

If Selma Were Heaven:
Economic Transformation and Black Freedom Struggles in the Alabama Black Belt,
1901 – 2000

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

In Selma, Alabama in 1965, local African Americans partnered with civil rights organizations to stage a movement for voting rights. The beating of peaceful black marchers by white state troopers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge that March catapulted the city and black demands for the ballot into the national spotlight. When the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed five months later, it cemented Selma as a symbol of voting rights. Since then, Selma has become a triumphal moment in the grand narrative of American democracy and citizenship. However, the years after the voting rights movement failed to bring economic opportunities and justice for black citizens in Selma. At the end of the twentieth century, numbing unemployment, gutted houses, and government transfer payments attested to barriers left unbroken by the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. How, then, did Selma become the site of a nationally-gear campaign for voting rights, and why was the right to vote not enough to bring economic justice for African Americans?

This dissertation is a local study that spans the course of century, one that looks at Selma and Dallas County as a place with a long history shaped by white supremacy and agricultural transformation, as well as local relationships and national developments. It begins in 1901, the year that the newly-passed Alabama constitution took the ballot away from nearly every African American in the state, and ends in 2000, when Selma's residents elected their first black mayor. Using newspapers and magazines, personal papers, organizational records, municipal records, federal publications, and oral histories, it examines

how municipal, state, and national politics, as well as enormous economic shifts, intersected with and altered the lives of black and white residents in Dallas County, Alabama.

The multifaceted struggle of African Americans for freedom in Dallas County unfolded within the context of a century-long agricultural revolution in the Black Belt. African Americans' overlapping demands for economic opportunity, self-sufficiency, quality education, and meaningful political representation reflected and responded to local economic shifts from cotton to cattle to industry. The semi-autonomous community black Dallas County residents forged through farmers' organizations, schools, and societies under segregation later helped them mount a frontal challenge to the ramparts of white supremacy. The civil rights movement, however, grew to maturity at exactly the moment when cattle had usurped cotton's reign over the fields, altering the Black Belt's economic and social fabric.

Political rights for African Americans in Dallas County did not solve the postwar economic challenges of vanishing farms and the rise of low-wage industry. Meanwhile, local white officials vigorously fought to maintain political control in the wake of the civil rights movement. Their calculated intransigence delayed the meaningful participation of black residents in the economic and political life of Selma. The rise of the Sunbelt South and globalization further siphoned resources away from the struggling Black Belt. As the federal government retracted and nearby military bases closed in the late 1970s and 1980s, rural areas like Dallas County were left without resources in a new economy that favored high-skilled workers in urban centers. Examining black freedom struggles and economic transformation side-by-side illuminates how voting rights alone did not alter the regional

network that concentrated both resources and poverty in an uneven process of development.

The vote brought political power, but it did not bring the economic justice, security, or quality education that made up the other half of African Americans' demands for freedom. By singularly focusing on the securing of voting rights, Selma became a pivotal moment in the story of American democracy, but black Dallas County residents' parallel demands for equal economic opportunities remained long after African Americans had won the vote. The triumphal narrative ignores the economic transformation that fundamentally altered the Black Belt. From cotton to cattle, industry to unemployment checks, black citizens perpetually found themselves on the losing end of economic change. At the end of the century, nearly four decades of federal divestment and globalization had sapped Dallas County of jobs, and the government's presence was felt mainly in the form of disability checks and food assistance. The political rights black Dallas County citizens had shed blood for in 1965 could not alone undo this legacy of economic inequality.

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Selma's beloved storyteller, Kathryn Tucker Windham, used to tell people that she was twice blessed. It came from the poem *Eulogy* by Jan Struther, which read:

She was twice blessed: She was happy; She knew it.

Like Ms. Windham, I, too, am twice blessed. In the journey of writing this history, I have been able to rely on the support and wisdom of so many wonderful people. Their generosity and love has been overwhelming, and I count myself among the luckiest.

I fell in love with Selma over a decade ago, as a second-year student at the University of Wisconsin – Madison venturing south on a civil rights bus trip. When I walked through the door of the National Voting Rights Museum for the first time, a wall plastered in hundreds of post-it notes caught my attention. Each bit of paper, stuck under an arching title reading “I Was There,” held one handwritten sentence, penned by a participant in the city’s 1965 movement for voting rights: “I cooked food for the marchers,” “I marched from Selma to Montgomery,” and even “I was a state trooper on Bloody Sunday.” Later that day, Joanne Bland, the museum’s director and one of the most inspiring people I know, directed our tour bus around Selma, narrating the street corners and buildings with her own stories of the movement. That week of straightening up the museum’s archives and talking about the many unnamed local activists changed the direction of my life.

I owe my beginnings to a magnificent troop of historians in Madison, Wisconsin. Steve Kantrowitz, Christina Greene, and Tim Tyson introduced me to the beloved community and showed me how to go about being a part of it. Theirs was a world where

being community, both inside and outside of the classroom, was an essential part of being a good historian. Steve and Christina were dedicated and moving teachers who shaped how I looked at history and the world. Tim's encouragement was of a slightly different sort. On at least two occasions, I followed his advice and ended up on crusades that were simultaneously the most stupid and brilliant things I have ever done. I now know that these suggestions are not to be followed without due reckoning, but I am a stronger, more confident person for where they have taken me.

One of Tim's suggestions was that I move down south for a while and become a waitress to help me decide if I really wanted to be a historian. Well, I didn't become a waitress, but I did pack up my little Geo Prizm and move to Selma after graduation. Thank the almighty that amazing Joanne Bland was there to take me under her wing when I arrived. Ms. Anne, I can't imagine what must have run through your head when my 21 year-old self showed up in the museum's back office, ready to volunteer. The warmth and kindness you showed me kept me afloat during my very first bout in Selma, and you continue to be my inspiration. I (and my parents, for that matter) can never thank you enough. That half of a year in the non-air conditioned upstairs archives of the National Voting Rights Museum cemented my love (or maybe obsession) for Selma and its history. This overwhelming, but rich experience propelled me towards graduate school. After a circuitous route that started in a bookstore in Kansas and ended in the best high school media center in Minnesota, I headed south to Duke University with Selma in mind.

There, I discovered that my magnificent teachers at the University of Wisconsin, the ones who had taught me so much about community, had learned many of those lessons

themselves in Durham, North Carolina. When I first met my adviser - the eternally-optimistic and unstoppable Bill Chafe - it felt like I had come home. Bill has been my biggest advocate and cheerleader. He was and is the sentry of my best interests, smoothing my sometimes jagged path through graduate school. After six years and at least a hundred South African breakfasts together, Bill is more like family than an adviser. Twice blessed also applies to my good fortune of having not one, but two advisers. Tim Tyson may be one of the world's greatest suppliers of vision, and he's now done it for me as an undergraduate and a graduate student. His warm spirit and insight has expanded my realm of possibility.

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and their candid, astute suggestions made the final product far better than it would have been without them.

There would be no dissertation, however, without Selma and the people who live there. The story I tell in the following pages is not the one that many folks in Selma would want told. Whichever way you look at it, the tumultuous political and economic history of Dallas County, and really the rest of the Alabama Black Belt, just isn't one of prosperity, growth, and harmony. Nor is it a tale of victory. But that sad story is not a reflection on the so many wonderful people I met in Selma, folks who overwhelmed me with their kindness. They helped me find places to stay, gave me telephone numbers of people I needed to talk to, invited me to sit in their pews on Sunday morning, and brought me into their lives.

Nearest to my heart are the splendid staff members at the Selma public library; they make magic happen every day. Every time I walked through the doors, there was always a smiling face saying hello, asking how I was doing, and ready to chat about anything from microfilm and mystery novels to granola bars and faith. Director Becky Nichols carefully tends this oasis, greeting every single person as if she had been waiting especially for them. She was my sounding board, listening to what I had unearthed and comparing it to her own wealth of personal experiences and knowledge. Local history librarian, Anne Knight, did the same. I looked forward to her regular appearance in the microfilm room to make sure I knew some of the best details of Selma's history. While their intellectual generosity sustained my work, Friday afternoon sessions at the "Faith Table" with Becky and Jan Parker, the delightful children's librarian/book club leader, sustained my soul. This loving group has welcomed me into their homes and hearts, and I count them as dear friends.

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my madness, brainstormed with me through my ruts, and made sure that my apostrophes are in the right place. Here is to our saner life after graduate school.

INTRODUCTION

The hard, wooden pews of Brown Chapel A.M.E. church teemed with people on March 4, 2007 as the crowd waited for Barack Obama to ascend the pulpit. It was early in the 2008 presidential campaign, and the African American senator from Illinois faced Hillary Clinton, the New York senator and former first lady, in a fight for the Democratic nomination. President Clinton and his wife had earned the respect of many black Americans during his years in office, and Senator Obama's success hung on his ability to convince black voters that he was more worthy of their votes than his formidable opponent. He chose Selma, Alabama as the place to make that claim.

Rewind the scene forty years to January 2, 1965. The throng inside Brown Chapel looked hauntingly similar. Martin Luther King, Jr., standing above a sanctuary jammed with local black residents, described Selma as a symbol of bitter resistance to civil rights in the Deep South. On that dark winter night, he named the city the new national battleground for voting rights, and African American residents of the Black Belt tightened the laces of their marching shoes in agreement. Two months later, shocking footage of white state troopers beating peaceful black marchers interrupted nightly television broadcasts. "Bloody Sunday," as the horrific event became known, catapulted Selma and black demands for the ballot into the national spotlight. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 became law that August, finally guaranteeing all Americans the right to vote. The legislation had been christened in Washington, but it had been born in the streets of Selma.

On the 42nd anniversary of Bloody Sunday, Obama endeavored to link his candidacy to the civil rights movement. Speaking from the same pulpit where King had spoken, he

declared himself a part of the Joshua generation - a biblical reference signaling the cohort of doers and creators that follow in the footsteps of the visionary Moses generation. He proclaimed, "I'm here because somebody marched. I'm here because y'all sacrificed for me. I stand on the shoulders of giants." There in Selma, Obama sunk his roots into the victorious legacy of the civil rights movement and positioned himself as the candidate who would continue its fight against poverty, injustice, and oppression.¹

Decades before Obama mounted that pulpit, Selma has been consecrated as a pivotal moment in the grand arc of United States history. In the collective memory of the nation, "Selma" represents the triumphal moment of black nonviolent protest and the fulfillment of the promises of American democracy. But the city Barack Obama visited bore little resemblance to this shining image. Driving fifty miles westward from Montgomery where the nearest East-West interstate ends, over the four-lane Highway 80, travelers roll the gentle hills and fields of lazily grazing cattle that once blossomed in cotton. Abandoned gas stations with barred windows and rusted industrial buildings dot the final miles to Selma. From the crest of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, high above the Alabama River, the downtown comes into view. The vacant Tepper's building – once a thriving department store – towers over the surrounding businesses on Broad Street. The clothing stores and wholesale businesses that had made Selma the trading center of the western Black Belt closed up shop decades earlier. Most of the bustle in downtown now centers around the intersection of Alabama Avenue and Broad Street where the ever-busy public library welcomes Selma's young and

¹David S. Gutterman, "Obama Fought the Battle of Jericho – and His Story Came Tumbling Down," *Theory & Event* 16 (2013); David Remnick, *The Bridge: the Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

old. Across the street, the Downtowner, a classic meat-and-three restaurant, keeps the sweet tea and Friday catfish special at the ready, while nearby Carter's Drug Store still delivers prescriptions, packaged in signature green bottles, to the front doors of Selma's residents.²

To the north and east of downtown - the historically blacker and poorer sections of the city - boarded-up buildings and abandoned houses mix with weary-looking homes whose porches have started to lose their struggle against gravity. Payday loan stores testify to how hard it is for poor people to scrape by, week after week. Meanwhile, the high school cashiers working the check-out lines at the Winn-Dixie grocery store are experts at SNAP cards, the credit card like payment of federal food assistance. Wal-mart is the best shopping option in town nowadays; the Dollar General or one of the other discount stores lining Highway 14 would be the next possibility. Employment is hard to come by, and good paying jobs are even rarer. Meanwhile, the public schools, with the exception of one elementary school in the western, wealthier, and whiter side of town, educate the city's black children, while nearly every white child attends the private John T. Morgan Academy or Meadowview Christian. The Selma Country Club, showcase of wealth and segregation during the twentieth century, still does not admit black members.

The Selma that Barack Obama visited in 2007 visibly and unmistakably told a story that diverged from the triumphal legacy of voting rights that he came to claim. The black mayor sitting in office and the African American majority on the city council testified to just how much voting rights had transformed Alabama politics. Black residents could trace the paved city streets, higher graduation rates, early childhood education, and ubiquitous indoor

² Kathryn Tucker Windham, *She: The Old Woman Who Took Over My Life* (Montgomery, AL: New South Books, 2011), 37.

plumbing to their gradual inclusion into the city in the years after the movement. But the numbing unemployment, gutted houses, and SNAP cards attested to barriers left unbroken by the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. In the symbolic birthplace of the voting rights movement, those very rights failed to bring economic opportunities and justice for African Americans. My dissertation seeks to answer how and why this stark disconnect between political legacy and economic reality came to reside in Selma, Alabama.

The answers hinge on understanding Selma and Dallas County as a place, instead of only a moment in time. Selma is a place with a long, complex history shaped by white supremacy and agricultural transformation, as well as local relationships and national developments. When Selma became a symbol of the voting rights movement, everything before and after the marches vanished as quickly as spilled lemonade on hot Alabama asphalt in August. But a city is not and can never be just a moment. My dissertation focuses on the political and economic transformations that played out in Dallas County and Selma, its county seat, over the course of the entire twentieth century. It begins in 1901, the year that the newly-passed Alabama constitution took the ballot away from nearly every African American in the state, and ends in 2000, when Selma's residents elected their first black mayor. Two questions guide my research: how did Selma become the site of a nationally-gearred campaign for voting rights, and why was the right to vote not enough to bring economic justice for African Americans in the Black Belt? The answers come by means of the close lens of a local study, one that examines how municipal, state, and national politics, as well as enormous economic shifts, intersected with and altered the lives of black and white residents in Dallas County.

The multilayered black freedom struggles in Selma, fought by generations of diverse actors, unfolded within the context of a century-long transformation in the agricultural economy of the Black Belt. African Americans' demands for economic opportunity, self-sufficiency, quality education, and political representation reflected and responded to drastic changes in the economic reality that structured daily life. The civil rights movement grew to maturity at exactly the moment when cattle had usurped cotton's reign over the fields, a takeover that sounded the death knell for the meager livings black tenant farmers had eked out on the land. I argue that the triumphal story of Selma, the one that emerged in the aftermath of the 1965 movement, depends on a singular focus on voting rights: one that ignores African Americans' parallel demands for economic justice and equitable opportunities.

Placing the black freedom struggle and economic transformation side-by-side makes clear how the achievement of political equality could not counteract the vanishing of small farms and the arrival low-wage jobs – and too few of them at that – that replaced farm work in the years after World War II. Meanwhile, local white officials fought tooth and nail in the wake of the civil rights movement to maintain political control. Their calculated intransigence effectively staved off the meaningful participation of black residents in the economic and political life of Selma. The rise of the Sunbelt South and globalization further siphoned resources away from the struggling Black Belt in favor of the educated, skilled, and urban. Voting rights alone could not remedy decades of unequal investment in black communities by local, state, and federal government. A hundred-year vantage point explains both why the movement for voting rights flourished in this rural area of the Black Belt and why it failed to achieve the opportunity and justice local black residents had envisioned.

Historiography

When reading the existing histories written about Selma, one might come away with the idea that not much happened in the city before or after 1965. From Charles Fager's early work to David Garrow's detailed and Taylor Branch's riveting tomes, this scholarship traces how civil rights organizations partnered with local people to demand voting rights and ultimately, forced the nation to rise to its moral compass with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. At its heart, this remains a story of triumph, and Selma becomes a monument to the justice and righteousness of American democracy. Part of this direction stems from the scholarship's unswerving focus on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the nationally-oriented goals of his civil rights organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to secure voting legislation. Even the inclusion of local activists in their 1965 roles does not bridge the canyon of our understanding. This body of scholarship tells only an abbreviated version of the black freedom struggle in Dallas County, one that focuses so intently on the campaign for voting rights that it misses the battle African Americans simultaneously fought for economic opportunities and independence.³ Often climaxing with the victorious passing

³ Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965 – 68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963 – 65* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998); Charles W. Eagle, *Outside Agitator: Jon Daniels and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Charles E. Fager, *Selma, 1965* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1986); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1986); Stephen Longnecker, *Selma's Peacemaker: Ralph Smeltzer and Civil Rights Mediation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Gary May, *Bending Toward Justice: the Voting Rights Act and the Transformation of American Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Book Group, 2013); James T. Patterson, *The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America* (New York: Basic Books, 2012); Mary Stanton, *From Selma to Sorrow: the Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Sheyann Webb, *Selma, Lord, Selma: Girlhood Memories of the Civil Rights Days* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1980); The most comprehensive study of Selma from its earliest days through the civil rights movement is Alston Fitts III, *Selma: Queen City of the Blackbelt* (Selma, AL: Clairmont Press, 1989).

of the Voting Rights Act, scholarship focusing on Selma “the moment” suggests by omission that gaining the franchise gave black residents the tools they needed to address the deeply rooted wrongs of white supremacy. Nothing would ever be the same, it seems to coo. And yet many things would be the same.

The concept of the “long civil rights movement,” put forward by historians such as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and William Chafe, provides a broader lens from which to examine the deeply-sunk and far-reaching roots of African Americans’ struggles for freedom in Dallas County.⁴ Scholarship of the “long civil rights movement” probes the origins of social movements, exploring the fertile ground they grew from in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Focusing on black civic organizations, labor unions, church associations, and schools, it reveals the breadth and longevity of African American campaigns for citizenship and justice that included sexual, economic, and political rights – all strands that are apparent in the decades-long attempts of black Selma residents to undermine white supremacy.⁵ Recent scholarship by Susan Youngblood Ashmore, Cynthia Griggs Fleming, and Hasan Kwame Jeffries has extended the scope and timeline of the black freedom struggle in the

⁴ William H. Chafe, “Presidential Address: ‘The Gods Bring Threads to Webs Begun,’” *Journal of American History* 86 (March 2000); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005).

⁵ Scholarship using a long civil rights movement focus has multiplied in the past thirty years. Some of the most notable of these works include, Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: the Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919 – 1950* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008); Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy In the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2010); Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: the Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

Alabama Black Belt beyond a narrow focus on 1965 and voting rights.⁶ My dissertation furthers this emphasis, examining how the relationships that black Dallas County residents forged in farmers' organizations, churches, and schools helped first, to sustain their communities and later, to mount a frontal challenge to the ramparts of white supremacy. The long framework makes clear how African American organizing and decades-old visions of freedom fueled the feats of the later civil rights movement.

But while the focus on the "long civil rights movement" places local people and community organizing as pivotal in a fight against white supremacy, it falls short in examining how federal investment and economic transformation contorted the outcomes of these challenges. African Americans secured voting rights in the midst of an agricultural revolution in the Alabama Black Belt. Thanks to the New Deal, cattle had taken the place of cotton (and its tenant farmers) in the fields. Dallas County's business leaders hung their hopes of economic prosperity on industrial development, but the boom of Sunbelt cities combined with globalization stymied both their efforts and economic opportunities for African Americans.

The emerging scholarship on urban studies and the Sunbelt South offers an explanation for the gap between Selma's celebrated image as the birthplace of voting rights and the contemporary city's decaying landscape. Asking questions about the relationship between growing, affluent suburbs and decaying inner cities, scholars such as Thomas Sugrue, Kenneth Jackson, Kevin Kruse, Matthew Lassiter, and Robert Self explore how

⁶ Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On: the War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964 – 1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008); Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *In the Shadow of Selma: the Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2004); Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

unequal relations of power are built into the regional geography of metropolitan areas.⁷

Bruce Schulman expands the implications of this scholarship from the fringes of the city to the region of the entire Sunbelt South. He argues that the massive amount of federal dollars funneled south to address the region's underdevelopment was unequally distributed,

bolstering majority white, urban areas while leaving the South's Black Belt in its shadows.⁸

My dissertation examines Selma as part of a regional network that concentrated both resources and poverty in uneven processes of development within the Sunbelt South. As the federal government retracted, seen in the closing of air force bases as well as massive spending cuts during the Reagan administration, rural areas, like Dallas County, were left without resources in a new economy that favored highly skilled workers in urban centers. Understanding why voting rights did not bring economic justice for African Americans requires an understanding of how the grossly unequal regional distribution of wealth hindered Black Belt counties.

Writing about a century brought me into the middle of numerous historiographical debates, far too many to list in one introduction. Broadly speaking, my dissertation weaves

⁷ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: the Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁸ Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938–1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); During the 1980s, political scientists and economists published numerous studies focusing on the uneven development taking place in the Sunbelt South. These include, Lionel J. Beaulieu, *The Rural South in Crisis: Challenges for the Future* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988); William Falk and Thomas Lyson, *High Tech, Low Tech, No Tech: Recent Industrial and Occupational Change in the South* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Thomas A. Lyson, *Two Sides to the Sunbelt: the Growing Divergence Between the Rural and Urban South* (New York: Praeger, 1989); Stuart A. Rosenfeld, *After the Factories: Changing Employment Patterns in the Rural South* (Research Triangle Park, N.C.: Southern Growth Policies Board, 1985); Southern Growth Policies Board, *Halfway Home and a Long Way to Go: the Report of the 1986 Commission on the Future of the South*, Southern Growth Policies Board (Research Triangle Park, N.C.: Southern Growth Policies Board, 1988).

together scholarship on the long civil rights movement, agricultural transformation, and a regional distribution of federal and economic resources to answer why the political legacy and economic realities of Selma stand in contrast.

Sources

Looking at political and economic change over the period of a hundred years requires an awesome variety of sources; together, newspapers and magazines, personal papers, organizational records, municipal records, federal publications, and oral histories built the framework of my research. They also filled in the gaps. There is no better way to trace the comings and goings of one particular place than by reading the newspaper, and Selma, as the hub of the western Alabama Black Belt, produced daily newspapers throughout the entire twentieth century. Reading one hundred years of the *Selma Times-Journal* and its predecessors provided a scaffolding for the political, business, and social happenings in Dallas County. The pages reflected the priorities of the large planters, leading businessmen, and political officials and revealed how the economic and political order of white supremacy functioned from week to week. Unfortunately, a separately published Negro section of the newspaper was not deemed worthy of preservation, and African Americans mostly appeared in the *Times-Journal* in the form of criminals, faithful servants, or middle-class leaders.

Reporting became more balanced in the years after 1965, but the white-owned and operated newspaper remained a more reliable source for white business leaders than black residents.

African Americans, however, left records of their own as a counter narrative to those that emerged from the newspaper. Publications from local black missionary and Rosenwald schools, Jeanes teachers, and Selma University all offered a window into black uplift efforts

in the early twentieth century. African Americans' participation in war efforts during the First World War were reflected in records from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People as well as a black-owned paper, *The Colored Alabamian*. Because the overwhelming majority of African Americans in Dallas County worked on the land, the records of Negro farm organizations, especially the Alabama Cooperative Extension Agency and the Clyde Johnson papers, documented the labors of black residents towards land ownership, self-sufficiency, and political rights. In the years leading up to and after the voting rights movement, the voices of Dallas County's African Americans could be found in the papers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in newspapers like the *Southern Courier*, and the workings of those connected with the Office of Economic Opportunity. Oral history interviews with black city council members, attorneys, and museum directors provided a firsthand account of how the struggle for meaningful political representation and economic opportunity soldiered on in Selma during the 1980s and 1990s.

In the years after World War II, the cadre of white men plotting Selma's future around board room tables gave a good bit of thought to the image of their city. Hoping to both attract industry as well as bolster their personal power, many of their less palatable undertakings remained hidden behind closed doors. Documentation or public memory about anti-union organizing, violent intimidation, or other damning activities has been, not unsurprisingly, hard to come by. The personal papers of one city official provided some insight into the inner workings of the city's elite as well as material produced and circulated by the local Chamber of Commerce. Individual testimonies sent to the NAACP and federal agencies as well as reports in newspapers, like the Communist Party's *Daily Worker*, offered

other hints. Most of the conclusions I have come to have resulted from placing snippets of conversations into the context of newspaper articles and other documents.

In a city where residents have been living in the fallout of 1965 for fifty years, many are reticent to talk about history. That is understandable. The rickety logic of segregation was common sense for white residents, and some actions taken by beloved parents and grandparents look especially ghastly in the light of acclaimed colorblindness. Many of the most active white leaders in the political and economic wrangling that happened after 1965 are dead, and others are hesitant to talk about the influential and often calculated decisions that were made in back offices or at exclusive Gulf Shore retreats. On the flip side, voting rights did not end poverty or under-education nor did it stop the explosion of drugs and incarceration, and some African American residents wonder what the movement won for them, there in Selma. While well-worn stories of 1965 get told at anniversary celebrations, lack of interest in the hard decades that followed only shore up disappointment over things not changed. I met and talked to many people during the time I lived in Selma. But building the trust of all the people I wanted to talk to – given the palpable hesitancy about talking history to an outsider - took more time than I had. Therefore, there are far fewer voices of the people who hitched their lives to Selma’s history than I would have wanted. Hopefully, this is something that time will allow me to rectify.

Chapter Summary

Tracing the bends and flows of a river requires knowing where it begins and where it ends. Likewise, my dissertation follows a chronological path through the century to map the ups and downs of one place. It is made up of interludes and chapters, with every interlude

representing a lapse, a hiccup, a short period of time or an event that interrupts or shifts the routines of daily life. It begins in 1901, when Alabama passed a new constitution that effectively removed its black citizens from the voting rolls. While a personalized system of white supremacy had always governed Dallas County, the 1901 Constitution marked the start of a familiar yet new legalized and entrenched system of Jim Crow segregation. Chapter 1 examines the world that cotton (and white supremacy) made. It argues that Dallas County's agricultural economy worked hand in hand with white supremacy to keep poor black sharecroppers landless, moneyless, and stripped of basic rights. African Americans, however, turned inward, building independent institutions and keeping alive the promise of full citizenship. During the First World War, the federal government called on black citizens to loyally serve their country, and the second chapter examines how this shift challenged local customs of white supremacy. But just as the infiltration of the boll weevil threatened (but failed) to uproot cotton's dominance, the racial landscape of the Alabama Black Belt remained unaltered after the war. Agricultural extension work, however, blossomed in the uncertainty of wartime, as united farmers and businessmen sought to upbuild Dallas County. It also encouraged white landowners to support industrial education and agricultural outreach for the black tenants whose labor they relied upon. These promises of progress and cooperation, however, shattered on the jagged edges of hard times at the end of the 1920s.

Chapter 3 examines how the Great Depression pummeled already poor African Americans and cajoled Selma's leading white citizens to embrace federal assistance as a last resort. But New Deal agricultural programs fundamentally altered the reign of cotton as well as white supremacy. Crop subsidies removed thousands of acres of land from production and encouraged landowners to dismiss African American tenant farmers. But as planters

replaced black tenants with cattle, federal programs also gave African Americans a new source of aid to turn to, outside the influence of local control. Some used this to challenge the boundaries of white supremacy. The presence of the federal government became even more tangible in 1940 when Craig Air Force Base opened outside of Selma. World War II provided black residents new opportunities to participate in and demand a broader, less-racially restrictive democracy and Chapter 4 focuses on how Dallas County citizens responded to this new national climate. Emerging federal challenges to segregation pushed white officials in Dallas County to channel more resources to African Americans, strengthening already established black institutions. Meanwhile, the rapid expansion of cattle and mechanical cotton pickers revolutionized the agricultural and economic landscape of the Black Belt, pushing black farmers from the land and turning the eyes of white businessmen towards industrial recruitment and new jobs.

National attacks on segregation had begun seeping into Dallas County by the 1950s. Chapter 5 examines how white residents united in organizations like the Farm Bureau and White Citizens' Council to defend their southern way of life. Meanwhile, local black leaders, assisted by the Extension Service and the NAACP, mounted an increasingly forceful attack on Jim Crow. In the midst of challenges to the racial order, white officials worked to recruit industries that would maintain the status quo, ones that opposed unions and would accommodate to the area's low wages. Squelching union organizing, as well as civil rights protests, became increasingly pivotal in maintaining Selma's image of a racially-harmonious, business-friendly town. But these efforts faltered when civil rights organizations singled out Selma in the mid-1960s precisely because of black residents' résumé of diverse strategies and robust community networks. The 1965 movement sets the stage for Chapter 6, which

reveals how efforts to secure national voting rights legislation caused civil rights organizations and the media to downplay the parallel calls of black Selma residents for better homes and equal pay. The passing of the Voting Rights Act marked Selma as the acclaimed birthplace of full citizenship for the nation, at the same time that black residents' demands for economic justice continued unmet. Skilled intransigence and maneuvering by a small but powerful group of public officials and businessmen helped ensure that African Americans would remain on the outside of federal poverty and social service programs. Massive changes in farm work undermined the already meager livelihoods of black residents while at the same time, the low-wage, industrial jobs that replaced agricultural work effectively maintained Dallas County's unequal economic relationships.

Chapter 7 examines how the abandonment of the rural Sunbelt South by the federal government and businesses hindered the tangible gains of African Americans' fight for justice and equality. Craig Air Force Base closed in 1977 at the same time that globalization was drawing away industries on which the Black Belt depended. Meanwhile, Reaganomics pummeled the social programs that gave many of the area's poor people a meager but nominal economic foothold. Black residents were left with few allies or options. In this bleak situation, a group of African American attorneys in Selma turned to the courts and to grassroots organizing to contest the tight grasp white political leaders held on local control. By the 1990s, a fierce political divide split the white mayor and his backers from the active black law firm. The division effectively drowned out more moderate voices. Continuing racial disparities in Selma city schools, amplified by existing political rivalries, fueled massive school protests on the 25th anniversary of the voting rights movement, which is where Chapter 8 begins. When the smoke had settled, the schools had reverted back to segregation

– this time in private versus public schools – and local politics further divided along racial lines. Even though the first black majorities oversaw local governing bodies, the scarcity of good jobs and the continued influence of illegal drugs required resources beyond what one city could provide. When James Perkins, Jr. finally unseated longtime Mayor Joe Smitherman in the 2000, it was a moment of great triumph for Selma’s African American residents. But the economic problems Mayor Perkins inherited at the start of the new century proved as insurmountable as they had been for the past four decades. Full citizenship for black Dallas County residents, as well as all Americans, still needed both political rights and economic justice.

DALLAS COUNTY

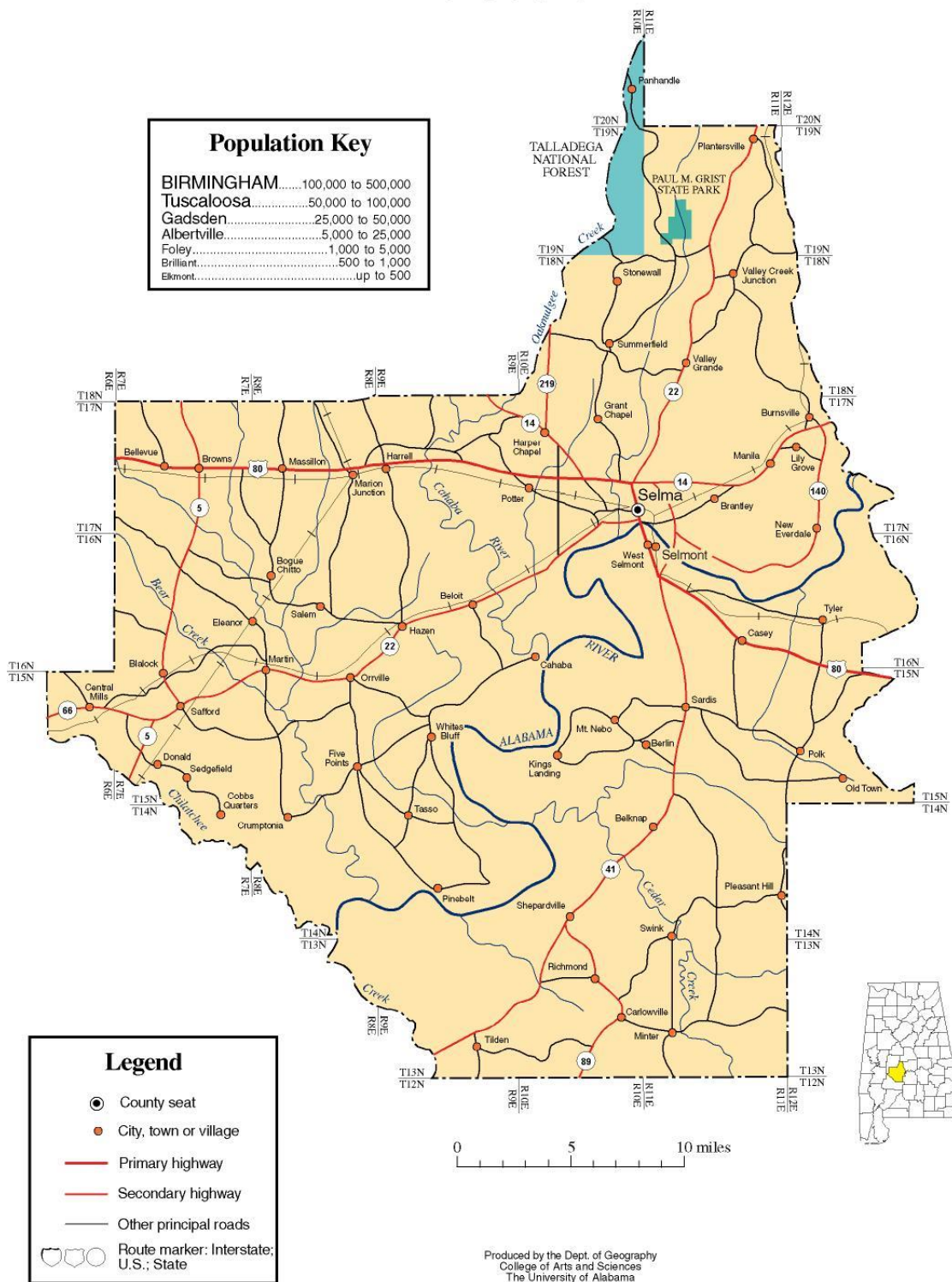


Figure 1: Map of Dallas County and Alabama. Courtesy of ADAH.

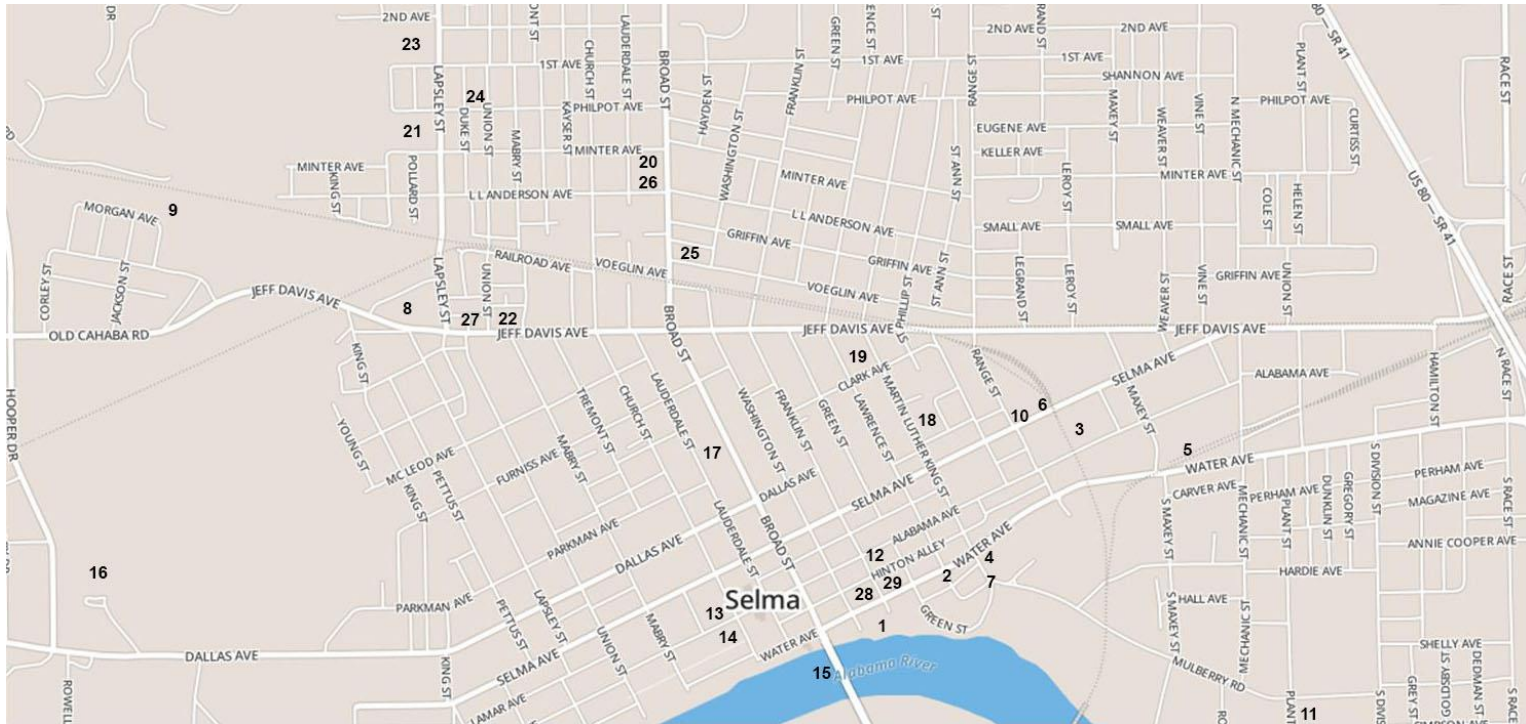


Figure 2: Map of Selma, Alabama, circa 1950s.

- | | | | |
|--|---|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1: Wharf | 10: Selma Manufacturing/
Ames Bagging Co. | 18: Brown Chapel A.M.E. | 28: Boynton's Insurance Ag. |
| 2: Wholesale grocers | 11: Selma Stockyards/Zeigler
Meatpacking Co. | 19: First Baptist Church | 29: Black Community Center |
| 3: Dallas Cotton Compress | 12: City hall | 20: Tabernacle Baptist Church | |
| 4: L&N R.R. depot | 13: Dallas County courthouse | 21: Selma University | |
| 5: Southern R.R. storehouse | 14: Federal building | 22: Knox Academy | |
| 6: L&N/Western R.R. offices | 15: Edmund Pettus Bridge | 23: R.B. Hudson High School | |
| 7: L&N/Western R.R. shops | 16: Selma Country Club | 24: Burwell Infirmary | |
| 8: Buckeye Cotton Oil Co. | 17: Temple Mishkan Israel | 25: Good Samaritan Hospital | |
| 9: Sunset Mill/I. Lewis
Cigar Manufacturing | | 26: Fathers of St. Edmund | |
| | | 27: Don Bosco Boys Club | |

INTERLUDE 1: 1901 CONSTITUTION

Nothing symbolized how much the Civil War had transformed the order of daily life in Dallas County more than the promising political career of Jeremiah Haralson, the former slave of a young Selma attorney. Haralson had been born into bondage near Columbus, Georgia and sold twice before traveling the well-worn path to the Alabama Black Belt in 1859 at the age of thirteen. Founded in 1818, Dallas County, an area of fertile farmland a thousand miles square, tripled in population during its first two decades. From the first of September through the first of April each year, slave traders brought thousands of enslaved men and women from other parts of the South to be sold at Selma's three-story wooden auction house. The crowd of well-off white men in the sitting room surveyed their potential purchases before buying slaves to labor in their cotton fields. More cotton came from Dallas County's soil in the antebellum period than anywhere else in Alabama, a fact that made its white planters some of the most powerful men in the state. By the time the attorney from Selma had purchased Jeremiah Haralson, 1,280 slaveholders in Dallas County owned 25,760 black slaves.¹

As a free man after the war, Haralson remained in Selma, taught himself to read, and built a reputation from his sharp tongue and quick wit. The famed abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, once proclaimed that the former slave had "humor enough in him to supply a half dozen circus clowns." During the years of Reconstruction, the federal government actively

¹ John Hardy, *Selma: Her Institutions, and Her Men* (Selma, Ala.: Times Book and Job Office, 1879), 16; Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/>. (accessed February 1, 2014).

protected the civil rights of black southerners, those that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments guaranteed. This enforcement helped Jeremiah Haralson achieve his first political victory when the votes cast by newly freedmen elected him to the Alabama House of Representatives in 1870. Then in 1872, he won a place in the State Senate. Haralson's political flare and flamboyant personality sometimes landed him in trouble. His opponents accused him of taking bribes and stealing bales of cotton. After he championed a radical but ill-fated civil rights bill, an Alabama newspaper labeled him as being "feared more than any other colored man in the legislature in Alabama." This probably had something to do with Haralson's penchant to goad white Democrats about their racial anxieties. He once joked that he would not give a white woman a second glance, unless, of course, she happened to be rich. Haralson's fiery personality helped him win election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1874, the crowning achievement of his political career.²

During Reconstruction, newly enfranchised African American voters elected black Republican representatives, like Jeremiah Haralson, to the state legislature and county courthouses across the Black Belt. For white Democrats accustomed to controlling local politics, a black judge issuing decisions from the county courthouse seemed akin to anarchy. White planters and merchants viewed the southern ascendancy of the Republican Party as illegitimate, an occurrence contrived by outsiders on northern terms. The brazen and self-confident manner of someone like Haralson only confirmed their suspicions. The *Chicago*

² Haralson's civil rights bill called for "equal and impartial enjoyment of any accommodation" in transportation, public parks, and schools. A less radical amended version of the bill passed the Senate but failed when the Alabama legislature adjourned before the House of Representatives could vote on the act; Loren Schwening and Alston Fitts III, "Haralson, Jeremiah," *American National Biography* 10 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 37–38; Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lamekners: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 94.

Daily Tribune went so far as to suggest that white Democrats preferred “to see the Devil himself in Congress rather than Haralson.”

But while black politics set the terms of the post-emancipation period, white supremacy determined its tenor. Dallas County’s prominent white men, amidst cries of “Negro domination,” pledged to “redeem” Alabama from black rule and return the Democratic Party to power. By 1877, the federal government’s protection of black southerners had indeed withered, and white Democrats turned to policing the ballot boxes as a means to regain power.³ White supremacy, electoral fraud, and racial violence were the shoals on which Jeremiah Haralson’s career ended. From 1876 onward, the Dallas County sheriff and Haralson’s Democrat opponent tampered with polling inspectors and vote counts, effectively preventing the black legislator from winning any future campaign for reelection. The all-too-common practices of intimidation, fraudulent tallies, shotguns, and outright violence caused thousands of black citizens to forsake their ballot. When Haralson contested his loss to the white sheriff in 1878, an armed mob chased him down between Montgomery and Selma and ordered him to leave the state.⁴

The Democrats’ reclamation of power, however, remained incomplete as long as African Americans retained their right to vote. During the 1890s, political alliances between

³In the Compromise of 1877, Rutherford B. Hayes became president over Samuel J. Tilden in the disputed 1876 presidential election under the agreement that federal troops (who were enforcing the civil rights of black southerners) would be removed from the South. The political bargain effectively ended the Reconstruction period; “Alabama,” Oct. 14, 1878, *Chicago Tribune*; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877 – 1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 20 – 21, 51.

⁴Haralson faced black contender, James Rapier, for the Republican nomination. When Rapier won, Haralson entered the race as an Independent. The dividing of the black and Republican vote in combination with fraudulent practices contributed to the victory of the white Democrat; *History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives*, “Haralson, Jeremiah,” <http://history.house.gov/People/Detail/14507>. (accessed February 2, 2014).

poor whites and black Republicans threatened the hegemony of the Democratic Party and their rallying cry of white supremacy.⁵ Half of Alabama's counties voted Populist during the 1890s, and only rampant ballot tampering in the Black Belt prevented Populist leader Reuben Kolb from gaining the governorship in 1892 and 1894.⁶ Southern Democrats, beginning with Mississippi in 1890, tackled this threat by calling constitutional conventions to purge undesirable elements from the voter rolls with stricter qualifications. A litany of restrictions - poll taxes, property requirements, grandfather clauses, and good character tests - materialized to bar thousands of black and poor white citizens from southern ballot boxes. The state-sponsored racial segregation of the Jim Crow era began its flurried growth in these legislative gatherings. The turn of the century posed a new era of repression for black southerners.⁷

In April of 1901, the men of Dallas County joined their fellow statesmen to decide whether Alabama should follow in the footsteps of other southern states. Voting in favor of a constitutional convention, the Dallas County Democratic Executive Committee urged, was a white man's only option.⁸ Large numbers of black citizens also cast their ballots at the courthouse that day. They likely would not have favored a convention aimed at their own disfranchisement, but the returns indicated an overwhelming majority of votes in favor. A

⁵ Michael Perman, *Pursuit of Unity: A Political History of the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). For more on populist organizing in Alabama, see Samuel L. Webb, *Two-Party Politics in the One Party South: Alabama's Hill Country, 1874 - 1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), and William Warren Rogers, *The One-Gallused Rebellion: Agrarianism in Alabama, 1865 - 1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970).

⁶ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 11, 6.

⁷ Grandfather clauses instituted that a person could not vote unless their grandfather did. Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 367.

⁸ "Large Meeting," *Selma Morning Times*, April 21, 1901.

slate of six local white Democrats - Benjamin H. Craig, Henry F. Reese, John F. Burns, Watkins M. Vaughan, P. Henry Pitts, and L.W. Grant -travelled to Montgomery to represent Dallas County in the convention.⁹ Fighting the thick summer heat, they proceeded to purify the ballot box and eliminate black men from politics.¹⁰

Three months of fiery convention debates exposed the delegates' deep-seated and often clashing regional loyalties. Black Belt politicians enjoyed extraordinary political influence in the state, and their representatives arrived, committed to removing African Americans from the voting rolls.¹¹ Meanwhile, Birmingham's industrialists, bankers, and railroad elites - known as the Big Mules - made up the other major regional faction. Permanently disfranchising African Americans may have motivated the convention, but suffrage provisions targeted poor white voters as well. Tenant farmers in the foot hills of the Appalachians and the eastern Wiregrass regions had challenged white Democratic rule when they turned to the Farmer's Alliance and Populist Party in the 1890s. The Big Mules wanted to ensure that poor white farmers would never again threaten the white elite's reign. But Democrats could not openly advocate disfranchising white voters under the banner of white supremacy, and delegates from the foot hills and Wiregrass regions vehemently opposed all measures to silence small white farmers.

⁹ Walter M. Jackson, *The Story of Selma* (Birmingham, AL.: The Birmingham Printing Company, 1954), 429.

¹⁰ "Large Vote Polled," *Selma Morning Times*, April 24, 1901.

¹¹ The large political pull of Black Belt politicians came through population numbers bolstered by African American residents. Violent intimidation, however, kept black voters from the polls and allowed the white minority to exercise inflated representation.

Debates over the terms of suffrage – or how to limit African Americans without blatantly appearing to eliminate poor white voters - proved an especially contentious task.¹² Long residency requirements, poll taxes, and other seemingly colorblind restrictions emerged as the preferred way to limit the voting rolls.¹³ All the same, uncovering the thinly disguised racial motivations of the delegates did not require much digging. “I do not propose to put my people under the hand of Negro rule because it might disfranchise one or two bastards in the white counties of Alabama,” Dallas County attorney Henry F. Reese declared. “When you pay \$1.50 for a poll tax, in Dallas County, I believe you disfranchise ten Negroes.” The poll tax’s potential cost to poor whites, Reese believed, was a worthwhile sacrifice to stave off black political domination.¹⁴ Delegates fighting for the interests of poorer whites could not beat back the combined power of the Black Belt planters and the Big Mules. The new constitution, adopted in early September, contained suffrage requirements strict enough to quell any remaining threats to white elite Democratic control.¹⁵

On the second Monday of November in 1901, Alabamians voted on whether or not to adopt the new constitution. Dallas County Democrats spent the weeks before drumming up support for ratification in mass meetings and political gatherings in front of street corner

¹² Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 8 - 9.

¹³ For more on colorblind voting requirements adopted by southern states at the turn of the 20th century see, Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Official Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Alabama, May 21, 1901 to September 3, 1901 (Wetumpka, AL: Wetumpka Printing Co, 1940), 3327, 3368.

¹⁵ Long residency requirements - two years in the state and one year in a county – prevented mobile tenant farmers and industrial workers from the polls, and a \$1.50 per year poll tax ensured that poor black and white Alabamians could not afford to vote; Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 8 - 9.

shops.¹⁶ Scores of African American men came to the polls on election day, hoping to stave off their disfranchisement in what appeared to be the very last vote of their lives. Their efforts caused no concern for the editors of the *Selma Morning Times* who confidently foresaw Dallas County's inevitable endorsement.¹⁷ It helped that vote tallying rested in the dependable hands of the county officials, all of whom were white Democrats and half of whom had represented the Black Belt during the convention.

The final numbers revealed a landslide in favor of the constitution: 8,125 votes for and 235 against.¹⁸ Similar returns came from across the Black Belt, but Dallas County gave the largest majority for ratification with 7,890 votes.¹⁹ That white voters made up only 20.4% of the 12,413 people registered made no difference²⁰ Even if every registered white voter had voted for ratification, 5,601 black men would have had to cast their ballot for their own disfranchisement. Despite the questionable arithmetic, Black Belt counties vehemently

¹⁶ "Public Speaking," *Selma Morning Times*, Nov. 9, 1901.

¹⁷ "The Election," *Selma Morning Times*, Nov. 12, 1901; Black Alabamians unsuccessfully spoke out against the new suffrage requirements. Booker T. Washington and fourteen others – including Selma's Charles O. Boothe, dean of theology at Selma University, William Pettiford, Selma University and president of the Alabama Penny Bank, and R. B. Hudson, principal at Selma's only public school for African Americans - submitted a petition to the Convention, asking that the black man - "a taxpayer and a worthy reliable citizen" - have "a humble share in choosing those who shall rule over him." The protests failed to redirect the Convention's war path; R. Volney Riser, *Defying Disfranchisement: Black Voting Rights Activism in the Jim Crow South, 1890 – 1908*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2010), 8 – 10; Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: an Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1901); "To Members of the Alabama Constitutional Convention," Alabama Secretary of State Constitutional Convention Proceeds, SG 17778, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama <http://www.archives.alabama.gov/teacher/ccon/lesson3/doc2.html> (accessed July 26, 2013); Wilson Fallin, *Uplifting the People: Three Centuries of Black Baptists in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 120.

¹⁸ These men included Probate Judge P.H. Pitts, Sheriff Blackwell, Deputy Circuit Clerk John Morgan Burns, and Henry F. Reese chairman of the Democratic Campaign Committee. Wayne Flynt reports these numbers as 9125 and 225 but the author could corroborate these numbers; "The Vote Tabulated," *Selma Morning Times*, Nov. 17, 1901.

¹⁹ *Selma Morning Times*, Nov. 22, 1901.

²⁰ In November 1901, 9,871 black men and 2,524 white men were registered to vote on the county rolls; William Rogers, Robert Ward, Leah Rawls Atkins, and Wayne Flynt, *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 346.

denied accusations of fraud in the election's aftermath.²¹ Regardless of the veracity of such claims, the 1901 constitution passed by a slim margin created by enormous Black Belt majorities.²² Governor William Jelks signed the Constitution into law on Thanksgiving Day, and white Democrats rejoiced. A new era had arrived.

The political death knell had sounded for black people, but the gritty work of purging the voting rolls lingered. Not willing to give up, 587 black voters along with 1,405 whites made their first poll tax payments in February of 1902. Each poll tax paid by black citizens marked a protest against Alabama's new political climate. The county board of registrars stood as the second line of defense against "the corrupt negro vote."²³ The new constitution gave the three county registrars almost limitless discretion, free from "any penalty for misuse of that power," in deciding which voters were qualified and which were not. Selma's newspapers praised the good sense of Dallas County registrars. As a result, potential black voters consistently met rejection. But with so much at stake, the white elite remained vigilant. When one unacceptable black voter qualified for lifetime registration, the *Selma Morning Times* issued a scathing reminder to the registrars. "The eyes of the state are upon you," the editors warned, "As Dallas goes so goes the Black Belt. Think, Think, Think." By the end of July, 2,230 white men and only 61 African Americans were registered to vote in Dallas County.²⁴

²¹ *Selma Morning Times*, Nov. 15, 1901.

²² "The state canvassing board . . .," *Selma Morning Times*, Nov. 22, 1901.

²³ "Poll Taxes in Dallas," *Selma Morning Times*, Feb. 10, 1902.

²⁴ "Honest Election Methods," *Selma Morning Times*, Dec. 14, 1901; "A Suggestion," *Selma Morning Times*, Mar. 13, 1902; "Honest Primaries and Elections," *Selma Morning Times*, July 30, 1902.

The white elite felt little remorse: “Dallas county people have done a great many things politically that they were sorry to be compelled to do,” noted the *Selma Morning Times*, “but they would repeat them without compunction ad finitum if it was necessary to maintain white supremacy in the state.”²⁵ Black representative Jeremiah Haralson had seen which way the winds were blowing in the 1870s. “The Democratic party, if they got power,” he warned, “would inaugurate slavery in a new form; not such as it was, but by depriving us of our right to vote. [...] The gentlemen who used to own us would represent us.” Haralson’s predictions proved hauntingly accurate. By the beginning of the twentieth century, a new legally-backed order for white supremacy had dawned in the Alabama Black Belt.²⁶

²⁵ “Dallas County people ...” *Selma Morning Times*, May 10, 1901.

²⁶ Haralson quoted in Eric Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 94.

CHAPTER 1: THE WORLD THAT COTTON MADE: AGRICULTURE AND RACE IN DALLAS COUNTY, 1901 – 1916

At the turn of the century, cotton dictated the daily lives of the 54,657 people who made their homes in Dallas County and in Selma, the county seat. The fleecy bolls supplied the direct or indirect livelihood of almost every resident: black sharecroppers produced the year's crop; white landlords, wholesalers, and merchants made their business in its trade; and black servants and draymen and white industrial workers labored for the wages it supplied. Neither agriculture nor demographics had changed much in the fifty years since the Civil War. In 1900, African Americans made up eighty-three percent of the county's population, and the majority of these men and women earned their livelihoods farming under tenant contracts.¹

White supremacy - the interlocking system of political, economic, and social control that protected white privilege – had long governed black and white relationships in rural Dallas County. The dominance of white landlords, wholesalers, and merchants hinged on cheap agricultural labor, while racial customs, personalized power, and threats of violence kept black tenants in their place. Despite cotton's ongoing dominion, the twentieth century marked a new era for white supremacy. In the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that separate but equal facilities for the races did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. Alabama then capitalized on federal noninterventionism by writing the disfranchisement of black voters into the 1901 Constitution. Segregation and

¹ Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/>. (accessed July 5, 2012).

disfranchisement - the twin pillars of Jim Crow – further ravaged African Americans’ claims to citizenship during the first decade of the twentieth-century. As legal segregation developed in Selma, it strengthened the boundaries of white supremacy in Dallas County and further cemented the unequal economic relationships between black and white residents.

African Americans responded to the barrage of attacks on the gains they had made since emancipation by mobilizing their own community resources. Building off of traditions of land ownership, education, and self-sufficiency, black residents forged a semi-autonomous world within the dictates of Jim Crow segregation. Selma University, the educational institution of the Alabama Colored Baptists, supported the city’s strong black middle-class made up of doctors, educators, undertakers, business owners, and tradesmen. Churches, fraternal lodges, and benevolent societies offered support to black men and women, and small corner groceries and shops bound neighbors together. As their legal and political rights shrunk with the rise of Jim Crow, African Americans turned inwards to protect their community and foster black economic and social autonomy to whatever degree possible.

Selma, A Cotton Town

Selma was a small but bustling town, perched high on the banks of the Alabama River. The wide, murky waters meandered west from the state capital of Montgomery, through the Black Belt and Dallas County before making their way down to the gulf city of Mobile. Home to 8,713 residents, Selma was the county seat and the hub of Black Belt agriculture. One the city’s two daily papers, the *Selma Morning Times*, called it “a cotton town.” The white, fleecy bolls ran the local economy, and cotton’s annual cycle forged an inseparable relationship between Dallas County and Selma. Thousands of tenant farms in

rural parts of the county satisfied the appetites of the buyers at Selma’s cotton exchange. Each year, black draymen loaded thousands of bales on to steam boats headed downriver to Mobile where they then set sail for far off textile mills. The demands of Selma’s commercial business shaped the surrounding landscape of Dallas County. “The hopes of a whole year are tied up in a cotton crop,” the *Morning Times* wrote, “and when the first boll bursts open and its white silken fibre is exposed to the morning sun, a whole section is awakened into life.”²



Figure 3: Street scene of Water Avenue during early 1900s. Courtesy of Dukes and Weeks Families Photograph Collection, ADAH.

Water Avenue, Selma’s main street, was where the buying and selling of cotton and goods took place. Living up to its name, Water Avenue did run parallel to the Alabama

² Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/>. (accessed July 5, 2012); “First Open Boll Sent This Office,” *Selma Morning Times*, August 7, 1903; In his study of Chicago, Cronon argues that the economic demands of the city shaped the landscape of the surrounding hinterlands; William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991).

River, but clouds of dust billowed behind streetcars and mule-drawn wagons and stray cotton lint perpetually hung in the air. Wholesale establishments, commission houses, and cotton warehouses lined both sides of the bustling street. R.H. & W.C. Agee Co., V.B. Atkins & Co., C.W. Hooper and Company, a few of the city's nine wholesale grocers, garnered recognition throughout the Black Belt. Salesmen from the wholesale establishments made their business by travelling the surrounding counties and selling goods to the hundreds of crossroad clapboard stores and plantation commissaries dotting the countryside. Potholed dirt roads and limited transportation made the country stores the main source of goods for rural customers, and with the help of wholesale merchants, they stocked everything from ribbons and coffee to kerosene oil.³ The trade area of Selma's wholesalers stretched across sixteen counties in a hundred mile radius.⁴ Wholesale merchants had cotton to thank for both their profits and influence. In addition to selling goods, wholesale food establishments doubled as commission merchants and cotton buyers. Tenant farmers and landowners alike needed cotton profits to buy their supplies and necessities, and wholesale merchants combined the complementary work of cotton buying and grocery selling into one location.⁵

In the aftermath of the Civil War, southerners faced devastated towns and farm lands, destroyed property, and the collapse of the regions' defining institution.⁶ Black hands had been picking Alabama's cotton since before statehood, and even in the midst of

³ Thomas Dionysius Clark, *Pills, Petticoats, and Plows; the Southern Country Store* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1944), 28; "Selma, the Gem of All Alabama Cities," *Selma Morning Times*, May 11, 1905.

⁴ Glen N. Sisk, "Alabama Black Belt: A Social History, 1875 – 1917," (Ph.D.; Duke University, 1951), 103 -5.

⁵ Sisk, "Alabama Black Belt," 81.

⁶ Eugene Dattel, *Cotton and Race in the Making of America: the Human Costs of Economic Power* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), 294 – 297.

financial distress, landowners could not coax crops from their fields without the now freed people. Sharecropping, tied to a system of credit, emerged as a shoddy but workable solution for the cash-strapped society. Facing a lack of ready funding, merchants became the local extenders of credit. Landowners would allow tenants to live on and work their land during the year, while advancing merchants or plantation commissaries lent individual farmers seeds and supplies to make the crop. Settlement came at harvest time each fall. Tenants turned over the fluffy white product of their summer's work to the advancing merchant or landlord who then, in turn, brought the cotton to a cotton buyer or to the wholesale house that had extended credit to them.⁷ Selma's wholesale establishments were known to charge fifteen percent on every dollar to advance credit and goods to merchants and plantation commissaries but would also accept payment in cotton bales instead of cash, keeping a two-and-a-half percent commission for their services. Living on borrowed money all year long, the only payday in Dallas County came when the cotton was done in September, October, or November.

⁷Few southern banks were operating in the wake of the Civil War, which tightened the availability of credit; Eugene Dattel, *Cotton and Race in the Making of America: the Human Costs of Economic Power* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), 304 – 310; Sisk, "Alabama Black Belt," 31 – 36.



Figure 4: Erhart Cotton Warehouse on the corner of Water Avenue and Sylvan Street during the early 1900s. Courtesy of Duke and Weeks Families Photograph Collection, ADAH.

As the cotton gins that were scattered throughout the county whirred each fall, Selma's streets sprung to life. Drove of cotton-laden wagons crowded the warehouses and compresses.⁸ Wholesale merchandising establishments worked late into the night. As M. Meyer & Co. clerks finalized the purchase of cotton from farmers who had traveled long distances, laborers unloaded the crop from the wagon and replaced it with provisions bought for the next year.⁹ The Dallas County Compress packed the influx of bales into smaller parcels, which were then stored in warehouses, like Erhart's Warehouse, before being sold to buyers at the Cotton Exchange.¹⁰ Directly behind Water Ave, the wharfs on the Alabama River overflowed with cotton bales being packed onto steamers like the Nettie Quill and the

⁸ "First Open Boll Sent This Office," *Selma Morning Times*, Aug. 7, 1903.

⁹ O.S. Wynn, "Brilliant Career of Boy Who Began Life Threading Needles for the Girls Sewing Class," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 1, 1921.

¹⁰ "First Open Boll Sent to This Office," *Selma Morning Times*, Aug. 7, 1903; "First Bale to Selma Brings a Fancy Price at Exchange Today," *Selma Journal*, July 30, 1914.

Helen Burke, which then headed for Mobile.¹¹ Having a store front on Water Avenue also gave wholesale merchants direct access to the wharf from the back of their establishments.¹² The remaining bales shipped out of town on the railroads, the main depot located just east of the wharf.¹³



Figure 5: Steamboat being loaded with cotton bales from Selma wharf as bystanders watch from above. Courtesy of Peter A Brannon Papers, ADAH.

While business on Water Avenue hummed with the dealings of cotton, the retail shops on Broad Street boomed off of the resulting income. Jewish families, whose fathers and grandfathers had come South selling goods as peddlers, now ran many of Selma's most illustrious department stores.¹⁴ Simon Eagle had opened Eagle's Department Store in 1885

¹¹ Peoples Bank and Trust Company, *Historic Selma and Dallas County* (Selma, Ala. 1976).

¹² Sisk, "Alabama Black Belt," 104.

¹³ As railroads grew in importance, R.H. & W.C. Agee and other wholesalers moved to new facilities directly alongside the railroad tracks; "To move March the First," *Selma Morning Times*, Feb. 8, 1905.

¹⁴ Abraham J. Peck, "The Other 'Peculiar Institution': Jews and Judaism in the Nineteenth Century South," *Modern Judaism* 7 (February 1987).

and began selling New York fashion to Black Belt citizens. Eagle's was especially popular one March when Mr. Eagle decided to get rid of his out of season surplus by tossing straw hats off of the second floor balcony. His three sons followed their father into the business, and the high class clothing store grew to occupy over half a block of Alabama Avenue.¹⁵ Shoppers could find choice fabric and the finest ready-to-wear clothes straight from New York City at Eliasberg & Brothers, Isidore Kayser & Co., Rothschild's, and the Liepold Brother's. J.C. Adler's Furniture Company kept Selma's homes supplied with couches and chairs, while Mr. Adler also shaped public opinion through his editorship of the *Selma Morning Times*. The Jewish-owned Schuster Hardware and Bloch Brother Hardware sold tools and farm implements to farmers out on business on Water Avenue. Meanwhile, Benish and Meyer Tobacco, Thalheimer Liquor, and the American Candy Company offered pleasures for the here and now.¹⁶ Each fall, Selma's business quieted as Jewish-owned stores closed to observe the holidays of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana.¹⁷ As an integral part of Selma's prosperity, Jewish merchants and their families lived alongside, socialized with, as well as married into white Protestant families.¹⁸

¹⁵ "Mr. Eagle, ..." *Selma Morning Times*, Mar. 24, 1907; "City and Vicinity," *New York Times*, Feb. 8, 1894; June Cohn, interview by author, Selma, Alabama, November 30, 2011; "75th Anniversary of Local Store Prods Memory," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 15, 1960;

¹⁶ "Services for Lee Adler at Four O'Clock," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 20, 1945; "History of Selma Jewry," Folder: Jewish Temple Mishkan Israel, Old Depot Museum Archives, Selma, Alabama.

¹⁷ *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 10, 1934; For more on Jewish life in the South, see Eli Evans, *The Provincials: a Personal History of Jews in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973).

¹⁸ None of the city's remaining Jewish residents remembered experiencing discrimination in their childhood or adult lives in Selma. They told stories of happily attending school and being friends with Protestant children. While a few Jewish social and civic clubs did exist, most local organizations had both Jewish and Protestant members. Unlike Birmingham or Montgomery, Selma was a small, more isolated town. It's likely that both the city's size and Jewish residents' loyalty to local customs of white supremacy helped support this somewhat atypical interchange amongst Jewish and Protestant residents.

The sheer volume of churches bordering downtown must have assured out-of-town visitors that Selma's white citizens were indeed on the heavenly path. The First Presbyterian church could be seen from downtown with its red brick bell tower rising above the dust clouds billowing down Broad Street. A half block to the west on Dallas Avenue, the Baptists worshipped in their newly-erected, gothic-style sanctuary, and St. Paul's Episcopal Church shared the block of Lauderdale Avenue with First Baptist Church, even if the congregations shared little else. The Methodists, just one more block west on Dallas Avenue, were also worshipping in a new building. Their red brick, turreted sanctuary, however, came into being after the old Church Street Methodist Church's steeple had unceremoniously fallen through the roof. Just to the north of First Presbyterian, the Temple Mishkan Israel towered over Broad Street, marking where Selma's Jewish community worshipped with a stained-glass Star of David. The most prominent white citizens worshipped in the wooden pews of the downtown sanctuaries. Wives of businessmen and professionals gathered in church sponsored societies, while their husbands served as deacons and lay leaders.

An array of social and civic clubs kept Selma's upper and middle class well-connected. Men debated matters of the day and listened to speakers in groups like the Elks, the Exchange Club, the Rotary Club, and the Kiwanis Club.¹⁹ While Jewish businessmen were a part of all of Selma's notable organizations, they also took their leisure at the Harmony Club, a Jewish social club located on the second and third floors of a three-story, arched-window building on Water Avenue. Abe Eagle, one of the three sons in charge of Eagle's Department Store, would unwind from a day's work with a game of cards at the

¹⁹ "Chamber of Commerce Urges Solons Beat Soldier Bonus Bill," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 15, 1922.

Harmony. Over ninety years later, his daughter, June Eagle Cohn, remembered her mother dialing the Harmony's number, 9 – 2 – 7, to instruct her father, "Abe, come home to supper!"²⁰ While their husbands discussed business and politics, the wives gathered in social clubs to improve their minds and organize civic projects. The Selma Study Club, the Chautauqua Circle, the Council of Jewish Women, the West End Circle, and the Ossian Club were only a few of the many.²¹

Cotton had turned Selma into the economic hub of the western Black Belt, and that in turn, meant that the city was home to a sizeable professional class of bankers, lawyers, and doctors. At the start of the twentieth century, three notable banks - People's Bank and Trust Company, City National Bank of Selma, and Selma National Banks – served the financial needs of area residents and businesses. The names of bank presidents, C.M Howard, A.G. Parrish, and E.C. Melvin, often appeared on rosters of local business campaigns, and they maintained especially close relationships with the wholesale merchants.²² Selma was also the medical center of the west central Black Belt, supporting numerous hospitals and private medical practices. These institutions over time consolidated into the Vaughan Memorial Hospital and the Alabama Baptist Hospital for white patients, and Burwell Infirmary and

²⁰ June Cohn, interview by author, Selma, Alabama, November 30, 2011; O.S. Wynn, "Brilliant Career of Boy Who Began Life Threading Needles for Girls Sewing Class," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 1, 1921.

²¹ Ellen Sturdivant, "Memories of Old Church Street Church," Folder: Church Street Methodist, Old Depot Museum Archives; "Reciprocity Meeting Held," *Selma Morning Times*, Apr. 17, 1907; "Council of Dallas Co. Clubs to be Organized Saturday," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 20, 1923.

²² "Selma's Financial Institution Solid," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 1, 1907; Albert Burton Moore, *History of Alabama and Her People*, Volume 3, (The American Historical Society, Inc., 1927), 201; "Chamber of Commerce," *Selma Morning Times*, Aug. 20, 1902; All three bank presidents participated in the Chamber of Commerce's efforts to increase cotton consumption at the beginning of World War I; "Buy a Bale Committee is Well Received," *Selma Journal*, Sept. 18, 1914.

Good Samaritan Hospital for African Americans.²³ Rounding out the city’s professional class, a cadre of Selma attorneys represented the legal interests of local residents at the Dallas County courthouse. Often operating as father and son law offices, the surnames Craig, Keith, Mallory, and Vaughan continued across generations of Selma attorneys.²⁴

All of Selma’s vibrant business and civic life, however, sprung from cotton’s wealth, and businessmen, professionals, and farmers alike understood that the city’s fortune grew directly from Dallas County’s soil. In the spring of 1901, fire broke out at the Babcock Cotton Warehouse after a stray match ignited a bale of cotton around noon. The *Selma Morning Times* reported that “bankers, merchants, mechanics, and firemen” all grabbed buckets of water and “worked like demons” to prevent the flames from spreading through downtown. Over nine hundred bales of cotton, and thousands of dollars, went up in smoke. But the composition of the volunteer firefighting force – from the bankers to the railroad workers - illustrated how cotton bound all of Selma’s citizens together. A cross-section of the city’s men desperately fought the blaze that day to protect what was their mutual interest.²⁵ The local Chamber of Commerce bragged in one of its early publications that the city drew annual revenue of almost eight million dollars from the cotton crop. “Can any other city of its size show so fine a revenue from a single crop?” it asked.²⁶

²³ “Old Court House for Sanitorium,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 13, 1911.

²⁴ Walter M. Jackson, *The Story of Selma*, 461 – 475.

²⁵ “A Disastrous Blaze,” *Selma Morning Times*, May 18, 1901.

²⁶ Chamber of Commerce, “Selma and Dallas County” [circa 1910], Old Depot Museum Archives; For more on cotton’s widespread influence in the southern Black Belt, see Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation since the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: the Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Eugene Dattel, *Cotton and Race in the Making of America: the Human Cost of Economic Power* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009).

Not all of Selma's white citizens lived the prosperous lives that owning an agricultural or retail business or practicing a professional trade secured. Working-class white residents made much more meager livings by working on the railroads or in local agricultural-based industries.²⁷ The Louisville & Nashville, the Southern, and the Western Railway companies all ran tracks through the Black Belt's main cotton town, and smoky engines chugged cotton bales into Selma from the surrounding hinterlands before shipping them out again to large industrial centers. Both industries and wholesale merchants owned property next to the main railroad lines and built private side tracks to funnel carloads of good directly into their warehouses.²⁸ Machinists, blacksmiths, engineers, and others employed at local railroad shops kept the trains running, and their wages of around \$3 per day helped support many of Selma's businesses. A Southern Railway Company payday in 1901 put \$30,000 into the hands of its employees. Skilled railroad positions, reserved for white workers, provided a solid but not extravagant living for white railroad families. Most lived in modest wood frame houses in East Selma.²⁹ Other local agricultural-based industries helped sustain the working-class families who lived on the eastern side of the city. The Buckeye Cotton Oil Company, the People's Cotton Oil Company, and the Dallas Compress

²⁷ It's likely that at largest, working-class whites around twenty percent of the adult white population in Dallas County. The 1900 census lists 1,375 wage earners employed in manufacturing over the age of 16. The total white adult population in Dallas County was around 6, 162 residents. (The listed number of adults employed in manufacturing does not separate by race, but it's likely that the total includes some African American workers); Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/>. (accessed July 5, 2012).

²⁸ Chamber of Commerce, "Selma and Dallas County" [circa 1910], Old Depot Museum Archives.

²⁹ "Machinists Get Raise," *Selma Morning Times*, Aug. 21, 1904; "The Southern Railway ...," *Selma Morning Times*, Sept. 20, 1901.

Company made their business in cotton processing. Meanwhile, Union Iron Works, Starr Ice Company, three wood and coal companies, and local saw mills served residential needs.³⁰

Cotton provided lavish lifestyles for the white citizens involved in the buying and selling, but it offered far less to those who made a living transporting and manufacturing the crop. The poorest of Selma's white residents worked in the Cawthon and Estelle Cotton Mills on the outskirts of town. The white operatives who worked in the mills often came from surrounding rural areas or out of state. Field work guaranteed a hard life with little money, and the textile mills offered cash wages to struggling families.³¹ Workers at the Estelle Mill lived in one of the 54 shotgun or duplex-style company houses in the mill village on the west side of Valley Creek. They shopped at the company store, sent their young children to the company-sponsored school, and attended church at the village's Methodist-Episcopal church. Across town, workers at the Cawthon Mill lived in similar housing that the company owned on St. Phillips, Mechanic, and Range Streets. Like textile mills across the South, children made up an important part of the companies' workforce. Grace Cooper, 16, and her cousin Shellie Cooper, 13, tended spindles and looms for the mill on Selma's east side. Both of their fathers worked as flagmen for the Southern Railway while their mothers labored in the mills as well. Hundreds of other working-class white children entered the textile mills to add to their family's meager income.³²

³⁰ Sisk, "Alabama Black Belt," 112 – 113; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, *Fire Insurance Maps of Selma (A.L.)*, 1903.

³¹ Mildred Mitchell, "California Cotton Mill Memories and Selma Historical Highlights," (Selma, Alabama, 1990), 29.

³² Jeff Mansell, "Milltown Minors: The Laboring Youth of Selma, Alabama, 1907 – 1915," (Seminar Paper, 1990); For more about southern textile workers, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, et al., *Like a Family: the Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

But the fluctuating condition of Selma's textile industry offered little security. A family of local businessmen, the Cawthon's, controlled both of the city's textile mills in 1902, but hard times resulted in a pattern of changing ownership. A depression in 1908 caused the mills to close. Hardship and change undercut any impulse to paternalism on the part of mill owners. After a reporter went to investigate conditions, the newspaper revealed that "inmates" of the mill village were lacking heat and other basic necessities. The company commissary and merchants on that side of the city had cut off workers' credit, and many men and women were forced to move. Over the next twenty years, the mills were renamed - Sunset Mill, Valley Creek Mill, Selma Manufacturing Company, and the California Cotton Mill - with each new owner. Only the lack of job security, deteriorating housing, and extraordinary low-pay remained consistent for the white workers.³³

Dallas County and One Pay Day a Year

The cotton fields stretching for miles across Dallas County and the Black Belt fueled Water Avenue's cotton empire and Broad Street's bustling department stores and drug store lunch counters. But while cotton provided a small group of white men with extraordinary wealth and influence, every part of its growth depended on rural black families. Dallas County plantations looked much like their antebellum predecessors at the turn of the century. African Americans operated 6,334 or 88.7% of the Dallas County's 7,141 farms. But

³³ "Condition of the Mill District as They Exist Today," *Selma Morning Times*, Feb. 3, 1908; Mildred Mitchell, "California Cotton Mill Memories and Selma Historical Highlights," (Selma, Alabama, 1990), 1 - 12.

only 390 black families had any ownership of their farms; the remaining 5,944 operated under some form of tenant contract.³⁴

In the Tyler community to the south of Selma, J.A. Minter, a fourth generation planter, operated eleven thousand acres of fertile land that his family had acquired back in 1819. He had over 160 African American tenants living on his property growing cotton when he decided to build his own cotton gin in 1901. Like many Dallas County landowners, Minter preferred black laborers over poorer whites. While white tenants would expect the same privileges as white people in the Black Belt, he explained, Negroes would accept the dismal straits of tenant life.³⁵ So what the *Selma Morning Times* called the “good and cheap labor” of African Americans secured the prosperity of elite white families. The cotton grown by black tenants filled the coffers of Dallas County landlords, wholesalers, and merchants. That profit then trickled through Selma in wages and the purchasing of goods. “These lands would be worth nothing if the Negroes were moved off of them,” the newspaper reminded daily readers.³⁶

Each January 2nd, black residents paraded through Selma’s streets celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation and its promise of freedom.³⁷ But the years following the Civil War had not undone the deeply rooted practices of white supremacy, like the tenant

³⁴ Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/>. (accessed July 5, 2012).

³⁵ John Fraser Hart, *The Land That Feeds Us* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 261 – 262; Sisk, “Alabama Black Belt,” 375.

³⁶ “The Emigration Scheme”, *Selma Morning Times*, Dec. 24, 1902.

³⁷ “Tuesday was Emancipation Day...”, *Selma Morning Times*, January 3, 1901.

contracts that bound African Americans to the land.³⁸ The sheer wealth of white planters and merchants in the rural areas gave them immense personal and economic power over black tenants. Washington Smith, the president of the Bank of Selma, owned a large Dallas County plantation near Bogue Chitto, while he resided with his family in a towering two-story, four-columned mansion in Selma. During the Civil War, Mrs. Smith became a local hero when she hid the bank's gold in one of those four, hollowed-out columns, never to be found by Union troops. When her husband died in 1869, Mrs. Smith continued to oversee the workings of the plantation, and tenants on the Bogue Chitto plantation had to comply with her supervision. After sending out a man to inspect the tenants' crops and gather the names of their advancing merchants, Mrs. Smith would instruct her tenants to bring their cotton to her attorneys in Selma or to nearby advancing merchants in Orrville to take care of their rent notes, which ranged from \$40 to \$145. A shrewd, prickly woman who had a keen eye for profit, Mrs. Smith gave her tenants no choice in how the cotton grown on her land should be handled.³⁹

Along the dirt roads, country stores, and cotton fields of rural Dallas County, white supremacy rested on the personal power of elite whites and the physical closeness of white and black residents.⁴⁰ Tight relationship between white landowners, advancing merchants, and overseers, like on Mrs. Smith's Bogue Chitto plantation, ensured that black tenants did

³⁸ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, From Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 118 – 120.

³⁹List of notes from plantation rent [n.d.], Letter from Susan P. Smith to Mallory & McLeod, Aug. 29, 1896, Folder: Letters, 1896, July – August, Box 12; Letter from John Moseley to Susan P. Smith, Aug. 27, 1897, Letter from Susan P. Smith to Bill Smith and Alfred Hunter, Aug. 29, 1897, Letter from Mrs. Washington Smith to B.F. Ellis & Son, Sept. 8, 1897, Folder: Letters 1897, June – Sept, Box 13, Washington M. Smith Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

⁴⁰ Mark Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 2 – 8.

not step out of their prescribed place. Local government and law enforcement typically maintained a hands-off attitude, allowing white landowners to reign over their property and tenants. This “culture of personalism” forced black residents to rely on the goodwill of white paternalism. When agents for the Louisville and Nashville railroad tried recruiting black workers around the Selma area, they discovered that planters held a “sort of claim or mortgage on the [N]egro community.” The planters’ local authority gave them the power to release tenants only after the farm work had been completed.⁴¹ The unspoken rules of racial etiquette combined with the familiarity of rural neighborhoods to ensure that African Americans paid proper deference to white residents. Behind the face-to-face interactions of white supremacy also lay the constant possibility and threat of violence.⁴² The realities of this imbalanced system circumscribed the scope of possibilities for black residents.

Traveling across Dallas County highlighted the gap between black and white residents’ lives. Roads traversed the county’s 993 square miles, tying landowners in the county to Selma’s merchants and markets. A traveler on a maintained road would pass by Greek Revival plantation houses owned by white landowners, through Dallas County’s small communities – Safford, Orrville, Carlowville, Burnsville, Summerfield, and Plantersville – and to downtown department stores, the hospital, and to schools like Dallas Academy. Roads traced the pathways of white life, but these stopped at the plantation gate. By contrast, worn paths were the conduits of rural black lives. Dusty trails that turned thick with mud in the rain ran from the main house back behind to the tenants’ quarters. This allowed

⁴¹ Transcripts of the Hearings of Board of Railroad Wages and Working Conditions quoted in Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 12.

⁴² Mark Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 15, 67, 88, 131.

white owners to regulate the visitors who desired to trudge through their property. These paths ran from rickety, one-room log cabins to the plantation commissary, the nearby school



Figure 6: African American woman with a child in front of house in rural Dallas County. Courtesy of Silas Orlando Trippe Photograph Collection, ADAH.

and church, and to neighbors and the midwife's cabin.⁴³

African Americans did not enter into tenant contracts because they wanted to; they did it because they had few other options. At least 67% of black men in Dallas County over the age of 21 could not read, leaving them no hope of challenging the terms of a written agreement or a landlord's faulty or self-serving accounting.⁴⁴ Constant debt and landlord

neglect forced black residents into poverty. Rickety one-room shacks made of rough boards and leaning chimneys dotted the countryside. Some of the sharecropper shacks standing in 1900 had started off as slave quarters.⁴⁵ Diets of cornbread, condensed milk, strong coffee, and salt pork "over and over again, without variation, [were] hardly conducive to health," and contributed to the prevalence of hookworm, pellagra, and tuberculosis.⁴⁶

⁴³ Arthur Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 397 – 398.

⁴⁴ Historical Census Browser, 1900, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/>. (accessed July 5, 2012).

⁴⁵ Knox Academy, "Glimpses of the Missionary Operations of the Reformed Presbyterian Church to the Freedmen in Selma, Alabama and the Vicinity," Selma, Alabama, 1911.

⁴⁶ Howard Snyder, "Negro Migration and the Cotton Crop," *The North American Review* 219 (January 1924), 26.

Land ownership remained out of reach for most black families because of debt, high prices, and “gentlemen’s agreements” amongst whites not to sell land to blacks.⁴⁷ Calculating debt at the end of a season depended on the sliding scale of the plantation owner or advancing merchant’s goodwill. Year after year at settling time, white landlords told tenants that they had not produced enough that season to cover their debts.⁴⁸ Ned Cobb, a black sharecropper in nearby Tallapoosa County, was thrown into such a situation when the white owner of the land he was farming died. Cobb’s debt was transferred to the new owner at ninety percent, but the new owner forced him to pay the full amount. “I had the brains to see how that transaction was runnin’ over me,” Cobb recounted, “but I had no voice on account of my color.”⁴⁹ Regardless of how many bales they produced, the accounting practices of white supremacy assured that black farmers ended a season with no more than \$15 or \$20 in their pocket, year after year after year.⁵⁰ A reporter from a black weekly newspaper in Montgomery summed up his assessment. “Never did a state of serfdom more truly exist in Russia than in some parts of Alabama.”⁵¹

In the rural provincialism of Dallas County, paternalism was the glue that helped hold white supremacy together. White citizens of the “better class” saw themselves as benevolent guardians of black residents, guiding and caring for the less fortunate. Although

⁴⁷ Amelia Boynton Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan* (Washington, D.C.: Schiller Institute, 1991), 53 – 57.

⁴⁸ Eugene Dattel. *Cotton and Race in the Making of America: the Human Costs of Economic Power* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), 302 – 307.

⁴⁹ For a personal account of how sharecropping contracts limited black farmers, see Ned Cobb’s account in Nate Shaw and Theodore Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers: the Life of Nate Shaw* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 146.

⁵⁰ William James Edwards, *Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt* (Boston: the Cornhill Company, 1918), xv.

⁵¹ “Emancipator Representative Visits Bullock County,” *The Emancipator*, December 8, 1917.

they considered African Americans not fit for political or social equality, some prominent whites did feel responsible to treat their wards with “honor, justice, and fairness.”⁵² But Glen Sisk, a historian raised in the Black Belt, observed that the “mores” of slavery and Reconstruction continued to shape the attitudes of white people towards black residents. Daily interactions between white and blacks seemed “placid enough,” he explained, “as long as there was no disturbance or challenge of the white man’s supremacy.” When a black person offended a white person, however, the act “released the delicate tensions, [and] explosions of mob violence often resulted.”⁵³ Violent conflicts between white citizens and black farm laborers highlighted a darker side to this proclaimed “harmonious” relationship.

One Sunday evening in 1901, ten-and-a-half miles out of Selma on the Benton road, the simmering tensions between black and white Dallas County residents rose to a boil. Deputy Sheriff Joseph Edwards ventured into a black settlement on Mrs. J.D. Jordan’s land to confront John Dawson, a black farm laborer in his mid-twenties, about some unknown matter. When the house’s residents refused him entrance, the Deputy fired two shots into the door and shoved the full force of his weight against it. The return shot from the inside of the house entered Deputy Edwards heart, killing him instantly. John Dawson fled the scene, understanding that his life depended on it and knowing that he had no other choice.⁵⁴

⁵² “The White Man’s Ward,” *Selma Morning Times*, Aug. 3, 1902; Mark Shultz gives a detailed analysis of how white supremacy operated in the rural Black Belt; Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy*.

⁵³ Sisk, “Alabama Black Belt,” 273 – 274.

⁵⁴ “Deputy Edwards Killed,” *Selma Morning Times*, Apr. 30, 1901.

Selma's white citizens erupted over this "most dastardly crime."⁵⁵ In the middle of the next night, a mob of determined and furious white men invaded the settlement where John Dawson lived. Tearing off the covers of the sleeping occupants of Angela Dawson's house, the men began carelessly shooting off their weapons. One black man died in the rampage. A seventeen year old boy, exiting his father's house after being awoken by the gun fire, became the mob's next victim. They left his body lying by the side of the road to be discovered early the next morning. Only on the afternoon of the following day did Sheriff Blackwell send out a posse of men to attempt to restore order. By that time, the hundred or so black residents of the settlement had fled to Selma or into hiding in the surrounding woods, fearing death if they returned.⁵⁶ John Dawson's capture by the Sheriff and subsequent imprisonment in Mobile was the only thing that cooled immediate mob threats in the area.⁵⁷

Selma's most civically-minded citizens deplored the Sheriff's killing and mob violence, uncontrolled fury that reflected poorly on the county and "the civilization of its people."⁵⁸ Yet their vocal objections did not alter the racist brutality. Nor did it change the way the publicly-sanctioned mob reinforced the unequal and unjust situation of African Americans in Dallas County. "Keeping the Negro in his place," historian Glen Sisk has argued, was one of the primary social objectives of white residents of the Black Belt. The

⁵⁵ "The deadly work of the mob ..." *Selma Morning Times*, May 3, 1901.

⁵⁶ "A Terrible Tragedy," *Selma Morning Times*, May 3, 1901.

⁵⁷ "Captured," *Selma Morning Times*, May 4, 1901.

