Tribune* reporter went to great lengths to reassure white readers that black celebrants had

behaved well, writing, "It was a notable feature of the occasion . . . that everything was conducted with perfect regularity and good order. There were no rows, and few, if any, drunken people on the grounds, and . . . was not aggravated by any unseemly exhibition of temper."[58] Oftentimes, descriptions and criticisms of black Chicagoans' behavior overwhelmed reporting on Emancipation Day exercises. Such racialized coverage suggests the heightened scrutiny, low expectations, and subtle racism that black Chicagoans faced during Emancipation Day celebrations.

Regardless of the criticism they attracted, postwar Emancipation Day celebrations served as important visual and sonic reminders that slavery and, consequently, the work of reconstruction were national issues, not problems confined to the South. Through processions and public oratory, black Chicagoans forged an egalitarian political movement for equality and recognition. By forcing these issues into the public sphere, black Chicagoans extended the fight for freedom from distant battleground to city streets. Besides mobilizing Chicago's black community, postwar celebrations helped to solidify social networks that connected black Chicagoans to each other and to black communities throughout the country. These celebrations also provided an opportunity for black Chicagoans to reflect on their past and fashion a vision for their future.

Conclusion

Up to the turn of the century, the memory of slavery and its abolition remained powerful unifying forces in Chicago's African American community. In post-Reconstruction jubilees, black Chicagoans found forums to express their dissatisfaction with national problems, namely the lynching of blacks in the South, and attempted to hold government to the promises of Reconstruction. These post-Reconstruction celebrations built on a tradition that stretched back for more than a quarter of a century to the 1850s. Whether organized around British or American abolition, the emancipation jubilees that occurred between 1853 and 1877 served as independent occasions for the connected processes of building community networks, forging a collective memory and identity, and mobilizing around political issues, especially the right to be included as equals in integrated civic and public spheres. After the Civil War, these celebrations likewise allowed black Chicagoans to project a militant

self-image that increased their visibility. At the same time, these public festivities left them vulnerable to racialized judgments and criticism from their white counterparts. Enduring this criticism, black Chicagoans continued to commemorate the abolition of slavery and agitate for equality on Emancipation Days in hopes that future generations of African Americans would not have to pay the same price.

Notes

1. *Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 1863.

2. Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie, *Rites of August First: Emancipation Day in the Black Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2007).

3. Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808–1915* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

4. Leslie Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

5. St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Christopher Reed, *Black Chicago's First Century: Volume 1, 1883–1900* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2005); Margaret Garb, *Freedom's Ballot: African American Political Struggles in Chicago from Abolition to the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

6. *Chicago Tribune,* August 2, 1861.

7. *Chicago Tribune*, August 4, 1857.

8. *Chicago Daily Journal*, August 2, 1860.

9. According to the 1860 U.S. Census, most of Chicago's black population had been born outside the state of Illinois. The number of Illinois-born black Chicagoans numbered 160, compared to 156 from Virginia, 116 from Kentucky, 102 from Missouri, and twenty-four from "British America."

10. *Chicago Tribune*, July 31, 1860.

11. Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, 59.

12. Ibid., 55.

13. Kerr-Ritchie, *Rites of August First*, 9.

14. Langston would go on to become the first president of the historically black Virginia Commonwealth University as well as the first African American to represent his home state of Virginia in the House of Representatives, following a long, bitterly contested election. *Chicago Tribune,* August 1, 1860.

15. Christopher Reed, *Black Chicago's First Century* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 108–109.
16. *Chicago Democratic Press*, August 1, 1853.
17. *Chicago Tribune*, August 4, 1857.
18. *Chicago Tribune*, July 31, 1860.
19. *Chicago Tribune,* August 4, 1857.
20. *Chicago Tribune,* August 2, 1860.
21. *Chicago Tribune*, July 31, 1862.
22. *Chicago Times*, July 31, 1862.
23. Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, 34.
24. *Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 1863.
25. *Chicago Tribune*, December 30, 1862.
26. Ps. 116:1–5, 8 (King James Version).
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. *Chicago Tribune*, August 4, 1863.
30. *Chicago Tribune,* January 1, 1864.
31. *Chicago Tribune,* January 3, 1866; *Chicago Tribune,* August 2, 1872.
32. *Chicago Tribune,* August 3, 1869.
33. *Chicago Tribune,* August 1, 1863. Pinchback would also go on to become the first African American governor in the United States. He served as Louisiana's governor from December 29, 1872 to January 13, 1873.
34. *Chicago Tribune,* September 21, 1875.
35. *Chicago Tribune,* January 3, 1866.
36. *Chicago Tribune,* April 2, 1872.
37. Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom,* 14.
38. *Chicago Tribune*, April 8, 1870.
39. *Chicago Tribune,* April 2, 1875.
40. *Chicago Tribune,* January 3, 1866.
41. *Chicago Tribune,* January 3, 1870.
42. *Chicago Tribune,* January 3, 1860.
43. Ibid.
44. *Chicago Tribune,* April 2, 1872.
45. *Chicago Tribune,* January 2, 1874.
46. *Chicago Tribune,* April 2, 1872.
47. *Chicago Tribune,* March 28, 1872.
48. *Chicago Tribune,* February 18, 1870.
49. *Chicago Tribune,* April 8, 1870.
50. *Chicago Tribune,* August 3, 1869.
51. *Chicago Tribune*, January 3, 1870.

52. *Chicago Tribune,* April 8, 1870.
53. Kerr-Ritchie, *Rites of August First*, 8.
54. *Chicago Tribune,* April 8, 1870.
55. Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 234.
56. *Chicago Tribune*, August 3, 1869.
57. *Chicago Tribune,* April 8, 1870.
58. *Chicago Tribune*, August 3, 1869.