⁵⁸ "The deadly work of the mob ..." *Selma Morning Times*, May 3, 1901.

threat of individual or mob violence played a central role in protecting white supremacy in the rural South.⁵⁹

Jim Crow Segregation

In Dallas County, black and white residents had long mixed with each other on farms, in country stores, in downtown businesses, in bars, and as neighbors. Personalized rules of racial etiquette had enforced white supremacy in these situations. African Americans knew to take off their hats, step aside, bow down, and say “yes ma’am” and “yes sir” to white citizens or face the consequences. But the twentieth century had brought with it a new era, one marked by a harsher, stricter form of racial segregation and exclusion. Southern states had already succeeded in writing the disfranchisement of black voters into new state constitutions. Next, the freshly triumphant Democrats turned their attention towards etching informal practices of racial separation into legally-sanctioned segregation. When the Supreme Court deemed racial segregation constitutional in its 1896 *Plessey v. Ferguson* decision, southern Democrats likely breathed a sigh of relief.⁶⁰

There was little sense for racial segregation in the countryside where neighbors and county stores failed to conform to color lines. In rural areas, the everyday and personal customs of white supremacy kept African Americans subordinate. Jim Crow came into being in crowded and urban spaces, like Selma, where segregation laws could anonymously and

⁵⁹ Sisk, “Alabama Black Belt,” 286.

⁶⁰ Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: the NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New Press, 2009), 1 – 2.

uniformly enforce the status of black residents as second-class citizens.⁶¹ Within a decade, southern states legislated separate train cars, schools, parks, hospitals, and waiting rooms for “White” and “Colored.” These codes ground into southerners’ subconscious that whites had preference in all arenas of daily life.⁶² But establishing and enforcing Jim Crow in a region long-governed by informal customs and casual interracial exchanges turned out to be tricky. The city of Selma spent much time during the first decade of the century trying to figure out how to separate the intertwined routines of whites and African Americans.

In 1902, delegates of the Alabama American Federation of Labor met for their annual convention in Selma’s Sylvan Hall. Of the thirty-five representatives, twenty-three were white men and twelve were black. An unexpected demand to prohibit black delegates from the meeting site, however, threw a wrench in the AFL’s order of business. The AFL president objected, as the *Morning Times* reported, that “while being a white man and opposed to social equality with the Negro, he would not consent to see the colored laborer discriminated against.” Fellow members seconded a resolution affirming that accredited delegates should not be excluded from the convention. A committee set out to find an alternative meeting location, and the superintendent of the Selma’s street railway saved the day, offering two special cars at Riverview Pavilion for the AFL’s use.⁶³ AFL members proceeded to elect officers, including two black Selma residents as First and Second Vice President, for the upcoming year. The convention took a turn for the worse when two

⁶¹ Mark Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 2 – 8.

⁶² C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955); Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 207 – 208.

⁶³ “The Laboring Men of Alabama, *Selma Morning Times*, Apr. 24, 1902.

delegates ended up in a shooting match, but the AFL assured Selma's citizens that longstanding personal difficulties - not "the Negro question" - had caused the ruckus.⁶⁴ Delegates closed out the convention by commending Selma for its friendly attitude towards labor and congratulating the newspaper for its accurate reports of the proceedings.⁶⁵ The rigid details of segregation had yet to be hammered out in Selma in 1902, but in years to come, Jim Crow would come to ensure that integrated labor meetings were prime targets for being run out of town.

Racial separation at the turn of the century also proved to be a problem in the city's butcher stalls. After inspecting the various places where meat was being slaughtered throughout town, Dr. W.W Harper declared them "filthy and in horrible condition - all of them." The city council decided to establish a union slaughter house, where in exchange for a license to sell meat, butchers agreed to follow certain health safeguards.⁶⁶ But Selma's newly-built market house only had eight stalls, all of which had been rented to white butchers in 1905. Two Negro butchers - Milas Martin and W.H. Edwards - who had had stalls in the old market house complained to the city that they could no longer do business. Judge Mabry issued a butcher's license to Martin, but refused him a place in the all-white market house and instead opened a separate market stall in East Selma. The following December, Selma's butchers gathered in front of city hall to secure their stalls for the upcoming year. Milas Martin bid \$50.50 for the stall of white butcher L.G. Clark in the city's

⁶⁴ "Shooting Scrape," *Selma Morning Times*, Apr. 24, 1902.

⁶⁵ "The Laboring Men of Alabama," *Selma Morning Times*, Apr. 26, 1902.

⁶⁶ This system of regulation arose from a nation-wide concern over the quality of meat, largely spawned by Upton Sinclair's expose on the Chicago meat-packing industry; Walter M. Jackson, *The Story of Selma* (Birmingham, AL: Birmingham Printing Company, 1954), 443.

main market. Not willing to allow a black man to outbid a white man, the city agreed to erect another market stall in East Selma where both butchers could operate.⁶⁷ The decision suggested that segregation's logic had yet to settle; in a tempered display of racial fairness, the city recommitted to white preference while simultaneously recognizing a black businessman's operating rights.

Slowly, the daily routines of Jim Crow coalesced in Selma. Only four years after Selma's street car company accommodated the integrated AFL gathering, it began running separate white and colored electric cars on the Union Street Line on Saturday nights.⁶⁸ A year later, the demand for separate electric cars had grown into a movement among the city's white citizens. The local newspaper reported that "the Jim Crow crusade [...] had become rather frenzied" and alleged that black and white riders found interracial transit both disagreeable and prone to cause conflicts. A petition to company officials brought results a few months later when the Selma Street Railway Company agreed to provide extra segregated cars on select lines.⁶⁹

But the rise of segregation laws did not split the geography of the city into starkly divided black and white areas. The residential streets on the west side of Selma displayed the enormous antebellum homes of prominent white citizens. Behind the Greek Revival mansions, however, black families lived in shacks and small cottages in backyards and off of

⁶⁷ The *Morning Times* lists Martin's first name as Miles, while the Selma, Ala. City Directory, 1909 – 1910 lists Martin's first name as Milas; "Mandamus in Market Case," *Selma Morning Times*, Jan. 4, 1905; Selma, Ala. City Directory, 1909 – 1910 (Birmingham, AL; R.L. Polk & Co. Publishers); "He Gets License," *Selma Morning Times*, July 6, 1905; "L.G. Clark Gets Place," *Selma Morning Times*, Dec. 21, 1905.

⁶⁸ "Separate Cars on Union Street," *Selma Morning Times*, Dec. 8, 1906.

⁶⁹ "Citizens Approve Separation of Races in Cars," *Selma Morning Times*, May 29, 1908.

alleyways, and some black homeowners lived in a neighborhood nearer to Valley Creek. Meanwhile in East Selma, black and white working-class families lived next to each other in identical creaky clapboard houses.⁷⁰ Citizens of both races continued to walk down the same streets, shop in stores, and work in establishments together. The face-to-face rules of white supremacy shaped these interactions more than segregation statutes. But some racial boundaries remained unbreachable. When a black woman opened a prostitution house next to white houses in the Tenderloin District, mayor and wholesale grocer Victor Atkins took action against “the disgraceful scenes” happening there. He gave them one week to relocate and threatened to fine them with vagrancy every 24 hours “until the resorts of this kind are separated.”⁷¹ Public interactions between black and white citizens caused no problems as long as black residents paid proper deference to the customs of white supremacy. Black women soliciting sexual encounters next door to already taboo white brothels broke the rules of propriety.

Jim Crow did more than keep black residents economically dependent, socially subservient, and politically disfranchised; it also helped bind the interests of the white working class with their more prosperous neighbors across town. White Democrats understood that their strength depended on solidarity amongst rich and poor white southerners. Although Selma’s textile and railroad workers may have barely scraped by in the mill villages and East Selma’s rundown houses, white supremacy at least offered them personal superiority and preference over their black neighbors.

⁷⁰ Letter to editor, *The Selma Journal*, Apr. 13, 1911; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, *Fire Insurance Maps of Selma, Alabama 1903*; Fred Williams, interview by author, September 2012, Selma, Alabama.

⁷¹ “They Must Move Elsewhere,” *Selma Morning Times*, Aug. 11, 1905.

Those men working in dirty and dangerous jobs, however, did not always behave like their social betters wished. On Saturday nights, city bars were crowded with young mill men rowdily enjoying their paychecks and their liquor.⁷² In the Black Belt of Alabama where most every man, black or white, was packing a pistol somewhere on his person, these nighttime escapades often ended in gun shots and violence. In May 1902, a sixty-year old black man was driving his buggy near the Estelle Cotton Mill when four white factory workers forced him to stop. After failing to remove his hat fast enough, the white roughs pulled him from his seat, shot him multiple times, and tossed him into Valley Creek.⁷³ He died the next day. Compelled by codes of paternalism, the best white citizens deplored the murder of a black man by these “ruffians.” The city police arrested three of the four men that the *Morning Times* described as “drunken rowdies, bent upon picking a fuss at any hazard [...] with the thirst of blood in their heart, crazed by mean whiskey.”⁷⁴ The grand jury had two of the men committed without bail, drawing a line in the sand that marked limits to the bonds of race.⁷⁵

Dallas County’s “best men” – its elite white professionals, businessmen, and planters – considered themselves most equipped to direct politics and business for the good of all citizens, but especially themselves.. The best men, as historian Laura Edwards describes, were economically successful and civically involved. With orderly households and dignified wives by their side, they demonstrated their gentle paternalism, the ability to determine and

⁷² “Promiscuous Shooting Came Near Causing the Death of a White Woman Sunday Afternoon,” *Selma Morning Times*, Sept. 24, 1901.

⁷³ “White Boys Assault Negro,” *Selma Morning Times*, May 18, 1902.

⁷⁴ “A Brutal Murder,” *Selma Morning Times*, May 20, 1902.

⁷⁵ “Law Reigns Supreme in Dallas County,” *Selma Morning Times*, May 29, 1902.

take care of the best interests of all. Many sported buttons reading “Greater Selma” on their lapels, so as to inspire conversations in which the wearer could “sing the praises of the city in which he lives.”⁷⁶

Patterns of paternalism extended to white workers and their families. Selma’s best men also expected working-class whites to conduct themselves in an industrious and moral manner, just as they expected African American citizens to abide by the racial order established by white supremacy. Even arguments for prohibition were based on societal order. “Are not the laborers, under prohibition more easy to manage? Don’t they attend to their crops better?” one letter by the Prohibition Campaign Committee asked. “Isn’t there a marked decrease in Saturday-night boisterousness, drunkenness and disorder of all kinds? Isn’t the [N]egro a better, more desirable citizen from every standpoint?”⁷⁷ A well-ordered city where everyone fulfilled his or her determined role was what Selma’s best citizens desired; it just so happened that in the class and racially-stratified world of Dallas County, this vision also preserved the wealth and power of the white elite.⁷⁸

But poorer white residents didn’t always agree with the order envisioned by their wealthier counterparts. In the wake of the new constitution, the Dallas County Democratic Party ran into an unexpected dilemma; some white men refused to pay their poll tax. When

⁷⁶ Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: the Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 230 – 238; “Wear Greater Selma Buttons,” *Selma Morning Times*, Aug. 18, 1906.

⁷⁷ “Prohibition Campaign Committee of Dallas County,” Oct. 5, 1911, Folder Selma Prohibition Campaign 1911, Old Depot Museum Archive.

⁷⁸ Campaigning to attract industry and prestige to the area was another concern of Selma’s elite. Selma’s Chamber of Commerce and Commercial and Industrial Association encouraged the city’s industrial development in an organized fashion. Committed to “upbuilding and advancing the business interests of our city,” members worked to attract the investment of capital and industry to the region; “A Chamber of Commerce,” *Selma Morning Times*, Aug. 16, 1902; “Selma Must Be There,” *Selma Morning Times*, Sept. 9, 1904.

deputized members of the executive committee went searching for white men on the unpaid list, they headed to the local machine shops, cotton mills, and oil mills.⁷⁹ On the day poll taxes came due, approximately two hundred white men had not paid. Living in East Selma gave working class whites an education in how the city fathers cared more about their votes than they did about their well-being. A city dump neighbored the mill village homes, giving off awful smells and swarms of flies in the sweltering Alabama summers. Meanwhile, street car lines didn't run to East Selma, even though the Union Street line extended into the black neighborhoods in the northern part of town.⁸⁰ Some poorer whites did not have the \$1.50 to spare to pay their poll tax, but others likely refused to pay to support elite politicians that did not seem to give a hoot about them.

Black Selma

Sometime after the Civil War, John Henry Tipton left the Tipton plantation where he had been enslaved. He walked east in hopes of a better life in nearby Selma. After he had crossed the Alabama River in a boat carrying molasses, he left another part of slavery's legacy behind, changing his last name to Williams. He got his start working on the boats on the river, but when he had saved up enough money, he bought a hack, a horse-drawn buggy, and started charging money for rides. Soon J.H. Williams had thirteen hacks transporting Selma's citizens across the city as his early taxi service took off. One of Selma's white funeral home directors took an interest in the obviously enterprising Williams and urged him to go

⁷⁹ "An Appeal to Democrats," *Selma Morning Times*, Jan. 24, 1902.

⁸⁰ "Separate Cars on Union Street," *Selma Morning Times*, Dec. 8, 1906; "East Selmians Want Electric Line Extended," *Selma Journal*, June 18, 1908; "Dumping Grounds Abandoned," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 10, 1923.

into the mortuary business. In 1905, he opened the J.H. Williams and Sons funeral services at 1025 Franklin Street, in the heart of Selma's black business district.⁸¹



Figure 7: Members of the J.H. Williams and Sons funeral service in 1922. Arthur Williams is on the far left, next to him is Fred Williams, Sr., son of J.H. Williams. Courtesy of Historic Selma and Dallas County.

Much like J.H. Williams, black residents in Dallas County in the years after the Civil War built schools and churches, opened corner grocery stores and other businesses, organized fraternal lodges and savings club, and worked to purchase property and farm land. Even as white supremacy stifled the opportunities available to them, they did their best to make the freedom of their dreams into a reality. After disfranchisement and the rise of Jim Crow segregation eliminated the last of the political rights African Americans, black citizens

⁸¹ Fred Williams, interview by author, Selma, Alabama, September 2012; Selma, Ala., City Directory 1909 – 1910, (Birmingham, AL: R.L. Polk & Co. Publishers).

turned inwards. The community institutions they built helped sustain them as the boundaries of white supremacy tightened.⁸²

By the turn of the century, Selma had established a reputation as the black educational center of the Black Belt. African American families that could scrape up the money sent their children to one of the city's three religiously-sponsored institutions and one public school. Knox Academy, under the guidance of the white, northern-based Reformed Presbyterian Church, educated its flock of students in a three-story brick building located just north of Jefferson Davis Avenue.⁸³ Reading, writing, and arithmetic were the basics, but Knox kept a firm eye on the practical, preparing students to make the most of the limited opportunities Jim Crow permitted. "The economic factor, skill in the manual trades, ability to supply his needs lie near the heart of the Negro's emancipation," a school information booklet explained. Male students perfected the work of blacksmithing or carpentry, while the women learned to cook and sew. High school students could also enroll in advanced classes like literature, economics, physics, and Latin, and the Knox Academy Band proudly played tunes at most major festivities of Selma's black community. Additionally, Knox ran three other branch schools: the East Selma School led by Miss Sophia Kingston, the Pleasant

⁸² For more on African American institution building and community organizing from Reconstruction to the early years of Jim Crow, see Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896 – 1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Politics in the Rural South from Slavery through the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: the Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁸³ Knox Academy opened in 1874. "The Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama, 1865 – 1972," National Register of Historic Places, May 10, 2013 National Park Service. <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/feature/places/pdfs/64501182.pdf>. (accessed August 1, 2013).

Grove School four miles north of Selma, and the Valley Creek school three miles to the north-west.⁸⁴

Of the area schools for black children, Selma University stood as the pinnacle of local education and a vital part of the black community. The African American State Baptist Convention founded the institution in 1878 as a theological seminary, and it kept its doors open through the loyal support of Alabama's black Baptists. The school got its humble start in the basement of St. Phillips Street Church (later First Baptist), but by the following year, it had purchased 36-acres of land on the northwest side of town and moved into its new location on Lapsley Street.⁸⁵ Over the next twenty years, Selma University erected a chapel, school rooms, and men's and women's dormitories on campus and attracted nearly 300 pupils per year.⁸⁶ The institution prided itself on its success and independence. "[Selma University] represents the desires and efforts of a people struggling to lift up themselves," the schools catalogue acclaimed, "and to place the opportunities of an education within reach of a rising generation." However, the tuition of 25 cents per month for primary students and one dollar for normal and collegiate students made up a hefty sum for black workers often making one dollar per week or tenant farmers with little-to-no cash.

⁸⁴ All females graduates of Knox attended graduation in a dress she had made herself. Knox Academy; *Glimpses of the Missionary Operations of the Reformed Presbyterian Church to the Freedmen in Selma, Alabama and Vicinity*, 1911; "Selma Negroes Observe Day of Emancipation," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 4, 1925.

⁸⁵ Andrew Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 45 – 48.

⁸⁶ The name of the school changed to Selma University in 1885, then to the Alabama Baptist Colored University in 1895, and back to Selma University in 1908; Wilson Fallin, Jr., *Uplifting the People: Three Centuries of Black Baptists in Alabama*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 85 – 89; Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Alabama Colored Baptist University, 1895 – 1896, Selma University Catalogues and the minutes of the Alabama Colored Baptist Convention, Microfilm, Reel 1, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama.

The University divided its resources among teacher and ministerial training, a college program, and its preparatory department. Primary classes for younger children included spelling, arithmetic, grammar, reading, geography, and Bible; more advanced students enrolled in history, bookkeeping, government, Latin, Greek, chemistry, commercial law, geometry, and psychology.⁸⁷ Industrial and domestic training programs rounded out the University's curriculum. Selma University's commitment to classical education for its black students was somewhat unusual at the turn of the century. The industrial, agricultural, and trade-based education promoted by Booker T. Washington at nearby Tuskegee Institute won the hardest and most substantial support of white southerners. Because Selma University operated on funds from black Baptists, not white philanthropists, their independence gave the institution some freedom to teach intellectual as well as practical subjects.

Richard Byron Hudson, one of the University's star students, went on to open Selma's first and only public school for black children. He had been born into freedom in 1866, and his parents, uneducated but determined, had big dreams for their son. Accumulating land and a town home in neighboring Perry County, Hudson's father served as a city councilman in Uniontown during Reconstruction. They sent young Hudson off to school at Selma University where his meteoric rise became somewhat of a legend. By the time he was finishing his collegiate studies, the University had given him a position as a student teacher. Then in 1890, Hudson opened Selma's first public school for African Americans. The first classes of Clark School met in the first floor of Sylvan Street Hall until

⁸⁷ Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Alabama Colored Baptist University, 1902 – 1903; 18th Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Alabama Colored Baptist University, 1895 – 1896, Selma University Catalogues and the minutes of the Alabama Colored Baptist Convention, Microfilm, Reel 1, Auburn University; Fallin, *Uplifting the People*, 89.

construction finished on the permanent school building on Lawrence Street, located a short distance away from Payne University, the school of the Alabama African Methodist Episcopal Church.⁸⁸

Like many of Selma's black middle class, R.B. Hudson owned a home on Lapsley Street. A short walk north from his two-story house with a wrap-around porch brought Hudson first past Selma University and then on to the houses of Rev. D.V. Jemison, pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church and president of the prestigious National Baptist Convention, and R. T. Pollard, the president of Selma University.⁸⁹ The city supported a sizeable number of black professionals, and many had Selma University to thank for their success. By 1906, forty-six University graduates made their homes in Selma and seven more in Dallas County. They worked as pastors, teachers, doctors, pharmacists, mail carriers, and insurance agents.⁹⁰ Many, like Hudson, possessed an enterprising spirit for the betterment of themselves and their race.

In addition to being principal of Clark School, R.B. Hudson owned a coal and wood yard located on a half-block of property abutting the railroad. Regular customers of both races helped ensure his financial security as well as respect amongst Selma's white elites. Hudson was also interested in the financial prosperity of his entire race. In 1890, a former Selma University professor had started the Alabama Penny and Savings Bank in Birmingham, believing that a black-run bank would cultivate thrift, economic solidarity, and

⁸⁸ "The Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama, 1865 – 1972," National Register of Historic Places, May 10, 2013 National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/feature/places/pdfs/64501182.pdf> (accessed August 1, 2013).

⁸⁹ Selma, Alabama City Directory, 1913 – 1914 (Birmingham, Ala.: R.L. Polk & Co., Publishers).

⁹⁰ Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Alabama Colored Baptist University, 1905 - 1906, Selma University Catalogues and the minutes of the Alabama Colored Baptist Convention, Microfilm, Reel 1, Auburn University.

racial uplift for African Americans.⁹¹ Within ten years, the bank's outstanding performance convinced the Alabama Colored Baptist State Convention to transfer all funds for itself and Selma University out of the white-owned First National Bank of Selma and into the Alabama Penny and Savings Bank. "Because all convention money came from blacks and since there was a skillfully-operated and successful bank of their own race," the resolution stated, "funds should be placed in that institution."⁹² Embracing the same sentiment, R.B. Hudson helped open a branch of the Alabama Penny & Savings Bank in Selma. Located on Franklin Street in the heart of the black business district, the bank stood as a testament to how, in the midst of Jim Crow, black Alabamians actively built the economic base of their community.⁹³

Another prestigious Selma University graduate, Dr. L.L. Burwell went on to study medicine at Leonard Medical School, later Shaw University in Raleigh, NC. He returned to Selma and opened Burwell Infirmary in 1907 to provide medical treatment for black residents. White hospitals refused to treat black patients, so black-owned and operated clinics gave African Americans the care they needed. When local white pharmacists refused to fill Dr. Burwell's prescriptions, he enrolled in Howard University's pharmacy program and opened his own drugstore in Selma.⁹⁴ Other black professionals established their businesses in the city. To the east of Selma's powerful wholesale grocer establishments, the black-

⁹¹ Wilson Fallin Jr., *Uplifting the People: Three Centuries of Black Baptists in Alabama*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007), 148 – 156.

⁹² Quoted in, Fallin, *Uplifting the People*, 147.

⁹³ G.P. Hamilton, *Beacon Lights of the Race* (Memphis, TN: F.H. Clarke and Brother, 1911), 376 – 384.

⁹⁴ Pauline Anderson interview in Wally G. Vaughn, *The Selma Campaign, 1963 – 1965: The Decisive Battle of the Civil Rights Movement*, (The Majority Press, 2006), 78; Thomas J. Ward Jr, "Black Hospital Movement in Alabama," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, Alabama Humanities Association, (August 2009) <http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-2410>, (accessed January 24, 2013).

owned Interlink Cotton Gin processed fleecy wagon-loads of the region's primary crop. Calvin L. Orsborn began the gin as a cooperative venture in 1886 and made it one of the few black-run gins in the entire country.⁹⁵ John Henry Williams' taxi-turned-funeral service grew into a reputable undertaking and ambulance service for the Selma's African American residents from its start in 1905 and continued to provide for the family's future generations.⁹⁶

Small grocery stores, barbershops, and cook houses run by entrepreneurial black residents populated the street corners of Selma's primarily African American neighborhoods. In these local institutions, African American laborers, ministers, domestic workers, laundresses, and railroad men could buy small quantities of the items they needed on a daily basis without having to confront the racial codes of downtown. Children grew up romping within the relatively protected boundaries of self-contained neighborhoods and under the watchful eyes of neighbors.⁹⁷ Stopping at the Hunter Grocery Company or Simon Bowie's grocery store on the way home from a weekly church meeting at First Baptist also kept money invested in the black community. From the earliest days of emancipation, African American families across the South worked to establish as much economic independence as

⁹⁵ John H. Britton, "Negro Owns Selma's Richest Cotton Gin," *Jet*, December 23, 1965.

⁹⁶ "The Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama, 1865 – 1972," National Register of Historic Places, May 10, 2013 National Park Service.

⁹⁷ Yvonne Hatcher, interview by author, Selma, AL, December 12, 2011.



Figure 8: African American laborer moving cotton bales. His pants are coated in a layer of cotton. Courtesy of Silas Orland Trippe Photograph Collection, ADAH.

possible through property ownership and self-sufficiency. Doing this helped black residents avoid relying on white paternalism.⁹⁸

White supremacy reserved the most desirable jobs for white Selma citizens and left black men and women the most grueling and lowest paid occupations. On Sylvan Street near the eastern and working class side of the city, black residents made

their living as cooks, waitresses, laundresses, seamstresses, draymen, and laborers.⁹⁹ The young black employees at a local bowling alley brought home only one dollar each week, despite working twelve hours every day. That did not amount to much when renting one of the shabby cabins available to African Americans cost between four to eight dollars per month. When the bowling alley workers struck for two dollar a week, the management replaced them that very same night.¹⁰⁰ For black women, working as household help in white homes brought the threat of sexual assault in addition to bone-tiring work and meager

⁹⁸ For more about African American aspirations post-emancipation, see Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003).

⁹⁹ Selma, Alabama City Directory, 1913 – 1914 (Birmingham, Ala.: R.L. Polk & Co., Publishers).

¹⁰⁰ “Struck for Higher Wages,” *Selma Morning Times*, Sept. 6, 1901; “Many Negroes Before Court,” *Selma Morning Times*, June 24, 1910.

wages. Stretching back to the earliest days of slavery, black women had little protection from the sexual advances of white men.¹⁰¹

But domestic workers did what they could to protect themselves. A 1904 *Morning Times* article, entitled, “The Servant Question,” reported that not only had it become difficult for southern women to secure household labor, but the black women they employed had taken to stealing and refusing to work. All of this challenged the southern housewife’s “inherited right to the well paid services of a good Negro servant.”¹⁰² A month later, the problem allegedly resulted in restaurants being filled as white families no longer could secure the household help they needed to cook their dinners. The newspaper attributed the situation to increased wages of black men and the laziness of their wives.¹⁰³ More likely was that black domestic workers were keeping their distance from a demeaning and potentially dangerous occupation. As one Black Belt newspaper reported, “An incipient strike is going on nearly all the time except in the winter when food is scarce among the Negroes.”¹⁰⁴

Like their white counterparts, black residents found sustenance and support in their churches centered in black neighborhoods. The first semi-independent black Baptist

¹⁰¹ J.L. Chestnut, who grew up in Selma in the 1930s, remembered how a white policeman regularly visited the wife of a black man who worked as a fireman on the railroad. The man would look to see if the police car was parked at his house when he got off of work. If so, he’d head over to the Chestnut Brothers’ store to drink a coke and wait. The legal system offered little recourse for African Americans and, at the turn of the century, a black man could not challenge a white man without serious consequences; J.L. Chestnut and Julia Cass, *Black in Selma: The Uncommon Life of J.L. Chestnut, Jr.* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990); For more about the sexual assault of black women by white men, see Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – a New History of the Civil Rights movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2010); Leslie Schwalm, *A Hard Fight For We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985).

¹⁰² “Servant Question in Politics,” *Selma Morning Times*, Nov. 9, 1904.

¹⁰³ *Selma Morning Times*, Dec. 8, 1904.

¹⁰⁴ *Selma Morning Times*, February 18, 1902, quoted in Sisk, “Alabama Black Belt,” 366. For more on strategies black women workers used to protect themselves and set the terms of their labor see Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

congregation had formed in 1845 when white members of the First Baptist Church allowed their slaves and free African Americans to worship in the church's basement. In 1866, this congregation broke off to form the First Colored Baptist Church on St. Phillips Street.

Whether the black Baptists left their former sanctuary with a generous financial gift from the white members or whether the white pastor staved off an alleged black take-over with a pistol in the church entrance continued to be a matter of debate. Regardless, over the next thirty years, the black First Baptist Church prospered, so much so that sections of its congregation broke off to form the equally formidable Second Baptist, Green Street Baptist, and Tabernacle Baptist Churches. Methodism also had deep roots among black Selmians. Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church began in 1867, and then St. Paul C.M.E. and Ward Chapel A.M.E. followed in northwestern Selma in the 1890s. The Reformed Presbyterian Church attracted numerous followers in addition to the young flock they educated at Knox Academy.

African American churches provided a space for black worshippers to participate in church governing bodies, missionary societies, and state and national conventions. Excluded from political participation, black citizens could still exercise their civic duties within the independent institution of the church. Black churches bolstered the spirit and gumption of black residents in the face of white supremacy. In 1922, Tabernacle Baptist Church began building a new sanctuary on the corner of Broad Street and Minter Avenue. When a member went down to the courthouse to take care of administrative details, county authorities forbid the church from building its front door on Selma's main artery, allegedly saying "We can't have a Nigger church on Broad Street." The contractor wisely followed directions, but did so by building two identical white-columned entrances: the one facing Broad was for show and

the one facing Minter was for regular use.¹⁰⁵ Tabernacle's two entrances stood as a visible objection to Jim Crow segregation, representing how the opinions and aspirations of African Americans still mattered in their own churches.

Selma's black residents also strengthened community ties and carried out civic duties in benevolent societies and fraternal lodges. The Independent Benevolent Society, No. 28 met fifteen miles out of town, near Cahaba. Its members paid one dollar to join and twenty-five cents in monthly dues. When a member got sick and could not work, the Society paid them a fifty cent per week benefit. When Sister Bama Evans passed away, the Society covered her thirty-five dollar burial cost.¹⁰⁶ Numerous mutual societies like this existed to care for community needs. But despite the vibrancy and complexity of black institutions, both secular and religious, the life blood of the community in the years before the First World War always came back to cotton.

The Boll Weevil

In the 1910s, a small but unstoppable insect challenged the world that cotton made in the Alabama Black Belt and the entire South. Spreading slowly northeastwardly from Mexico during the late nineteenth century, the boll weevil had infiltrated the cotton fields of

¹⁰⁵ "The Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama, 1865 – 1972," National Register of Historic Places, May 10, 2013 National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/feature/places/pdfs/64501182.pdf> (accessed August 1, 2013); Alston Fitts, *Selma: Queen City of the Blackbelt* (Selma, AL: Clairmont Press, 1989), 73; "Tabernacle Baptist Church," National Register of Historic Places, May 24, 2013 National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/feature/places/pdfs/13000469.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2013); Marie Foster interview in Wally G. Vaughn, ed. *The Selma Campaign, 1963 – 1965: The Decisive Battle of the Civil Rights Movement* (Dover, MA: Majority Press, 2006), 69; For more on black women's activism within the church see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: the Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 – 1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁰⁶ Minute Book, Independent Benevolent Society, No. 28, 1927 – 1932, Box 2, Andrew Arthur Papers, 1904 – 1951. Duke University, Rubenstein Library, Durham, North Carolina.

eastern Texas by 1903. The small insects feasted on the immature buds and flowers and decimated entire crops before harvest time. For a society where cotton was both the economic lifeblood and the foundation of a social order, the threat of the boll weevil loomed like a hurricane over fleecy white fields. Selma newspapers carefully traced the insect's trajectory from Texas to Louisiana in 1906, Mississippi in 1907, and nearby Clarke County, Alabama in 1911, and farmers across the South monitored the weevil's progress with apprehension.¹⁰⁷

While the ravaging insect lowered cotton yields, it also spawned a secondary revolution in how the federal government interacted with rural farmers. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and agricultural colleges saw the widespread fear of the boll weevil as an opportunity to challenge the region's overreliance on cotton and its hesitation to adapt modern, scientific farming methods.¹⁰⁸ Federally-funded agricultural education began with the Morrill Land-Grant Act in 1862 that gave states public land on which to build agricultural colleges. Then in 1887, the Hatch Act created agricultural experiment stations at land-grant institutions to promote research. In Alabama, the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn University) headquartered white agricultural work while nearby Tuskegee Institute served the separate black division.¹⁰⁹ These institutions implemented and refined the latest techniques in scientific agriculture. Additionally,

¹⁰⁷ "Scientists predict ..." *Selma Morning Times*, Aug. 25, 1903; "Boll Weevil in Louisiana," *Selma Morning Times*, June 8, 1906; "Boll Weevil Has Crossed Mississippi," *Selma Morning Times*, Sept. 22, 1907; "Boll Weevils Invade Clark," *Selma Journal*, May 6, 1911.

¹⁰⁸ James C. Giesen, *Boll Weevil Blues: Cotton, Myth, and Power in the American South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2, 25.

¹⁰⁹ Lynne Anderson Rieff, "Rousing the People of the Land"; Home Demonstration Work in the Deep South, 1914 – 1950 (Ph.D. Dissertation, Auburn University, 1995, 27 – 28.

agricultural extension programs employed educators or “agents” to spread these methods to black and white farmers across the state.¹¹⁰

The looming threat of the boll weevil sent southern farmers searching for assistance, and the agricultural colleges capitalized on this plea.¹¹¹ Extension agents spread throughout weevil-threatened territory, encouraging farmers to diversify their crops and practice soil conservation methods as a way to slow the boll weevil. New agricultural legislation helped the agents in their work. In 1906, the Department of Agriculture gave demonstration agents the status of federal employees, and the state of Alabama allotted funds in 1909 to support and expand agricultural demonstration work. The culmination of this progression came with the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, which established a national extension system that distributed funds through land-grant colleges in each state.¹¹²

Preparing for the boll weevil’s pending arrival, the best men of Dallas County turned to the Agricultural Extension Service. In 1910, three years before the pest crossed into the county, farmers and merchants raised a thousand dollars to secure a USDA demonstration agent “for the purpose of fighting the boll weevil.”¹¹³ Their efforts brought John Blake, a young, gregarious agriculturalist, to Dallas County as county agent. Upon his arrival, he began instructing white farmers and Negro tenants alike to diversify their crops and take precautions. A group of the county’s largest farmers and prominent businessmen traveled

¹¹⁰ Thomas M. Campbell, *The Movable School Goes to the Negro Farmers*, (Tuskegee Institute, Ala.: Tuskegee Institute Press, 1936), 83.

¹¹¹ James C. Giesen, *Boll Weevil Blues: Cotton, Myth, and Power in the American South*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2, 25.

¹¹² Lynne Anderson Reiff, “Rousing the People of the Land’: Home Demonstration Work in the Deep South, 1914 – 1950,” (Ph.D. diss., Auburn University, 1995), 42 - 50.

¹¹³ “Will Fight Weevil in Dallas County,” *Selma Journal*, Feb. 13, 1910.

west with Blake in the summer of 1912 to survey the weevil's destruction. They returned trumpeting better farming methods as their only means of survival.¹¹⁴ On July 11, 1913, John Blake confirmed that the long-feared weevils had been located on the south side of Dallas County in the community of Richmond.¹¹⁵ Their arrival only made Blake's advice more popular. Two years later, he described his work as "on a broader and much larger scale than ever before." Fear of the boll weevil had turned the ears of previously uninterested farmers to his advice.¹¹⁶

Over the next decade, cotton yields dropped precipitously in Alabama, sometimes reaching as low as fifty percent of the per acre production before the weevil.¹¹⁷ But even though growing cotton became more difficult, the weevil did not break the Alabama Black Belt from its dependence on its best cash crop. Even Selma's Chamber of Commerce admitted in 1913 that the panic and its "consequent loss of labor and confidence, has been more serious than the actual ravages of the pest." The Chamber urged merchants and landlords to continue advancing credit, instead of calling in loans, but on the terms of smaller cotton acreage and more foodstuffs.¹¹⁸ Government agents promoted a similar strategy to farmers in Orville to the west of Selma: diversify but continue to grow

¹¹⁴ "Interesting Story of Selmians Trip to Boll Weevil Territory," *Selma Journal*, Sept. 6, 1912.

¹¹⁵ "Weevils Found at Richmond by Demonstrator," *Selma Journal*, July 11, 1913.

¹¹⁶ John Blake, Report of the Work of the County Agent, Calendar Year 1915, Box 111, Folder 1915 Dallas, Alabama Cooperative Extension Service Papers (ACES), Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama.

¹¹⁷ J. Allen Tower, "Cotton Change in Alabama, 1879 – 1946," *Economic Geography* 26, (January 1950), 13.

¹¹⁸ Resolution of a Committee of the Selma, Alabama, Chamber of Commerce in Benjamin Lawrence Moss, *The Boll Weevil Problem: An Analysis of Its Significance to the Southern Farmer and Business Man* (Birmingham, AL: Progressive Farmer, 1914), 78 – 80.

intelligently.¹¹⁹ In 1914, Dallas County produced 64,230 bales. Three years later, that number had dropped to 14,230.¹²⁰ But the boll weevil alone did not single-handedly cause that decline. The *Selma Journal* named the departure of black labor, scarcity of credit advancements, and a turn to grain and forage crops and pasture lands as contributing factors. And despite cotton's dismal numbers, the newspaper still affirmed that "a reasonable acreage and intense cultivation are highly desirable."¹²¹

Diversification was, also, not a realistic possibility for most of Dallas County's tenant farmers in the 1910s. The credit system still forced black tenants to grow the region's only cash crop; advancing merchants – and all the other businessmen whose living came back to cotton - made no profit on loaning money for grains or foodstuffs. As the weevil infestation grew more severe, advancing merchants took fewer chances in extending loans to produce a blighted crop.¹²² Black sharecroppers bore the heaviest burden of this as white planters released tenants from contracts and forced black families off of the land.¹²³ They were the casualties in cotton's continued dominance. A University of Alabama student from the Centre Ridge community commented, "The period from 1895 to 1914 is notable for its bold

¹¹⁹ "Meeting Today at Orrville on Farm Subjects," *Selma Journal*, Oct. 14, 1915.

¹²⁰ Alston Fitts III, *Selma: Queen City of the Black Belt* (Selma, Alabama: Clairmont Press, 1989), 107.

¹²¹ "Cotton Acreage Reduced in Dallas," *Selma Journal*, May 21, 1916.

¹²² Giesen, *Boll Weevil Blues*, 109; According to Sisk, only four of Dallas County's large advancing merchants remained in operation in 1930. These included J.B. Hain of Sardis and Selma; J.E. Dunaway of Orrville; E.M. Marshal and Son of Orrville; and J.A. Minter of Tyler. By 1942, only J.B. Hain and J.A. Minter remained, and Minter admitted to working only fifty percent of the cotton acreage he had done ten years prior. Sisk, "Alabama Black Belt," 480.

¹²³ Arvarh E. Strickland, "The Strange Affair of the Boll Weevil: The Pest as Liberator," *Agricultural History* 68 (Spring, 1994), 157 – 168.

but fruitless effort to dethrone King Cotton.” Even the boll weevil could not break Dallas County’s economic reliance on its favorite cash crop.¹²⁴

The twentieth century brought a new political and social order for both black and white residents in the Black Belt. As the 1901 Constitution formally removed black Alabamians from the voting rolls, black political participation plummeted. The Supreme Court’s blessing of de facto segregation signaled the federal government’s non-interventionist policy towards the South. White Democrats had succeeded in reclaiming their unbridled political and economic power. In cities like Selma, the birth of Jim Crow codified customs of white supremacy into enforceable regulations on street cars, in restaurants, and in other public spaces. Black residents responded to these changes by turning inwards and investing in the separate institutions that already sustained the black community. Selma University, Knox Academy, Tabernacle Baptist, Brown A.M.E. Church, Burwell Infirmary, and black-owned entities allowed black residents control over their resources and provided a modicum of protection from white supremacy’s deadly rules.

While disfranchisement and segregation ushered in a new racial order, the economic base of Dallas County remained virtually unchanged from the end of the nineteenth century. It was the world that cotton made. Cotton fueled nearly all of the economic transactions in Selma from the wholesalers, retail merchants, attorneys, and banks to the industrial and railroad workers, draymen, and domestic workers. Selma’s prosperity depended on bountiful

¹²⁴ William Palmer Moulder, “A History of Centre Ridge Dallas County, Alabama,” (Seminar Paper: University of Alabama, 1936), 88.

and cheap agricultural labor, and Dallas County's large African American majority supplied this need. The system of credit and practices of white supremacy ensured that black tenant farmers stayed poor and disadvantaged. Dependence on white paternalism and the persistent threat of violence gave rural African Americans little recourse from the injustices inherent to sharecropping. Even the boll weevil could not shake cotton's hold. Crop yields plummeted and credit became harder to find, but Dallas County's economic scaffolding continued to hang on the cash crop and tenant farming that produced it. Only with the outbreak of World War I did cotton begin to lose ground.

INTERLUDE 2: WORLD WAR I AND MAKING THE WORLD SAFE FOR DEMOCRACY

Charles J. Adams had been working at his job as a postal clerk on one of Selma's railway mail cars for eight years when shots rang out in Europe in August of 1914. There were few better places a black man could work than the postal service, and a railway mail clerk was the most coveted position of them all. A paycheck signed by Uncle Sam guaranteed financial independence from local whites, and traveling on speeding trains, snatching the bags of letters dangling from the mail cranes at the stations whirring by, took black clerks far outside their provincial home towns. C.J. Adams, as with all Americans, could not imagine how such a faraway battle would transform his life. By the war's end, the black postal clerk from Selma would return home a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army, having served in both France and in the Philippine Islands.¹

In 1914, the United States' role in the Great War remained uncertain. Facing a country deeply divided over progressive reforms, governmental regulation, corporate power, labor unrest, and immigration, President Woodrow Wilson avidly attempted to avoid the controversies of involvement in the war. But in the spring of 1917, German aggression inflamed American public opinion when a German telegram urging Mexico to join in the war against the U.S. was intercepted and revealed. On April 2, Wilson called Congress into a

¹ Letter from C.J. Adams to NAACP, New York, February 4, 1920; Folder, African American Voting and Disenfranchisement, Feb. 1, 1920 – July 31, 1920, NAACP Papers, Part 4: Voting Rights Campaign, 1916 – 1950. ProQuest History Vault, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/histvault?q=22789:001412> (accessed Jan. 20, 2013); Philip F. Rubio, *There's Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 30 – 34.

special session to ask for a formal declaration of war.² He painted the impending engagement as a battle for democracy - “the right of those to [...] have a voice in their own government.”³ Under the slogan of making the world safe for democracy, Wilson attempted to win the hearts, minds, and support of the country’s many and diverse citizens.⁴

Preparing the United States for war required an extraordinary logistical undertaking. Never before had the country needed to train and equip an army, produce food and war supplies, and mobilize the support of its citizens to such a degree. Hundreds of new federal agencies emerged under the direction of the President and his cadre of progressive supporters to address the many demands of mobilization. The Council of National Defense, the War Industries Board, the National War Labor Board, and the Selective Service became household names as government agencies began overseeing everything from war production, fuel, food, and railroads to finance, labor and propaganda.⁵

Mobilization for war reached far into the lives of Dallas County’s residents, upsetting daily routines and customs. Beginning in the summer of 1917, the newly instituted draft called on white and black men alike to fulfill their patriotic obligations in service of the United States military.⁶ Local practices of white supremacy did not condone young black

² David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 10 – 13.

³ Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 37.

⁴ Wilson formed the Committee on Public Information through which the federal government sent thousands of speech makers, millions of pamphlets, and hundreds of press releases into local communities seeking to unify the nation’s mind around patriotism and democracy; Kennedy, *Over Here*, 61.

⁵ Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 282 – 287.

⁶ Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*, 41.

men, like postal clerk C.J. Adams, serving as equals to white soldiers. But excluding African Americans from the draft would force young white men to disproportionately bear the South's enlistment quota. As the *Selma Times* explained, "the effect would [be] to leave the Negroes at home and call to the colors practically every available white boy of military age."⁷ Facing unfavorable demographics and the federal government, white Dallas County leaders had little choice but to relent. When the first registration day on June 5th came to a close, the local war rolls included two black registrants for every white.⁸

After nearly a decade of relative independence as a mail clerk on the railroad, C.J. Adams had no intention of being drafted into one of the Army's segregated labor battalions. Instead, he volunteered for military service, joining over twelve hundred of the brightest, most educated black men in the country at the Officer's Training Camp at Fort Des Moines. While the United States' may have needed black soldiers to fight, white supremacists made sure that Jim Crow went with them. Those who trained at Fort Des Moines tolerated segregation as the price for officer status. Black Americans had long understood enlistment as a means to claim full citizenship. "By their valor and achievements," one black newspaper affirmed, black soldiers would "prove to the world the Negro's claim to freedom, justice, protection, and the full rights of citizenship."⁹ Men like Adams and his fellow trainees were at the frontline of this battle. After five months of training, two Selma natives, C.J. Adams

⁷ "The Problem of the Negro Soldier," *Selma Times*, Aug. 26, 1917.

⁸ "2,896 Names in Dallas County on War Rolls," *Selma Times*, June 6, 1917.

⁹ "Colored Soldiers at Camp Sheridan Ordered to Newport News," *The Emancipator*, December 8, 1917.

and William H. Dinkins, son of the president of Selma University, received their commissions as first lieutenants in the U.S. Army.¹⁰

Those of Alabama's black men who were drafted into service also found themselves heading north for training in the Midwest.¹¹ On April 2, 1918, the first batch of one hundred and sixty black servicemen left Selma to train at Camp Dodge, Iowa. Black citizens cheered their boys off with a four-day long fanfare. The hoopla started with a farewell reception accompanied by the Knox Academy brass band on Friday, a Saturday mass meeting, a Sunday religious service, and a Monday morning patriotic procession from the courthouse to the train station led by Mayor Louis Benish and the entire draft board.¹² It was, according to some, "the greatest patriotic demonstration ever [witnessed] in the history of the county," as a crowd of five thousand people sent off the black enlistees with bouquets of flowers, bibles, and patriotic cheers.¹³

The war's banner of democracy – a principle with no color lines – created problems for a nation steeped in practices of white supremacy. Wilson's call to make the world safe for democracy gave African Americans a platform from which to demand civil rights and justice at home, and mobilization became a means for black Americans to prove their worthiness

¹⁰ The tradition of using black military service as proof of worthiness for citizenship stretched back to Civil War. See W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Hartford, Brace & Company, 1934); Leslie Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*, 113 – 114, 34; Editorial, *Selma Times*, Aug. 19, 1917; "Selma Negroes in List of Officers," *Selma Times*, Oct. 24, 1917.

¹¹ David Alsobrook, "A Call to Arms for African Americans during the Age of Jim Crow: Black Alabamians' Response to the U.S. Declaration of War in 1917," in *The Great War in the Heart of Dixie: Alabama during World War I*, edited by Martin T. Olliff (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 91.

¹² "Colored Troops will Leave to be Cheered," *Selma Journal*, March 28, 1918; "Fine Ovation to Negro Selectmen," *Selma Journal*, March 31, 1918.

¹³ "Selma Ablaze with Patriotism," *The Emancipator*, April 20, 1918.

for full citizenship.¹⁴ By participating in the war effort, African Americans demonstrated both their patriotism and capability to meet the responsibilities of citizenship. J. Edward McCall, a black editor in Montgomery, championed these sentiments across the Black Belt in his wartime paper, *The Emancipator*. Black Selma residents could buy their copies from the black-owned Reid's Drug Store or Burwell's Pharmacy, and read about how their support for the war would show that "the Negro is a loyal American citizen, and should be guaranteed all the rights of American citizenship and protection."¹⁵

Dallas County citizens, white and black, kept the patriotic fires at home burning as their sons and brothers trained for war. While the local council of defense directed Liberty Loan and War Savings Stamp drives and thrift campaigns, a separate branch led by prominent black leaders like Dr. L.L. Burwell and R.B. Hudson encouraged African American support.¹⁶ Black citizens strove to demonstrate their loyalty to the country by throwing themselves wholeheartedly into the war effort.¹⁷ After attending a patriotic mass meeting held in Brown Chapel, a white reporter wrote that the event served "to disabuse the minds of all that [black citizens] have thought other than the most deep seated loyalty to the

¹⁴ Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*, 38.

¹⁵ "Justice for the Negro," *The Emancipator*, Oct. 6, 1917; "Selma News," *The Emancipator*, Mar. 30, 1918.

¹⁶ A businessman from Selma, Lloyd Hooper, chaired the entire organization of the Alabama State Council; Dowe Littleton, "The Alabama Council of Defense, 1917 – 1918," in *The Great War in the Heart of Dixie: Alabama during World War I*, edited by Martin T. Olliff (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 152; W.C. Agee to Dallas County Council of Defense, "The Development of Community Councils," May 1, 1918, Folder 10, Box 1, Alabama Council of Defense, Program Administration Files, 1917 – 1919 (ACD), Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH), Montgomery, Alabama; Black county agent T.H. Toodle was also a part of this group; Council of National Defense "Program for Organization of Negroes by the Southern State Councils", Feb. 23, 1918; Box 1, Folder 6, ADC, ADAH; McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 287.

¹⁷ "Parade of 700 Colored People," *Selma (Morning) Times*, July 9, 1917; "Parade of 700 Colored People," *Selma (Morning) Times*, July 10, 1917.

government and their homeland.”¹⁸ These public rallies gave substance to black citizens’ claims of loyalty and patriotism. African Americans also dutifully purchased War Savings Stamps and Liberty Loans to help finance the war. “Show your patriotism and escape the bondage of German chains by subscribing to American Liberty Bonds,” an ad in *The Emancipator* urged. Drawing a connection between the war, full citizenship, and the newspaper’s mission, it continued on, “Also shake off the visible and invisible fetters that bind you by subscribing to the Emancipator.”¹⁹ Although cash-strapped and poor, African Americans dug deep into their pockets to help secure democracy abroad and at home. Three miles outside of Selma, black residents in the Kent West community raised an astounding \$1,530 at a “rousing” War Saving Stamps meeting.²⁰

The simultaneous growth of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) illuminated how African Americans saw the war as a chance to demand first-class citizenship. Established in 1909, the NAACP used the courts to challenge practices of racial discrimination and insisted on full rights for black citizens. The organization gained sway during the war years as African Americans across the country responded to the NAACP’s call for social and political equality for blacks. As *The Emancipator* saw it, the NAACP sought to “make 11,000,000 Americans physically free from peonage, mentally free from ignorance, politically free from disfranchisement, and socially free from insult.” Branches spread throughout the country – already 68 by 1916 – in a fight

¹⁸ “Prominent Selmians to Address Patriotic Meet of Colored Citizens,” *Selma Times*, April 13, 1917.

¹⁹ Advertisement, *The Emancipator*, October 6, 1917.

²⁰ “Negroes Raise \$1530 for War Savings,” *Selma Journal*, July 30, 1918.

against segregation and white supremacy.²¹ Growing from local conditions in specific communities, these branches personalized the organization's work.

In December 1918, 81 of Selma's black citizens organized the city's first NAACP branch and in one year, the chapter had grown to 308 members.²² Local *Emancipator* reporter and NAACP member Joseph Sams declared, "Now is the time for all patriots and race lovers to rally around some organization for civic betterment."²³ His juxtaposition highlighted how African American patriotism and the hopes of full citizenship found a home in one organization. In 1919, Selma member Rev. J. A. Martin spoke at the NAACP's tenth anniversary conference. He explained how the Great War had changed daily life in Dallas County. Before the war, a call would go out for "the citizens of this county" to meet at the courthouse, but when black men appeared, the authorities told them they were not welcome. After the passage of the draft law, the same notice - "all citizens will meet at the courthouse" - now included black men. But Martin wasn't satisfied with white citizens' expanded but still limited recognition of African Americans' citizenship. As he saw it, the "problems in the South" would only be settled when "they will give us recognition of our citizenship and the ballot."²⁴

²¹ Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*, 25 – 27; "Some Work for the N.A.A.C.P.," *The Emancipator*, Sept. 7, 1918; Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: the NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New Press, 2009).

²² "Branches Authorized During Year of 1918," Annual Business meeting, including discrimination in employment and education, Dec. 14, 1915 – Dec. 31, 1919, p. 127, NAACP Papers, Pt 1 Meeting of Board, Proquest History Vault; "Selma News," *The Emancipator*, June 21, 1919.

²³ Not all prominent black Selmians agreed with the NAACP's dual purpose of patriotism and black uplift. After a December meeting in 1918, Joseph Sams asked "where are those so called leaders who were very busy a little while back, installing patriotism, selling bonds, and War stamps?" When the NAACP demanded more justice and less cooperation, Sams noted of those leaders, "Ah they are miss," and then spiritedly demanded "Page all slackers!;" "News of Selma and Dallas County, Ala.," *The Emancipator*, September 21, 1918.

²⁴ J.A. Martin, Selma, Alabama, "Rural Conditions of Labor," Tenth Anniversary Conference of the NAACP, June 24, 1919, Annual Convention, 1919, Speeches, NAACP Papers, Pt. 1, Meeting of Board, ProQuest History Vault.

First lieutenant C.J. Adams tried to do just what Martin suggested. After serving in the segregated 366th infantry division in France, he returned home determined to exercise his full rights as an American citizen. He went to the Dallas County courthouse to register to vote, but the county registrar rejected his application. Regardless of military service, paid taxes, and property ownership, the Black Belt's order of white supremacy would never allow independent and assured black men like Adams to qualify. Adams refused to passively accept his denial of the ballot because he of his race, but he could not convince any of Selma's white lawyers to take his case. With nowhere else to turn, Adams appealed to the New York office of the NAACP for assistance. They suggested trying to find a lawyer in a larger city like Birmingham, and then gave him the address of the Mr. J.S. Chandler, the secretary of the Selma NAACP chapter. By denying C.J. Adams the vote, the white registrars in Selma created a formidable opponent aligned against the entire system of white supremacy. Within the next couple of years, Adams took over the operation of the local NAACP branch, as well as organized the Dallas County Voter's League, an organization that would eventually make Selma the center of a national movement for voting rights.²⁵

²⁵ Letter from C.J. Adams to NAACP, New York, February 4, 1920; Letter from NAACP Secretary to C.J. Adams, Feb. 9, 1920; Folder, African American Voting and Disenfranchisement, Feb. 1, 1920 – July 31, 1920, NAACP Papers, Part 4: Voting Rights Campaign, 1916 – 1950. ProQuest History Vault; J.L. Chestnut and Julia Cass, *Black in Selma: The Uncommon Life of J.L. Chestnut, Jr.* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990); Amelia Boynton Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan* (Washington, D.C.: Schiller Institute, 1991).

CHAPTER 2: FARM AGENTS, SCIENTIFIC AGRICULTURE, AND PROGRESS, 1917 – 1929

At the end of 1919, the Selma Chamber of Commerce elected the young and promising wholesale grocer, G. Frank Cothran, as president. Cothran was a member of one of the city's oldest families - a family that local citizens would say had "dug the river" – but a relative newcomer to the dry goods and grocery business. He had opened Cothran Grocery Company in the heyday of Water Avenue, when trading in cotton meant making it big. By the war's end, Frank Cothran had "won his spurs in business circles by his own efforts," at least according to the *Selma Journal*. Lauded as a "live wire" and "a man who believes in doing things," the new Chamber of Commerce president promised to do all in his power to bring greater prosperity to Selma.¹

Like Cothran, Dallas County's best citizens emerged from the war with dreams of social and economic progress, what they called "upbuilding," for their agricultural hamlet.² Mobilization had disrupted the routines of daily life for residents at the same it altered the agricultural landscape of Dallas County. The boll weevil first pushed farmers and merchants to turn a willing ear towards the Extension Service's gospel of scientific agriculture, but the enormous food demands accompanying the United States' entrance into the war created fertile ground for these seeds to blossom. In the name of patriotism, farmers loosened their

¹ "Cothran is Elected President of Chamber of Commerce," "The New Chamber of Commerce President," *Selma Journal*, Dec. 30, 1919; "Do Not Realize Worth of Chamber of Commerce," *Selma Journal*, Dec. 31, 1919.

² Upbuilding was a concept adopted by both white and black progress-minded citizens. For more on how African Americans understood upbuilding within Jim Crow, see Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 9 – 11.

reliance on cotton and turned towards foodstuffs, cattle, and poultry. The Extension Service and its new associate, the Farm Bureau, gained extraordinary influence in local affairs during the 1920s as better farming methods came to symbolize progress. These organizations, in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce, promoted scientific agriculture and cooperation among farmers and merchants all in the name of upbuilding Dallas County.

But Selma's best white citizens quickly discovered that progress was unattainable without the black men and women who grew their crops, worked in their stores, and cooked their dinners. During the war, African Americans fueled panic across the labor-dependent Black Belt as they packed into train cars heading to southern industrial towns or further north, to war jobs in Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland, all in hopes of a better life. While people like Frank Cothran did not support political equality for their black maids and laborers, they did believe in helping African Americans lead comfortable and industrious lives within the confines of white supremacy. A black man by the name of Lewellen Phillips took care of Cothran's horses and drays. For his entire life, Cothran watched out for Phillips' family, passing along second-hand suits, buying new shoes for the children, and helping Phillips with the down payment on a home. Upbuilding efforts among black residents followed the same grooves worn by the logic of paternalism. White civic leaders turned their hopes towards agricultural education for African Americans, hoping to keep them in the Black Belt's fields and turn them into better farmers. Campaigns to improve sanitation, build better roads, and promote cooperation all nominally included black residents while sidestepping the underlying causes of poverty.

But upbuilding efforts didn't always play out in the way its promoters dreamed. African Americans in Dallas County used these limited opportunities to further their dreams

of land ownership, economic security, education, and independence. In fact, the black county agents institutionalized in the 1920s often acted as African Americans' loudest advocates for racial and economic justice. Meanwhile, social progress and counter-reaction went hand in hand. The rebirth of a local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan flew in the face of best citizens' public efforts towards progress. While Frank Cothran, along with most other respected business and civic leaders, publicly denounced the hooded order, the hooded order belied the steady march of progress.

Fighting the Kaiser with Food

When the United States declared war in 1917, it entered into a partnership with Allied nations already ravaged from three years of heavy fighting. While U.S. servicemen trained for combat on European battlefields, food became a crucial way for Americans at home to show their support for the war. The United States Food Administration was created with the purpose of setting agricultural priorities and promoting food production and conservation on the home front. To do so, the agency appealed to Americans' sense of self-sacrifice and patriotism.³ "Put your knife and fork to work for the freedom of the [world]," an advertisement in *The Emancipator* urged.⁴ Daily papers throughout the Black Belt urged residents to conserve food, observe meatless and wheatless days of the week, join poultry

³ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 117 – 118.

⁴ "Advertisement," *The Emancipator*, February 9, 1918.

clubs, and raise gardens for the good of the cause.⁵ Food became the means by which average Americans could fulfill their war duty.

While loyalty in the form of cornbread and poultry thrived in kitchens, food production became the primary utensil of patriotism in agriculturally-driven Dallas County. The *Selma Journal* explained to its readers that the war “is a fight [...] between the farmer of the United States on the one hand and the gaunt wolf of the Kaiser, famine, on the other hand. The whole world is on the verge of starvation.”⁶ Local defense council leader and wholesale grocer W.C. Agee took the lead in laying out the county’s agricultural priorities to farmers: food crops, then cotton, and lastly livestock. “Every farm and farmer,” Agee commanded, “should produce more food and feed stuff than for [our] own requirements, which shows patriotism and assures food for us and our Allies.”⁷ The program of diversification begun with the boll weevil gained an aura of patriotism during the war as farmers worked to do their part, producing food instead of cotton.

The agricultural success of white residents had always depended on the labor of black sharecroppers, but now their patriotic obligation did as well. But for the first time, a significant numbers of African Americans found reason to abandon the fields of the Black Belt, causing panic among Selma’s white farmers. In the summer of 1916, massive flooding of the Alabama and Cahaba Rivers destroyed hundreds of acres of crops. The high waters left thousands of African American tenants cropless and hopeless with no ready supply of

⁵ “Campaign for Food Conservation,” *The Emancipator*, October 13, 1917.

⁶ Chas. A Whittle, “Will the American Farmer Kill the Kaiser’s Wolf,” *Selma Journal*, March 8, 1918.

⁷ W. C. Agee to members of Dallas County Council of Defense, Jan. 10, 1918. Box 1, Folder 10, ADC, ADAH.

money.⁸ The Rev. E. W. Gamble of St. Paul's Episcopal Church and county agent John Blake headed down river by boat to disburse rations, and they encountered numerous needy black residents with plans to travel elsewhere to look for work.⁹ A black resident of neighboring Perry County remembered that "it rained all the year. Every time you would look up, you could see folks that the plantations had turned out."¹⁰ Some of the initial reports applauded black laborers' departure as a positive development towards breaking Dallas County of its dependence on a one-crop system.

But as the military draft began sending more and more of Dallas County's men to war, the supply of able-bodied farm laborers fell. By the end of 1917, local newspapers began publishing articles about "the labor crisis." Producing food for the war effort could not be done without agricultural workers tending the fields. As one article stated, "The labor famine is working at cross purposes to the conservation campaign"¹¹ Prominent citizens did what they could to remedy the situation. The local council of defense sent a letter to their fellow Selma businessmen in charge of the Alabama State Council in 1918 explaining the need to pass over farmers in the draft.¹² Meanwhile, the Selma Chamber of Commerce appealed directly to the Secretary of War to exempt the city from government recruiting for war industry workers.¹³

⁸ "County Begins Work of Repairing Damage Done to Roads by Floods," *Selma Times*, July 12, 1916.

⁹ "Issue Rations to 1000 for a Week," *Selma Times*, July 30, 1916.

¹⁰ Quoted in Samuel C. Adams, Jr., "The Changing Organization of a Rural Negro Community and Its Implications for Race Accommodation," (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1953), 50.

¹¹ "The Labor Crisis," *Selma Times*, Nov. 15, 1917, 4.

¹² W.C. Agee to L.M. Hooper, May 13, 1918, Box 1, Folder 10, ADC, ADAH.

¹³ "Writes Officials to Exempt Dallas From Labor Drain," *Selma Journal*, Apr. 23, 1918.

Enlistment was not the only reason Dallas County farmers were worried. The war increased the demand for industrial labor at the same time the country closed its doors to the thousands of European immigrants who had been keeping American factories running. War industries began recruiting black labor from the south to fill these positions. Reeling from agricultural displacement and harsh racial hostility, African Americans began boarding trains and leaving the South in a tremendous exodus. The *Chicago Defender*, a widely-circulated African American newspaper, became the mouthpiece of this “Great Migration.”¹⁴ One of its first reports came from Selma, Alabama on February 5, 1916. Over the months prior, hundreds of black citizens had been quietly leaving the Black Belt on trains departing from Selma. White residents were doing what they could to stop the stream but “the discrimination and race prejudice continues as strong as ever.”¹⁵ Some residents even wrote to the *Chicago Defender* for help. A seventeen year-old reader who attended Knox Academy listed her skills - dish washing, laundry, nursing, and grocery or dry goods work – and asked the newspaper to find her a job and a sponsor for her train ticket.¹⁶ Many of the outward bound headed towards southern industrial centers like Birmingham before turning further

¹⁴ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 36 – 37. For more about the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural south to northern cities, see James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Carole Marks *Farewell, We're Good and Gone: the Great Black Migration* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

¹⁵ “Race Labor Leaving,” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 5, 1916.

¹⁶ Letter from Selma, Ala., May 19, 1917 in Emmett T. Scott, “Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916 – 1918,” *Journal of Negro History* 4 (July, 1919), 317.

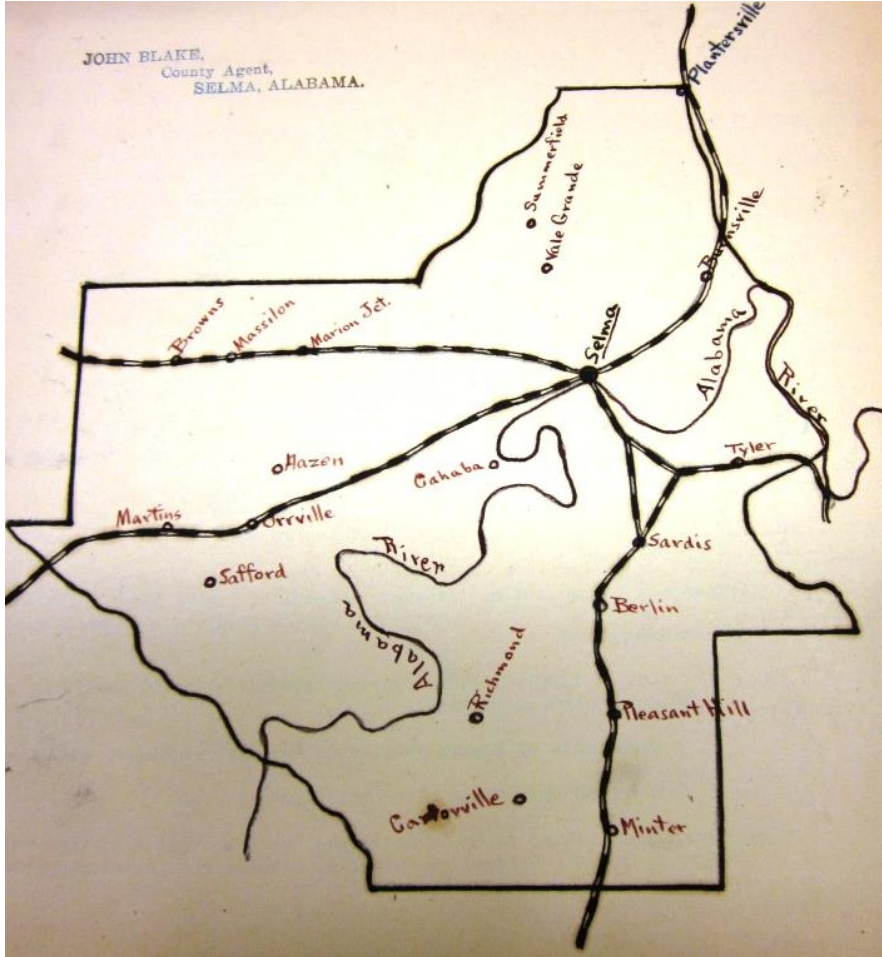


Figure 9: Map drawn by County Agent John Blake of train lines and communities in Dallas County, circa 1920. The large number of African Americans leaving from Selma was likely due to the city being a transportation hub for the Western Alabama Black Belt. Courtesy of Alabama Cooperative Extension Service Records, Auburn University.

north. A whopping 12,037 railroad tickets were purchased, mostly by African Americans, from Selma to the Birmingham district between August 1916 and June 1917.¹⁷

White citizens of Dallas County refused to acknowledge the

local injustices that compelled black residents to leave. They accused roving labor agents of enticing black workers away with big promises about industrial jobs in the north. In the first two months of 1917, Selma's law enforcement officers arrested at least eight men suspected of being labor agents. The troubles of four of these men started when their car broke down

¹⁷ Mr. S. H. Dykstra, Representative Wage and Hour Division, U.S. Department of Labor, Address, at the NAACP Convention, June 28, 1939, Richmond VA, p. 7. Annual Convention, 1939, Feb. 11 – June 28, 1939, NAACP Papers, Pt. 1, Meeting of Board, ProQuest History Vault.

outside of Benton, twelve miles east of Selma. Their indecipherable license plates aroused the suspicion of the police, and later Chief Perry Dawson took them into custody from the hotel where they were staying. The men allegedly had long lists of names of “Negroes living in Selma and Dallas County,” which warranted their extended lockup.¹⁸ Other grounds for the imprisonment of accused labor agents included being unable to account for their previous day’s movements and “their activities among the Negroes aroused suspicion.”¹⁹ White leaders blamed these outside agitators for the alarming departure of the black labor force. Through blatant intimidation and arrests, Dallas County acquired a reputation of being especially “unwelcome territory for the labor agent.”²⁰

Other white residents attempted to quell the steady migration themselves. The Southern Railroad vowed to stop furnishing trains for the black exodus. The labor crisis, according to the *Selma Times*, “assumed such proportions that it is difficult in some localities to secure sufficient Negro labor for farm work and other local needs.” The railway refused to supply extra passenger and baggage cars for black passengers and sought to “discourage the Negro exodus from the South in every legitimate manner.”²¹

The battle between the steady departure of black laborers and white Selma citizens’ proclaimed effort to fulfill their patriotic obligation climaxed in 1918. Prominent white citizens called a meeting at the courthouse that May to consider the “serious situation of

¹⁸ “Four Men, Suspected of Being Labor Agents, Arrested with Two Girls from Montgomery,” *Selma Times*, Jan. 16, 1917.

¹⁹ “Negro Labor Agent Suspect is Arrested,” *Selma Times*, January 21, 1917; “Negro Labor Agent Given \$50 Fine,” *Selma Times*, January 29, 1917; “Negro Labor Agents Suspects are Arrested,” *Selma Times*, February 1, 1917.

²⁰ *Montgomery Advertiser*, Jan. 4, 1921, in Glen Sisk, “Alabama Black Belt: A Social History, 1875 – 1917,” 446.

²¹ “Will Furnish No More Trains for Negro Exodus,” *Selma Times*, June 6, 1917.

labor” confronting Dallas County.²² Then in August, the city of Selma passed a vagrancy ordinance criminalizing “any person, male or female, who wanders or strolls about in idleness, or lives in idleness, [...] having no income producing property sufficient for his support.”²³ In the name of patriotism and war mobilization, the city council planned to use the measure to round up idlers and compel them to work in the fields.

Enforcing the new vagrancy ordinance required citizen support. On the night of August 27, 1918, a group of Selma’s white citizens formed the Dallas County Self Preservation Loyalty League with the purpose of mobilizing and distributing labor. However, the inclusion of “self preservation” in the new organization’s title suggested that the vagrancy laws would personally benefit white citizens in addition to Uncle Sam.²⁴ The League sought to ensure that all able men between sixteen and sixty were “engaged in some kind of work required for the successful carrying out of the war with our enemies.” Under a banner of patriotism, the organization proclaimed that it would take no part in “politics, religious, or labor controversy.”²⁵ City residents needed to carry loyalty cards with them at all times, which gave proof of gainful employment six days a week. Failure to produce the loyalty card “may at times cause some inconvenience.”²⁶ The underlying racial motive of the vagrancy ordinances were apparent in the report by the *Selma Times* that all of those

²² “Labor Situation in Dallas County Need Attention,” *Selma Journal*, May 15, 1918.

²³ W.C. Agee to Lloyd Hooper, August 15, 1918, Folder 11 W.C. Agee Correspondence Jul. – Aug. 1918, Box 1, ADC, ADAH.

²⁴ “Labor Loyalty League Formed in Dallas County,” *Selma Journal*, August 28, 1918.

²⁵ “To See that Every Man is Hard at Work. Organization of Self Preservation Loyalty League is Under Way,” *Selma Journal*, September 2, 1918.

²⁶ “Loyalty League Meets Tonight,” *Selma Journal*, September 9, 1918.

prosecuted under the law were Negroes.²⁷ The mission of the League highlighted how prominent white residents saw agriculture, access to black labor, and patriotic duty as interrelated and subject to their own control.

But the end of the war stopped local labor regulations from taking full effect. In November of 1918, cheering citizens flooded the streets of Selma in celebration. The United States' experience in the Great War changed how the federal government participated in the lives of its citizens. For the first time, white Alabamians in the Black Belt were made to recognize African Americans as capable soldiers and necessary contributors to the war effort. The war did not end African Americans' second-class citizenship as many had hoped, but it illuminated how the federal government could be a potential ally.

The opening of northern industrial jobs additionally gave southern blacks a viable opportunity to abandon Jim Crow segregation, and 1,246 African American residents in Dallas County chose to move between 1910 and 1920. Although the black population dropped from 81.4% to 77%, Dallas County was still the only Black Belt county to gain population in the 1920 census. The region's agricultural landscape did change during the war, but the much-talked about labor shortage was not the primary cause. By 1920, cotton production in Dallas County made up only 52.8% of total crop value, down from 78.1% in 1910.²⁸ This shift indicated entrenchment of the Extension Service's gospel of crop

²⁷ "Vagrancy [sic] Cases," *Selma Journal*, October 3, 1918.

²⁸ Historical Census Browser. University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/>. (accessed July 5, 2012); "Dallas County Shows a Gain," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 6, 1920.

diversification and better farming methods in addition to the destructive effects of the weevil.²⁹

Progressivism in the Black Belt

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, progressive reformers pushed for fundamental changes in how the government took care of its citizens. The progressive agenda – one set on nothing less than social transformation - included everything from limiting big business and improving sanitation, to relieving poverty and securing women’s suffrage.³⁰ Prewar progressive activism in Alabama tended towards limited political reforms like regulating the railroads. A deep skepticism among the state’s citizens about the benefits of government intervention in their lives gave one explanation, but dogged unwillingness to channel funds towards black Alabamians was even more to blame for lackluster social reforms.³¹

The Alabama State Legislature’s staunch refusal to extend women the vote was one example of the intransigence. During the 1901 Constitutional Convention, Selma representative, Benjamin H. Craig, had first proposed extending suffrage to women. Middle-class women of both races had long been spearheading campaigns for better education,

²⁹ While diversification helped expand the production of food crops, cotton remained the staple crop of the Black Belt. In fact, after the war, county agent John Blake reported that “Dallas County will produce as much cotton per acre this year as she did before the weevil came;” John Blake, Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics. Report of Work of the County Agent, 1918, Box 113, Folder Dallas 1918, Alabama Cooperative Extension Service (ACES), Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama.

³⁰ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, xiiv – xv.

³¹ William Warren Rogers, et al., *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994) 362 – 363; Robert Saunders, Jr., “World War I: Catalyst for Social Change in Alabama,” in *The Great War in the Heart of Dixie: Alabama During World War I*, edited by Martin T. Olliff (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 184 – 185.

community improvement, prohibition, and prison reform, but in the midst of the frenzy of disfranchisement, Craig's suggestion met resounding defeat. In 1910, a small group of prominent white women rekindled the cause when they formed the Selma Suffrage Association. People of the city continued to play pivotal roles on both sides of the suffrage debate. The determination of local white suffragettes caused Dallas County representative Joseph W. Green to sponsor a referendum on women's suffrage in the 1915 state legislature. But the move met fierce resistance. Every representative walked into the legislative chambers and found a pamphlet on their desk charging that "women's suffrage is the most dangerous blow aimed at the peace and happiness of the people of Alabama and white supremacy since the Civil War." The bill failed to pass, and its sponsor Joseph Green received the nickname "the Dallas County acrobat" when he flip-flopped and denounced his own bill.³² Only after thirty-six other states ratified the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 did the Alabama legislature extend the vote to white women.³³

Progressive reforms directed at public health attracted heartier vocal support, if not always action.³⁴ Decrepit, overcrowded housing and persistent malnutrition among the county's poorest residents, however, undermined the middle class campaign for sanitation. Complaining about the crumbling alleyway shacks black people resided in, the *Selma Morning Times* exclaimed, "It is a mystery to us why more of them do not die, living in the cramped,

³² In the first decades of the twentieth century, club women organized through statewide organizations like the Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs and the National Association of Colored Women's Club; Quote from "A Protest Against Women's Suffrage in Alabama," in Alston Fitts, III, *Selma: Queen City of the Black Belt* (Selma, Ala.: Clairmont Press, 1989), 98, 113 – 115.

³³ Rogers, et al., *Alabama*, 383.

³⁴ Rogers et al, *Alabama*, 363 – 365.

unsanitary houses that they occupy.”³⁵ Fears of disease lurked behind the concerns of Selma residents about sanitation. Tuberculosis had gained a reputation as the “Negro servant’s disease,” in the years since the Civil War.³⁶ A special exhibit on “Tuberculosis among the Negroes” in Selma sought to draw attention to how, “the Negroes in their capacity of servants, may easily transmit the disease into the homes of every person of the land.”³⁷ Colonel W.W. Quarles, who had married the daughter of former Selma Bank president Washington Smith and his gold-stashing wife, minced few words expounding upon the problem: “It is no exaggeration to say that ninety-nine percent of our servants are blacks, and that ninety-nine percent of all our household work is performed by black servants, many of whom are walking, reeking hives of the terrible bugs to all the susceptible inmates of our homes slow and certain death.”³⁸ White Dallas County residents may have been most vocal about the cleanliness of black residents, but disease failed to follow Jim Crow’s color line. In 1914, an outbreak of smallpox among white textile workers at the Valley Creek Cotton Mill shut down operations, and the 1918 Spanish Influenza touched all citizens alike.³⁹

The First World War helped break down some of Alabama’s resistance to providing government assistance for social improvements. During 1917 and 1918, the draft board

³⁵ “The Committee at Work,” *Selma Morning Times*, August 12, 1905.

³⁶ For more about the development of tuberculosis as a black disease, see Tera W. Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 187 – 198.

³⁷ “Special Attention to Negroes at Exhibit,” *Selma Journal*, June 11, 1908.

³⁸ Col. W.W. Quarles, “Tuberculosis and Servants,” *Selma Journal*, June 19, 1908; Only a few weeks after making these his comments against black servants, a black resident pelted Col. Quarles in the knee with a rock as he was walking down Broad Street. Black bystanders then mocked Quarles after being hit; “Col. Quarles is Target for Rock of Negro,” *Selma Journal*, Oct. 9, 1908.

³⁹ “Mill People Needing Help for a While,” *Selma Times-Journal*, December 6, 1914.

rejected over eighty-six percent of registered Alabamians for failing health requirements or intelligence exams, or for receiving family or economic exemptions. The astronomical rejection rates cut into Alabama's pride about the strength and agility of its citizens while simultaneously creating support for government aid in health and education. As Progressivism faded on the national stage, it grew in Alabama, a precursor to the upbuilding fervor that would sweep across the Black Belt in the 1920s. Elected on a platform of progressive reform in 1918, Governor Thomas Kilby's administration increased support to social campaigns by creating the state's first Department of Health, doubling education spending, and forming the Department of Child Welfare.⁴⁰

The Dallas County Health Unit opened its doors in the Liepold Building on Water Street in 1920 with the mission "to advise the public how to live and to improve sanitation and control disease epidemics."⁴¹ The *Selma Times-Journal* regularly reported on the progress of the Health Unit in vaccinating school children against small pox and other sanitation projects.⁴² Citizens also waged an annual war against mosquitoes, charged with spreading sickness throughout the city. Contending that hazardous health conditions resulted from "neglect, indifference and inefficiency," the city drained standing water and nearby swamps and cut weeds believing that it could eliminate the pests.⁴³

⁴⁰ Robert Saunders, Jr., "World War I: Catalyst for Social Change in Alabama," in *The Great War in the Heart of Dixie: Alabama During World War I*, edited by Martin T. Olliff (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 184 – 198.

⁴¹ O.S. Wynn, "Machinery of Dallas County Health Unit Ready to Turn for Better Conditions Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, November 13, 1921.

⁴² "Vaccination of Negroes Planned," *Selma Times-Journal*, January 13, 1922.

⁴³ "Ridding the Town of Mosquitoes," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 6, 1924; "Selma to Be Mosquito-Free," *Selma Times-Journal*, April 16, 1924.

In Selma, improvements regarding sewerage and sanitation most often took place in the well-to-do white sections of town.⁴⁴ Residents of East Selma, home to the railroad men and working-class whites, protested the city's selective application of sanitation regulations. In 1922, ninety-one residents signed a petition protesting an open ditch running through the neighborhood where the Selma Creamery dumped its dairy by-products.⁴⁵ A year later, Rev. G.W. Check, representing sixty-three property owners, demanded to know why the city council had failed to provide proper sewerage to residents on the eastern side of the city.⁴⁶ Alabama's progressive reforms in health, sanitation, and education tended to disproportionately benefit the well-off over the poor.

Industrial and Agricultural Education for African Americans

Only the smallest of reverberations from Alabama's progressive campaigns reached rural African Americans living in the Black Belt. Despite wartime shifts towards food production, Dallas County's agricultural landscape for black tenant farmers remained much the same. The county had over seven thousand farms in 1920. 89% were operated by black farmers, and of these, 91% were tenants.⁴⁷ Debt, unfair dealings with landlords and commissary merchants, illiteracy, and isolation kept tenant farmers impoverished and trapped. For example, J.A. Minter, the white plantation owner who had hundreds of tenant

⁴⁴ Letter to editor, "Complains of Negro Shacks," *Selma Journal*, April 13, 1911.

⁴⁵ "May Close Ditch Near Creamery," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 23, 1922.

⁴⁶ "Citizens State Grievances to City Council," *Selma Times-Journal*, September 11, 1923.

⁴⁷ Historical Census Browser from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004. <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/>. (accessed January 27, 2013); The *Selma Times Journal* reported in 1926 that the average tenant farmer grossed \$256 per year and consumed more than they produced; "Tenant Farmers Draw Low Wages," *Selma Times Journal*, May 7, 1926.

farmers working his thousands of acres near Tyler, proposed a new law to the Alabama Legislature in 1919. He moved to ban traveling salesmen from selling to tenants without the written consent of the plantation landlord. Not only did large landowners like Minter want to control black tenants' labor, they also wanted control the people and ideas their tenants interacted with.⁴⁸ The state of Alabama, bowing to provincialism and white supremacy, put little into providing opportunities for its black residents.

With the federal government occupied in other undertakings during Reconstruction, the establishment of public education had fallen to individual southern states. In Alabama, public schools for African Americans came about slowly, and once in existence, they perpetually suffered from overcrowding, poor conditions, and underfunding.⁴⁹ A bill submitted during the 1890 – 1891 session of the Alabama legislature mandated that state educational funding be allotted on a per student basis to counties. However, these funds came into the hands of a local board, trusted to distribute the money between white and Negro schools in a manner they deemed "just and equitable." Already ruffled over providing tax money for black education, white school boards ensured that the majority of funding funneled into white schoolrooms.⁵⁰

Since emancipation, African Americans viewed education as an essential tool to claiming their freedom, and they added their own resources to the meager amounts provided

⁴⁸ For more on the conditions of black tenant farmers, see Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1936); Charles S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934); Alabama Legislature. House of Representatives. *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 1920, 779.

⁴⁹ Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 19.

⁵⁰ Glenn N. Sisk, "Negro Education in the Black Belt, 1875 – 1900," *Journal of Negro Education* Vol. 22 (Spring, 1953), 128.

in hopes of forging a better future for their children. Rural black communities mobilized the little they could spare to supplement their shortchanged schools. But in a culture of white supremacy, black attempts to own land, educate their children, vote, or form organizations often garnered the suspicion of local white elites. It was in this climate of wariness that industrial education - emphasizing practical, trade-based skills – found fertile ground.

Tuskegee Institute, under the direction of Booker T. Washington, stood as the shining example of how industrial education for African Americans and white supremacy could co-exist. Training students in home economics, agriculture, brick masonry, and other trades, Washington urged his students to rely on their labor and make the most of their circumstances.⁵¹ His influence spread as his pupils returned to their homes in the rural areas and opened their own industrial training schools. In Wilcox County just south of the Dallas County border, former pupil William Edwards began Snow Hill Institute in 1893. He sought to train students for the skills their life required of them, “to make education practical rather than theoretical.” R.O. Simpson, the white owner of the plantation where Edwards was born, gave him the school’s first seven acres of land. In 1904, a Snow Hill student, Emmanuel M. Brown, returned to his home community of Richmond in Dallas County to begin the Street Manual Training School. As Edwards recalled, the students of Emmanuel Brown “spend no time on psychology, economics, sociology, or logic; their time is taken up trying to raise crops, to manage a small farm, to cook, and to sew.”⁵²

⁵¹ Booker T. Washington’s philosophy is captured in his Atlanta Exposition Address in 1895, see Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, (Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1995), 127 – 131.

⁵² William James Edwards, *Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt*, (Boston: the Cornhill Company, 1918), 35 – 39, 68.

White residents supported industrial education as a means of black uplift that did not challenge the economic structure of white supremacy; African Americans, however, could not have seen it more differently. William Edwards laid out his intentions for the students at Snow Hill Institute in his memoir *Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt*. He wanted to create leaders from and of rural black residents who would “teach them how to live economically, to pay their debts, to buy land, to build better homes, better schools, better churches, and above all, how to lead pure and upright lives and [be] helpful citizens in the community in which they live.”⁵³ White landlords gave their support for industrial education, confident they were creating more productive tenants, but black teachers and students worked to become land owners who could help build stronger black institutions.

National philanthropic organizations played a central role in supporting rural blacks’ educational efforts. The Rosenwald Fund – run by Sears and Roebuck, Co. magnate Julius Rosenwald - built thousands of public school houses for black children throughout the South between the First and Second World Wars. In order to build a Rosenwald school, local communities had to meet certain stipulations. Black residents were required to give their support through monetary contributions or donations of labor, and the county needed to consent to incorporating the prospective school into its public school system.⁵⁴

African Americans in the Orrville area, a rural community fifteen miles west of Selma, set out in the spring of 1921 to build a Rosenwald School for their children. In addition to pooling their own financial resources, they also needed the blessing of Darby M.

⁵³ Edwards, *Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt*, 112.

⁵⁴ Glenn Sisk, “The Educational Awakening, and its Effects Upon the Black Belt, 1900 – 1917,” *Journal of Negro Education* Vol. 25 (Spring 1956), 194.

Calloway, the white superintendent of Dallas County Schools. Superintendent Calloway corresponded with J.S. Lambert, the Alabama State Agent for Rural Colored Schools, throughout that spring and summer, settling funding and construction details of what would become Keith School. Complications plagued the endeavor. When funds were unavailable for building a one-teacher school, black residents consolidated their efforts and supplied five acres of land for a four-room building.⁵⁵ The first building plan was rejected by Agent Lambert because it lacked a manual training room, “a very important adjunct to a colored school building of any type.”⁵⁶ Constant delays in securing funding, both at Keith and another Rosenwald school, pushed the white superintendent to frustration in the fall: “We are not treating right those niggers,” he wrote in one letter.⁵⁷ The Keith School finally opened its doors in 1922. The total contributions of Orrville’s black residents surpassed those of the state and the Rosenwald Fund. Local black residents raised \$1,700 while public

⁵⁵ D.M. Calloway to J.S. Lambert, April 7, 1921, Box SG15455, Folder: Dallas County, Supt. D.M. Calloway, 1920 – 1922, Alabama Department of Education, Rural School Agents Papers (ADERSA), ADAH.

⁵⁶ J.S. Lambert to Supt. D.M. Calloway, Apr. 9, 1921, Box SG15455, Folder: Dallas County, Supt. D.M. Calloway, 1920 – 1922, ADERSA, ADAH.

⁵⁷ D.M. Calloway to J.S. Lambert, Nov. 14, 1921, Box SG15455, Folder: Dallas County, Supt. D.M. Calloway, 1920 – 1922, ADERSA, ADAH.

funds supplied \$1,300 and Rosenwald \$1,000. Coming from the pockets of tenant farmers and some independent landowner, \$1,700 represented an enormous commitment to ensure an education for their children. By 1929, a total of ten Rosenwald schools were in operation in Dallas County.⁵⁸

A Rosenwald school in a rural area often meant that a Jeanes teacher was nearby. Begun by a Quaker woman from Pennsylvania, the Anna T. Jeanes Foundation hired black women to teach industrial education to rural African American children across the South.

Dallas County Jeanes Teachers were based at Selma University from before the First World War and complimented the school's aim of developing students' "head, heart, and hand."⁵⁹ In the early 1920s, the teachers focused on "the fundamentals of industrial work," including



Figure 10: The Mud Hall School, built in Dallas County during the 1920s, is an example of a two-teacher Rosenwald School. Keith School near Orrville was larger and built for four teachers. Courtesy of Alabama Department of Education, Rural School Agents Records, ADAH.

cooking and sewing for girls and manual training for boys. They also conducted outreach work in rural communities, directing residents in creating better homes and schools. Jeanes

⁵⁸ Rosenwald Fund Card File Database, Fisk University, <http://rosenwald.fisk.edu>. (accessed January 29, 2013).

⁵⁹ Correspondence from R.T. Pollard, President of Selma University, Box SG15451, Folder P 1918, ADERSA, ADAH.

Teachers organized mothers' clubs, school improvement associations, parent teacher organizations, and assisted in raising funds to build new schoolhouses.⁶⁰ For example, the Jeanes Supervisor managed to organize thirty clubs in Dallas County and hold eighteen public canning demonstrations in the summer of 1918 alone.⁶¹ As the Extension Service became increasingly involved in home demonstration work and club organizing, Jeanes Teachers concentrated their efforts on primary instruction in rural schools and literacy work.⁶²

The conditions that Jeanes teachers encountered in the rural regions of Dallas County and the South made their work difficult at best. Mrs. A.B. Wilson, the local Jeanes teacher, spent much of her time trying to supply rural schools with teachers; a month into the 1920 – 1921 school year, she had secured instructors for 103 out of the 125 black schools in Dallas County.⁶³ With so many schools - the majority in poor condition - spread out across the county's nine hundred square miles, Jeanes Teachers could only cover limited ground. Rural School Agent J.S. Lambert warned Mrs. Wilson's successor against being "too scopy" in her efforts; he urged her to focus on doing a few things well and avoid doing "everything half-way."⁶⁴ Despite these challenges, Jeanes Teachers established a presence in

⁶⁰ J.S. Lambert, Rural Agent of Colored Schools, Summary of Reports from Jeanes Industrial Teachers and Home Makers Clubs, 1918 – 1919, Box SG15451, Folder: Jeanes Fund 1918, ADERSA, ADAH.

⁶¹ Summarized Statement of Home Maker's Club Work for the Summer of 1918 in the State of Alabama, Box SG15451, Folder: Jeanes Fund 1918, ADERSA, ADAH.

⁶² John W. Abercrombie, Superintendent of Education, Montgomery, Ala.; report concerning agencies employed for the advancement of negro education, Box SG15451, Folder: Dr. John W. Abercrombie, ADERSA, ADAH.

⁶³ A.B. Wilson to J.S. Lambert, December 7, 1920, Box SG15455, Folder: Dallas County, Mrs. A.B. Wilson (J), 1920 – 1921, ADERSA, ADAH.

⁶⁴ J.S. Lambert to Mrs. Lydia Martin, August 22, 1921, Box SG15455, Folder Dallas County, Mrs. A.B. Wilson (J), 1920 – 1921, ADERSA, ADAH.

Dallas County, becoming what one Selma resident called “a little black superintendent.” As black education improved during the 1940s, Jeanes Teachers urged African American children to make better lives for themselves by pursuing college degrees.⁶⁵

While Dallas County’s white-controlled board of education intentionally undercut black public education, black residents, supported by philanthropic organizations, pooled scarce resources to provide an education for their children. The sums of money poor tenant farmers raised to erect a local school illustrated the depth of their determination. Industrial education offered a means for black communities to buy land, educate their children, and create better lives within the boundaries of Jim Crow segregation. Such education for African Americans could thrive in the Black Belt because white landlords viewed it not as challenging white supremacy but as creating more industrious and contented workers. This fallacious belief provided a space for black residents to build community institutions and organize themselves within, but also against Jim Crow.

The Extension Service and the Farm Bureau

Gaining adherents since the boll weevil’s arrival, the Extension Service played a pivotal role in organizing and educating Dallas County’s residents in the years after the war. County agents served as the local face of the Extension Service, and from 1911 onward, that man in Dallas County was John Blake.⁶⁶ A mid-sized fellow equipped with a small notebook, a suit coat and a stiff felt fedora on his head, Blake spent most of his time standing in fields

⁶⁵ Louretta Wimberly, interview by author, December 4, 2012, Selma, Alabama.

⁶⁶ “Blake Honored for Long Service to Dallas Farmers,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 19, 1931.

consulting with farmers or keeping up with a county agent's daily grind of correspondence, pamphlets, and administration in his courthouse office. In accordance with the racial climate of the Black Belt, Blake concentrated his work amongst large white farmers. He reported receiving their hearty cooperation, and by 1915, he estimated that he had influenced every white farmer, directly or indirectly, regarding growing cotton under weevil conditions. His gospel of scientific agriculture included crop rotation and diversification, soil conservation, fertilizer use, and implementing better farming methods, and his gregarious personality and penchant for talking "an awful lot" certainly helped his popularity.⁶⁷



Figure 11: John Blake (right) examining H.B. Stringer's (left) field of first-year vetch, 1926. Courtesy of ACES, ADAH.

But no matter how successful county agent Blake was in selling white farmers on scientific agriculture, the fact remained, as he admitted himself, that "ninety-five percent of

⁶⁷ John Blake, Report of Work of the County Agent, 1915, Box 111, Folder Dallas 1915, ACES, Auburn University; William Tanquary, "'Organization' Watchword of Dallas County Farm Tour," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 1, 1929.

the soil is cultivated by negro tenants.”⁶⁸ There was no avoiding the Black Belt’s central tenet of white supremacy: bountiful crops and high-yielding farmland hung on the labor of African American farmers. So in 1916, Dallas County hired T.H. Toodle, its first black county agent, to bring extension work to black farmers. Insurmountable odds plagued county agent Toodle’s work from the beginning. In the credit-laden, landlord-controlled system of tenant farming, African American farmers had little direct control over their supplies or methods. After his first year in the county, Toodle noted that nearly all farmers had stopped using fertilizer since the boll weevil because “they were in the habit of buying on credit. Now the credit has been withdrawn that prevents the use of fertilizer.”⁶⁹

Decimated by decades of continual cotton production, the depleted Black Belt soil produced smaller and smaller yields for black tenant farmers short on cash and options.⁷⁰ While black county agents promoted scientific agriculture, they could not surmount the barriers of sharecropping, spent soil, or Jim Crow’s rules of order.

But black agents did become catalysts for bringing isolated rural blacks together in community clubs and larger organizations. In 1921, two hundred farmers joined county agent Toodle, teachers from the city and county, Jeanes Fund supervisors, Tuskegee representatives, and students for a farmer’s conference at Selma University. During the event, Selma’s black middle class mixed with farmers from the Extension Service. Sessions covered everything from the proper use of fertilizer to components of good citizenship. A

⁶⁸ John Blake, Report of Work of the County Agent, 1919, Box 115, Folder Dallas, ACES, Auburn University.

⁶⁹ T.H. Toodle, Report of Work of the County Agent, 1916, Box 112, Folder 1916 Dallas, ACES, Auburn University.

⁷⁰ William J. Edwards, *Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt*, (Boston: The Cornhill Company, 1918), 87 – 89.

dozen women, led by Mrs. R.T. Pollard, the wife of Selma University's president, demonstrated food conservation methods, chair caning, making soap from scraps, pine needle baskets, house slippers, and brooms.⁷¹ Black county agents fostered cooperation between rural and city black residents. T.H. Toodle and his successor, C.D. Menafee, aided black farmers in agricultural work while also simultaneously building a network of community clubs.⁷² By 1925, black county agents had established a presence in Dallas County

John Blake had been strengthening the local Extension Service since he and the boll weevil first arrived in Dallas County. Through weekly newspaper features, crop demonstrations on farms, and visits with farmers, Blake and his agricultural methods enjoyed widespread popularity among white landowners. His gospel of scientific agriculture seeped into the consciousness of planters and merchants alike. By 1920, not only were large landowners planting good cotton seeds but merchants made sure to secure such seed for the African Americans they advanced credit to. "Dallas County will produce as much cotton per acre this year as she did before the weevil came. Dry weather helped, but good seed and improved methods of cultivation did much," Blake affirmed.⁷³

⁷¹ A.F. Owen, "Ellis, Allgood and Hall Speak at Negro Meet," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 13, 1921.

⁷² "Marion Jct. Endorses Movable School," *Selma Times-Journal*, April 14, 1925.

⁷³ John Blake, Report of Work of the County Agent, 1918, Box 113, Folder Dallas 1918, ACES, Auburn University; For more about African Americans and the Extension Service, see Mark D. Hersey, *My Work is That of Conservation: an Environmental Biography of George Washington Carver* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Debra Ann Reid, *Reaping a Greater Harvest: African Americans, the Extension Service, and Rural Reform in Jim Crow Texas* (College Station, TX: A& M University Press, 2007).

In 1921, John Blake reported to his superiors at Alabama Polytechnic Institute that he planned to form a local chapter of the country's most popular farmers association.⁷⁴ The Farm Bureau began as county-level organizations in 1911, and by 1920 had grown into a national American Farm Bureau Federation. While the Extension Service focused on agricultural education, the Farm Bureau concentrated on farmer's economic and political concerns, aiming to promote their business interests and secure favorable agricultural legislation.⁷⁵ The two agencies grew in tandem after the Smith-Lever Act passed in 1914. County agents, from their work educating and organizing local farmers, became the natural representative to coordinate marketing and distribution.⁷⁶ John Blake headed up the effort to establish a Farm Bureau chapter, and the *Selma Times-Journal* assisted by dependably reporting the Bureau's programs and growing popularity⁷⁷

By the spring of 1923, two hundred white farmers had joined Dallas County's chapter.⁷⁸ The Farm Bureau promised to adopt new farming methods to increase productivity, reduce operating costs and marketing losses, and secure more money for crop producers.⁷⁹ Cooperation in favor of the farmers' interests dictated the organization's activities. From its central office in the courthouse, members sent out questionnaires inquiring how much of popular cover crops (like vetch and crimson clover) farmers needed,

⁷⁴ John Blake, Report of Work of the County Agent, 1921, Box 117, Folder Dallas 1921, ACES, Auburn University.

⁷⁵ Christina McFadyen Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal; a Study of Making of National Farm Policy, 1933-40* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962), 5 - 7.

⁷⁶ Maurice Chase Burritt, *The County Agent and the Farm Bureau* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co, 1922), 93.

⁷⁷ "The Farm Bureau," *Selma Times-Journal*, April 1, 1923.

⁷⁸ "Forty Four New Names of Dallas Farmers Added to Farm Bureau Roll," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 22, 1923.

⁷⁹ "The Farm Bureau and Its Program," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 20, 1923.

who wanted to purchase pecan trees, and how many calves members would have to market come fall. Using this information, the local Bureau then purchased supplies and marketed farmers' products collectively, leading to savings and increased profits for individual farmers.⁸⁰ The cooperative selling plan grew to include hogs, turkeys, chickens, eggs, and other locally-grown produce. After three years of work, John Blake resoundingly declared, "Nothing has ever come into the County that has done more for the farmer and the County Agent than the Farm Bureau." In his report to Alabama Polytechnic, he wrote, "This organization has given me a great deal of assistance in my work. I have been in this County for thirteen years as agent. I do not think that I exaggerate when I say that with its help and co-operation I have been able to do more real constructive work in the past three years than I have in the other ten."⁸¹ Dallas County's best citizens wanted progress, and the Farm Bureau led the upbuilding crusade.

⁸⁰ "Farm Bureau to Buy Vetch Seeds and Pecan Trees for Members," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 13, 1923.

⁸¹ John Blake, Annual Report of Extension Work in Dallas County, Alabama, 1924, Box 121, Folder Dallas 1924, ACES, Auburn University.



Figure 12: Black farm laborers load the turkeys of A.G. Deshervinan onto a Dallas Co. train headed for market in 1927. The Farm Bureau organized train cars to pick up poultry and cooperatively market it in larger cities for better prices than could be secured locally. Courtesy of ACES, Auburn University.

The reach of the county agent and Farm Bureau did not only extend to the men of Dallas County. In 1924, the USDA created the Office of the Cooperative Extension Service, and divided extension work along gender lines. While the farm agent worked with the men in the fields, his partner, the home demonstration agent, worked with farm women to better their homes and improve family care.⁸² Helen Kennedy began organizing home demonstration clubs among Dallas County's white girls starting in 1920, and her successor, Annette Tyndall, expanded that work to adults.⁸³ Each club was made up of a dozen or so members from a particular rural community. In these organizations, women undertook clothing projects, baking demonstrations, nutrition lectures, garden work, and more. Farm

⁸² Rieff, "Rousing the People of the Land," 61.

⁸³ "Demonstration Clubs Formed at All Points," *Selma Times-Journal*, April 18, 1920.

women also partnered with their husbands and the programs of the county agents. As farmers diversified their operations with row crops, cattle and poultry, their wives brought their bounty to market. Dallas County's first Curb Market began in 1925. Three times a week, farm women brought in produce from their gardens and baked goods to sell to women in town. The liberal support of city club women and the Chamber of Commerce made the market a resounding success.⁸⁴ Then in the fall of 1925, home demonstration work extended to African American women when black agent Lucille Davis arrived.⁸⁵

The widespread influence of the Extension Service and the Farm Bureau in Dallas County made scientific agriculture, better rural living, and cooperative organizing a focus during the years after the war. Prominent farmers and merchants understood modernization and cooperation as a way to increase the economic prosperity of the region. The rejuvenated commitment to modern methods of agriculture also found its parallel campaign amongst businessmen and professionals in Selma.

Our Country First, Then Selma

In 1922, white civic leaders reckoned that the time had come for visitors and citizens alike to understand just how much they believed in their city. An electric sign installed on Broad Street seemed like the perfect symbol of this sentiment. Shining over the heads of bustling crowds of shoppers, it read, "Our Country First Then Selma." A feverish obsession of upbuilding pulsed through Selma and Dallas County in the years after the war. Combining

⁸⁴ Annette S. Tyndall, Annual Report of Extension Work in Dallas County, Alabama, 1925, Box 123, Folder Dallas 1925, ACES, ADAH.

⁸⁵ "Menafee Appoints Negro Committees for Fall Festival," *Selma Times-Journal*, September 23, 1925.

progressive reform and economic advancement, the city's best men and women spared little in their campaign to make Selma the cleanest, most industrious, and most harmonious city in the Black Belt, if not the entire state of Alabama. The county's most prosperous white businessmen and professionals headed up this effort in partnership with the women's clubs, the Rotary and Kiwanis Club, and the Chamber of Commerce as well as the Farm Bureau.⁸⁶

As in the campaigns to improve sanitation, reduce disease, and implement better farming methods, white citizens could not succeed without considering the county's black majority. Upbuilding thus became the grounds on which prominent white citizens tentatively, but paternalistically, reached out to African Americans. In January 1925, a small group of white citizens and "a number of leading Negroes" gathered at the courthouse to discuss how to make their city a pinnacle of progress. These white and black educators, ministers, and professionals formed a committee seeking to "minimize differences and to exalt those influences and agencies that are dedicated to community upbuilding with every unit sharing in the resulting benefits." One of its first orders of business was "the cramped, unfit and unsanitary quarters" in which many black families lived. Houses surrounded by water and congestion led to disease, and as a committee member pointed out, "the health of a community is no stronger than its weakest link."⁸⁷

The Rev. Edward W. Gamble, the rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, became the organization's primary spokesperson. An independent and assured man, Mr. Gamble walked

⁸⁶ "Huge Electric Sign Bearing Slogan 'Our Country First Then Selma,' Planned for Broad Street," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 23, 1922.

⁸⁷ "Inter-Racial Meeting Held at Ct. House," and "Helping the Negro Solve His Problem," *Selma Times Journal*, January 18, 1925.

his own path in Selma, scrapping many of the conventions of white supremacy along the way. Besides his willingness to partner with black residents, he had thrown his support behind the amendment for women's suffrage.⁸⁸ In a luncheon speech to the powerful Rotary Club, the Rev. Gamble urged white citizens to take action to improve the conditions of Negro residents. He pleaded for "greater opportunity, more protection, and more of the comforts of life for the colored people."⁸⁹ His advocacy was not typical of white Selma citizens or even representative of interracial committee members. Its next meeting took place at the courthouse, but only white civic club leaders were apparently in attendance, and they discussed problems of the Negroes amongst themselves. The public campaign of upbuilding Dallas County did not require recognition of African Americans as equal participants so much as it needed harmony and a pleasant appearance.⁹⁰ Mr. E.W. Gamble continued to be a strong ally to African Americans, but on the whole, the interracial committee did little to improve the daily lives of black residents.⁹¹

Part of the postwar campaign to build a greater Selma included bringing new industries to the area. Even though agriculture fueled the economic engines of Dallas County, a combination of hometown pride, boosterism, and a commitment to progress compelled city leaders to seek out new business opportunities as well. Cities across the South turned towards tax exemptions, the promise of cheap, non-unionized labor, industrial bonds,

⁸⁸ United States Congress, House Committee on Woman Suffrage, *Extending the Right of Suffrage to Women: Hearings Before the Committee on Woman Suffrage*, House of Representatives, Sixty-fifth Congress, Second Session on H. J. Res 200. January 3, 4, 5, and 7, 1918, 268.

⁸⁹ "Gamble Speaks on Negroes at Rotary Club," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 27, 1925.

⁹⁰ "Meeting Discusses Negro Problems," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 12, 1925.

⁹¹ "Renovated Samaritan Hospital for Negroes and New Annex to be Open for Public Inspection Sunday July 12," *Selma-Times Journal*, July 5, 1925.

and local citizen financing, all in hopes of attracting industry.⁹² The city council and the Chamber of Commerce made sure that Selma kept pace. Hoping to entice more textile mills to the area, the city council in 1923 voted unanimously to offer a ten year tax-exemption to all new textile mills or expansions within the city limit.⁹³ Business representatives from Selma traveled across the country to entice relocating industries. H.H. Frazier, the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, and F.T. Raiford, the editor of the *Selma Times-Journal*, ventured on a recruiting trip to Chicago in 1927 where they planned to meet with several business firms who were planning on moving south.⁹⁴ Shortly afterwards, a large knitting mill expressed potential interest in Selma if the city could provide for some of the costs of relocating. Selma's wealthiest citizens pooled their money in the name of investment and progress to raise the \$300,000 dollars required by the mill management.⁹⁵ Despite their prodigious fundraising, the mill decided not to relocate, causing much disappointment.⁹⁶ Civic leaders truly believed that Selma was an "ideal city for manufacturers," as the Alabama Power Company advertised, and they worked to make sure their good roads, impressive sewer systems, and sanitation standards reflected this.⁹⁷

Despite a growing interest in industrial development, city leaders understood that Dallas County's progress still depended on agriculture. It alone sustained Selma's reign as a

⁹² James Cobb, *The Selling of the South: the Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 36.

⁹³ "New Mills in City Tax Exempt for a Ten Year Period," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 12, 1923.

⁹⁴ "Fraiser and Raiford to Chicago in Effort to Secure New Plants," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 27, 1927.

⁹⁵ "Commerce Chamber and Paper Praised for Mill Success," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 7, 1928.

⁹⁶ "Effort to Bring Union Mills Here Proves Failure," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 22, 1929.

⁹⁷ "Selma – Ideal City for Manufacturers," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 21, 1923

financial center, transportation hub, and bustling marketplace of the Black Belt. The *Selma Times-Journal*, the mouthpiece for upbuilding Selma, summed up these connections: “Surely there is no need to emphasize the argument that the more closely the city interweaves its interests with the agricultural development of its surrounding area the more certainly will both urban and rural fortunes thrive.”⁹⁸ The proponents of upbuilding believed that cooperation among local farmers, merchants, bankers, and professionals was at the heart of the area’s progress and success.

Frank Cothran and the other wholesale grocers on Water Avenue noticed how their business boomed as the local Extension Service and Farm Bureau thrived. Imbued with the spirit of progress and cooperation, the Selma Chamber of Commerce wanted to be a part of the action. In 1924, the Dallas County Farm Bureau’s campaign to promote diversified farming and grow more food stuffs attracted high praise from the chamber. Being more versed in business than in agriculture did not stop the Chamber of Commerce from sending out a letter to every “planter and tiller of the soil in this country” praising the Bureau’s “magnificent agricultural program,” and urging farmers to plant corn and legumes, livestock and hay, and make a living at home.⁹⁹ This new and hearty cooperation between the county’s business and agricultural interests continued to prosper as the decade continued. One year later, representatives from the Farm Bureau and the directors of the Chamber of Commerce

⁹⁸ “The Acres Back of Selma,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 12, 1922.

⁹⁹ “Chamber of Commerce Urges Farmers to Grow Food Stuff,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 20, 1924.

met jointly to “work out a definite farm program for Dallas County.”¹⁰⁰ John Blake described what such cooperation meant for the county:

If it had not been for the organized work of the Bureau, the business men of Selma could never have done what they have for our work. As a result they have contributed directly ten thousand dollars this year for agricultural development in this county. Only a few years ago, this would have been considered foolish by the Selma Chamber of Commerce, and for that matter by the farmers. Today it is realized as good business and money well spent. I consider however the wonderful spirit of co-operation existing between the business man and the farmer of our county of much greater importance than the money spent.¹⁰¹

Agriculture was no longer the sole responsibility of the farmer but that of the civically-minded businessman as well.

The newfound spirit of cooperation not only included white farmers and merchants; the heightened awareness of the city and county’s interconnectedness led to greater interest in the lives and undertakings of black Dallas County residents. As white landowners became avid proponents of crop rotation, diversified farming, and scientific agriculture, they began to pay more attention to the demographics of farming. In order for better agricultural methods to bring prosperity to the area, black farmers needed to be a part of the movement. Support for African American industrial education institutes like Tuskegee Institute and Snow Hill Institute reflected this understanding among white landowners and merchants. When the Farm Bureau and Selma Chamber of Commerce met together in 1925, they acknowledged that any commercial or agricultural program in the Black Belt needed to take into consideration the economic needs and welfare of the African American majority. “For

¹⁰⁰ “Farm Bureau Submits Practical Program,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 29, 1925.

¹⁰¹ John Blake, Annual Report of County Extension Workers, Box 124, Folder Dallas 1925, ACES, Auburn University.

there is the weak link,” they declared, “not only in Selma’s progress, but in the county as a whole.”¹⁰² To address this problem, they turned to the Negro Extension Service.

Extension work among rural African Americans had started before the war, but it soared to new heights once white county agents, the Farm Bureau, and the Chamber of Commerce started supplying their public and monetary support in the mid-twenties. Following the first joint Farm Bureau and Chamber of Commerce meeting in 1925, Mayor T.J. Rowell addressed the annual conference of black farmers at Selma University. He assured attendees that Selma businessmen were deeply interested in the well-being of Negro farmers. Sounding more like a county agent than Selma’s mayor, Rowell urged black farmers to create balanced, self-supporting farms, increase production, improve quality, and market their products more effectively.¹⁰³ The Chamber threw its money behind all of its talk about cooperation and agreed to pay half of the salaries of a black extension agent and home demonstration agent for the county.¹⁰⁴

Dallas County’s white Extension Service also turned its attention to the agricultural education of black tenants. In March 1925, John Blake secured Tuskegee’s Movable School for a multiple-week engagement in the area.¹⁰⁵ This mobile school began as a simple wagon equipped with farm implements before it expanded to the motorized Booker T. Washington Agricultural School on Wheels. T.M. Campbell, Alabama’s first black demonstration agent,

¹⁰² “Farm Bureau Submits Practical Program,” *Selma Times-Journal*, 1925.

¹⁰³ “Mayor Rowell Makes Some Telling Points on the Negro Farmer’s Place in the Business Equation at the Selma University Meeting,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 15, 1925.

¹⁰⁴ John Blake, Annual Report of County Extension Workers, Box 124, Folder Dallas 1925, ACES, Auburn University.

¹⁰⁵ “Agricultural Movable School Coming to Dallas from Auburn and Tuskegee for the Negro Farmers,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 8, 1925.

brought the school to rural areas and gave farming demonstrations to African American farmers who did not have the means to travel to Tuskegee themselves. The truck would set up at a rural location for two or three days, include the local school and church in the program, and give demonstrations in better farming, housekeeping, and hygiene to area black residents.¹⁰⁶ The Selma Chamber of Commerce assured apprehensive landowners that the program would not upset “local conditions and that no section or locality or farm be included in these plans where objection might be offered.”¹⁰⁷ During its three weeks in the county, the school drew crowds of rural blacks; 987 at one night and day session on the south side of the Alabama river, 750 in Marion Junction, and sizeable attendances at Burnsville, Summerfield, Plantersville, and more.¹⁰⁸ F. T. Raiford, editor of the *Times-Journal*, sent a letter to T.M. Campbell afterward praising the school’s excellent record: “The school did not ruffle the feelings of a single person in this county that I have heard of. We want it to come again; we will do more on a second trip than at the first.”¹⁰⁹

Extension work among African American farmers received unprecedented support from white business and political leaders in the late 1920s. County agent C.D. Menafee drew up a farm program, published in the *Times-Journal*, urging black tenants to move into their homes for the next year with enough time to do fall and winter preparations and purchase

¹⁰⁶ T.M. Campbell, *The Movable School Goes to the Negro Farmer* (Tuskegee Institute, Ala.: Tuskegee Institute Press, 1936), 92, 120 – 125.

¹⁰⁷ “Report of the Chamber Giving Approval to Farming Plan,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 22, 1925.

¹⁰⁸ “Negro Movable School Ends Fine Week with 987 Attending at Night and Day Session on South Side” *Selma Times-Journal*, April 12, 1925; “Marion Jct. Endorses Movable Farm School,” *Selma Times-Journal*, April 14, 1925; “Movable Farm School Leaves the County with Fine Record of Good Work Done in a Practical Manner,” *Selma Times-Journal*, April 26, 1925; “Movable Farm School This Week at Summerfield and Four Other Points for the Negro Farmers,” *Selma Times Journal*, April 27, 1925.

¹⁰⁹ T.M. Campbell, *The Movable School Goes to the Negro Farmer* (Tuskegee Institute, Ala.: Tuskegee Institute Press, 1936), 164.

fertilizer early.¹¹⁰ The annual Negro Farmer's Conference at Selma University began awarding cash prizes donated by the Chamber of Commerce to black farmers achieving the highest yields and employing the best methods.¹¹¹ The black county agent Menafee worked to bring improved farming methods to rural African Americans and create marketing opportunities for their products. He forged a partnership with the Childers Packing Company and arranged for a large group of black farmers to supply vegetable crops for canning. Trying to do an impossible task within a world of white supremacy (and that was likely at fault), Menafee died of a heart attack on the road near J.B. Hain's store in Sardis in 1928.¹¹²

Plantation owners and Chamber of Commerce members alike praised the work of the Negro county agent in his death. Of course, upbuilding depended on everyone's support. People within the city of Selma forged a cooperative relationship with landowners and planters, promoting scientific agriculture and marketing strategies for farmers. All of these undertakings required the involvement of the area's African American residents if they were to succeed, and the 1920s saw some of the first tangible assistance given to black citizens by white Dallas County residents, despite the ongoing persistence of paternalism.

Backlash

¹¹⁰ "Program for Negro Farmers by Menafee," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 14, 1925.

¹¹¹ "Annual Conference Attracts Several Hundred Negro Farmers to Session," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 12, 1926.

¹¹² "Farm Demonstration Agent C.A. Menafee Dies by the Roadside," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 29, 1928.

Despite the white elite's best efforts, not all Dallas County citizens agreed with the campaign of progress. In the aftermath of the war, lynchings of black soldiers and race riots made regular headlines as African American citizens tried to hang on to their wartime gains. Chapters of the Ku Klux Klan – a purely southern organization in the late nineteenth century – appeared across the country, vowing to fight anything un-American, including racial unrest, bolshevism, anarchy, Catholicism, and Jews.¹¹³

The first sign of the Klan in Selma appeared in 1919. An advertisement published in the local paper urged all “one hundred percent Americans” to join a newly organized chapter of the invisible empire.¹¹⁴ It was four more years before the group established a visible presence in the area. By 1923, Selma's leading citizens, like Frank Cothran, John Blake, Rev. E.W. Gamble, and Mayor T.J. Rowell responded to Klan activity with a fierce counterattack. Civic leaders stressed that “Selma has been singularly free from racial and religious friction,” and demanded that “these harmonious conditions be not disturbed by the injection of the Ku Klux principles of class antagonism of her people.” With one eye trained on economic development and upbuilding, prominent white citizens valued Dallas County's public image of law and order for all its citizens. The Klan's anti-Jewish sentiment also made many Selma citizens uneasy. Jewish members of Temple Mishkan Israel were some of Selma's most respected residents, operating polished department stores, doing charity work, and participating in society life. Selma's Jewish residents were socially indistinguishable from

¹¹³ For more about the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s, see Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915 – 1949* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999); Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹¹⁴ “WANTED One Hundred Percent Americans ...” *Selma Journal*, Feb. 6, 1919.

wealthy white Protestants - unlike the patterns in nearby Birmingham and Montgomery. Yet Jewish signatures were noticeably absent from the public statement issued by city merchants, professionals, and civic clubs, a testament to their caution regardless of social inclusion.¹¹⁵ Shortly thereafter, the city council dealt the Secret Order a blow by passing an ordinance prohibiting mask wearing. Those in violation faced drastic fines and imprisonment.¹¹⁶

However, white Dallas County residents had never been as united as civic leaders might have wished, and the local Klan grew. Unfortunately, nonexistent records make it impossible to know exactly who filled the ranks of the hooded order. In September of 1924, an estimated three to five thousand people gathered at the Just Right Swimming Pool on the Orrville Road to participate in the Orders' naturalization exercises. As much a social gathering as secret initiation, the ladies of the Cooperative Home did a brisk business selling cold drinks and refreshments to the crowd.¹¹⁷ But the Klan was far from only a social organization. In December of that year, a Selma resident sent a letter to the U.S. District Attorney detailing some of the local chapter's less savory activities. At the organization's weekly Thursday night meetings in the Gillman Building, various offenders appeared before the gathering where Klan members would then "handle them very ruff [sic]." The letter writer accused the organization of "running Negroes away." White landowner, Harry Smith, came to a meeting to protest the loss of his tenant, Shannon W, who fled after Klan

¹¹⁵ "Klux Organizer in Selma Tying to Get Up Lodge, Protests Made," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 16, 1923.

¹¹⁶ "A Statement – In Opposition to a Ku Klux Klan in Selma," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 16, 1923; "Ku Klux Klan in Selma Gets the Finishing Blow from City Council," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 29, 1923.

¹¹⁷ "Knights in Full Regalia Hold Initiation Attended by Huge Assemblage at Swimming Pool," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 14, 1924.

intimidation, but Smith's intervention accomplished little. Forcing offenders to leave town or taking them to the woods and flogging them were the organization's favored methods.¹¹⁸

These doings of the Klan certainly did not make headlines in a city obsessed with its public image. A front-page editorial published by a Klan representative stated that all citizens "living an upright and honest life" had nothing to fear from the organization.¹¹⁹ In fact, those listed as members by the writer of the letter to the District Attorney were themselves solid contributors in Selma's business community; two were dentists, one was president of the Keeble-McDaniel Clothing Co., others managed at Tissier Hardware, and another operated Lamar & Shanks. The respectable image the Klan tried to muster undoubtedly did not fool the residents who the organization policed.

Violence and economic intimidation towards African Americans were part and parcel of maintaining white supremacy in Alabama's Black Belt. Despite upbuilding efforts purporting to include and benefit black residents, the Klan's resurgence made clear the limits of white-directed campaigns for progress.

A new organization for African Americans also spread throughout the black-majority areas of the South in response to this racial climate. Jamaican Marcus Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) as a worldwide racial uplift organization for people of African descent. By its peak in the mid-1920s, the UNIA had thousands of

¹¹⁸ S. Jonce, Selma, Alabama to U.S. District Attorney, December 5, 1924, Department of Justice, RG60, NARA, <http://research.archives.gov/description/6857747>. (accessed February 19, 2014).

¹¹⁹ Letter to Editor from the Ku Klux Klan of Selma, Ala., *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 27, 1925.

divisions spanning the continents of the globe.¹²⁰ Black-majority areas of the rural South provided especially fertile ground for the tenets of Garveyism, and hundreds of chapters sprang up in Deep South states, including one in Selma.

Isolation, economic dependency, and threats of violence characterized the daily lives of rural black residents, and the UNIA offered a way to protect and control their own families and communities in a hostile environment. According to historian Mary Rolinson, “race pride, solidarity, nationalism, independence, self-defense, and redemption formed the essence of the ideology for Southern Garveyites,”¹²¹ Circulation of the *Negro World*, the mouthpiece of the UNIA, helped motivate and sustain these isolated rural chapters. Alabama, possibly due to lack of manpower, had far fewer UNIA chapters than Georgia or Mississippi, but a number of those in existence grew in the western Black Belt. The social and economic independence trumpeted by rural Garveyites closely paralleled Tuskegee Institute’s efforts to help African Americans establish economic self-sufficiency.¹²² Both industrial education and economic independence had deep roots in rural black communities in Dallas County. Likewise, rural UNIA members practiced self-defense and kept their shotguns loaded for that purpose. No records or membership lists survive from Selma’s chapter of the UNIA. However, its very existence suggests that black residents were searching for a way to confront and protect themselves from the violent nature of white supremacy. While prominent white citizens focused on upbuilding and progress during the

¹²⁰ Mary G. Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920 – 1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1.

¹²¹ Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism*, 17.

¹²² Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism*, 73 – 88.

1920s, black Dallas County residents pursued education and economic self-sufficiency as a buffer to the injustices of white supremacy.

In the closing years of the 1920s, prominent white Selmians likely expected the prosperity of the past decade to continue. Farmers had adopted better farming methods including crop rotation and diversification, allowing them to coax more products from the cotton-worn soil. The Extension Service and Farm Bureau achieved an unprecedented level of organization among farming people, a development that in turn benefitted merchants in Selma. Avid support from the Chamber of Commerce helped unite the interest of farmers and business people, and white civic leaders' commitment to upbuilding caused them to reach out in limited ways to African American residents.

The First World War, however, did not dismantle Jim Crow's second-class citizenship as African Americans had hoped. The unjust boundaries of white supremacy still confined black Dallas County residents to debt, poverty, political disenfranchisement, and threats of violence. Yet the economic opportunities of World War I opened up northern jobs and gave black residents a place to escape southern de facto segregation. For those who stayed, the expansion of industrial education and the Extension Service provided new tools which black communities used to build stronger schools and further their pursuance of landownership and economic independence.

INTERLUDE 3: THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The Great Depression punctured the hopes of prominent Dallas County citizens. Rising flood waters in March of 1929 marked the escalation of hard times in the Black Belt. The Cahaba River and area creeks spilled over their banks, covering crop lands across the county. Landowners on the Furniss, Kirkpatrick, and Houston plantations to the west of Selma removed their black tenants to safety, but rising waters left many others stranded.¹ The Rev. E.W. Gamble, the independent-minded rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, set out in the life boat *Montgomery* to deliver Red Cross relief to the desperate. He found that some large planters were refusing to feed their tenants as well as denying them access to outside aid. One of them told Gamble that with so much need amongst the displaced Negroes, labor would come cheap for the coming year.² The Red Cross spent the next two months distributing seeds, food, clothing, and furniture to those "many hungry Negroes."³ Already struggling rural black residents absorbed the first shocks of what would soon grow into widespread desperation.

Local newspapers headlined the plunging stock market on Wall Street that October, but business on Water Avenue and Broad Street gave no indication of the brewing storm. It wasn't until Christmas time that the first signs of the pending crisis started to show. In mid-December 1929, the Rev. Gamble asked the *Times-Journal* to draw attention to the growing

¹ "Negroes Marooned on Plantations Near Cahaba," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 17, 1929.

² O.S. Wynn, "Gamble Reports on Progress of Relief Work in Flood Area," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 27, 1929.

³ "Singleton Completes Flood Relief in Selma Territory," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 19, 1929.

problem of unemployment among white and colored citizens.⁴ The local Charity Association took on the duty of providing for needy white citizens and passed responsibility for poor African Americans onto the Chief of Police N.S. Stanfill, who helped distribute tons of coal to the many seeking assistance.⁵ Growing unemployment moved the Chamber of Commerce to action, especially after Mr. Gamble presented a list of forty-two white people who had applied to him for work. Already urging residents to “buy-Selma-products,” local businessmen challenged employers to hire more laborers at the start of 1930.⁶

Signs of economic downturn accumulated slowly over the course of the spring and summer. In February, the Bank of Orrville closed due to uncollectable debt.⁷ A temporary shutdown at the Alabama Cotton Mill plant in August, caused by fewer Americans buying cotton products, put employees out of work.⁸ The area’s growing number of poor and jobless pushed local charity organizations to pool their resources. Private charity instead of government aid had long governed the rural South’s approach to the welfare of its citizens, and Selmians turned to these customs to face the recent bout of hard times.⁹ In October of 1930, local charity organizations, like the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and local governments, came together to form the Selma Relief Association. They elected a committee of leading white citizens - a merchant, a banker, the newspaper editor, the secretary of the

⁴ “Local Solution of Employment Problem Urged,” *Selma Times-Journal*, December 15, 1929.

⁵ “Needy Negroes Get Supplies of Coal,” *Selma Times-Journal*, December 19, 1929.

⁶ “Effort Made to Solve Problem of Unemployment,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 27, 1929.

⁷ “Orrville Bank in State Hands as Doors Close,” *Selma Times-Journal*, February 28, 1930.

⁸ “Mill Here Will Remain Closed During August,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 1, 1930.

⁹ Mark Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 183.

Chamber of Commerce, a judge, and the Rev. Gamble - to survey local conditions and come up with a financial estimate for the hard winter months.¹⁰ The Relief Association began supplying six dollars per month to fifty families and anticipated that its numbers would grow rapidly. The charitable support of Selma's financially-sound citizens fueled the organization's efforts.¹¹ "We know that this depression has effected [sic] many," Isidore Kayser appealed in the newspaper, "but send to us what you can to help us in this work."¹²

The Depression hit African American men and women the hardest, but they received the smallest amount of aid from the relief organizations. In November 1930, Mrs. Joe Rosenberg, wife of one of Selma's Jewish merchants, chose to take matters into her own hands. Tapping into her own savings, she opened a soup kitchen in the basement of the African American Tabernacle Baptist Church. There she fed unemployed black men and their families a daily bowl of soup made from beef stock, corn, onion, okra, rice, and potatoes with a slice of white bread and a piece of corn bread, all at no cost. Mrs. Rosenberg explained that while white unemployed families benefited from organized social services, black residents' calls for help went unanswered.¹³ Her generosity indicated the depth of responsibility some white citizens felt to help the needy. Mrs. Rosenberg closed her soup

¹⁰ These organizations included the United Charities, Red Cross, Salvation Army, American Legion, City of Selma, and County Board of Revenue. "Unemployment Relief Program Planned Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 2, 1930.

¹¹ "Relief Association Hears Many Calls," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 7, 1930.

¹² "Plea for Funds to Assist Poor Made by Kayser," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 12, 1930.

¹³ "Soup Kitchen for Negroes Out of Employment Will be Opened Monday by Mrs. Joe Rosenberg," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 8, 1930.

kitchen after four months – and 7,382 meals - when the Red Cross and relief organizations began extending aid.¹⁴

The Rev. E. W. Gamble's office in St. Paul's parish house was the other place African American residents could find help. Starting in 1931, black families could go to the church to receive one dollar worth of groceries per week in rations of meat, meal, and peas.¹⁵ Selma University registrar P.L. Lindsey directed the Colored Relief Association, which helped raise funds and supplement the limited assistance provided by the Selma Relief Association.¹⁶ By February, the local charity lists bulged with the names of 132 white and 900 black families. Gamble appeared in front of the city council to plead for additional support. Selma, he argued, was "the mother who alone is responsible for the welfare of her own children." But the small amount of money the city put towards relief combined with private donations could not quench the tremendous need.¹⁷

Warm weather and bountiful summer gardens helped relieved some of the cold and hunger, but by August 1931, relief organizations began preparing for another harsh winter. The Dallas County Red Cross chapter urged farmers and gardeners to "conserve every ounce of food and to prepare to take care of themselves through the winter."¹⁸ Meanwhile, the Chamber of Commerce geared up for a city-wide fundraising drive, appointing citizens to speak to ministers, congregations, and luncheon clubs. "The obligation rests upon Selma

¹⁴ "Relief Kitchen to Close Doors Here on Sunday," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 1, 1931.

¹⁵ "100 Negroes Apply to Gamble for Aid," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 19, 1931.

¹⁶ "Negroes Start Drive to Assist Needy in Selma," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 20, 1931.

¹⁷ "City Charity Fund Raised This Month," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 10, 1931.

¹⁸ "Save Food, Plea Made to County," *Selma Times-Journal*, August 13, 1931.

citizens to feed and care for every indigent person within our gates,” Chairman Morris Bloch explained, “and that obligation is going to be met by the public-spirited people of the community.”¹⁹ Not all white Dallas County residents shared in this conviction. Some landowners drew scorn from the more publicly charitable citizens when they confiscated all of their tenants’ food stuff as rent payment in late October 1931 and forced them to apply for the limited relief available in Selma.²⁰



Figure 13: Ray’s Place, a restaurant in Selma, began offering free meals to wanderers during the Depression. The sign reads, “Come In & Eat Before We Both Starve,” and below, “Travelers, If You Are Without Funds, Come In & Eat.” Courtesy of Billy Rosenberg Photograph Collection, Temple Mishkan Israel.

While black and working class white families suffered, Selma’s department stores, wholesale groceries, and banks continued to prosper. Money made in the booming 1920s helped cushion well-off white residents from the harshest realities of the Depression. In the spring of 1931, Carter’s Drugstore hosted a grand opening for its new five thousand dollar

¹⁹ “Bloch Makes Appeal for Relief Fund,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 14, 1931.

²⁰ “Negro Tenants Refused Aid by Red Cross Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 20, 1931.

soda fountain, which claimed to be “one of the three best soda dispensaries in the southeast.”²¹ Wealthy Selmians had resources enough to enjoy luxuries like a cold Coca-Cola and dancing at the new pavilion at Kopeccky’s place on Old Orrville Road.²² A new Kress store opened and shortly afterward, Tissier’s Hardware store underwent renovation and expanded business. As children during the Depression, neither June (Eagle) Cohn, whose father owned Eagle’s Department Store and Boston Bargain, nor Miller Childers, whose father owned Childers’ clothing store, remembered going without basic necessities. Childers recalled how white transients would knock on the back door during the depths of the Depression, asking if they could rake their yard for a meal. He was used to black men doing this, but the break in racial custom highlighted how bad the Depression was.²³ Max Hagedorn, an active member of Temple Mishkan Israel, acknowledged that while prosperous families lost money, it was nothing like the hard times impoverished residents were facing. He urged the Jewish community, “to give in this campaign as they have never given before. [...] This is a community responsibility.”²⁴

Despite pockets of relative affluence, the deepening crisis stretched local resources and forced the municipal government and relief organizations to scrounge for funds. The passing of a one-cent gasoline tax by the city council in October 1931 highlighted the severity of the crisis. White Dallas County residents and their ancestors before them had

²¹ “Carter Drug First Host to Customers at New Soda Fount,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 12, 1931.

²² “New Dance Pavilion to Open on Sept. 23,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 13, 1932.

²³ June Cohn, interview by author, Selma, Alabama, November 30, 2011; Miller Childers, interview by author, Selma, Alabama, January 20, 2012.

²⁴ “Jewish Leaders to Start Drive Here This Week,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 15, 1932.

fiercely opposed both taxes and government meddling. But voluntary subscriptions could no longer support so much charity work, and council members saw the “distasteful” tax as the most feasible way for Selma to meet “the obligation of taking care of the down and out people within her gates.”²⁵ By January, the sheer masses applying for aid at the racially-segregated relief offices necessitated more fundraising. Impoverished rural residents coming to Selma for help found themselves turned away: “It is not possible for the city to shoulder the county’s bread and meat problem,” the newspaper conceded.²⁶ Black churches tried to provide some solace by opening their doors on winter nights to give African Americans without coal a warm place to sleep, but these gestures proved only a drop in the bucket.²⁷

Eventually, individual charity and local government aid stretched to the breaking point. The 1931-1932 school year closed with a warning that enough funding existed to support only a four-or-five-month-long school term the following year: “There are no sources of public revenue that can be tapped.”²⁸ The Red Cross reported in July that it had distributed relief to an astounding 843 families in the past year.²⁹ By the fall of 1932, local representatives began considering applying for a federal loan from President Hoover’s Reconstruction Finance Corporation.³⁰ F.T. Raiford of the *Times-Journal* summed up the

²⁵ “Relief Gas Tax to Take Effect on October 1,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 29, 1931

²⁶ “More Cash Needed by Relief Workers,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 6, 1932.

²⁷ “Negro Churches of City Held Open for Relief of Homeless,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 10, 1932.

²⁸ “A 5-Months School Term Only,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 15, 1932.

²⁹ “Red Cross Work Report Made at Friday Meeting,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 22, 1932.

³⁰ “Selma Will Ask Government Loan for Relief Program,” *Selma Times-Journal*, August 23, 1932.

feelings of many prominent white citizens when he argued that the responsibility of relief was “a community matter.”³¹ But the resources of the community had run dry.³²

Local officials had exhausted most of their options when they cast their ballots for Franklin Delano Roosevelt in November 1932.³³ According to the Rev. Gamble, the situation among black residents was desperate: many people had no food, clothes, shoes and “no means of alleviating their own distress.”³⁴ The Board of Revenue rejected Gamble’s request for \$1,500 in aid because it had no funds available.³⁵ Then at the new year, the Red Cross discontinued its charity work outside of city lines because the limited funding could not stretch to all county residents who needed help.³⁶ Although county commissioner and planter J.A. Minter assured the county government that “hundreds of negroes are in no worse condition than last year,” the relief office turned away dozens of persons.³⁷ “Dallas County Relief Problem Now Pressing,” wrote the *Times-Journal* in January 1933, noting that “most of the persons applying for aid Monday were white.”³⁸

The Depression had sapped local resources. When the city and county government finally applied for a loan from the federal government’s Reconstruction Finance

³¹ “Our Local Charity Problem,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 21, 1932.

³² “Big Budget Cut Asked for City by Committee,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 7, 1932; “Dallas Revenue Board Cuts \$25,000 From Annual Budget,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 11, 1932.

³³ “Both Bonds and Tax Spurned by Dallas County,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 9, 1932.

³⁴ “Relief for Negroes of County Planned,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 22, 1932.

³⁵ “Negro Relief Fund Refused by Board,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 6, 1932.

³⁶ “Red Cross to Cease Charity Work Beyond Jurisdiction of Police,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 6, 1933.

³⁷ “County Budget Slash Asked by Judge Vaughan,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 2, 1933.

³⁸ “Dallas County Relief Problem Now Pressing,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 24, 1933.

Corporation, they had nowhere else left to turn.³⁹ In a last move of desperation, the city council resorted to creating its own scrip currency in February 1933 to loosen the credit freeze paralyzing the majority of businesses. Nearly heroic attempts to muster local resources had done nothing to stop three spiraling years of worsening economic conditions. Prominent white citizens had arrived at the conclusion “that something is wrong with our money system.”⁴⁰ In these desperate circumstances, white and black citizens were willing to put their faith in a new way and a new deal.

³⁹ “Burns to Make Plea for Loan by Government,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 8, 1933.

⁴⁰ “Scrip Plan Grows in Favor,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 28, 1933.

CHAPTER 3: PLOWING UNDER: THE NEW DEAL'S NEW METHODS, 1932 – 1940

Heading westward through the freshly plowed fields of Lowndes County, the Negro extension agent for the state of Alabama jokingly warned his traveling companion, Amelia Platts, that she had better get ready to jump out of the moving train when they got to Selma. The city was so small, he explained, that the train would not even stop at the station. While he was wrong about the size and the train stop, he wasn't fibbing about the challenges Platts would face as Dallas County's new Negro home demonstration agent. The Negro county agent, S.W. Boynton, met her at the train station that spring day in 1929. After taking over when C.D. Menafee died of a heart attack a year earlier, Boynton was hard at work trying to help black farmers produce enough to feed their families, bring in some profit, and throw off the shackles of tenant farming. As Boynton drove Platts to the house of Dommie Gaines, one of Selma's few black registered voters, where she'd be staying, neither of them knew just how much their work would end up defying Dallas County's order of white supremacy.¹

Within a year, the Depression had only made bad times worse for black tenant farmers, and work for the black extension agents more difficult. As the economic crisis deepened, municipalities, counties, and states found themselves no longer able to address the deepening desperation of their people, and Americans began demanding unprecedented

¹ Amelia Boynton Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan*, (Washington, D.C.: Schiller Institute, 1991), 33; "Boynton Named as Farm Agent," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 3, 1928; "Negro Home Agent Starts Work Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, April 9, 1929.

action from the United States government. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt came into office with a broad plan of recovery; what he called a New Deal for the American people fundamentally altered the federal government's relationship to its citizens.² The new federal agencies pumped much-needed money into Dallas County's economy during the 1930s. New Deal agricultural programs paid farmers thousands of dollars to plow up acres of cotton hoping to stabilize prices; public works agencies put citizens to work building roads, city halls, and schools; employment programs imposed new standards for businesses and organizing opportunities for workers. Eager for aid, Dallas County's officials actively pursued funds for agriculture, relief work, and municipal improvements.

But relying on the federal government forced Dallas County's leading white citizens to forfeit a portion of their control over local matters. As New Deal agricultural programs put money into the pockets of white landowners, they also protected the right of otherwise disfranchised black tenants to vote in new farm referendums. Roosevelt's meager inclusion of African Americans undermined southern customs of white supremacy, and the federal government's new responsiveness to the plight of ordinary citizens prompted African Americans to see it as a potential ally in their quest for fair treatment, better opportunities, and justice. Agents S.W. Boynton and Amelia Platts led this push in Dallas County. Bypassing local white authorities, they appealed directly to New Deal agencies to secure needed services for black residents, the most impressive being a black community center in downtown Selma. White citizens reacted to these threats to power, sometimes violently.

² Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 22 – 23.

When black sharecroppers pushed for dollar-a-day wages in 1935, Dallas County's law enforcement and landlords banded together to beat, arrest, kidnap, and even kill the perpetrators.

The New Deal fundamentally altered the landscape of Dallas County. The plowing under of crops marked the beginning of the end of cotton's long reign. White landowners no longer depended on the labor of black tenant farmers, and the new pastureland where cotton once stood paved the way for cattle-raising. S.W. Boynton took to warning black farmers that the only way they would stay on the land was to buy it or become a white-faced cow. Together, Boynton and his new wife, Amelia Platts Boynton, led the way in promoting economic independence for Dallas County's black residents, as well as in demanding direct assistance from the federal government. This new avenue of support did not immediately result in highly visible or tangible improvements, but the shift in the balance of power created small changes and gains that later organizing would build upon. White citizens had trumpeted Roosevelt's recovery plan when it benefited them and protected their economic dominance, but their support waned when the federal government touched on the fiercely-guarded boundaries of white supremacy.

The New Deal

Franklin D. Roosevelt's program for economic recovery began in 1933 when the President ordered a nationwide banking holiday. Thanks to the depth of local wealth, Selma's banks had remained stable throughout the early years of the Depression, but they and the rest of the nation's financial institutions shut their doors in early March for the federal government to institute new security measures. When Selma National, City National,

People's Bank and Trust Company, and Selma Savings Bank reopened, business surged under the new regulations. The *Times-Journal* noted the "more buoyant tone" that permeated the business district, and the municipal government quietly relieved the special deputies after no runs on the bank materialized.³

The recovery agencies of the New Deal debuted over the following months, bringing programs for relief with them. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a holdover from the Hoover administration, provided the first direct relief to the destitute in Dallas County. In late February of 1933, the local division began hiring the needy to do roadwork. Within the first two weeks of operation, the R.F.C. employed 728 men out of the 2,455 applicants from Dallas County.⁴ Margaret Shupe, the former executive secretary of the Red Cross, transitioned from local to federal relief work when she became a case worker with the R.F.C. By May, she was recruiting young men to work in forestry camps that eventually became part of the Civilian Conservation Corp, and her coordination of new programs continued over the next few years.⁵ By the time summer arrived, the President's early efforts drew resounding endorsements from Selma's staple institutions. Although the farm and industrial recovery plan had yet to be unveiled, the county board of revenue, the city council, the Farm Bureau, the cotton exchange, and the American Legionnaires all pledged their support.⁶

³ "Confidence Reigns as Four Banks of Selma Open," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 15, 1933; "Special Guards for County and City Dismissed," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 15, 1933.

⁴ "Weekly Report Made on Relief Program," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 13, 1933.

⁵ "Red Cross to Divide Trade Among Stores," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 6, 1932; "Ten Youths Listed for Forestry Work Pending Next Call," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 8, 1933.

⁶ "County Plans to Endorse Roosevelt's Program," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 7, 1933.

In an agriculturally-dominated county, any hope for economic recovery hung on the federal government's farm plan. The proposal of Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, took landowners aback when details came to light in the middle of June 1933.⁷ The newly-created Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) proposed plowing under millions of acres of cotton in an attempt to decrease supply and raise prices. In return for withdrawing their acres from cotton production, the federal government offered cash payments to planters. The program in Dallas County was projected to take thirty to thirty-five thousand acres out of production. Despite its unprecedented nature, the relief plan's ample benefits quickly won the backing of large farmers. The county's largest land owners called the AAA a "lifesaver" as they pledged their full support for the program.⁸

Instead of building a bureaucracy from the ground up, the AAA relied on already existing farm organizations to implement its program. In Dallas County, the responsibility of drumming up support and instituting cotton acreage reduction fell to county agent John Blake and the local Farm Bureau. Informational meetings held in rural areas and at Farm Bureau headquarters in June of 1933 assured attendees that the new agricultural program would not interfere with their control of black tenants. Money for tenant-worked land that was taken out of production would go directly into the landlord's pocket. When the AAA turned to already-existing local structures, it furthered the racially discriminatory practices already in place. Over the next few weeks, local committees pounded the dirt roads,

⁷ "Plowing Under the Cotton Crop," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 18, 1933.

⁸ "Poll Shows Dallas in Favor of Farm Aid Plan," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 20, 1933.

inspecting acreage and signing up landlords and tenants.⁹ Then on the last day of July, John Blake asked all farmers to begin destroying the approved cotton; the thirty thousand acres plowed under were projected to bring in \$250,000 to the county.¹⁰

While the AAA demolished fields of summer cotton, merchants, labor groups, and civic organizations met in Selma to work out the details of the newly passed National Industrial Recovery Act. Its purpose was to establish industry-wide codes fostering fair competition and restoring purchasing power. Enlisting the voluntary cooperation of businesses, the new codes regulated prices, implemented set work hours and equal wage standards, and assured bargaining rights for workers.¹¹ Blue and white National Recovery Administration (NRA) posters began appearing in Selma store windows after a mass meeting at the courthouse in early August. According to the *Times-Journal*, the posters demonstrated that “local employers are cooperating 100 per cent in the blanket wage and hour agreements of the NRA.”¹² After implementing the suggested eight-hour shifts for five days a week, the Buckeye Cotton Company added 45 new employees on a third shift. Workers began earning the same pay for 40 hours a week that they had been receiving for 72.¹³ The new NRA protections for workers prompted a surge of local labor organizing. Selma’s textile workers, carpenters, paper hangers, and retail clerks all met to charter union locals and discuss higher

⁹ “Dallas County Nears Success in Cotton Drive,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 9, 1933.

¹⁰ “County to Receive Big Sum on Cotton,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 26, 1933; “Blanket Order for Plowing of Cotton Issued,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 31, 1933.

¹¹ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 44.

¹² “Posters Appear as Code Applied Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 1, 1933.

¹³ “Shift Added at Local Industry,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 1, 1933.

wages.¹⁴ As during wartime mobilization, churches hosted four-minute speakers who explained how the NRA would restore the former economic capacity, and black and white women set out on foot to solicit universal cooperation.¹⁵ An NRA official even praised Selma for its exemplary compliance.¹⁶

In addition to rejuvenating agriculture and business, the New Deal sought to put the millions of unemployed citizens back to work. By November 1933, the newly-created Civil Works Administration (CWA) replaced the RFC's temporary relief program. The Dallas County CWA office hoped to place the unemployed in reliable, well-paying jobs on local public work projects.¹⁷ The federal program offered to pay laborers thirty cents per hour for a thirty hour work week, as well as providing thirty percent of the material costs to municipalities.¹⁸ The local Employment Office received thousands of applications from men and women formerly on relief rolls seeking work in sewer repair, park landscaping, and building and road work.¹⁹ Two weeks after its opening, the *Times-Journal* attributed the "Saturday night crowds on Broad Street and jostling groups on Alabama and Washington

¹⁴ "Steps Taken by Local Labor to Get Protection," *Selma Times-Journal*, August 11, 1933.

¹⁵ "Recover Program will be Presented at Churches Sunday," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 17, 1933; "Colored Women Will Gather to Hear NRA Talks," *Selma Times-Journal*, August 23, 1933.

¹⁶ "Selma Praised for Support of Recovery Drive," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 9, 1933.

¹⁷ "Works Program to Create 1,590 Jobs in County," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 13, 1933.

¹⁸ "Dallas Seeks Benefits of Civil Work Program," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 12, 1933.

¹⁹ "Jobs for 790 by Tuesday Civil Works Goal Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 20, 1933.

and in the vicinity of the food stores and markets,” to the new CWA payroll.²⁰ At the end of its first month, the agency work lists at the unemployment bureau included 4,500 names.²¹

Shadows of the New Deal

The first years of the New Deal forged a new relationship between the federal government and American citizens. Roosevelt’s relief programs extended assistance to people who had been consistently bypassed in local relief efforts. But despite this revolution in the responsibilities of the federal government, the President’s promise of economic recovery did not apply equally to black and white citizens. A long history of one-party politics and disfranchisement gave southern politicians unequaled seniority and influence in Congress.

²⁰ “Works Payroll Helps Business,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 26, 1933.

²¹ “Payroll of \$11,422 Met by CWA Here Saturday,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 3, 1933.



Figure 14: A tractor transporting cotton bales in Dallas County in the 1930s. The photo reflects racial divisions of labor in agriculture as black laborers perch on the bales of cotton while a white driver and another white supervisor stand nearby. Courtesy of Billy Rosenberg Photograph Collection, Temple Mishkan Israel.

The New Deal's success depended on the cooperation of southern congressmen. As a result, the politics of white supremacy pervaded many relief agencies, and regional practices introduced racial discrimination into the daily administration of New Deal programs. Local boards coordinated programs like the AAA and CWA, ensuring the continuation of racially unjust practices in the operation of southern New Deal programs.²²

The AAA, across the South and in Dallas County, exemplified the discrimination built into recovery efforts. While the largest land owners benefited mightily from cotton reduction, black tenant farmers and sharecroppers tilling the land absorbed the bitter aftereffects of federal handouts to the rich. The AAA stipulated that landowners distribute

²² Harvard Sitkoff. *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 34-7.

the cash they received from plowing under cotton among the tenants who worked that plot of land. Yet by fall of the first year, reports of pocketed money and displaced sharecroppers trickled back to Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace.²³ Dallas County received a quarter of a million dollars from the first cotton plow up, but black tenants received little if any of this bounty. In December of 1933, the *Times-Journal* reported that black county residents were streaming into Selma after being forced to move out by their landlords.²⁴ While white residents had been willing to extend aid during the hardest years of the Depression, directly supporting the economic advancement of black tenant farmers was unthinkable. The 1935 United States Agricultural Census confirmed this trend. While white operators worked 133,047 acres of land in 1930, they controlled 224,293 acres by 1935. Meanwhile, black operators worked 210,683 acres in 1930 but had only 191,855 acres five years later.²⁵ With the local Farm Bureau in charge of administering the federal agricultural program, black farmers had little recourse against non-complying white landlords.²⁶ Compounding the tenuous relief situation for African American residents, the Alabama Civil Works Administration disqualified tenant farmers from employment relief, charging that many owned property and “enjoyed ample means to make a livelihood.”²⁷

But while the AAA benefited wealthy landowners at the expense of poor tenant farmers, it also challenged Dallas County’s political order by protecting African Americans’

²³ “Tenant Farmers Left Out in the Cold,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 19, 1933.

²⁴ County to Receive Big Sum on Cotton,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 26, 1933; “A number of negro residents ...” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 27, 1933.

²⁵ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census. *U.S. Census of Agriculture: 1935*, vol. 1, pt. 21, 624.

²⁶ “Bureau Lays Plans for Cotton Relief,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 11, 1933.

²⁷ “Tenant Farmers to Be Dropped,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 8, 1933.

right to vote in farm elections. 7,100 “land-owners, tenants, share-croppers, or those who have any rights involved in the growing of cotton” in Dallas County were eligible to vote on the retention of cotton controls in December of 1934.²⁸ If white planters wanted hundreds of thousands of AAA dollars, they needed to resign themselves to black voting. Dallas County’s sheriff understood the potentially revolutionary side effects of federal aid. “This AAA voting is giving [African Americans] ideas that they can become regular voters,” he explained, “I think it’s dangerous.”²⁹ Even in this limited manner, the federal government began looking like a potential ally to black farmers, a place where they could turn to when local officials refused to comply.

The racial implications of federal aid extended into other New Deal programs in Dallas County. The honeymoon-like vision of the NRA codes held by Selma’s business leaders ended as quickly as it had started. The NRA mandated that black workers be paid a minimum wage far higher than what local custom dictated. The Chamber of Commerce organized what it hoped would be a “south-wide movement” encouraging federal authorities to address “the peculiar labor conditions in the southern states.” Under the guise of saving the jobs of “Negro porters, delivery boys and others employed around places of business,” Selma employers argued that they could not afford the federally-prescribed wages for black employees. Either wages needed to be lowered or employees would need to be let go.³⁰

²⁸ “Dallas to Cast Good Ballot on Bankhead Plan,” *Selma Times-Journal*, November 30, 1934.

²⁹ Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 73-8.

³⁰ “Drive Begun to Seek Solution of NRA Problem,” *Selma Times-Journal*, September 27, 1933. Not all Selmians agreed with the chamber’s position: labor leaders responded to such threats by holding an emergency meeting at the courthouse, protesting the modification of the NRA wage code; “Meeting Called to Protest Code Move by Local Chamber,” *Selma Times-Journal*, October 15, 1933.

Temple Mishkan Israel's rabbi Joseph Gumbiner laid out white business and civic leaders' largest grievances with the NRA. Speaking before the Kiwanis Club, he expressed concern over the federal wage scale for black labor and the government's potential recognition of "the new radical labor unions."³¹

F.J. Ames, owner of Selma Manufacturing Company and representative of the NRA, delivered a proposal to a group of local black ministers in August 1933. It asked the Ministerial Alliance to give its support to a lower weekly wage for black textile workers than mandated by NRA codes. Rev. E.D. Hughes, pastor of Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church and president of the Ministerial Alliance, bravely hand delivered the response back to Ames: "We have read Mr. Roosevelt's code. We have carefully read all phrases and have no suggestions to offer. Thank you very much for your special interest manifested in our group." Two days later, two deputy sheriffs appeared at Rev. Hughes' door and demanded his presence at the courthouse. A group of thirty-some of the city's leading white citizens met him there, and the spokesman warned Hughes that he had twenty-four hours to get out of Dallas County. Rev. Hughes did not leave quickly enough. Two days later, a man driving Hughes' car to a filling station was pursued by five carloads of armed officers. After hearing the news, Rev. Hughes headed north in a different car. Followed by another batch of officers, he jumped out of the car into a thick cloud of dust and hitched a ride to Montgomery after dark.³²

Equal pay for black workers threatened the economic authority, local control, and customs of white supremacy of the white Dallas County elites, and leading citizens did what

³¹ "Code Problems are Discussed by Local Rabbi," *Selma Times-Journal*, October 18, 1933.

³² Report of the Secretary, October 5, 1933, Monthly Reports, Jan 5 – Dec 31, 1933, NAACP Papers, Pt 1, Meetings of Board of Directors, Records of Annual Conferences, Major Speeches and Special Reports, ProQuest History Vault.

they saw necessary to stymie outside intrusions. Issues of race and labor again came to a head in the summer of 1934. Sixty black relief-roll workers refused to get on the trucks to do county road work when they learned that they would only be paid \$1 a day for ten hours of work, instead of the promised thirty cents per hour for a thirty hour work week. Local administrators, with the approval of the state, dealt with the problem by “[striking] the names of the malcontents from the relief roll of the county” and withholding the workers’ regular relief checks.³³

Dallas County political and business leaders handled labor threats with the same passion as they treated challenges to white supremacy. 250 textile workers at the California Cotton Mill in Selma decided to join in a nation-wide strike in 1934, but the mill threatened to shut down before workers could walk out. The Chamber of Commerce also intervened, urging workers to stay at their jobs. “Selma has never had a strike,” member Harry Maring stated, “and this fact has been one of the city’s real talking points, as it indicates the good conditions which exist here between all groups.”³⁴ Early the next Tuesday morning, company management dealt with the potential strike by posting a closing notice at the mill. Although textile workers walked out before the regular 6 p.m. closing time, the mill’s shutdown squelched any union action.

But the showdown between workers, the mill, and white business leaders flared up again three years later. In July 1937, National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) hearings at Selma’s Federal courthouse revisited the mill’s 1934 closing. The Textile Workers Organizing

³³ “Relief Workers in County in Walkout,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 2, 1934.

³⁴ “Selma Workers to Heed Order for Textile Strike,” *Selma Times-Journal*, August 20, 1934; Harry Maring quoted in “Selma Leaders Will Strike to Avert Walkout,” *Selma Times-Journal*, August 21, 1934.

Committee (TWOC), who was also seeking to represent workers in the reopened Sunset Mill, claimed that the mill had shut down on account of labor organizing activities. It also charged that when the mill began work again, it discriminated against union-friendly workers and selectively hired former employees or new hands.³⁵ Company officials recorded no comments, but it was no secret that local businessmen had a proven history of opposing unions. In the NLRB-supervised election at the Sunset Mill one week later, both white and colored employees cast their ballots.³⁶ This time TWOC lost the election by five votes out of a total of 277.³⁷ Just because workers had the right to organize did not mean they could surmount fierce local anti-union opposition.

The New Deal, more frequently than not, furthered the status quo for Dallas County's wealthy and powerful. Large landowners and the Farm Bureau administered profitable agricultural programs and reaped a lopsided share of the benefits at the expense of black tenant farmers. Likewise, prominent business and civic leaders controlled public work relief programs, effectively minimizing any challenges to the area's political and economic order. But some of the federal government's promises still managed to disrupt the status quo of racial and labor relations. Prominent white citizens found themselves forced to action when African Americans refused to accept discriminatory wages and workers threatened business operations through unions. The New Deal did not unravel the South's long history

³⁵ Eric Arneson, ed., "Textile Workers Organizing Committee," in *Encyclopedia of U.S. Labor and Working Class History: A – F* (CRC Press, 2007), 60; "Labor Hearing Scheduled for City on Friday," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 14, 1937.

³⁶ "Mill Workers Hold Bargaining Ballot," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 22, 1937.

³⁷ "CIO Rule Reputed at Worker Ballot," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 23, 1937.

of white supremacy, but it did give support and hope to those poor and black southerners seeking to overturn the unjust system.

Negro Farmers and the Extension Service

Despite the federal government's failure to directly challenge local economic structures, black Dallas County residents utilized its lukewarm support for their own benefit. While the white Extension Service and Farm Bureau chapters controlled the administrative work of the AAA, black county agents made sure that rural African Americans took full advantage of federal programs whenever possible. In Dallas County, Samuel William Boynton, the black county agent, and Amelia Platts, the black home demonstration agent, played a pivotal role in expanding organizing among black farmers and ensuring that federal aid reached African Americans in Dallas County.

S.W. Boynton had started what would become a twenty-year tenure as Dallas County's black farm agent in May of 1928. Trained in scientific agriculture under George Washington Carver at Tuskegee Institute, Boynton already had two years of experience as the county agent in Lamar County, Georgia. T.M. Campbell, head of Tuskegee's Movable School, introduced twenty-six year-old Boynton to John Blake, and both the Dallas County Farm Bureau and the colored farmers clubs gave him their approval. County agent Boynton began his work by connecting black vegetable farmers with the Childers Canning Plant and establishing dairy routes in the county.³⁸ A year later, Amelia Platts joined S.W. Boynton as

³⁸ "Boynton Named as Farm Agent," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 3, 1928; Amelia Boynton Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan*, (Washington, D.C.: Schiller Institute, 1991), 33.

the black home demonstration agent.³⁹ Originally from Savannah, Georgia, Platts also received her education at Tuskegee Institute in home economics. Continuing in the vein of industrial education, she taught at a Rosenwald school in St. Mary's Georgia and then as a home economics teacher at a Baptist boarding school before beginning her work as Dallas County's home demonstration agent.⁴⁰ S.W. Boynton first became her guide to the county and later her partner and husband in their joint efforts to better the lives of black people.

S.W. Boynton and A.I. Platts' work as county agents connected them with Dallas County's rural black residents and the unforgiving conditions of their daily lives. "I had read in school that Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863," Amelia Platts Boynton Robinson recounted years later, "I believed in this until I went to Dallas County, Alabama." Two incidents during Platts' early years as home demonstration agent highlighted the area's racial climate. In October of 1929, Esther Barnes, a white woman, shot and killed Edward King, a black farm hand, on her father's farm on Range Line Road fourteen miles from town. When explaining her actions to the sheriff, Barnes claimed that the shooting had "been the outcome of insulting remarks addressed to her by the Negro."⁴¹ Self-defense was a well-worn justification for white Dallas County residents using force against African Americans. Another incident illustrated how seemingly arbitrary crimes could lead to deadly punishment. On August 10, 1933, Joe Solde, a black man, was charged with stealing a cow. His white accuser instituted justice by taking Solde into the woods and

³⁹ "Negro Home Agent Starts Work Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, April 9, 1929.

⁴⁰ Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan*, 33, 47 – 49.

⁴¹ "Negro Kill by White Girl on Farm Near Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, October 21, 1929.

beating him to death.⁴² These incidents and the hundreds of injustices Platts and Boynton witnessed in dealings with the county's poor black tenants deeply affected them.

In their eyes, land ownership and political rights were the only means by which black residents could hope crawl out from under the yoke of white supremacy and tenant farming.⁴³ Economic independence and voting rights became the message that Dallas County's black county and home demonstration agent preached, and extension work grew tremendously under their leadership. Boynton taught Platts to respect the knowledge of the rural men and women she encountered; "They may be unlearned," he would say, "but they are intelligent and can teach you a whole lot you don't know."⁴⁴ With over one hundred thickly settled black communities in Dallas County in the 1930s, the county agents faced the daunting task of organizing and teaching good farming methods to rural residents. Community-based clubs formed to teach rural people ways of living better. In 1932, at least twenty-four black home demonstration clubs were operating across the county, from Safford to Plantersville, and Bogue Chitto to Minter.⁴⁵ The presidents, vice presidents, treasurers, and secretaries of individual clubs then met once a month at the county agents' office in Selma as the Club Leaders' Association. This ensured that club leaders kept up with the

⁴² Report of the Secretary, September 6, 1933, p. 6, NAACP, Jan. 5 – Dec. 31, 1933, Monthly Reports, NAACP Papers, Pt. 1, Meeting of the Board, ProQuest History Vault.

⁴³ Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan*, 109.

⁴⁴ Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan*, 52.

⁴⁵ A.I. Platts, "Annual Narrative Report of the Home Demonstration Work Among Negroes," Dallas County, Box 366, Folder: Dallas 1932, ACES, Auburn University.

latest demonstration methods and led local clubwork when the farm or home demonstration agent could not be there.⁴⁶



Figure 15: S.W. Boynton training 4-H club boys in 1933 how to judge quality poultry. Courtesy of ACES, Auburn University.

In May 1930, Platts and county nurse, Mrs. J.E. Davis, traveled to the Bogue Chitto community fifteen miles west of Selma to give typhoid inoculations. Over nine hundred people gathered at the clinic grounds while the nurse inoculated eight hundred. Home demonstration agent Platts taught club songs and talked about club work to those who were interested.⁴⁷ A number of black farmers in Bogue Chitto had become landowners after the Civil War, and this independence from white oversight gave them the flexibility to adopt the Extension Service's techniques for better farming and homemaking.⁴⁸ "We are proud to

⁴⁶ A.I. Platts, "Supplement to the Annual Report of the Agricultural Extension Work Among Negroes in Alabama," Dallas County, Box 366, Folder: Dallas 1930, ACES, Auburn University.

⁴⁷ A.I. Platts, Home Demonstration Agent "Supplement to the Annual Report of the Agricultural Extension Work Among Negroes in Alabama," Dallas County, Box 366, Folder: Dallas 1930, ACES, Auburn University.

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan*, 62 – 69.

say,” Platts wrote in her annual report, “that this club is one of the live-wires of the County and the work being done is far above the average club.”⁴⁹

As the Depression deepened throughout the early 1930s, black Selma residents also followed Extension Service practices that advanced self-sufficiency. Many families kept small gardens and harvested pecans from trees in their yards, and some, like Mabel Blevins, raised cows and chickens in their backyards. Blevins, whose husband worked for the Post Office, did not have an outside job, but sold her milk and butter to black neighbors as a source of income. She also opened her house to black visitors who could not stay in any of the city’s white-only hotels.⁵⁰ In addition to working in processing plants and as domestics, Selma’s black citizens also eked out a living through bootlegging. J.L Chestnut, who would later become Selma’s first black attorney, grew up on a block where four of his neighbors sold corn whiskey.⁵¹

The economic self-sufficiency pushed by Dallas County’s black extension agents offered African Americans a degree of safety from white supremacy. Each February, black extension workers partnered with Selma University to host an annual Negro Farmers Conference and Ham Show. At the Black Belt’s premier educational institution, black county residents attended demonstration sessions, viewed exhibitions, and learned how to make what they needed at home. Even African American schools closed so that teachers and

⁴⁹ A.I. Platts, Home Demonstration Agent, “Supplement to the Annual Report of the Agricultural Extension Work Among Negroes in Alabama,” Dallas County, Box 366, Folder: Dallas 1930, ACES, Auburn University.

⁵⁰ Erin Mitchell, *Born Colored* (Chicago: Ampersand, 2006) 73- 74, 80- 81.

⁵¹ Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 33-34.

students could attend the event.⁵² In his early years as extension agent, S.W. Boynton promoted hog-raising among black farmers as a means to supplement family income and produce meat at home. The 1930 Farmer's Conference showcased five thousand pounds of ham, cheered as a marked improvement from the prior year. The presentations - "How I can Succeed in Dairying," "Methods of Curing Meat," "Successful Gardening," "Poultry Raising," and "Home Improvements," - focused on teaching black farmers ways to raise more money and be self-sufficient.⁵³ A.I. Platts wrote in her 1933 annual report that conference attendees, "have decided that the only way back to prosperity is to make an independent living."⁵⁴ This emphasis on independence harmonized with the educational goals of Selma University's president, William H. Dinkins. He promoted cooperation within and the economic strengthening of the black community, writing that "such co-operation would be the means of giving us a fuller share in the determination of the course of events."⁵⁵ If white supremacy denied African Americans political rights, economic independence was another means subvert the order of Jim Crow.

S.W. Boynton and A. I. Platts organized black farmers into cooperative associations and brought them into federal farm programs to improve their livelihoods. With Boynton's assistance, black farmers organized their own segregated unit of the Farm Bureau in the early 1930s. The white and black Dallas County Farm Bureau branches met separately, but black

⁵² "Negro Schools to Close During Meet," *Selma Times-Journal*, February 10, 1929; "Five Hundred Hams on Exhibit as Negro Farmers Open Conference," *Selma Times-Journal*, February 15, 1929.

⁵³ "Negroes Stage Ham Show Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, February 7, 1930.

⁵⁴ A.I. Platts, "Supplement to Annual Report of the Agricultural Extension Work Among Negroes in Alabama," 1933, Box 366, Folder: Dallas County 1933, ACES, Auburn University.

⁵⁵ William Hovey Dinkins, "Implications of Economics and of Religion in the Development of Teacher-Training at Selma University," (unpublished Master's thesis, Columbia University, 1931), 45.

members could buy their fertilizer, seeds, and feed for greater savings and market their hogs, poultry, sheep, and cotton for higher profit with the white branch. All government loans routed through the local Farm Bureau, so black farmers needed to be included if they hoped to survive.⁵⁶ Platts and Boynton urged farmers to adopt “Live At Home” programs, planting big enough gardens and raising livestock and poultry to supply the family.⁵⁷ Within the homes, women participated in canning work in partnership with the Red Cross and relief association to preserve foods for their families and the unemployed.⁵⁸



Figure 16: Mrs. Jamerson, a club leader from the Tyler community, canned over 300 jars of produce, earning her the reputation as a woman “who can Can.” Self-sufficiency for rural African Americans was one of the major goals of Alabama’s Negro extension agents. Courtesy of ACES, Auburn University.

⁵⁶ S.W. Boynton, Annual Report of Negro County Agent, 1931, Box 366, Folder: Dallas Annual Report 1931, ACES, Auburn University.

⁵⁷ “Negro Farmers Urged to Plant Own Food Crop,” *Selma Times-Journal*, February 1, 1931.

⁵⁸ A.I. Platts, Annual Narrative Report of the Home Demonstration Work Among Negroes,” Dallas County, 1932, Box 366, Folder: Dallas 1932, ACES, Auburn University.

After Roosevelt's election, Boynton and the colored Farm Bureau brought word of the newly formed agricultural relief programs and farm loans to black farmers.⁵⁹ Members traveled all the way to Chicago in 1935 to represent the local colored Farm Bureau at the national convention. A separate delegation of white farmers from Dallas County also attended and listened to President Roosevelt and Secretary of Agriculture Wallace speak on the farm program.⁶⁰ Then over one hundred black extension members travelled to Tuskegee a year later to hear Secretary Wallace speak about the soil conservation plan.⁶¹

In June of 1935, Amelia Platts and S.W. Boynton were married. Home demonstration agents were not permitted to be married, so the new Mrs. Boynton resigned from her position. Ms. Lucy Upshaw arrived a month later to assume the duties of the demonstration agent.⁶² The relationships Amelia Boynton had forged with rural African Americans throughout the county, however, did not end. She and her husband opened a life insurance office on Franklin Street, the center of Selma's black business district, and continued to be a resource for rural black people.⁶³

The Boynton's work increasingly turned towards voter registration after they entered the insurance business. That same summer, the Reformed Presbyterian Church was forced to end its sixty-five year relationship with Knox Academy when the Pittsburgh-based church ran out of money in the midst of the Depression. To keep Knox from closing, a group of

⁵⁹ "Negro Farmers Called to Meet," *Selma Times-Journal*, November 25, 1934.

⁶⁰ "Dallas county's delegation to ..." *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 13, 1935.

⁶¹ S.W. Boynton, Herbert Hahn, Paige Keith, and Brack Martin were among the attendees; "Negro Farmers Will Hear Wallace Speak," *Selma Times-Journal*, September 8, 1936.

⁶² "New Leader Selected for Negro Club Work," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 12, 1935.

⁶³ Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan*, 76.

black citizens assumed the responsibilities of managing and financing the school.⁶⁴ This group had first come together in the late 1920s when World War I veteran and railroad clerk, C.J. Adams, founded the Dallas County Voters' League (DCVL) to encourage African Americans to become registered voters. In Selma's harsh racial climate, the Voters' League fell dormant, but the dismal state of education for black children and Knox Academy's possible closing reunited its drive in 1936. DCVL president Adams, the Boyntons, Henry Boyd, P.L. Lindsey, Dommie Gaines, and A.G. Carroll attended that first meeting. They sent a petition to the white board of education requesting a high school with twelve grades and a new building for Clark School. According to Amelia Boynton, the petition received no response.⁶⁵ In June 1937, however, the city school board agreed to take over and incorporate Knox Academy into the public school system.⁶⁶ Then in October of 1940, funding from the New Deal agency, the Works Progress Administration, created an eleventh grade at Knox, the highest grade that black students could achieve in public schools.⁶⁷ The rekindled Dallas County Voter's League continued to meet from that point on, and through it, C.J. Adams, the Boynton's, and other devoted members pushed for political and economic justice for African Americans.

Share Cropper's Union

⁶⁴ "Negroes to Operate Knox Academy Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 5, 1935.

⁶⁵ Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan*, 136 – 138.

⁶⁶ "City Will Run Knox Academy," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 11, 1937.

⁶⁷ "Eleventh Grade for Negro School Planned," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 4, 1940.

Black extension agents, while making notable gains, still faced an insurmountable task during the depths of the Depression. Those rural African Americans that stayed on plantations struggled for loans and lost acreage in federal crop reduction programs, and the tenants displaced by the agricultural revolution found cities crowded, steeped in high unemployment, and unwilling to add more to local relief roles. Hard times amongst rural black people made the Black Belt fertile grounds for the birth of another farm organization specifically concerned with the plight of the poor tenant farmers.

The Share Cropper's Union (SCU), organized by Alabama's Communist Party, spread throughout the region in the middle of the 1930s. The SCU's monthly publication, *Southern Farm Leader*, declared that the organization was fighting for "union, justice, and better life" for sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and small landowners.⁶⁸ Thirty black sharecroppers organized the union's first local in Tallapoosa County on the northeastern fringes of the Alabama Black Belt in 1931. The black men and women who joined the Share Cropper's Union did not necessarily believe in Communist ideology, nor could they locate the Soviet Union on a map, but members like Ned Cobb understood that it was an organization for poor people. He explained that the union "was workin' to bring us out of bad places where we stood at that time and been standing since the colored people had remembrance."⁶⁹

⁶⁸ *Southern Farm Leader*, June 1936, vol. 1, no. 2, Box 2, Folder Southern Farm Leader 1936 – 1937, Clyde Johnson papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC).

⁶⁹ Shaw and Rosengarten. *All God's Dangers*. 296, 304. For more about communist organizing in the South before World War II, see Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: the Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919 – 1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008); Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

SCU members in Tallapoosa County began holding secret meetings and distributing literature calling for sharecroppers to have the right to market their own crops, be paid a dollar a day, in cash, to grow their own food, and to have a nine-month school year for their children. The SCU's threat to the authority of white landlords and boundaries of white supremacy drew fierce retaliation. Over several days of violence near Camp Hill, Alabama, white law enforcement officials, vigilantes, and black union members exchanged deadly gunfire. The body of one union member was dumped on the steps of the Dadeville courthouse and dozens more black farmers were arrested.⁷⁰ This swift and brutal reaction indicated how much southern whites knew was at stake in the demands of poor black tenant farmers.

By 1934, sharecropper strikes had spread westward across the Black Belt into Dallas and Lowndes County. The New Deal's Agricultural Adjustment Act and Bankhead Cotton Control Act helped fuel the flames of discontent by reducing white landowners' dependence on tenant farmers and supplying money to buy farm machinery. Tenants found themselves booted from the land or converted to easily exploitable wage-hands. The increased number of Share Cropper's Union locals directly stemmed from the displacement and abuses caused by federal programs.⁷¹

SCU battles came to a head in Dallas County in May of 1935. Black sharecroppers, receiving as little as thirty-five cents for a ten-hour workday, struck for dollar-a-day wages.

⁷⁰ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 40 – 41.

⁷¹ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 54.

White landlords and law enforcement officials mounted a violent counter-reaction to protect their dominion.⁷² From the very beginning of the strike, white landlords bloodied, evicted, or ran black sharecroppers out of their homes. Meanwhile, the sheriff alone arrested eighteen sharecroppers. Saul Davis, a union leader, was one of those placed in jail. Two days after his arrest, white law enforcement officials delivered him into the waiting arms of a white mob allegedly made up of American Legionnaires.⁷³

The terror only worsened as International Labor Defense representatives connected with the Communist Party flocked to Selma to investigate the violence. On May 12th, Sheriff Reynolds arrested Henry Johnson and Bernard Owen in a private home and held them over twenty-four hours for investigation. The sheriff then released them at gun point into the hands of a band of seven men in three cars, one of which was the sheriff's green Plymouth. The mob drove Owen and Johnson fifteen miles outside of Selma, stripped off their clothes, and tied their hands around the trunk of a tree. They then beat them with horsewhips and ropes until blood reportedly dripped down their sides. After muttering threats of lynching, one vigilante lit a piece of paper and held the flame to one of the men's wounds.

Other black workers and investigators suffered similar fates. Ed Arnold was taken from his job, placed in jail, and released into the hands of the mob three nights later.⁷⁴ Willie John Foster, a black worker from Birmingham, came to Selma to investigate the earlier

⁷² Beth Mitchell, "The Bosses in Alabama Are Goin' Crazy," *Daily Worker*, July 3, 1935.

⁷³ Alabama Sheriff Hands Prisoners to Terror Gang, *Daily Worker*, June 4, 1935; "Negro and White Alabama Cotton Choppers Win Strike," *Daily Worker*, June 21, 1935.

⁷⁴ Letter from Robert Wood, District Secretary, ILD, Birmingham to Governor Bibb Graves, May 18, 1935, Box SG 12165, Folder: Communism #1 1935, Bibb Graves Papers, ADAH, Montgomery, Alabama; Mitchell, "The Bosses in Alabama are Goin' Crazy," *Daily Worker*, July 3, 1935.

arrests. After being taken while walking down Selma's main street, the desk sergeant at the jail released him to what an ILD organizer labeled "the landlord-police terror gang."⁷⁵ A week later, he still could not be found.⁷⁶ At the end of June, a body of a black man, presumed to be Willie Foster was found off of Summerfield Road, reportedly buried by the police who threatened black neighbors into silence.⁷⁷ ILD District Secretary Robert Wood pleaded with Alabama Governor Bibb Graves to intervene and end the violence. "Not only the United States Constitution, but all state and community laws," he wrote, "are being violated in this reign of terror directed against working people by united forces of police and landlords."⁷⁸ The reign of terror against the SCU spread into neighboring Lowndes and Perry County during the summer. While the *Daily Worker*, the Communist Party's publication, reported that some landlords raised wages to seventy-five cents a day to stop the strike from spreading, the strike of Dallas County's sharecroppers brought little gain at a deadly price.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Letter from Robert Wood, ILD, District Secretary, ILD, Birmingham to Governor Bibb Graves, May 24, 1935, Box SG 12165, Folder: Communism #1 1935, Bibb Graves Papers, ADAH.

⁷⁶ "Missed Negro Feared Victim of Vigilantes," *Daily Worker*, June 12, 1935.

⁷⁷ "Body of Willie Foster, Missing Negro, Believed Buried by Cops Who Handed Him to Vigilantes," *Daily Worker*, July 2, 1935.

⁷⁸ Letter from Robert Wood, District Secretary, ILD, Birmingham to Governor Bibb Graves, May 21, 1935, Box SG 12165, Folder: Communism #1 1935, Bibb Graves Papers, ADAH.

⁷⁹ Historian Glenn Feldman has argued that the vigilante violence surrounding the Share Cropper's Union strikes during the 1930s was a sign that Dallas County had an active Klan chapter. All references to the Klan in relevant sources, however, are written by people opposing the violence, and who use "Klan" as a general descriptor of white vigilantes. The local newspaper makes no mention of a local Klan chapter during the 1930s as it did during the 1920s. While the vigilante violence of white sheriffs and landlords might have been incredibly similar to violence carried out by the Klan, that in itself is not concrete evidence of an active Klan chapter; "Negro and White Alabama Cotton Choppers Win Strike," *Daily Worker*, June 21, 1935. Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915 - 1949* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 259 - 268.

White citizens' violent reactions illustrated what was at stake in the sharecroppers strike. The economic and political order protecting the wealth and authority of white citizens depended on cheap, subservient, and unorganized black labor backed by white supremacy. The SCU strike threatened the racial and economic foundations of Dallas County, and it evoked a swift response from white citizens protecting their interests. As the *Daily Worker* described the situation, "Landlords from the outlying plantations own the Selma shops. The Selma cops are employed to preserve the peace – for the landlords."⁸⁰ The severe violence laid bare their desperate need to maintain power by any means necessary, whether lynching, beating, or murder.⁸¹

The landlord and police terror may have quieted the activities of the Share Cropper's Union, but it did not kill the determination of its rural black members. As one SCU member from Selma explained, "The landlords are crazier than ever," but "they can't stop the organizin' noway."⁸² In July of 1936, forty SCU members from across the Black Belt gathered in New Orleans and issued a "call to action."⁸³ The delegates affirmed that black sharecroppers had a right to organize for better working conditions and wages, free from the vigilante terror that had left so many members dead.⁸⁴ They urged "all workers to utilize their legal right to armed self-defense when they are attacked by thugs and mobs to protect their

⁸⁰ Beth Mitchell, "The Bosses in Alabama Are Goin' Crazy," *Daily Worker*, July 3, 1935.

⁸¹ During the entire summer of violence against the SCU, the *Selma Times-Journal* made no reference to the strike or the arrests. Only the *Daily Worker* reported the violence taking place against the strikers.

⁸² Quoted in Beth Mitchell, "The Bosses in Alabama Are Goin' Crazy," *The Daily Worker*, July 3, 1935.

⁸³ *Southern Farm Leader*, July 1936, vol. 1, no. 3, Clyde Johnson Papers, Box 2, Folder: Southern Farm Leader, 1936 – 1937, Clyde Johnson Papers, UNC.

⁸⁴ "Defend Your Right to Organize and Strike," *Southern Farm Leader*, August 1936, vol. 1, no. 4, Box 2, Folder Southern Farm Leader, 1936 – 1937, Clyde Johnson Papers, UNC.

lives and homes.”⁸⁵ Calling attention to the low-wages and drudgery of women’s work on plantations, they demanded equal pay for equal work for women, higher wages for cooks, servants, and washerwomen, and free medical care for women surrounding child birth. The SCU attacked the poll tax as a tool that strengthened the landlords and industrialists and discouraged law enforcement officials from providing equal justice. They also reprimanded the Agricultural Adjustment Administration for worsening the conditions of tenant farmers.⁸⁶

But resolutions did little to change the repressive local conditions that black sharecroppers faced. Two years after the dollar-a-day strikes in Dallas County, the mail carrier on an Orrville route opened a bundle of Share Cropper’s Union publications addressed to Butler Molette. Molette was a 37 year-old union member and farmer who had never been to school and could not read or write, although his wife Victoria could. When the postal employee began threatening Molette’s life, the family fled to Birmingham as their last option.⁸⁷ “If President Roosevelt is going to carry out the mandate the people of this country gave him on election day, if law and order is to be established in the cotton country,” one SCU member wrote “the constituted government authorities will act at once to see that lives are protected and the right to organize is established.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ “Defense,” *Southern Farm Leader*, September 1936, vol. 1, no. 5, Box 2, Folder Southern Farm Leader, 1936 – 1937, Clyde Johnson Papers, UNC.

⁸⁶ “Women are Entitled to Free Medical Aid,” & “Poll Tax Keeps Poor Farmers From Voting,” *Southern Farm Leader*, August 1936, vol. 1, no. 4; “A.A.A. Hurts Small Farmers,” *Southern Farm Leader*, September 1936, vol. 1, no. 5, Box 2, Folder Southern Farm Leader, 1936 – 1937, Clyde Johnson Papers, UNC.

⁸⁷ 1930 U.S. Census, Dallas County, Alabama, population schedule, Lexington, p. 16B, digital image; Birmingham, Alabama, City Directory, 1937, digital image, Ancestry.com, <http://ancestry.com>. (accessed February 5, 2014).

⁸⁸ Editorial, “Life and Liberty,” *Southern Farm Leader*, February 1937, vol. 2, no. 2, Box 2, Folder Southern Farm Leader, 1936 – 1937, Clyde Johnson Papers, UNC.

Although the New Deal gave little to black sharecroppers, the federal governments' tepid inclusion of African Americans in AAA voting and wage code suggested a new potential ally for black Dallas County residents. Black tenants appealed to Roosevelt to challenge the provincial and repressive culture of the rural South. The protests of Alabama's SCU and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union failed to win the federal redress members had sought. But in the second half of the 1930s, the federal government began to broaden its farm policy to address rural poverty.⁸⁹ As the President increasingly turned towards using government as a tool to advance the economic security and welfare of all Americans, African Americans took advantage of the opportunity to mobilize under his leadership.⁹⁰

From Relief to Building: Rural Rehabilitation, PWA, & WPA

President Roosevelt overwhelmingly won reelection in 1936. In his second term of office, the tenor of the New Deal shifted from providing immediate relief to building and strengthening the nation's communities for the long-term. Pressure for this shift came from a growing coalition of black voters, southern liberals, unionists, and northern radicals who were dissatisfied with the conservatism of the early New Deal. The push for more progressive, further-reaching reform unfolded amidst growing concern about the stunted economic landscape of the South as well as the rise of fascism in Europe.⁹¹ Roosevelt's second term marked a shift towards large-scale public works projects and addressing the

⁸⁹ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 58.

⁹⁰ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 42.

⁹¹ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 42.

needs of the rural poor.⁹² As the federal government became an increasingly more vocal ally, African Americans put their hopes in the New Deal and federal aid to help challenge the local boundaries of white supremacy.

In April of 1934, the local Civil Works Administration and its program of temporary manual labor jobs came to an end. Despite the ever-changing array of New Deal agencies, a relatively constant staff of employees directed local relief efforts. Mrs. Margaret Shupe continued to head up the local relief office, and county agent John Blake assumed the duty of presenting Washington's new rural rehabilitation program to the area's white landlords. In the summer of 1934, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration offered to provide farmers supplies, stock, seed, and support. It also proposed that landlords accept one-fourth of the participating tenant's annual produce as rent.⁹³ Dallas County landlords disparaged the proposal, bemoaning the government's direct dealings with tenant farmers and the almost certain loss of income they would personally suffer.⁹⁴ In the rural Black Belt, federal rehabilitation for tenant farmers had little chance of success without the support of white landowners.

While the federal government searched for new ways to address the needs of the poorest rural residents, it also turned to public works programs as a means of building lasting change. The rampant, nationwide unemployment of the early 1930s caused Americans to rethink their ideas about the role of the federal government in citizens' daily

⁹² Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 44 - 45.

⁹³ "Saturday Sees Passing of CWA Into New Order," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 1, 1934.

⁹⁴ "A New Rural Rehabilitation Plan," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 8, 1934.

lives. More than at any other time in the nation's history, American citizens began to see unemployment as a structural problem of the economy, not an individual failure. This created a new faith in the government's ability to address such issues and prompted hope in the saving graces of public works. Two New Deal agencies – the Public Works Administration (PWA) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) – spearheaded these efforts.

During its tenure, the Public Works Administration created a national infrastructure by building bridges, dams, schools, hospitals, and public buildings throughout the country. The agency undertook such work to stimulate the economy by creating a demand for building materials while putting money into the pockets of workers. The federal government solicited project proposals from individual cities, giving municipalities the control to choose projects of greatest benefit to their communities. Financing for projects came in the form of a combination grant/loan package. The PWA agreed to fund thirty percent of the project cost by grant and provide for the remaining balance through low-interest loans to the communities.⁹⁵

Roosevelt appointed Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes as administrator of the PWA. Each project was required to meet standards in engineering soundness, legal authority, and financial capability. Ickes' careful scrutiny kept PWA projects slow-moving, but largely free of corruption.⁹⁶ Even though the PWA's enabling legislation made no mention of discrimination standards, Ickes required that projects hire African Americans in proportion

⁹⁵Robert D. Leighninger, *Long-Range Public Investment: The Forgotten Legacy of the New Deal* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 9, 38-41.

⁹⁶ Leighninger, *Long-Range Public Investment*, 38-41.

to the 1930 census. He used the same proportional standard to funnel federal funds to black-sponsored projects. While local administration of PWA projects thwarted many of Ickes' efforts, the PWA spent an unprecedented amount of federal funds on African Americans as compared to other public or private agencies.⁹⁷

Selma's white civic leaders had always had big dreams for their city, but it was the city's black residents who took the first steps in pursuing the public works funding for an African American community building. Rural African Americans in the county regularly traveled to Selma to do their shopping and to socialize. While downtown businesses appreciated their black customers' dollars, none of the merchants offered a sitting area or restroom for them. County agents S.W. and Amelia Boynton saw how they could evade the obstinacy of local white officials by securing federal funding. They initiated a campaign amongst black Dallas County residents to raise money for their own community center. The kickoff meeting took place in late January 1936, but the wariness of white Selma leaders of federal aid coming directly to African Americans ensured that black residents' efforts met countless obstacles.

The Boyntons partnered with their most reliable white advocate, the Rev. E. W. Gamble, to appeal to the PWA for funding. After raising \$3000 among black residents, the group received a \$17,000 direct grant from the PWA. Unlike other federal projects, the grant did not require the city government to match the funds. It only asked the all-white city council to provide a lot valued at \$2,500. Dallas County's black community kicked off a campaign to raise a portion of the sum for the land, which meant that the proposed project

⁹⁷ Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 50 - 51.

would cost the city only \$1,500.⁹⁸ The miraculous price tag, however, did not prevent the uproar that followed the city council's announcement of potential locations. White property owners on Lawrence Street protested so vigorously that the council rescinded its action and resumed searching for a new location.⁹⁹ Six months after its start, municipal inaction caused all progress to ground to a halt.

It took a string of unexpected happenings in late 1937 to break the stalemate.¹⁰⁰ Milton Wood, the president of the city council, died in November of that year, and council member Otto Erhart unexpectedly died as well one month later. Before Erhart's funeral arrangements could be finalized, however, coal merchant and Third Ward council member, Sidney Katzenberg also died of a heart attack. Only a few hours later, Councilman W.C. Hall was hit by a car and seriously injured.¹⁰¹ As a whole, these unlucky councilmen had been some of the staunchest opponents of the community house. After the string of municipal tragedies, the Boyntons found the remaining council members finally willing to support the project. "Heaven knows whether or not this was indirectly an answer to prayer," Amelia Boynton recalled, "but anyway, the city council decided not to stand in the way but to buy a piece of property and permit the government project to proceed. Our dream came true."¹⁰²

In January 1938, work finally began on the community center to be located on Franklin Street. Local black contractor George Wilson designed the yellow brick building

⁹⁸ "The Building for Negroes," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 15, 1935.

⁹⁹ "Negro Project Plans Changed After Protests," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 11, 1936.

¹⁰⁰ Jackson, *The Story of Selma*, 503.

¹⁰¹ "Tragedy Strikes Twice at Selma City Council," *The Selma Times-Journal*, December 28, 1937.

¹⁰² Boynton, *Bridge Across Jordan*, 143.

that would house rest rooms, showers, an auditorium, and offices of the Negro Extension Service and Farm Bureau. But even with federal funding and a plot of land, obstacles plagued construction work. Problems caused by financing lighting and electricity and securing furniture for the building delayed its opening until December two years later. Four entire years after the Boyntons began raising funds for the building, the Negro community house finally opened for Selma and Dallas County's black residents.¹⁰³

Public works projects sponsored by the city council, unlike the black community center, garnered enthusiastic support and speedy follow through. Mayor Lucian P. Burns and county commissioner G.C. Blanton traveled to Washington to push for PWA funding for a new city hall and jail building in October 1936.¹⁰⁴ They secured grant money that month, and the ground breaking took place in January, only three months later.¹⁰⁵ The building costs amounted to \$180,000. The PWA provided \$81,000 in an outright grant for construction, and the Selma city government issued notes and bonds to cover the remaining balance.¹⁰⁶ By the end of 1937, city business was being conducted in the hallways and offices of the new municipal building. PWA funding also built Selma a new white high school to replace the aging and overcrowded Tremont Street School. The PWA offered the city a \$145,125 grant in August 1938 with the stipulation that construction begin on the building within eight weeks.¹⁰⁷ Building construction right on schedule, and after the 1939 Thanksgiving break,

¹⁰³ "Site for Negro Community House Purchased by City Heads Today," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 21, 1938.

¹⁰⁴ "Selmians Seek Building Funds at Washington," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 20, 1936.

¹⁰⁵ "PWA Grant Funds for City Building Project," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 22, 1936.

¹⁰⁶ Jackson, *The Story of Selma*, 502 - 504.

¹⁰⁷ "Grant Assures Speedy Action on New School," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug.7, 1938.

Selma's white high school students began attending classes in the brand new Albert G. Parrish High School. From proposal to completion, the project had taken less than a year and a half.¹⁰⁸



Figure 17: Construction of Selma municipal building and jail as PWA project during 1937. The building directly behind the construction site is the newly-completed Negro Community Center, also a PWA project. Courtesy Billy Rosenberg Photograph Collection, Temple Mishkan Israel.

In addition to the new public buildings, Alabama Governor Bibb Graves announced in November 1937 a plan to build a new bridge over the Alabama River in Selma. Funded by state and federal money, prominent citizens viewed the bridge as insurance for the city's economic future. Securing a location, appraising the property, and other details took time to work out, and flooding and other unforeseen delays slowed construction. But in May of 1940, the arching Edmund Pettus Bridge - named for the revered, home-town Confederate general and U.S. senator - was complete. Selma spared nothing for the opening extravaganza; speeches by the former and present governors, barbecues, historical tours, music by the

¹⁰⁸ "New High School Will Open Here Monday," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 3, 1939.

Selma High School Band, and a ball were all part of the festivities. The demand for “The Cavalcade of Selma, A Historical Pageant” was so great that it held two performances on the day of the bridge opening.¹⁰⁹ The Edmund Pettus Bridge further opened Selma to the highways of Alabama and the nation, a grand symbol of how federal and state funding had chipped away at Selma’s insularity.

Money pouring into Selma during the New Deal changed the landscape and environment of the city in concrete and lasting ways. The overarching advantages of public works and relief funding moved white elites to reluctantly relinquish some of their local control, even when that infringed on customs of white supremacy. While city officials attempted to regulate federal dollars entering Selma, black residents still benefited. New Deal relief money helped support black families during the tough years of the Depression. In addition to the community center, the WPA operated a nursery for African American children a block away from the Boyntons’ house on Lapsley Street and paid for adult education classes. “When the federal government created the PWA and then the WPA,” Amelia Boynton explained, “people were kept from starving and the doors opened for young children to get proper food.”¹¹⁰ The federal government’s tangible aid also revealed an outside authority that African Americans could turn to for assistance. Instead of having to rely on a local government fiercely committed to maintaining white supremacy, black

¹⁰⁹ Jackson, *The Story of Selma*, 506-8.

¹¹⁰ Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan*, 97; The New Deal changed the relationship of the federal government with its citizens across the entire country. For an in-depth analysis of this in Chicago, see Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919 – 1939* (Cambridge, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

residents could now appeal to the federal government for relief, assistance, and demands of economic and political justice.

Federal Meddling

By the late 1930s, the acute desperation from the depths of the Depression was fading into the past thanks to President Roosevelt's relief programs. The New Deal offered Dallas County farmers sizeable sums of money each year for not planting cotton on their land. It brought relief aid, jobs, and regular paychecks to thousands of the area's needy men and women. Public works projects not only employed local residents, but planted forests on overworked land, repaired sewage systems and roads, cleaned up parks, built a better school for white children, as well as new city offices. When Dallas County's head of the AAA resigned in 1941, he estimated that he had distributed over four million dollars in aid since his start in 1933.¹¹¹

But support for the President and his economic recovery programs waned among white residents as federal aid became a rising threat to the daily operation of white supremacy. Despite the millions of dollars of aid that had poured into Dallas County over the prior five years, the last few years of the 1930s marked a turning point in white residents' opinions about the federal government's assistance. When the federal government began aiding tenant farmers, equalizing wages, and supporting unions, white Dallas County residents began rethinking their priorities.

¹¹¹ "Allen Resigns Position With AAA in Dallas," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 7, 1941.

In July of 1937, the proposed Black-Connery Bill elicited a flood of outrage from the Black Belt's white farmers. The local newspaper accused the bill of marking "the end of the honeymoon of the New Deal and the farmer."¹¹² The bill, which grew into the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, called for minimum wage and maximum hour standards across the nation.¹¹³ White landowners in Dallas County opposed the bill and its implications for the wages of black farm laborers. The *Times-Journal* declared that the proposed labor legislation was "the greatest peril to confront [the South's] economic interests since the imposition of carpet-bagger rule in reconstruction days."¹¹⁴ Speakers at the Kiwanis Club and the Farm Bureau condemned the bill and its "threat to the personal liberties of the farmer."¹¹⁵

White agricultural leaders had another chance to express their disapproval when the WPA proposed to provide supplemental work to farm families with cash incomes of less than \$300. The county commissioners declared that they were "not interested," in taking part in the plan.¹¹⁶ With approximately six thousand people eligible within the county, local farm organizations feared the effects that such a program would have on farm labor.¹¹⁷ The plan passed only when a delegation from the Selma Retail Merchants Association argued that

¹¹² "Black-Connery Bill Treat to Farmer," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 8, 1937.

¹¹³ Robert K. Fleck, "Democratic Opposition to the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938," *Journal of Economic History* 62 (March 2002).

¹¹⁴ "Revision has not Mitigated Labor Legislation Threat," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 11, 1937.

¹¹⁵ "Black-Connery Bill Attacked at Club Lunch," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 21, 1937; "Labor Measure Condemned by Dallas Bureau," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 25, 1937.

¹¹⁶ "WPA Plans for Boosting Farm Incomes Bared," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 25, 1938.

¹¹⁷ "Dallas County Opinion Varies About WPA Aid," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 28, 1938.

it was “economically essential at this time that new cash sources be made available for this section where cotton is the basis of most incomes.”¹¹⁸

Mumblings of discontent with New Deal regulations grew into accusations of federal meddling by the end of the decade. When the National Emergency Council declared in July of 1938 that the South was the country’s number one economic problem, it only confirmed the growing suspicions white southerners held about the New Deal. A shortage of farm labor in 1940 led white Dallas County farmers to unleash a torrent of criticism against President Roosevelt’s relief efforts. They placed blame for the shortage directly on the federal government’s pesky intervention. “The situation is one which was inevitable from the time that government started directing the destinies of the citizenry,” declared the local newspaper, “for the combination of crop restriction measures and ready relief money has rapidly drained the rural areas of workers necessary to till and cultivate our rich black soil.”¹¹⁹ Accusing WPA relief programs of tempting black laborers with cushioned and easy alternatives, Dallas County’s white landowners and citizens demanded that the federal government extricate itself from the “agricultural meddling of the past seven years.”¹²⁰

The 1935 annual report of the Alabama State Extension Service Agent for Negro Girls and Women summed up the cause of white discontent in the Black Belt. Mrs. L.C. Hanna acknowledged that the New Deal did not bring prosperity to black farmers in the way they had hoped. However, she wrote, “it has loosened the chain of economic slavery

¹¹⁸ “Merchants to Ask for Farm Family Funds,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 31, 1938.

¹¹⁹ “And Now Comes the Harvest,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 23, 1940.

¹²⁰ “What the Farmer Needs,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 3, 1940.

somewhat and set the slave on the path which leads to the road of prosperity.” After passing on the “good fruit” of the New Deal agricultural programs, Hanna contended that “the black slave is left (as he was nearly three-quarters of a century) with meager benefits, disturbed and lonely.” It would be up to the black extension agent and their live-at-home program to put black farmers “well on the road to prosperity,” Hanna believed.¹²¹ Beliefs in independence, economic self-sufficiency, education, and landownership ran deep in rural black communities, and in Dallas County, S.W. and Amelia Boynton helped mobilize these resources towards economic and political justice for African Americans. As Hanna laid out, the brief honeymoon that white Dallas County citizens had with the New Deal could not survive the loosening of the chains of economic slavery for African Americans.

By the time Franklin Roosevelt assumed office, Dallas County citizens had exhausted their relief efforts and were ready to put their welfare in the hands of the federal government. The earliest New Deal programs focused on restoring wealth and inordinately benefited white citizens who had always been skeptical of government intervention. In rural Dallas County, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration’s cotton reduction program directed large sums of money straight into the hands of landowners. Because most federal agencies gave administrative control to local authorities, southern practices of white supremacy could continue unfettered. Landlords turned former cotton acres into equally profitable pastureland for cattle, while pocketing federal money and evicting black

¹²¹ L.C. Hanna, State Agent for Negro Women and Girls, Annual Report, 1935, Box 356, Folder: Annual Report, Negro Women 1935, ACES, Auburn University.

sharecroppers from the land. Cotton had dominated Dallas County's thousands of acres of cropland since Alabama's earliest days as a territory, but the Great Depression and New Deal finally pulled the ruling crop down from its century-long reign.

The New Deal, however, also fundamentally challenged the local status quo by including African Americans in AAA voting, wage codes, and other federal funding. Although this modicum of fairness left much to be desired, black residents saw their new and direct relationship with the federal government as a way to circumvent local white authority. Black extension agents, S.W. and Amelia Boynton, led this effort, promoting economic self-sufficiency to rural black residents while simultaneously applying to the Public Works Administration to fund black programs. Prominent white citizens, however, responded violently when African Americans openly flouted the economic and racial order, such as during the bloody Share Cropper's Union strikes. After a decade of the federal government's involvement in local affairs, white Dallas County residents were no longer enamored with the New Deal's offers of funding. As black residents successfully used the federal government to challenge the boundaries of white supremacy, white citizens rejected President Roosevelt's aid as it began to look more like reform rather than restoration of the status quo.

INTERLUDE 4: CRAIG AIR FORCE BASE

As Roosevelt's New Deal labored to pull the United States from the doldrums of depression, a burgeoning conflict in Europe loomed large in the background. The global economic crisis of the 1930s gave rise to the aggressive dictatorships of imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and the Communist USSR. In September 1939, Germany, under the command of Adolf Hitler, invaded Poland. The outbreak of war pushed the United States away from its position of neutrality. Addressing the weakness of its military, the country embarked on a massive defense build-up. New military bases coupled with wartime production to create an industrial boom, vigorously increasing the demand for labor and raw materials.¹

May of 1940 was a good month for Selma and Dallas County. Following a weekend of festivities celebrating the opening of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Alabama Congressman Sam Hobbs unveiled his efforts to secure an air base for Selma as part of the growing national defense program.² After a long distance telephone call from Washington in late June, Mayor Lucien P. Burns announced that the Air Corps and U.S. Army had chosen Selma as a site for an Air Corps Pursuit Training School. The base would be located four and half miles south of town off of Highway 80 and would host three hundred officers and eight hundred enlisted men.³ Within one week, the base's projected size of 640 acres had

¹ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: the New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2013), 38 – 41, 277 – 281, 305 – 307.

² "Hobbs Seeking Plane Factory for This City," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 26, 1940.

³ "City Gets Air Training School," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 21, 1940.

nearly tripled to 1700. The city arranged for this expansion by negotiating settlements with large white landowners, including Dr. W.W. Harper, J.B. Hain, and smaller black owners, A. Parnell, Joe Yelder, Simon Durant, and Percy Brown.⁴ After acquiring the property, the city of Selma agreed to lease the acreage to the federal government for ninety-nine years at a cost of one dollar per year.⁵ The Federal Housing Authority committed to building a 200-home complex adjacent to the new base to house incoming officers and their families.⁶

Beyond the prestige of being part of the national defense effort, the arrival of the base – later named Craig Air Force Base for a local lieutenant who had been killed in action – brought the promise of prosperity for Dallas County. “From its very inception the pursuit school will constitute the equivalent of two or three major industries,” the *Selma Times-Journal* explained, “[It] will release a huge annual payroll into channels of trade and bring about an immediate impetus in growth of the community.”⁷ The new airbase not only created jobs in construction and civilian service for local residents, but it also promised to increase traffic for area businesses and tradesmen. During the negotiating process, Congressman Hobbs secured assurances from the War Department that local contractors and local materials would receive preference throughout construction.⁸

⁴ “Air School Site Lease Conferences Held Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 26, 1940.

⁵ “Airfield Leases Details Almost Complete Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 30, 1940.

⁶ “Air School Gets Housing Unit,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 23, 1940.

⁷ “Selma’s Greatest Development,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 23, 1940.

⁸ “Selma Gets Full Benefits of Air School,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 27, 1940.



Figure 18: Mayor Lucien P. Burns breaking ground at Craig Air Force Base. Courtesy of Old Depot Museum.

The initial construction of the base demanded the labor of 1,196 men.⁹ A huge array of tasks needed to be completed before it could be operational; \$2.3 million worth of projects including grading, grubbing, draining, and sodding the field; constructing forty-three buildings - barracks, a mess hall, a fire house, medical barracks, storage warehouses, repair shops, parachute, and airplane hangers; and building base roads.¹⁰ Local businesses thrived with the federal government as their new customer. In fact, the air field's arrival marked the end of a decade's worth of depression in Dallas County.

In addition to construction and supplies, the air base needed a ready pool of workers to run operations. A vocational training program - funded by a National Defense appropriation and conducted by the Selma Public Schools - launched classes to train

⁹ "Construction Air School to Begin Shortly," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 2, 1940.

¹⁰ "Air Field Work to Begin Soon," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 14, 1940.

unskilled local people in relevant trades.¹¹ Race, as usual, dictated which trades Selma residents could learn. In the old vacated high school building on Tremont Street, white workers took classes in carpentry, electrical work, plumbing, painting, and roofing. Meanwhile, black workers learned brick laying, plastering, and concrete work at Knox Academy.¹² By the time Craig's Advanced Flying School opened in the spring of 1941, newly-skilled local workers filled civil service jobs for aircraft sheet metal workers, electricians, welders, mechanics, and leather workers.¹³ Mrs. Louise Rice of the Dallas County Welfare Board attributed the 257-person drop in welfare cases to "the effect of defense employment."¹⁴

Besides new jobs and booming business, the new air training school also remade the social routines of Dallas County citizens. Buses and taxis of the new Selma Bus Lines service traversed the city delivering civilians and soldiers to and from the air field.¹⁵ Within four months, these lines began serving area schools as well; two buses left Carter's Drug Store on Broad Street each morning at 7:40 a.m., one covering west Selma and one covering east Selma before dropping their passengers off at school.¹⁶ Recreation and entertainment opportunities grew in importance as young soldiers started arriving at the base. Paul Grist, general secretary of the YMCA, headed up the recreational work at the USO, which was

¹¹ "Trades Classes Scheduled for Local Workers," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 24, 1940.

¹² "Labor Classes Registration Opens Monday," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 28, 1940.

¹³ "More Jobs at Aerial School," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 18, 1941.

¹⁴ "Welfare Lists of County Reduced by Defense Program," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 27, 1941.

¹⁵ "Bus Line Will Serve Airport," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 14, 1940.

¹⁶ "New Bus Added to Serve City Lines," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 9, 1941.

housed in the old YMCA building on Broad Street.¹⁷ Local civic leaders encouraged housewives to invite soldiers to their homes for dinner and to “keep the jar full of cookies” for when soldiers came to visit.¹⁸ Selma’s young women also enjoyed the continual arrival of new air men to town. The city hosted a parade to celebrate the arrival of the first class of cadets. Jean Martin, who was a senior at Parrish High during Craig’s first year of operation, remembered the soldiers appearing over the crest of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. “I swear, everyone had a convertible. [...] They all had their hair cut short, and [were] bronze, brown, tan, from flying,” she recalled. “And they came over the bridge; we thought they were the most gorgeous ... it was just like a movie.”¹⁹ Over the years, the air field supplied many of Selma’s young women with husbands.

The first thirty-nine cadets of the Southeast Air Corps Advanced Flying School received their wings on the stage of the Wilby Theatre downtown in May 1941.²⁰ By the time they graduated, other signs of the pending war had begun appearing in Selma. Since the previous summer, convoys of military men and equipment regularly passed through town, often camping at Rowell Field overnight.²¹ The Selective Service Act authorized the United States’ first peacetime draft, and in October 1940, young men between the ages of 21 and 35 lined up outside of Selma polling centers to register.²² Two hundred twenty-four Dallas

¹⁷ “Grist Elected as Recreation Unit Director,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 15, 1941.

¹⁸ “Housewives Invited to Keep Cookie Jar Full for Soldiers,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 2, 1941.

¹⁹ Jean Martin interview with author, December 6, 2011, Selma, Alabama.

²⁰ “Flying Cades Receive Wings at Rite Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 30, 1941.

²¹ “More Soldiers to Camp Here Tonight,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 3, 1940.

²² Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 312 – 313; “Young Americans March to Registration Booths,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 16, 1940.

County men, black and white, received their call-up by the end of the month, and inductees continued shipping out for training over the next year.²³ The rebirth of the local defense council marked mobilization on the home front.²⁴ C.W. Hooper was elected as the council's permanent chairman, following in the footsteps of his father, Lloyd Hooper, who served as Alabama State Chairman of Defense during the First World War.²⁵

When Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Selma, Alabama and the nation were prepared. The economic prosperity that accompanied the arrival of Craig Air Force Base was one local example of what World War II would do for the nation. The base brought a strong physical and financial presence of the federal government to Dallas County and pulled the area out of the long depression with its employment, job training, services, and business.

²³ "Total of 224 Dallas Counties Called by First 1,500 Drawings," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 30, 1940; "Eleven Negro Draftees Get Call to Duty," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 19, 1940; "Fifty Negroes Leave Monday to Join Army," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 14, 1941.

²⁴ "Defense Council of County is Complete," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 30, 1941.

²⁵ "Hooper Named Defense Head," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 5, 1941.

CHAPTER 4: “WHITE-FACED COWS”: WORLD WAR II, CATTLE, AND SEGREGATION, 1941 – 1952

The United States’ participation in World War II pulled the country out of economic depression while giving rise to a radically different postwar political terrain. War mobilization – as it had done twenty years prior - called on the patriotic support of all Americans to secure democracy at home and for the world. The federal government’s recognition of African Americans as soldiers and essential war workers undermined the South’s racial order in pursuit of a national purpose. Through enlistment, mobilization on the home front, and food production and conservation, African Americans in Dallas County fulfilled patriotic obligations. But in the midst of wartime disruption, black residents also demanded their fair share and full citizenship. While white residents participated in the campaign for victory, black Americans fought a Double V Campaign, a two-sided battle against fascism abroad and racism at home.¹

The end of the war did not dismantle white supremacy’s grip over black Dallas County residents, but it did mark the beginning of a new era for the Alabama Black Belt. After a century of domination, cotton’s reign had ended. Crop restrictions during the New Deal pushed large landowners away from cotton, and soil conservation programs made pasturelands and cattle profitable. Cattle-raising required bigger farms and less labor, and in the years surrounding World War II, thousands of Dallas County’s black tenant farmers found themselves displaced by herds of white-faced Hereford cows. With the ending of

¹ “Where Selma Stands,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 3, 1941.

wartime metal restrictions, tractor and combine production skyrocketed while their prices dropped. The enthusiastic embrace of mechanization by cotton farmers only pushed more black sharecroppers from the land. As the traditional plantation faded into the past, so, too, did the economic organization that had evolved with it; amidst this transition, Dallas County's civic and political leaders began envisioning a new, more industrialized future for the region.

While the economic base of Dallas County readjusted after the war, a coalition of civil rights groups, labor unions, and a liberal wing within the Democratic Party mounted a challenge against southern segregation. In carefully argued legal cases, the N.A.A.C.P. chipped away at the legality of separate but equal in institutions of higher education. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party increasingly turned towards civil rights in response to the shifting demographics of the party's base. White southerners condemned the mounting attacks on segregation and mustered their resources in defense. In the postwar years, white Dallas County leaders attempted to bolster segregation by living up to the guise of equality and increasing public funding to African American residents. Local leaders built new black high schools and undertook slum clearance programs as a way of proving that separate but equal was fair, legal, and desirable. While segregation continued to rule in Alabama after World War II, its death knell had sounded.

To Serve, To Earn, To Learn

Twenty Dallas County men, two weeks before draft registration began, boarded a truck at the Dixie's Chevrolet Company's garage and drove to the U.S. Army recruiting

office in Montgomery to volunteer; seventeen of the twenty were African American.² In mid-October, more black Dallas County men responded to Uncle Sam's appeal and turned out to register. Likely hoping to stave off racial tensions at other locations, the county draft board agreed to allow any and all black residents to register at Selma University.³ The university's president, W.H. Dinkins, was himself a veteran of the First World War, one of the select black officers who had trained at Fort Des Moines in Iowa. He spoke to a contingent of new black enlistees ready to leave for training later that year. He encouraged them to take advantage of opportunities "to serve, to learn and to earn," and assured them that they would return to civil life better equipped to help themselves and their people.⁴



Figure 19: Dallas County natives, Phillip Johnson and Herman Washington, pose for a photograph in 1944 at Fort Lewis in Washington where they were stationed. Courtesy of Edmundite Southern Missions Photograph Collection.

While black men received the same call to service as white men, segregation still defined their military experience. Local black enlistees often headed to Fort McClellan near

² "Twenty Volunteers from County Offer Service for Army," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 6, 1940.

³ "County Draft System Gets Final Touches," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 14, 1940.

⁴ "Fifty Negroes Leave Monday to Join Army," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 14, 1941.

Anniston, Alabama for training.⁵ Once there, they joined with other black G.I.'s from across the country to train for combat in the segregated 92nd Infantry Division.⁶ But military service frequently relegated African Americans to menial service jobs. The Navy sponsored a drive in Dallas County urging black residents to volunteer for its "messmen branch." The *Selma Times-Journal* thought it was a superb opportunity, describing how "they cook and serve food and receive splendid training which may benefit them in civilian life should they choose work in hotels or dining cars."⁷ The War Department, while calling on black Americans to fulfill their patriotic duty, actively bolstered practices of segregation. Instead of fair and equitable treatment, African Americans encountered the familiar discrimination and racial exclusion. Fed up with the segregated military, black Americans set their sights on equality in national defense efforts.⁸

President Roosevelt spoke to the theme of freedom in his 1941 annual address to Congress. He named the freedom of speech and worship and the freedom from want and from fear as the "four essential human freedoms" necessary to protect democracy worldwide. "Freedom means the supremacy of human rights everywhere," he declared.⁹ The gaping distance between the President's professed principles and the treatment of African Americans in military and civilian life were glaringly obvious to black Americans. A. Phillip

⁵ "Forty Four Negroes Leave for Service," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 23, 1941; "Twenty Negroes off for Service in the Army," *The Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 17, 1941.

⁶ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 401.

⁷ "Thousands of Posts Open to Negroes in United States Navy," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 15, 1941.

⁸ Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, 253.

⁹ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Annual Address to Congress 1941," Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/pdfs/ffreadingcopy.pdf> (accessed February 19, 2013).

Randolph, head of the influential Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union, chose to hold the President accountable to his words. Randolph suggested that African Americans march fifty thousand strong to Washington, D.C. to demand an end to segregation in defense industries and the armed services. Organizing in grassroots units across the country, Randolph crafted the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), scheduled to take place on July 1, 1941. In the months leading up to the march, Randolph called on Roosevelt to issue an executive order banning discrimination in all defense industries and the government. Government officials became increasingly fearful of the potential impact as the day drew near. Only six days before the march, the President yielded to the pressure. He issued Executive Order 8802, which banned discrimination in “defense industries or government” and created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to investigate complaints of alleged racial discrimination.¹⁰ With the President’s concession, Randolph cancelled the March on Washington.

But victories for African Americans in the nation’s capital faced a long, tumultuous road before they reached black residents in Dallas County. In the summer of 1942, Alabama Governor Frank Dixon refused to sign a contract with the War Production Board allowing state prisons to manufacture cloth for the Army. Dixon alleged that the ban on discrimination in wartime production was an effort “to break down the principle of segregation.” “I will not permit the employees of the State to be placed in a position where they must abandon the principles of segregation or lose their jobs,” he declared. Prominent

¹⁰ Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919 – 1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 358 – 360; For more about the Double V campaign and African Americans push for full citizenship rights during the war, see Rawn James, *The Double V: How Wars, Protest, and Harry Truman Desegregated America’s Military* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

white citizens in Dallas County applauded the Governor's stand, and the next week, he enjoyed the spot of honor at a local barbeque.¹¹ As during the New Deal, the United States' early wartime efforts often settled into the well-worn patterns of white supremacy rather than challenging them.

Mobilization for war unfolded in Dallas County much as it had twenty years earlier. The United States' entrance into the First World War had forced the federal government to create an

infrastructure for wartime mobilization with no precedents or experience. When fighting



erupted on European

Figure 20: Hundreds of Selma citizens line Broad Street to watch the military parade during World War II. Courtesy of Billy Rosenberg Photograph Collection, Temple Mishkan Israel.

soil for a second time, the wheels of American war machinery spun into motion again. New military bases – many concentrated in the South like Craig outside of Selma – complemented those already in operation in training thousands of new enlistees from the national draft.

¹¹ Frank Dixon quoted in "A Champion Arises," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 26, 1942; "Governor Guest at Barbecue Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 2, 1942.

Campaigns geared toward frugality – saving, recycling, home production, conserving, and rationing – defined the war’s presence at home.¹² The Dallas County Defense Council worked side-by-side with the local chapter of the American Red Cross, coordinating war work, raising money with War Bonds and Savings Stamps, and drumming up patriotic support. Scrap metal drives collected scarce materials for defense industries. In Selma, housewives could donate their aluminum to the defense program at a depository outside of Abe Eagle’s Boston Bargain store.¹³ Bond drives, patriotic rallies, and soldiers training at Craig Air Force base gave the war a physical presence on Selma’s streets.

While white soldiers could relax at the downtown USO, Jim Crow forbade black enlisted men from stepping a foot through the door. Selma’s black leaders – many as invested in the war efforts as their white counterparts – rallied to support their soldiers stationed at Craig AFB. The Selma Colored Civic League, whose membership overlapped with the Dallas County Voters League and the Negro Extension Service and Farm Bureau, solicited donations to go towards a recreation area for black soldiers.¹⁴ On Christmas day 1942, the Negro Community Center opened its doors for black G.I.s to dance until midnight to an eighteen piece orchestra.¹⁵ C.J. Adams, the black lieutenant who had served in World War I before coming home to head up the Voters League, spearheaded the effort to organize a proper black USO on the Community Center’s second floor. It opened in May of

¹² Terrence H. Witkowski, “World War II Poster Campaigns: Preaching Frugality to American Consumers,” *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 32 (Spring, 2003), 73.

¹³ “Aluminum Depository Established at Store,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 6, 1941.

¹⁴ Boynton, *Bridge Across Jordan*, 138; “Recreation Building for Negro Soldiers,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 1, 1942.

¹⁵ “Yule Program for Colored Soldiers,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 24, 1942.

1943, and touring big bands, including Duke Ellington, Earl Hines, Nat King Cole, and Fats Domino, stopped in, playing swinging shows that echoed out into Franklin Street.¹⁶

C.J. Adams and S.W. Boynton, the two black men most concerned with securing political and economic justice for African Americans in Dallas County, also commanded the local war effort. S.W. Boynton, having gained a reliable reputation in agricultural work, coordinated the black division of U.S. Bonds drives at the request of the white defense council.¹⁷ Adams, meanwhile, mailed out thousands of bond rally posters to ministers and leaders as Boynton's right-hand man. Purchasing War Bonds was not only black citizens' patriotic duty but also, as Adams put it, an "opportunity to render a service to democracy."¹⁸ Black residents knew full well that their patriotic support for a war against fascism also challenged white supremacy at home, and Adams' appeal certainly did not fall on deaf ears.

Food for Freedom

While fighter planes and ammunition poured off assembly lines in industrial centers, the patriotic duty of producing food for the troops fell to the Alabama Black Belt. "Dallas Will Help to Feed the World," the *Times-Journal* trumpeted in the early days of the local "Food for Freedom" campaign.¹⁹ As in the First World War, the federal government called upon farmers to increase their production of vegetables, eggs, livestock, oil, and grain for the

¹⁶ "Recreation Center for Negro Soldiers," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 17, 1943; "Formal Opening of Colored USO Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 9, 1943; Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan*, 143.

¹⁷ Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan*, 87.

¹⁸ C.J. Adams quoted in "Negroes Plan Bond Rally," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 21, 1943.

¹⁹ "Dallas Will Help to Feed the World," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 11, 1941.

war effort and to grow enough produce at home to feed themselves and their neighbors. Farm speakers regularly appeared at Selma's wartime assemblies. Walter Randolph, the President of the Alabama Farm Bureau gave "a splendid wartime address" to Selma's citizens at a town meeting at Rowell Field. The city council even welcomed its black citizens by reserving a special section of the grandstand for them.²⁰ One of the weekly radio broadcasts aired by the Negro Extension Service, however, deflated any ideas that war production followed racial lines: "Our program for Negro farmers is the same as that for white farmers – The production of more food and feed to win the war and win the peace."²¹

White and black farm agents had been at the forefront of promoting scientific agriculture and rural cooperation since the boll weevil arrived over twenty years earlier. As the gears of wartime mobilization cranked into action, county and home demonstration agents found themselves dispensing patriotic counsel in addition to agricultural advice.²² The relationships they had built during years of traveling back roads, as well as their paychecks direct from the federal government, made them an obvious liaison to rural Americans. In 1942, the U.S. government enlisted the Extension Service to organize a neighborhood leadership system in every county and community in the nation.

By that point, Dallas County's black agents had already been hard at work on food production and conservation programs. A full eleven months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, S.W. Boynton and Lucy Upshaw had hosted a meeting at the Negro Community

²⁰ "What Can I Do," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 20, 1943; "Negroes Urged to Attend Town Meet," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 22, 1943.

²¹ "Farm Response to Food Campaign Good," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 23, 1941; Forty-Eight in Series of Negro Extension Service Monthly Program, August 25, 1944, Box 392, Folder Radio Transcripts 1943 – 44, ACES, Auburn University.

²² "Need of Food Discussed at County Meets," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 13, 1941.

Center concerning “the part negro citizens may take in the National Defense Program”²³

The wartime neighborhood leaders organization paralleled the agricultural and home demonstration clubs that S.W. and Amelia Boynton had first assembled in the early 1930s. Every rural community had a club with local leaders who helped relay information from the extension agents, and with the war, they just piled patriotic duties on top of their agricultural program. S.W. Boynton praised these groups for “doing much to touch every family in the county in the way of keeping them well informed.” These community leaders promoted food production, collected salvage material, sold and bought War Bonds, and raised funds for the Red Cross. “It has been through these organizations,” Boynton reported, “that our people have worked to carry on the splendid war program.”²⁴ The Assistant State Leader for Negro Work in Alabama estimated that “by virtue of their position,” extension agents carried out “at least 90% of the War Emergency Programs in which the rural population was expected to participate.”²⁵

The defense program’s focus on food production and self-sufficiency complemented the already-existing priorities of Alabama’s black county agents. For county agent Boynton, scientific agricultural methods of raising food and livestock had always been a means for black farmers to secure more money, greater independence, and the possibility of land ownership. War work amplified these goals in the name of patriotism. Boynton encouraged

²³ “Negroes Will Hold Defense Conference Here on Wednesday,” *Selma Times-Journal*, January 13, 1941.

²⁴ S.W. Boynton, Negro County Agent, Dallas County, “Supplement to Annual Report,” 1944, Box 367, Folder Dallas County Negro Reports 1943 – 1944, ACES, Auburn University; Lucy M. Upshaw, Negro Home Demonstration Agent, Dallas County, “Supplement to Annual Report,” 1944, Box 367, Folder Dallas County Negro Reports 1943 – 1944, ACES, Auburn University.

²⁵ Luella C. Hanna, Assistant State Leader for Negro Work, Alabama “Home Demonstration Leader (Negro) Annual Report,” 1944, Box 357, Folder Annual Report, Negro Work 1944, ACES, Auburn University

black farmers to raise livestock, sell milk, preserve food at home, and market the surplus as a means to buy “clothing, home and farm equipment, farms and homes, and war bonds.”²⁶ Food production for market and for home consumption immediately benefitted farmers. Mr. and Mrs. U.G. Anderson, landowners in the Bogue Chitto area, owned six milk cows and shipped their milk daily to the cheese plant in Safford on the western edge of the county. This work brought them ninety dollars of additional income per month, \$1080 per year. For smaller farmers, the newly established Selma Canning plant added “another source of income to the county.” Its arrival gave farmers a local market to sell produce like snap beans, okra, and sweet potatoes.²⁷

Rural women partnered with their husbands to make their farms and homes self-sufficient. Demonstration agent Lucy Upshaw crisscrossed the county, instructing women in poultry-raising, gardening, food preservation, home dairying, and clothing projects. Young members of 4-H clubs also contributed, learning agricultural methods in service of the war. Upshaw encouraged rural boys and girls to take up poultry projects during the war, “so that their families could be assured of enough meat and eggs to fulfill their dietary needs first, then sell the surplus.”²⁸ When some of these 4-H members were featured on the Tuskegee

²⁶ S.W. Boynton, Negro County Agent, Dallas County, “Supplement to the Annual Report,” 1945, Box 368, Folder: Dallas, Annual Report, 1945, ACES, Auburn University.

²⁷ S.W. Boynton, Negro County Agent, Dallas County, “Supplement to Annual Report,” 1944, Box 367, Folder Dallas County Negro Reports 1943 – 1944, ACES, Auburn University.

²⁸ Lucy M. Upshaw, Negro Home Demonstration Agent, Dallas County, “Supplement to Annual Report,” 1944, Box 367, Folder Dallas County Negro Reports 1943 – 1944, ACES, Auburn University.

radio broadcast, the announcer declared “Dallas County 4-H girls are right on the firing line, backing up their parents who’re fighting on the home front.”²⁹

Black members of the extension service understood that mobilizing for freedom abroad and working for personal freedom at home were two-sides of the same struggle. Despite their contributions to the war effort, segregation still kept black Dallas County residents out of parks, swimming areas, and other entertainment. So as they had done with the Negro Community Center, rural club leaders decided to muster their own resources to buy land for an independent recreational area and 4-H camp for black residents. The 110-acre plot that they set their sights on was located 6 ½ miles out of Selma on Highway 80. With the help of county agent Boynton, these leaders turned again to their churches, community clubs, and organizations, the same connections they relied on for war mobilization.³⁰

In 1941, the Negro Farm Bureau and home demonstration council paid a one thousand dollar down payment on what became known as Joyland. Fundraising really took off when the Chesterfield Club, a prestigious group of black businessmen in Selma, adopted Joyland’s cause. With C.J. Adams at the helm, the Chesterfield Club brought in entertainers

²⁹4- H members also played an active role in local War Bond Drives. In their clubs, schools, and communities, 4-H boys and girls sold war bonds and stamps as well as purchasing them themselves. “We cannot give too much praise to the teachers of the schools and to the community and neighborhood leaders,” Boynton claimed, “for their part in organizing the boys and girls to work in the War Bond program”; Sixth in a Weekly Series of Negro Extension Service Programs, November 17, 1945, Box 392, Folder Radio Scripts 1942 – 43, ACES, Auburn University; S.W. Boynton, Negro County Agent, Dallas County, “Supplement to Annual Report,” 1944, Box 367, Folder Dallas County Negro Reports 1943 – 1944, ACES, Auburn University.

³⁰ Many of the rural people who were pivotal in Joyland’s purchase were the same people who chaired patriotic undertakings. J.A Williams from Beloit, B.J. Rountree of Burnsville, R.W. Harrison and Arthur Sanders from Orrville, David Peasant of Minter, Rev. A.T. Carson of Bogue Chitto, Jeff Thomas in Summerfield, and Emma Johnson in Marion Junction all served on Joyland’s central committee as well as organized bond drives in their communities; “Negro Recreational Program Perfected,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 26, 1941; “Negro 4-H Event to Attract Huge Crowd,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 20, 1944; “Negroes Seek \$125,000 Goal in Bond Drive,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 14, 1944.

for fundraising events and contributed personal donations. It took until August of 1944 for rural community leaders and businessmen to come up with the remaining portion of the mortgage, but Joyland's unveiling was scheduled for August 23rd.³¹ A bus left from the Negro Community Center at one in the afternoon, made another stop at the Reid Drug Store, and then delivered its passengers to Joyland. There, members from the rural clubs, societies, church lodges, and Sunday Schools, all of whom had helped raise funds, celebrated their accomplishment by setting the paid-in-full mortgage on fire.³²

Work, Fight, or Git'

Wartime shortages, however, made it difficult for black farmers and white landowners alike to farm as they wished. Military service and potential employment in wartime industries drained young men from the countryside, creating a severe shortage of manpower. Members of Dallas County's Negro Extension Service spoke about the pressing labor shortage. "Lack of labor caused our crops to suffer this year," Mildred Brown from the King's Landing community explained, "Some of the men left to work on defense jobs in Selma, Mobile, and Birmingham. Some were drafted." S.W. Boynton agreed that military service and war industries were to be blamed: "All young men on our farms are just about gone - many into the army, and others to cities for better employment." In order to compensate for the young men's absence, farm women stepped in to fill the need, taking up

³¹ S.W. Boynton, Negro County Agent, Dallas County; "Supplement to the Annual Report," Box 367, Folder Dallas County Negro Reports, 1943 – 1944, ACES, Auburn University; "Negro Rural Camp Fund Growing Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 22, 1942.

³² "Negroes Will Burn 4-H Club Mortgage," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 9, 1944; "Negro 4-H Event to Attract Huge Crowd," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 20, 1944.

larger portions of farm work as well as managing their homes. According to Mrs. Brown, “the women folks have tried to carry on our work of gardening, poultry raising, and food preservation, along with it the extra work on the farm. This has meant hard work and plenty of it.”³³ The 1945 Agricultural Census confirmed that the number of farms in operation had dropped since 1940, from 5,713 to 4,857. Black operators (the majority tenant farmers) made up 93.6% of those who had left the countryside.³⁴ D.J. Taylor, the white Emergency Farm Labor Assistant for Dallas County, estimated that a quarter of those who had left the farms had moved to Selma to work at the I. Lewis Manufacturing Company and the Zeigler Meat Processing plant, which had opened in 1941.³⁵

White landowners nervously watched as Dallas County’s young men left for military service and defense work. Although it was “undoubtedly true that the defense industrial boom is responsible in part for the drain upon farm labor,” the local newspaper observed, “the basic conditions go deeper than that.” Federal crop reduction programs had rained prosperity on large landowners, but during the Second World War, these beneficiaries found themselves in need of the same tenant farmers that had left for jobs in the cities when the New Deal left them landless. Prominent white farmers blamed relief programs for providing rural African Americans with, what the *Times-Journal* called, the “comparatively soft living made possible by wages far above their actual ability to produce.” According to them,

³³ “Shortages – Farm Labor,” Twentieth in Series of Negro Extension Service Monthly Reports, Nov. 3, 1942, Box 392, Folder Radio Scripts, 1942 – 43, ACES, Auburn University.

³⁴ Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Agriculture: 1945*, vol. 1, pt. 21, Statistics for Counties, Alabama, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1948), 22, 36.

³⁵ Robert Scott Hereford, “A Study of Selma and Dallas County, Alabama, 1930 – 1970” (M.A. Thesis, University of Georgia, 1992), 47.

laborers would never again be satisfied with the low-wages of agricultural work compared to “industry, the wage-hour law and the WPA for labor.”³⁶ When the farm worker shortage took on pressing proportions before the fall harvest, Dr. D.M. Walker, president of the Dallas County Farm Bureau, appealed directly to President Roosevelt. He argued that rural workers employed on non-defense related WPA projects were a serious dilemma and needed to be released for “the essential occupation of gathering crops which might do a great deal to decide the outcome of world conflict.”³⁷

By May 1942, the city council decided to reinstate Selma’s old vagrancy laws, mandating that all able-bodied men and women have employment or face vagrancy charges. When Mayor L.P. Burns asserted that “Plenty of jobs can be found now,” he unquestionably referred to agricultural work. After a meeting with WPA officials and white farmers, the mayor announced that the farmers had agreed to a wage scale of seventy-five cents for women and one dollar a day for men.³⁸ As in the First World War, prominent white citizens invoked patriotic duty as their primary motivation; yet they wielded harsh penalties in order to force black farm laborers to work for subpar wages. The local newspapers rallied to rid the city of idlers, adopting the slogan “work, fight, or git’.”³⁹ Area draft boards also addressed the problem by grouping all farmers into 2-C and 3-C groups and granting deferments to farmers who produced more than they consumed and sold the surplus to the

³⁶ “A New Problem for Farmers,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 16, 1941.

³⁷ “Farmers Look to WPA for Laborers,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 27, 1941.

³⁸ “Vagrancy Law to Be Invoked Here Shortly,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 12, 1942.

³⁹ “There is No Place for Drones In War,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 22, 1943.

war effort.⁴⁰ The practice lasted until the Selective Service ruled in March of 1944 that the Army - not agriculture - had priority in drafting eighteen to twenty-six year old men.⁴¹ Despite the shortages, white Dallas County citizens voted to turn down the use of German prisoners of war as harvest hands; although they cited feeding costs and inexperience, cheap black farm hands were still more compatible with the Black Belt's racially-tinged agricultural system than white enemies.⁴²

Cattle in the Cotton Fields

By 1944, the war's end hovered on the horizon. Landowners in Dallas County began reconsidering their agricultural priorities, and from a postwar perspective, the labor shortage looked more like a blessing than a curse. Between 1930 and 1960, a virtual revolution in agriculture took place in the Alabama Black Belt. Massive cotton plantations – thanks to demographics, markets, the credit system, and tradition - had reigned in Dallas County fields for over a century.⁴³ Large landowners and wholesale merchants saw little reason to abandon the lucrative enterprise that bolstered their personal wealth and power.⁴⁴ But with the onset of the Depression, black migration to industrial centers, and new federal agricultural programs, the equation changed drastically. The New Deal's AAA and Soil Conservation programs paid landowners cash to remove cotton acreage from production. These programs

⁴⁰ "Farmers Classified Under New System," *Selma Times-Journal*, December 7, 1942.

⁴¹ "Local Draft Boards Will Follow Policy of Army Preference," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 17, 1944.

⁴² "No War Prisoners Sought for Dallas," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 2, 1943.

⁴³ Hazel Latendress Stickney, "The Conversion from Cotton to Cattle Economy" (Ph.D. diss., Clark University, 1961), 41.

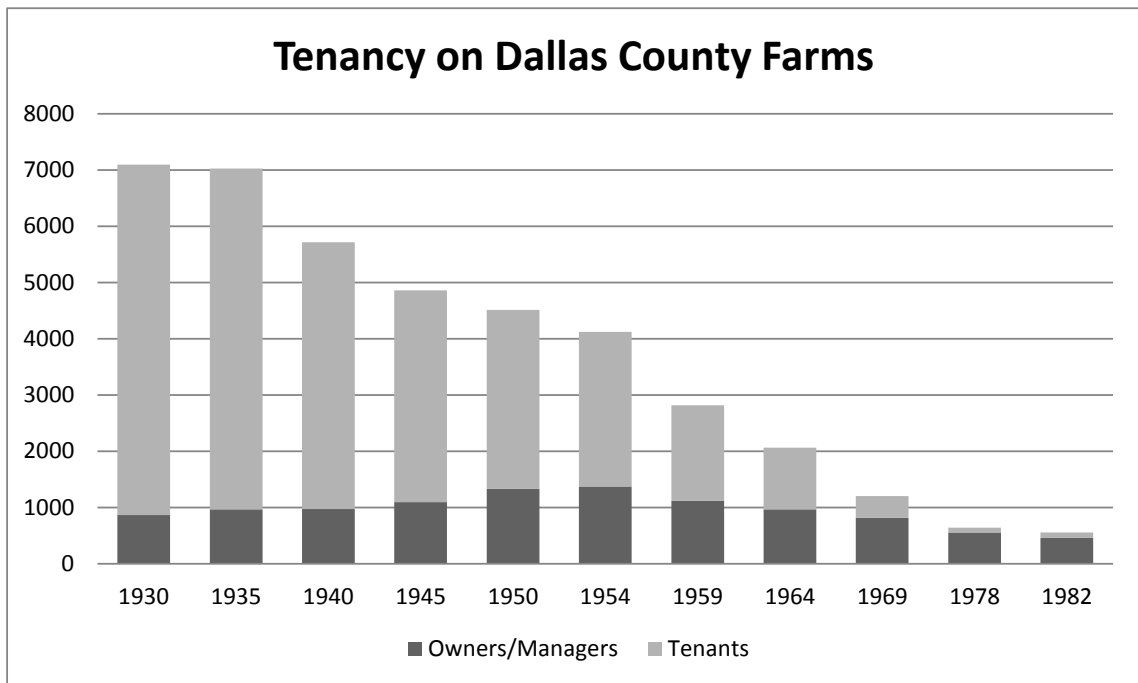
⁴⁴ Stickney, "The Conversion from Cotton to Cattle Economy," 157.

radically restructured the traditional ways of southern agriculture and brought dramatic consequences. Black tenant farmers found themselves without fields and homes as white landowners took tenant-operated lands out of production and pocketed the payments. As black labor became increasingly unnecessary, white landlords turned towards wage work and day labor agreements. This gave them the freedom to hire workers temporarily without providing black families even the meager acres, cabins, and supplies that had come with tenant arrangements.⁴⁵ As a result, the number of tenant-operated farms plummeted. In 1930, tenants operated 6,230 of Dallas County farms; in 1940, they operated 4,743; in 1945, the number dropped to 3,763; by 1950, tenants worked only 3,178 farms. In twenty years, 3,052 tenant farmers had abandoned their farms, and the rate of tenancy in Dallas County dropped from 87.8% to 70.5%.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ J.R. Otis, State Leader of Negro Work, "Changes in the Characteristics of the Type of Farming Areas in Alabama, 1880 – 1940," (unpublished thesis, 1949), Box 383, Folder J.R. Otis Thesis 1949, ACES, Auburn University.

⁴⁶ Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/>. (accessed February 21, 2013); Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Agriculture: 1950*, vol. 1, pt. 21, Counties and State Economic Areas, Alabama (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1952), 64 – 65.

Table 1: Tenancy on Dallas County Farms



But removing cotton fields from production did not mean that the land lay idle.

During the New Deal, the federal government embraced soil conservation programs as a way to prevent overproduction and build better soil. Suddenly, planting pasture grasses - perfect for livestock-raising - looked more lucrative than tending fields of cotton, and white Hereford cattle made their entrance into the former cotton kingdom.⁴⁷ In 1940, long-time county agent John Blake retired, just at the cusp of Dallas County's transition to cattle. Farmers and businessmen alike praised his foresight in spreading the gospel of diversification, home production, and pasture lands: "John Blake gave Dallas a head start over other sections of the state in dairying and then livestock production," reported the *Times-Journal*, "His chief reward has been witnessing the creation of a new agricultural empire

⁴⁷ Stickney, "The Conversion from Cotton to Cattle Economy," 2.

on the lush lime land of the Black Belt.”⁴⁸



Figure 21: A showing of white Hereford cattle just north of the intersection of Water Avenue and Broad Street in Selma during the 1940s attracts many interested bystanders. The Edmund Pettus Bridge is visible in the background. Courtesy of Billy Rosenberg Photograph Collection, Mishkan Israel.

The cattle industry in Dallas County flourished in conjunction with other local assets. The Black Belt Experiment Station in Marion Junction, on the county’s northern border, operated an extensive agricultural research program. Run by the Extension Service at Alabama Polytechnic, the station had opened in 1931 with the purpose of developing agricultural methods compatible with the Black Belt’s prairieland. Since the nineteenth century, farmers had struggled to keep Johnson grass, a tall perennial plant, from taking over cotton fields. Diversification and growing numbers of cattle changed the equation.⁴⁹ The

⁴⁸ “John Blake Closes an Era,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 10, 1940.

⁴⁹ Marion Junction began cultivating Johnson grass for commercial hay in the 1880s, and by 1910, the town shipped one train carload of hay to the county daily; Brooks Blevins, *Cattle in the Cotton Fields: A History of Cattle Raising in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 70.

Black Belt Experiment Station developed methods of pasturage fit to prairie soil, like Johnson grass, and gave beef cattle a boost in the region.⁵⁰ Cattle producers also benefited from a local market for their livestock. In 1929, the Selma Stockyards opened, providing a viable market for cattle. A decade later, the Zeigler Company built a meat packing plant next door to the Stockyard, which expanded beef producers selling grounds and helped meet wartime food demands.⁵¹ The cattle boom overtook the county so quickly that in 1942, the *Selma Times-Journal* felt confident asserting that “the livestock industry blossomed so magically that it soon challenged and ousted King Cotton as the leading money source of this section.”⁵²



Figure 22: New Selma Stockyard Facilities built in the 1940s in tandem with the growth of cattle-raising in the Black Belt. Courtesy of Alabama Chamber of Commerce Photograph Collection, ADAH.

⁵⁰ Stickney, “The Conversion from Cotton to Cattle Economy,” 159.

⁵¹ Stickney, “The Conversion from Cotton to Cattle Economy,” 158, 209, 227 – 228.

⁵² “There Was a Time,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 13, 1942.

The farm of Green Suttles, owner of the Selma Stockyards, highlighted the transition from cotton to cattle that started in the 1930s and finished by the mid-1960s. His original farm had over a thousand acres of land primarily planted in cotton. As the stockyards grew, Suttles shifted his operation towards cattle; the complementary setup allowed Suttles to purchase calves and hold them on his property to wait for better prices. In 1952, he purchased a three thousand acre property that came with forty-nine black families who raised cotton and corn on shares. During the first year, Suttles cleared the land by bulldozer, built fences, and prepared the property for livestock production. He changed the property's tenants from working on shares to a cash rent basis. Ten families left after the first year and others continued to trickle away thereafter. By 1960, Suttles' farm had 4,300 acres with only forty acres of cotton. Of the seventy-some tenant families who used to make their living on the land, only four remained; they worked under cash rent contracts and as one scholar described "just barely eke[d] out a living."⁵³ Purchasing thoroughbred cattle required financial resources that few but the largest landowners, like Green Suttles, possessed. Thus, the abundant capital and large landholdings that characterized Dallas County's cotton plantations also facilitated the transition to cattle.⁵⁴

Although handicapped by lack of financing and limited land ownership, some black farm owners managed to transition from cotton to the more profitable livestock industry.

⁵³ Stickney, "The Conversion from Cotton to Cattle Economy," 187 – 191.

⁵⁴Two of the earliest purebred cattle operations (already selling cattle shortly after World War I) in Dallas County included Bon Aire Farm, operated by Cecil Shuptrine in Safford. Then in Orrville, J.E. Dunaway ran West Dallas Farms in addition to his mercantile company and the Orrville Bank and Trust Co. He operated his 6,000 acres with Kentucky-born cattle buyer, Joe Lambert, raising both cattle and cotton; *Jersey Bulletin*, Vol. 1, 1920, p. 150 http://books.google.com/books?id=i5U5AQAAMAAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s; Blevins, *Cattle in the Cotton Fields*, 67; Stickney, "The Conversion from Cotton to Cattle Economy in the Alabama Black Belt," 201 – 206.

John Mitchell, a black farmer from the Beloit community twelve miles west of Selma, owned one hundred acres of land (“clear of debt”) on which his sixty-six cattle and purebred Hereford bull grazed. He made a visit to the Black Belt Experiment station upon starting out, to learn more about pastures and oats. Mitchell then sold his beef cattle at the Selma Stockyard when they held their regular sales. “I’m convinced that livestock is the salvation of the farmers in this section,” Mitchell said on the Negro Extension Service’s radio broadcast, “Since I’ve been raising cattle I’ve made more cash money from the sale of my cows each year than I have from cotton.”⁵⁵ Dairy cattle also offered smaller black farmers a means to supplement their incomes without the large acres necessary for beef production. Due to the stringent regulations that accompanied Grade A milk, Dallas County’s black farmers all produced Grade B milk, perfect for cheese making. Milk routes crossed the country picking up the farmers’ full cans of milk in the morning, delivering them to the cheese plant or condensory, and then returning the empty cans in the evening. A year-round money-making operation, milk provided black farmers with checks every two weeks.⁵⁶

The Chestnut Brothers - Preston, Mallory, and Frank, Jr. - ran an especially successful cattle business on their eight hundred acre farm in the Beloit community. Their father, Frank Chestnut, Sr., had bought the first forty acres of land with the money his father- a white man who owned a boarding house in Marion Junction - had given Frank Sr. before he died. In addition to providing for the needs of his family by raising livestock and

⁵⁵ Tenth in Series of Negro Extension Service Programs, “Livestock Program among Alabama Negro Farmers,” April 26, 1941, Box 391, Folder Radio Scripts, 1940 – 1941, ACES, Auburn University.

⁵⁶ “104th in a Weekly Series of Negro Extension Service Programs,” Box 392, Folder Radio Scripts 1947 – 8, ACES, Auburn University.

food, Frank Chestnut, Sr. taught his sons to be independent.⁵⁷ By the mid-1940s, the Chestnut brothers' dairy herd had over thirty cows and brought in \$300 - \$350 per month, enough to pay for a new dairy barn and four electric milkers. Most of the feed came from one hundred acres of "good lush improved pasture," where the Chestnut brothers kept oats, Caley peas, and frosted Johnson grass growing for winter grazing. The farm also had 125 beef cattle which brought in \$2,000 annually. "We have two tractors, a combine, and two hay balers which we use for custom work with neighbors when not in use on our farm," Preston Chestnut explained, "This brings in additional income." This family of astute businessmen divided the work of farm management; Preston was general manager of the farm and took care of financial dealings, Frank managed the beef herd and hired out machinery, and Mallory took charge of the dairy herd.⁵⁸ In addition to their farm, brother J.L. Chestnut, Sr. and Frank Chestnut Jr., operated a grocery store and meat market near Selma University.⁵⁹ The Chestnut brothers illustrated how black farmers with resources could make good on the Black Belt's agricultural potential to move from cotton to cattle.

For the majority of poor black tenant farmers, however, the shift to cattle production marked the end of their lives on the farm. Hand-picked cotton could be farmed equally well on small farms subdivided out to tenants or on large estates, but livestock-raising required large swaths of land for pasturage and feed. Beginning in the 1930s, farms in Dallas County grew in size as white landowners consolidated their holdings, and the New

⁵⁷ Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 26 – 27.

⁵⁸ "104th in a Weekly Series of Negro Extension Service Programs," Box 392, Folder Radio Scripts 1947 – 8, ACES, Auburn University.

⁵⁹ Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 29.

Deal helped remove tenant farmers from the land. By 1950, an average farm was 122.6 acres, more than double from the 48.4 average from twenty years earlier.⁶⁰

With the switch to cattle already pushing black tenants from the land, the mechanization of cotton following the end of wartime metal rationing compounded the revolution in progress. Landowners in Dallas County had dabbled in mechanization as early as the 1920s, but early tractors could not compete with the quality and accessibility of cheap black laborers' work. It was not until the mid-1940s that International Harvester and other farm implement companies perfected the work of mechanical cotton harvesting and attracted the serious interest of cotton producers.⁶¹ The war, however, channeled any excess metal into defense, and the white county agent admitted, "that it is very difficult to acquire new farm machinery."⁶² Mechanization came to the Alabama Black Belt only when production restrictions ended alongside of the war.⁶³ The postwar availability (and affordability) of cotton pickers directly threatened tenant farmers' tenure on the land. Mechanized pickers worked best on large plots of land that allowed operational costs to be

⁶⁰ Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Agriculture: 1935*, vol. 1, pt. 21, Statistics by Counties, Alabama (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1936), 624; Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Agriculture: 1950*, vol. 1, pt. 21, Counties and State Economic Areas, Alabama (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1952), 58 - 59.

⁶¹ Craig Heinicke and Wayne A Grove, "Machinery Has Completely Taken Over: The Diffusion of the Mechanical Cotton Picker, 1949 - 1964," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 39, no. 1 (Summer, 2008), 69.

⁶² Dallas County held its first tractor clinic, sponsored by tractor company representatives, in late 1943; F.A. Rew, "Farm Facts for the Farm Family," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 29, 1943.

⁶³ J.R. Otis, State Leader of Negro Work, "Changes in the Characteristics of the Type of Farming Areas in Alabama, 1880 - 1940," (unpublished thesis, 1949), Box 383, Folder J.R. Otis Thesis 1949, ACES.

distributed over more acres.⁶⁴ As the number of tractors increased on Dallas County farms, the number of tenant farmers went down.⁶⁵

In his 1946 annual report, S.W. Boynton laid out how the trend towards larger farms spelled doom for tenant farmers. Beef cattle required large acres of pasture land, and farm machinery allowed cotton growers to produce on a large scale; these changes, Boynton disclosed, meant “that many of the tenant farms are being closed out.”⁶⁶ J.C. Ford, state coordinator of Negro extension work, agreed. “A disproportionate number of the families that are being crowded off the farms are negroes; not being crowded off because they are negroes,” he explained, “but because they live in those areas of large plantations where tractors and the establishment of pastures and perennial hays are reducing the need for human labor.” Displaced families had nowhere to turn. Many left Dallas County and the rural areas and headed to cities to find employment. But, Ford made clear, “it is difficult for entire families, untrained for anything except the farm, to go to cities or towns and make their way.”⁶⁷ Amelia Boynton remembered how her husband had urged black farmers to buy land as a means of security: “‘The time will come, ladies and gentlemen,’ he would say, ‘when the only way you are going to stay on this white man’s place is to turn into a white-faced

⁶⁴ Craig Heinicke and Wayne A Grove, “‘Machinery Has Completely Taken Over’: The Diffusion of the Mechanical Cotton Picker, 1949 – 1964,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 39 (Summer, 2008), 70.

⁶⁵ Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Agriculture: 1945*, vol. 1, pt. 21, Statistics by Counties, Alabama (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1949), 36.

⁶⁶ S.W. Boynton, “Narrative Report of County Extension Agents,” 1946, Box 369, Folder Dallas, Annual Report 1946, ACES, Auburn University.

⁶⁷ J.C. Ford, Coordinator of Negro Work, “Annual Report of the Coordination of Negro Work, Alabama Extension Service,” 1940, Box 356, Folder, Annual Report – Negro Work 1940, ACES, Auburn University.

cow. Soon your farm will be turned into pastures or rented to the government and you will be turned out to graze elsewhere.”⁶⁸

By 1950, cotton had come to the end of a century-long reign in Dallas County. The fields that used to parade “cotton right up to the cabin door” now sprouted pastures with foraging white-faced Hereford cattle.⁶⁹ Cotton, however, had been more than just a crop; the puffy, white bolls forged the foundations of the economic, political, and social relationships in the Black Belt. Prominent white landlords, merchants, and professionals bolstered their economic and political dominance on the labor of underpaid and repressed black tenants. White supremacy in Dallas County grew from the cotton fields, and when cattle replaced black tenant farmers, the transformation shook the ramparts of Jim Crow segregation. Displacement forced many African Americans to leave for cities and the North; those that remained had purchased land, built businesses, and forged community connections that would grow stronger in coming years. When coupled with the nationally-mounting campaign for African American civil rights after the war, the Black Belt’s agricultural revolution set the stage for the fierce battle of local black citizens for political rights and the “good freedom” it promised.⁷⁰

Southern Segregation under Attack

⁶⁸ Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan*, 159.

⁶⁹ Stickney, “The Conversion from Cotton to Cattle,” 154; For more about the rural transformation taking place across the South after the war, see Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: the American South, 1920 – 1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

⁷⁰ Joanne Bland, “Growing up in the segregated south: Selma voting rights movement,” Winona Senior High School, Winona, Minnesota, n.d., Culture Clique, KQAL, Winona State University, <http://www.prx.org/pieces/59935>. (accessed November 19, 2012).

President Roosevelt envisioned the New Deal as bringing economic security and human decency to all American citizens in the midst of the Depression, and this purpose remade the Democratic Party. A burgeoning left wing composed of northern liberals, African Americans, labor organizers, and others, sought to build an inclusive, democratic United States. Even before the war began, the newest members had collided with the Democratic Party's southern and deeply segregationist roots. Roosevelt's naming of the South as "the nation's number one economic problem," increased white southerners' existing skepticism, especially as minimum wage bills and labor unions threatened their provincial control over black labor. World War II, as historian Patricia Sullivan explains, both heightened democratic movements rooted in the New Deal and provoked a fierce backlash and the conservative coalescing of southern Democrats.⁷¹

Since emancipation, the political power of white southern Democrats had depended on their tireless and often violent policing of the ballot box, but the 1940s challenged white southerners' control of the vote in ways unseen since Reconstruction. Within the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, the poll tax came to symbolize a fatal flaw in American democracy - a fraudulent tool of the privileged elite that disenfranchised blacks (and whites) at will.⁷² In September 1942, Congress passed the Soldier Voting Act, waiving poll tax requirements for American soldiers and undermining southern voting restrictions. White Dallas County citizens had seen the swarms of local black G.I.s shipping off to war and knew the threat their votes would continue to pose long after hostilities had ceased. Sam

⁷¹ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 42, 64 – 67.

⁷² Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 106 – 107.

Hobbs, a Selma native and Alabama congressman, deplored the bill as “an attack on [the] Southern way of life and on white supremacy.”⁷³ The *Selma Times-Journal* again turned to patriotism to defend the status quo of white supremacy. “Despite the need for national unity, New Deal crusaders persist in trying to make over the nation,” the paper indignantly protested, “and they now are well on the way to [the alienation of] a large majority of Southerners from the administration when their support is vital to the country’s welfare.”⁷⁴

The Supreme Court soon delivered another blow against white southerners’ feverish fight to keep African Americans away from the ballot. In their arsenal of disfranchisement tactics, white Democrats in the Deep South legally barred blacks from participating in primary elections, claiming that the Democratic Party was a private organization that could restrict membership as it wished. In 1944, the Supreme Court overturned the all-white primary in the *Smith v. Allwright* case, argued by the NAACP.⁷⁵ The decision provoked the wrath of white southerners, but before the smoke had settled, segregationists were already plotting their next move to keep the ballot box white.

State legislators, accepting that the Alabama Democratic Party would need to be at least nominally open to black voters, set out to construct voting requirements even more strict than those engrained in the 1901 Constitution. Passed in 1945, the Boswell Amendment required prospective voters to be “of good character,” who “understood the duties and obligations of good citizenship under a form of government,” and who could

⁷³ Sam Hobbs quoted in Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, “A War for States’ Rights: The White Supremacist Vision of Double Victory,” in *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012), 135.

⁷⁴ “Why Can’t They Leave Us Alone,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 2, 1942.

⁷⁵ Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, “A War for States’ Rights: The White Supremacist Vision of Double Victory,” in *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012), 139.

“read and write, understand and explain,” any section of the U.S. Constitution. The amendment vested overwhelming discretionary power in the three-member board of registrars, all of whom were appointed by the approval of the governor. In January of 1946, the Alabama Democratic Executive Committee lifted its ruling allowing only white people to vote in the primary and began campaigning for the ratification of the Boswell Amendment.⁷⁶ The *Times-Journal* drummed up support for the vote, obscuring nothing when it claimed that the amendment was “primarily for the purpose of protecting white supremacy at the polls in this state.”⁷⁷ Prominent landowner W.P. Molette joined in: “To the citizens of the Black Belt this amendment is imperative if we wish to continue to live in peace and good will with our Negro neighbors.”⁷⁸ In November 1946, Dallas County joined Alabama voters in ratifying the Boswell Amendment.⁷⁹ But their triumph was short lived. In 1948, ten black plaintiffs from Mobile charged that they were denied registration on account of their race. The U.S. Supreme Court agreed and ruled the Boswell Amendment unconstitutional shortly afterwards.⁸⁰

While liberal Democrats attacked the South’s cherished voting restrictions, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People aimed its sights on dismantling legal segregation and what Thurgood Marshall called “the fiction of separate but equal.” The lifeblood of the NAACP came from African American membership in branches

⁷⁶ Vera Chandler Foster, “Boswellianism: A Technique in the Restriction of Negro Voting,” *Phylon* Vol. 10, No. 1 (1st Quarter, 1949), 26 – 27.

⁷⁷ “The Boswell Amendment,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 24, 1946.

⁷⁸ W.P. Molette, letter to editor, *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 20, 1946.

⁷⁹ “County Votes Strongly for Boswell Plan,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 6, 1946.

⁸⁰ Foster, “Boswellianism,” 35 – 36.

throughout the country, and beginning in the 1930s, the national organization used local discrimination suits to build a broader attack on the institution of segregation. With growing liberal support for and attention to civil rights surrounding the war, the NAACP launched a multifaceted attack on the legal basis of separate but equal in schools, transportation, housing, and voting.⁸¹ Attorneys Charles Houston and Thurgood Marshall led the hard-fought crusade. With the whites-only primary already dismantled, the 1946 *Morgan v. Virginia* decision overturned enforced segregation on buses and trains that crossed state lines. Then in 1948, *Shelley v. Kraemer* struck down racially restrictive covenants in housing. In 1950, the NAACP won cases regarding segregation in higher education which would pave the way for the monumental *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954.⁸²

White southerners watched the growing campaign against segregation carefully and responded with a counterattack of their own. Education, primarily controlled at a state and local level, became a major playing field. With separate but equal as a guide, white Dallas County residents joined Alabamians in channeling hundreds of thousands of dollars into the long-neglected and sorely-underfunded public education system for African Americans. The NAACP grounded their earliest arguments against segregated education on the premise that separate but equal was a far cry from equal in everyday practice.⁸³ Following this line of thinking, white southerners reasoned that segregation could be preserved if they made good on increasing funding for and improving black schools.

⁸¹ Marshall quoted in Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 298 – 299.

⁸² “NAACP Legal History,” www.naacp.org/pages/naacp-legal-history. (accessed February 23, 2013). For an extensive study of the NAACP school desegregation campaign, see Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, 1975).

⁸³ Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 256 – 284.

Some of the first improvements ever to be made to Dallas County's black public schools occurred during the 1940s. In October 1940, the city school board used WPA funding to open an eleventh grade for black students at Knox Academy (even though the new classroom was equipped with the leftovers of the recently-closed Tremont Street white high school).⁸⁴ Two years later, the state legislature extended the black school session to eight months, a vast improvement from the three-or-four month terms typical of rural schools. The Dallas County Board of Education unpleasantly discovered that state funding would be withheld until "all colored schools of Dallas County" showed "150 teaching days."⁸⁵

The pinnacle of white Dallas County political and business leaders' campaign to equalize white and black education came in the form of new African American high schools. In February 1944, the city school board announced that it had applied for a \$150,000 direct grant from the Federal Works Agency to build a two-story, twenty classroom high school for African Americans.⁸⁶ White city leaders were especially pleased when the project acquired federal status, meaning that the only thing the city had to give was the property for the site.⁸⁷ Construction began on the high school, located just north of Selma University on Summerfield Road, in April 1948.⁸⁸ During the same period, the Dallas County Board of Education also built two new black high schools: Shiloh Junior High, two miles outside of

⁸⁴ "Eleventh Grade for Negro School Planned," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 4, 1940.

⁸⁵ "Session of Negro Schools Extended," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 25, 1943.

⁸⁶ "Negro School Funds Sought," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 20, 1944.

⁸⁷ "Negro High School is Federal Project," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 14, 1944.

⁸⁸ "Negro School Work Started," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 14, 1948.

Sardis on the south side of the Alabama River, and Keith School, the former Rosenwald school one mile outside of Orrville. The County acquired money for these projects from State Building Commission funds “designated for Negro School buildings.”⁸⁹ The *Times-Journal* praised the building campaign, claiming that “Dallas County will take enviable ranking with any in the nation as regards facilities for Negro education.”⁹⁰ Selma’s new R.B. Hudson High School – named for the esteemed principal of Clark Elementary School – opened its doors in May of 1949. Black teenagers now had a gym and auditorium, a cafeteria and library, science laboratories and shops, and new classrooms. But for all of white Selma’s sudden fuss about equality, one black resident was quick to point out that the concrete floors at R.B. Hudson High were still not as good as those over at the white Parrish High.⁹¹

White Dallas County residents’ sudden interest in quality black education clearly did not stem only from the goodness of their hearts. With attacks on segregation mounting, white southerners took concerted steps to bolster separate but equal. The *Times-Journal* laid out exactly how the new R.B. Hudson High sustained the social and political parameters of white supremacy: “If we are to maintain the principle of segregation, desired by both races, we must maintain comparative educational facilities. [...] The Negro high school students of Selma will have the most modern plant in the city after beginning of the next Fall term.” The editorial explained that this “should constitute proof that the citizens of Selma are in earnest about meeting their just obligation under a system they consider imperative for the welfare

⁸⁹ “County Board Let Contract For Two Negro High Schools,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 12, 1948.

⁹⁰ “Negro Education in Dallas County,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 14, 1948.

⁹¹ “Hundreds See Negro School Building Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 9, 1949.

of everyone concerned.” After years of blatantly underfunding black education, southerners were putting their money where their mouths were in the fight for segregation.⁹²

The education black students received in their updated but segregated classroom buildings, however, undermined the rule of white supremacy. When Knox Academy opened its eleventh grade, teacher John Shields was transferred to the WPA-sponsored adult literacy program to work with the senior high students. J.L. Chestnut, Jr. – son of the owner of Chestnut Brother’s Grocery and later to become Selma’s first black attorney – idolized Shields and his attacks on the “Southern way of life.” Shields would lecture his civics students on how segregation was designed to exploit black people for their labor and was, by no means, natural. Living by himself in a book-lined house on Broad Street, Shields pushed young black students in the 1940s to question how white supremacy limited their lives.⁹³ Student Louretta Wimberly remembered similar teaching taking place at R.B. Hudson High. Her teachers taught their students that they lived in a democratic country. “And they began to teach [...] that because you are an American citizen [...] you have certain inalienable rights. And they used to teach us those inalienable rights.” R.B. Hudson students also learned black history alongside the tenets of democracy.⁹⁴ The attempts of white southerners to equalize education in the 1940s and 1950s provided more resources for black educators to

⁹² “Proof of Good Intention,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 8, 1949; Harris Wofford, “A Preliminary Report on the Status of the Negro in Dallas County,” (Seminar Paper, Yale University, 1953), 27; For more on white southerners’ defense of white supremacy, see Kimberley S. Johnson, *Reforming Jim Crow: Southern Politics and State in the Age Before Brown*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010; Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: the Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936 – 1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

⁹³ Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 43 – 47.

⁹⁴ Louretta Wimberly, interview by author, Selma, Alabama, December 4, 2012.

challenge the underpinnings of white supremacy. Making changes to preserve the status quo would prove disastrous for local business and political leaders.

Just as money began flowing into black schools, the Fathers of St. Edmund, a group of white Catholic priests, arrived in Selma with a religious mission to serve and minister to the city's African American residents. The Fathers began a separate Catholic church, St. Elizabeth's Mission for the Colored, in 1937, right next door to the prominent Tabernacle Baptist Church on Broad Street. When a group of Catholic nuns from New York, the Sisters of St. Joseph, joined them in 1941, the Edmundite's mission work took off. Black children could attend the St. Elizabeth School or play basketball with the Don Bosco Boys Club. Father Zeiter adopted the rambunctious members of the Don Bosco Boys Club as his own, organizing sports teams, pushing them towards college, and simply believing in them. The



Figure 23: Members of the Don Bosco Boys Club playing ping pong, boxing, and relaxing in their club rooms, sponsored by the Fathers of St. Edmund. Courtesy of Edmundite Southern Missions Photograph Collection.

Edmundite's social outreach program fed and clothed the needy, and black elderly residents received care at the Fathers' nursing home. By 1944, the Sisters of St. Joseph had taken over the operation of the Good

Samaritan Hospital (locally known as "Good Sam"), where they tended to black patients and

later trained black nurses.⁹⁵ Etta Smith Perkins was one of the eleven members of the first practical nursing class in 1950. As a child, she had walked over to the Burwell Infirmary from her home near Selma University in the evenings to help take care of patients, and when she heard Good Sam was opening a nursing school for African Americans, she began what would become a lifelong career. Perkins named her first child after Sister Remegia, the nun who taught students how to care deeply for all their patients.⁹⁶

The Fathers of St. Edmund and the Sisters of St. Joseph did more than care for black residents; their presence gave African Americans somewhere to turn to outside of local racial customs. After returning from the service in World War II, Edwin Moss, a small-statured and animated man, began working as a production manager for the Fathers. Moss' father had run the Torch Motel, one of Selma's only hotels open to African Americans, and his shrewd business sense lived on in his son. In 1950, Edwin Moss partnered with the Fathers of St. Edmunds to open Selma's first black credit union. Because the city banks and their boards were deeply invested in white supremacy, African Americans couldn't get loans for their homes, cars, or anything in between. The Pride of Alabama Elks Lodge - the black fraternal order of which Edwin Moss was Exalted Ruler - agreed to charter the Elks Federal Credit Union when St. Elizabeth's Parish did not have the necessary number of members.⁹⁷ The credit union brought financial independence to Selma's black community. When black members found themselves unemployed and threatened with foreclosure, "we would take

⁹⁵ R. Bentley Anderson, "'A Sound Mind and A Sound Body': The Don Bosco Boys Club of Selma, Alabama, 1947 - 1964," *Journal of Ethnic History* 22 (Winter 2003), 52.

⁹⁶ Etta Perkins, interview by author, Selma, Alabama, December 14, 2011.

⁹⁷ "Third Credit Union Listed for Selma," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 17, 1960; Jeanette Berryman, "Moss: Voting is Key," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 6, 1981.

over the mortgages and keep them from losing their homes” Moss, the credit union’s longtime manager and treasurer, explained.

The Dixiecrat Revolt

While black residents in Selma garnered their resources, the growing storm clouds of civil rights continued to brew in Washington. On April 12, 1945, Franklin D. Roosevelt died, and Harry Truman became president on the eve of the war’s end. A year earlier, southern Democrats had used their political might to unseat the current vice president and avid New Dealer, Henry Wallace from his number two position. Harry Truman, a moderate Democratic senator from Missouri, supported the New Deal out of political expediency, not ideological passion. White southerners trusted Truman to moderate the strengthening liberal wing of the Democratic Party. However, demographics had shifted. While southern legislators maintained their seniority and power within Congress, the northern, urban, and liberal coalition in the party constituted a new majority in the years after the war. Truman’s success now depended as much on African Americans, organized labor, and New Deal liberals as it did on white southerners.

Henry Wallace made Truman’s task more difficult when he broke from the Democrats to run for the presidency under a third-party, the Progressive Party. His platform advocated the passage of a federal civil rights bill to enforce the 14th and 15th amendments and protect black citizens, in addition to reinvigorating New Deal reforms and ensuring economic security for Americans citizens. Wallace took his campaign south, speaking to

crowds on a non-segregated basis.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, Harry Truman pushed back against this direct threat. On February 2, 1948, Truman sent a message to Congress, calling for legislative action for civil rights. The move marked white southerners' declining influence in the Democratic Party. Never before had civil rights risen so high on the national agenda. White southerners exploded in outrage.⁹⁹ Ed Fields, editor of the *Selma Times-Journal* accused President Truman of being a "machine politician," labeling his civil rights message "an open challenge to many of the South's most cherished customs and traditions." He alleged that Truman had infuriated the Black Belt in ways "witnessed rarely since Reconstruction days."¹⁰⁰

This indignation only worsened when at the 1948 Democratic National Convention, delegates adopted a strong civil rights plank over the blatant opposition of the party's southern wing. Southern Democrats reconvened in Birmingham shortly thereafter and organized themselves as an insurgent wing of the party, the National States' Rights Party, commonly known as the Dixiecrats.¹⁰¹ Due to southern Democrats' significant political power in Congress, the Dixiecrats chose to draw their battle lines within instead of outside the party. The *Times-Journal* referred to the whole ordeal as "the Truman rape of the Democratic party."¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 228, 245.

⁹⁹ Perman, *Pursuit of Unity*, 261 – 265.

¹⁰⁰ "Political Perfidy," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 4, 1948.

¹⁰¹ Perman, *Pursuit of Unity*, 266 – 269; For more about the Dixiecrats' reaction against Truman and the Democrat Party, see William D. Barnard, *Dixiecrats and Democrats: Alabama Politics, 1942 – 1950* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1974); Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932 – 1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

¹⁰² "The Choice is Made," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 9, 1948.

Support for the Dixiecrat movement ran strong among Dallas County residents, especially among a powerful cadre of white landowners, businessmen, and professionals. Walter C. Givhan – a large planter from Safford, state legislator, and president of the Dallas County Farm Bureau – headed up the charge. Elected to the Alabama House in 1930, Givhan chaired the agricultural committee and fiercely watched out for the interests of wealthy landowners.¹⁰³ With Givhan at its helm, Dallas County’s tightly organized and influential Farm Bureau became a formidable supporter of Dixiecrat causes. Starting in 1948, the Dallas County Farm Bureau’s annual fall barbecue turned into a massive rally for defending states’ rights and segregation. Thousands of white members and guests from rural areas and surrounding counties flocked to the event. That year, Mississippi Governor Fielding L. Wright, running-mate of the States’ Rights presidential candidate and South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond, warned those gathered at Twilley’s Lake to “stand solid” in the general election or “endure a shameful period of social and economic exploitation.”¹⁰⁴ Truman won the 1948 election, but the Dixiecrat Rebellion, backed by individual white southerners and influential organizations like the Farm Bureau, laid the groundwork for future battles over segregation.

Industry Comes to the Alabama Black Belt

¹⁰³ “Senator Givhan Lands Six Committee Seats in State Legislature,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 12, 1955; For more about the Farm Bureau’s growing political influence in the 1950s, see Samuel Berger, *Dollar Harvest: the Story of the Farm Bureau* (Lexington, MA: Heath Lexington Books, 1971).

¹⁰⁴ Fielding quoted in “South Urged to Stand Solid in Talk by Wright,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 19, 1948.

White southerners' defense of segregation and states' rights unfolded alongside the agricultural and industrial revolution taking place across the South during the mid-twentieth century. Since the 1920s, southern states had courted northern industries largely as part of local boosterism and upbuilding efforts. Chambers of Commerce tempted industries southward with promises of cheap, non-unionized labor forces, tax exemptions and subsidies, and abundant natural resources.¹⁰⁵ As sociologist Morton Rubin found in his 1940s study of nearby Wilcox County, the typical factory located in plantation areas was owned by Northern managers "who like the South for its relatively cheap unorganized labor and the cooperation of local authorities in keeping out unions and recruiting labor."¹⁰⁶

Selma, as the economic center of the western Black Belt, readily jumped into the feverish competition for industry. Craig Air Force Base's arrival in 1940 was a major economic boon to Dallas County, and local business and civic leaders worked to add new private industries to their public defense luck. In 1941, an eastern-based cigar manufacturer arrived in town to conduct interviews with local women. Hunt Frasier, secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, emphasized that a cigar factory would help Selma achieve a balance between agriculture and industry and provide additional employment for farm people.¹⁰⁷ When the I. Lewis Cigar Manufacturing Company bought the old Sunset Textile Mill by Valley Creek, Mildred Mitchell, a former mill worker, recalled the deal: Hunt Frasier told

¹⁰⁵ James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: the Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936 – 1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 85 – 98.

¹⁰⁶ Morton Rubin, *Plantation County* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 85.

¹⁰⁷ "Cigar Factory Benefits for City Stressed," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 19, 1941.

Lewis that “the pay scale down here was \$0.15 an hour and he could get plenty of help for that pay and that was the pay scale that the Cigar Factory started the people to work at.”¹⁰⁸

As the mechanization of cotton and the turn to cattle pushed black laborers from the farms, labor-intensive, low-wage industries provided an alternative means of employment without challenging Dallas County’s economic status quo. In August 1944, the King Pharr Canning Plant began canning okra, peas, beans, spinach, and sweet potatoes at its new Selma plant.



Figure 24: African American employees inside King Pharr Canning Plant circa 1950. The three white employees seated in the right of the photograph are likely supervisors. Courtesy Billy Rosenberg Photograph Collection, Temple Mishkan Israel.

The company employed 165 black women to do the actual cutting of the okra and promised that as operations got under way, between twenty and twenty-five white women would be

¹⁰⁸ Mildred Mitchell, “California Cotton Mill Memories and Selma Historical Highlights,” (unpublished, Selma, Ala., 1990), 12.

needed for “labeling, inspecting, and other types of semi-skill duties.”¹⁰⁹ As in agricultural and other wage labor, white employers confined African Americans to the lowest paid, hardest, and dirtiest jobs. Industrial development did not affect the Black Belt’s valuation of underpaid African American workers. To the municipal leaders and the Chamber of Commerce, that made the King Pharr plant “an ideal acquisition.” It provided jobs for urban residents, a market for the rural population, and did nothing to upset Selma’s racial and economic status quo.¹¹⁰



Figure 25: White employees at King Pharr Canning Plant circa 1950s. The absence of any black employees in the picture highlights the racial divisions of labor within the plant. Courtesy of Billy Rosenberg Photograph Collection, Temple Mishkan Israel.

During the 1940s and earlier, the South’s racial conservatives, concerned with the maintenance of segregation, made common cause with the region’s economic conservatives

¹⁰⁹ “Okra Cut for Processing at Cannery Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 3, 1944.

¹¹⁰ “An Ideal Acquisition,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 6, 1944.

who were seeking to prevent federal interference in their private businesses. Federal wage standards, support for labor unions, and the threat of the Fair Employment Practices Committee all had challenged the racially-stratified labor practices of southern industries that helped keep wages low and unions out; meanwhile the Democratic Party's realignment towards civil rights provided a newly invigorated threat to southern segregation. Segregationist and economic conservatives joined together in what historian Glenn Feldman called "the great melding." By uniting against both racial and labor challenges, white southern businessmen, landowners, and civic leaders could resist "liberal' federal economic policies that also eroded white supremacy."¹¹¹ Doing so allowed southern Democrats to muster their forces in protection of "the region's distinctive and interlocking system of labor and racial control."¹¹²

Dallas County's white leaders did just that in their massive postwar industrial recruitment drive to "Secure Selma's Future."¹¹³ Walter C. Givhan best embodied these sentiments. Givhan's leadership helped transform the Dallas County Farm Bureau - an organization concerned with the economic interests of large farmers - into a vocal platform for segregationist causes. But protecting white supremacy also required Givhan to defend local control and individual priorities against federal intervention. In a letter, he told his constituents that the local and state Farm Bureau stood for "the freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom to work and operate our own business

¹¹¹ Glenn Feldman, "Southern Disillusionment with the Democratic Party: Cultural Conformity and 'the Great Melding' of Racial and Economic Conservatism in Alabama During World War II," *Journal of American Studies* 43 (2009), 201 – 207.

¹¹² Perman, *Pursuit of Unity*, 260.

¹¹³ "A Challenge to Every Selmian," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 14, 1945.

without interference from bureaucratic bureaus.”¹¹⁴ By claiming the freedom to operate businesses without interference, Givhan referred to the fiercely protected prerogatives of white southerners to pay lower wages to black workers and to operate free from the meddling of labor unions.

The Chamber of Commerce’s development program in the early 1950s looked to recruit “suitable industries to convert more of our abundant raw materials into the finished product.”¹¹⁵ The characteristics of these newly arrived industries suggested that “suitable” meant corporations that upheld the current racial and economic system; they provided low-wage employment for displaced black agricultural labor and countered any attempts at union organizing. In October 1950, the city gleefully welcomed the new southern branch of the Independent Lock Company to Selma. This development followed a successful local campaign to sell \$400,000 in industrial bonds to finance the construction of the new industry, which promised to employ three hundred workers and bring an annual payroll of \$750,000 to town.¹¹⁶ Three years later, however, a pending union vote at Independent Lock Company would cause the Chamber of Commerce to question the industry’s suitability for the city. As Dallas County and the Alabama Black Belt became increasingly integrated into a broader regional economy, those same developments undermined the fiercely protected local control of white officials as well as the system of white supremacy.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ W.C. Givhan, “Farm Success Based on Freedom,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 18, 1951.

¹¹⁵ Baker J. Turner, “Selma’s Progress Program,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 6, 1949.

¹¹⁶ “SELMA GETS LARGE INDUSTRY,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 15, 1950; “Congratulations,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 15, 1950.

¹¹⁷ “An Open Letter to the Employees of Independent Lock Company of Alabama: WHICH IS THE BETTER WAY?” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 6, 1953.

The Second World War marked a turning point for Dallas County; no longer did cotton single-handedly dictate the daily lives of its residents, and no longer was southern segregation secure from first national and then local challenges. War mobilization demanded the participation of all Americans, and African Americans across the nation again leveraged their patriotic service to expand the parameters of democracy. While black Americans and liberal Democrats partnered to dismantle segregation within the federal government, black residents in Dallas County strengthened their own community connections and bolstered their economic independence while supporting the war effort. Only a decade later, these efforts would grow into a frontal attack on local practices of white supremacy.

Meanwhile, the agricultural revolution rooted in the New Deal came to fruition in the Black Belt and replaced cotton fields and sharecropper shacks with pastures full of grazing white-faced cattle. For the first time, the cheap black labor that agricultural prosperity once depended on was rendered unnecessary. In the face of massive changes, white business leaders turned their focus towards industrial development in the postwar years, seeking to preserve the Black Belt's racial and economic status quo. That became increasingly difficult as the Democratic Party turned towards the civil rights agenda of its growing liberal wing. This development strengthened and unified the outrage of white southerners. The Dixiecrat movement brought together racial and economic conservatives concerned with curtailing federal intervention and bolstering white supremacy, but the accelerating changes in the Black Belt made it nearly impossible to maintain the tight-fisted provincialism of early days. By the early 1950s, the stage was set for the civil rights and segregationist battles that would unfold over the next decade and a half.

INTERLUDE 5: “I LIKE IKE”

Smarting from their defeat in the 1948 presidential election, white southerners turned their attention towards 1952, determined this time to stand firm against the liberal integrationists who seemed to be taking over. Battle plans began early in Dallas County with Farm Bureau president and state senator Walter C. Givhan leading the way. For the Farm Bureau’s 1951 annual barbecue, Givhan arranged for Senator Harry Byrd, an ardent states’ rights supporter and high-profile legislator from Virginia, to address the throngs of white farmers and business attendees. Dixiecrat leaders, eyeing the upcoming presidential election, decided that the Dallas County barbecue was the ideal event around which to bring southern Democrats together. After Byrd’s address, States’ Righters would gather at a conference to draft campaign plans. Givhan adamantly maintained that the Farm Bureau did not take an active role in politics, but the facts clearly suggested otherwise.¹

White supremacy had deep roots in the Black Belt. Montgomery’s *Alabama Journal* predicted that the spirits of Selma’s late senators, John Tyler Morgan and Edmund Winston Pettus, would be smiling about the upcoming gathering. The senators’ “loyalty to the United States Constitution’s principles of state’s rights and [...] guarantee against federal dictation in local affairs,” claimed the editorial, motivated their support of the “Confederacy’s protest against centralized tyrannies.”² Racial motivations lay barely under the surface of southern Democrats’ allegiance to states’ rights. As historian Glenda Gilmore observed, “Grown-up

¹ “Opportunity Knocks,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 9, 1951.

² “Where Morgan and Pettus Rest,” editorial from *The Alabama Journal*, published in *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 29, 1951.

white Southerners had always known that Dixie depended on localism, on their right to be left alone to manage their unique ‘Negro Problem.’”³

The Farm Bureau, with the Chamber of Commerce’s assistance, spent all of October preparing to welcome five thousand people including notable politicians and governors from half a dozen southern states.⁴ Rain poured down on the morning of the barbecue, but the wet weather did not stop crowds of white citizens from packing the bleachers of Memorial Stadium. In front of the Farm Bureau gathering, Senator Byrd castigated the Truman administration and called for an “immediate uprising of political virility in the South” to reclaim the Democratic party.⁵ Afterwards, the thousands of attendees feasted on barbecue (seventy-seven hogs worth) prepared by a small army of workers on pits behind right field.⁶ The Dixie Democrats of Alabama reconvened in the courthouse later that afternoon for the explicitly political portion of the day. Although missing what the newspaper called “the high brass of the party,” they adopted a manifesto calling for “re-emphasis [on] local state government, restoration of the courts and Congress to their rightful place in government and a limit on federal taxation.”⁷

Other white southerners turned their hopes in a different direction: General Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Republican Party. They saw the revered hero of World War II as a true leader, one whose “concept of Americanism” and “executive ability” would bring an

³ Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919 – 1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008), 3.

⁴ “States Righters May Form Plans for Battle Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 12, 1951; “Half-Dozen Governors Expected for Talk by Senator Byrd Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 14, 1951.

⁵ Harry Byrd quoted in “Byrd Calls for Political Virility in South,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 1, 1941.

⁶ “Barbecue Spectacle,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 1, 1941.

⁷ “State Democratic Group Formed at Session Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 2, 1941.

end to the recent upheavals in Washington. As Democratic loyalists since the Civil War, the willingness of white southerners to now consider the Republican Party marked an enormous ideological shift. While the Farm Bureau prepared for its states' rights guests in October 1951, the *Selma Times-Journal* published an open letter to Eisenhower. "Ike, the people of the United States as a whole want you for their next President," the letter declared. "This is especially true of the honest, patriotic, 'fighting' South. They want you for President Ike, because our great nation desperately needs a leader."⁸

Despite deep historical roots, the shifting political landscape of the postwar period pushed white southerners to question which party would best protect their priorities and where their loyalties should be. When Eisenhower announced his candidacy for president in January 1952, the *Times-Journal* swore its allegiance to him.⁹ The local newspaper spoke for many white Dallas County residents when it affirmed that Eisenhower "would make a great President along the lines of moderation and a sharp Southern reversal of allegiance would serve to teach Democratic radicals that they cannot hope to continue in power indefinitely without conceding due respect to the once Solid South."¹⁰ Republican enthusiasm flourished in Dallas County. Eisenhower's calls for decency and limits in government appealed to white citizens, and when he urged local control for the FEPC, they deemed him a protector of states' rights. In their eyes, he was "a Democrat of the old school."¹¹ Harry Truman's announcement in May that he would not run for re-election did nothing to stem this change

⁸ The Selma Times-Journal, "Open Letter to General Eisenhower," *Selma Times Journal*, Oct. 16, 1951.

⁹ "It Looks Like Ike for Us," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 8, 1952.

¹⁰ "South's Last Candidate Hope Lost," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 7, 1952.

¹¹ "Ike Delivers the Goods," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 6, 1952.

of heart.¹² In July, three hundred of Dallas County's former Democratic voters pledged their support to Ike in a telegram prior to the Republican National Convention."¹³

After Eisenhower secured the Republican nomination, a contingent of citizens organized themselves as the Dallas County Citizens for Eisenhower. The group, under the direction of attorney William B. Craig, chose not to affiliate with the national Republican Party. Instead, it focused its attention on "dissident Democrats" frustrated by "mismanagement and corruption in Washington and abuse of the South by national party leaders."¹⁴ Attorneys Edgar A. Stewart and A.T. Reeves, along with cotton merchant Charles Hohenberg, headed up the speakers committee, while Mrs. Mortimer P. Ames and Mrs. James Kenan took charge of the women's campaign. Sub-committees of women organized transportation to the polls and baby sitters so mothers could cast their vote for Eisenhower.¹⁵ A photograph of Libba Kenan Buchanan and Pat Cammack graced the pages of the *Times-Journal*, after they attended an Eisenhower rally in Birmingham. Their smiles shone above a "Dallas County Likes Ike," sign stuck to the side of their car. Buchanan worked as a secretary in the local headquarters, while Cammack "did yeoman service" drumming up support.¹⁶

Excitement ran high in the weeks leading up to the presidential showdown between Eisenhower and Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson. Local Eisenhower advertisements

¹² "Truman Will Not Run for Re-Election," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 30, 1952.

¹³ "More Than 300 Former Democrats Sign Dallas County Pledge to Support Ike," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 6, 1952.

¹⁴ "Eisenhower Banner Raised," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 31, 1952.

¹⁵ "Ike Supporters Open Local Headquarter," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 28, 1952.

¹⁶ "Still Like Ike," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 5, 1952.

urged voters to “Put Patriotism above Party! Principles above Politics!”¹⁷ Sample ballots circulated amongst white Selma citizens, instructing voters how to vote a split ticket. “DO NOT mark in the circles below party emblems unless you want to ‘vote her straight,’” the *Times-Journal* warned. It was the first time white voters had ever needed to know how to vote anything other than Democratic.¹⁸

For the first time since Reconstruction, Dallas County joined the Republican column on Tuesday, November 4, and Dwight D. Eisenhower won a resounding national victory. A 464 vote-majority secured the county for Ike and made Dallas the only county in Alabama’s Fourth Congressional District to desert Democratic ranks. Long before white southerners en masse abandoned the Democratic Party during and after the civil rights movement, Dallas County’s white residents keenly understood where their loyalties lay in the new political landscape. The majority of the county’s citizens, reported the *Times-Journal*, “have discerned that the Republican leadership of today comes closer to upholding their political traditions than does the Democracy of northern bosses and radical minorities.” It projected that other Alabama counties would fall in line, as serious thinking would “make clear the fallacy of following a stolen party label which our grandfathers would have repudiated even quicker than they seceded from the Union.”¹⁹

In December of 1952, President-Elect Eisenhower wrote a thank you letter to the *Selma Times-Journal*, expressing “my deep personal gratitude for the outstanding work you did

¹⁷ “Why thousands of life-long Democrats have become Democrats for Eisenhower,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 28, 1952.

¹⁸ “How to Vote a Split Ticket,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 2, 1952.

¹⁹ “Eisenhower Elected by Landslide Ballot: Dallas County Joins in Procession to Ike,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 5, 1952; “Ironic Political Twist,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 14, 1952.

on behalf of our campaign.” On election night, he claimed, “we won the right and the high privilege to embark upon the Crusade to which you and I had pledged ourselves.”²⁰

Eisenhower failed to detail what that “crusade” entailed, but white Dallas County citizens understood it as a formidable defense of states’ rights, limited federal government intervention, and the protection of segregation. White southerners entered the 1950s more confident that the federal government was again on their side.

²⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower, letter to editor, *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 7, 1952.

CHAPTER 5: SEGREGATION'S LAST STAND: EQUALITY, INDUSTRIAL EXPANSION, AND IMAGE, 1953 – 1964

In the early 1950s, a white law student from Harvard University arrived in Selma to study the “status of the Negro in Dallas County.” Harris Wofford, who would later become a U.S. senator, had been stationed at Craig Field in the mid-forties. He had formed close relationships with two white families from Marion Junction during his time in the Air Force, but he had never known African Americans as anyone other than servants or farm hands - that is until he returned five years later to ask them about their lives. He also questioned white officials and business people about local race relations. The white woman working at the Chamber of Commerce spared nothing when she described Selma as “a nigger heaven.” But when the young law student repeated that assessment to a black resident, the African American woman got tears in her eyes. “God help me from heaven, if Selma is a Negro heaven,” she said.¹ This irreconcilable disconnect between the white and black woman’s perception became the defining battle of the postwar years in Dallas County.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the beginning of an unprecedented attack on the South’s white supremacist order. In response, southern politicians united to fight against the Democratic Party’s meddling in the affairs of southern states, while white southerners closed ranks in defense of segregation. But the racial skirmishes taking place in Washington immediately after the war spread into Dallas County during the 1950s. In Selma, African Americans drew on the relationships forged through

¹ Harris Wofford, “A Preliminary Report on the Status of the Negro in Dallas County, Alabama,” (Seminar Paper, Yale Law School 1953), 1-2.

farm, church, school, and community associations to mount an increasingly forceful attack on the bulwarks of white supremacy. Bolstered by black protest campaigns escalating across the South, black citizens demanded better jobs, greater dignity, equal funding in education, and the right to vote. Meanwhile, white Dallas County citizens, shocked by the homegrown civil rights campaigns emerging in their own backyards, did their best to preserve and protect segregation. Thousands of white men joined the local White Citizens' Council in the furious aftermath of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that theoretically struck down separate but equal. Citizens' Council members – connected through civic clubs, the Farm Bureau, and the Chamber of Commerce – used economic intimidation to fight any and all dissidents and defend Jim Crow.

At the same time that white supremacy was coming under fire, the Black Belt faced a new economic order where industrial development supplanted the waning plantation economy. As cattle took over the cotton fields, black tenant farmers found themselves without work or homes. Selma's business and political leaders turned their hopes towards attracting industries that would create jobs and bring prestige, but also preserve the racial and economic status quo. The Chamber of Commerce's development strategy sold the area's cheap labor and resources, low taxes, and anti-union climate to industries seeking to relocate. Such a strategy depended on a harmonious image of Selma as a city united towards progress and free from racial and labor unrest. In a period when black residents increasingly pushed back against the dictates of Jim Crow and local workers struck for better wages and benefits, white political and business leaders desperately worked to control and contain visible discontent in the name of industrial development. Quieting internal and external disagreements, however, strained relationships among white officials. From the divisions, a

young white appliance salesman, Joseph T. Smitherman, emerged to usher in a new political order forged in the fires of the African American civil rights movement.

N.A.A.C.P. and the White Citizens' Council

In the spring of 1953, the wife of a white airman at Craig Field reported that a black man had broken into her house on First Avenue.² With a mask covering everything except his eyes, he held a knife to her neck, she claimed, and then raped her.³ One month later, the daughter of Selma mayor Chris Heinz awoke to find a black man with a butcher's knife standing in her bedroom. Jean Rockwell's husband was downtown, working at his job as a pharmacist at Carter's Drug Co., and her two children were asleep in their Mabry Street home while Mrs. Rockwell fought off what the *Times-Journal* called a "rape attempt." She survived uninjured although she reportedly "suffered shock following the terrifying experiences."⁴

White Selma erupted in panic. In his 1944 study *American Dilemma*, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal observed that sex was "the principle around which the whole structure of segregation of the Negroes [...] is organized."⁵ White men ruled over the South's racial and sexual caste system, and their powerful position allowed them to sexually assault black women with no penalty. The social order did not work in the same way for

²² "Several Held in Rape Probe," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 22, 1953

³ J.L. Chestnut and Julia Cass, *Black In Selma: The Uncommon Life of J.L. Chestnut, Jr.* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 72.

⁴ "Attack Foiled by Young Mother in Bout With Negro," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 26, 1953.

⁵ Gunnar Myrdal, *American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 587.

black men. White women were the pristine symbol of the white man's patriarchal control and supremacy. If a black man approached a white woman, he took his life in his hands. As historian Timothy Tyson described it, "the much-traveled sexual backroad between the races was clearly marked 'one way.'"⁶

Night after night that May, Selma residents reported black prowlers lurking at their windows and in their alleyways.⁷ Black businessman, Preston Chestnut, called his nephew J.L., who was studying law at Howard University, with the updates; "The police were getting five or six calls a night – "There's a nigger in my house! I saw him! I saw him!" – from white women all over Selma." The police eventually arrested William Fikes, a black employee of Owen's Pan-Am Service Station in Marion, who they found in an alleyway on the edges of the white side of Selma.⁸

After being subjected to twenty-four hours of "continuous grilling" by law enforcement officers, Fikes admitted to attacking Mayor Heinz's daughter.⁹ Police captain Wilson Baker secured Fikes' full confession for all crimes one week later after a nine-hour questioning session at Kilby Prison.¹⁰ White Selma attorneys Sam Earle Hobbs and Hugh S.D. Mallory were assigned to defend Fikes against two of Alabama's most serious capital charges - rape and attempted rape.¹¹ Although the defense questioned their clients'

⁶ Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 93 – 94.

⁷ "Prowler Escapes After Effort to Enter Residence," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 10, 1953.

⁸ Chestnut and Cass, *Black In Selma*, 72 – 73.

⁹ "Negro Confesses to Prowl Attacks Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 19, 1953.

¹⁰ Arthur Capell, "Negro Held at Prison Confesses Rape Guilt and Other Raids Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 24, 1953.

¹¹ Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 73.

confession, his guilt, and his sanity, the all-white jury found Fikes guilty. To the shock and dismay of white Selma citizens, however, the jury chose 99-years of imprisonment instead of the death penalty.¹²

Local black activists, along with the rest of Selma's African Americans, paid close attention to the uproar and subsequent trial. Since the 1930s, the small, but dedicated Dallas County Voter's League had been meeting in S.W. and Amelia Boynton's insurance office. Their efforts to secure political rights and economic independence for black residents attracted the attention of white citizens. Through his work as the Negro county agent, S.W. Boynton had encouraged black rural residents to buy land and strive towards self-sufficiency. But in 1951, he resigned after increasing white pressure made it clear that he could not continue his political work in a public position.¹³ Longtime activist and DCVL president, C.J. Adams was also targeted for his unwillingness to respect the rules of white supremacy. In 1949, he received a year-long prison sentence for allegedly notarizing false documents. When Adams got out of prison, the man who would become Selma's first black attorney later remembered, he was "old, sick tired, [and] had had enough of Selma." He left shortly after in J.L. Chestnut's car, heading north to spend the rest of his days with family in Detroit.¹⁴

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in the years before the Fikes trial, had been reaching out to local communities across the South, looking for members, plaintiffs, and funding for its legal attack on segregation. The civil rights

¹² Three psychiatrists from Tuskegee gave expert testimony that Fikes was schizophrenic; "Life Term Given Negro By Jurors at Rape Hearing," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 25, 1953; J. Mill Thornton, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 388.

¹³ Amelia Platts Boynton Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan*, (Washington, D.C.: Schiller Institute, 1991), 163, 176 – 182.

¹⁴ "Notary Public Gets Sentence to Prison," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 29, 1949; Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 53.

agenda of the NAACP complemented the Voter's League's mission, and S.W. Boynton along with World War II veterans, J.D. Hunter and Ernest Doyle, reconvened the long inactive local chapter of the NAACP. By 1952, the Selma branch had 102 members, and the Fikes trial rounded up even more supporters.¹⁵ Boynton pounded the black church circuit in Selma Sunday after Sunday, trying to raise funds to bring in two lawyers from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund for Fikes' defense.¹⁶

When black NAACP attorneys, Peter Hall and Orzell Billingsley, walked into the Circuit Clerk's office to request an insanity hearing for William Fikes, the battle over civil rights became a local reality in Selma.¹⁷ Never before had black lawyers tried a case in a Dallas County courtroom, and white citizens viewed their arrival in town in horror.¹⁸ Hall and Billingsley did not intend to just fight Fikes' indictment but to take on the injustice of the system itself. They called over 50 witnesses, many of them upstanding middle-class black citizens, to substantiate their case that Negroes were systematically excluded from the jury. Publicly testifying on the side of NAACP attorneys in the courthouse was about the riskiest thing a black man could do in Dallas County; those that stood witness were longtime race men with independent incomes. Along with S.W. Boynton, Tom Moss and McKinley Jackson were farmers active in the Extension Service; veteran Mark Thomas ran a well-

¹⁵ "Report of the Secretary for the Month of April 1953," Board of Directors Meeting, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, May 11, 1953, NAACP Papers, Part 1, Supplement, 1951 – 1955, Secretary's reports, ProQuest History Vault.

¹⁶ Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 74.

¹⁷ "Fikes Attorneys File Motion for Insanity Probes," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 23, 1953

¹⁸ Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 74.

known grocery before retiring to cattle farming, and J.D Hunter of the local NAACP chapter earned his living as a minister and insurance agent.¹⁹

Attorneys Hall and Billingsley succeeded in forcing the jury commission to comply with state law after they supplied compelling evidence that the rolls were nearly void of black names. But despite the inclusion of more African Americans, the white courthouse crowd made sure that the selected retrial jury was still entirely white. Neither black nor white residents were surprised when the all-white jury then returned a guilty verdict and a sentence of death in less than an hour.²⁰ The Fikes trial brought civil rights to Selma, and it marked the beginning of black residents' mounting challenge and white residents' concerted defense of white supremacy. As J.L. Chestnut remembered, black people brought their children to the trial to "see black men who weren't bowing or Uncle Tom-ing in the presence of important white people."²¹

Nationally, the NAACP also made headlines as the Supreme Court weighed in on the fate of segregation. Over the last three decades, the NAACP had built legal precedents against segregated schooling, beginning with graduate programs and slowly working down to elementary schools. White southerners, seeing the writing on the wall, countered with a massive equalization campaign. By building new schools, like Selma's R.B. Hudson High

¹⁹ "Court Hears Motions by Fikes Defense Lawyers," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 1, 1953; "Hearing on Motions Forces Delay of Fikes Trial," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 4, 1953.

²⁰ From there, the Fikes case went to Alabama Supreme Court, which affirmed the lower courts sentence. The NAACP then appealed the case to the U.S. Supreme Court, and it reversed the decision in January 1957. However, the earlier 99-year prison sentence still stood, and Fikes served 21 years before J.L. Chestnut convinced a federal district judge to overturn it; Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 388- 389.

²¹ Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 78.

School, they attempted to inject the appearance of equality into segregated education.²² In the lead up to the court's ruling, local Farm Bureau president and state senator Walter C. Givhan expressed fierce opposition to any "breakdown of our traditional segregation policy." A federal outlawing of segregation, he threatened, would force white southerners to turn to racially-exclusive, private schools, given that "the people of Alabama are grimly determined to preserve our way of life, and to maintain home control of our educational program."²³ But on May 17, 1954, the Court unanimously overturned the doctrine of separate but equal in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

As white Dallas County citizens worriedly witnessed the growing affronts to white supremacy, some of the most vehement segregationists moved to organize an all-out battle for the preservation of the status quo.²⁴ Five months after the *Brown* decision and two weeks after Alabama's NAACP delegates held a three-day conference in Selma, the Dallas County White Citizens' Council (WCC) publicly revealed its existence.²⁵ White planters and businessmen in Indianola, Mississippi had formed the first Citizens' Council in the wake of

²² Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936 – 1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 124.

²³ Letter to Editor, Walter C. Givhan to Governor Gordon Persons, *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 10, 1953

²⁴ "Serious Concern Created Here by Segregation Ban," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 18, 1954.

²⁵ Just five months after the *Brown* decision, NAACP representatives from across Alabama descended on Selma for the organization's statewide conference. The three-day event brought national leaders, including executive secretary Walter White, Constance B. Motley and Thurgood Marshall of legal defense to town. Meeting in Tabernacle and First Baptist Churches, delegates resolved to wipe out segregation from all areas of existence in Alabama. Local branches adopted the "principle of first class citizenship for all citizens," and agreed to organize voter registration drives and keep records of police brutality. Additionally, the crowd applauded S.W. Boynton for his "courage in the face of intimidation" as a defense witness in the Fikes trial; NAACP Will Hold Sessions in City," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 11, 1954; "Segregation Ban Sought by NAACP," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 14, 1954; "NAACP Promises Legal Fight to 'Open' Alabama," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 15, 1954.

the *Brown* decision, and from that beginning, chapters spread like kudzu across the South.²⁶ The organization promised to defend racial segregation through the legal but effective tactic of “economic pressure.” Alston Keith, attorney and chairman of the Dallas County Democratic Executive Committee, was the spokesman for the local council. Distancing the new organization from the Klan, he explained to a reporter that members were not “anti-Negro” nor “vigilantes.” The WCC only vowed “to make it difficult, if not impossible, for any Negro who advocates de-segregation to find and hold a job, get credit, or renew a mortgage.”²⁷

On the night of November 29, 1954, nearly 1,200 “Black Belt farmers, merchants, bankers, professional men and public officeholders” filled the auditorium of the Selma Junior High School for the first Citizens’ Council meeting. After listening to the WCC’s “plans for applying economic pressure to Negro advocates of integration,” over six hundred white men paid the three dollar membership fee at the meeting’s end, bringing the chapter’s total membership to a reported eight hundred.²⁸ Historian Numan Bartley highlighted how the Alabama Citizens’ Council movement “was deeply intertwined with much of the black-belt power structure,” and nowhere was this more apparent than in Selma.²⁹ Mayor Chris Heinz and Probate Judge Bernard Reynolds co-chaired the WCC nominating committee that selected officers; Senator Walter Givhan served as chairman to the local and later State

²⁶ Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 160.

²⁷ Women were not be allowed to join “because we feel that it is a job for men,” as Keith explained; “Group Reveal Plan of Defense for Segregation,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 28, 1954.

²⁸ “Large Crowd Present as Council Organizes to Defend Segregation,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 30, 1954.

²⁹ Numan Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950’s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 88.

Council; additionally Ed Fields, editor of the *Selma Times-Journal*, Jim O. Risher, wealthy cattle rancher, Circuit Judge James Hare, and Aubrey Allen, who was in charge of agricultural loans at City National Bank, represented the upstanding men the organization attracted.³⁰

The Citizens' Council quickly became the arbiter of public opinion and municipal politics in Dallas County, as well as one of the strongest chapters in the state. Membership was all but required for political advancement and business success. The WCC even sent questionnaires to local candidates, assessing their stand on integration.³¹ The council's public events brought well-known segregationist speakers to drum up excitement for white supremacy in front of large crowds. Practices of economic reprisal took place behind the scenes, ready to be applied to whites who stepped out of line as well as African Americans.³² Meanwhile, the frank promotion of economic intimidation all but disappeared from public discussion. The change indicated the WCC leadership's evolving understanding of segregationist respectability. Only six months after its birth, Alston Keith explained that the council's tactics boiled down to "nothing more than simply sitting down with the recognized Negro leaders, who have the best interests of their race at heart, talking over our mutual problems and working out a peaceable solution beneficial to both races."³³

On the surface, the Citizens' Council's formidable presence seemed a testimony to the monolithic support of white residents, but differences between die-hard segregationists

³⁰ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 399 – 400.

³¹ Mercer Helms, "Candidates Back Council Policies by Poll Answers," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 24, 1958.

³² "Patterson Warns of Mongrel Race Before WCC Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 1, 1955.

³³ Alston Keith quote in "Citizens Council Head Hits Charge of Editor Carter," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 8, 1955

and more moderate whites simmered below. In June of 1955, over five thousand white residents filled Memorial Stadium to hear former Georgia Governor Herman Talmadge root for segregation and local self-government. It was the first mass meeting of the Citizens' Council that welcomed men, women, and teenagers alike.³⁴

Joseph Knight sat in the audience, a young marine freshly home from the Korean War. His mother had “dragged” him to the event that promised to be both the political and social event of the season. The segregationist tirade disgusted Knight. He had grown up in rural Hazen in Dallas County where unequal yet intimate relationships existed between black and white residents, and he had just returned from service in an integrated military. On the car ride home, he pleaded with his mother that what had just occurred wasn't right, and she agreed. When they passed two black servicemen in Selma waiting for a bus to Craig Field, she pulled over and asked “Do you boys need a ride?”³⁵

People like the Knights, the Rev. E.W. Gamble and his family, librarian Patricia Blalock, and others made up a contingent of moderate whites for whom the harsh edges of segregation rubbed hard against their recognition of humanity across the color line.³⁶ However, as southern political leaders and the WCC gathered forces to defend segregation, the possibility of public dissent among white southerners evaporated. Kathryn Windham, a white reporter at the *Times-Journal*, spoke of the fate of white moderates in Selma: “These people were pressured and there was bitter conflict – friendships broken and economic

³⁴ “Large Crowd Cheers as Speakers Appeal for Racial Defense,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 23, 1955.

³⁵ Author's Field Notes, Conversation with Joe Knight, Selma, Alabama, March 12, 2013.

³⁶ For more about Pat Blalock's move to desegregate the Selma Public Library, see Patterson Toby Graham, *A Right to Read: Segregation and Civil Rights in Alabama's Public Libraries, 1900 – 1965* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002).

suffering.”³⁷ Publicly questioning the WCC brought social ostracism and economic reprisal in a provincial town like Selma. Those who disagreed mostly stayed quiet, and the Citizens’ Council assumed its reign as the singular voice of white citizens.³⁸

The local chapters of the NAACP and the WCC came head to head in a battle over the desegregation of Selma public schools. In August 1955, twenty-nine black residents submitted a petition to the Superintendent demanding the admission of black students to Selma’s white schools. The Fikes trial and the Supreme Court’s landmark decision had revealed cracks in the wall of white supremacy, bolstering both the hopes and expectations of African American residents. “The time for delay, evasion or procrastination is past,” the petition affirmed; the school board was “duty bound to take immediate concrete steps leading to early elimination of segregation in public schools.” Retaliation came swiftly. The *Selma Times-Journal*, a reliable mouthpiece of segregationist solidarity in the mid-fifties, printed the names and home addresses of each and every black signatory.³⁹ Within one week’s time, the number of petitioners plummeted as, one-by-one, they lost their jobs. The Selma Marble Works, Cloverleaf Creamery, Bayuk Cigar Company, Miller and Company, the Selma Country Club, Ford Construction Company, the YMCA, Cleveland Table Company, and Selma Junior High all fired the petitioners they employed. NAACP president and signatory, J.D. Hunter, called the firings “clear-cut cases of pressure being applied because of the petition.” But Citizens’ Council spokesman, Alston Keith, claimed that the council

³⁷ Kathryn Windham quoted in Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 84.

³⁸ For examples of white moderates in Selma see Stephen Longnecker, *Selma’s Peacemaker: Ralph Smeltzer and Civil Rights Mediation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

³⁹ Nelson Cole, “Petition From Negroes Calls for Elimination of School Segregation,” *Selma Times-Journal*, August 30, 1955.

would “take neither credit nor censure” for the developments. Instead, he praised the WCC’s educational efforts for the united response of white businesses: “[The employers] did just what we have been advocating all along.”⁴⁰

In the end, local NAACP members, J.D. Hunter and Ernest Doyle, were the only two petitioners who refused to withdraw their names. Doyle, an interior decorator whose livelihood depended on white business, received word from the WCC that he should reconsider his decision; when he did not, “the Citizens’ Council blacklisted me, and I didn’t make another white dollar for twenty years.” Hunter, who worked for a black insurance agency, fared better but still had a hard time securing credit. Meanwhile, a newspaper editorial expressed disgust that white citizens were forced to use “economic pressure against the very people to whom they have given economic aid and support in the past.”⁴¹ Paternalistic attitudes kept white residents from understanding why black residents would want their children to attend the better funded white schools. Ultimately, the school board did nothing with the petition, simply ignoring it until the issue faded away.⁴²

The Citizens’ Council continued to use economic reprisals to keep African Americans in their designated place. After Cloverleaf Creamery fired one of the petition signers, black residents started a boycott against the business. Milk sales subsequently soared at the store of African American grocer, John Smitherman. A white female sales representative came by to inquire about the change in sales, but Smitherman was busy and

⁴⁰ “Schools Petition Signers Reduced by Withdrawals,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 8, 1955.

⁴¹ “Now that We Know,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 11, 1955.

⁴² Ernest Doyle quoted in Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 85.

asked her to call him back. The seemingly small incident made it to the ears of the WCC who saw Smitherman's request as a sexual pass at a white woman, a story similar to that of the Emmett Till murder that had been running in the newspapers. Within the hour, Smitherman's store phone rang with instructions for him to be out of town by five that afternoon.⁴³ When he decided to stay, wholesale grocers boycotted his store and left him unable to purchase goods.⁴⁴ In October, the house of Smitherman's next door neighbor on Church Street was set on fire. The perpetrators corrected their miscalculation three nights later when they fired shots from a passing car into Smitherman's home. That same evening, a carload of white men snatched a black porter off of his bicycle and drove him ten miles out of town before he convinced them that he was not John Smitherman. Two Selma police officers were later convicted in the incident.⁴⁵ Despite fierce harassment, Smitherman stayed in Selma until the boycott destroyed his livelihood. In January 1956, Smitherman, his wife, and three children left for Detroit, just as C.J. Adams had done a few years earlier.⁴⁶

Industry and Harmony

⁴³ J. Mills Thornton, III, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 396 – 397; “Kidnaping, Arson Cases on Docket of County Panel,” *The Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 13, 1955.

⁴⁴ Francis Ward, “Smitherman Boycotted Out of Selma has New Life in Detroit,” *Jet Magazine*, April 1, 1965.

⁴⁵ Bailey, one of the officers convicted, committed suicide less than a week after being charged with arson; “Two Officers of Force Here Face Serious Charges,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 22, 1955; “Indictments Voted By Grand Jurors On Kidnap, Arson Counts,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 15, 1955.

⁴⁶ John Smitherman fared much better in Detroit than he did in Selma. First working as a janitor at the Ford Motor Company and then finding work at a hospital, Smitherman claimed that he had more money and economic security than he ever had in Alabama; Francis Ward, “Smitherman Boycotted Out of Selma has New Life in Detroit,” *Jet Magazine*, April 1, 1965.

The economic intimidation of the Citizens' Council worked as an efficient, effective, and quiet tool to stifle black dissent in Selma. Control and the image of harmonious relationships within the city were especially important to Selma's political and business leaders in the years after World War II. With the transition to cattle farms and the mechanization of cotton, agriculture provided livelihoods for fewer and fewer people as the 1950s progressed. Leading white citizens in Dallas County- along with the rest of the South - turned their sights towards industrial development as a means to strengthen and diversify the Black Belt's shifting economy. But these advocates of progress (still segregationists to the core) wanted to maintain the South's status quo in economic and racial relationships. They adopted a development strategy that promoted abundant natural resources and tax incentives but also a large supply of cheap labor and an anti-union climate. Like the WCC's use of economic intimidation, business and political leaders worked to squelch all racial and labor unrest in order to maintain a positive image of Selma's good neighborly, progress-minded attitude.⁴⁷

By 1959, the number of farms in Dallas County had plummeted to 2,816, a far cry from the 7,096 that had been in operation thirty years prior. The decline came as prosperous landowners expanded their operations, buying more land to suit cattle grazing and mechanical cotton pickers. The average size of farms more than tripled from 48.2 acres in 1930 to 169.3 acres in 1959. Farming in Dallas County no longer depended on large numbers of black agricultural laborers. Even though sixty percent of farms were still

⁴⁷ For more about white political leaders use of civility as a method of controlling civil rights organizing, see William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

operated by tenant farmers, they worked only 13.8% of the county's farmland. The sun was unquestionably setting on decades-old practices of cotton production.⁴⁸

The changes in farming in Dallas County came part and parcel with a drastic shift in demographics. Since the late 1830s, African Americans had made up an overwhelming majority of the population.⁴⁹ Black citizens totaled 83% percent of county residents at the turn of the century, but by 1960, that number had fallen to 57.7%.⁵⁰ The out-migration of black residents searching for better jobs and opportunities in cities or the north began in mass with the First World War, but the Black Belt's agricultural transformation intensified the trend. The warning S.W. Boynton had made about African American farmers needing to turn into white-faced cows to stay on the farm had come true. A study conducted by the Selma schools found that the conversion of cotton farms had "forced tenants to go into the city to seek employment or move entirely out of the area."⁵¹ These changes created an abundance of people fresh from the farm and looking for a new way to survive.

With African Americans leaving the farms and rural whites moving closer to town, Selma seemed to be splitting at the seams in the years after World War II. The population

⁴⁸ Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/>. (accessed March 24, 2013); Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Agriculture 1935*, vol. 1, pt. 21 Statistics by Counties, Alabama (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1937), 624; Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1959*: vol. 1, pt. 32, Counties and State Economic Areas, Alabama (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960), 132, 144.; Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Agriculture: 1964*, vol. 1, pt. 32, Statistics for the State and Counties, Alabama (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 258, 274.

⁴⁹ Charles S. Davis, *The Cotton Kingdom in Alabama* (Montgomery: Alabama Department of Archives and History, 1939), 38.

⁵⁰ Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/>. (accessed March 24, 2013).

⁵¹ "Public Given Facts in School Survey," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 28, 1954.

had grown from 19,834 in 1940 to 28,385 in 1960.⁵² While many well-to-do whites built homes in suburbs outside of the city limits, the majority of black families lived in dilapidated apartments and homes that lacked running water and indoor toilets.⁵³ In 1949, the Selma Housing Authority applied for slum clearance funds from the Public Housing Administration and received the go-ahead to construct three hundred units of low-rent housing.⁵⁴ In order to build two new racially-segregated housing projects, currently-standing homes needed to be destroyed, and when demolition began in 1951, black residents found their neighborhoods targeted.⁵⁵ In mostly white west Selma, the building of the white Valley Creek Homes helped eradicate a formerly black neighborhood.⁵⁶ The George Washington Carver (GWC) Homes for black residents - a ten building, 216-unit complex – centered around Brown Chapel A.M.E. church on the eastern side of the city. Black homeowners on Sylvan, St. Ann, St. Phillips, and Lawrence Street found that their homes fell within the designated “slum area.” The compensation offered by the Housing Authority did not match what their homes were worth. “If we were people of means and money, we wouldn’t mind, but to the majority of us ‘our home’ is our life’s savings,” the homeowners pleaded. “We

⁵² Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Manufacturers: 1947*, vol. 3, Statistics by State, Alabama (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1950), 68; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population: 1960*, vol. 1, pt. 2, Characteristics of the Population, Alabama (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), 2-46.

⁵³Even though housing units had grown by over one thousand since 1940, the city school survey reported a “steady demand for more and better Negro housing;” “Increase of More than Thousand Units Shown by Selma Housing in Ten Years,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 22, 1950; “Public Given Facts of School Survey,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 28, 1954; Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Housing: 1950*, vol. 1, pt. 2, General Characteristics, Alabama (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953) 2-28.

⁵⁴ “Slum Clearance Housing Okeyed,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 6, 1949.

⁵⁵ “Rapid Progress Made on Housing Project Site Clearance,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 4, 1951; “Housing Area Cleared,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 15, 1951.

⁵⁶ “Hearing Postponed on Condemnation of Housing Units Site,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 30, 1951.

don't have the kind of homes handed down on 'silver platters,' but the kind we burnt the night oil washing, ironing, cooking, and doing odd jobs."⁵⁷ But their appeal fell on deaf ears. The Selma Housing Authority only stressed the "sub-standard character" of the neighborhood and affirmed that every effort had been made to establish fair prices. Under the banner of progress, city officials forged ahead, and the GWC Homes opened the next year.⁵⁸

Public officials and businessmen saw wooing industry as a means to provide jobs for the thousands of people being pushed into southern cities by agricultural changes.⁵⁹ New industries could both supply jobs to ready workforces of ex-sharecropping families as well as help diversify agriculturally-dependent local economies.⁶⁰ Southern business progressives partnered with state governments to establish an elaborate system of industry-enticing subsidies. As early as the 1920s, Selma had adopted ten-year tax breaks for relocating industries. Alabama passed legislation after the war that allowed cities to form industrial development corporations to fund the expansion of private industry and construct plants with public bond money. Development-minded businessmen in Selma, like Rex Morthland of People's Bank and Trust Co., investment banker Catesby ap. R. Jones, and Lucien Burns

⁵⁷ Quote continues, "Working and toiling to have a place to call our own and now in our old age, our homes must go at give way prices;" letter to editor, "Why? Ask Colored Home Owners," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 20, 1950.

⁵⁸ Selma Housing Authority Board of Commissioners, letter to editor, *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 24, 1950.

⁵⁹ White business and political leaders searched for more ways to ease Selma's growing pains. In May of 1956, the city council moved to annex outlying areas of the city. The decision brought nearly two thousand people with their property and their tax dollars into Selma, while simultaneously expanding the range and funding of public services. Providing homes and extending infrastructure helped incorporate new residents into urban life; "Citizens School Survey Studies City Extension," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 13, 1954; Arthur Cappell, "Outlying Areas Will Be Taken Into City Tonight," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 30, 1956.

⁶⁰ James Cobb, *The Selling of the South: the Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936 – 1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 2.

of City National Bank, secured the city council's approval for an industrial board in April 1950. Its purpose was to balance "our agricultural economy with new industries by inducing manufacturing, industrial, and commercial enterprises to locate in Selma and thereby further the use of the agricultural products and natural resources in Dallas County."⁶¹

The Selma Chamber of Commerce enthusiastically joined the industrial recruitment bandwagon, but they did so with a clear idea of the kind of economic development they wanted. As the plantation economy withered, political and business leaders searched for economic development that would reinforce the exiting status quo, built on the foundation of cheap black labor and white supremacy. The industries that best fit the bill were those that paid low wages to unskilled workers and opposed unions on their shop floors. As the mouthpiece of industrial development, the Chamber of Commerce accentuated low labor costs and anti-unionism as Dallas County's major selling points. In 1961, its publication, "An Economic Report on the Selma and Dallas County Area," showed prospective companies how even area wage rates for skilled workers (\$1 – 1.75 per hour for unskilled male workers; \$1.25 – 1.75 for semi-skilled; \$1.80 – 2.50 for skilled) hovered very near the national minimum of one dollar per hour. In case low labor costs weren't enough, the next page read "IN SELMA UNIONS DON'T WIN ELECTIONS," followed by a chronicle of every unsuccessful union vote in the city during the past five years.⁶²

⁶¹The Cater Act was passed in 1949 allowing for the development of industrial development corporations, and the Wallace Act of 1951 allowed cities to issue public bonds for the construction of plants for private industry; "Regular Semi-Monthly Session of the City Council of Selma, Alabama," April 24, 1950, Selma City Hall, Selma, Alabama; James Cobb, *Selling of the South: the Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936 – 1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 36.

⁶²James Cobb, *Selling of the South: the Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936 – 1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 2 – 15; The Industrial Committee, Selma and Dallas County Chamber of Commerce, "An Economic Report on the Selma and Dallas County Area," 1961, Box 7, Folder 135, Selma – Economic Report, 1961, Judge James Hare Papers, Vaughan-Smitherman Museum, Selma, Alabama.

But the chamber's best efforts did not stop all union-activity in Selma. In the spring of 1955, local telephone employees and rail workers nearly brought these services to a halt when they joined national strikes.⁶³ To keep service running, company officials hired scabs, and later off-duty personnel from Craig Air Force Base, as stand-in switchboard operators. Striking Southern Bell employees amassed outside the building, protesting the use of military men as strikebreakers. The potentially violent situation was averted only when Craig's commander arrived in person to remove his off-duty servicemen.⁶⁴ Three weeks later, members from all of Selma's union locals gathered at the National Guard Armory for a mass meeting. Labor leaders, in front of a crowd of three hundred people, castigated the South's use of "cheap labor" to attract new industries. They warned management that unions were in Selma to "stay and grow."⁶⁵

But unions faced fierce opposition in a city where business leaders, municipal officials, and the courts were united against them. In 1953, employees at the local Independent Lock Company (ILCO) voted in favor of representation by the International Union of Electric, Radio, and Machine Workers. The Industrial Development Board had published a fruitless letter in the *Times-Journal* before the vote, urging workers to help keep labor troubles away from their city. "Does a union really care what happens to our city?" they asked lock company employees. Two years later in September 1955, ILCO's Local 793 went on strike at the Burnsville Road plant. Marching workers carried signs accusing the

⁶³ "Phone Employees Here Join Southwide Strike," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 14, 1955; "Two Rail Services Here Put Out of Operation by Strike Workers," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 17, 1955.

⁶⁴ "Strike Violence Averted as Off-Duty Service Men Leave Phone Posts Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 5, 1955.

⁶⁵ "Walkouts Forced to Choke Unions, Charge of Labor," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 21, 1955.

company of being unfair to its southern workers. Tommy Shoults, vice-chairman of Local 793, charged that employees in ILCO's northern plants received nearly double the wages and more benefits than Selma's workers.⁶⁶ An integrated group of male and female strikers – nearly half of the company's workforce – kept up a round-the-clock picket line, and their public mockery of segregation and harmonious labor relations commanded swift reaction.⁶⁷ The *Selma Times-Journal* accused lock workers of being ungrateful for ILCO's new jobs and better wages - "pay comparing favorably with the average prevailing in the area" - and threatened that if disruption continued "it will be impossible to obtain general support [for attracting new industries] in the future."⁶⁸ Circuit Judge James A. Hare single-handedly put an end to the strike one week later, granting a temporary injunction against Local 793 for conducting an illegal strike.⁶⁹

The union activism at ILCO had taken place against the backdrop of escalating civil rights activity in Selma. ILCO workers had first voted in the union in the midst of the Fikes trial in 1953 and had gone on strike at the same time the local NAACP school desegregation crisis unfolded in 1955. For the white establishment concerned with harmoniously maintaining the status quo, union and civil rights activism were an equal threat, and the coincidence ensured Local 793's swift defeat.

⁶⁶"An Open Letter to the Employees of Independent Lock Company of Alabama: Which is The Better Way?" *Selma Times-Journal*, October 6, 1953; "Lock Plant Operations Sharply Curtailed by Strike," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 21, 1955.

⁶⁷ "Half of Workers Back on Job at Lock Plant Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 22, 1955.

⁶⁸ "The Community Has a Stake," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 25, 1955.

⁶⁹ A company manager responded, "all is forgotten, as far as we are concerned;" "Strike Ended at Lock Plant Here After Injunction," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 28, 1955.

Union activity remained muted in Selma during the rest of the 1950s. Workers voted down representation in the Bayuk Cigar Company, Ames Bag Company, and Cleveland Table Company in 1957, followed by the Alabama Metallurgical Company and Coca-Cola in 1960.⁷⁰ As with the Citizens' Council's tactics of economic intimidation, unions partly failed because of the pressure employers put on their workers. The manager of Bayuk Cigar Company had a reputation as a good-humored and fair man, but he was anti-union through and through. One white Selma resident, Joseph Ellwanger recounted the manager's reaction to union organizing efforts at Bayuk. "He tried to be overly friendly to Negroes in order to prevent their voting for a union," Ellwanger recalled, but, "after the vote was over and they did not vote for the union, he was less friendly. Considerable pressure was put upon the Negroes not to vote for a union, lest they lose their jobs." Racial divisions gave manufacturers greater leverage in dealing with their workers. Management could use underpaid, unskilled black laborers to threaten the better positions of white workers in the face of union threats. This division helped Bayuk maintain low wages at \$1.00 to \$1.25 per hour in 1965.⁷¹ With cheap black labor undergirding white supremacy, union activity posed a direct challenge to the racial status quo, and as the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce

⁷⁰ "Union Beaten in Cigar Plant Vote by Large Margin," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 5, 1957; "Challenged Ballots to Decide Outcomes of Union Test Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 13, 1957; The Industrial Committee, Selma and Dallas County Chamber of Commerce, "An Economic Report on the Selma and Dallas County Area," 1961, Box 7, Folder 135, Selma – Economic Report, 1961, Judge James Hare Papers, Vaughn-Smitherman Museum.

⁷¹ Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century* South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 97; Ellwanger Interview, December 9, 1964 from Ralph Smeltzer Papers, Box 120, Folder: Selma, Main (6 of 7), Taylor Branch Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, UNC.

explained to Harvard student Harris Wofford in 1952, “Selma is not a union town. People here are just not sold on it, [...] and agitation is discouraged.”⁷²

Civil Rights and Eisenhower

Civil rights and union activity in Dallas County in the 1950s unfolded amidst escalating civil rights activity nationwide. In nearby Montgomery, African Americans sustained a massive boycott of the segregated city buses for nearly all of 1956. Segregation in Selma had mostly operated on custom instead of law, but after Rosa Park’s infamous arrest in December of 1955, the city council passed an array of segregation ordinances regulating “the separation of white and colored persons” in taxicabs, restaurants, rooms, auditoriums, yards, ball parks, and public parks, as well forbidding racial mixing in everything from dominoes to golf.⁷³

The most alarming development for white Dallas County residents came in September 1957 when President Eisenhower sent federal troops into Little Rock, Arkansas to protect the nine black students desegregating Central High School. Instead of defending states’ rights and white supremacy, the President’s action set a precedent for federal intervention on behalf of civil rights. The *Selma Times-Journal* accused the weak-minded president of being swayed by “constitutional rapists and racial renegades” into “this new occupation by carpetbag troops.” Abandoning its prior support of the President, the

⁷² Harris Wofford, “A Preliminary Report on the Status of the Negro in Dallas County, Alabama,” (Unpublished Paper, Yale Law School, 1953), 44.

⁷³ Newspaper headlines regularly reported NAACP court cases and desegregation battles unfolding across the South during the late 1950s; “Regular Semi-Monthly Session of the City Council of Selma, Alabama,” January 23, 1956, Selma City Hall, Selma, Alabama.

newspaper insisted that Eisenhower's picture would no longer hang above its editorial desk.⁷⁴

Two months after Eisenhower's actions in Little Rock, the Ku Klux Klan celebrated a conspicuous rebirth in Dallas County. In November 1957, five six-foot tall crosses wrapped in fuel-soaked rags were set ablaze, three on Highway 80 east and west, one near the Independent Lock Company, and one at the intersection of Highway 14 and Range Street.⁷⁵ When the Klan paraded through Selma's neighborhoods a week later, prominent white citizens dismissed the hooded order as out-of-town visitors, "not representative of the citizenship element" of Dallas County.⁷⁶ Yet a KKK rally in March 1958 drew nearly one thousand cars and 2,500 Klan affiliates to a field five miles north of town. Police Deputy Wilson Baker showed up at the rally to drum up support for his campaign for sheriff. His appearance, although castigated later, suggested that a number of Dallas County citizens (and potential voters) stood in the crowd.⁷⁷

Politicians and business leaders wanted nothing to do with the Klan and its violent reputation. As Harris Wofford observed, "The whites of the Black Belt are said to be too refined to go much for the Klan."⁷⁸ Besides, industrial development depended on maintaining an image of harmonious race relations. White civic leaders, however, did little to

⁷⁴ "We Will Not Surrender," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 26, 1957.

⁷⁵ "Cross Burn to Mark Resurgence of Klan in Area," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 15, 1957.

⁷⁶ "Unwelcome Visitors," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 2, 1957.

⁷⁷ Baker later clarified his appearance at the Klan rally, claiming that he was not a member of the Klan but appeared to demonstrate their support of segregation; "Klan Rally Here Draws Big Crowd," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 16, 1958; "Paper Corrects Error Concerning KKK Rally," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 17, 1958.

⁷⁸ Wofford, "A Preliminary Report on the Status of the Negro in Dallas County," 19.

stop the activities of the hooded order outside of vocal denouncement. When a fifty-car Klan parade wound through the black areas of East Selma, Police Chief Ed Mullen refused to act, insisting that the KKK only needed a parade ordinance if the motorcade included a band.⁷⁹ In the summer of 1959, the Klan added its welcome signs – shaped like a sawmill blade with blood dripping from its teeth – alongside civic and church signs welcoming visitors.⁸⁰ In practice, the Klan’s methods of intimidation reinforced the WCC’s publicly acceptable use of economic reprisal to protect segregation.⁸¹

Meanwhile, the local Citizens’ Council continued its stronghold on white public opinion, boasting at least 1,600 members. Notable civic organizations, like the Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs, as well as the Farm Bureau threw their weight behind the WCC’s fight for segregation. The *Times-Journal* noted that the speech at the annual Farm Bureau barbecue in 1958 was “devoted more to federal usurpation of states’ rights which has resulted in the school segregation crisis than to agriculture.”⁸² As the strongest chapter in the state of Alabama, Alston Keith and other Dallas County WCC members helped organize new chapters in the surrounding Black Belt.⁸³ In the summer of 1958, the Alabama Citizens’ Council moved its headquarters to Selma, and the organization elected Walter C. Givhan,

⁷⁹ “Robed Klansmen of Four Counties in Local Parade,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 27, 1958.

⁸⁰ “Klan Welcome Signs Erected at Hiway Entrances,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 17, 1959.

⁸¹ For example, Israel Page, a black man from Browns, made the mistake of seeking \$15,000 in traffic accident damages from a Talladega County Deputy Sheriff. Four white men – not officially identified with the Klan but participating in Klan-like activities – kidnapped Page from his home, beat him unconscious, and left him thirty-five miles from his home in the Bogue Chitto swamp for his missteps. The Dallas County Bar Association “deplored” the incident, but public outrage was the white establishment’s only response; “Attack on Negro Deplored by Bar,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 25, 1959.

⁸² “Strong Hint of Formation of Black Belt Congress District with Selden as Representative,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 15, 1958.

⁸³ “County Credited with Leadership in Council Move,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 12, 1956; Numan Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance*.

long-time president of the Dallas County Farm Bureau, to become its permanent chair a little over a year later.⁸⁴ After welcoming segregationist Senator James E. Eastland to the annual barbecue, the council announced a drive “to make personal contact with every white voter in Dallas County and ask them to join the organization.”⁸⁵ Under the rule of the Citizens’ Council, white Dallas County citizens appeared to be united to the defense of segregation at all costs.

But a publicly united front did not quell the federal government’s mounting investigation of discriminatory voting practices in southern states. In December 1958, Probate Judge Bernard Reynolds received a subpoena calling him to appear before the Civil Rights Commission in Montgomery with the county’s voting records.⁸⁶ This invasion by the “federal civil rights carpetbaggers” prompted an elaborate campaign of resistance by county officials.⁸⁷ First, the grand jury rapidly impounded Dallas County’s registrar files in a supposed investigation of illegal voter registration practices.⁸⁸ Then three months later, the courthouse crowd agreed to grant the Civil Rights Commission access to the files, “but only with rigid restriction which at best will give the investigators nothing more than a peep into

⁸⁴ “Selma Chosen as Headquarters of Citizens Council,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 18, 1958; Arthur Capell, “Sen. Givhan Elected Permanent Chairman of Citizens Council,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 6, 1959.

⁸⁵ Bert Weaks, “Eastland Favors AD Fund to Tell South Viewpoint,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 22, 1959; “Blackwell Will Head CC Membership Drive,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 27, 1959.

⁸⁶ “Dallas Added to Roster of Counties Instructed to Produce Voting Lists,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 3, 1958.

⁸⁷ “New Carpetbagger Invasion,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 4, 1958.

⁸⁸ “Rex Thomas, “Patterson Welcomes Test of Rights Probe Defiance,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 10, 1958.

the records.”⁸⁹ By 1960, public officials realized what the future held and stopped identifying voters by race.⁹⁰ The tides, however, had already turned against the racial status quo.

When the Civil Rights Commission requested access to Dallas County voter records, it also subpoenaed six black residents, including S.W. and Amelia Boynton and Dr. Sullivan Jackson, to testify about voter discrimination.⁹¹ Dr. Jackson, a war veteran and dentist, told of how he had never received an answer from the board of registrars the two times he tried to register. “I am an American citizen. I believe I have a right to vote,” Jackson testified. “I fought for my country. I believe in the principles in it, and I don’t see any reason why I should have to run back and forth to register.”⁹² Testifying solved nothing for Jackson back in Selma afterwards. His wife, Jean, lost her job as secretary at the Selma Housing Authority; white employers forbid their maids from seeing Dr. Jackson; and the city cut off the dentistry work he had been doing for city and county prisoners. Average citizens might not have known about the hearings, Mrs. Jackson reflected later, but “the power structure knew, *as always*.”⁹³

United Against Agitation

⁸⁹ “Wilcox Jury Expected to Follow Patter Set on Vote Records Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 13, 1959.

⁹⁰ “List of Qualified Voters in Dallas County, Alabama,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 9, 1960.

⁹¹ In the Montgomery hearings, S.W. and Amelia Boynton, Dr. Sullivan Jackson, Jennie Anderson, Ruth Lindsey, and Frank Gordon spoke of the economic pressure, widespread fear, and blatant racial discrimination that kept African Americans from voting; “Rex Thomas, “Patterson Welcomes Test of Rights Probe Defiance,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 10, 1958.

⁹² Testimony of Sullivan Jackson, Selma, Dallas County, Alabama. Tuesday Morning Session, December 9, 1958, Civil Rights Commission hearing at U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, Montgomery, Ala. Taylor Branch Papers, UNC.

⁹³ Interview with Mrs. (Jean) Sullivan Jackson by Taylor Branch, Taylor Branch Papers, UNC.

At the forefront of the local effort to quell racial and labor disturbances was Sheriff Jim Clark. Appointed in 1955 by Governor Folsom, Clark capitalized on his popularity amongst rural Dallas County residents and won his reelection campaign three years later by accusing his opponent, police deputy Wilson Baker, of being a pawn of the Selma political establishment.⁹⁴ Even with internal dissension between members, the Citizens' Council, Chamber of Commerce, and city and county governments all worked together to monitor and neutralize threats to local order in the wake of the *Brown v. Board* decision. Union trouble in the fall of 1958 pushed the Sheriff to action. Striking workers from the Birmingham and Tuscaloosa plants of the Zeigler Packing Company formed an early morning picket line in front of the Selma plant and roughed up a local worker trying to go to his job. In response, Sheriff Clark and Circuit Solicitor Blanchard McLeod threatened to bring in special deputies to deal with any disturbances. Over the next two days, the *Times-Journal* reported that "more than 100 law enforcement officers and special deputies armed with shotguns, rifles, pistols, and clubs assembled at the plant to protect Zeigler workers and prevent formation of picket lines."⁹⁵ No picketers returned, but Sheriff Clark's expeditious actions received high praise. "This is a peaceful and orderly community," the newspaper affirmed, "and it will take whatever steps are necessary to remain that way."⁹⁶ While the Sheriff's rashness and alleged

⁹⁴ Clark was originally from Elba, Ala., and moved to Dallas County in 1948 as a cattle farm operator at Browns; "James Clark selected by Governor to Serve as Sheriff of County," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 8, 1955; James Clark political ad, "The Cause of the County People and Jim Clark Rests with the People of Selma," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 2, 1958.

⁹⁵ "Vigil Maintained at Ziegler Plant," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 10, 1958.

⁹⁶ "Beyond Toleration," *Selma Times Journal*, Oct. 8, 1958.

involvement in illegal whiskey sales and gambling would never endear him to image-conscious white leaders, they gave their support to his defense of the community.⁹⁷

Escalating civil rights challenges pushed Sheriff Clark to regularize his posse for the defense of segregation in addition to anti-unionism. In early 1960, four young black men sat down at a lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina and sparked a flood of parallel lunch counter sit-ins across the South. Soon after, in a standing-room only meeting at the courthouse, Sheriff Clark deputized three hundred men for special duty during emergencies. Solicitor McLeod instructed the possemen to “use whatever force is necessary to repel any attack made against the peace and dignity of Dallas County.” “The day of passive resistance has passed,” he declared.⁹⁸ The next day fifty-two members of the mounted posse paraded through town on horseback. J.O. Risher of Tyler, area cattleman and chairman of the Citizens’ Council, captained the mounted posse while W.M. Agee, wholesale grocer, took over the posse on foot.⁹⁹ Once again, the newspaper was full of praise: “When the citizens of a community are prepared to take speedy and effective action against self-seeking, trouble-makers, there is rarely cause for such action on a major scale.”¹⁰⁰ Whether Sheriff Clark’s posse protected the area from labor unions or from civil rights agitation made little

⁹⁷The deputies that issued such charges received vituperative retaliation from Clark, one charged with insubordination and the other with drinking on duty before being fired. One week later, two shots were fired as the former deputies drove on the Camden Highway; Arthur Capell, “Sheriff Clark Charged with Collusion,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 18, 1959; Arthur Capell, “Sheriff Clark Issues Countercharges,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 19, 1959; Arthur Capell, “Bullets Riddle Auto of Ex-Deputies,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 25, 1959; “A Responsibility of the People,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 26, 1959.

⁹⁸ Arthur Capell, “Three Hundred Aides Enlisted by Sheriff,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 13, 1960.

⁹⁹ “Mounted Posse Parades Downtown Streets Here in Training Session,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 14, 1960.

¹⁰⁰ “Preparedness Precludes Action,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 15, 1960.

difference to white city leaders; economics and race were - and always had been - part and parcel of the same battle to preserve white supremacy and local control.

As heated conflicts over segregation and labor organizing hit home, leading white Selma citizens worked to quiet and control disturbances in the name of harmony and progress. In 1956, the Alabama Metallurgical Corporation announced plans to build a multi-million dollar plant in Selma.¹⁰¹ The company's arrival, proclaimed Chamber of Commerce president Harry Maring, Jr., marked "the beginning of a new era of industrial expansion for the entire Central Alabama area."¹⁰² Alamet fit neatly into business leaders' image of the ideal industry. In 1960, the Alamet president, A.E. Peterman, sent a letter to company employees urging them "to keep the union out of our plant." Alamet, he claimed, conducted operations "in such a way that a union is not necessary for good wages, good employee benefits and good working conditions." Charging that unions would hurt both the company and workers, Peterman emphasized the unlimited potential of "working together without outside interference."¹⁰³ The Chamber of Commerce confidentially circulated the Alamet letter to all of its members. "Whenever you have an opportunity to support the philosophy advanced in Mr. Peterman's letter," the general manager of the Chamber urged, "you will be rendering a valuable service to all industries in this area by positively asserting your views."¹⁰⁴ Bolstered

¹⁰¹ Arthur Capell, "Magnesium Plant Ground-Breaking Set for Fall," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 20, 1956.

¹⁰² Harry Maring, Jr. quoted in "Selma Gets Big Industry," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 19, 1956.

¹⁰³ Arthur Capell, "Magnesium Plant Ground-Breaking Set for Fall," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 20, 1956;

A.E. Petermann, Alabama Metallurgical Corporation, Selma, Alabama to Alamet Employees [circa 1960] Box 7, Folder 137, Judge James Hare Papers, Vaughn-Smitherman Museum.

¹⁰⁴ Jack Miles, General Manager of the Chamber of Commerce to all members, Mar. 25, 1960, Box 7, Folder 137. Judge James Hare Papers, Vaughn-Smitherman Museum.

by the company's strong anti-union policy, Alamet employees twice voted down union affiliation in the first two years of operation.¹⁰⁵

The anti-unionism of business leaders did not succeed in stamping out all local labor organizing. On October 18, 1961, members of Local 793 walked off their jobs at the Independent Lock Company for a second time. Their picket signs again called for equal benefits with ILCO's northern employees, echoing the demands of striking workers from six years earlier. Company officials immediately charged that the strike "seriously threaten[ed]" the company's continued operation in Selma.¹⁰⁶ The newspaper aligned itself with ILCO. "Our only interest is to preserve this industry, and possibly to further exploit its extensive plant to the point of attracting another payroll for the betterment of our people," it explained.¹⁰⁷ Then one week later, the Chamber of Commerce intervened, claiming it had "the general welfare of this community at heart." In a full page-ad in the *Times-Journal*, the Chamber implored striking workers to return to their jobs on Monday morning. "In the interests of fellow-citizens, [...] let Selma's leadership stand shoulder-to-shoulder with you in our efforts to protect your jobs and keep on working to bring more industry into this area, which will help to give you greater security and raise generally your plane of living."¹⁰⁸ Significant pressure pushed some striking workers to abandon their cause, and by midday Tuesday, fifty percent of ILCO workers had returned to their jobs.

¹⁰⁵ "Alamet Employees Turn Down Union," *The Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 22, 1961, Box 7, Folder 137: Correspondence – Incoming Dallas Co. Chamber of Commerce, 1960 – 68, Judge James Hare Papers, Vaughn-Smitherman Museum.

¹⁰⁶ "Production Halted at Lock Factory by Labor Balk," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 18, 1961; "Production Stays Near Standstill at Lock Plant," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 19, 1961.

¹⁰⁷ "Our Only Consideration," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 20, 1961.

¹⁰⁸ Selma and Dallas County Chamber of Commerce, ad "An Emergency Statement to the Employees of Independent Lock Company," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 22, 1961.

Local 793's strike collapsed eight days after it began as employees crossed the picket lines and the company hired over a hundred new workers. When the workers who had remained out for the entire strike tried to return their jobs, ILCO refused to let them in.¹⁰⁹ Two hundred sixty-three union members found themselves out of work, and Local 793's vice-president Robert Zetwick demanded redress. He accused business leaders of intervening, falsely promising to protect workers' jobs if the strike ended. "The Chamber of Commerce said they'd help us," Zetwick proclaimed, "Well, we need their help."¹¹⁰ When the Chamber insisted it could not intervene, Zetwick pleaded the case of the unemployed workers in a full-page ad in the *Times-Journal*. "These people, your friends and neighbors, returned to work after Selma's leading citizens and merchants with whom they have dealt throughout most of their lives urged them to end their strike," he entreated, "They never gained the opportunity to return to their machines. THESE MEN AND WOMEN WERE LOCKED OUT BY ILCO."¹¹¹ But his appeal brought no response from the Chamber or the company. Instead, ILCO's corporate headquarters announced two weeks later that the company now had no intentions to close Selma plant.¹¹² Whether facing unions or civil rights challenges, business and industrial leaders lined up on the side of preserving the area's economic and racial status quo.

¹⁰⁹ "Lock Plant Meets Critical Need," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 24, 1961; "Government Takes Hand as Strike Ends at Plant," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 26, 1961.

¹¹⁰ "Union Calls for Chamber to Aid Worker Return," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 30, 1961.

¹¹¹ Local 793 IUE-AFL-CIO, Robert Zetwick, ad "LOCKED OUT," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 1, 1961.

¹¹² In an almost three-to-one vote four months later, ILCO workers voted against union representation as the favorable ballots cast by 142 non-rehired workers were not counted; "Ilco Given Boost for Operation Lifetime Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 15, 1961; Lock Plant Votes to Reject Union by Big Margin," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 18, 1962.

SNCC Comes to Selma

While white political and business leaders were wrangling over how best to respond to vast shifts in agricultural and industrial development, black Selma residents turned civil rights into an unavoidable issue in the spring of 1963. Throughout the early 1960s, sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and examples of African Americans standing up to Jim Crow segregation filled the newspaper headlines. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were the two civil rights organizations at the forefront of these charges. The SCLC, headed by Rev Martin Luther King Jr., was a nonviolent, church-based organization focused on securing civil rights legislation at a national level. Meanwhile, SNCC (pronounced “snick”) was born from the sit-ins and attracted young activists committed to creating grassroots change by empowering local African Americans through participatory democracy.¹¹³

Black residents in Dallas County had long been working towards full citizenship and equal economic opportunities. Years of segregation had fostered, by necessity, black professionals and strong, black-run institutions. Selma University and R.B. Hudson High School, the Extension Service and the Negro Community Center, Good Samaritan Hospital and Tabernacle Baptist all contributed to the individual and community advancement of African Americans, setting the stage for later challenges to white supremacy.¹¹⁴ In 1963,

¹¹³ For more on SNCC’s mission see Wesley Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

¹¹⁴ Baptist ministers, many whom would later play important roles in the civil rights movement, gathered for conferences at Selma University in the 1950s. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy often spent the night at Sullivan and Jean Jackson’s house on Lapsley Street while attending conferences. Meanwhile teachers at R.B. Hudson High School, Jeanes supervisor, and extension leaders taught black students to value citizenship and democracy; Interview with Mrs. (Jean) Sullivan Jackson by Taylor Branch, Taylor Branch Papers, UNC; Louretta Wimberly, interview by author, December 4, 2012, Selma, Alabama.

these local efforts merged with larger civil rights organizations when Bernard Lafayette, a representative from SNCC, arrived in Selma.



Figure 26: A crowd of boys played pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey at the Don Bosco Boys club. Above them are pictures of older club members who have gone on to serve in the military or went to college. Institutions like the Fathers of St. Edmund created a place where black children could imagine possibilities outside of the limitations of segregation. Courtesy of Edmundite Southern Missions Photograph Collection.

Although only 22-years-old, Lafayette had impressive movement credentials. He had learned the principles of nonviolence and direct action at Fisk University where he participated in the early Nashville sit-in movement. Becoming involved in SNCC, he went on to participate in the Freedom Rides and spent time fundraising in Chicago with a promise from SNCC's executive secretary, James Forman, that Lafayette would later be put in charge of his own project.¹¹⁵ When Lafayette came back to SNCC headquarters in Atlanta, "I was told there weren't any more [assignments] left." "That was unacceptable," he remembered,

¹¹⁵ Bernard LaFayette Oral History Project, Mss. Gr. 123, University of Rhode Island Special Collections. http://www.uri.edu/library/special_collections/registers/oral_histories/msg123a.xml#series2. (accessed April 5, 2012).

“because I was twenty-two years old and had to be the director of something!” Selma had been crossed off the map “because supposedly the white folks were too mean and the black folks were too scared.” But Bernard Lafayette, young and confident, accepted the challenge.

He came to Selma to get a lay of the land in 1962, and after meeting Amelia Boynton, he decided he had found himself a project. “Even though I was a SNCC member,” Lafayette recalled, “I didn’t need to reinvent the wheel in each new location but instead build off the existing foundation.”¹¹⁶ When he moved to town early in 1963, those in the Dallas County Voter’s League became his earliest supporters. They included S.W. and Amelia Boynton with their insurance and real estate companies, James Gildersleeve and Ulysses Blackman from Alabama Lutheran Academy, Marie Foster, a dental hygienist for her brother Sullivan Jackson, and Ernest Doyle who was employed in the postal service.¹¹⁷ Since that January, Marie Foster had been teaching citizenship classes, aimed at helping black residents pass the literacy requirement of voter registration.¹¹⁸ Some of her most determined and reliable participants were the people from the Browns and Bogue Chitto communities, the same people educated in cooperation and self-sufficiency by S.W. Boynton and the Extension Service.¹¹⁹ Once someone successfully registered at the court jouse, their names would be added to the honor roll of black voters posted on the wall of the Boynton’s

¹¹⁶ Bernard Lafayette, Presentation, Walk in History Workshop (Selma, Alabama: National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, June 2005).

¹¹⁷ Bernard LaFayette Oral History Project, Mss. Gr. 123, University of Rhode Island Special Collections. http://www.uri.edu/library/special_collections/registers/oral_histories/msg123a.xml#series2. (accessed April 5, 2012).

¹¹⁸ Marie Foster, “The Selma Movement: One of America’s Most Successful Non-Violent Movements,” Chronology, May 1989, Box 120, Folder: Selma Background. Taylor Branch Papers, UNC.

¹¹⁹ Marie Foster interview by Taylor Branch, Taylor Branch Papers, UNC.

insurance agency.¹²⁰ By the time Lafayette arrived, the honor roll listed a total of 156 names.¹²¹

Swift and severe retaliations against those who challenged Selma's segregationist status quo made many black residents leery about associating with this young SNCC worker. Instead, Lafayette found his most ardent supporters among the students at R.B. Hudson High School. Cleophus Hobbs and Charles Bonner were pushing Hobbs' broken down car from Morning Star Baptist Church towards Small Street in February 1963 when a well-dressed Bernard Lafayette lent them an extra hand. Sitting on the porch afterwards, he explained that he was looking to organize students to help teach adults to fill out voter registration forms. Lafayette encouraged the two teenagers to go to Hudson High and spread the word about direct action workshops he was going to be holding in the basement of Tabernacle Baptist Church. Over the next eight months, a small but growing group of Hudson students gathered to sing freedom songs and debate nonviolence in nighttime workshops, often held in the basement of Tabernacle or at St. Elizabeth's Mission run by the Fathers of St. Edmund.¹²² These students became the frontline of the burgeoning Selma movement. Betty Fikes remembered knocking on doors in the black community, passing out leaflets, and organizing some of the earliest mass meetings and protests. After finding adults

¹²⁰ Mrs. A.P. Boynton Robinson interview by Taylor Branch, Aug. 9, 1990, Box 120, Folder: Selma Main (3 of 7), Taylor Branch Papers, UNC.

¹²¹ Bernard Lafayette, Jr. & Kathryn Lee Johnson, *In Peace and Freedom: My Journey in Selma* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 7.

¹²² Some of these students were Betty Fikes, Evelyn Mann, Thomasina Marshall, Willie Emma Scot, Terry Shaw, and Charles Mauldin, along with Bonner and Hobbs; Charles Bonner presentation, Walk in History Conference (Selma, Alabama: National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, June 2005); Bernard Lafayette, Jr. & Kathryn Lee Johnson, *In Peace and Freedom: My Journey in Selma* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 39.

afraid of “being hurt, of losing their jobs or their lives,” Fikes claimed that in the early years, “youth carried the full load of the Selma Movement and had to make adult decisions.”¹²³

Rural African Americans became Lafayette’s other most ardent supporters. Primed by years of county agent Boynton’s gospel of land ownership, voter registration, and independence, a number of black farmers heard the message of registration and trekked miles into town to fill out applications. Rev. S.P. Powell, a local minister involved with the DCVL and SNCC, pounded the dirt roads around Orrville, teaching people in St. Mary Church, Rising Star, Salem, and Providence Baptist church how to register. At the end of July, Rev. Powell brought five people to the courthouse, one being, Mr. Fred Smith, who was an active member in the Extension Service.¹²⁴ Smith’s family participated in the selective Farm and Home Development Program, designed to help black farmers increase their farm income, enrich family living, and practice efficient and productive farming.¹²⁵ Boynton’s successor, county agent C.D. Scott praised the participating families’ “tendency to work together.” In addition to “developing leadership ability and [...] participating in community and other activities,” Scott noticed that they are “more willing to accept citizenship responsibilities.”¹²⁶ Extension Service involvement in Dallas County- as seen with

¹²³ Bettie Mae Fikes, “Singing For Freedom,” in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, edited by Faith S. Holsaert, et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 465 – 467.

¹²⁴ Rev. S.W. Powell, “Report,” July 16, 1963, Orrville, Alabama, Reel 17, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Papers, microfilm edition.

¹²⁵ C.D. Scott and G.C. Brooks, Dallas County, “Narrative Report of Negro County and Assistant Agents,” Dec. 1 – 1954 – Nov. 30, 1955. Box 377, Folder: Dallas Co. Negro Annual Reports, 1955, ACES, Auburn University.

¹²⁶ C.D. Scott, G.C. Brooks, & E.S. Harrison, Dallas County, “Narrative Report of Negro and Assistant Agents,” Dec. 1, 1956 – Nov. 30, 1957, Box 379, Folder: Dallas Annual Report 1957, ACES, Auburn University; C.D. Scott and Ernest S. Harrison, Dallas County, “Narrative Report of Negro and Assistant Agents,” Dec. 1, 1957 – Nov. 30, 1958, Box 381, Folder: Dallas Negro Reports 1958, ACES, Auburn University.

Mr. Fred Smith - primed African Americans to demand full citizenship instead of accepting the restrictions of white supremacy. Decades of striving self-sufficiency and land ownership helped rural black people stand together for their freedom when the opportunity presented itself in the early sixties.

S.W. Boynton helped pave the way for Bernard Lafayette, but by 1963, the years of activism and harassment had taken their toll. That winter and spring, Boynton lay in failing health at Burwell Infirmary after a series of strokes. Lafayette often sat by his side at the nursing home where Boynton would still urge passersby to register to vote.¹²⁷ In May of 1963, S.W. Boynton died, and Lafayette seized his memorial service as the occasion for Selma's first mass meeting. "We put the two things together because that's what he stood for," Lafayette explained.¹²⁸ On the night of May 14, 1963, 350 black residents gathered at Tabernacle Baptist Church to honor Boynton and his legacy of voting rights.¹²⁹ For a man who had spent his life working for political and economic justice for Dallas County's black residents, this first mass meeting marked a powerful symbolic end to a life of dedication to the cause of racial justice.

Sheriff Clark, members of his posse, and young white men holding wooden sticks from the Cleveland Table Company ominously circled the premises that night. The potential for violence loomed high both inside and outside the church. A white coach from Parrish

¹²⁷ Amelia P. Boynton Robinson interview by Taylor Branch, Aug. 9, 1990, Box 121, Folder: Selma (main) 3 of 7, Taylor Branch Papers, UNC.

¹²⁸ Bernard Lafayette, presentation, Walk in History Workshop (Selma, Alabama: National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, June 2005).

¹²⁹ Arthur Capell, "Voter Registration Rally Concluded Quietly Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 15, 1963; Tabernacle's Rev. L. L. Anderson opened the church for the occasion after threatening his cautious deacons with public embarrassment; Bernard Lafayette interview by Taylor Branch, Taylor Branch Papers, UNC.

High School succeeded in dispersing the crowd, and Lafayette later admitted that “he saved a whole lot of white folks from being killed. Some of the members in that church had not been trained in nonviolence and had their weapons with them.” Black southerners – like their white counterparts - were well-versed in armed self-defense. Shotguns and rifles rested against doorframes and across the mantles of many African American homes both in rural areas and the city of Selma.¹³⁰ While both SNCC and SCLC publicly espoused nonviolence, armed protection was a part of civil rights activity in Selma from the very beginning.

Throughout the summer of 1963, the mass meetings continued and grew, and the Citizens’ Council convened to stifle the burgeoning action.¹³¹ The organization urged white citizens to ask themselves, “What have I personally done to maintain segregation?”¹³² Shortly thereafter, Bernard Lafayette was attacked after two white men asked him for help with their stalled car; one clubbed Lafayette in the head at least three times and sent him to the hospital for stitches. The attackers fled when Lafayette’s neighbor leaped across his porch with rifle in hand.¹³³ Two months later, Alabama’s flamboyantly segregationist Governor George Wallace harangued the crowd at a WCC barbecue promising to re-segregate any school the

¹³⁰ Bernard Lafayette, presentation, Walk in History Workshop (Selma, Alabama: National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, June 2005); For more about the role of self-defense in the black freedom struggle see John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: the Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Timothy B Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

¹³¹ “Negroes Urged to Push Quest for Right to Vote,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 25, 1963; “Prayer Services Urged as Means to Win Ballot,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 2, 1963.

¹³² Ad, Dallas County Citizens’ Council, *Selma Times Journal*, June 9, 1963.

¹³³ Bernard Lafayette, presentation, Walk in History Workshop (Selma, Alabama: National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, June 2005); Lafayette, *In Peace and Freedom*, 75.

federal government dared to integrate. Over 6,800 people attended.¹³⁴ But the intimidation failed to quell the growing movement as young SNCC workers recruited increasing numbers of black residents to apply for voter registration at the courthouse.

Meanwhile, a group of black moderates added to the scope of civil rights activity by submitting a list of grievances to city leaders. Most of the members of the Dallas County Improvement Association (DCIA) were black businessmen and ministers, including Edwin Moss, fundraising manager at the Father's of St. Edmund and founder of the Elks Credit Union, Rev. C.C. Hunter, and Rev. W.T. Minefee.¹³⁵ The DCIA first brought their petition to the municipal government, which included requests to end "the brutal and savage manner in which [the police department deals] with Negroes," to hire African Americans in jobs other than common laborers, and to form a committee to "correct certain known unjust practices" in local businesses.¹³⁶ When Mayor Heinz refused to act, the black moderates appealed directly to Selma's businessmen. In a letter sent to all retail merchants, the DCIA explained that they wanted both calm and harmonious race relations, as well as the end of segregation. "Let it be known that the Negro Citizens here, too, are no different [than] those all over the country who are seeking those rights and freedoms that they feel they justly deserve – those privileges that will enable them to live with dignity and to assume those responsibilities that should be shared by all citizens" They demanded that merchants promote black employees to sales clerks, pay all black workers "a livable wage," treat all

¹³⁴ Arthur Capell, "Integration Acceptance Flouted by Governor Before Large Crowd," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 30, 1963.

¹³⁵ Longnecker, *Selma's Peacemaker: Ralph Smeltzer and Civil Rights Mediation*, 43 – 44.

¹³⁶ "Negro Committee Airs Grievances, Urges Harmony," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 11, 1963.

customers with courtesy, and remove “White” and “Colored” signs from the premises.¹³⁷ As the DCIA made clear, local civil rights activity was as much about securing legal justice, equal access to city services, better jobs, and dignified and fair treatment in area businesses as it was about voting rights.

In an emergency meeting, the Chamber of Commerce voted to ignore the letter and support local merchants’ opposition to integration. Furthermore, Chamber members agreed to contact “all civic, commercial and fraternal organizations” and have them send a representative to a private chamber-sponsored meeting “to support segregationist policies.” The new group would then meet regularly for the purpose of “formulating future attitudes and policies.”¹³⁸ Meanwhile, the chamber’s board of directors drew up a list of rights and principles that they saw as necessary to preserving the “mutual confidence, trust, and respect between the races.” These included “the right to buy, sell and rent property according to individual inclination;” the right to own and operate a private business “with unchallenged authority to select such personnel as the owner desires;” and finally “the right to select one’s own associations, whatever the occasion.”¹³⁹ Echoing familiar states’ rights credos, Selma’s business leaders affirmed that local control would and should override racial justice.

Meanwhile, the voter registration campaign continued gaining momentum, even as SNCC’s Prathia Hall and Worth Long came to replace Bernard and Colia Lafayette (who

¹³⁷ Letter from Dallas County Improvement Association, Edwin L. Moss chairman to Selma Retail Merchants Association, August 29, 1963, Box 7, Folder 137, Judge James Hare Papers, Vaughn-Smitherman Museum.

¹³⁸ Minutes, “Special Emergency Meeting of the Board of Directors, Selma Chamber of Commerce,” 11 O’Clock, Tuesday Morning, Sept. 3, 1963. Box 7, Folder 137, Judge James Hare Papers, Vaughn-Smitherman Museum.

¹³⁹ “A Declaration of Rights and Principles,” Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, Sept. 20, 1963, Box 7, Folder 137, Judge James Hare Papers, Vaughn-Smitherman Museum.

were returning to Fisk University). With SNCC and the DCVL's assistance, a steady stream of black residents applied for registration at the courthouse over the summer. Strong voter registration programs flourished, held in the Boynton insurance agency, local churches, and rural communities like Sardis, Orrville, Bogue Chitto, and Beloit.¹⁴⁰ Months of organizing climaxed on September 16, 1963, only one day after a bomb exploded in Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church killing four black girls. Local students working with SNCC sat-in at three of Selma's drugstores and one café, the first direct action protests seen in the city. At Carter Drugstore, Willie Robinson bought a tube of toothpaste from the cosmetics counter and then walked over to the fountain and asked to be served. While he was being turned down, Harmon Carter, the owner, came up from behind and slugged him across the head with an axe handle, giving him a wound that required multiple stitches.¹⁴¹ Across town, Hudson High School students poured out of their classrooms in a massive walkout and congregated at Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church.¹⁴² A SNCC worker reported that the effect of the protest "on the local Negroes was tremendous." For the next month, a determined contingent of black men and women regularly presented themselves at the courthouse for registration, and Sheriff Clark responded by arresting at least three hundred demonstrators.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ "Field Report: From Bruce Gordon," Nov. 9, 1963, Reel 37, SNCC Papers, microfilm.

¹⁴¹ Charles Bonner presentation, Walk in History Workshop (Selma, Alabama: National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, June 2005).

¹⁴² "Five Arrested in Sit-In Attempts During Morning in Downtown Demonstrations," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 16, 1963.

¹⁴³ "Field Report: From Bruce Gordon," Nov. 9, 1963, Reel 37, SNCC Papers, microfilm; Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 149; For more on SNCC's early campaign in Selma, see Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963 – 1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1986); Bernard Lafayette, Jr., *In Peace and Freedom: My Journey in Selma* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013).

The voter drive came to a head on Monday, October 7, a day that SNCC billed as “Freedom Day.” The Dallas County Board of Registrars only accepted applications on the first and third Monday of each month, and SNCC wanted black residents to turn up in mass on registration day. Throughout the morning, the line of African Americans grew longer and longer until 350 people waited on the sidewalk. Accompanying them was Clark and his entourage of posse members, “dressed in khakis or fatigues, carrying guns at their hips, clubs in their hands,” as SNCC observer Howard Zinn recalled. The afternoon sun blazed in the sky, and few had entered the courthouse doors. SNCC workers became concerned about the hunger and fatigue of those waiting, but Sheriff Clark refused to allow them to pass out water or baloney sandwiches. Early in the afternoon, SNCC field secretaries Avery Williams and Chico Neblett loaded their arms with food and approached the line. The posse and recently arrived state troopers swarmed and brought Neblett to the ground, poking him with clubs and sticks and shocking him with cattle prods. All of this occurred in plain sight of the federal building located across from the county courthouse, but no one intervened as a truck carted the two men off to jail.¹⁴⁴ At 4:30 p.m., the courthouse closed and the intrepid line dispersed; only forty applications had been processed by the board of registrars that day.¹⁴⁵

Freedom Day escalated black protests against the entrenched system of white supremacy, but it also brought swift retaliation to those who stood in line. Charles Dunn, the segregationist owner of the Dunn Rest Home, employed forty black women as nurses at his home for the aged. Passing by the courthouse on Freedom Day, Dunn recognized two of his

¹⁴⁴ Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 147 – 166.

¹⁴⁵ “Selma: Town in a Reign of Terror,” *Student Voice*, July 22, 1964.

employees – Annie Lee Cooper and Elnora Collins – standing in line. A short time later, Cooper received a phone call from Dunn informing her that her services were no longer needed. He then called Collins into his office to tell her she was fired. She accepted the news calmly but resisted when Dunn attempted to snap her picture as a means of preventing her from finding other work. This angered Dunn who then struck Collins with a cattle prod, lacerating her arm. As Amelia Boynton recounted, “Such treatment was too much for the other colored employees to take so all of them walked off in protest of Mr. Dunn’s cruelty which was not the first time he had abused them.”¹⁴⁶ Boynton took up the cause of the former Dunn employees, passing word along to James Forman at SNCC and the Department of Labor. She proposed a sewing center for those unemployed and blacklisted by the recent events and requested the donation of a high-powered sewing machine. As she explained, “our people would prefer having gainful employment.”¹⁴⁷ Seven months after SNCC had arrived in town, the reign of local control and white supremacy in Dallas County faced a new and determined challenger.

Business Moderates versus Old Guard Segregationists

As civil rights activity heated up in Selma, cracks began to appear in the outwardly united position of public officials and businessmen. The election of Lucien P. Burns as mayor in 1932 had marked the start of a new political era in Selma. Burns led the city for

¹⁴⁶ A.P. Boynton, Chairman of Dallas County Voters League to James Forman, SNCC, Nov. 30, 1963, Reel 6, SNCC Papers, microfilm.

¹⁴⁷ Chairman of Dallas County Voters League to Mr. Willard Wertz, Secretary of Labor, U.S. Labor Department, Jan. 9, 1964, Reel 37, SNCC Papers, microfilm.

seventeen years before resigning in 1949, and then three years later, his close friend and apprentice, Chris Heinz, took over as mayor. The “Burns-Heinz organization” pushed a conservative agenda that staunchly opposed reforming race relations, but during Heinz’s stay in office, this opposition grew into what historian J. Mills Thornton labeled “racial animus.”¹⁴⁸ The explosion of civil rights activism in Selma pushed the hardline segregationist machine - including Heinz, WCC chairman Alston Keith, Judge James Hare, H. Hunt Frazier of the Chamber of Commerce, and Lucien Burns with the City National Bank - to more fiercely defend white supremacy. Over in the governor’s mansion, George Wallace was doing the same thing. His race-baiting stunts solidified where one stood on race as the litmus test of Alabama politics for decades to come.¹⁴⁹ The simultaneous revolution occurring in agriculture and industry only heightened the attempts of Selma’s staunch segregationists to maintain control. Outsider business threatened to further disrupt local control and traditions, and the old guard leaders of Black Belt plantation areas worked to limit its influence. Rumors amongst black leaders and younger businessmen alike accused Selma’s segregationist political machine of turning away interested industries because they challenged local racial and labor relations.¹⁵⁰

By the 1960s, the skepticism of younger businessmen grew into outright disenchantment with the miserly industrial recruitment strategy – one that valued

¹⁴⁸ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 380 – 386.

¹⁴⁹ Wayne Flynt argues that Wallace use of race-baiting to win the governor’s mansion and then build a national presence stymied a revitalization of Alabama politics, which could have come from increased black registration and legislative reapportionment; Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 98 – 100.

¹⁵⁰ Smeltzer, *Selma’s Peacemaker*, 41.

preservation of a racially hardline status quo first - of Mayor Heinz and the chamber.¹⁵¹ This new Black Belt contingent, according to sociologist Morton Rubin, was driven by economic motives and had a far-reaching outlook, as opposed to the sectional and historical interests of the plantation old guard.¹⁵² In 1962, a group of these business leaders - including People's Bank president Rex Morthland and vice-president B. Frank Wilson, tractor dealer Carl Morgan, along with investment banker Catesby ap C. Jones and others - formed the Committee of 100 Plus with the purpose of creating a "new industrial image of Selma."¹⁵³ Chairman Otis "Red" Adam explained its mission further: "The negative approach which stymied Selma for so long has finally been channeled into a positive action, and the Committee is very optimistic about what it can accomplish."¹⁵⁴ In an unprecedented move, the Committee of 100 broke with the Chamber during the director elections later that year; they ran six alternative candidates and gave their approval to only four of the twenty Chamber nominees, many of whom were tied to the county political establishment.¹⁵⁵ The fierce election ended in defeat for the rogue businessmen, but the setback only encouraged them to mount another challenge, this time against Mayor Chris Heinz in the 1964 mayoral election.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 431.

¹⁵² Morton Rubin, *Plantation County* (New Haven, CT: College and University Press, 1951), 79 – 80.

¹⁵³ "New City Image Committee Goal," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 28, 1962.

¹⁵⁴ Adam quoted in J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 431.

¹⁵⁵ "Nominees of Chamber Elected Directors in Unique Ballot Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 6, 1962.

¹⁵⁶ J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 431 – 432.

The man the Committee of 100 lined up behind was Joseph T. Smitherman, an appliance salesman turned city councilman. Joe Smitherman had been a month old when his family moved to East Selma. His father, a sawmill man, lost his job and soon left his wife to care for three boys and three girls when illness ended his life. Everyone in East Selma was dirt poor, and Smitherman started his life with no more material possessions than the black neighbors who lived near the families' shotgun shack house at 2518 Water Avenue. Government commodities and a small welfare check helped keep the family fed. Sometimes, instead of eating the cheese, the Smitherman children would use it as bait to catch rats, a more filling if not tasty meal. Even though his friends' fathers had jobs on the railroad, Joe Smitherman grew up fully aware that he was living on the wrong side of the tracks.¹⁵⁷ Walter Stoudenmire, a city councilman and owner of the Selma Appliance Company, gave Smitherman one of the biggest breaks in his young life when he offered the eager, big-eared twenty-something year-old work selling appliances.¹⁵⁸ Smitherman sold his way into a better life, one Frigidaire at a time, and his ambition grew. Selma's political and business elite kept a tight grasp on political control. Their families had "dug the river," they dined at the Selma Country Club, and they lived on a combination of old and new money. Coming from the other side of the tracks, Smitherman resented what the elite stood for. In the mid-fifties, he took over his partner Walter Stoudenmire's seat on Selma's City Council when Stoudenmire ran for council president. Councilman Smitherman immediately positioned himself as Mayor

¹⁵⁷ 1940 U.S. Census, Dallas County, Alabama, population schedule, Selma, p. 3A, Joseph T. Smitherman; digital image, Ancestry.com, <http://ancestry.com>. (accessed February 5, 2014); Paul Davis, "He Has Worn Many Labels" *Selma Times-Journal*, July 29, 1979; "The Smitherman Story," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 29, 1979.

¹⁵⁸ Jean Jackson, wife of Selma's black dentist, Sullivan Jackson, remembered the young Smitherman as a polite man. "Experience Back of New Concern," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 15, 1955.

Heinz's arch nemesis. Railing on the "country club crowd" and rich attorneys, Smitherman presented himself as the man who could represent the rich and the poor, pave the city streets, and bring jobs to town.¹⁵⁹

In 1964, Joe T. Smitherman, at the age of thirty-four, threw his hat into the mayoral race. Because segregation wasn't a debatable issue in Selma or the state of Alabama in the 1960s (all whites were publicly for it, even if they had some doubts buried deep below), Joe Smitherman was unquestionably a segregationist. He was also, however, the representative of a younger group of business moderates who were willing to make small, token compromises on racial issues for the sake of economic development. Those southern businessmen with their ears to the ground peered into a future where towing a hard line for segregation could very well become bad for business.¹⁶⁰ Lining up with the concerns of the younger, more moderate businessmen from the Committee of 100, Smitherman played himself up as the mayoral candidate for change and progress. "For the past 30 years a favored few have dominated Selma's destiny!" one of his campaign slogans read, "Are you satisfied with Selma's progress under their control, or do you agree that after 30 years it's time for a change?" Always a brash man, the young challenger even went so far as to publicly accuse the municipal machine of keeping the area's minimum wage scale abnormally low.¹⁶¹ This ambitious man from East Selma struck a chord with Selma's white citizens, many of whom

¹⁵⁹ Arthur Capell, "Only One Runoff Required by Outcome of Primary Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 23, 1960; Field notes. Conversation with Joe Knight, March 10, 2013, Selma, Alabama; Arthur Capell, "Foes of Renewal Plans Here Win Major Victory," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 14, 1963; "Smitherman in Race for Mayor Post in March," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 7, 1964.

¹⁶⁰ Field notes. Conversation with Joe Knight, March 10, 2013, Selma, Alabama.

¹⁶¹ Ad "Joe Smitherman for Mayor," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 6, 1964.

had felt pressured to fall in line with the united defense of segregation. In March of 1964, those who had been uncomfortable with the hardline rule of the WCC most likely joined with the working-class whites that Smitherman had come from to vote the young councilman in as mayor, bringing an end to the staunchest era of the old segregationist order. Young business-minded white leaders were willing to sacrifice unwavering segregation in order to bring economic prosperity. But as future years would show, moderation and accommodation now became the tools which the new mayor and his supporters used to keep a tight grasp on local control.

Tension and conflict boiled in Dallas County during the 1950s and early 1960s like a volcano nearing eruption. As civil rights gained ground nationally, black residents drew strength from their diverse but deeply connected community to attack segregation at home. The Fikes trial, the local NAACP school desegregation attempts, and the growing push for African American voting rights made civil rights a Selma issue. Responding to their worst fears, white Dallas County citizens rallied to the defense of segregation. The White Citizens' Council forged a seemingly united front also drawing from relationships built in civic clubs, the Farm Bureau, and churches. Its preferred tactic of economic intimidation allowed white citizens to silence and destroy black protests in a quiet and legal manner.

Meanwhile, the agricultural transformation begun in the 1930s had fundamentally reshaped the Black Belt's economy. As farm employment disappeared, Selma's white business and political leaders joined in the southern mania for industrial expansion to provide jobs and diversify the economy. But the Chamber of Commerce and political elites had no desire to attract industries that would challenge the hard-won status quo of white

supremacy built on cheap black labor. Thus, they sold Selma with promises of abundant resources, cheap and plentiful labor, low taxes, and an anti-union climate. Recruiting industries also depended on enforced unity among municipal leaders as well as harmonious race relations. As in the Citizens' Council's "respectable" use of economic intimidation, the local political machine worked diligently to contain any and all racial and labor agitation. But fissures emerged as the efforts of hard line segregationists to maintain the status quo hindered industrial recruitment. A new group of young businessmen, willing to soften racial practices in the name of good business, staged a coup in city hall and then the Chamber of Commerce. However, such developments did not stop the growing tide of civil rights activism across the South. Before Mayor Joe Smitherman could establish a new way of business and segregation in Selma, local civil rights activity captured the attention of the entire nation.¹⁶²

¹⁶² Arthur Capell, "Joe Smitherman Elected Mayor as Record 4,530 Cast Votes," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 18, 1964.

INTERLUDE 6: 1965

In July 1964, President Lyndon Johnson legally ended decades of racial discrimination when he signed the Civil Rights Act into law. The events leading up to the passage of this monumental legislation had begun in Birmingham, Alabama one year prior. Nicknamed “Bombingham” for the regular explosions that rocked black neighborhoods, the city was notorious for its violent suppression of African Americans. In the spring of 1963, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference staged a frontal attack on segregation in partnership with the city’s black residents. Bull Connor, Birmingham’s unpredictable and deeply racist public safety commissioner, responded with force. Vivid images of black children being mauled by police dogs and ricocheting down the street from police-directed fire hoses provoked a national outcry and a call for federal action. The events pushed President John F. Kennedy, for the first time, to publicly throw his support behind the civil rights agenda. In a television broadcast, he pronounced to American citizens that civil rights was “a moral issue ... as old as the scriptures and ... as clear as the American Constitution.” When an assassin in Dallas, Texas ended Kennedy’s life that fall, Lyndon B. Johnson assumed the slain president’s legacy and pushed new civil rights legislation. When he signed the 1964 Act, Johnson asserted that those equal before God would now be equal in the America’s public spaces.¹

¹ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, Fourth Edition, 1999), 214 – 217; Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963 – 1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 387 – 388.

In Selma, black activists wasted no time testing the Civil Rights Act. On the 4th of July, African American patrons overflowed the upstairs balcony of the Wilby Theatre, which was normally reserved for black seating. When a group requested to sit downstairs, manager Roger Butler, complying with orders from the owner of the Wilby chain of theaters, did not block them. Sheriff Jim Clark then intervened, squelching the short-lived integration by invading the theater and chasing black patrons out. After his posse harassed those waiting in line outside, Clark ordered the Wilby closed.² The Sheriff did the same in response to testing at the Walton Theater. When African Americans attempted to eat at the Thirsty Boy restaurant, four were arrested on trespassing charges. Two five-foot tall crosses burned that night on the northern edge of town, signifying the anger of some white residents.

Law enforcement officers remained on alert. At a mass meeting a few days later, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee revealed its plan to test lunch counters and restaurants. When the crowd exited AME Zion Hall that night, they were met by police officers equipped with “tear gas grenades and night sticks.” Deputies later alleged that an attack against them had prompted the ensuing twenty minutes of violence, but they had already been armed and waiting before the meeting ended.³ With tensions rising, Judge James Hare issued an injunction seeking to quell activity prompted by the Civil Rights Act.⁴ Although he forbade SNCC, the DCVL, SCLC, the Klan, and other organizations from

² Jerry DeMuth, “Total Segregation: Black Belt, Alabama,” *The Commonwealth*, Aug. 7, 1964, 536 – 539.

³ “Violence Threat Quelled at Movie,” & “Missiles Thrown,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 5, 1964; “Full Scale Test Set for Sunday in Civil Rights,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 8, 1964; J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 462.

⁴ Judge Hare had issued a similar injunction in the late 1950s to stop the ILCO worker’s strike against the company; “Mass Registration Here Occupies Monday Calm,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 6, 1964; “Judge Hare Bars Meetings For or Against Civil Rights Laws,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 10, 1964.

meeting, Hare took action a step further and banned the very assembling of more than two people in any public place. The injunction knocked public protest in Selma out cold.⁵

But from underneath the enforced racial calm, black activists charted their next move. The Dallas County Voter's League, guided by Amelia Boynton and R.B. Hudson High teacher F.D. Reese, understood how their local struggle gained potency by partnering with larger civil rights organizations. Bernard Lafayette's arrival and SNCC's strong presence in Dallas County had started with the DCVL's early sponsorship.⁶ But when Judge Hare's injunction debilitated SNCC's work, Amelia Boynton turned to Dr. Martin Luther King and the recently victorious Southern Christian Leadership Conference. At a meeting in Birmingham, Boynton urged SCLC members to come to Selma to stage a full-blown campaign against political repression.⁷ "The local black leadership in Selma was really responsible for the Selma movement," SCLC's Andrew Young remembered, "We did not choose them, they chose us."⁸ After overturning segregation through the Civil Rights Act, the SCLC set its sights on national voting rights legislation, and Selma's well-organized black community, intransigent white elites, and voting rights activism added up to an ideal testing ground. Fresh off its victory, the organization sought to replicate the mass protests and media attention that worked so well in Birmingham. "We wanted to raise the issue of voting to the point where we could take it outside of the Black Belt," SCLC's C.T. Vivian explained,

⁵ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 463.

⁶ Bernard Lafayette, Presentation, Walk in History Workshop (Selma, Alabama: National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, June 2005).

⁷ David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: 1st Perennial Classic, 1986), 359.

⁸ Andrew Young quoted in Henry Hampton, ed., *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990).

“We were using Selma as a way to shake Alabama, so that it would be no longer a Selma issue or even an Alabama issue but a national issue.”⁹

African Americans in Dallas County were well-versed in taking on white supremacy. The recent movement for voting rights drew its strength from the deep community ties forged in complementary fights for better jobs, quality education, legal justice, dignity, and independence. The “economic, religious, political, and fraternal organizations” in Selma’s black community, as SNCC workers found, were “old” and “stabilized.” Respecting the authority of these associations, SNCC worked to build a movement in partnership with established institutional connections.¹⁰ The proven strength and determination of black Dallas County citizens sold SCLC on Selma’s potential. As SCLC began formulating a nationally-gearred but Selma-based drive for the right to vote, however, it pushed black residents’ simultaneous demands for economic justice and other pieces of the “good freedom” into the background.

A successful movement for voting rights, as SCLC had learned from its earlier campaigns, needed to capture the media spotlight and national attention, and the explosive racial hostility of Sheriff Jim Clark and his posse provided the necessary ingredient. Three years earlier in Albany, Georgia, Police Chief Laurie Pritchett had withered media coverage by nonviolently arresting civil rights protesters; his quiet arrests made weak news and thus kept national scrutiny at bay. SCLC did not make the same mistake again. When police commissioner Bull Connor violently assaulted black school children, the campaign in

⁹ C.T. Vivian quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 360.

¹⁰ Selma Workshop Report, Written by Walter Stafford, December 13 – 16, 1963. Reel, 9, SNCC Papers, microfilm.

Birmingham made headlines across the world. SCLC's ability to secure new voting rights legislation depended on another nationally-broadcast morality play of white segregationists brutally attacking nonviolent black marchers. In the hotheadedness of Sheriff Jim Clark, SCLC saw the potential of another Bull Connor.¹¹

The Selma campaign began on January 2nd, 1965, the same day African Americans traditionally celebrated emancipation from slavery. In front of seven hundred people packed into the pews of Brown Chapel A.M.E. church, Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed that Selma had "become a symbol of bitter-end resistance to the civil rights movement in the Deep South." The gathering, in fact, was the first mass meeting since Judge Hare had issued the injunction six months earlier. "Today marks the beginning of a determined, organized, mobilized campaign to get the right to vote everywhere in Alabama," King boomed to the crowd.¹² Black Selma residents, he passionately preached, would march, demonstrate, and protest all the way from the Dallas County courthouse to the White House until they received the ballot. After the meeting, King met with DCVL, SNCC, and SCLC to map out a plan for organizing and running the movement.

Over the next eight weeks, SCLC and SNCC staff, along with local activists, spread out across Selma. They organized the city into wards, recruited block captains, and knocked on doors to find willing volunteers to attempt to register.¹³ On January 18th, the next day the

¹¹ For more on SCLC's strategy in regards to violent law enforcement officials and the media see David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 360, 390 – 391.

¹² Public Safety Director Wilson Baker, a close ally of image-conscious Mayor Smitherman, had told SCLC before the meeting that he had no intention of arresting everyone who came to the meeting; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 371 – 372; Charles E. Fager, *Selma, 1965* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 9 – 10.

¹³ "Freedom Days Being Monday – 18th at the Dallas County Courthouse," [1965]. Reel 36, SNCC Papers, microfilm.

registrar's office opened, black adults marched, two-by-two, to the courthouse to apply to vote. Selma's recently elected mayor, Joe Smitherman, and his newly appointed public safety director, Wilson Baker, tried to stifle any attention-attracting incidents, but the explosive Sheriff Jim Clark claimed dominion over the courthouse. When protestors refused to be directed into a back alley on the second day of protests, Clark's temper rose, and he seized Amelia Boynton by her coat collar, roughly dragging her to a patrol car.¹⁴ Then that Friday afternoon, Selma's black teachers, led by F.D. Reese of the DCVL, marched from Clark Elementary School to the courthouse in protest. Never before had a group of middle-class teachers - whose paychecks were signed by the white school board - demonstrated so visibly. Clark's reaction to these respectable citizens captured national headlines: "Alabama Sheriff Turns Back Negro Teachers," and "Negro Teachers Protest in Selma: 105 Demonstrators Pushed Away With Nightsticks."¹⁵ A SCLC member later told the press, "Every time it appears the movement is dying out, Sheriff Clark comes to our rescue."¹⁶

Meanwhile, Selma's more moderate business and political leaders attempted to restrain Clark and prevent bad press coverage. When the Sheriff forced a group of black teenagers to march several miles outside of the city in early February, Roswell Falkenberry, editor of the *Selma Times-Journal*, called for action: "The time has come – like it or not – when the citizens of this community must take a stand ... if this city and county are to return to

¹⁴ David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 377 – 379.

¹⁵ "Alabama Sheriff Turns Back Negro Teachers," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 23, 1965; John Herber, Special to New York Times "Negro Teachers Protest in Selma: 105 Demonstrators Pushed Away With Nightsticks," *New York Times*, Jan. 23, 1965, Proquest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁶ Quote in David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 391.

the status of dignity, respectability, and decency which they have always known.”¹⁷ With Selma’s white officials working to quiet the voting rights movement, SCLC leaders expanded demonstrations into the surrounding Black Belt counties.¹⁸ On February 18, state troopers fiercely attacked a night march in Marion, the county seat of neighboring Perry County, and shot a young black man.¹⁹ Jimmie Lee Jackson’s death one week later focused the media spotlight back on the Black Belt. At a mass meeting at Brown Chapel, James Bevel of SCLC proposed that black people in Selma march to Montgomery, symbolically carrying the body of Jackson to Governor Wallace. “The blood of Jackson will be on our hands if we don’t march,” he said. 3,400 black residents had been arrested in the last month of protests, and the audience gave Bevel their support.²⁰

On the morning of Sunday March 7th, black residents solemnly amassed at Brown Chapel in the George Washington Carver housing project in preparation for the walk to Montgomery. On the opposite side of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, state troopers, Sheriff Clark, and his posse waited at the ready, some on horseback, others equipped with billy clubs and gas masks. SCLC’s Hosea Williams and SNCC’s John Lewis led the march. Behind them were hundreds of local black residents – like Amelia Boynton and Marie Foster - who had built the movement. The line crested over the sharply arched bridge before coming to a stop

¹⁷ “A Matter of Satisfaction,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 6, 1965.

¹⁸ In February, local officials introduced an “appearance book” at the courthouse where potential registrants could sign their name and then be served in a first come, first served manor instead of waiting in line. This caused a split between SCLC and DCVL, with SCLC viewing the “appearance book” as a delaying tactic, and DCVL seeing it as mediocre progress. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 386 – 387.

¹⁹ David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 391.

²⁰ Roy Reed, special to New York Times, “Wounded Negro Dies in Alabama,” *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1965. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

in front of a barrier of law enforcement officers. Commander of the state troopers, Major John Cloud, ordered the marchers to stop and disperse at the foot of the bridge. A few minutes after they did not, he let out the order, “Troopers, advance!”

With billy clubs swinging and tear gas filling the air, law enforcement officers and posse members assailed the black men, women, and children. Those at the front of the line crumpled unconscious from direct beatings while others frantically stumbled back towards Brown Chapel seeking refuge, bleeding and panicked. The posse and troopers continued their rampage all the way to the GWC Homes. There, however, they met bricks and bottles, as furious black residents retaliated. One black man, Clarence Williams, had blocked the posse’s attack with his car, and then headed home for his two guns before returning to the housing project. Gathering in Brown Chapel that night after the terror of the day had calmed, SCLC leaders fervently urged their supporters to remain nonviolent.²¹ In Dallas County, where independence and resistance to white supremacy had always involved the protection of a gun, it was a testament to local residents’ determination that further violence was avoided.

That night, footage of what became known as “Bloody Sunday” broadcast into American living rooms. Images of white state troopers brutally beating peaceful black marchers sickened the conscience of the nation. When Martin Luther King issued a call for people to come to Selma and join “our peaceful, nonviolent march for freedom,” the response was overwhelming.²² As men and women poured into Selma, black residents of the

²¹ Fager, *Selma 1965*, 93 – 97.

²² “Dr. King Announces Plan for New Walk and Assails Attack,” *New York Times*, Mar. 8, 1965, ProQuest Historical Newspaper; David Kraslow, “Disgust, Shock Felt in Capital Over Clubbins,” *The Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 9, 1965, ProQuest

Carver Homes opened their doors and gave them shelter. Two thousand people followed King in Tuesday's protest march, one that turned back so as not to violate a federal injunction. Elsewhere, civil rights sympathizers marched in the thousands demanding federal intervention while a bipartisan coalition of lawmakers rallied for swift congressional action.²³ In Selma, tensions ran high as outsiders flocked into town. Local white men outside of the Silver Moon Café beat a white Unitarian minister, Rev. James Reeb, on the night of the second march. His traumatic injuries soon gave the Selma movement its second fatality.²⁴

The crisis in Selma pushed President Lyndon Johnson to action. In a televised address one week later, Johnson detailed his newly proposed voting rights bill. Echoing Kennedy's Birmingham speech, the President declared, "It is wrong – deadly wrong, to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote in this country." Dr. King watched the speech that night in the living room of Sullivan and Jean Jackson's house on Lapsley Street. When Johnson vowed that "we shall overcome" the country's "crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice," it brought King to tears.²⁵

The Selma-to-Montgomery march finally became a reality later that week with the approval of Federal Judge Frank Johnson. The work of setting up campsites on black-owned land, securing portable toilets, organizing transportation, coordinating food and water, and

Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times (1881 – 1989), accessed April 10, 2013; "Thousands Across U.S. Protest Racial Violence," *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 10, 1965. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

²³ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 403; Steven F. Lawson, "The Selma Movement and the Voting Rights Act of 1965" in *Civil Rights Since 1787: A Reader on the Civil Rights Struggle*, Jonathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor, eds, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p 539 – 545.

²⁴ "Death Feared Near For Beaten Minister," *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1965. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

²⁵ Johnson quotes in David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 408.

finding masses and masses of volunteers consumed organizers. As Jean Jackson remembered, “Assignments were divided up among staff and off they went. Calls were pouring in from everywhere.”²⁶ Because Highway 80 only had two lanes through Lowndes County, Judge Johnson limited the march to three hundred people for that section. The task of selecting the three hundred fell to SNCC worker Frank Soracco. Many of the local men and women who had gone to jail and faced down Jim Clark won the honor of walking the entire fifty-four miles.²⁷

On Sunday, March 21st, over three thousand people triumphantly marched over the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The billy-club-wielding officers from two weeks before had disappeared; instead, the federalized Alabama National Guard walked alongside, protecting those demonstrating for voting rights.²⁸ When the exhausted but determined group of three hundred started for Alabama’s capitol five days later, their numbers swelled to 25,000. Standing near the spot where Confederate President Jefferson Davis had taken the oath of office, Dr. King addressed the crowd. “The confrontation of good and evil compressed in the tiny community of Selma generated the massive power that turned the whole nation to a new course,” he proclaimed, reminding the audience of where the movement had come from. While praising President Johnson’s recent actions, King implored those gathered, “Let us march on the ballot boxes,” until justice was achieved. “How long? Not long,” King asked in closing, “because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards

²⁶ Richie Jean Sherrod Jackson, *House By the Side of the Road: The Selma Civil Rights Movement* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011).

²⁷ Fager, *Selma, 1965*, 146.

²⁸ Roy Reed, “Freedom March Begins in Selma” *The New York Times*, Mar. 22, 1965. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

justice.”²⁹ But the arc had not bent far enough that night. In the process of shuttling marchers back to Selma from Montgomery, a carload of Klan members, including one FBI informant, shot into a car driven by a Detroit mother and volunteer, Viola Liuzzo, leaving her to die on the side of Highway 80.³⁰

On August 7th, 1965, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. Over fifty years of carefully guarded voter restrictions in the South came to an end, and federal examiners descended on southern counties to ensure that the voting rights of all citizens were protected.³¹ The movement that had grown from black Dallas County citizens’ fight against white supremacy succeeded in securing voting rights legislation designed to protect all Americans. The first half of 1965 forever changed Selma; however, the long and painstaking work of turning the promises of the voting rights movement into reality for African Americans’ daily lives was only beginning.

²⁹ Roy Reed, special to the New York Times “25,000 Go to Alabama’s Capitol,” *The New York Times*, Mar. 26, 1965. ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

³⁰ Gary May, *The Informant: the FBI, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Murder of Viola Liuzzo* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

³¹ John H. Averill, “President Signs Voting Rights Bill Into Law,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 7, 1965. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

CHAPTER 6: MAKING THE “GOOD FREEDOM”: BLACK ORGANIZING, LOCAL CONTROL, AND FEDERAL SUPPORT, 1965 – 1976

Joanne Bland became a freedom fighter before the age of ten. Standing with her grandmother outside of Carter’s Drug Store one day, Bland wanted to go in and order at the lunch counter. Her grandmother explained that colored children were not allowed to do that. Then leaning over, she told Bland that when they got their freedom, she could do that too. “I became a freedom fighter that day,” Bland recalled, “I understood that Grandma was going for the *good* freedom. Abraham Lincoln had given me *a* freedom, but not the *good* freedom.” When the voting rights campaign swept Selma, Joanne Bland marched to the courthouse and received her first ride on a yellow school bus as it drove her, her grandmother, and other protestors to jail.¹ The 1965 Voting Rights Act guaranteed African Americans the political leverage vital to dismantling the entrenched system of white supremacy. But this monumental achievement marked a beginning rather than an end. Making the “good freedom” a reality quickly proved to be a difficult undertaking.

As the national spotlight faded from Selma in the aftermath of the 1965 movement, black citizens of Dallas County resolutely continued their attack on the daily constraints of white supremacy. Drawing energy from the exploding new black voter base and mobilizing inside movement-inspired organizations, black residents took on local political, economic, and social injustices. The federal government became their principal, but still reticent, ally.

¹ Joanne Bland, “Growing up in the segregated south: Selma voting rights movement,” Winona Senior High School, Winona, Minnesota, n.d, Culture Clique, KQAL, Winona State University, <http://www.prx.org/pieces/59935>. (accessed November 19, 2012).

For the first time since Reconstruction, the national government put its might to use, forcing white southern officials to treat African Americans as full citizens. Ballooning black voter rolls, the end of segregated school systems, the hiring of black public employees, and racially-balanced election districts were all products of federal intervention. Meanwhile, Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty funneled millions of dollars into programs to empower poor people and eradicate poverty. It was a time of hope for African Americans, who watched small changes for the better accumulate in their lives. In Dallas County, War on Poverty funding helped support a cooperative for black farmers, provided day care programs, employment for low-income teens and adults, and paved roads and streetlights for long-neglected black neighborhoods.

Battered from the unfavorable attention of 1965, Selma's white business and political leaders fought determinedly to dictate the pace of change and repair the city's image. A new generation of more moderate businessmen had replaced the old guard segregationists, but they, too, were interested in maintaining local control. Fierce resistance from white elites constrained federally-supported gains in black employment, legal justice, and school desegregation during the 1970s. With his domineering political style, Mayor Joe Smitherman wrested control of local War on Poverty funding away from a black-led grassroots organization of poor people and installed a board of white moderates and black middle-class representatives to supervise a program that met his approval. The Chamber of Commerce continued their policy of supporting low-wage, non-unionized, and racially-stratified industries. Thus, black workers remained underpaid, underemployed and in racially-stratified jobs, at the same time the nearly completed agricultural revolution foreclosed the livelihoods of black tenants and small farmers alike. Welfare payments became the only option for many

blacks, and their lack of access to cash and subjugation to regulations only strengthened the power of local white elites. While black mobilization and the federal government's intervention forged a decade of potentially meaningful change, the tightly-controlled political and economic order that white politicians and business leaders upheld in the late sixties and early seventies hindered the arrival of Joanne Bland's "good freedom."

After the Movement

After the thousands who had flocked to the Selma-to-Montgomery march returned home, national media attention turned elsewhere, towards an escalating crisis in Vietnam or uprisings setting the nation's cities aflame. In Dallas County, black and white citizens began sorting out what life would look like in the aftermath of the legislative changes of 1964 and 1965. Organizers from SCLC and SNCC remained in Selma, but disagreements ran rife over where the movement should go from there. Within the city government, Mayor Joe Smitherman conceded to biracial meetings with the Dallas County Voters League, now headed by Rev. F.D. Reese.² Local black leaders called for an end to police brutality, fair employment and representation in city government, the integration of public facilities, and the institution of courtesy titles for black citizens. The newly elected mayor refused to budge, yet his stubbornness did not stop him from insisting that black residents call off their

² Once of the primary debates in SCLC concerned whether to mount an intensive voter registration project, known as SCOPE, or to put their efforts into statewide boycott; Charles Fager, *Selma, 1965* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 166 – 178, 188 – 191.

boycott of downtown businesses as well as give their “vocal support [to] Selma’s industrial development.”³

Meanwhile, boxes of clothing and food began pouring into Brown Chapel and First Baptist, a symbol of how disturbed Americans had been by the poverty broadcast through their television sets. Distributing the relief supplies fell to SCLC and the DCVL, and it was not long before accusations of fraud and favoritism flew like willow flies in August. Months of marching had taken a toll on the black men and women who sustained the movement.⁴ The increasing self-interest of the leadership of the Voter’s League, in addition to the city’s obstinate refusal to address black demands, compounded the frustration of black residents and caused the temporary unity of the past year to crack. Black residents from East Selma’s Ward 5B rebelled against the DCVL’s attempt to maintain control. Fed up with their children trekking long distances to get to R.B. Hudson High, the residents began raising funds to purchase a school bus. When DCVL vice-president, Ernest Doyle, insisted that all money needed to first be channeled through the DCVL’s coffers, ward residents refused and split from the organization. On their own, they raised enough funds to buy the bus.⁵

³ The agenda items received endorsements from the DCVL, the Selma Teacher’s Association, the Business and Professional League, the Chesterfield Club, as well as the barbers, beauticians, and numerous savings clubs; “What the Negroes of Selma and Dallas County Want,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 2, 1965; Cooperation of Negro Leaders is Requested,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 8, 1965.

⁴ Charles Fager, *Selma, 1965* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), 166 – 178, 188 – 191.

⁵ Fager, *Selma, 1965*, 190 – 191.

While African Americans grew more wary of the power-hungry actions of movement organizations, the sense of self-worth and empowerment built by SNCC's grassroots organizing thrived. In East Selma, one of the city's poorest sections, the participation of residents in voting rights protest had done nothing to alleviate the piles of rubbish, standing water, muddy streets, and cracked sewage pipes that were a daily norm. Three SNCC workers that summer, in partnership with the neighborhood's movement veterans, started to organize weekly ward meetings for residents to talk about local problems.⁶ In early July, Claudia Mae Strong hosted the East Selma People's Convention in her backyard. The theme of the evening was "If we don't help ourselves, who will?"⁷ Convention attendees threw their support behind registering to vote and running candidates for office in order to secure paved roads, better housing, sewers, and playgrounds. Not taking any chances, however, they also vowed to take up direct action tactics - like non-



Figure 27: African American men and women entering and coming out of the Federal building in Selma after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. After being prevented from registering at the Dallas County courthouse for so long, many African Americans chose to register at the Federal building. Courtesy of Jim Pepler Southern Courier Photograph Collection, ADAH.

⁶ Doug and Tina Harris and Janet Jermott, "Over 200 at East Selma People's Convention" Reel, 36, SNCC Papers, microfilm.

⁷ "East Selma People are Getting Together for Some Bar-B-Q, Some Movies, Some Talk," Reel 17, SNCC Papers, microfilm.

payment of taxes and suing the city for misappropriation of public funds - if the traditional political process failed them.⁸

While middle-class black leaders petitioned city and county officials, laboring African Americans pushed for fair treatment and better pay in their workplaces. At Selma's Coca-Cola Bottling Company, black employees began organizing a union with the help of civil rights workers during the summer of 1965. The men demanded \$1.25 an hour for a forty hour work week, instead of the \$32 they currently made for fifty hours. Willie Fuller, one of the local leaders explained, "I just don't see how a man with seven children can survive on take home pay of \$29.66."⁹ But the South's long history of racially-divided workforces hurt the efforts of black Coca-Cola employees. At the NLRB election in August, the union lost by one vote. "I didn't want to join no nigger organization," one of the company's white workers stated. Four years earlier, the situation had been exactly reversed; a group of white Coca-Cola workers failed to form a union when the company urged the black workers to vote against it.¹⁰ Mayor Joe Smitherman explained the roots of this enmity. Employers had always been able to pressure white employees by saying "if you can't do better, and you won't for this price, we'll get a black to do it."¹¹ Voting rights did could not cause all of the

⁸ Doug and Tina Harris and Janet Jermott, "Over 200 at East Selma People's Convention" Reel 36, SNCC Papers, microfilm.

⁹ "Selma Coke Workers Vote on Union Aug. 18," *Southern Courier*, July 30, 1965.

¹⁰ Marshall Bloom, "Coke Union Loses Again," *Southern Courier*, August 28, 1965.

¹¹ Interview with Mayor Joseph Smitherman, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on December 5, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

years and decades of racial division and discrimination in local workplaces to disappear overnight.¹²

Even with the promise of political rights for black citizens, the structural causes of poverty had deep roots in the Alabama Black Belt, and they were not easy to unearth. In Dallas County in 1960, 52% of all families lived in poverty, but an extraordinary 84.3% of black families eked out a living with less than three thousand dollars per year. Meanwhile, 42.8% of the fifteen thousand housing units in Dallas County were classified as deteriorating or dilapidated. In fact, more homes had television sets than had flush toilets. Any residents who had reached the ninth grade could consider themselves amongst the better educated of their neighbors, but for African Americans, the median number of school years completed totaled a paltry 5.8.¹³ In order for the voting rights movement to usher in meaningful change, activists increasingly believed a myriad of other issues - substandard housing, underfunded education, lack of access to cash and credit, malnutrition, poor health care, and subpar transportation - needed to be addressed.

This growing awareness of the structural roots of poverty also resonated in the halls of the United States' capitol. Lyndon Johnson believed that extending civil rights and eradicating poverty were vital to his dream of a Great Society. In 1964, Congress agreed,

¹² Black workers at Henry Brick Yard, Lovoy's, and Stewart King & McKenzie Grocer also attempted to form unions in the aftermath of the voting rights movement; Meeting Men from Coca Cola, June 21, 1965 & Memo: To Silas, Staff; From: Doug, Tina, Janet, Reel 17, SNCC Papers, microfilm.

¹³The formal Census poverty line was not established until 1963 - 1964; Bureau of Census, *U.S. Census of Population, 1960*, vol. 1, pt. 2 Characteristics of the Population, Alabama, (Washington, D.C.:U.S. Government Printing Office,1963), 2-118, 2-119, 2-221, 2-226; Bureau of Census, *U.S. Census of Housing: 1960*, vol. 1, pt. 2 States and Small Areas, Alabama - Connecticut, (Washington, D.C.:U.S. Government Printing Office,1972), 2-66; "Results Given on Housing Survey," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 20, 1962; Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964 - 1972* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 164.

passing the Economic Opportunity Act, a far-reaching anti-poverty bill. The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) opened that October to spearhead new War on Poverty programs. These fell into two primary categories: Title II Community Action Programs (CAPs), projects developed by poor people to address local and immediate needs, and Title III programs specifically targeted at rural poverty. Of utmost importance to Dallas County's black residents, the War on Poverty insisted on the maximum feasible participation by the poor who its programs would serve. Coupled with the newly enforced federal civil rights protections, the OEO offered a promising possibility for African American communities to further their fight for political equality and economic justice.¹⁴

When War on Poverty funds became available in Dallas County, two SCLC staff members undertook the substantial task of assembling an anti-poverty committee of black and poor people. Rev. Harold Middlebrook, a small-statured African American minister, and Shirley Mesher, a fiery white activist from Seattle, had arrived in Selma in the end days of the national movement and threw themselves into organizing around economic issues.¹⁵ The offices they worked from – also home to other local civil rights groups and the Boynton's Insurance Agency - were literally stacked on top of each other at the 31 ½ Franklin Street building, and movement organizers benefited from this close contact. Mrs. Boynton had used her knowledge from years of Extension Service work to connect outside activists with willing rural communities. During the summer of 1965, Mesher and others ventured out into

¹⁴ Ashmore, *Carry It On*, 58 – 59.

¹⁵ Ashmore, *Carry It On*, 164 – 165.

the county, talking at rural churches, distributing leaflets, and trying to reach as many poor people as possible.¹⁶



Figure 28: Amelia Boynton speaking at Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church at a mass meeting in May 1966. Courtesy Jim Pepler Southern Courier Photograph Collection, ADAH.

During the 1965 voting rights movement, the DCVL had mainly concentrated its efforts within the boundaries of Selma; anti-poverty workers, however, found their best supporters out in what locals called the “rurals.” In many ways, this was a legacy of S.W. Boynton and the Negro Extension Service’s mission to build economic independence and self-sufficiency among black farmers. “To some extent they are somewhat more cooperative in the rural than they are in the city,” black Dallas County farmer Joe Johnson explained, “It is a strange thing that the people in the rural are much more politically educated than the city people are.”¹⁷ SNCC volunteer Martha Prescod Norman encountered this when she drove with Amelia Boynton to an anti-poverty meeting in the county. When she asked “Why are

¹⁶ Ashmore, *Carry It On*, 165.

¹⁷ Clarence William and Joe Johnson, interview by Hardy Frye, 1972. Hardy Frye Oral History Collection, Auburn University Special Collections, Auburn, Alabama.

people poor?” one of the small farmers in the crowd piped up, “Because someone steals their labor.” Surprised by the astute answer, Norman pressed them on why someone would steal a person’s labor. “Then I received a ten-minute description of the crisscrossing of economic and political power in the county along with how these people were related to one another by blood and marriage,” she recalled. “That was the last time I attempted to teach any kind of political education class in Alabama.”¹⁸

By the fall of 1965, organizers had marshaled a coalition of men and women, ready to work for a better life for poor people. Holding public meetings in Selma, the group sought to establish themselves as the designated anti-poverty agency in Dallas County.¹⁹ They called themselves Self-Help Against Poverty for Everyone (SHAPE) and named local African American minister Ernest Bradford as their spokesman. Mayor Joe Smitherman had submitted his own proposal for a Community Action Program earlier in the year, but it had withered away after the OEO rejected it for its glaring lack of black participation.²⁰ When SHAPE’s mission started spreading around town, however, the stakes of the game changed for Joe Smitherman.

Two days after a SHAPE gathering in late October, the mayor announced his intention to apply again for anti-poverty funds. He proclaimed that he would not assist any “self-appointed group [...] which attempts to go around local government to obtain antipoverty [funds],” even though SHAPE had made a special effort to get the city’s

¹⁸ Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, “Captured By the Movement,” in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* edited by Faith S. Holsaert, et al (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 483 – 503, 497.

¹⁹ “Sanction Sought by Local Group on Anti-Poverty,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 27, 1965.

²⁰ Edward Rudd, “Race Complicates Black Belts Anti-Poverty Plans,” *Southern Courier*, October 16, 1965.

support.²¹ All factions – city officials, business leaders, SHAPE members, and DCVL activists – met at the National Guard Armory on Thursday, November 4th to hear the mayor’s proposal. SHAPE’s plan called for a black-majority board that would reflect Dallas County’s demographics as well as prioritize the voices of poor people.²² Smitherman, instead, proposed a board with an equal number of black and white members, and a smaller executive board that would administer the funds.²³ Additionally, he stipulated that an eleven-man, African American committee would choose all of the black representatives and that Probate Judge Bernard Reynolds held final say over proposed black members.²⁴

SHAPE, understandably, balked. Five days later, 450 mostly black citizens crammed into Green Street Baptist Church to debate how they should respond.²⁵ Tension between the black middle-class leaders and Dallas County’s mobilized poor filled the air.²⁶ SHAPE’s inclusion of rural and working-class people jeopardized the authority of Selma’s traditional black leadership. One activist working with SHAPE explained that now a man from the rural “could stand up just like any preacher and voice his opinions and his opinion carried just as much weight because he had discovered that he was a man.” Middle-class leaders had thrown their support behind negotiation with city officials, a strategy advantageous to securing concessions as well as their own personal power. That night at the church, Rev.

²¹ Joe Smitherman quoted in “City Will Apply for Anti-Poverty Funds,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 29, 1965.

²² Youngblood, *Carry It On*, 169.

²³ “Mayor Asks for Broad Base Plan in Anti-Poverty,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 5, 1965.

²⁴ Edward Rudd, “Poverty Dispute in Selma,” *Southern Courier*, November 13, 1965.

²⁵ “Poverty Parley Punctuated by Spirited Debate,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 10, 1965.

²⁶ Edward Rudd, “Poverty Dispute in Selma,” *Southern Courier*, November 13, 1965.

F.D. Reese of the DCVL took the stage in support of the mayor's plan, while SHAPE's Rev. Bradford stood staunchly opposed.²⁷ It was clear that a line had been drawn between SHAPE and the black middle class leaders of DCVL.²⁸

Over the next three months, black ministers, including Reese, P.H. Lewis of Brown Chapel, and J.D. Hunter of the DCVL, joined forces with Mayor Smitherman, trying to compel SHAPE to participate in the city's plan. "Nobody is trying to shove the poor people out," Rev. J.D. Hunter implored. "But when I go to court I want a lawyer, and when I go to church I want a preacher." A decade earlier, Hunter had refused to remove his name from the NAACP school desegregation petition, but now he was suggesting that poor people had no place in anti-poverty leadership. After burning through their limited options, SHAPE grudgingly relented in January and nominated representatives to Smitherman's board.²⁹ When the Community Action Program finally came to Dallas County, it began without the voices of the poor who had labored hardest for it. "The key people who are active on CAP in the Negro community," Shirley Mesher, who had become one of the mayor's fiercest critics, explained, "are in close political coalition with the white power structure, again to the dismay and displeasure of the majority of the community."³⁰

Independent Black Political Power

²⁷ Edward Rudd, "Poverty Dispute in Selma," *Southern Courier*, November 13, 1965.

²⁸ Francis X Walter, Interview by Stanley Smith, August 1968, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Sprigam Research Center, Howard University, 26 – 27.

²⁹ John Klein, "Selma Negroes Wonder What the Mayor Meant," *Southern Courier*, February 2, 1966.

³⁰ Shirley Mesher, Interview by Stanely Smith, 1968, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland Sprigam Research Center, Howard University, 44.

Even though SHAPE lost the fight for War on Poverty funds, it fired up a constituency of working-class people who were fed up with self-appointed black leaders and white control. One county over, Stokely Carmichael and SNCC activists were partnering with local activists to drum up support for an independent, black-led political party in Lowndes County. The Democratic Party in Alabama, with its slogan of “White Supremacy for the Right,” continued to be the political home of white power brokers. Instead of casting their votes for the party that had unleashed its full arsenal against civil rights, black Lowndes residents formed a grassroots third-party committed to “One Man, One Vote.” The Lowndes County Freedom Organization ran a slate of working-class black residents as candidates for county offices. They chose the black panther as their symbol.³¹

Since the passage of the Voting Rights Act, federal registrars at Selma’s federal courthouse had processed thousands of voter applications from black residents, and by March, Dallas County’s voting rolls included 10,200 Negro and 12,100 white registered voters.³² The primary election in the spring of 1966 was the first election where these residents could cast their ballots. Like their neighbors in Lowndes, SHAPE members organized the Dallas County Independent Free Voters Organization (DCIFVO) in an attempt to achieve black political control. “Negroes must come together and act as one strong group if we want to change the conditions we live in,” a DCIFVO handout urged. “The white people will not help us win control of our government. They will not give us candidates who will work for our welfare.” The DCIFVO believed that black people could

³¹ Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 144 – 145.

³² John Klein, “Two Old Foes Battle in Selma,” *Southern Courier*, March 19, 1966.

address the needs of the black community best, just as SHAPE contended that poor people were best equipped to come up with solutions to their own problems.³³

The 1966 primary pitted old guard segregationist, Jim Clark, against former public safety director and racial moderate, Wilson Baker, in the race for sheriff. Once again, Rev. Reese and the Voter's League clashed with the DCIFVO's poor and rural members about what direction to take in the election. Although black voting numbers had multiplied exponentially, they still did not match registered white voters. That and the

possibility of a run-off election if a black candidate ran for sheriff persuaded the DCVL to throw its support behind Wilson Baker. If black voters came out for a white candidate, Reese further explained, "then that man must have some 'caterance' to the desires of the Negro communities."³⁴ But the DCIFVO refused to endorse either white candidate and instead focused on organizing its own slate. On May 3rd, the day of the primary, DCIFVO nominated Samson Crum for Sheriff, Horace D. Griffin for tax collector, Addie Lilly for tax



Figure 29: Children at DCIFVO rally at the GWC homes in April of 1966, holding signs with the slogan "Strength Through Unity." Courtesy Jim Pepler Southern Courier Photograph Collection, ADAH.

³³ Dallas County Independent Free Voters Information [1966], Reel 17, SNCC Papers, microfilm.

³⁴ John Klein, "Dallas County Voters Start Third Party," *Southern Courier*, March 19, 1966.

assessor, Nathan Payne for coroner, Agatha Harville and two others board of revenue, and two for school board.³⁵



Figure 30: DCIFVO political rally at the Selma National Guard Armory on Dallas Avenue in 1966. SNCC activist Julian Bond's speech to an attentive crowd is followed by dancing. Courtesy Jim Pepler Southern Courier Photograph Collection, ADAH.

That night after the polls had closed in the regular primary, Sheriff Clark and the Dallas County Executive Committee threw out six boxes due to, what they called, voter irregularities. The votes, all from black neighborhoods, would have given Wilson Baker the lead. The case moved immediately into federal court, and within weeks, a judge ordered a recount of all boxes, which ensured Baker's nomination.³⁶ Taking a cue from the DCIFVO, Clark reentered as an independent candidate in the November election. Railing against the federal government and "black power" for taking over the Democratic primary, Clark vowed to maintain law and order in Dallas County.³⁷ Yet a new generation of moderate, image-conscious leaders, like Mayor Smitherman, banker Rex Morthland, and newspaper editor Roswell Falkenberry, had a vested interest in ridding themselves of Clark. With the DCVL's

³⁵ Michael S. Lottman, "How Did Your County Vote," *Southern Courier*, May 7, 1966.

³⁶ "Sheriff's Fight Enters Federal Court," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 6, 1966; "Re-Tabulation Set on Disputed Boxes" *Selma Times-Journal*, May 26, 1966.

³⁷ Jim Clark for Sheriff, ad, *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 23, 1966.

support and the withdrawal of Samson Crum from the race, Baker squeaked into office.³⁸ Meanwhile, the DCIVO candidates suffered what the *Southern Courier* called “staggering defeats” at the polls. Clarence Williams, DCIFVO chairman, blamed the Voter’s League’s endorsement of the entire Democratic ticket (a move to help Baker’s campaign) for part of their loss. But he refused to be defeated. “We’re out to establish a democratic system in the county,” Williams stated, “We intend to stand up politically, any way we can. We’re going to keep on fighting.”³⁹

It’s a Deal to Starve You to Death

While African Americans in Dallas County fought for political and economic justice, white officials and leaders worked to maintain both control and the status quo. Civil rights protests, as historian James Cobb argues, forced growth-oriented business leaders in the South “to weigh their commitment to segregation against their desire to see their communities – and themselves – continue to prosper.” Racial violence and die-hard segregation had become bad business.⁴⁰ From these considerations emerged Mayor Smitherman and the Committee of 100, a new generation willing to make limited concessions in the name of progress and power.

In the heat of voting rights demonstrations in February 1965, the local Chamber of Commerce won a substantial victory when Hammermill Paper Company announced it was

³⁸ “Baker Edges Clark in Sheriff’s Race,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 9, 1966.

³⁹ “Dallas: DCIFVO Head Not Discouraged,” *Southern Courier*, Nov. 12, 1966.

⁴⁰ James Cobb, *The South and America since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 101.

building a plant outside of Selma. It turned out that cattle was not the only operation that thrived on former cotton fields. Timber grew tall in the Black Belt, and the paper makers came looking for a ready supply of pulpwood. Economic considerations, not racial motivations, drove Hammermill's decision, but while white Selma businessmen celebrated, protests erupted elsewhere.⁴¹ Scorn rained down on the company for investing in a place that was so visibly committed to denying black people the right to vote. Meanwhile, Governor George Wallace rolled out the red carpet, offering Hammermill cheap land and water, a fifty percent reduction in property tax, approval of its water disposal system, and even a new bridge across the Alabama River to alleviate traffic.⁴² However, race did enter into the picture when the Liberty National Insurance Company purchased \$400,000 of industrial revenue bonds to fund Hammermill's construction. Four months earlier, the Liberty National had thrown a barbecue for Dallas County's law enforcement officers, giving its tacit approval for the force's reputation of putting down racial disturbances.⁴³

Hammermill understood that good business and a good image went hand in hand. Company executives assured the public that they would implement a color-blind hiring policy and use their corporate citizenship to encourage the protection of equal voting rights.⁴⁴ Selma's political leaders supported the attempts of the industrialists to smooth over the city's turbulent image. After the Selma-to-Montgomery march, the local Chamber of

⁴¹ "Hammermill to Construct \$30 Million Plant Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 3, 1965.

⁴² Cobb, *The South and America Since World War II*, 104 – 105.

⁴³ "Bullwhips, Paper Mills, and Governor Wallace," Selma, Alabama. Reel 36, SNCC Papers, microfilm.

⁴⁴ Cobb, *The South and America since World War II*, 105; "Hammermill Takes Realistic Stand," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 14, 1965.

Commerce refused to sign a statement by Alabama businessmen and published in the *New York Times*, expressing mild support for integration. The city council, however, with Hammermill's relocation in mind, passed a resolution calling for the Chamber to reverse its position.⁴⁵ It took only two days for the Chamber to fall in line.⁴⁶

New industry and a new image, however, did little to alter Dallas County's racially stratified economy. By the late 1960s, agriculture had nearly completed its transformation into an occupation for only the large landowning, credit and resource-rich farmer.⁴⁷ The number of farms in Dallas County had dropped to 1,204 in 1969, and in the five years prior, average farm size had ballooned from 215.1 acres to 312.8. Even though tenant farmers still totaled 32.2% of all farm operators, the remaining 325 African American tenants worked only 3% of all farm land.⁴⁸

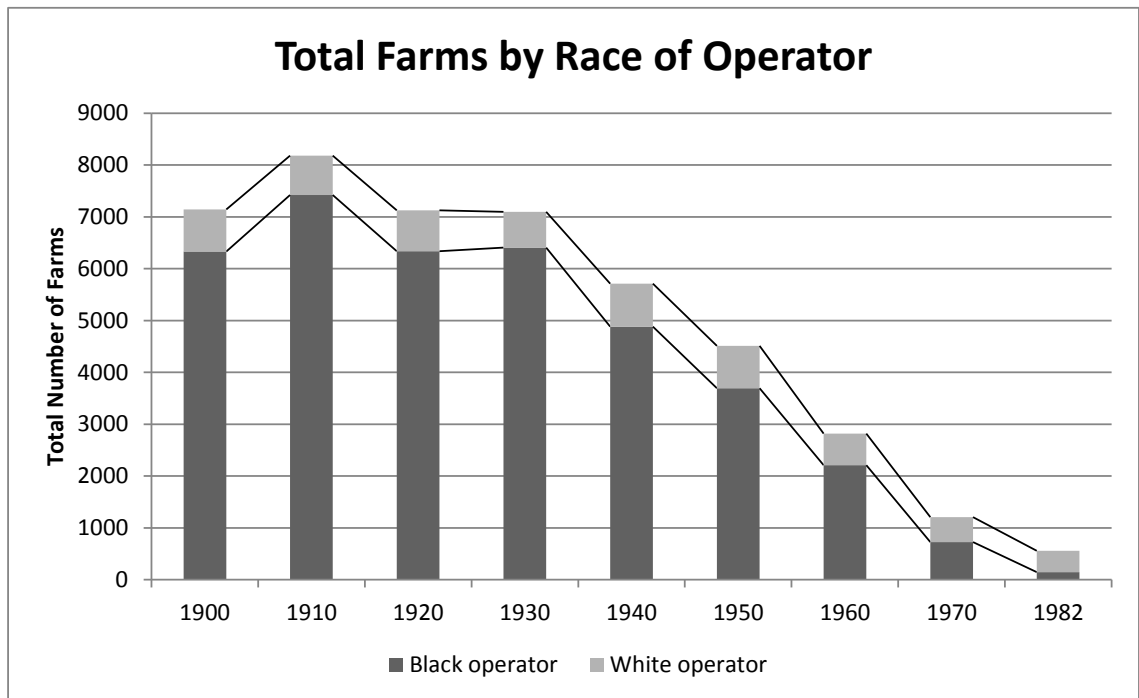
⁴⁵ "City Council in Agreement Here on Declaration," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 16, 1965.

⁴⁶ "Chamber Reverses Stand on Advertisement Issue," *Selma Times-Journal*, April 18, 1965.

⁴⁷ "New Type of Farmer Emerging," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 30, 1969.

⁴⁸ Bureau of Census, *U.S. Census of Agriculture: 1969*, vol. 1, pt. 32 Area Reports, Alabama, (Washington, D.C.:U.S. Government Printing Office,1972), 193.

Table 2: Total Farms by Race of Operator



Displaced black farmers either left the area or turned to the low-wage, non-union jobs recruited by local economic development schemes. Textile manufacturing became one of Dallas County’s major industries. Dan River Mills opened a much-acclaimed textile plant twelve miles east of Selma in 1966, and then Laura Industries and U & W Manufacturing began operations producing military clothing for government contracts shortly afterwards.⁴⁹ By 1972, five apparel and textile companies employed 1,100 people, one-quarter of all manufacturing employees in Dallas County.⁵⁰ Black women, the lowest paid segment of Selma’s workforce, did the majority of textile work.

⁴⁹ “A Welcome to Dan River Mills,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 25, 1966; “Marchers Ride to Laura for Demonstration Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 11, 1967.

⁵⁰ Bureau of Census, *U.S. Census of Manufacturers: 1972*, vol. 3, pt. 1, Area Statistics, Alabama-Montana (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976)1-6.

In August of 1967, the overwhelming majority of Laura Industries' employees walked out on strike.⁵¹ Their goal was to force the company to recognize the International Ladies Garment Workers Union at the plant. Laura Industries president, David Wallace, called the strike illegitimate, even though eighty percent of employees had walked out.⁵² Strikers like Robert Nunn and Leona Bowden, spoke out against unfair company practices. These included refusing to pay injury compensation, firing people by their first name over the loudspeaker, and setting quotas so high that workers could never meet them.⁵³ "A civil rights law had been passed," one union organizer explained, "but that don't mean we have gotten our civil rights." The strike, he claimed, was about being "treated like human beings."⁵⁴

As the strike continued into September, black middle-class leaders lent their support to the fight. Rev. F.D. Reese urged a six hundred strong rally at Green Street Baptist church to march from Brown Chapel to Laura Industries.⁵⁵ Rain turned the Monday morning march into a protest caravan to the Bell Road Industrial Park where picketers demonstrated outside the company.⁵⁶ Those who had supported the DCIFVO in the past elections were skeptical of the DCVL leaders' involvement. While Rev. Reese, Rev. P.H. Lewis, businessmen Ed Moss, and Rev. C.C. Brown tried to negotiate with downtown politicians, strike leader

⁵¹ "‘Illegal Strike’ Called Alleges Spokesman for Laura Industries," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 3, 1967.

⁵² "Plea Issued for Workers Return Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 6, 1967

⁵³ Beth Wilcox, "Strikers in Selma Ask Recognition of Union," *Southern Courier*, Sept. 2, 1967.

⁵⁴ Douglas Levins quoted in "Marchers Ride to Laura for Demonstration Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 11, 1967.

⁵⁵ "Action Asked in Support of Local Dispute," *Southern Courier*, Sept. 6, 1967.

⁵⁶ "Marchers Ride to Laura for Demonstration Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 11, 1967.

Robert Nunn threatened, “If Wallace doesn’t give us what we want we are going to burn Selma down.”⁵⁷ Strikers remembered how other workers had permanently lost their jobs when trying to bring unions to Selma, and working-class African Americans had neither the financial cushion nor willingness to let white public officials dictate the pace of change. Fed up with never-ending barriers, Laura workers were ready to use more drastic measures.

The company, however, had the resources and political support to outlast the strike. Strikebreakers and then other employees returning to work brought Laura Industries production back up to quota.⁵⁸ Although failing in this first strike, company employees did succeed in voting in the union over the next two years. By 1969, however, the *Selma Times-Journal* reported that Laura Industries had closed due to “unprofitability” and hinted that the union was to blame. When the company shut down, former executive David Wallace with James Utsey formed a new corporation, U and W Industries. They then purchased all of Laura Industries physical assets and moved the former U and W Manufacturing Company to the old Laura Industries site. Despite similar management, the *Times-Journal* laid out bluntly the difference between the two companies: “U and W does not have a union contract.”⁵⁹

Job opportunities changed little for African Americans after the voting rights movement, and the civilian positions at Craig Air Force Base remained the best jobs available. “The number of jobs that have opened here to black people are minute,” activist Shirley Mesher explained. Most black women still worked in white households for twelve to

⁵⁷ Beth Wilcox, “Strikers in Selma Plan Next Move,” *Southern Courier*, Sept. 9, 1967.

⁵⁸ “Alert Force Unneeded at Laura Site,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 14, 1967.

⁵⁹ “Laura Industries Has Closed,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 17, 1969.

fifteen dollars a week while non-unionized laborers could bring in as little as 36 cents an hour, and farm workers earned a dollar a day.⁶⁰ When the federal government extended minimum wage standards to domestic workers in 1974, the *Times-Journal* focused on how the \$1.90 per hour rate would affect “working mothers.” White women, who had been able to pay their black maids far less than living wages, despaired that their own take-home salaries would now be reduced to barely twenty dollars a week after expenses.⁶¹ White residents might have disagreed about the proper course of action regarding civil rights, but Shirley Mesher insisted “they’re not arguing about whether you have a right to that dollar. They’re united in saying that you don’t have a right to that dollar. You do not have a right to disrupt their economy.”⁶² The white community’s tripartite commitment to attacking unions, maintaining low wages, and controlling anti-poverty funds effectively perpetuated Dallas County’s racialized system of economic inequality.

Bringing home wages far below the poverty line, black families turned to welfare programs to make ends meet. “Welfare was a way of putting cash-money into the hands of people living in a practically non-cash economy,” historian Rickie Solinger contends.⁶³ But

⁶⁰ Shirley Mesher, Interview by Stanley Smith, 1968, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 11, 343 – 346.

⁶¹ Nikki Davis Maute, “Law Doesn’t Provide for Working Mothers,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 13, 1974; Stan Voit, “She’s Always Been a Maid – Now What?” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 14, 1974.

⁶² Shirley Mesher, Interview by Stanley Smith, 1968, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 61 – 62.

⁶³ Rickie Solinger, “The First Welfare Case: Money, Sex, Marriage, and White Supremacy in Selma, 1966, A Reproductive Justice Analysis,” *Journal of Women’s History* Vol. 22 (Fall 2010), 19. African American women protested unfair and demeaning treatment in welfare offices across the country. For more information, see Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894 – 1994* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999).

receiving welfare aid through programs such as Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) came with a litany of restrictions and regulations. In Alabama, white people administered welfare and black people received it. It was a system that gave white female welfare workers the authority to monitor the smallest details of poor black women lives, everything from their relationships and parenting to finances.

In 1966, the Selma welfare office cut off Sylvester Smith - a café waitress making sixteen dollars a week - from ADC for allegedly having sex with a man who wasn't the father of any of her four children. The man-in-the-house rule mandated that if a woman on welfare had sex with a man then he was obligated to take on the financial responsibilities of her children, regardless of his biological or legal relation to them. Smith refused to accept the local welfare office's decision, stating that the social worker "didn't have no right to cut my kids off. Sitting down there in that air-conditioned place and saying my kids can't get aid. She never came around to my house and found anybody there."⁶⁴ Smith filed suit in federal court. In June 1968, the Supreme Court ruled in her favor, overturning the substitute father rule on the grounds that "destitute children who are legally fatherless cannot be denied federally-funded assistance on the transparent fiction that they have a substitute father."⁶⁵

But Sylvester Smith's victory did little to alter the poverty and economic dependency of black residents. The Dallas County Board of Revenue only agreed to participate in the Commodity Foods Program after Washington officials threatened that there was a "strong possibility" that the responsibility of distributing surplus food to poor people would

⁶⁴ Sylvester Smith quoted in Solinger, "The First Welfare Case," 18 – 21.

⁶⁵ "Warren's Last Ruling," *Southern Courier*, June 29, 1968.

otherwise be given to civil rights groups.⁶⁶ Then in 1967, the food stamps program replaced the commodity food program. The new system allowed low-income people to pay a certain sum of money - for example ten dollars - and receive a larger value - twenty dollars - of food stamps. With their food budget increased, poor people could then shop for their own groceries. But food stamps also required cash to purchase them. For blacks in Dallas County dependent on welfare benefits or jobs paying non-livable wages, securing the cash to purchase food stamps become an additional burden. Agatha Harville, an active member of SHAPE and DCIFVO, asked “How in the world can you buy food stamps with something you ain’t got? It’s a deal to starve you to death.” Already stretching welfare income to its limits, food stamps forced black families to spend money on food when before it had gone to rent, gas, and clothing.⁶⁷ Welfare programs like ADC and food stamps, although created to keep poor people afloat, gave them virtually no means to escape from the well-worn cycle of dependency.

War on Poverty and the Southwest Alabama Farmer’s Cooperative Association

President Johnson’s War on Poverty aimed to create new jobs and opportunities for poor people, undermining the economic structure that trapped them at the bottom. But the political maneuvering of local white elites and state officials kept anti-poverty funds out of the control of the poor and stymied the dismantling of deeply-rooted economic disparities.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ “County Board Bows to Pressure, Seeks Surplus Food Aid,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 23, 1965.

⁶⁷ Robin Reisig, “People Criticize New Stamp Plan,” *Southern Courier*, March 18, 1967.

⁶⁸ Ashmore, *Carry It On*, 7 – 16.

Mayor Smitherman appointed Joe Knight, the marine turned minister from Hazen and a close friend, as director of the Selma-Dallas County Economic Opportunity Board (EOB). Under Knight's direction, the EOB secured funds for numerous programs for poor citizens, including a summer work training program for teens, Project Drain-O to employ residents in public works projects, and preschool programs for children.⁶⁹ The Operation Mainstream program employed hundreds of low-income men in city service positions and supported four hours of classroom work per week.⁷⁰ Three neighborhood centers in the city and four in the rural areas gave poor residents access to nutrition programs, medical services, community programs, and childcare.⁷¹ Knight called the "huge, thick, blue book" of federal programs "my bible. I studied that thing, and if there was money out there, I went for it."⁷² By the time Knight stepped down in September of 1970, OEO programs had brought in nearly \$6.5 million in federal funding to Dallas County.⁷³

But while local politicians and the *Times-Journal* praised EOB's successes, black people in Dallas County remained skeptical. Operation Mainstream was known as "the Nigger in the Ditch Program," by African American residents. "It was just as segregated as ever," Shirley Mesher recounted, "the white fellows drive the truck and the black fellows

⁶⁹ "Summer Project Funds Approved," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 16, 1966; "150 Working on Project Drain-O and Forty More Workers Needed," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 6, 1966; "Project Center Funding Sought," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 18, 1967.

⁷⁰ Chris Cobbs, "Operation Mainstream Gives Opportunity to Job Seekers," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 30, 1969.

⁷¹ In Selma were the Carver Y.M.C.A., East Selma, the Bosco Center, and county centers included Bogue Chitto, Hobbs, Richmond, and Potters Station; Annette Bandy, "Carver Neighborhood Center Here Prepares Children for School," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 22, 1970.

⁷² Joe Knight interview by author, October 31, 2012, Selma, Alabama.

⁷³ "Joe Knight Resigns Position with OEO," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 14, 1970.

load the garbage just like on the city garbage truck.”⁷⁴ Likewise, the job training provided by the neighborhood centers mostly consisted of domestic work and day labor, jobs already black-dominated and consistently low paid, and childcare had little resemblance to early childhood development programs. Many of the residents living around the community centers agreed with the statement, “Selma-Dallas County Economic Opportunity Board is carrying out the wishes of the ‘establishment’ in maintaining the *status quo*.”⁷⁵

Efforts to establish Head Start, an early childhood education program, showcased these disagreements as the local EOB, representatives from SHAPE, and the regional OEO office sparred over the program’s administration.⁷⁶ In the summer of 1967, the regional OEO in Atlanta rejected the Dallas County EOB’s Head Start program for failing to recruit enough white children.⁷⁷ In a fiery hearing in Selma’s federal building, Joe Knight denounced the OEO officials who “arrived in air-conditioned automobiles, will leave in air-conditioned airplanes, and will take their air-conditioned theories back to the air-conditioned Washington offices, leaving local citizens to try to handle the problems they leave behind.” But SHAPE and DCIFVO’s Clarence William agreed that not enough effort had been made to involve poor white people.⁷⁸ By February 1968, Dallas County still had no official Head Start, although both the EOB and SHAPE had submitted applications to administer the \$250,000

⁷⁴ Shirley Mesher, Interview by Stanley Smith, 1968, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 42 – 43.

⁷⁵ Susan Youngblood Ashmore, “Going Back to Selma: Organizing for Change in Dallas County after the March to Montgomery,” in *War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964 – 1980*, edited by Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 326.

⁷⁶ Beth Wilcox, “Noisy Meeting Extends Selma’s Poverty Fight,” *Southern Courier*, December 23, 1967.

⁷⁷ “Head Start Centers Open Despite Denial,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 11, 1967.

⁷⁸ Joe Knight quoted in “Proposed Session on Head Start Ended Abruptly,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 20, 1967.

program. Meanwhile, SHAPE operated its own independent daycare center, run exclusively by donations, at St. Paul's AME Church in Selmont.⁷⁹ It took four more years for an official Head Start Program to begin operating in Dallas County.⁸⁰

Some War on Poverty efforts did directly reach poor people in the Alabama Black Belt. Title III of the Economic Opportunity Act authorized the federal government to issue direct grants to poor-led organizations, effectively bypassing intervention by local, state, and regional officials. This component was especially important in the rural south where white governors, local politicians, and influential bankers and businessmen were in cahoots to maintain control. In 1967, nearly one thousand small farmers from ten Black Belt counties united to form the Southwest Alabama Farmer's Cooperative Association (SWAFCA), and they received an OEO grant for \$399,967.⁸¹ Their purpose was to support small farmers in cooperatively growing and marketing vegetable crops while also providing education, shared equipment expenses, and administrative support. SWAFCA embodied many of the Negro Extension Service's central tenets, especially cooperation, self-sufficiency, and land ownership. By the late 1960s, however, black county agents no longer commanded the same prestige as the growth of large, mechanized farms drove black farmers off the land. As SWAFCA Chairman Joe Johnson told a reporter, "We are fighting to stay on the land."⁸²

The co-op also protected black farmers from racially discriminatory treatment by landowners, suppliers, buyers, and government programs. Don Jelinek, a civil rights attorney

⁷⁹ "The Kids From SHAPE," *Southern Courier*, Feb. 24, 1968.

⁸⁰ "Head Start has been Refunded," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 5, 1972.

⁸¹ "Mayor Protests Award to OEO," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 11, 1967.

⁸² "Farmers Joining New Cooperative," *Southern Courier*, February 18, 1967.

based in Selma, conducted interviews with hundreds of black families in his Southern Rural Research Project. He found that the U.S. Department of Agriculture denied “Negroes participation in food programs, have cut cotton acreage of Negro farmers to where it isn’t economically feasible to farm, and they have discriminated against Negroes in farm loans and agricultural extension services.”⁸³ The U.S. Civil Rights Commission agreed with Jelinek’s findings. “As the group most depressed economically, most deprived educationally and most oppressed socially,” its 1965 report, *Equal Opportunity in Farm Programs* concluded, “Negroes have been consistently denied access to many [USDA] services, provided with inferior services when served, and segregated in federally-financed agriculture programs whose very task was to raise their standard of living.”⁸⁴ For SWAFCA members, the cooperative was a way to better their farming, increase their income, build their communities, and mediate against discriminatory treatment on the part of whites.⁸⁵ SWAFCA leader Albert Turner explained that by selling cooperatively, co-op members could get \$90 per ton of cucumbers as opposed to the \$60 per ton they got before. As he saw it, SWAFCA was “the economic arm of the Civil Rights Movement.”⁸⁶

White politicians and business leaders attacked SWAFCA with concentrated vengeance. Federal money channeled directly to a grassroots organization made up of black

⁸³ Bob Labaree, “Feeding 20 Kids on \$100 a Month,” *Southern Courier*, Nov. 18, 1967.

⁸⁴ 1965 Civil Rights Commission Report, *Equal Opportunity in Farm Programs* quoted in Paul Good, *Cycle to Nowhere*, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Clearinghouse Publication No. 14, 1968, 17.

⁸⁵ Shirley Mesher, Interview by Stanley Smith, 1968, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 86.

⁸⁶ Turner quoted in Ashmore, *Carry It On*, 200. For more about discrimination against African Americans by U.S. Department of Agriculture employees and programs, see Pete Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

and poor people represented an immediate attack on the Black Belt's economic and political status quo. Mayor Joe Smitherman and Probate Judge Bernard Reynolds invited politicians from SWAFCA's ten-county area to mobilize for what the *Times-Journal* called an "all-out fight" against the co-op's grant.⁸⁷ One week later, this powerful delegation from Central Alabama - including representatives from two Alabama based vegetable canning companies - flew to Washington to present their protests directly to the deputy director of the OEO.⁸⁸ When such efforts failed to reverse the OEO's decision, the fight against the black farmer's cooperative took root as a localized struggle. Credit dried up for SWAFCA members. Local politicians and the regional OEO besieged its central office with investigations.⁸⁹ The harassment indicated just how much SWAFCA threatened the white elite's control over the economy: "I think that people sometimes have the idea that [the local economic structure] is sort of haphazardly thrown together," Shirley Mesher explained, "It's not at all. It is very tightly knit, and very interwoven, and very carefully thought out."⁹⁰ When SWAFCA and the federal OEO challenged this structure, the white elite retaliated swiftly and with vengeance. The co-op marketed vegetables and assisted black farmers for a few years, but limited funding, lack of experience, and continual harassment contributed to SWAFCA's disintegration over the next decade.⁹¹ The more War on Poverty funding challenged the

⁸⁷ "Resistance to Collective is Being Organized Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 31, 1967.

⁸⁸ "Protest Hearing Presentation is Held Excellent," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 5, 1967.

⁸⁹ Shirley Mesher, Interview by Stanley Smith, 1968, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 211 – 225.

⁹⁰ Shirley Mesher, Interview by Stanley Smith, 1968, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 63.

⁹¹ Janis Quinn, "SWAFCA fund plea gets nod," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 3, 1974.

racial and economic status quo of the Black Belt, the faster white officials worked to neutralize that threat.

Federal School Desegregation

While white officials and black activists wrangled over poverty funding, threats from the federal government finally pushed the Selma school system towards desegregation, ten years after the *Brown* decision. The Freedom of Choice plan the district adopted allowed parents to enroll their children in any school they wished. Grades one through four were eligible for the 1965 – 66 school year, followed by five through eight the next year, and the high school the year after that. The southern masterminds behind Freedom of Choice plans assumed that no white parent would willingly enroll their child in a black school, and meanwhile, so few black students would enroll in white schools that segregation would effectively be preserved.⁹² And just as the district had hoped, only nineteen black students appeared in formerly white elementary classrooms on the first day of school.⁹³

While most anyone would be hard pressed to call Selma's public schools "desegregated" in 1965, the threat alone was enough to give birth to John T. Morgan Academy, an all-white private school.⁹⁴ Alston Keith, leader of the Citizens' Council, and

⁹² "Schools Desegregation Plan Here is Approved," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 17, 1965.

⁹³ "Schools Integrate Quietly in Selma," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 3, 1965.

⁹⁴ M. Alston Keith, Acting Chairman, Dallas County Private School Foundation, Inc. to Judge James Hare, June 16, 1965. Box 7, Folder 134, Judge James Hare Papers, Vaughan-Smitherman Museum.

others had begun exploring the possibilities of opening a private school five years earlier.⁹⁵ As desegregation in public schools loomed, a growing number of white southern officials realized that they could preserve segregation in private academies. Keith and his accomplices had exactly this in mind, drafting articles of incorporation that stated “the corporation shall be and is hereby irrevocably committed to the custom and practice of separation of the white and negro races in its activities [...] as most conducive to the welfare of both races and the public interest.”⁹⁶

It took the Freedom of Choice plan in 1965, however, for the proposed school to win the necessary support of white residents. 119 elementary children filled the first classes at John T. Morgan Academy (named for the longtime Senator and supporter of the Confederacy), meeting in a columned antebellum mansion on Tremont Street.⁹⁷ The next school year, when desegregation came to the public middle schools, Morgan’s campus expanded to the Houston Park Church of Christ to accommodate the new seventh and eighth grade. In the spring of 1967, the school broke ground for a new campus on the western edge of Selma, and by the 1968- 1969 school year, Morgan Academy had a fully-accredited elementary school and a high school reaching the tenth grade. The very first

⁹⁵ Attorneys Sam Earle Hobbs, William Craig, and state representative Val Hain were also organizers. M. Alston Keith to Mr. MacDonald Gallion, Montgomery, Ala., Nov. 13, 1963, Box 7, Folder 134, Judge James Hare Papers, Vaughn-Smitherman Museum.

⁹⁶ “Articles and Certificate of Incorporation to the ____ School,” to the Honorable B.A. Reynolds, Judge of Probate of Dallas County, Alabama [1959?], Box 7, Folder 134, Judge James Hare Papers, Vaughn-Smitherman Museum.

⁹⁷ The Selma Baptist Association had attempted to open an all-white private school in 1959, but had abandoned the effort when only one child registered for classes. Apparently threats of desegregation were not real enough then to gain the support of the necessary white parents; “Private School Purchases Land,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 24, 1966.

school yearbook that included a picture of the posing fourth grade class as two of their classmates held up a Confederate flag in the background.⁹⁸

Unsurprisingly, Freedom of Choice plans repeatedly failed to integrate southern schools during the 1960s, finally forcing the federal courts to intervene. Thirty Alabama school systems – including Selma and Dallas County - received federal court orders in 1969 to submit plans for “disestablishing” their dual school programs. If the Selma school board refused, then the government would draw up its own plan for total desegregation. The ultimatum made choosing to comply an easy decision. The white A.G. Parrish High would become the Selma senior high school; black R.B. Hudson High would turn into West Side Junior High, one of two middle schools. Elementary schools would be zoned by residence areas, and at least 25 percent of teachers in each school would be African American. Superintendent J.A. Pickard stressed again and again that quality education could only continue if the majority of white students, as well as black, stayed in the public schools. “If the public schools greatly deteriorate,” he warned at a Rotary Club meeting, “the economy is bound to follow in rapid order.”⁹⁹ Roswell Falkenberry, editor of the *Times-Journal*, lined up behind the Superintendent, writing, “This newspaper, without reservation, unhesitatingly pledges full support to our public school system.”¹⁰⁰

But as the school year approached, another group raised the banner for massive defiance. Made up of white parents mostly from East Selma, the Concerned Parents of

⁹⁸ John T. Morgan Academy, Yearbook, 1969, Selma Public Library, Selma, Alabama.

⁹⁹When federal approval came in June of 1970, the school board set to work dismantling years of deliberately segregated schools. J.A. Pickard quoted in “Plan Submitted for Schools Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 11, 1970; “Board Meets to Plan School Opening Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 19, 1970.

¹⁰⁰ “In Support of Public Education,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 28, 1970.

Dallas County had two main objections. First, the desegregation plan reassigned white children who lived in East Selma to majority black schools, a reflection of the demographics of the neighborhood. One father went so far as to suggest that he would rather “sign [his children] all up to go to the war in Vietnam,” than send them to their new, mostly black school. The Concerned Parents also condemned the school board for failing to fairly represent all areas of the city when it appointed new members; the board’s self-perpetuating structure was a holdover from Reconstruction, originally instituted to prevent black citizens from gaining seats. Their objection came only one month after the school board appointed African Americans to fill two board vacancies, a move which the *Times-Journal* had applauded. Attorney Henry Pitts, son of the city attorney, and conservative Presbyterian minister Cecil Williamson took up the parents’ cause. While Pitts fought against the school board, Williamson castigated the *Times-Journal* for supporting desegregation, calling it “left-leaning” and out of touch. But their rants brought no concessions. When zoning remained unchanged, Williamson opened an extension branch of Meadowview Christian, his private segregationist academy and offered all white children in East Selma cut-rate tuition.¹⁰¹

Despite the build-up, Selma’s desegregated schools opened in September of 1970 without crisis. On the first Friday night of the school year, black and white fans gathered, in proper Alabama fashion, to inaugurate the new Selma High School football team, and at Memorial Stadium, the Selma High Saints trounced their Demopolis opponents. “If parents

¹⁰¹ “Massive Defiance Urged for ‘Concerned Parents’ at Public Meeting Here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 5, 1970; “Concerned Parents and Politics,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 9, 1970; “Three New School Board Members,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 24, 1970; “New School Board Members,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 26, 1970; “Parents Meet is Set Tonight for Ball Park,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 11, 1970; “Allen Tells Parents School Segregation ‘Thing of Past,’ Urges Pressure for ‘Freedom of Choice,’” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 12, 1970; “Concerned Parents’ Offered Cut-Rate Tuition Proposal by Meadowview Private School,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 19, 1970.

and students will wait before they impulsively condemn and desert, if they will contribute to easing some of the problems,” the *Times-Journal* implored, “Selma High will be the fine educational institution this city must provide for its children.”¹⁰² The halls of Morgan Academy and Meadowview Christian might have been fuller that fall; but for the first time, desegregated schools allowed a majority of Selma’s black and white children to meet each other as classmates and teammates.¹⁰³

Electing Black Representatives

The 1965 movement had fixed voting rights and Selma together in the eyes of the nation, but school integration took place before any black elected officials won seats on the city council or the county commission. 1968 was the first major election since the Voting Rights Act revolutionized southern voting rolls. Six black candidates ran for city council seats that year and Tabernacle Baptist’s minister, Rev. L.L. Anderson, threw in his name for mayor.¹⁰⁴ Although these African American contenders won nearly unanimous support from the black voters, none of the candidates emerged victorious. Part of the problem was the city’s at-large election scheme, which allowed all registered voters to choose the representative from a specific ward instead of limiting the vote to only people within the district. In Selma, at-large elections meant that the city’s 5,200 registered black voters could never secure a majority against 8,200 registered white voters, if everyone cast ballots along

¹⁰² “Things Went Quite Well,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 6, 1970.

¹⁰³ John T. Morgan Academy ad, “Announcement,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 8, 1970.

¹⁰⁴ “Heavy Balloting Expected Tomorrow,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 4, 1968.

racial lines.¹⁰⁵ With black residents holding no political leverage on the city council, the all-white councilman could safely ignore the demands of African American residents.

This changed in 1972 when a new state law forced a complete revamping of Selma's election procedures. The city council had a choice. It could maintain its current ten-member body, but would need to replace at-large elections with representatives elected by district; otherwise, it could keep at-large elections but it would need to reduce its membership to five. Switching to district elections practically ensured that four of the ten council members would be African Americans given Selma's racial demographics. On the other hand, at-large elections would likely keep the city council white, but it also meant that half of the current councilmen would lose their jobs. Businessman Edwin Moss presented a petition straightforwardly summing up the feelings of African American residents, "We, the citizens of black Selma, would like to participate in the operation of our city." Meanwhile, J.L. Chestnut, who had returned in 1958 to become Selma's only black attorney, threatened to sue the city under the Voting Rights Act if the council failed to vote in favor of districts.¹⁰⁶ In January 1972, the city council voted to retain its ten-member make-up, virtually guaranteeing that the first African American representatives since Reconstruction would be seated in the fall.¹⁰⁷

On October 2, 1972, the Selma City Council swore in F.D. Reese, E.L. Doyle, Lorenzo Harrison, J.C. Kimbrough, and William Kemp as its first black council members.

¹⁰⁵ "Incumbents Lead in Primary Ballot," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 6, 1968; "Reflections on City Politics," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 10, 1968.

¹⁰⁶ Edwin Moss quoted in Chestnut and Cass, *Black Selma*, 259.

¹⁰⁷ "Vote Draws Quick Response, Challenge," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 25, 1971.

The middle-class black leaders that rose from the ranks of the Voter's League won this first chance for political representation instead of SHAPE or DCIFVO members.¹⁰⁸ But five of ten seats did not give African American members a voting majority; the city council's president, still elected through at-large elections, also had voting power. Businessman Carl Morgan, owner of the Black Belt Tractor Co. and a World War II veteran who had helped liberate Nazi death camps, was council president.¹⁰⁹ When Morgan cast his votes with the other five white council members, they overruled black members six-to-five. Attempts by the new black council members to secure gains in employment and public services for Selma's black community repeatedly ran up against the opposing white majority. For example, the majority of city officials for the upcoming term received their appointment on a six (white) "aye" and five (black) "nay" votes. When F.D. Reese recommended one of J.L. Chestnut's new law partners, for city attorney, the mayor chimed in that the Chestnut, Sanders, and Sanders law firm "was continually keeping the city in lawsuits," and white councilmen instead voted in attorney McLean Pitts for another term. Additionally, every time Reese proposed to employ black and white residents in city government in proportion to their percentage of the population, white members voted the resolution down.¹¹⁰

Yet Joe Smitherman was a shrewd, opportunistic, and intelligent mayor who knew full well that his political future lay in the hands of black voters. African Americans made up a sizeable portion of the voter rolls in the years after 1965, and white politicians across the

¹⁰⁸ Selma City Council Minutes, Oct. 2, 1972, Selma City Hall, Selma, Alabama.

¹⁰⁹ "Former Alabama Leader, Carl C. Morgan, Jr., Dies," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 6, 2006.

¹¹⁰ Selma City Council Minutes, Oct. 9, 1972, Selma City Hall, Selma, Alabama.

South started paying more attention to black demands when they needed those votes.¹¹¹

According to attorney J.L. Chestnut, Mayor Smitherman approached Selma's new racial order using the mantra "If you give just a little, you won't have to give a lot." The mayor made sure everyone knew he was paving the streets and employing African Americans in city government, but he didn't mention how the money came straight from the federal government or how he handpicked which black men served on what committee.

Joe Smitherman was a master of public opinion and excelled at the dramatic. In the early years of black representation on the city council, Smitherman would privately offer to pave streets in a black councilman's district but then encourage the member to propose the plan themselves at a municipal hearing. The mayor would publicly attack the black member's proposal for a few weeks before loudly withdrawing his opposition. The dramatic routine helped black councilman to boost their leadership credentials by facing down the mayor, while Smitherman won support by appearing magnanimous in his change of heart. Despite the theatrics, both black representatives on council and Smitherman's fervent desire to win votes brought a notable improvement in public services for African Americans, as well as more dignified treatment in city hall.¹¹²

While black council members worked for change within city government, the Chestnut, Sanders, and Sanders law firm turned to the federal courts to bring civil rights victories in Selma. J.L Chestnut had grown up in Selma in the thirties and forties. His father owned the Chestnut Brothers' Grocery near Selma University, and his uncles ran the self-

¹¹¹ Cobb, *The South and America since World War II*, 107.

¹¹² Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 260 – 262.

sufficient dairy and cattle operation near Beloit. After earning his law degree from Howard University, Chestnut returned home to become Selma's first and only black attorney. In 1972, he joined forces with Hank and Rose Sanders, two young attorneys from Harvard Law School who had relocated to Selma. The mission of the Chestnut, Sanders, and Sanders law firm was to serve the needs of the black community and file litigation "over jobs and fair representation" in local government when necessary.¹¹³ J.L. Chestnut's name became a staple in the pages of the *Selma Times-Journal* in the late sixties. The law firm would first threaten a lawsuit to encourage action, and if that fell on deaf ears, the law firm then filed in federal courts. Everything from private schools using public facilities free of charge to hiring practices and election districts made their agenda.¹¹⁴ In 1972 alone, the law firm filed two suits charging "widespread discrimination" in local city and county hiring practices, and a class action suit demanding that Dallas County be redistricted on a one-man, one-vote basis.¹¹⁵ Rose Sanders and her outspoken, idealist, and fiercely determined nature, often riled white citizens' feathers. Meanwhile, J.L. Chestnut negotiated with white officials and Hank Sanders planned strategy.¹¹⁶ From the 1970s forward, the Chestnut, Sanders, and Sanders law firm was an indispensable part of making civil rights promises into reality in the Alabama Black Belt.

¹¹³ Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 250 – 252.

¹¹⁴ "Mayor Critical of Pressure" *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 11, 1972.

¹¹⁵ "Suit Charges Selma and Dallas County with Hiring Bias," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 18, 1972.; Nikki Davis Maute, "Suit Requests Court Ordered Redistricting in County," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 21, 1972.

¹¹⁶ Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 257 – 258.

The Only Thing Tainted about Federal Money is, T'ain't Enough

During the late 1960s, the War on Poverty, public housing, and welfare programs funneled an abundance of federal funding into Dallas County. Joe Smitherman was known to claim “the only thing tainted about federal money is, t'ain't enough.”¹¹⁷ Much of this money went to city operations, paving Selma's streets, improving its sewer lines, paying for parks and recreation programs, and writing pay checks for the garbage collectors and other city employees. It was a far cry from the War on Poverty's vision of empowering the poor, but it kept the mayor popular and city services running.¹¹⁸ The escalating Vietnam War and ballooning military spending in the late sixties, however, slowly ate away at the money flowing into domestic social programs. As the Democratic Party fragmented over the war and social movements, and the liberal agenda seemed to disintegrate, Republican Richard Nixon rode a conservative backlash into the presidency in 1968. Nixon wasted little time disassembling the Office of Economic Opportunity and cutting back federal spending. Meanwhile, the cost of war and President Johnson's failure to raise taxes created rising inflation and a loss of real income, marking pending hard times ahead.¹¹⁹ Even the mayor's enthusiastic search for outside resources could not keep federal funding flowing. By the

¹¹⁷ As in the anti-poverty board controversy, the mayor made sure he had a hand in how funding for low-income housing and anti-poverty programs was spent. The city received a \$3 million grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to rebuild a black slum area. But when the Clarke School project began in 1972, the city's plans concentrated housing projects in already poor and black areas, reclassified valuable residential property occupied by blacks as industrial zone, and included virtually no black input in the planning. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund intervened, suing HUD and the city for perpetuating residential segregation with federal funds. After much negotiation, all parties involved signed the Selma Accord agreeing to locate low-income housing outside of majority black area, to hire a black urban renewal director, and to appoint a 50/50 racially-split advisory board; Nikki Davis Maute, “Renewal Project Will Turn Area into Model,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 19, 1972; Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma* 266 – 268.

¹¹⁸ Bob Hawkins, “East Selma's ‘Big Ditch’ Now Well Underway,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 9, 1970; Nikki Davis, “Anti-Poverty Agency Lists Where Money Went,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 25, 1971.

¹¹⁹ Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 374 – 378, 413.

1970s, the wells of money that Dallas County had tapped into to improve public services were drying up.

The shockwaves from President Nixon's cutbacks reached Selma in the beginning of 1973. As the President transferred the administration of federal programs to the states, the limited funding was now spread to cover larger areas. Selma lost \$450,000 when Operation Mainstream expanded from a city-based program to a new ten-county district in November 1973. A delegation from Dallas County managed to salvage \$150,000 as a direct grant after flying to Washington, but their pleading could not stop the federal government's phase out.¹²⁰ This presented a major crisis in Selma. On average, the local Economic Opportunity Board brought in more than a million dollars to the economy each year, and its director called it "an industry vitally needed."¹²¹ Local officials hired Jean Sullivan – Selma resident and Alabama's Republican Committeewoman well-versed in Washington politics - as a lobbyist for bringing federal programs to the city.¹²² But pending federal cuts made Sullivan's a losing battle. Over the next few years War on Poverty programs, including daycare, community service centers, elderly feeding programs, and low-income jobs disappeared.¹²³

The Better Communities Act gave Selma one final influx of federal funding in September of 1974. The city received a whopping \$5,480,000, astoundingly more than what other similarly sized areas received. The number was so high, the mayor explained, because

¹²⁰ Nikki Davis Maute, "Cut Feared Mainstream is Threatened," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 22, 1973; Nikki Davis Maute, "City Loses Mainstream Reins," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 4, 1973.

¹²¹ Nikki Davis Maute, "Anti-Poverty Agency Lists Where Money Went, Plans," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 25, 1971.

¹²² "Youth Work," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 11, 1973; Nikki Davis Maute, "City-County Troubleshooter Now on the Job Fulltime," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 15, 1973.

¹²³ Carolyn Cain, "Selma Transit System: It has a bumpy road ahead due to lack of finances," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 27, 1977; Nikki Davis Maute, "EOB seeks funds," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 5, 1977.

“HUD did not want to cut off cities which were dependent heavily on federal funds” From 1968 through 1972, Selma had received an astronomical \$17 million in federal funds. The Better Communities money, however, could only be used for public improvements, not salaries for low-income people.¹²⁴ The shifting political climate and the tightening federal pocketbook that accompanied it posed a serious problem for Selma’s future.

In the hand of white public officials, War on Poverty funding temporarily relieved but failed to address the deeply rooted structural causes of poverty in the Black Belt. The tangible hope among African Americans after the voting rights movement pushed black residents to demand better wages, representation in local government, city services, and dignified treatment. Organizations like SHAPE, SWAFCA, and preschool programs brought childcare, health care, and advocacy to black Dallas County residents. Although still formidable, the poverty rate for African American families dropped from 84.3% to 60.1% between 1960 and 1970. Education statistics, however, reflected how far there was to go. The year that Selma city schools desegregated, only 18.7% of black residents had graduated from high school and the median years of school completed had only risen to a seventh grade level. As the War on Poverty dwindled, racial discrimination, limited industrial growth, declining agriculture, unemployment, and health and educational deficiencies still remained, and by the mid-1970s, the era of domestic social programs in the federal government had come to an end.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Stan Voit, “Mayor has \$2 million worth of good news,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 7, 1974.

¹²⁵ Susan Youngblood Ashmore, “Going Back to Selma: Organizing for Change in Dallas County after the March to Montgomery,” in *War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964 – 1980*, edited by Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 325.

At the same time, Selma's status as the shopping center of the Black Belt changed as highways, cars, chain stores, and malls lured customers elsewhere. A study by the Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Planning Commission found that residents in surrounding counties bypassed Selma, and headed for Montgomery or Birmingham to make their big purchases.¹²⁶ In February of 1972, the new Selma Mall opened on the north side of town, "a new vista in trade" promising to bring shoppers back to the area.¹²⁷ But the mall hurt downtown business more. Tepper's Department Store and Sears Roebuck left behind vacant buildings on Broad Street, while Meyers, Jackson's, Kress, and Leon's tried run locations downtown and in the mall.¹²⁸ In 1968, the acclaimed Hotel Albert was dismantled due to financial concerns and its neighbor, the Wilby Theater, caught fire in 1972. The end of these downtown institutions paved the way for the construction of a new municipal complex paid for by urban renewal funds.¹²⁹ As customers became increasingly scarce downtown, longtime Jewish store owners closed up shop. Eagles' closed in 1973 after eighty-eight years in business, Rothschild's in 1974, and Barton's in 1976.¹³⁰

After successfully drawing Hammermill, Dan River Mills, and other textile plants to Selma, industrial growth stagnated in the mid-seventies, and local workers began

¹²⁶ Meyer, Darrel C and the Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission, *Downtown Selma Plan* (Camden, Ala: The Commission, 1976), 11.

¹²⁷ "Sears Opening Set at Mall," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 11, 1971.

¹²⁸ "Nikki Davis Maute, "Though Broad Street Hurting, Businessmen Remain Optimistic," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 31, 1972.

¹²⁹ "Municipal Complex Within Reach," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 14, 1972.

¹³⁰ Janis Quinn, "After 88 Years Eagles is Closing," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 20, 1973; Bertraim de Souza, "Rothschild's here is closing doors," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 31, 1974; Nikki Davis Maute, "Mr. Sam' closes the doors of Barton's," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 29, 1976.

experiencing the economic hard times felt across the nation. The Alabama Power Company gave political and business leaders an upshot of hope when it announced in 1972 that it was building a nuclear power plant in Dallas County. Once it reached peak operation of the proposed nuclear plant to be located at Molette's Bend, promised both economic growth and security for the area.¹³¹ However, cracks found in deep in the earth ended these dreams as quickly as they started. Alabama Power got hundreds of acres of idle land, and Dallas County got no new jobs.¹³² As Jamie Wallace, *Times-Journal* reporter and later Chamber of Commerce president, explained, "This was only the first blow to the city in the 1970s."¹³³ Layoffs became increasingly common in major industries like All-Lock and Hammermill.¹³⁴ Between 1971 and 1976, over seven hundred jobs had disappeared from the county, and by July of 1975, unemployment in Dallas County reached 11.8 percent, its highest levels in the recent past.¹³⁵

Ten Years Past the Voting Rights Movement

While black residents had made gains in the decade since 1965, the intransigence of white officials, persistent poverty, and increasing economic instability stoked African Americans' growing anger at the slow pace of change. In 1975, attorney J.L. Chestnut filed a

¹³¹ Jamie Wallace, "At Peak Power Plant May Employ 2,875; Weekly Payroll \$750,000," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 28, 1972.

¹³² Jackie Walburn, "Fighting for Farmland," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 1, 1981.

¹³³ Jamie Wallace, "Economic History of Dallas County," Unpublished Paper, in author's possession.

¹³⁴ Stan Voit, "180 All-Lock Layoffs Told," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 13, 1974; "Hammermill Plans Shut Down," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 14, 1975; "Dan River at Benton plans week shutdown," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 18, 1975.

¹³⁵ Meyer, Darrel C and the Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission, *Downtown Selma Plan* (Camden, Ala: The Commission, 1976), 9; Nikki Davis Maute, "Unemployment: state watches problem closely, sends 'rate watcher' to Selma," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 2, 1975.

lawsuit against the white-majority Selma school board, charging that its racial makeup was discriminatory and its self-perpetuating nature undemocratic.¹³⁶ Behind him stood black parents, concerned with what they called “the hard times black principals, teachers, students and parents have suffered at the hands of this very white school board.”¹³⁷ But the school board remained unresponsive to the issues raised, escalating the situation later that summer when it passed over black administrators, Dr. J.W. Yelder and Evans E. Rutledge, in favor of two new white principals¹³⁸

Two weeks later, the Selma-Dallas Legal Defense and Education Fund set up picket lines outside the superintendent’s office on Washington Street. The grievances of this group of black citizens included unequal disciplinary measures applied to black and white students, concentrating black students into vocational classes, and employing exclusively white athletic directors.¹³⁹ After a week of pressure, the school board and superintendent relented to negotiations.¹⁴⁰ Five representatives from the Legal Defense Fund, including middle-class leaders Rev. L.L. Anderson and F.D. Reese, met with school board members behind closed doors. The “mutual accord,” they claimed to reach, however, only resulted in Rutledge’s appointment as principal of Westside Junior High School as a visible concession.¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Buzz Sayer, “Suit Filed Against City School Board,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 30, 1975.

¹³⁷ Letter to Editor from “Black Parents,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 7, 1975.

¹³⁸ Buzz Sawyer, “City group asks hearing to eye ‘explosive issues,’” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 7, 1975.

¹³⁹ Buzz Sawyer, “Picketers protest appointment” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 18, 1975; Buzz Sawyer, “Blacks ask school board meeting,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 19, 1975.

¹⁴⁰ Nearly four hundred black parents, teachers, and students packed into Selma High’s auditorium to express their discontent to board members in a public meeting; Buzz Sawyer, “Closed-door session continues,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 22, 1975.

¹⁴¹ Buzz Sawyer, “Westbrook resigns post,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 24, 1975.

By October, the Legal Defense Fund (LDF) announced it would resume protests due to the school board's bad faith in implementing the earlier agreements. No black head coach had been appointed to a major sport; Rutledge did not have the same authority as the other principals; Selma High continued to elect dual queens and student officers; and no qualified and respected black person had been appointed to the school board.¹⁴² Mayor Smitherman - after first calling black protesters "political opportunists" - pushed the school board to listen to the Legal Defense and Education Fund's grievances.¹⁴³ The LDF presented them in front of packed council chambers.¹⁴⁴ Two weeks later, the school board appointed Preston D. Chestnut, J.L. Chestnut's uncle and a respected businessman, to serve on the school board.¹⁴⁵ While such actions temporarily smoothed over black grievances, the white school board and politicians' unwillingness to transfer meaningful authority to African Americans only continued to aggravate the frustrations of Dallas County's black citizens.

Ten years after the 1965 voting rights movement, black residents were still waiting for the "good freedom" to arrive. Significant changes had taken place in Dallas County. In the movement's wake, black residents vigorously organized for economic justice, jobs, political representation, public services, and respect. While SHAPE and the DCIFVO failed to wrest political control and anti-poverty funding out of the hands of local white elites, they

¹⁴² "School Picket Plan Revealed," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 12, 1975.

¹⁴³ Robin Fornoff, "Mayor to enforce pickets," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 13, 1975; Bertram de Souza, "Mayor asks meeting between board, LDF," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 18, 1975.

¹⁴⁴ Bertram de Souza, "LDF Airs List of Grievances," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 25, 1975

¹⁴⁵ Bertram de Souza, "Selma businessman appointed toe Selma City School Board," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 14, 1975.

created a grassroots, black-led coalition of poor people who learned to work together, whether through unions or farm cooperatives, for their own benefit. Meanwhile, the newly enlarged and protected black electorate secured African American representation on the city council. This voice inside government helped expand public services in unprecedented ways to black neighborhoods in Selma. With the federal government as an ally, black children gained access to greater resources as the South's dual school system was finally disassembled. Yet none of these changes came without a fight. As J.L. Chestnut explained: "Almost every step of progress for black people, required either a confrontation – a lawsuit, a boycott, a march, or the threat of them – or a federal regulation requiring black participation as a condition for receiving money. Very little happened voluntarily."¹⁴⁶

But while black citizens of Dallas County reaped some of the benefits of social programs and political representation, the deeply rooted structure undergirding white economic and political control remained in place. Low-wage industrial jobs, shrinking agricultural opportunities, and continuing racial divisions of labor kept African American families poor. While the War on Poverty aimed to help the poor lift themselves out of poverty, local white politicians and businessmen undercut black-led grassroots activism and kept control of federal funding safely in their own hands. The continued power of white elites contributed to an unequal distribution of public funds that maintained rather than challenged the political and economic status quo. Federal enforcement of civil rights laws challenged local control, but the unwillingness and foot-dragging of Dallas County's politicians forced prolonged court battles to ensure African American gains. While the

¹⁴⁶ Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 268.

decade after the civil rights movement brought some of the biggest gains for black residents, the effective maintenance of control by white leaders prevented lasting changes to the economic and political practices that continued to bolster white supremacy.

INTERLUDE 7: CLOSING CRAIG AIR FORCE BASE

In 1975, Craig Air Force Base (AFB) celebrated its thirty-fifth anniversary. Years of federal funds in the form of payrolls and services had made Craig one of Dallas County's most important industries, alongside agriculture and manufacturing.¹ Over one million dollars poured into Dallas County's economy each month through the combined military and civilian payroll. Even more military funds flowed into the city through basic operating costs and local contracts to maintain base facilities.² The service men and their families that circulated through Craig's undergraduate training program also invigorated Selma's social and civic life. They moved into neighborhoods, joined churches, and sent their children to local schools. Area school systems benefited from almost \$100,000 of federal assistance paid every year to support the children of Craig's military personnel.³

But ever-shifting national defense priorities cast uncertainty over the air force base's continued operation in Dallas County. Local delegates, including city and county officials and leading businessmen, had traveled to Washington in 1945, 1962, and 1971 to (successfully) plead for Craig's retention. At home, they vigilantly monitored what then Mayor Chris Heinz had called a "perfect relationship" between the base and the area's citizens.⁴ In the early 1970s, air pollution from surrounding industries grew so bad that it

¹ Golembe Associates, Inc., *Impact of Closure of Craig Air Force Base on the Dallas County Economy, and Comparison with the Effects of Closure of Other Undergraduate Pilot Training Bases* (Washington, D.C.: Golembe Associates, November 22, 1976), v.

² "Craig Investment May Be Best Money Selma People Ever Spent," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 8, 1965.

³ "City Schools Get 95,682 Payment," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 21, 1970.

⁴ "Personnel of 2,000 Expected at Craig," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 18, 1945; Chris Heinz quoted in Arthur Capel "Local Delegation to Pleas Cause of Craig Base," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 22, 1962; "Craig Given Back," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 20, 1971.

forced Craig to ground training flights. The *Times-Journal* demanded action, claiming that “the future of the Air Force facility that has contributed so markedly to our area is imperiled.”⁵ But some threats to the base’s continuance were outside of local control. Serious military cutbacks following the end of the Vietnam War and skyrocketing energy costs from the Arab oil embargo pressed the Department of Defense into considering closing bases to reduce costs.⁶

Rumors of Craig’s closing in the winter of 1976 prompted local officials to make another trip to Washington.⁷ Black citizens also threw their weight behind saving Craig.

Father James P. Robinson of the Legal Defense and Education Fund, also a

former Don Bosco Boys Club member, petitioned the Black Congressional Caucus to intervene on Craig’s behalf. His telegram stressed that closure would cause undue economic hardship. Robinson additionally praised “Craig’s positive influence for good in our quest for continued equality and dignity,” and emphasized that a shutdown would be a “tragic loss for the total citizenry in this Civil Rights bastion of the nation.”⁸ The Selma delegation returned



Figure 31: Father James Robinson with Mayor Joe Smitherman and Council President Carl Morgan in city council chambers in the mid-1970s. Courtesy Alston Fitts III, Encyclopedia of Alabama.

⁵ “The Problem of Air Pollution,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 17, 1970.

⁶ Thomas Berkey, “The Closing of Craig Air Force Base,” (M.A. Thesis: University of Virginia, 1980), 6; Anthony S. Campagna, *The Economy in the Reagan Years: The Economic Consequences of the Reagan Administrations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 12.

⁷ “Craig closing seen: Local officials in Capital,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 21, 1976.

⁸ Nikki Davis Maute, “Black leader here urges some ‘soul negotiation’ for Craig,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 22, 1976.

home confident, thinking that their January efforts had saved the base for another year. On March 10, 1976, however, the Air Force announced that Craig AFB, along with Webb AFB in Howard, Texas, were candidates for closure.⁹

Closing a base was not a simple undertaking; it required weighing operational considerations of the Department of Defense with the local economic and political impacts a closure would cause.¹⁰ The Air Force first prepared a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) over a six month-period, followed by public hearings in Dallas County. After the final EIS was issued a few months later, a decision could then be made.¹¹ This process provided local communities time to mount their challenge to the proposed closure. The day after the announcement, Mayor Joe Smitherman began rallying his troops. He approached Rex Morthland, president of Peoples Bank and Trust Company, to chair the Selma and Dallas County Craig Air Force Base Study Committee. Besides being a respected professional economist, Morthland knew how to negotiate in Washington and was well placed to coordinate local efforts to save Craig. The five-person committee he assembled included respected black businessman, Edwin Moss, a decision indicating that the fight needed the support of black and white residents alike.¹²

Unfortunately, Craig AFB's facilities registered near the bottom when compared to the Air Forces' seven other undergraduate pilot training bases (UPI). It had the lowest

⁹ Bruce Morrison, "Air Force explains Craig decision," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 11, 1976; Golembe Associates, "Impact of Closure of Craig Air Force Base on the Dallas County Economy," Table III-2.

¹⁰ Berkey, "The Closing of Craig Air Force Base," 3.

¹¹ Jill M. Wright Davis and Army Engineers Study Center Fort Belvoir, VA, "Army Base Realignment Methodology, Volume II," (Ft. Belvoir Defense Technical Information Center, 1981), F-2-3.

¹² Berkey, "The Closing of Craig Air Force Base," 16 – 18.

annual pilot production capacity, bad flying weather, two runways instead of three, limited room to expand, and outdated structures left over from World War II.¹³ But in terms of the impact of a potential closing on the surrounding area, Dallas County had one of the least healthy, most dependent economies of all seven UPT bases. Rex Morthland and the study committee chose to highlight these economic consequences as their best strategy to save Craig. They hired Golembe Associates, a private consulting firm in D.C., to study how Craig's closing would bring economic ruin, as well as a team at Troy State University to develop a more comprehensive model than that used by the Air Force.¹⁴

When the Golembe report came out at the end of November, it punctured decades of high praise and grand claims that Dallas County boosters had sung about the area. The report argued that bases should only be closed in places that had full employment, adequate housing, and low poverty levels and where the local economy could recover quickly. It then painted a staggeringly bleak picture of Dallas County's economic health, even with Craig AFB. In 1969, almost forty percent of the county's population lived in poverty. This was over ten points higher than any other county with a UPT base. The per capita personal income in 1974 was \$3,709 compared to \$4,824 for Alabama (the lowest state in the nation), and \$5,486 for the nation. Personnel at Craig received some of the highest salaries in the county; military personnel received \$12,595 per year, civil service workers averaged \$11,679, while other county employees grossed \$6,293.¹⁵ Undercutting years of economic

¹³ Jill M. Wright Davis and Army Engineers Study Center Fort Belvoir, VA, "Army Base Realignment Methodology, Volume II," (Ft. Belvoir Defense Technical Information Center, 1981), F-2-1.

¹⁴ Berkey, "The Closing of Craig Air Force Base," 18 – 24.

¹⁵ Golembe Associates, Inc. *Impact of Closure of Craig Air Force Base*, v – vi.

development hype, the Golembe report found that “efforts to increase manufacturing employment by bringing in new industries have not yet met with great success; incomes are low; and housing conditions for many families are inadequate.” It claimed that over ten thousand jobs in agriculture had disappeared since 1949.¹⁶ All of these conditions impacted black families most. African American families earned only 36.1% of the median income of white families, \$8,494. Only a quarter of Dallas County’s housing qualified as substandard in 1970, but over sixty percent of black-occupied units lacked proper plumbing facilities. The report predicted that black families would be hardest hit by Craig’s closure since low-income blacks were most vulnerable to job loss.¹⁷ “By nearly any measure used, income levels are lowest in Dallas County and the incidence of poverty is highest,” the report concluded, “The County economy clearly is the least prosperous of those with UPT bases.”¹⁸

Unfortunately, the public hearings took place a week before Golembe Associates released their study. Rex Morthland urged citizens to fill the November hearings, admonishing “Now is the time for all of you to get into the act.”¹⁹ For Selma’s leaders, the public hearings promised a forum where their concerns could be fairly aired and relayed to the Secretary of Defense. The draft EIS released by the Air Force in September had seriously understated the economic impact of Craig’s pending closure. “It’s an important day for

¹⁶ Golembe Associates, Inc. *Impact of Closure of Craig Air Force Base*, 7 – 9.

¹⁷ Golembe Associates, Inc. *Impact of Closure of Craig Air Force Base*, 63 – 64.

¹⁸ Golembe Associates, Inc., *Impact of Closure of Craig Air Force Base*, 56.

¹⁹ Bertram de Souza, “Craig: Input from public sought,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 25, 1976.

Selma,” the *Times-Journal* wrote on the eve of the hearing, “and everyone must be together and of one mind. Save Craig.”²⁰

Yet the fruits of white official’s unwillingness to negotiate on black demands came back to haunt them in the days prior to the hearing. In the spring of 1976, a group of black teenagers from the Blackbelt Arts and Cultural Center, in partnership with Councilman F.D. Reese, moved that the city council change the name of Sylvan Street to Dr. Martin Luther King Street.²¹ Reese submitted a petition with the signatures of many supportive Sylvan Street residents, but the white council majority voted down the proposed change.²² They did so again in July and again in October.²³ With the Craig AFB hearings upon the city in November, Reese and a group of black citizens threatened to demonstrate if concessions were not made. The threats were enough to make two white councilmen pledge their support to the name change, admitting that “any negative reaction during public hearings could be detrimental to Craig AFB’s future.” The name change went through after some additional bargaining. “[It] gives the black community a signal,” Councilman Reese summarized afterwards, “that if you want something you have to fight for it ... apply pressure.”²⁴

²⁰ Bruce Morrison, “Top o’ the day,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 14, 1976.

²¹ Carolyn Cain, “Sylvan Street Unchanged,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 11, 1976; Cleophus Merritt, “Top o’ the Day,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 15, 1976.

²² Selma City Council Minutes, May 10, 1976, Selma City Hall, Selma, Alabama.

²³ Bertram de Souza, “Council rejects renaming,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 13, 1976; Bertram de Souza, “Sylvan Street remains unchanged,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 11, 1976.

²⁴ Bertram de Souza, “White councilman OK Sylvan Change,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 15, 1976.

When the three-person Air Force panel arrived at the Selma Convention Center, it was apparent that the lower ranking officers had no direct line to persons of authority.²⁵ Over six hundred people crowded into the Convention Center during the hearings on November 15th and 16th. Individual testimonies stressed again and again how the base closing would destructively impair citizens' quality of life, the viability of the local economy, as well as national economic goals. Father James Robinson pleaded for "the marginal people," the maids and cooks and poor who would be hardest hit.²⁶ Over 57 people appeared to testify at the hearings including Governor George Wallace, many of Alabama's congressmen, local government leaders, businessmen, and private citizens. While reports commissioned by the Craig study committee supported the predictions of economic catastrophe that would occur if the base closed, the hearings ended before they were ready.²⁷

Afterwards, Rex Morthland and a five-man delegation flew to Washington to meet with Air Force officials. They brought the Golembe and Troy reports with them, hoping to make one last case for the potentially devastating effects of closure.²⁸ But the final EIS report, released on February 22, 1977, did not include any of the testimony from the public hearings or the findings of the two studies.²⁹ Craig ranked as one of the lowest of the seven UPT bases in operational capacity, and the Air Force's scant concern for how seriously surrounding communities would be affected made the situation in Selma look bleak. In a last

²⁵ Berkey, "The Closing of Craig Air Force Base," 35 – 36.

²⁶ Bertram de Souza, "Economics: Speakers paint bleak picture," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 16, 1976.

²⁷ Berkey, "The Closing of Craig Air Force Base," 40 – 41.

²⁸ Bertram de Souza, "Armed with Troy study, team attacks Pentagon," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 29, 1976.

²⁹ Berkey, "The Closing of Craig Air Force Base," 40 – 44.

ditch attempt, city and county political leaders flew to the capitol again to meet with the Alabama Congressional delegation and Governor George Wallace, who then appealed Craig's case all the way up to newly elected president, Jimmy Carter.³⁰ On March 16th, however, Secretary of the Air Force Thomas Reed flew unannounced into Craig AFB and spent an ominous hour touring the base's facilities, before flying out again.³¹

The fateful decision came on March 30th, 1977: Craig Air Force Base would be closed.³² The daily realities of Craig's closing accumulated slowly in the months following the announcement. Little by little, civil servants, military personnel, and air force equipment made their final exit through the base's gates. The last class of undergraduate pilots received their wings in mid-August, leaving the runways and air space silent.³³ In the span of a year, Craig's 2,800 military and civilian employees dwindled to a 106-member caretaker force.³⁴ With them went the base's \$34.5 million payroll and \$3.3 million in local contracts.³⁵ Already besieged by unemployment, poverty, substandard housing, and decreased federal funding, Craig's closing marked the start of a new era for Selma and Dallas County as the 1980s approached.

³⁰ "Group off to D.C. to plan Craig Strategy," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 1, 1977; Bertram de Souza, "Carter to Keep Eye on Craig Situation," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 3, 1977.

³¹ Bertram de Souza, "Officials Tour Base," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 16, 1977.

³² Bertram de Souza, "Decision Made to Close Craig," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 30, 1977.

³³ Jack Ehn, "Last Class Finishes at Craig AFB," *Selma-Times-Journal*, Aug. 13, 1977.

³⁴ Jack Ehn, "Low-key ceremony marks 'closing date,'" *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 2, 1977; Article reports 2,600 employees, but federal Economic Adjustment Reports indicate Craig AFB's 1976 operational force as 2,800.

³⁵ Economic Adjustment Program, Selma/Dallas County, Alabama, Federal Team Visit Report, President's Economic Adjustment Committee, Office of Economic Adjustment, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Pentagon, Washington, D.C., January 1978. Old Depot Museum Archive.

CHAPTER 7: THE SUNBELT'S SHADOW: REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REAGANOMICS, 1977 – 1988

When the regular injection of Air Force dollars stopped, Dallas County's economy was left tottering between agriculture and small-scale manufacturing. June Cohn, who was running a travel agency with her husband Seymour after closing Eagle's Department Store and Boston Bargain, watched how their business dried up. Five years after Craig Air Force Base's closing, a whopping 77 of Dallas County's 493 retail businesses had shut their doors.¹ The hard times inaugurated by Craig's closing only got worse as the 1980s wore on. When business leaders set out to fill the void left by Craig, they found that Dallas County's bargaining chips no longer held much sway in the new Sunbelt South. Promises of tax incentives, low labor costs, and anti-unionism no longer appealed to the technology-savvy, innovative corporations who flocked to southern cities. Poor education, poverty, isolation, and racially-divisive politics all stopped the Alabama Black Belt from joining in the Sunbelt's prosperity. At the same time, local industries packed up in search of cheaper labor in Mexico or China. As garment factories, furniture companies, and other industries moved away, the longstanding joke, "Last one out of Selma, turn off the lights," seemed increasingly true.²

¹ June Cohn, interview by author, November 30, 2011, Selma, Alabama; Bureau of Census: *U.S. Census of Retail Trade: 1977*, vol. 2, pt. 1, Geographic Area Statistics, Alabama – Indiana (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978) 1-54; Bureau of Census: *U.S. Census of Retail Trade: 1982*, vol. 2, pt. 1, Geographic Area Statistics, Alabama – Indiana (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 44-45.

² University of Alabama, Office of Economic and Community Affairs, *Selma/Dallas County Economic Development Planning Report* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama, Nov. 17, 1986), 10 – 11; M.G. Hudson Trend & Auburn Technical Assistance Center. *What Happens to Workers After the Plant Closes: Project Report*. Auburn, Ala.: Auburn Technical Assistance Center, Auburn University, 1987, 128 – 130.

Ronald Reagan's ascendancy to the White House only made Dallas County's existing problems worse, especially for the 49.6% of black residents living below the poverty line.³ Riding a conservative backlash into office, the Reagan administration pushed forward unprecedented cuts in social spending programs and used unemployment to rein in inflation all the while cutting taxes. In the Alabama Black Belt, double-digit unemployment arrived with the new decade and stayed until its end. Austerity and stringency in Washington shattered the lives of Dallas County's many low-income residents as disappearing welfare and public services left the poorest with nowhere to turn.

The economic and federal drought of the 1980s aggravated existing political discord. Mayor Joe Smitherman and white politicians had secured their hold on local power by selectively accommodating black demands, which had brought African American representation without meaningful political power. African American activists connected with the influential Chestnut, Sanders, and Sanders law firm mounted a head-on attack against white control in the midst of economic crisis. Organizing amongst black children and low-income mothers helped build political support for black candidates running for office at the same time federal lawsuits challenged the legality of continued white political control. Backed by local activists of all ages, black Dallas County citizens fought to bring the political promises of the Voting Rights Act to fruition twenty years after its passage. Doing so, however, further solidified existing divisions between Dallas County's black and white political activists.

³ University of Alabama, Office of Economic and Community Affairs, *Selma/Dallas County Economic Development Planning Report* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama, Nov. 17, 1986), 16.

Aftermath of Craig

When the Department of Defense shut down Craig, Selma's civic and business leaders shifted their prodigious efforts from salvation to future development.⁴ Mayor Joe Smitherman made sure to tell national news reporters that Selma had yet again been "sold down the river" by the federal government, but instead of contesting the Air Force's decision, he focused on reacquiring base property and developing plans for future use.⁵ Within two weeks, the Craig Field Airport and Industrial Authority was born to plan for the future with the help of the federal government.⁶ The city and county governing bodies elected five prominent men to serve on the board: city council president and agricultural equipment company owner Carl Morgan; Edwin Moss, the solo black representative, worked at the Edmundite Mission and ran the black Elks Credit Union; Billy Bond worked as a paper manufacturing official; James Wilkinson was a large county farmer, and Joe Pilcher, Jr. was a local attorney with an interest in real estate.⁷

While the Craig Industrial Authority negotiated with the federal government, the Chamber of Commerce revved its industrial recruitment drive into high gear. In April, a group of civic and business leaders flew to Salina, Kansas and Laredo, Texas to see how

⁴ The President's Economic Adjustment Committee (EAC) lent its support, helping coordinate federal resources designated to assist communities left behind; Thomas Berkey, "The Closing of Craig Air Force Base," (Master's thesis, University of Virginia, 1980), 33 – 34.

⁵ Smitherman quoted in Bertram de Souza, "Selma starts on road block," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 1, 1977; Bertram de Souza, "Senator incurs mayor's wrath," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 2, 1977.

⁶ Bertram de Souza, "One group to handle Craig development," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 14, 1977.

⁷ Bertram de Souza, "Craig Field: Five men prepare to handle redevelopment," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 22, 1977.

other communities had dealt with base closures.⁸ The top question in the minds of Chamber and industrial authority officials was which industries to attract. Because of the base's flight capacities, the Chamber targeted 480 air-related industries. In August 1977, it brought one hundred interested company representatives to Selma where they toured the area's three industrial sites - Craig Field, Selfield, and the Bell Road Industrial Park - on chartered Greyhound buses.⁹ Carl Morgan, chairman of the Craig Industrial Authority, explained to the *Times-Journal* that instead of leasing buildings quickly to low-paying industries, "We can look for the cream of the crop, good, clean industries that hire more people, that pay high wages and that are going to stay with us." This path, in his estimation, would secure Dallas County's spot in the burgeoning prosperity some southern cities were experiencing.¹⁰ The local editor agreed that a new day had arrived in Selma: "No longer should we boast that we have 'cheap labor.' [...] Our future depends on our people – that's what industry is really after: quality people."¹¹

Bold pronouncements in the face of economic disaster, however, did little to alter Dallas County's long history of anti-unionism and overreliance on low-paying, labor-intensive industries. The January before Craig's fate was announced 280 United Steel Workers members at Bush Hog, a farm implement company in Selma, struck for a forty-cent

⁸ Bertram de Souza, "Redevelopment takes a team effort," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 27, 1977.

⁹ Jack Ehn, "Systematic search on for industries," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 20, 1977; George Smith, "Industrial development reps came, saw, were impressed," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 9, 1977.

¹⁰ George Smith, "Authority searches for best industries to come to Craig," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 30, 1977.

¹¹ Bruce Morrison, "Industry: What kind to attract," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 8, 1977.

raise plus increases in retirement, insurance, and pension plans.¹² Alabama's right-to-work laws allowed employees to refuse to join a union local, and tension soon erupted between strikers and those non-union members that continued reporting for work. Union workers allegedly spread roofing nails across Bush Hog entrances, and overturned the car of an employee trying to enter the plant, leading to the arrest of seven strikers. The *Times-Journal* also reported shots being fired into the homes of workers both for and against the strike.¹³ While company and union officials attempted to reach a settlement through a federal mediator, strikers extended their picket lines to Selma police headquarters. They accused the city police of unfair treatment, especially when police cars provided escorts for Bush Hog trucks leaving the plant.¹⁴

Negotiations renewed after an explosion at the plant in March tore a two-by-five foot hole in the wall of a main assembly building.¹⁵ The blast happened days before the announcement of Craig's closure. An editorial in the *Times-Journal* urged a quick settlement before the strike and its associated violence tainted Selma's reputation for "good employer-employee relationships."¹⁶ This reputation owed more to the local penchant for strike-breaking than to any company official's willingness to negotiate, a pattern that Bush Hog affirmed. When the company refused to reinstate striking employees, insisting instead on

¹² "Strikers picketing at Bush Hog," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 10, 1977.

¹³ "Cars turned over; 7 strikers arrested," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 19, 1977; "Industry offers strike meeting," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 21, 1977.

¹⁴ "Steel workers set up police station pickets," *Selma Times Journal*, Feb. 24, 1977.

¹⁵ "Explosion rips hole in wall of Bush Hog plant," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 20, 1977; "Bush Hog to meet with union officials," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 22, 1977.

¹⁶ Bertram de Souza, "Meeting of union, firm important," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 23, 1977.

giving preference to the people hired in the interim, union workers balked and continued the strike.¹⁷ By June, Bush Hog's production, with the newly-hired, non-union workers, was running near normal.¹⁸ Local 7827 of the United Steel Workers called off its strike in early July as picket numbers dwindled, and it accepted the company's lesser January settlement. When the union met the next day, one leader urged strikers to remember the city officials who refused to help them when the next election came around.¹⁹ But long memories did not bring concessions, better wages, or jobs. Carl Jones, a 21-year company veteran and former union president, insisted that Selma was "scab town, USA," a city with some of the lowest paying wages in the southeast but still vehemently anti-union.²⁰

Despite officials' talk of good jobs, the Bush Hog strike made clear how low-wages and anti-unionism continued to reign amongst business and civic leaders. In a series focusing on local labor unions, Jack Ehn of the *Times-Journal* revealed that fifteen percent of Dallas County's 16,040 employed workers belonged to a union. Jack Wright, vice-president of the United Paperworkers International Union at Hammermill Paper, echoed the sentiments of the Bush Hog strikers in an interview; he claimed that local people were against unions because of fear and of ignorance of what good a union did. While five Hammermill employees doing the same work were paid five different wages before the union, now, he said, "we're just making for good working conditions. We sell an honest day's work for an honest day's pay." The difference between union and non-union wages were "striking:"

¹⁷ Bertram de Souza, "Deadlock halt Bush Hog negotiations," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 26, 1977.

¹⁸ "Strikers are hoping for end to picket." *Selma Times-Journal*, June 29, 1977.

¹⁹ Nikki Davis Maute, "Settlement seen as defeat for local union," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 8, 1977.

²⁰ Nikki Davis Maute, "Strikers bitter about 'weak' workers," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 8, 1977.

Unionized workers brought in from \$5.34 to \$10.30 per hour, while non-union salespersons, grocery checkers, and janitors made around \$2.75 per hour, and welders and skilled machinists were paid between \$3.00 - \$5.00 per hour.²¹ Keeping unions out of Selma clearly kept wages low and workers divided.

The tax incentives, industrial bonds, cheap labor, and hostility towards unions that rural southerners had used to recruit industry helped maintain the racial and economic status quo during the region's transition away from cotton. By the late 1970s and 1980s, these same policies became a liability as the national economy shifted towards high-skilled, well-educated, technologically-savvy workers. Much of this growth took place in what was fast becoming known as the Sunbelt South – a band of prosperous metropolitan areas spread across the South and West with economies that boomed on defense spending and high-tech industries.²² Of the 400,000 new high-tech jobs created in the South between 1977 and 1981, 87.2% were located in metropolitan regions and only .4% moved to the Black Belt.²³ Cities like Raleigh, Atlanta, Huntsville, and Dallas flourished in the Sunbelt's climate of good education and good jobs. In the meantime, rural areas, like Dallas County, struggled with a legacy of racial discrimination and poor pay, and the vibrant growth of Sunbelt cities, as historian Bruce Schulman argues, largely bypassed the Black Belt and its majority of African

²¹ The union locals were concentrated in only nine of the area's seventy manufacturing firms; Jack Ehn, "Union in county viewed suspiciously," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 20, 1977; Jack Ehn, "Wright believes unions can help," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 21, 1977.

²² For more on how the idea of the "Sunbelt" developed see, Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk, eds., *Sunbelt Rising: the Politics of Place, Space, and Region* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 4 - 13

²³ William Falk and Thomas Lyson, *High Tech, Low Tech, No Tech: Recent Industrial and Occupational Change in the South* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 45.

American citizens.²⁴ The Southern Growth Policies Board in 1986 deemed the stark difference a “consequence of schools that have not always served all people equally, as well as economic systems built on low-wage, low-skilled employment.” Highlighting the growing gap between the prosperity of the urban south and the poverty of the rural south, the board titled its report, “Halfway Home and a Long Way to Go.”²⁵

The search for industry in the wake of Craig’s closing forced business and political officials to confront the implications of an emerging service-gearred, high-tech economy. An all-white group of Chamber officials and local politicians gathered at Gulf Shores, Alabama in September 1977 in a private meeting to plan for the area’s economic development. Chamber president Jim Bradley indicated that disagreements existed over the type of industries to recruit – big or small, high or low wages, with or without labor unions - and explained that all media was prohibited so that members could talk freely.²⁶ This exclusively white and strictly confidential gathering highlighted how decisions were made in Selma; nowhere in these meetings did black citizens have either representatives or a chance to voice their concerns.

Regardless, recruiting industry still required more than the consensus of white civic leaders. In November, a seventeen-member delegation flew to California to negotiate lease and building incentives with Lockheed Aircraft Service Company.²⁷ Despite offering the

²⁴ Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938 – 1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 176 - 179

²⁵ Southern Growth Policies Board, *Halfway Home and a Long Way to Go: the Report of the 1986 Commission on the Future of the South, Southern Growth Policies Board* (Research Triangle Park, N.C: Southern Growth Policies Board, 1988), 11.

²⁶ Jack Ehn, “Leaders plan future of area,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 24, 1977.

²⁷ Jack Ehn, “Craig envoys return here,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 12, 1977.

company nearly \$2 million in bonuses, Lockheed chose, instead, to locate at the deactivated Webb Air Force Base.²⁸ The director of public relations at Lockheed admitted that the availability of skilled workers played a role in its final decision. According to delegate Carl Morgan, Lockheed suggested that Webb's 85% white, 15% black population was more favorable to finding high-skilled workers than Selma's 50 – 50 ratio. Mayor Smitherman and Probate Judge Johnny Jones charged the aircraft company with racial discrimination against black Selma residents, a position they had no hesitation taking when it served their personal interests.²⁹ Lockheed's decision forced white business and political officials to acknowledge that Dallas County's abundant but low-skilled workforce no longer offered the attraction it once had.

During the next decade, industries slowly moved into the now vacant Craig Field, but none matched the high pay, ample government contracts, and mass of people that the Air Force had supplied. Lifetime Industries, a roofing-tile manufacturing company, became the first industrial tenant in January of 1978; Jet Exteriors, Inc. came that November, and Beech Craft Aircraft Corporation in December, but the development officials struggled in their recruitment efforts.³⁰ The roots of Dallas County's difficulties looked much like those of rural America. Over in Montgomery, nearly sixty miles away, Interstate 85 ended when merged with Interstate 65 instead of continuing westward through the Black Belt to join with Interstate 20 on the Alabama-Mississippi border. Interstate access was almost a must if

²⁸ Jack Ehn, "Lockheed turned Craig site down," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 17, 1977.

²⁹ Jack Ehn, "No one specific thing' swayed Lockheed to Webb," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 17, 1977.

³⁰ Jack Ehn, "Lifetime Industries secures lease; roofing-tile company," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 30, 1978; Dave Farnham, "New industry picks Craig," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 16, 1978; "Welcome Beechcraft," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 24, 1978.

a county hoped to grab their own sliver of Sunbelt prosperity. Meanwhile, as people moved away in search of jobs, rural areas emptied and resources followed. Selling Dallas County was a tall order when prospective industries could see the crumbling houses, too few day care centers, and visible effects of low wages.³¹

Reaganomics

Hard times hit during the late 1970s, not just in Dallas County, but across the entire country. Facing hyperinflation rooted in government deficits from the Vietnam War, Americans found that their dollar now bought a much smaller cart of groceries. They also started feeling luckier if they even had a job as the automation of industrial jobs and the steady outflow of manufacturing companies overseas left more and more people out of work. Arab oil embargoes, the Iranian hostage crisis, and the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan made the unquestioned economic and military might of United States seem far less certain. Meanwhile, President Nixon's resignation after the Watergate scandal shattered citizens' faith in politicians and the federal government alike.³² In Dallas County, cutbacks in federal spending and local industry layoffs only added to the catastrophic effects of Craig's closing. "The effects of the long-awaited recession are starting to appear in Selma," the

³¹ Economic Adjustment Program, Selma/Dallas County, Alabama, Federal Team Visit Report, President's Economic Adjustment Committee, Office of Economic Adjustment, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Pentagon, Washington, D.C., January 1978, Old Depot Museum Archives.

³² William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 447 – 450; Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 27 – 31; For more on how automation eliminated industrial jobs, see Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Times-Journal admitted by the spring of 1980.³³ That summer, Dallas County's jobless rate hit double digits at 10.2 percent and did not drop down to single digits for another decade.³⁴

Out of what President Jimmy Carter called the country's "crisis in confidence," emerged Ronald Reagan, the conservative former-governor of California, with a new vision for America. Reagan threw in his bid for the presidency in Mississippi at the Neshoba County Fair in August 1980. Twenty-four years earlier, three civil rights workers had been murdered outside of Philadelphia, the Neshoba county seat, their bodies buried in an earthen dam. Gesturing to the legacy of the White Citizens' Council and white southerners' displeasure with black civil rights gains, Reagan vowed to support states' rights, reduce the size of the federal government, and decrease regulation and taxes.³⁵ By tapping into American discontent with government and a pulsating white and Christian conservative backlash, Ronald Reagan captured the presidency in November of 1980. In his oath of office, Reagan laid out what would be his governing principle over the next eight years: "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem." Cutting taxes, reducing federal spending, and eliminating government regulations were the three principles that guided his administration's policies over the next eight years.³⁶

At the time of Reagan's election, nearly half of the people living in Dallas County were already scraping by on incomes below 150% of the poverty level, a number that

³³ Jeanette Berryman, "Recession arrives, but 'things could be lots worse,'" *Selma Times-Journal*, May 7, 1980.

³⁴ Janet Gresham, "Dallas County's jobless rate increases," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 13, 1980; Patricia Stubs, "Unemployment dips to 8.9 percent," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 13, 1990.

³⁵ Ronald Reagan, Neshoba County Fair speech, Mississippi, Aug. 3, 1980.

³⁶ Reagan quoted in Troy, *Morning in America*, 57, 68.

included an astounding 70.7% of all black residents. Federal government programs helped many of these families keep little ones fed, and Reagan's ascension to the White House spelled disaster for them.³⁷ "Up until now, we had the luxury of everybody doing good and federal funds flowing," Mayor Smitherman claimed a bit optimistically, but then he summed up the new reality: "Now the federal funds ain't flowing."³⁸ The local offices of the Department of Pensions and Security and the Unemployment Compensation Agency, along with the school superintendents, fretted during the spring of 1981 about how cuts to food stamps, child nutrition, welfare, extended unemployment benefits, and Medicaid would affect people and the local economy.³⁹ Poor people were already struggling before the proposed cuts became law. Mrs. Jewel Kynard wrote a letter to the editor of the *Times-Journal* explaining the dire situation her family faced. The previous winter, her husband had been in the hospital, and the family could not afford heat, water, or electricity. "Unemployed, I had to borrow \$238 to get them back on," she wrote, "Now he has been back in the hospital, still unable to work and we're behind again. He filed with Social Security but to no avail, so he's applying again."⁴⁰

The Reagan administration assured Americans that it would maintain social programs for the "truly needy," but the list of programs on the chopping block made it doubtful if anyone actually qualified. Everything from food and nutrition, housing assistance,

³⁷ 47.4% lived on incomes under 150% of the poverty line. Bureau of Census. *U.S. Census of Population: 1980*, Vol. 1, Pt. 2, Characteristics of Population (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 2-389, 2-484.

³⁸ Janet Gresham, "Smitherman's rhetoric: fast and breezy," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 6, 1981.

³⁹ Jeanette Berryman, "Dallas Could Hurt; Budget impact left to Congress," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 15, 1981.

⁴⁰ Letter to Editor from Mrs. Jewel Kynard, 2503 McDaniel Drive, *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 9, 1981.

and school lunches to student aid and extended unemployment fell under the heading of unessential.⁴¹ When the fiscal year began in October of 1981, new cuts directly affected one thousand Dallas County families, with more damage projected as Congress finalized the budget plan. The working poor bore the harshest load when stricter standards for programs like Aid to Dependent Children ended their eligibility.⁴² As federal social programs withered, poor citizens began turning to church and charity organizations. “We are bracing for the blow,” admitted local Salvation Army officer Lt. Will Cundiff one year into Reagan’s presidency, “This year there are even more people below the poverty level. More people were making it before and can’t this year.” Churches, meanwhile, found themselves struggling to provide for the many who fell through gaping holes in government aid. In the past, tax incentives had encouraged wealthy congregants to donate. But when the Reagan administration lowered the tax bracket for the richest, those financial incentives dried up. “People now have to give for benevolent reasons, rather than financial ones,” Rev. Phillip Wise of the Selma Ministerial Association explained. When even the local Department of Pensions and Securities (the government agency in charge of welfare) began routing aid seekers to individuals and businesses for help, it was obvious just how bad times had become in Dallas County.⁴³

Cuts to federal programs fell hardest on the people living in uninsulated, clapboard houses with no outside resources to turn to. On top of that, double-digit inflation and

⁴¹ Anthony S. Campagna, *The Economy in the Reagan Years: The Economic Consequences of the Reagan Administrations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 40.

⁴² Jeanette Berryman, Janet Gresham, Jackie Walburn, “Reagan cuts pinch Dallas slow but sure,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 4, 1981.

⁴³ Jackie Walburn, “People look elsewhere,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 21, 1982.

interest rates sent the costs of daily living soaring. Even Dallas County's middle class couldn't afford the early 1980s. The best home loan to be found in 1981 had a 17.5% interest rate while the majority of banks offered between 18 to 20%.⁴⁴ Federal Reserve Board Chairman Paul Volcker kept interest rates high in attempt to rein in inflation. His policy stabilized inflation but it also dragged the country into economic recession.⁴⁵ Unemployment exploded, and it was poor and working-class Americans who bore the brunt of the downturn. While the wealthiest Americans tightened their belts by foregoing a family vacation or putting off that new car, those at the bottom lost their jobs and burned through all of the resources they had.⁴⁶

Layoffs and closings ruled the day in Dallas County during the spring of 1982. The Gibson Discount Center closed, while General Battery cut back about half of its workforce.⁴⁷ As high interest rates hit farmers, demand for farm machinery plummeted. Bush Hog responded by laying off one hundred employees in March and then shutting down its entire production facilities in July.⁴⁸ A survey conducted by the Chamber of Commerce found that 376 workers had been cut by 76 area manufacturers since March of 1981.⁴⁹ Job vacancies attracted scores of people. A position with the police department received 140 applicants, and nine months later, four hundred people applied for forty

⁴⁴ Janet Gresham, "Selma is a home buyer's market," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 4, 1981.

⁴⁵ Troy, *Morning in America*, 209 – 211.

⁴⁶ Campagna, *The Economy in the Reagan Years*, 90

⁴⁷ "Economy forces closing, industry cutbacks in area," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 24, 1982.

⁴⁸ Bush Hog lays off 100 workers," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 5, 1982; "Bush Hog to shut down in July," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 13, 1982.

⁴⁹ Janet Gresham, "Economy blamed as 376 workers out," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 18, 1982

temporary jobs at the Piggly Wiggly grocery store.⁵⁰ By November of 1982, Dallas County's unemployment rate hovered at a record high of 19.5%.⁵¹

A combination of bad crop years, high interest rates, and tight lending policies also wreaked havoc on local agriculture, causing numerous Dallas County farmers to lose their farms. John Henderson was one of them. After buying his first acre of land in 1937 at the age of twenty, Henderson lost his 440-acre farm at Five Points, south of Orrville, in a mortgage foreclosure sale in July 1983. Cotton had sustained him and his family up until 1976; in 1977, he borrowed \$400,000 to plant his fortieth crop, but failed to make a profit due to drought and low prices. The same pattern repeated itself for the next five years and put him out of business. Inflation pushed interest rates and product prices up at the same time crop prices either fell or failed to match inflation. "If a farmer has farmed the last six years, he owes money," Henderson asserted.⁵² The 1983 season saw fifteen fewer farms than the year before, most selling out in an effort to pay off farm debts. Carl Barker, president of Dallas County Bank, explained that most farmers had more debt than their farmland was worth.⁵³ As the number of farm auctions increased with farmers selling off their machinery, the local farm dealerships suffered. By 1984, they had followed in the path of the farmers, dropping in number from seven to three.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Jeanette Berryman, "140 apply for police vacancies," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 17, 1982; Jeanette Berryman, "More than 400 apply for 40 temporary jobs," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 26, 1983.

⁵¹ Jeanette Berryman, "Jobless rate keeps jumping," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 4, 1983.

⁵² Carl Henderson quoted in Janet Gresham, "His farm to the highest bidder," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 10, 1983.

⁵³ Janet Gresham, "Forced sales: 15 fewer farmers will be tilling Dallas County soil," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 6, 1983.

⁵⁴ Janet Gresham, "Farm auctions prevalent," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 16, 1983.

Reaganomics – the Reagan administration’s program of tax cuts, government spending reductions (except in defense), and de-regulation – decimated all segments of Dallas County’s economy. Federal cuts to social programs disproportionately hurt Selma’s low-income black residents already living below the poverty line, while unemployment struck at the livelihoods of black and white workers earning a living in local industries. Meanwhile, the shifting tax burden meant that the poorest Americans paid significantly larger shares of their income towards taxes at the same time the wealthiest citizens paid less.⁵⁵ By 1983, the worst years of the recession were over for most of the country. National unemployment steadily dropped from its high of 10% in 1983 to 5.4% five years later. Almost none of that recovery made it to the rural Alabama Black Belt. The recession barreled on throughout the rest of the decade, making bad times worse.⁵⁶

Last One Out of Selma, Turn Off the Lights

While federal spending cuts pummeled Dallas County, an increasingly globalized economy chipped away at the Black Belt’s hard won industrial jobs. Sunbelt cities like Raleigh, Charlotte, Atlanta, and Dallas settled into their fortune, as technology driven jobs and federal investment attracted educated, middle-class citizens. But that boom largely skipped over rural regions with little to offer in terms of education, skills, or infrastructure.⁵⁷ The timber, apparel, and paper companies that did come to the Black Belt were about as

⁵⁵ Campagna, *The Economy in the Reagan Years*, 79 – 82.

⁵⁶ Campagna, *The Economy in the Reagan Years*, 90.

⁵⁷ Stuart A. Rosenfeld, “The Tale of Two Souths,” in *The Rural South in Crisis: Challenges for the Future*, Lionel Beaulieu, ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 51 – 53.

different from the Sunbelt's innovative corporations as eggs, milk, and butter were from an icing-coated, candle-topped birthday cake.⁵⁸ Raw materials did not equal the value of the finished product. Already on the losing end of economic development, the rise of foreign competition sealed the rural South's fate. By the early 1980s, companies began bypassing the rural South completely to locate their plants in developing countries with fewer regulations and thousands of people desperate to work for miniscule pay. The gospel of low-wage, anti-union labor that southern business leaders had touted since before World War II proved mighty unreliable in the new economy.⁵⁹

In August of 1985, Dan River Mills, a cotton sheeting plant located just east of the Dallas County line, announced it was closing, citing imports and the depressed textile economy as reasons. The decision left the company's 250 employees to join the already large number of area residents also out of work. The Auburn Technical Assistance Center sent a team to Dallas County to trace what happened to the workers in the months following the plant shutdown. After nine months, only 46% of the 219 people interviewed had found work, on average commuting sixty-six miles (or the distance to Montgomery) to their new jobs. Of those who managed to secure work, the majority were white males while white females and African Americans overwhelmingly populated the ranks of those still searching. Despite facing a poor labor market, researchers found that the majority of ex-mill workers - with family ties, homes, and a deep affection for the area - remained in Dallas County. Most

⁵⁸ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 178 – 179.

⁵⁹ Daniel T. Lichter, "Race and Unemployment: Black Employment Hardship in the Rural South," in Beaulieu, *The Rural South in Crisis*, 184.

former workers survived by buying less food or clothing, delaying medical care, and simply falling behind on installment payments⁶⁰

The treatment employees experienced at Dan River Mills had been far from outstanding. One black Baptist minister, who started as a sweeper and moved up to a tie-in operator, called the plant “the rottenest place in the world.” The company allegedly failed to regulate the heat and humidity, ignored reports about unsafe machine conditions, and refused to take injured workers to the doctor. Numerous employees referred to the supervisors as “overseers,” and the minister insisted, “They drove us like ANIMALS!”⁶¹ But with unemployment hovering at 17.6 percent, Dan River Mills paychecks of \$6.06 per hour (still twenty cents lower than average textile workers’ wage in the southeast) allowed families to get by.⁶² Although unemployment benefits - typically called “pennies” by Dallas County residents - helped displaced workers for a limited time, the majority failed to secure a job in that period. “There’s just no jobs in Selma,” one white woman in her sixties told interviewers, “I’m still looking, but there aren’t any jobs.” A forty-year old former black worker agreed, claiming, “My pennies are running out. I would like to work and it’s just not here in Selma.”⁶³

⁶⁰ M.G. Hudson Trend & Auburn Technical Assistance Center, *What Happens to Workers After the Plant Closes: Project Report* (Auburn, Ala.: Auburn Technical Assistance Center, Auburn University, 1987), 1 – 5, 89.

⁶¹ Auburn Technical Assistance Center, *What Happens to Workers After the Plant Closes*, 194 – 197, 228.

⁶² “Dallas County unemployment rate jumps to 17.6,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 9, 1985; Auburn Technical Assistance Center, *What Happens to Workers After the Plant Closes*, 2.

⁶³ Auburn Technical Assistance Center, *What Happens to Workers After the Plant Closes*, 242, 256.

Shortly after Dan River Mills shut down, Beech Aircraft Corp., one of the celebrated industries attracted to Craig Field, announced its closing.⁶⁴ Business owners expressed their assessment of the local economic crisis to Auburn University interviewers. Many believed that a small group of elites prevented certain industries from coming to the area. “The local economy ain’t worth ****. Our business is off 50%,” one owner of a recreational equipment store indicated, “I don’t think our city fathers want any industry in here that will pay anything.” Public employees also spoke of the desperate situation. A social service worker explained that people with good work records now confronted a labor market that had little demand for their skills. Gesturing to federal programs cuts, the worker explained “it was as if the rules of the game had been changed, and in the middle of it all, the means to alleviate the disruption in mill workers’ lives (retraining is one thing that comes to mind) were also being scaled back.”⁶⁵

A 1986 report conducted by the Chamber of Commerce found that the area had lost jobs due to “a shift in manufacturing to lesser developed countries where labor is cheap.” The combination of “the basic restructuring of the national economy” and the lingering effects of Craig AFB’s closing “represent conditions that are almost beyond the control of the leadership of this area.”⁶⁶ One of the white interviewers working with the Dan River Mills study also spoke of the desperateness of Selma’s situation: “As much as it pains my conservative soul to say it, there can be little hope for economic recovery in the Selma area

⁶⁴ Jesse Tullos, “Beech closing expected to hit hard,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 7, 1986.

⁶⁵ Auburn Technical Assistance Center, *What Happens to Workers After the Plant Closes*, 116 – 117, 121, 129.

⁶⁶ Office of Economic and Community Affairs, University of Alabama, *Selma/ Dallas County Economic Planning Report* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama, 1986), 11.

without implementing sweeping programs reminiscent of FDR's New Deal." Public works programs funded by federal, state, and local governments would need to provide employment for displaced workers desperately wanting a job because as he saw it, "even Alabama-owned businesses will not open factories [in rural areas] without being offered tax incentives." Without proactive measures, the interviewer suggested that the morbid local joke, "last one out of Selma, turn off the lights," might come true.⁶⁷

As departing industries left more Dallas County citizens unemployed, the Reagan administration's continuing agenda of reductions to federal social programs, tax cuts for the wealthy, and deregulation escalated instead of relieved the nearly ubiquitous run of tough luck. The *Times-Journal* laid out the bleak situation on New Year's Day in 1987. Illiteracy, poverty, lack of industry, and disappearing agricultural jobs doomed the Alabama Black Belt to remain an enduring economic backwater. Reckoning with the seriousness of the situation, the editors – who had long questioned the value of federal intervention - concluded, "Alabama's economic progress, perhaps even the federal government's record on human rights, will be measured in direct proportion to the support given the economically and socially disadvantaged of the Black Belt."⁶⁸

But the federal government under Ronald Reagan had little interest in addressing Selma's misfortunes. Under the guise of its "new federalism," the administration systematically transferred control of social programs from the federal government to states and municipalities, a move that resonated with states' rights at the same time it cut

⁶⁷ Auburn Technical Assistance Center, *What Happens to Workers After the Plant Closes*, 128 – 130.

⁶⁸ "Growth," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 4, 1987.

spending.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, massive increases in defense spending and lower taxes for the wealthy sent the budget deficit soaring. Instead of addressing the root causes of the deficit, the Reagan administration cut more programs benefitting average citizens. In December 1985, Congress voted to end federal revenue-sharing, a program that funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars into local government's operating budgets.⁷⁰ Mayor Joe Smitherman revealed that Selma received \$780,000 a year in revenue-sharing, and the significant loss of funds would be felt in education, transportation, health care, and formerly federally-funded programs.⁷¹ To weather the nine percent reduction in the city's budget, the city council voted nine months later to raise gasoline and cigarette taxes and cut public employees.⁷²

All-in-all, President Reagan's cuts to domestic spending cost Alabama \$1.9 billion in federal assistance between 1981 and 1986.⁷³ Income inequality became worse during his two terms in office as the bottom sixty percent of the population saw their incomes decline while the top five percent saw an increase. In the meantime, the declining unemployment and trumpeted job creation did not benefit all Americans alike. The majority of new jobs came from low-paying service sector jobs, instead of high-paying manufacturing jobs, and even these did not often make it to Dallas County⁷⁴ The alleged prosperity of the United States during the Reagan years seemed like a cruel lie for Alabama's Black Belt.

⁶⁹ Campagna, *The Economy in the Reagan Years*, 129.

⁷⁰ "Sound Planning," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 24, 1985.

⁷¹ Cheryl Washington, "Gramm-Rudman, Local Officials expect cuts to dig deeper," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 2, 1986.

⁷² Kenneth Boone, "Proposed city budget: Raise taxes and squeeze," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 7, 1986.

⁷³ "Reagan cut cost Alabama \$1.9 bill," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 30, 1986.

⁷⁴ Campagna, *The Economy in the Reagan Years*, 117 – 118, 186.

Joe Smitherman and White Political Control

The relentless economic blows that pounded Dallas County in the 1980s aggravated existing political divisions until they were as raw and stinging as an open blister. As the twentieth anniversary of the Voting Rights Act approached, white majorities still controlled all governing boards of the city and county, even though 52.6% of Selma's and 54.6% of Dallas County's population were black.⁷⁵ Having black people as council members, county commissioners, and state representatives translated into better treatment for black citizens both in personal interactions and city services. But the black representatives who sat on the city council were prevented from having a louder say in the city's operation because of their lack of combined voting strength. The persistence of white political control throughout the 1970s had shown African Americans that if you wanted people you trusted in positions of authority – not black people who would accommodate the white powers that be – you needed a black majority. Meanwhile, decades of disfranchisement, persistent poverty, and frustration all contributed to low turnout rates among black voters, a major problem when racial demographics split close to fifty-fifty black-white. Staring down mobilization concerns, at-large election districts, and the cunning intransigence of white politicians, black activists' fight for political power would reveal the depths of division and desperateness in Dallas County.

⁷⁵ Bureau of Census: *U.S. Census of Population: 1980*, vol. 1, pt. 2 Characteristics of Population (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 2-13, 2-14, 2-25, 2-27.

Joe T. Smitherman loved his job as mayor. He loved the power, he loved the attention, but he also loved Selma. Although he wrestled his way into office as a business-minded segregationist, Smitherman keenly understood what the Voting Rights Act meant for his political future. In a city where African Americans made up a majority, his continued stay in his beloved office depended on winning black votes. In many ways, Joe Smitherman was the hometown version of the man he admired most, Alabama's master politician Governor George Wallace. A dynamic, cunning, oftentimes charming, and all-the-time politically astute man, the mayor used federal

dollars to pave streets in black neighborhoods and stood on the side of school desegregation when it became prudent. He fostered congenial relationships with black council members, like

F.D. Reese, by day, and stopped in at the black Elks

Club to joke and dance at night. But underneath the mayor's outward transformation, his bottom line never changed: Joe Smitherman would do whatever he needed to maintain his personal power and the spotlight that went with it. His hijacking of War on Poverty funding from SHAPE in late sixties was only one example of this determination.



Figure 32: George Wallace shaking hands with an African American police officer as Joe Smitherman stands nearby. Courtesy of ADAH Photograph Collection.

The mayor's stand against the revival of the local Ku Klux Klan in 1979 revealed both his willingness to publicly stand by black residents as well as his refusal to give up personal authority.⁷⁶ Thirteen years earlier, Mayor Joe Smitherman had been on a first name basis with the head of the local Klan. When Joe Knight took over Selma's anti-poverty agency, Smitherman invited Knight to the mayor's office, introduced him to the head of the KKK, and instructed the Klan leader to leave Knight alone.⁷⁷ But times had changed. After a series of racially-charged crimes drew threats from a vocal group of Klan members, Mayor Smitherman accused the Klan of being outside agitators. He praised Selma's good race relations and continued to publicly denounce the hooded order as they marched through the summer.⁷⁸ Black attorney, J.L. Chestnut laid out why the mayor and council members turned against the Klan this time. Local white "shakers and movers" had forged relationships with a few token black citizens, something that brought small concessions for black residents at the expense of maintaining the status quo. "At the present, the arrangement is working without serious challenge," Chestnut argued, and the revitalized Klan directly threatened the "nervous, shallow 'truce' engendered and maintained by this tokenism."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ The international and economic uncertainty of the late 1970s, as well as political gains by African Americans, had helped sparked revival of white vigilante organizations like the Ku Klux Klan across the country. In March 1979, two white women claimed to be victims of attempted rape at the hands of black males, and a white man shot two black boys with birdshot from his car. The revived local Klan chapter then vowed to seek out the black men allegedly guilty of raping the white women. The Editors, "Klan help not needed," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 1, 1979; George Derek Musgrove, *Rumor, Repression, and Racial Politics: How the Harassment of Black Elected Officials Shaped Post-Civil Rights America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 114.

⁷⁷ Joe Knight, interview by author, October 31, 2012, Selma, Alabama.

⁷⁸ Likewise, white councilman Bill Porter rejected the KKK's proposal to add its sign to Selma's welcome sign, saying he'd only be amenable to the suggestion when the Klan was as respectable as the Exchange Club, Selma City Council Minutes, Mar. 26, 1979, June 25, 1979, Selma City Hall, Selma, Alabama; Nikki Davis Maute, "Klan marches in Selma Saturday," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 15, 1979; "City pools are closed," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 17, 1979; Sheila Thompson, "Selma police to 'beef up' patrols following Klan appearance at pools," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 19, 1979.

⁷⁹ J.L. Chestnut Jr., "Perspective," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 1, 1979.

Black citizens had been hearing the mayor's words of good will for too long to put much faith in his sincerity, so instead, they gathered at Tabernacle Church to plan for their own protection against those parading in white bed sheets. "Blacks will protect their property and persons, and Blacks should not take up arms, and go into the streets" were the first two statements attendees agreed upon. From there, the list went on to their deeper grievances: jobs for black people, black teachers and administrators in public schools, continuing segregation within Selma High School classes, and city and county school boards lacking meaningful African American representation.⁸⁰ Mayor Smitherman might have been willing to denounce the Klan, a position that wouldn't cost him a cent politically in the late seventies. But political representation, jobs, and public schools directly cut into the status quo of white control, and Smitherman showed no willingness to negotiate away his own personal power.

Ongoing fights over representation on the city school board highlighted the depths of the resolve that Joe Smitherman and white council member demonstrated to maintain control. The city council had assumed responsibility for appointing board members in 1977 to address criticisms about its self-perpetuating nature.⁸¹ But with a white majority on the council, black councilmen could never garner enough votes to unilaterally select the African Americans of their choosing. Black businessman, Edwin Moss, urged the council in 1979 to appoint black members to fill vacancies, offering a list of recommendations, but the white

⁸⁰ A history of police brutality and white attacks on African Americans had taught black Selma residents to be wary. In 1970, the black community had staged a week of protests after a police officer fatally injured a black man, Lloyd Bizzell, while taking him into custody; just one year later, however, the police officer had been acquitted and reinstated. "Group Asks Suspension of Officer," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 2, 1970; "Chambers Held Not Guilty By Jury Here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 1, 1971; Dan Davison, "Blacks want end to violence," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 3, 1979.

⁸¹ Nikki Davis Maute, "Board selection ends," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar 7 6, 1977.

majority chose to maintain the board's previous composition of seven whites and four blacks.⁸² Then again in 1982, the council's white majority, against the wishes of black council members, voted to reappoint all three of the white board members whose terms were expiring. "This particular strategy and procedure that you all are using now is 'racist,'" the normally moderate-tempered Councilman F.D. Reese accused, "That's all it is because you are definitely concerned about the majority of the school board being white."⁸³ Despite protests, the carefully protected white majority on the city council also ensured that a black majority would not govern the Selma school board.

Selectively accommodating black demands didn't stop white politicians from exploiting racial politics when it played in their favor. When Craig Field closed, the Air Force had left behind neighborhoods of sturdy, well-maintained military homes. The Craig Industrial Authority, with the backing of the Chamber of Commerce, agreed to purchase the 526 units, but their proposal included nothing about low-income housing, even though the waiting list for the Selma Housing Authority was 450 long. A black group representing the interests of low-income residents had asked to participate, but their request was denied on the grounds that the group did not belong to the nearly all-white Chamber of Commerce. The local Legal Services Corporation, a federally-funded assistance organization, filed a lawsuit demanding that a portion of Craig housing be set aside for low-income residents.⁸⁴

⁸² Selma City Council Minutes, Sept. 10, 1979, Selma City Hall, Selma, Alabama; Alvin Benn, "School board vacancies filled," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 25, 1979.

⁸³ Selma City Council Minutes, July 12, 1982, Selma City Hall, Selma, Alabama.

⁸⁴ The black group was called the Dallas County Improvement Association; Economic Adjustment Program, EAC, January 1978, Old Depot Museum Archive; Jack Ehn, "Attorney charges access denied," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 23, 1978; Dave Farnham, "Control delayed," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 13, 1978; Dave Farnham, "Suit for Craig Housing Filed," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 7, 1978.

Lawsuits and questions of the legal ownership brought city and federal negotiations to an acrimonious halt that stretched on for years.⁸⁵ In January of 1980, a U.S. District Court judge demanded a settlement within sixty days, and local officials saw the low-income housing issue as a means to compel the federal government to act.⁸⁶ Carl Morgan (who was serving a brief stint as mayor after Joe Smitherman dramatically renounced city politics and resigned for six months before deciding to run again) decided to move poor black families into the empty houses in a take-over from the federal government. On January 30th, the city moved four families into duplexes on the former base. Mary Sims and her four daughters, after spending months on the Selma Housing Authority list, left their small, uninsulated house on Philpot Street for a three-bedroom Craig unit.⁸⁷

Carl Morgan's stand failed to impress the lawyers from Legal Services as well as other African Americans in Selma. Rick Ebbinghouse, the attorney heading up the efforts to secure low-income housing, told the *Times-Journal*, "I believe those people are being used as pawns by the Airport Authority. [...] It's a smokescreen to avoid the issues raised by our suit."⁸⁸ By the early 1980s, Selma's white politicians had mastered what historian Joseph Crespino has called "strategic accommodation." By making limited concessions to civil rights demands and allowing token black representation, local officials could preserve white

⁸⁵ Alvin Benn, "Craig property suit is filed," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 27, 1979.

⁸⁶ Janet Gresham, "Craig attorneys told 'settle or go to trial,'" *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 22, 1980.

⁸⁷ Janet Gresham and Jacki Walburn, "Craig families take a chance," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 31, 1980.

⁸⁸ Alvin Benn, "Craig 'truce' is declared," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 1, 1980.

control, secure federal funding, and stave off federal accusations of discrimination.⁸⁹ The Craig housing takeover again gave city officials the opportunity to exploit racial politics for their own political gain. Attorney J.L. Chestnut agreed, claiming that the only black people involved were the squatters and that white politicians had switched sides to harass the federal government into doing what they wanted.⁹⁰

Morgan's actions compelled the federal government to drop some of its demands for public transportation and commercial businesses in the Craig housing, a move that hurt instead of helped future residents. In March of 1981, four years after Craig's closing, an agreement was reached with a total 175 units reserved for low-income residents. All of those years of grandstanding by white politicians provided few if any benefits to the poor black residents who finally began moving to Craig in the winter of 1983.⁹¹

Challenging the Status Quo

Until African American attorneys Hank and Rose Sanders sank their roots down in Selma, Joe Smitherman basked in his personal reign over local politics. Much like a bird-of-paradise securely strutting its brilliant colors and outrageous performances, the mayor slept soundly at night knowing that practically nothing could challenge his dominion. But the Sanders' partnership with J.L. Chestnut changed that equation. Chestnut and his young and

⁸⁹ Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 11 – 12.

⁹⁰ J.L. Chestnut, "Perspective," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 3, 1980.

⁹¹ Alvin Benn, "'Treaty Room' conference resumes," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 14, 1980; Janet Gresham, "Overtime effort seals Craig deal," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 5, 1981; Five years later, residential segregation persisted at the decommissioned base as the Selma Housing Authority kept Section 8 homes on the west side of Lackland Drive and owner-occupied homes to the East; Johanna Rice and Rick Vest, "Craig's Section 8: on wrong side of road?" *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 31, 1988.

determined new partners declared outright war on racial discrimination wherever they saw it. The small brick building on Jeff Davis Avenue, home to the Chestnut, Sanders, and Sanders law firm, hardly seemed like the beginning of the demise of Joe Smitherman and white political control. Its power came in its advocates' overlapping spheres of organizing. As Rose Sanders built community organizations within Selma's black neighborhoods, J.L. Chestnut attacked white supremacy through legal avenues, and Hank Sanders worked to cultivate black political might. What started as a political rivalry between Mayor Smitherman and the Chestnut, Sanders, and Sanders law firm in the 1970s grew into a bitter enmity as the disastrous economic terrain of the 1980s aggravated dissatisfaction over white politicians' death grip on local control.

As economic crisis and federal abandonment left Selma's poorest struggling, Rose Sanders threw herself with abandon into ameliorating the glaring need. Soon after her arrival in the early seventies, Sanders formed the Black Belt Arts and Cultural Center (BBACC). "All I did," she explained, "was use the arts to teach and to inspire and connect with the culture, especially with African culture and African experiences." BBACC's teenage members staged plays about black history and current issues like teen pregnancy, drugs, and later AIDS.⁹² Additionally, they took African dance and theater classes, and sponsored a yearly African Extravaganza celebration.⁹³

⁹² These plays were typically written by Rose Sanders. Faya Rose (Sanders) Toure, interview by author, August 17, 2013, Selma, Alabama.

⁹³ "African Extravaganza planned for July 1," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 23, 1974; Nikki Davis Maute and Alvin Benn, "Selma Churches salute King," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 16, 1980; "BlackFest," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 19, 1981.

Then from BBACC grew the McRae Learning Center. When Mabel McRae retired from teaching in the Selma city schools, she moved to early childhood education, and news spread that she was teaching three-to-five year-old children how to read. Rose Sanders, whose daughter Malika was born in 1973, along with Vivian Chestnut, Lola Doss, Nancy Anderson, and Ora Gaines decided to expand McRae's teaching methods into an early childhood education program for black children.⁹⁴ Within a decade of McRae Learning Center's start in June 1978, it had grown from twenty-five to eighty children and relocated from Selfield Industrial Park to a more centralized building on Range Street. "We were filled to capacity, so we moved in order to accommodate the children who were on the waiting list to enroll," director Ora Gaines explained. The children came from homes of lawyers and doctors as well those dependent on welfare headed by mothers and grandparents. McRae, as Gaines saw it, filled a void in the life of children who lived in single-parent households where mothers were overworked, undereducated, and without paternal support.⁹⁵ A social worker at the Department of Pensions and Security agreed, "At McRae, I know they will be cared for. They help the children tremendously by giving them socialization skills as well as baths, clothing, hot meals, and love. [...] And for the children who come from homes where there are no parenting skills, McRae provides care and concern."⁹⁶ McRae survived despite

⁹⁴ Faya Rose (Sanders) Toure, interview by Author, Selma, Alabama, August 17, 2013; Nikki Davis Maute, "Teacher, 74, 'retiring' for second time," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 29, 1977; "McRae Learning Center opens decade celebration" *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 21, 1987.

⁹⁵Only forty percent of children paid McRae's full fee of \$120 per month; the Department of Pensions and Securities (DPS) helped fund the rest. Gloria Foster, "Learning center established," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 25, 1978; Ora Gaines was Rose Sanders' mother; Ora Gaines quoted in Jean Martin, "Building today for tomorrow' at McRae Learning Center," *Selma Times-Journal*, April 6, 1986.

⁹⁶ Jean Martin, "Hearts to Hands at McRae," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 13, 1986.

Reagan-initiated funding cuts to the DPS and free lunch programs, and continued providing foundational experiences for Selma's black children.⁹⁷

From the McRae Learning Center, grew Mothers of Many, (MOMs) a program for low-income, working mothers that Sanders called, "one of the most effective things we did." MOMs worked to equip mothers with the skills and knowledge they needed to care for themselves and their families. In addition to bringing their children to group meetings, the mothers volunteered at McRae and in after-school tutoring programs for the BBACC kids. They opened a short-lived restaurant across from Selma University, and grew their own vegetables on Rose and Hank Sander's land to the east of Selma.⁹⁸ In May of 1983, MOMs partnered with local black cosmetics entrepreneur P.D. Chestnut, Sr. (J.L. Chestnut's uncle) to manufacture its own home cleaning product. "Clean-All" sales helped finance MOMs programs, while simultaneously teaching economic literacy and self-sufficiency to poor women.⁹⁹ Three years later, the organization received a \$30,000 grant to expand their work.¹⁰⁰ MOMs stopped meeting for a while in the late 1980s, but in the early nineties, support from the Christian Children's Fund helped restart it again. Joanne Bland, coordinator of MOMs, organized monthly meetings where mothers would gather to discuss community issues. The mother also opened a flea market across from First Baptist Church and began making a small profit by selling clothes and miscellaneous items.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ "McRae Center not closing," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 12, 1987.

⁹⁸ Jackie Walburn, "MOMs sponsors mother's skills conference here," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 20, 1983.

⁹⁹ Jackie Wilburn, "It's economics," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 29, 1983.

¹⁰⁰ Cheryl Washington, "\$30,000 grant awarded here," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 9, 1986.

¹⁰¹ Author's field notes, conversation with Joanne Bland, Selma, Alabama, August 20, 2013.

While Rose Sanders mobilized Selma's youth and mothers around "whatever the need was," her partners pushed for legal and political change through the courts. In 1983, a lawsuit filed by Chestnut, Sanders, and Sanders forced a court-ordered redrawing of Alabama's legislative districts, which guaranteed the election of an African American representative. Mobilizing a coalition of movement veterans from across the Black Belt, attorney Hank Sanders made good on the law firm's legal victory by winning election to the state senate as the District 23 representative in 1983.¹⁰²

The political organizing surrounding Senator Sanders' election initiated an all-out fight for black political power in 1984. That February, F.D. Reese decided to personally challenge Joe Smitherman's twenty-year reign as mayor, an extension of Reese's decade-long campaign for equal representation for African Americans.¹⁰³ That year was also a presidential election year. While Republicans lined up again behind President Reagan, Jesse Jackson, a black minister with roots in SCLC, fought for the Democratic nomination against Walter Mondale. A veteran of the 1965 voting rights movement, Jackson prioritized Selma as one of his regular and repeat campaign stops. One week after F.D. Reese announced his candidacy, Jackson stumped through Selma on his second stop since the previous November. In front

¹⁰² Chuck Chandler, "Lawsuit seeks to halt Reed remap plan," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 12, 1983; Musgrove, *Rumor, Repression, and Racial Politics*, 149.

¹⁰³ Another of Reese's continuing battle for racial justice happened when Wal-Mart came to town. A few months after Wal-Mart arrived in Selma in February of 1982, the national chain settled into local practices of hiring white cashiers and black janitors. Reese, in partnership with the Black Leadership Council, organized picket lines outside of the store. "It's not that we want to close down stores in this tight economic situation we've got," Reese told the *Times-Journal*, "We need stores. We just want a fair policy." The protests motivated the company's vice-president of personnel to travel to Selma from the Arkansas headquarters to negotiate with the council. Good business practices in a majority black city helped company executives and black protestors reach an agreement within one week. F.D. Reese continued to stop by Wal-Mart afterwards to make sure he saw black faces behind the counters; "Group organizes against Wal-Mart," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 1, 1982; Janet Gresham, "Store, council agree," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 10, 1982; Faya Rose (Sanders) Toure, interview by author, August 17, 2013, Selma, Alabama; F.D. Reese, interview by author, Oct. 17, 2012, Selma, Alabama.

of a crowd at Selma University, Jackson “preached the gospel of voter registration and black voting power,” throwing his strong support behind Reese and the black candidate running for city council president. Like a Sunday offering, Jackson asked every non-registered person older than eighteen to come to the front of the hall and register with the waiting deputy registrar.¹⁰⁴ From the beginning, both the 1984 municipal and national elections promised to be racially-charged and contentious.

Jesse Jackson’s rallying of black voters provoked a backlash from a segment of the area’s white population. Less than a week after his speech, white council member Cecil Williamson kicked off Project SAVE (Selma Area Voter Enlistment), explicitly aimed at registering white voters. Williamson, a minister at Crescent Hill Presbyterian church, was a vocal supporter of white local control and conservative causes, and he held the support of many similarly-minded residents. “We are trying to do the same thing the blacks are trying to do,” he explained, “register all eligible voters.”¹⁰⁵ It was no accident, as historian James Cobb has shown, that white southerners’ enthusiasm for voting just happened to swell as the Voting Rights Act added more and more black names to the rolls.¹⁰⁶



Figure 33: Jesse Jackson with Attorney J.L. Chestnut during a 1984 campaign stop in Selma. Courtesy of the New York Times.

¹⁰⁴ Jackie Walburn, “Jackson ‘preaches’ voter registration,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 8, 1984.

¹⁰⁵ Williamson quoted in Janet Gresham, “Williamson heads up voter drive,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 12, 1984.

¹⁰⁶ Cobb, *The South and America since World War II*, 120 – 121.

In the midst of the fierce registration drive, the three-member Dallas County board of registrars voted, along racial lines, to rescind the appointments of ten deputy registrars, including veteran activists, Marie Foster and Perry Varner. The mayor, white state representatives, and two white registrars conveniently forgot to inform Edwin Moss, the sole black registrar, of the meeting where they made the decision. Both Moss and Hank Sanders accused the board of making a racially-motivated political move. Marie Foster, however, vowed that the change would not stop her; she would just go back to what she'd been doing for twenty-five years and bring people directly to the courthouse to register. As she saw it, "we were dismissed simply because we were registering too many blacks."¹⁰⁷

Local voter registration continued at a frenzied pace one month before the July 10 municipal election. Mayoral candidate F.D. Reese and Jesse Jackson, with the help of black activists, rounded up black voters, while Cecil Williamson and Project SAVE went door to door in the majority-white Wards 1, 2, and 3.¹⁰⁸ From January 1984, the rolls gained 918 new black and 827 new white voters for a total of 9,909 registered black voters and 11,963 white.¹⁰⁹ But black voter registration efforts failed to pay off. Joe Smitherman defeated F.D.

¹⁰⁷ Fraud charges were brought by conservative white state senator, Earl Goodwin. Such incidents became common during the Reagan administration as the Department of Justice partnered with local district attorneys and registrars to bring charges of fraud against black political organizations. In the Alabama Black Belt, this happened as African American voting activists became adept at using absentee voting in their favor, leading to the election of black majorities. During 1984, the Department of Justice brought numerous charges against black movement activists who helped secure majorities in certain western Black Belt counties. Historian George Musgrove argues that the federal prosecution of black voting rights activists in the Black Belt only helped to increase black registration and voting, as well as widening the credibility of local black political leaders; Janet Gresham, "Smitherman denies charges by Sanders," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 15, 1984; Musgrove, *Rumor, Repression, and Racial Politics*, 153 – 159; Foster quoted in "Marie Foster to continue to help," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 2, 1984.

¹⁰⁸ Jeanette Berryman, "Registration race gets 'frantic,'" *Selma Times-Journal*, June 13, 1984.

¹⁰⁹ Jeanette Berryman, "Rolls show whites have vote majority," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 21, 1984.

Reese in the mayoral race by some 2,500 votes.¹¹⁰ The problem, according to attorney J.L. Chestnut, was that only a little over half of eligible black voters had gone to the polls and cast their votes.¹¹¹

After the disappointing results of the municipal election, Jackie Walker, a black woman deeply involved in MOMs, decided to run for tax collector in 1984. J.L. Chestnut claimed she entered the race to ward off defeatism among black voters. With Hank Sanders as her campaign manager, Walker intentionally kept a low profile to avoid attention from white opponents. She met people in their homes and at rural churches on Sunday morning, stressing that the time had come to put a black person in the county courthouse. Much to the surprise of her challenger, Tommy Powell, she received enough votes to force a run-off election.¹¹² In September 1984, Jackie Walker became the first black woman elected to the courthouse by a margin of forty-eight votes.¹¹³ She credited MOMs and BBACC with helping her understand the needs of the community and wanting to serve on a larger scale. “As a female, I am particularly aware of the effects of public decisions on the total community,” she wrote, “Increased involvement by women in the community will be of benefit to all in many ways.”¹¹⁴ Walker, however, did not get to see her dreams through to fruition. The following February, she died after her car hit an icy patch of road and ran into a

¹¹⁰ Jeanette Berryman, “Smitherman wins, Reese vows support,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 11, 1984.

¹¹¹ J.L. Chestnut, Jr., “Had blacks ‘stooped,’ they would have won,” Perspective, *Selma Times-Journal*, July 15, 1984.

¹¹² Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 367 – 369.

¹¹³ Jean Martin, “Voters elect first black courthouse official in a century,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 26, 1984.

¹¹⁴ Jackie Walker, writing in “Perspective,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 30, 1984.

tree.¹¹⁵ The all-white county commission refused to follow tradition and appoint her husband, Nathaniel Walker, as tax collector in her place. Instead, they selected her white opponent, Tommy Powell, for the position.¹¹⁶

Walker's death only escalated black residents' resentment of the all-white county commission. Dallas County had spent thousands of tax dollars - much paid by black residents - in legal fees to maintain at-large elections and white control. After Powell's appointment, black citizens formed COPE, the Committee to Ouster Political Enemies, at a meeting at Brown Chapel. The next day, Rose Sanders, Dan Rutledge, Hank Sanders, Perry Varner, J.L. Chestnut, Jr., and Edwin Moss occupied the county commission chambers, registering their dissent and forcing commissioners to meet elsewhere.¹¹⁷ Black protest, however, failed to move the all-white commission.

The battle lines that had been drawn in the 1984 election became wider and deeper with each passing year. Joe Smitherman maneuvered to preserve his personal power, and in the process, became the upholder of white political power for people like Cecil Williamson. On the other side, stood Hank and Rose Sanders, proclaimed defenders of justice for African Americans. Rose Sanders' community organizations paired with the notorious black law firm, what Smitherman liked referring to as "the Jeff Davis crowd," to attack the vestiges of Jim Crow in the city. Meanwhile, a new statewide black political organization, the Alabama New South Coalition, coalesced out of the 1984 election. The Chestnut, Sanders,

¹¹⁵ Phillip Smith, "Friends hope Jackie Walker's legacy won't die," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 3, 1985.

¹¹⁶ Jean Martin, "Blacks meet on collector decision," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 12, 1985.

¹¹⁷ Emily Bentley, "Black eye seats on commission," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 13, 1985; Jean Martin, "Group takes over county board seats," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 14, 1985.

and Sanders law firm stood at its helm as it sowed the seeds of a more expansive, sustained black political activism.¹¹⁸

Black Majorities, Local Government, and the Justice Department

Almost two decades after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, black residents were fed up. None of the county's most important governing bodies - the Selma City Council, the Dallas County Commission as well as the city and county school boards - had a black majority. Part of this was because of at-large election districts that diluted the local black majority and part of it was because of low black voter turnout. A pattern of boundary haggling, racial division, lawsuits, and federal intervention repeated itself incessantly. It went something like this. White city council members would pass a redistricting plan that preserved the council's white majority over the objections of black council members and citizens. The Justice Department would subsequently reject the plan. When council members failed to come up with a racially-fair alternative, U.S. District Judge Brevard Hand in Mobile would intervene. After redrawing the district lines himself, Judge Hand would threaten that

¹¹⁸ The Alabama Democratic Conference had emerged in the early 1960s as the major political organization of black Alabamians, offering its support and endorsement to black candidates across the state. When the ADC and its officious chairman Joe Reed chose to endorse Walter Mondale instead of Jesse Jackson in 1984, however, many of its members revolted. Out of the resulting split grew the Alabama New South Coalition (ANSC). Its strongest supporters in the Black Belt had first united around Hank Sanders and his 1982 "Campaign for a New South." Then in 1985, after a year of vigorous grassroots organizing, sixty people gathered in Selma to debate the start of a new organization. The New South Coalition was officially born in January 1986, when 1200 black delegates - including Dallas County's Samson Crum, Marie Foster, Perry Varner, Margaret Hardy, and F.D. Reese - organized at a statewide convention in Birmingham. They formed what Mobile Democrat Michael Figures described as a black organization "that was interested in economic development, the youth, education, not just politics." Figures, J.L. Chestnut, Hank and Rose Sanders, and Birmingham mayor, Richard Arrington spearheaded the ANSC's work. In addition to political mobilization, the organization's early efforts included defending voting rights activists against the federal government's allegations of fraud and raising legal defense funds, but later the ANSC would become a major force in Alabama, with the motto, "Making a change for the better in our lifetime;" Janet Gresham, "Jackson Blackbelt's Choice?" *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 14, 1983; Jack Walburn, "Hayden fears coalition will have divisive effect," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 26, 1986; Michael Figures quoted in Allen Tullos, *Alabama Getaway: the Political Imaginary and the Heart of Dixie* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 204 - 208; "History of ANSC," <http://alnewsouthcoalition.org/history/>. (accessed October 22, 2013).

the city council had better come up with new lines by the next election or else. In 1984, he actually cut the council's ten members to five and gave the swing ward a slight black majority as a symbol of his annoyance. Even Mayor Smitherman admitted, "I guess the judge got tired of having to do the city of Selma's work."¹¹⁹

Depending on the circumstances of the particular battle, the Chestnut and Sanders law firm would take legal action against the local governing body on behalf of black citizens. In 1977, for example, J.L. Chestnut and Hank Sanders filed a lawsuit challenging the entirely-white Dallas County Commission and school board as well as the constitutionality of at-large elections. For the next eleven years, disagreements sent the suit volleying back and forth from the county commission to Judge Brevard Hand's court to the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals, and eventually all the way to the Supreme Court.¹²⁰ All the while, the white majority continued ruling the county, either unaware or unconcerned that the frustrations of

¹¹⁹U.S. District Judge Brevard Hand had drawn Selma's ward lines after racial grievances threatened to derail the entire 1980 election, but he instructed city officials to agree on a new district plan before 1984. In January of 1983, black and white council members stood in a standoff. The four African American members refused to support a city ward realignment plan that gave three out of five districts majority white populations. White council members, meanwhile, rejected an alternative plan that established the third ward as a fifty-fifty black-white swing ward, even though Selma's population was 52.4% black. The council's white majority sent their plan on to the Justice Department, wholly ignoring African American objections. In response, the Justice Department rejected the proposed ward lines. Finally in 1988, for the first time in its integrated history, the city council jointly drew up a redistricting plan. It proposed eight-single member districts - four with black and four with white majorities - with the mayor and the city council president selected at-large. In June, the Justice Department gave its official approval; five days after Joe Smitherman threatened to hold a city election with or without their go ahead; Jeanette Berryman, "Decision stuns city officials," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 18, 1984; Janet Gresham, "Racially split vote okays ward lines," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 11, 1983; Selma City Council Minutes, Jan. 10, 1983, Apr. 23, 1984, Selma City Hall, Selma, Alabama; Pam Hartley, "New districts pass muster," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 9, 1988; Pam Hartley, "Mayor calls August election," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 23, 1988; Pam Hartley, "Council plan approved," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 28, 1988; Jeanette Berryman, "Decision stuns city officials," *Selma Time-Journal*, May 18, 1984; Low black turnout caused African Americans to claim only two of five council seats - six including council president - in the 1984 election, reducing their representation from the previous term's five out of eleven seats; Jeanette Berryman, "Blacks reassess," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 1, 1984.

¹²⁰ Chestnut and Cass, *Black in Selma*, 409.

their black neighbors were inching closer and closer to a boiling point.¹²¹ When asked, thirty years later, about whether white political leaders would have willingly increased black representation on the council, F.D. Reese laughed, stating “It would be very unlikely that it would have happened even as soon as it did without federal intervention.”¹²² Increasing black representation on the city council required pressure by black council members, the backing of their constituents, as well as support of the Justice Department.

The fight against the all-white county commission appeared to be over in 1986 when Judge Brevard Hand ordered Dallas County to institute district-based elections.¹²³ The all-white commission however, fought for its survival to the very last breath. Local intransigence, judicial appeals, and Justice Department rejections governed the next two years. Meanwhile, tax dollars paid by black residents went to pay the county government’s mounting legal costs. Ignoring loud protests, the commissioners pursued their appeal all the way up to the United States Supreme Court. But their efforts failed. In 1988, Dallas County received orders to hold elections under a Justice Department plan calling for two black-majority districts, two white-majority districts, and one-swing district.¹²⁴ The white commissioners’ costly and selfish fight only further exacerbated the existing distrust between Dallas County’s black and white residents and belied any remnants of good faith.

¹²¹ The commissioners’ decision to appoint prominent white landowner, James Wilkinson, to fill a vacancy in the midst of the lawsuit controversy suggested that they were more unconcerned about black protests than unaware; *Selma Times-Journal*, March 20 1987.

¹²² F.D. Reese, interview by author, Oct. 17, 2012, Selma, Alabama.

¹²³ Jackie Walburn, “Political leaders predict district judgment should put 2 – 3 blacks on board,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 2, 1986.

¹²⁴ Johanna Rice, “Court slaps down Hand plan,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 14, 1988.



Figure 34: The swearing in ceremony of Dallas County's first integrated county commission in 1989. From left to right, D.L. Pope, Douglas Morrow, Perry Varner, Deans Barber, and Erskine Minor. Judge Oscar Adams officiating. Courtesy of Old Depot Museum.

Twenty-three years after the voting rights movement, black residents in Dallas County finally secured a majority on a local governing body. African Americans successfully elected black representatives to three of five county commission seats in 1988 after a decade of litigation.¹²⁵ The new black-majority commission, however, assumed power after ten years of industrial decline and federal abandonment. Craig Air Force Base's closing in 1977 and the massive loss of funding that accompanied it marked the beginning of an era of economic decline for Dallas County. The federal government's retraction left only a shrinking agricultural base and labor-intensive manufacturing sector on which to rely. Preserving the

¹²⁵ Rick Vest, "Blacks, whites vow to govern together," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 28, 1988.

economic, political, and racial status quo had been central to the way in which white civic leaders had enticed industry to Dallas County since World War II. But as an increasingly globalized, high-skilled economy emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s, the anti-union, cheap labor, tax incentive-based industrial recruitment policy left the Alabama Black Belt at a disadvantage. When its labor intensive industries began relocating to developing countries and bypassing the South altogether, the rural Black Belt faced crippling unemployment, crumbling public infrastructures. Meanwhile, the urban centers of the Sunbelt south flourished with an inpouring of high-tech industries, new residents, and federal investment in transportation, schools, and industry.

Ronald Reagan's dismantling of federal social programs and funding cuts throughout the 1980s exacerbated the pressing problems Dallas County was already facing. Unemployment skyrocketed while reductions in welfare and social programs hit already struggling poor and working-class citizens hard. In the economically and racially-stratified Black Belt, Reagan's cuts fell disproportionately on black families. Black citizens, in the face of disappearing assistance, turned to resources available within their communities to continue pushing for more political representation and better education and employment opportunities. Facing white political leaders adept at using tokenism and other methods of strategic accommodation to maintain control, black activists turned to federal courts to help secure equitable representation. By the end of the 1980s, however, both black and white political and business leaders, as well as citizens, confronted a new landscape of economic depression and deep poverty with fewer resources with which to create solutions.

INTERLUDE 8: SUPERINTENDENT NORWARD ROUSSELL AND SCHOOL LEVELING

In 1987, the Selma Board of Education unanimously voted to hire Norward Rousell, a black associate superintendent from the New Orleans school district, to fill the vacancy left when Superintendent Martha Barton resigned. Their decision made Rousell the first African American to ever head the integrated city school system.¹ Not all of Selma's black residents had faith that his hiring marked the beginning of new day for African American students. White officials had a dismal track record of willingly transferring authority to African Americans, so why would a white-majority school board hire a black man as superintendent, some thought. As J.L. Chestnut saw it, Rousell's arrival boiled down to white administrators looking for "a black superintendent to hide behind."²

When Norward Rousell arrived in Selma, however, he quickly made clear that he was nobody's man except his own. Impeccably dressed, dignified, and composed, Rousell avoided aligning himself too closely with either the white business and political elite or the crusades of the Chestnut and Sanders law firm. He became the first black member of the Rotary Club, Selma's most prestigious civic association, but he quickly bowed out when rumors spread that he was being considered for membership at the whites-only Selma Country Club. Rousell stressed to local reporters that he did not come to Selma "to claw

¹ Susan Hurst Rountree, "School superintendent hired," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 27, 1987.

² Gay Talese, *A Writer's Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 201.

down racial barriers.”³ While carefully navigating the city’s landmine-laden social terrain, Roussell got down to the business of upgrading the education of the 5,948 children in his care.⁴

The school system’s practice of grouping students by ability had drawn criticism from black parents and activists long before Roussell arrived.⁵ The tiered curriculum system began in the 1970 – 1971 academic year, the first year of federal court-enforced school desegregation. At the time, school officials cited the “recent forces and alterations which are taking place and changing the way of life in our society” as the impetus for the new curriculum practices. In theory, classroom performance, achievement and intelligence scores, and teacher recommendations were used to group students in an appropriate level, ranging from honors to remedial. In practice, however, there was no uniform, district-wide criteria for student placement, and teacher recommendations dictated who was placed in which level. This led to a form of racial segregation within schools as white children were overwhelmingly placed in higher levels and black children in lower. Before the 1981 – 1982 school year began, Selma High School librarian Nancy Sewell expressed her concern to the board of education over the fact that black students made up ninety-five percent of students in the bottom two levels.⁶

³ Talese, *A Writer’s Life*, 202 – 203.

⁴ Alabama Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Crisis and Opportunity: Race Relations in Selma*, December 1991, Table 3.1, p 18.

⁵ Bertram de Souza, “LDF airs list of grievances,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 25, 1975; Janet Gresham, “Honor promises, blacks ask board,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 14, 1981.

⁶ When tracking was first instituted in Selma City Schools, students were divided into four levels. Sometime in the 1980s, level four (the lowest level) was eliminated; Alabama Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Crisis and Opportunity: Race Relations in Selma*, December 1991, 33 – 34; Janet Gresham, “Honor Promises, Blacks ask Board,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 14, 1981.

A 1991 study by the Civil Rights Commission found a serious gap between how white and black residents perceived the leveling problem. White residents strongly believed that ability levels enhanced learning and student achievement at all levels, while black residents typically saw the system as a means of preventing black students from taking more challenging, college preparatory classes.⁷ Many black parents had experienced, first hand, their children being placed in lower levels. Nancy Sewell and her husband Andrew, an athletic coach, encountered tracking when their daughter, Terri, was placed in a lower level at Cedar Park Elementary. School administrators refused to promote her to the next level, so Mrs. Sewell waited until Terri entered Westside Middle School and met with the counselors there to ensure she was enrolled in more difficult courses. Likewise, Rose Sanders only found out that her daughter had been placed in a lower level when Malika's teacher mentioned it in passing at another meeting. "I didn't know that they were leveling children in elementary school," Sanders exclaimed later. According to Sewell, while black middle class parents insisted that their children be placed in higher levels, but lower-class parents working in factory jobs did not or could not do the same.⁸

In 1987, a group of black parents and residents organized the Best Education Support Team (BEST) aimed at dismantling "an institutionalized racial tracking system." BEST, with Rose Sanders at the helm, petitioned Superintendent Roussell to eliminate the

⁷ Alabama Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Crisis and Opportunity: Race Relations in Selma*, December 1991, 33 – 34.

⁸ Terri Sewell later went on to become valedictorian of Selma High before attending Princeton University. She then received a M.A. at Oxford University and a law degree from Harvard University. In 2011, she was elected as the Alabama 7th Congressional Districts representative to the U.S. House of Representatives. Nancy Sewell, interview by author, December 6, 2012, Selma, Alabama; Faya Rose (Sanders) Toure, interview by author, August 17, 2013, Selma, Alabama

inequities at work in leveling within the Selma city schools.⁹ But during his first year, Roussell sidestepped the school level issue and instead focused on enhancing the math, science, and technology curriculum.¹⁰ He received a \$1.2 million federal grant that helped install new computer labs and earned him high praise all around.¹¹

It was not until the 1988 – 1989 academic year that the superintendent, at BEST’s prodding, undertook an extensive review of the leveling system. “He did his research. He wouldn’t just take our word,” Sanders remembered and “he came back and said y’all are right.” Roussell confirmed allegations that teacher judgment factored heavily into student placement and revealed that the test scores and grade point averages of a number of level II (General Studies) and III (Essential Studies) students were equal or better than those students in level I (Honors). Additionally, advanced courses like algebra, biology, calculus, chemistry, and foreign language courses were only available to level I students and carried extra academic credit. Roussell concluded that leveling, as practiced by the district, had created “two school systems in one.”¹² In the spring of 1988, Roussell called a series of community meetings.¹³ At a three-hour meeting at Eastside Middle School attended by two hundred people, Roussell called for the development of a uniform criteria to place students.

⁹ Alabama Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Crisis and Opportunity: Race Relations in Selma*, December 1991, 32 – 33.

¹⁰ Nancy Sewell, interview by author, December 6, 2012, Selma, Alabama.

¹¹ Talese, *A Writer’s Life*, 205.

¹² Faya Rose (Sanders) Toure, interview by author, August 17, 2013, Selma, Alabama; Alabama Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Crisis and Opportunity: Race Relations in Selma*, December 1991, 35.

¹³ Pam Hartley, “School leveling under scrutiny,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 24, 1988.

“I think parents and children have a right to know,” he declared, “if they are placed in the highest or the lowest level, why they were placed there.”¹⁴

The superintendent’s intervention in school grouping policy generated rumblings of discontent from some white residents and officials. Roussell’s independent and domineering management style had already rubbed some citizens the wrong way, and his involvement in leveling only fanned the flames. With criticism flying in May 1988, the *Times-Journal* published an editorial demanding that the city school board either “back him ... or boot him.”¹⁵ Meanwhile, the superintendent insisted that the messy battleground of local politics was the real problem, not him. “What Selma has to come to grips with is not Norward Roussell as its superintendent of schools,” he wrote, “but whether, the education of its children is important enough to put it above personalities and politics. That’s the ultimate question for this whole community.”¹⁶ Over the next week, both the Selma city school board and a group of 75 black educators, church people, and business leaders publically affirmed their support for Roussell. Local dentist Sullivan Jackson expressed his concern “at the uncalled for unilateral criticism of Dr. Roussell, which amounts to almost a lynching.”¹⁷ Roussell’s temporary redemption, however, left continuing debates over tracking unresolved.

The ongoing struggles over black and white political power undergirded the leveling controversy. Black residents’ frustration with the white-majority school board (appointed by

¹⁴ Roussell quoted in Pam Hartley, “Parents respond to level changes,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 8, 1988.

¹⁵ “Back him ... or boot him,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 20, 1988; Talese, *A Writer’s Life*, 205.

¹⁶ Letter to editor from Norward Roussell, *Selma Times-Journal*, May 22, 1988.

¹⁷ Pam Hartley and Jean Martin, “School Board Backs Roussell,” Jean Martin, “Group rallies around Roussell,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 29, 1988.

a white-majority city council and governing a black-majority school district) had grown more acute with each passing year. In the 1987 – 1988 year, black enrollment in the Selma school system surpassed white enrollment by two to one ratio (4,150 to 1,798).¹⁸ While African Americans pushed for a louder political voice, Carl Morgan, the white city council president, defended the status quo. Because Selma’s economic base was still vested in white people, he explained, whites were justified in holding a greater proportion of representation on the school board. Keeping this balance would, in his estimation, prevent white flight to private schools.¹⁹ A group of moderate white parents had refused to place their children in area private schools after court ordered desegregation, and many white school board members saw maintaining white involvement - not equalizing student grouping - as their main priority.²⁰

The 1988 – 1989 academic year reignited the leveling debate. BEST representative, Rose Sanders, indicated that the group would be willing to accept the leveling system proposed by Roussell, incorporating uniform standards and parent participation.²¹ A three-tiered student grouping system was introduced to the Selma school board in October. That January, the board voted 5-4 in favor of the plan. Four white members cast dissenting votes,

¹⁸ Alabama Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Crisis and Opportunity: Race Relations in Selma*, December 1991, Table 3.1, p 18.

¹⁹ Alabama Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Crisis and Opportunity: Race Relations in Selma*, December 1991, 14 -16.

²⁰ J.L. Chestnut, “Papering over the problem,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 18, 1988; Alabama Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Crisis and Opportunity: Race Relations in Selma*, December 1991, 4.

²¹ Rick Vest, “Parents meet to challenge leveling,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 14, 1988.

citing the lower requirements for honors courses as their primary reason.²² The tempered truce over leveling, however, did not last for long. One month later, the school board's five white members raised the standards for honors courses over the objection of the four black members.²³ When they then raised the grade points awarded for more advanced classes, Rose Sanders protested, calling the practice a "double standard" and a type of "hypocrisy."²⁴

Racial tensions grew over the spring and summer of 1989 with the Selma school disputes at the heart of the matter. Fights between black and white students broke out inside and outside of Selma High in May after carloads of whites flew a Confederate flags at the local Sonic Drive-In and near the high school.²⁵ The superintendent blamed the incidents on Selma's adults: "If we express attitudes of racial intolerance, our children will do the same."²⁶ The recent controversy regarding varying grade points came to a head when a white student was named valedictorian of Selma High School over popular black student, Kwambi Dover; Dover only lost because the white student had received higher points for honors debate than Dover had received for taking honors band.²⁷ Reliable black moderate and council member Edwin Moss probed at the deeper cause of unfolding tensions, again raising the question at a city council meeting of why blacks could never hold a majority on any city board.²⁸ In July,

²² The lack of definition for advanced placement and honors courses was another of their concerns; Pam Hartley, "3-tiered leveling proposed," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 14, 1988; Pam Hartley, "Schools pass 3-tiered plan," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 13, 1989.

²³ Pam Hartley, "City BOE stiffens honors standards," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 10, 1989.

²⁴ Pam Hartley, "Selma school leveling policy attacked," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 16, 1989.

²⁵ Pam Hartley, "Heightened tension at Selma High," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 3, 1989.

²⁶ Norward Roussell, "Passing on adult problems," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 4, 1989.

²⁷ Letter to the editor from Rufus Lee Ford, Selma High Student, "*Selma Times-Journal*, June 1, 1989.

²⁸ Letter to the editor from Edwin Moss, *Selma Times-Journal*, June 22, 1989.

the tensions simmering among Selma's residents settled on Superintendent Norward Roussell. At a board meeting, white school board members voted to fire him, which they only rescinded when one black board member threatened to resign and another threatened to call a press conference.²⁹ By the time the 1989 – 1990 school year began in August, visible battle lines had been etched between Selma's white and black citizens.

²⁹ J.L. Chestnut Jr., "Whispers and Rumors," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 23, 1989.

CHAPTER 8: TWO SELMA'S: SCHOOL TRACKING, BLACK POLITICAL POWER, AND HISTORICAL MEMORY, 1989 – 2000

At the start of each term, the newly elected city council posed in the council chambers to take an official picture. In the twenty-five years since the voting rights movement, those photos reflected some of the changes that had taken place in Dallas County. People like F.D. Reese, who had once been demanding fair treatment as a civil rights protestor, stood tall in numerous photos, having helped make Selma a more equitable city from within. The black city department heads, policemen, and superintendent highlighted how the vote had made African Americans an integral part of running of the city. But the African American spiritual, “There is a Balm in Gilead,” had promised a salve that would make the wounded whole, a solution that would make white supremacy’s decades of injustice right. Those who had marched in Selma in 1965 had hoped that the vote would be their balm, but three decades later, it was clear it wasn’t so.

All was not well in Dallas County in the last decade of the century. Racial tensions ran high against a backdrop of widespread poverty, a sagging local economy, and bitter political divisions between the increasingly desperate mayor and those associated with the Chestnut, Sanders, and Sanders law firm. When white members of the school board made a major decision over the objections of black members, the floodgates opened. The nineties began with massive protests, boycotts, and lawsuits led by attorney Rose Sanders and supported by black residents who were fed up with alleged tracking in the schools and the racial make-up of the city school board. The school tracking protests coincided with the 25th

anniversary of Bloody Sunday, putting Selma, once more, into the media spotlight. When the dust had settled, most white children had transferred into private academies, leaving Selma's public schools with more racial segregation than educational justice.

The school protests reflected a longstanding bitterness in Selma. At the heart of these divisions was the limited effect the civil rights movements had in easing poverty in the black community and transferring meaningful political power to African Americans.¹ The city council finally seated its first black majority in 1993 after another round of brokering between black and white residents and the U.S. Justice Department. But when black council members assumed the reins of city government, they inherited problems far beyond the scope of local municipal authority. Crack cocaine had arrived in Dallas County, decimating already struggling poor neighborhood. Still living in the shadow of the Sunbelt, Dallas County's economy, staggered with a smattering of industries and government transfer payments. As the federal government continued its policy of benign neglect for the country's poorest residents and regions, black Dallas County residents turned inwards again.

Historical memory became a new political battleground as groups of white and black citizens fought for control of local government. The city's new motto, "From Civil War to Civil Rights," played out more like civil war versus civil rights. After decades of resistance by the city's white business and political leaders, movement veterans and Rose Sanders opened the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute to honor the past while mobilizing in the present. All the while, Mayor Smitherman and his backers fueled increasingly desperate

¹ Alabama Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, "Crisis and Opportunity: Race Relations in Selma," December 1991, 3.

attempts to maintain his personal power and white political control, further exacerbating the anger of black residents. The coalition of black citizens associated with the Chestnut and Sanders law firm mounted a political challenge that grew in strength throughout the nineties. Politics, however, could not magically fix segregated schools, drugs, too few, inadequate jobs, and a state and federal government uninterested in pursuing policies aimed at economic justice for all residents.

Selma School Crisis

In the fall of 1989, movement veterans, as well as white civic leaders, turned their sights towards the approaching 25th anniversary of Bloody Sunday. Both groups, although in different ways, hoped that the commemoration would bring good things to Selma. The unforgettable images of billy clubs and tear gas on the Edmund Pettus Bridge had plagued white residents since 1965, and they were eager to demonstrate their southern hospitality and the city's friendly business climate to the world. Mayor Smitherman, the Chamber of Commerce, and other community representatives hoped to organize a cooperative commemoration that brought different factions together. Barely concealing his self-interest in a joint black and white celebration, the mayor explained to the *Times-Journal* that a better image could make the city more attractive to industry and tourists and thus benefit the local economy.² "We could get \$50 million in free publicity," he later told the Chamber of

² Michele Savage, "Leaders talk as anniversary nears," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 19, 1989.

Commerce. Rev. F.D. Reese, movement veteran and longtime supporter of interracial efforts, agreed to co-chair the city-sponsored committee with white banker, Rex Morthland.³

But others in the black community spurned the attempts of white civic leaders to use the commemoration for economic gain, especially while the city school situation simmered. Cooperation might have been preferable, but “if there is not some honest effort to resolve the many volatile issues surrounding the school board,” J.L. Chestnut stated, “I’m afraid a racially cooperative effort may not be possible.”⁴ In a press conference, black leaders connected with the Chestnut and Sanders law firm warned that the city was heading towards two different commemoration events, one black and one white. “We are not going to stand back and let some people make some money off of it,” Perry Varner, one of the three black members on the first integrated county commission, declared, “If Dr. King had anything to resent in the world, it would be someone capitalizing economically from the march.”⁵ One month later, F.D. Reese resigned from the city’s organization to join the National Right to Vote committee made up of national civil rights groups and local activists.⁶ After the black-led group hosted a three hundred strong organizational meeting at First Baptist Church, the city’s organization withdrew in the name of community harmony.⁷

Rising anger with the city school board during the fall of 1989 made peace even more unlikely between black and white Selma citizens. Edwin Moss, the reliably moderate

³ “Right men for the job,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 21, 1989.

⁴ J.L. Chestnut quoted in Michele Savage, “Leaders talk as anniversary nears,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 19, 1989.

⁵ Perry Varner quoted in Jeff Stumb, “Some blacks predict dual celebrations,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 22, 1989.

⁶ Patricia Cavanaugh, “Reese resigns local march post,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 24, 1989.

⁷ Jeff Stumb, “Celebration group ‘off and running,’” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 10, 1989; Michele Savage, “City-backed committee disbands,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 19, 1989.

black businessman and council member, repeatedly appealed to his colleagues on the council to address the longstanding racial imbalance on the board of education (BOE). “You all know I’m no rabble-rouser.” Moss stated at a council meeting, “Seldom do I put issues in terms of white and black, but the feeling among blacks is that the board of education situation where we have a white majority is unfair and has been for years.” He warned that the issues with the school board and the pending contract renewal of Superintendent Roussell could lead to boycotts and protests among African Americans.⁸ But the plans that Moss put forward to equalize black and white representation over the next month received no action from white council members. Mayor Smitherman inserted himself into the controversy when he appealed to the white school board president, Carl Barker, to indefinitely postpone his pending resignation. When Moss urged Barker to resign in favor of racial balance and goodwill, Smitherman publicly rebuked the councilman and accused him of being influenced by outside black activists and attorneys who “seek to control the superintendent, the school, the city council, and everything else in Selma.”⁹

Superintendent Norward Roussell’s three-year contract was set to expire in June of 1990, and its terms mandated that school board give him six months’ notice regarding their contract renewal decision. The superintendent’s strong personality had rubbed numerous black and white Selma residents the wrong way, and his revamping of the leveling system had especially alarmed white citizens. Tensions ran high in the days leading up to the school

⁸ Michele Savage, “White majority on city BOE questioned,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 12, 1989.

⁹ Michele Savage, “Moss asks for Barker’s resignation,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 24, 1989; “Mayor replies to Moss’ letter,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 1, 1989; Joe Smitherman quoted in Patricia Cavanaugh, “Council to meet with BOE,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 3, 1989.

board's decision with letters to the editor filling the *Times-Journal* urging support for Roussell.¹⁰ The renewal vote took place at the Selma City Board of Education meeting on a late-December afternoon, four days before Christmas; over the opposition of black board members, the white majority decided to not renew Roussell's contract in a 6-5 racially-split decision. Dr. Charles Lett led the subsequent resignation and walkout of all five black members; each paused to make clear their actions were a protest against the failure to renew the superintendent's contract.¹¹ The school board's decision brought an end to any illusions of racial harmony in Selma. The next day black protesters braved below-zero wind chill temperatures to form picket lines in front of city hall and two downtown banks connected with white school board members. They sported signs reading "Smitherman appointed school board must go," and "Education without representation means deprivation."¹²

The Best Education Support Team (BEST) quickly assumed leadership of the protests, giving shape to black residents' outrage. The group, headed by Rose Sanders, commissioner Perry Varner, and others, called for parents to keep their children out of Selma schools until the city met a list of demands. These included an elected board of education, the resignation of the "six elitist school board members" and reinstatement of five members "representing the people," the employment of more black teachers, a prohibition of parents with children in private academies from serving on the school board, and a safety clause for those who chose to participate in the school boycott. Noticeably

¹⁰ Letter to Editor from Rose Sanders, *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 7, 1989; Letter to editor from Martha and David Hodo, *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 13, 1989.

¹¹ Michele Savage, "Roussell's contract not renewed," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 22, 1989.

¹² Michele Savage, "Roussell firing brings pickets," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 24, 1989.

absent from BEST's list of demands was the reinstatement of Superintendent Roussell or any reference to recent leveling debates. Although Roussell believed that race and politics, not his performance, prompted the BOE's non-renewal decision, he opposed the BEST-supported boycott.¹³ "Student and staff absenteeism do not show concern for me or for the education of our students," he wrote in a public appeal for children to stay in school. Stressing that the absentee policy remained in effect, Roussell argued that "students must not have to give up a year of their effort to move on in school in order to solve adult problems in this community."¹⁴ Regardless of Roussell's appeal, almost a quarter of the Selma's school children - 1,400 students - failed to report for school on the first day back from winter break in January.¹⁵ After two days of high absentee rates, BEST announced it was postponing additional boycotts so that students could prepare for their mid-year exams.¹⁶

A majority of the students boycotting classes were black, but the controversy did not divide neatly along racial lines. A devoted group of white moderates in Selma supported the public school system and refused to send their children to the area's private, all-white academies. In fact, a battle of bumper stickers played out among white Selma parents: city school supporters sported stickers reading "MY HEART IS IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND SO ARE MY CHILDREN," while the cars of Morgan Academy parents proclaimed

¹³ Other BEST organizers included Ronald Peoples and Alice Boynton; Michele Savage, "Group urges class boycott," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 28, 1989.

¹⁴ Norward Roussell, "An appeal for our children to stay in school," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 31, 1989.

¹⁵ Michele Savage, "On boycott's first day, 1,400 absent," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 4, 1990.

¹⁶ Patricia Stumb, "School boycott suspended," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 5, 1990.

“MY CHILDREN ARE IN MY HEART, AND THEY ATTEND MORGAN ACADEMY.”¹⁷ While many white supporters of the public schools opposed the student boycotts, they also disapproved of the school board’s intransigence and refusal to negotiate.¹⁸ Behind the scenes, people like white attorney Harry Gamble, Jr. (grandson to the Rev. E. W. Gamble), black librarian Nancy Sewell, and other community members, attempted to persuade the school board to renew Roussell’s contract.¹⁹

But the school board’s decision and BEST’s vocal reaction only solidified Selma’s already existing factions. When Mayor Joe Smitherman allegedly referred to Roussell as an “overpaid nigger” to a *Newsweek* photographer, he fanned the anger of black residents. 123 of the school system’s 368 employees (33%) and 2,209 students (37%) did not show up for work or school on BEST’s next boycott on January 17.²⁰ Nancy Sewell recalled that the more that average black and white citizens got involved, the harder the positions of the white school board members became.²¹ Negotiations stalemated when white board members refused to accept any proposal without their black colleagues who had walked out in December. Meanwhile, black members refused to negotiate until white members agreed to

¹⁷ Peter Applebombe, *Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1996).

¹⁸ Letter to the editor from Martha J. Hodo, *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 4, 1990.

¹⁹ Nancy Sewell, interview by author, December 6, 2012, Selma, Alabama.

²⁰ Michele Savage, “Roussell: Report of slur could spark tension,” Michele Savage, “Boycott cut to one day,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 16, 1990; Patricia Stubbs, “Students’ feelings on boycott mixed,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 18, 1990.

²¹ Nancy Sewell, interview by author, December 6, 2012, Selma, Alabama.

extend Roussell's contract.²² Twenty years later, Sewell remembered, "I didn't expect the majority white school board to dig in and take the stance they took and not yield."²³

On February 2, the six white BOE members voted to relieve Roussell immediately of his duties as superintendent in hopes of restoring the "peace and tranquility" in the city schools.²⁴ They appointed teacher F.D. Reese as acting superintendent. Black protestors vehemently disapproved of Reese's intrusion into the situation, and boos echoed through the sanctuary at First Baptist Church on Sunday, February 4 when he attempted to address a mass meeting.²⁵ The following day, Rose Sanders, Perry Varner, and Attorney Carlos Williams of BEST attempted to force their way into Mayor Joe Smitherman's office, after waiting for hours to meet with him. Police officers arrested the three and bodily dragged them out of the building.²⁶ All remnants of order broke down the next day. The air crackled with tension Tuesday morning as students arrived at Eastside and Westside Middle Schools and Selma High School. In consultation with the school board president and the mayor, Reese ordered Eastside Middle and Selma High closed by 9:30 a.m. Westside Middle School remained in session, but a throng of singing and chanting protesters stampeded through the hallways later that morning and brought concerned parents out in mass to pick up their children. Facing concentrated disapproval, Reese tendered his resignation, and the school board then reinstated Superintendent Roussell in a desperate attempt to alleviate the

²² Michele Savage, "Roussell outvoted on school closing," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 25, 1990.

²³ Nancy Sewell, interview by author, December 6, 2012, Selma, Alabama.

²⁴ Michele Savage, "BOE ousts Roussell early," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 4, 1990.

²⁵ Andrew Williford, "Group calls for boycott," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 5, 1990.

²⁶ Michele Savage, "Sanders, Varner, two more arrested in City Hall melee," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 6, 1990.

mayhem. That afternoon the white members of the Selma BOE unanimously voted to close city schools the next day.²⁷

The schools did not open again for the next five school days. Over 1,600 black residents flooded Selma's streets on Saturday and Sunday in protest marches to city hall. BEST organizer Connie Tucker told one reporter that Roussell's revamping of the school leveling system had led to his firing. This was one of the first explicit ties BEST representatives had drawn between the current protests and school tracking. "Why should our children attend schools under the laws of Jim Crow in an era of integration. We are tired of living in the era of Plessy vs. Ferguson," Tucker exclaimed. At Selma High School, nearly two hundred students seized the school's cafeteria on Thursday afternoon in a protest sit-in. They kept up their vigil until the next Monday when Superintendent Roussell requested that they cease and desist, explaining that he would rather resign than be forced to expel them.²⁸ Meanwhile, a small group of BEST protesters continued their occupation of city hall when a federal judge denied a city-requested temporary restraining order.²⁹

On Tuesday morning, the eleven city schools reopened under the watchful presence of local police, state troopers, and national guardsmen. A crowd of BEST protesters gathered on the edges of the circle of law enforcement officers surrounding Selma High's entrance. Over the past week, the white-majority BOE had made no concessions to protester's demands, but Rose Sanders claimed success in garnering national media attention.

²⁷ Michele Savage, "Reese resigns, Roussell back in," Michele Savage, "City Schools close," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 7, 1990.

²⁸ Connie Tucker quoted in Leonard Esau Colvin, "Selma, Ala. In uproar over school controversy," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, Feb. 14, 1990; ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

²⁹ Michele Savage, "Schools open, court order denied," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 13, 1990.

“Our overall purpose is to educate the people about this tracking issue,” she told one reporter. Despite protests, 77 percent of the district’s students returned to classes.³⁰ That number grew to 92 percent on Wednesday, but apprehension filled the hallways of the middle and high schools. At Selma High, Roussell suspended 87 students after they ran through the cafeteria chanting “ain’t gonna take it no more.”³¹ When the dust began to settle, 278 students, nearly all of them white, had withdrawn from the city’s public schools.³²

The events of January and February 1990 deepened already raw divisions between Selma residents. While BEST members continued protests and their occupation of city hall, a group of white parents formed PEST, the Public Education Support Team. Both organizations held common ground in supporting public education, but PEST defended the actions of the Selma school board and affirmed “that our elected officials by law have the right and authority to govern and carry out their specific duties, and that any unlawful interference should not be tolerated.”³³ BEST and PEST unleashed a torrent of verbal jabs at each other and helped keep rancor high.³⁴ Meanwhile, a flurry of lawsuits and injunctions flew between the City of Selma, the BOE, and BEST protesters. Roussell added to the legal flood when he sued the city BOE for ten million dollars, charging that the nonrenewal of his

³⁰ Rose Sanders quoted in Laura Parker, “Selma’s Schools Reopen Following Racial Dispute,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 14, 1990, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

³¹ Michele Savage, “Trouble spurs 87 suspensions,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 15, 1990.

³² Michele Savage, “Judge won’t intervene in BOE dispute,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 21, 1990.

³³ “Join in Support of Public Education Support Team,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 18, 1990.

³⁴ Michele Savage, “BEST spars with PEST,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 25, 1990; Michele Savage, “BOE draws another crowd,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 16, 1990.

contract was racially-motivated.³⁵ By March, a Circuit Court Judge from Lauderdale County was brought in to mediate and “strong-arm” all sides into an agreement.³⁶ A group of devoted BEST members, however, refused to halt their ongoing protests, ranging from pickets to occupation to tents on the outside lawn at city hall.³⁷ Without their participation, settlement attempts remained unsuccessful.³⁸

Against the backdrop of the school crisis, Selma and the nation observed the 25th anniversary of Bloody Sunday. Instead of the positive publicity the mayor and the Chamber of Commerce hoped for, the national media compared the current protests to 1965. A headline in the *Washington Post* read, “25 Years After March, Selma Still a City Divided by Race.” The article noted that objections to the tracking system had been one cause of the boycott, but it put more emphasis on Roussell’s take of the situation. “This is not a matter of my performance here. This is a matter of who is going to be in control,” he explained, “Whites have final say on everything in this community – including the schools.” The article explored the ongoing power struggle between white and black Selma citizens, highlighting the white majorities on city boards, the reign of Mayor Smitherman, the racially distinct Elks clubs and Y.M.C.A. branches, and the segregated Selma Country Club.³⁹ More than 3,500 people flocked to the city in early March to remember Bloody Sunday, including many of the

³⁵ Michele Savage, “Roussell sues city BOE for \$10 million,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 18, 1990; Patricia Stumb and Michele Savage, “City Files Suit against BEST,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 22, 1990.

³⁶ Michele Savage, “Judge works out terms for city, BEST,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 18, 1990.

³⁷ Andrew Williford, “Judge: Move the tents now,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 26, 1990.

³⁸ Michele Savage, “Judge restricts protests to sidewalks,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 11, 1990.

³⁹ Laura Parker, “25 Years After March, Selma Still a City Divided by Race,” *The Washington Post*, Feb. 20, 1990, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

nation's most prominent black figures. Jesse Jackson, Representative John Lewis, Joseph Lowery of SCLC, Dorothy Height of the National Council of Negro Women, comedian Dick Gregory, and Coretta Scott King joined with local movement veterans to recognize those who had helped win equal voting rights for all Americans.⁴⁰ But with Selma more torn and divided than ever, few local white residents even attended the commemoration events.

The school crisis slowly lost steam over the next year, but the polarization remained. In early May, Norward Roussell resigned as part of a settlement with the board of education. He received an additional \$150,000 and in return, dropped the discrimination lawsuit he had filed.⁴¹ Negotiations regarding the other outstanding lawsuits involving the city, the BOE, and BEST continued throughout the summer. When the school year opened in August, BEST demonstrators protested outside the high school where they burned Mayor Joe Smitherman in effigy. The flames engulfed a stuffed figure that read, "Joe T., repression, miseducation must die" across its chest.⁴² But interim superintendent James Carter, also African American, took a firm stance against the protesters, signing warrants for their arrest and forbidding them from entering school property.⁴³ One week later, black and white school board members reunited in a compromise similar to the one Edwin Moss had proposed nine months earlier; five white and five black members would now sit on the board with a non-voting chairman which would alternate between black and white on a

⁴⁰ Andrew Williford, "Marchers retrace civil rights path," *Selma Times-Journal*, March 5, 1990; Andrew Williford, "Visitors boost local economy," *Selma Times-Journal*, March 6, 1990.

⁴¹ Michele Savage, "Roussell tenders resignation," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 8, 1990.

⁴² Michele Savage, "Group torches effigy of mayor," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 16, 1990.

⁴³ Michele Savage, "Sanders, 17 protesters arrested," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 19, 1990.

yearly basis.⁴⁴ When BEST, the City of Selma, and the board of education agreed to dismiss all lawsuits at the end of August, the last of the immediate crisis came to a close.⁴⁵

But the year of turmoil had widened the already deep gap that existed between white and black residents. The 1990 – 1991 school year opened with six hundred fewer white students than the previous year. White enrollment dropped from 26.8 percent to 19.9 percent, a trend that accelerated with each passing year.⁴⁶ The white parents who had staunchly supported integrated public schools transferred their children to private schools, afraid for their safety. Harry and Molly Gamble reluctantly sent their fourteen year-old son to live with relatives in Montgomery, so he could attend school there.⁴⁷ Alston Fitts, resident historian and director of the Edmundite Missions, and his wife Mary kept their children in Selma schools longer than most. But in the fall of 1991, they moved their two daughters to an integrated boarding school near Birmingham.⁴⁸ Nancy Bennett kept her two daughters and her two foster children in Selma High, but when the youngest two graduated, they were practically the only white students in the graduating class. Former superintendent Joe Pickard observed later that the protests were more about power and politics than about education or Norward Roussell. Whether or not the movement against tracking and for fair political representation achieved its goals, it spelled the death of integrated public education in Selma.

⁴⁴ Michele Savage, "Agreement brings BOE back together," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 28, 1990.

⁴⁵ Michele Savage, "Compromise makes it past 11th hour scare," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 28, 1990.

⁴⁶ Alabama Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Crisis and Opportunity: Race Relations in Selma*, December 1991, 17.

⁴⁷ Author's field notes, One Selma Meeting, November 15, 2011, Vaughan Memorial Hospital, Selma, Alabama.

⁴⁸ Peter Applebombe, *Dixie Rising*, 74.

After a year of turmoil, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights came to Selma to conduct a study of local race relations.⁴⁹ The Commission interviewed 140 people over the summer of 1990. Then in December, fifty-one citizens, representing the diversity of Selma, testified at public hearings at the George Wallace Community College. Despite the vastly different viewpoints expressed in the hearing, “a surprisingly large number of people” united on one theme: that a struggle for power raged behind the façade of race relations in Selma. Shelton Prince, former publisher of the *Selma Times-Journal*, characterized the chasm as a fight for political control between “Mayor Joe Smitherman and his loyal band” and the Chestnut and Sanders law firm, vituperatively referred to by the mayor as “the Jeff Davis crowd.”⁵⁰ The majority of black and white citizens, in all likelihood, fell in a more moderate middle ground, not defined by either faction. However, the school controversy had left a bitter taste in the mouths of black and white residents, while giving a public platform to the perpetual power struggle churning between Mayor Smitherman and Rose Sanders.

While black and white residents may have agreed about the underlying power struggle, they differed drastically in what should be done to address it. County commissioner Perry Varner summed up the sentiments of many black residents when he stated that problems regarding race relations would not be solved until equitable power sharing existed. Richard Morthland of Peoples Bank, on the other hand, spoke for white citizens when he asserted that economic power was concentrated in the white community and that was not

⁴⁹ Michele Savage, “Civil Rights study set for second stage,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 21, 1990.

⁵⁰ J.L. Chestnut, “Critics don’t mention civil deeds,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 22, 1996.

going to “just shift.”⁵¹ The study done by the Commission on Civil Rights reinforced Varner and Morthland’s arguments. It concluded that black city employees overwhelmingly served in low-level, hard-labor jobs and that tight financing and lack of a black-white social/economic network kept African Americans out of business. Additionally, it determined that public housing sites remained clearly identifiable by race and that black residents felt excluded from equal political representation.⁵² In its final report, the Commission on Civil Rights concluded that “in spite of integration in the schools, housing, and the workplace, there remain two Selmas: black and white.”⁵³

Crack City

While local political battles consumed the late eighties and early nineties, crack cocaine, a dangerous new adversary, put down roots in the Black Belt. The Selma City Council declared its opening battle against street corner drug dealers at the end of 1985, and within five years, drugs had fundamentally altered poor neighborhoods and law enforcement alike.⁵⁴ Crack - a cheaper, crystallized version of cocaine – first hit the nation’s streets in 1985 and had made its way to Selma by sometime in 1987. Captain Billy Duke headed up the newly formed narcotics division of the Dallas County sheriff’s department. He estimated that cocaine use was up nearly forty percent in 1987. A gram of power cocaine cost around

⁵¹ Alabama Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Crisis and Opportunity: Race Relations in Selma*, December 1991, 12 – 16.

⁵² Alabama Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Crisis and Opportunity: Race Relations in Selma*, December 1991, 61 – 65.

⁵³ Michele Savage, “Civil Rights observers head back to town,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 7, 1990; Alabama Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Crisis and Opportunity: Race Relations in Selma*, December 1991, ii.

⁵⁴ Cheryl Washington, “City declares war on corner drug dealers,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 14, 1985.

\$100 in Selma, but crack, the newcomer in town, ran at \$15 a gram. “People here are just beginning to fool with it,” he reported.⁵⁵ It did not take long, however, for crack’s presence to be felt. By 1988, a mobile home park in Selmont, south of the Alabama River, gained the nickname, “Crack City.”⁵⁶ “It’s just devastating,” Rev. Fairro J. Brown, pastor of the Selmont Community Baptist Church, explained, “this thing has touched, directly or indirectly, 75 percent of my congregation.”⁵⁷ In December, nearly thirty law enforcement officers from four different agencies raided TC’s Place, a bar and general store, in Selmont. They confiscated \$14,000 in cash and nearly \$30,000 worth of crack.⁵⁸ After the raid, bar owner Tommy Lee Cole’s trailer caught fire in a suspected arson attempt. Drugs were not what Selmont residents envisioned for their neighborhood, and Cole admitted that a lot of them “want me out.”⁵⁹

While the influx of drugs decimated the poorest neighborhoods, drastic policy shifts in the 1980s exacerbated the growing problem. Ronald Reagan declared a War on Drugs in late 1982, marking the beginning of federal intervention into local policing, severe penalties for drug use, and skyrocketing incarceration rates. The president had ridden a conservative backlash into office, heavily campaigning on racially-tinged themes like crime and welfare. Throughout the seventies, stricter sentencing laws became the most popular way to combat

⁵⁵ Lorrie Trippe, “Cocaine Cracks Selma,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 16, 1987; For more about how federal funds fostered the creation of local drug units that were the frontlines of the War on Drugs, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 72 – 73.

⁵⁶ Pam Hartley, “Police move in on Crack City,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 12, 1988.

⁵⁷ Michael Isikoff, “Crack Trade is Selma’s New Struggle,” *The Washington Post*, Nov. 21, 1989, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁵⁸ Kenneth Boone, “Law raids Selma coke house,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 18, 1988.

⁵⁹ Rick Vest and Sandy Mau, “Trailer fire follows Crack City bust,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 20, 1988.

crime. Alabama, for example, had passed the Habitual Felony Offender Act in 1979 that automatically increased sentences for anyone with a previous felony conviction. By declaring war on drug users and street crime, as attorney Michelle Alexander explains, Reagan could make “good on his promise to crack down on the racially defined ‘others’ – the undeserving.” When the president began his war in the mid-eighties, illegal drug use was on the decline and with only two percent of Americans concerned that drugs were a major problem.⁶⁰

The War on Drugs escalated the fight against crime and its racial biases to new extremes. The federal government in the early eighties pumped billions of dollars into nationwide anti-drug enforcement efforts, like the Dallas County sheriff department’s narcotic division, while the Justice Department targeted drug violations instead of white collar crime. Then in 1986 and again in 1988, Congress passed two anti-drug abuse acts that established severe mandatory minimum sentences for drug possession. The acts also instituted civil penalties for drug offenders, including eviction from public housing and exclusion from other federal benefits. The mandatory add-ons for drug convictions, like selling within a school zone, took sentences to the extreme.⁶¹ While most states’ drug-safe zones extended in a thousand foot circumference around a school, Alabama’s was a three-

⁶⁰ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 6, 48 – 49; Equal Justice Initiative of Alabama, *Criminal Justice Reform in Alabama: A Report and Analysis of Criminal Justice Issues in Alabama, Part One: Sentencing, Probation, Prison Conditions and Parole*, Montgomery Alabama, March 2005, 15 – 24.

⁶¹ Peter Bourne, “Just Say No’: Drug Abuse Policy in the Reagan Administration,” in *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies, Legacies*, edited by Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 48; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 52; For more on the War on Drugs and the rise of prisons, see Robert Perkinson, *Texas Tough: the Rise of America’s Prison Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

mile radius. This meant that practically any drug conviction within the city of Selma automatically dictated more years in prison.⁶²

Although the rates of drug use and selling were remarkably similar amongst all Americans, the War on Drugs came down hardest on poor African Americans. Of the approximately one hundred people arrested for dealing or possessing crack in Dallas County in 1989, ninety-five were black. This lopsided percentage represented policing patterns in addition to drug use. Local law enforcement often focused their street level drug patrolling in poor black neighborhoods. Dallas County's "Crack City," where most policing happened, was nearly entirely black, and its residents brought home an average \$4,613 a year, barely half of the per capita income of Selma residents and well below the poverty threshold of \$6,310. Nightly news stories only contributed to the perceptions of African American drug use by reporting "crack whores," "crack babies" and "gangbangers" all with black faces. Racial bias was also evident in sentencing regulations: crack cocaine, more widely used by African Americans, garnered an exponentially harsher punishment than powder cocaine, typically associated with whites.⁶³

It was no accident that double-digit unemployment rates and drugs went hand in hand. The *Times-Journal* laid out the connection: "Selma still can't find enough jobs to keep all its willing workers working. Many Selmians seemed to have dropped out of the job market entirely," the editors wrote. "Real poverty continues to keep many of our people in

⁶² Todd R. Clear, *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 52.

⁶³ Average per capita income in Selma in 1990 was \$8,844; Bureau of Census, *U.S. Census of Population: 1990*, Social and Economic Characteristics, Alabama (Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), 8; Michael Isikoff, "Crack Trade is Selma's New Struggle," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 21, 1989, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 7, 51

rural ghettos. In this atmosphere, drugs and crime flourish in the streets of Selma.”⁶⁴

African Americans had borne the brunt of job scarcity. ⁶⁵ 27.4% of black residents in Selmont, or “Crack City,” were unemployed while a devastating 56.3% lived below the poverty line. Police Chief Randy Lewellen pointed to money as the primary reason juveniles got involved in drugs. Working eight hours a day for minimum wage, if they could even find a job, “would bring home somewhere around \$32 to \$35 a day,” he explained, “Some juveniles make \$500 a night selling drugs.” With jobs scarce and good jobs scarcer, drug selling offered a way for black residents, left dredging through the muck of Dallas County’s weak economy, to make some needed dollars.⁶⁶

President Reagan’s War on Drugs adopted a tough law-and-order policy that favored locking drug users away instead of treating and rehabilitating addicts. In 1989, Michael Page, a 24 year-old from Selmont, received a thirty year prison sentence after robbing two service stations. He had started using crack in the mid-eighties, and to support his habit, he began stealing from his father and others. Page first spent eighteen months in the Dallas County jail for stealing thirty-two gold necklaces from a local jewelry store. The next time he got in trouble with the law, he went to Kilby Prison in Montgomery for the next three decades.⁶⁷ This severe sentencing also sent 25 year-old Joe Hatcher – whose grandmother had been a heroin addict - to prison for life after his second drug charge. Calling him a “threat to the

⁶⁴ “Still with us in 1989,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 2, 1989.

⁶⁵ Michael Isikoff, “Crack Trade is Selma’s New Struggle,” *The Washington Post*, Nov. 21, 1989, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁶⁶ Bureau of Census, *U.S. Census of Population: 1990, Social and Economic Characteristics, Alabama* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), 41; Randy Lewellen quoted in Marty Roney, “Crack changes face of crime in Selma area,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 4, 1991.

⁶⁷ Patricia Cavanaugh, “Crack City’s devastating burden,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 19, 1989.

community,” the circuit judge sentenced Hatcher to life for selling crack to an undercover agent.⁶⁸ As young black men in Dallas County disappeared into prisons, their neighborhoods carried the impact. Chain fences and Beware of Dog signs now appeared on the houses in “Crack City,” and Michael Page’s 75 year-old father described how dealers “sell [crack] on playgrounds for goodness sakes. It’s like a picnic ground in parts of Selmont with people buying and selling drugs.”⁶⁹ Locking people up took away potential breadwinners from already impoverished communities, at the same time it broke up family relationships in neighborhoods that needed all the help they could get.⁷⁰

Black Political Control and the 1990s

While black parents struggled to bring home a paycheck, feed their families, and keep their children away from crack and the police, the fight for black political representation, spearheaded by the Chestnut and Sanders law firm, raged on. Black commissioners Perry Varner, Erskine Minor, and D.L. Pope had a decade of litigation to thank for their seating on the five-person Dallas County Commission at the start of 1989. Securing a black majority on Selma’s city council in the early nineties followed the same pattern: white political intransigence, lawsuits, polarization, and Justice Department involvement. By 1990, black

⁶⁸ Victor Inge, “Man sentenced to life here for crack conviction,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 10, 1991.

⁶⁹Peter Bourne, “Just Say No’: Drug Abuse Policy in the Reagan Administration,” in *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies, Legacies*, edited by Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2008), 46; Gordon Page quoted in Patricia Cavanaugh, “Crack City’s devastating burden,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 19, 1989.

⁷⁰ Todd Clear, *Imprisoning Communities*, 5.

residents made up 58.5% of Selma's population.⁷¹ Yet the city council had four white members, four black members, and a white council president who held the deciding vote.⁷² In the twenty-five years since the Voting Rights Act, black citizens' patience had worn thin. "No one should forget the years and public dollars thrown away trying to keep black people off the county commission," Dr. Samuel Lett, the son of minister and school board member Charles Lett, implored. "This and many other things should not be forgotten."⁷³

In the midst of a sweltering Alabama summer, county commissioner Perry Varner filed a lawsuit calling for the drawing of new ward lines to give African Americans a majority on the council, and District Judge Brevard Hand called off the city's scheduled elections in response.⁷⁴ Over the next six months, Selma's black and white council members scuffled to come up with district lines acceptable to themselves, the community, and the Justice Department. The chances of negotiating going well looked about as good as an unsuspecting raccoon facing down an alligator lurking in the Alabama River. As in the past, white council members used their majority to pass plans over the vetoes of black members, which the Justice Department then rejected as unconstitutional.⁷⁵ After repeated rounds of wrangling,

⁷¹ Bureau of Census, *U.S. Census of Population: 1990*, Social and Economic Characteristics, Alabama (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), 31; Clark Wheeler, "Justice rejects city council's districting plan," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 15, 1992.

⁷² When a vacancy opened in Ward 4 in January of 1992, black council members urged their white colleagues to replace white councilman, Tom Headly, with an African American to better reflect the demographics of the city. A racially deadlocked vote on the council, however, forced the vacancy to be decided by special election and led to another white council member being elected in April; Victor Inge, "Council fails to fill vacant Ward 4 seat," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 28, 1992; "Special election set for Ward 4," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 4, 1992; Victor Inge, "Ward 4 hopefuls in runoff," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 29, 1992.

⁷³ Letter to editor, Dr. Samuel Lett, *Selma Times-Journal*, June 17, 1990.

⁷⁴ Victor Inge, "Council elections called off," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 5, 1992.

⁷⁵ A plan approved only by white council members, keeping four white and four black districts, was deemed unconstitutional by the Justice Department in November. In the meantime, Commissioner Varner had drawn up an

three black council members called a press conference. There they castigated Mayor Smitherman, Council President Morgan, City Attorney Henry Pitts and the four white council members for refusing to transfer political control despite the city's black majority.⁷⁶ Ultimately, the Justice Department's approval of a plan for five black districts strong-armed white members into returning to the drawing board with black council members, if only to avoid another political reprimand from Judge Hand.⁷⁷ White councilmen John Ingram and Council President Morgan broke rank in April 1993 to vote with the four black members, approving the new "Citizen's Plan." Before the vote, white moderate Alston Fitts pleaded with council members for level-headedness: "In the name of God, in the name of Selma, remember all our history – do not let your anger affect your vote."⁷⁸

When white council members failed to hold the line, Joe Smitherman - with his personal power and continued reign as mayor at risk - intervened. In his first move, Smitherman, with the help of council member Rita Franklin, put forward a new ordinance transferring the authority to appoint certain city officials from the city council to the mayor. Now instead of elected council members appointing the tax collector, purchasing agent, and city attorney, the decision lay at the sole discretion of the mayor. This move prevented any

alternative, racially-proportionate redistricting plan, and Judge Hand ordered Varner, in the resulting deadlock, to forward his plan to the Attorney General. The council's white majority then countered with yet another plan that all black council members again rejected; Clark Wheeler, "Justice rejects city council's districting plan," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 15, 1992; Cheryl Graffo, "Judge to city: submit Varner's plan," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 3, 1992; Sue Hite, "Whites on council approve another redistricting plan," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 29, 1992.

⁷⁶ Sue Hite, "Black councilman want OK of Varner plan," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 29, 1992.

⁷⁷ "Justice rejects city ward plan," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 16, 1993; Sue Hite, "Council agrees on redistricting plan," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 31, 1993.

⁷⁸ Sue Hite, "Split council passes districting plan," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 6, 1993.

future black-majority council from having control over some of the most important positions in municipal government.⁷⁹ Then two days later, Smitherman vetoed the recently passed redistricting plan, making a two-thirds council vote necessary to overrule his veto.⁸⁰ Cecil Williamson, champion of white political control, applauded the mayor's actions as "an attempt to save Selma from political terrorists." In a letter to the editor, Williamson asked whether black moderates who supported school, church, and civic work would be elected under the Citizen's plan or "would it be the political terrorists who have nearly wrecked the city school system, bankrupted surrounding counties, lied to federal judges, created a Banana Republic atmosphere in the county government, and appear motivated by hate rather than love?"⁸¹ Every reader of the *Times-Journal* knew exactly who Williamson was referring to. By the 1990s, the fierce struggle for political control had splintered into two opposing camps: the vocal activism of Rose Sanders and the "Jeff Davis crowd," and Mayor Smitherman and the equally loud racial conservatism of people like Cecil Williamson. Williamson unabashedly claimed that Sanders was the racial boogeyman of white citizens, and in the terrain of racial polarization, white council members knew what they needed to do. At the next city council meeting, all white members voted both to sustain the mayor's veto and to transfer council appointing powers to the mayor over objections from the black minority.⁸²

Once again, white political intransigence forced the intervention of the federal government to ensure just representation for Selma's black majority. In May 1993, the

⁷⁹ Sue Hite, "Proposal would shift power to mayor," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 13, 1993.

⁸⁰ Sue Hite, "Mayor vetoes districting plan," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 16, 1993.

⁸¹ Letter to editor by Cecil Williamson, *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 25, 1993.

⁸² Sue Hite, "Council upholds mayor's veto," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 27, 1993.

Justice Department filed a voting rights lawsuit against Mayor Smitherman, the city of Selma, and the city council. The suit first charged that discriminatory ward boundaries diluted black voter strength, and secondly accused the named parties of failing to develop a racially fair plan. In typical fashion, Smitherman refused to take any blame. "I think it's a sad state of affairs," he told a *Times-Journal* reporter, "when the Justice Department gets involved with our tax dollars in a lawsuit brought by a local firm."⁸³ Meanwhile, Judge Hand submitted the compromise Citizen's Plan over council objections. The Justice Department approved and cleared the path for city elections.⁸⁴ J.L. Chestnut, speaking in front of the Selma Rotary Club, assured the nearly all-white audience that his law firm had no interest in taking over city hall, but he questioned the mayor's efforts to maintain a white-run council. "Do you think we'll ever get to a point where we won't have to go through this?" he asked them.⁸⁵ With the new ward lines, the August elections ensured that the first black majority would sit on the city council.⁸⁶ When the five black council members – Selma High librarian Nancy Sewell, attorney Yusuf Salaam, McArthur McWilliams, returning Councilman Bill King, and Mark West - took their seats in October of 1993, black Selma residents reacted quietly. Activist Sam Walker summed up the absence of visible celebration. "People have been living

⁸³ Joe Smitherman quoted in Sue Hite, "Justice Department sues mayor, council," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 20, 1993.

⁸⁴ Sue Hite, "Hand sending 'Citizen Plan' for Justice OK," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 21, 1993; Sue Hite, "Justice Oks district plan for city," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 15, 1993.

⁸⁵ Cheryl Gaffo, "Chestnut lays it out in black and white," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 25, 1993.

⁸⁶ Sue Hite, "Black majority, three women to govern city," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 25, 1993.

with this administration for 30 years,” he explained, referring to Mayor Smitherman, “They don’t expect everything to change at once.”⁸⁷

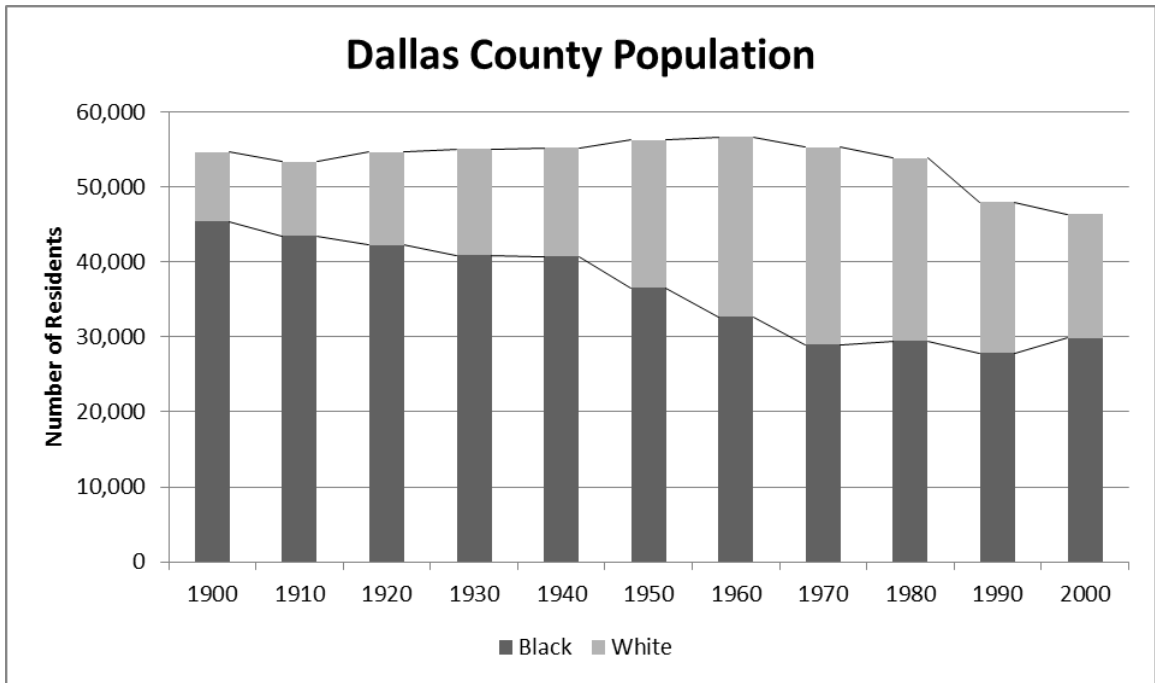
When the black majority assumed control of the Selma City Council, they inherited what historian Glen Eskew called “the same daunting economic problems the old white majority found itself unable to solve fifty years before.”⁸⁸ Attorney J.L. Chestnut applauded black people gaining proportional representation, but he tempered any enthusiasm for what a black majority would be able to accomplish. “What a government can do to create jobs is very limited,” he wrote.⁸⁹ In the summer of 1993, a new report, “Selma-Dallas County Economic Development Competitiveness Summary,” laid out the serious situation facing the new municipal officials. Many of the findings came as no surprise.

⁸⁷ Jay Reeves, “Selma reacts quietly to City Hall power shift from whites to blacks,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 6, 1993; “Three of five council members re-elected,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 28, 1996.

⁸⁸ Glen Eskew, “Selling the Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama” in *Destination Dixie: Tourism and Southern History*, edited by Karen L. Cox (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012) 177.

⁸⁹ Rick Vest, “Blacks, whites vow to govern together,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 28, 1988.

Table 3: Dallas County Population



The report revealed that Craig’s closing and a weak economy had caused Dallas County to lose nearly thirteen percent of its population in the 1980s. One in eight people in the job market could not find jobs, and unemployment ran at least five points above the national average. Although manufacturing workers were the best paid locally, they still made “considerably less” than comparable workers in Alabama and the nation. Meanwhile, the report found that “poorly educated and untrained workers” made up the majority of the local workforce. It named three factors standing in the way of Dallas County’s potential for economic development: first, an unskilled labor force; second, an underfunded and divided education system; and finally, a history and continuing image of racial tension. The report castigated the county’s four separate school systems – two public and two private – for

fighting over “scarce resources” when the student population hardly justified two systems.⁹⁰

Most revealing, however, was the assessment of the head of the company conducting the study. Admitting that Selma was a nice community to live in with potential for growth, he concluded that nothing would change “as long as those making public policy are more interested in their own personal agendas than in the community’s best interests. The message from my point of view is economically, you don’t have a lot of time.”⁹¹

No Jobs, No Justice, No Welfare

Gaining the vote was not enough to bring economic justice to Dallas County. The black majority on the city council undertook the enormous task of bringing prosperity at a time when more than 3,200 Dallas County families received some sort of public assistance and nearly fifty percent of the area’s children lived in poverty.⁹² Law enforcement maintained a heavy presence in the area’s poor black neighborhoods on constant alert for street corner drug dealing. In December 1994, a deputy sheriff stopped three young black men walking down an alley in a Craig Field neighborhood. A scuffle broke out between Robert Walker Jr. and Deputy Dempsey. Although details remained foggy, the deputy fired several shots, possibly in self-defense, and the eighteen year-old collapsed dead.⁹³ “It wasn’t long before

⁹⁰ Growth Strategies Organization, Inc., “Selma-Dallas County Economic Development Competitiveness Summary,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 15, 1993.

⁹¹ Ross Boyle quoted in Cheryl Graffo, “Survey: Leaders attitudes a drawback,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 23, 1993.

⁹² Cheryl Graffo, “Half of county children in poverty,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 13, 1992.

⁹³ Alvin Benn, *Reporter: Covering Civil Rights – and Wrongs in Dixie* (Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2006), 176 – 177; Subsequent newspaper reports suggest that Walker succeeded in taking the deputy’s gun after the incident, but the sheriff’s department refused to allow multiple viewings of the videotape from the deputy’s squad car. No resolution was reached. Penny Pool, “Man killed by officer’s bullets,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 8, 1994.

dozens of neighborhood residents stepped forward to claim Walker had been murdered by the deputy,” *Montgomery Advertiser* reporter Al Benn later wrote. Whether Walker had threatened Dempsey’s life or Dempsey had acted recklessly, Benn explained that black residents knew that “a young black man had just been shot and killed by a white cop.” Anger at a long history of police brutality, not the specifics of the incident, fueled black citizens’ reaction.⁹⁴

The sheriff’s department released video footage of the events recorded by the squad car’s camera hoping to bring clarity, but it only spurred Craig Field residents, along with the Black Leadership Council, to further action.⁹⁵ The Coalition of Alabamians Reforming Education (CARE) – a statewide organization formed by BEST members in the wake of the school protests – sponsored a march against violence. They saw Alabama’s substandard education system at the root of the rise of violence and crime in the nineties.⁹⁶ Starting in Selma and ending with a press conference in Montgomery, CARE titled its march, “From the Graveyard to the Schoolyard.”⁹⁷ While the schools Robert Walker had attended were severely underfunded (Dallas County ranked last out of 129 state school systems in local funding in 1992), a legacy of drugs, police brutality, and targeted law enforcement played an equally central role in his death.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Alvin Benn, *Reporter: Covering Civil Rights – and Wrongs in Dixie* (Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2006), 176 – 177;

⁹⁵ James D. Ross, “Black Leadership Council initiates plan to learn more of shooting,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 11, 1994.

⁹⁶ Penny Pool, “CARE plans walk to curb violence,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 21, 1994.

⁹⁷ Penny Pool, “Selmians march to help end violence through education,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 1, 1995.

⁹⁸ Pam Frasier, “Dallas County school funding lowest in state,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 1, 1992.

In the midst of high unemployment and dwindling social programs, black leaders in Dallas County again turned inward looking for a solution. These citizens represented the breadth of the black community, including moderate members of the black middle class as well as the fiery activists associated with the Chestnut and Sanders law firm. Following Robert Walker's death and a string of other shootings, councilwoman Nancy Sewell organized "Save Our Male Students Day" for Selma High School's boys; at Wallace Community College, the 525 students listened to motivational speakers addressing issues like AIDS, juvenile crime laws, and drug abuse. "We want to put them on track, get them focused," explained Sewell.⁹⁹ A few days later, the Black Leadership Summit sponsored a community forum for African Americans to discuss "critical issues," including "black-on-black and youth crime, education, housing, spiritual and moral confusion, economic development, voter apathy and political divisiveness."¹⁰⁰ Instead of waiting for local political leaders or the federal government to change, concerned black Selma citizens sought to better their own neighborhoods from within using whatever resources were available.¹⁰¹

Meanwhile, President Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it" ominously pointed towards more hard days ahead for Black Belt residents. A national conservative backlash had methodically dismantled social programs and the country's safety net for its poor, sick, and elderly residents since the late 1960s. Following a decade of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush's conservative policies, Democrat Bill

⁹⁹ Nancy Sewell quoted in Chuck Chandler, "Selma High boys get away for day of timely topics," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 27, 1995; Penny Pool, "Latest death prompts action to stem violence," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 23, 1994.

¹⁰⁰ Paula Webb, "Black Leadership Summit brings HOPE," *Selma Times-Journal*, Feb. 6, 1995.

¹⁰¹ Chuck Chandler, "Project helps boys make right choices," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 19, 1994.

Clinton pulled himself into office on a reputation of moderation and pragmatism, offering a new centrist way of politics.¹⁰² The nation's welfare system had long attracted the criticism of conservatives who argued that it fostered dependency and illegitimacy while failing to encourage poor people to work. In 1994, Republicans, united in a conservative campaign known as "Contract with American," captured control of Congress with mastermind strategist Newt Gingrich at the helm.¹⁰³ The new conservative majority enthusiastically took up Clinton's promise of welfare reform as a chance to dismantle the longstanding system of government assistance to the poor. In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act ended welfare as the country knew it, instituting a five year time limit on aid and work requirements.¹⁰⁴

Conservative social policies passed in the halls of Congress looked very different on the ground in Dallas County. Craig's closing, Reagan's economic and social policies, and globalization had entrenched economic hard times in the area for the last quarter of the century. Unemployment consistently broke double digits. Those numbers included only people who were still looking for work, not those who had dropped out in frustration. A large number of Dallas County residents owed their livelihood to government transfer payments, making the local economy equally dependent.¹⁰⁵ Beginning in 1992, the Department of Human Resources (DHR) Job Opportunity for Basic Skills (JOBS) program

¹⁰² Brendon O'Connor, *A Political History of the American Welfare System: When Ideas Have Consequences* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2004), 185 – 187.

¹⁰³ O'Connor, *A Political History of the American Welfare System*, 209.

¹⁰⁴ O'Connor, *A Political History of the American Welfare System*, 223.

¹⁰⁵ "Selma-Dallas County Economic Development Competitiveness Summary," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 15, 1993.

had been working with a select group of welfare recipients to educate, train, and help them find jobs.¹⁰⁶ Three years later, 341 local JOBS women had found employment.¹⁰⁷ But the 1996 changes required all participants - not just those best positioned and able - to hold a job after two years of aid. At a JOBS work fair held at the Selma Public Library that November, representatives from the Dallas County DHR admitted that welfare reform left the agency with “a tough job that they can’t handle alone.”¹⁰⁸

Jamie Wallace, president of the Chamber of Commerce, laid out the biggest question regarding welfare reform to the *Times-Journal*: “In Alabama counties where you already have double digit unemployment the question is where do you find jobs to put these people to work?” In order to do so, Dallas County would need to create approximately two thousand additional jobs, and that number did not include new graduates or those relocating. Wallace criticized Congress’s welfare reform legislation for failing to come “to the real world like Dallas County” and talk to those administering local programs. Welfare reform also failed to make provisions for educational advancement, which was severely needed in the rural Black Belt.¹⁰⁹

The people at the Department of Human Resources understood that the switch to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) from AFDC on December 1, 1996 marked the beginning of a race against time. From that date, welfare recipients had sixty months of aid, and no more. Director James Ware warned that some welfare recipients

¹⁰⁶ Patrice Darden, “JOBS moves adults from welfare rolls into work force,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 17, 1992.

¹⁰⁷ “State’s JOBS Program ranks No. 2 in nation,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 7, 1995.

¹⁰⁸ Wendy Isom, “JOBS fair Friday at library,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 21, 1996.

¹⁰⁹ Penny Pool, “Welfare reform expected to impact economy,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 13, 1997.

could not become self-sufficient due to limited abilities and other circumstances. African Americans, he explained, made up a disproportionate number of those served locally. He stressed how a history of Jim Crow and unequal opportunities in education and other areas continued to impact area residents in the present. Ware also expressed concern over childcare and transportation costs: “If you’re forcing people to go to work – if you’re talking about forcing people to meet these work requirements then you have to be looking at providing [jobs],” he warned.¹¹⁰

After the voting rights movement in 1965, many black Dallas County residents placed their faith in the federal government as a new ally in their long fight for political and economic justice; by the mid-nineties, decades of cutting back social programs made it clear to African Americans that the federal government would provide little if any support. In 1996, welfare reform balanced the national budget on the backs of the country’s neediest citizens. It did this without addressing the underlying structural issues that kept the majority of black Dallas County residents unemployed, undereducated, and impoverished. While the Sunbelt South flourished with defense contracts, military bases, interstate highways, and highly skilled workforces, the rural Black Belt struggled as globalization sucked up scarce jobs and federal spending came mainly through transfer payments.

Historical Memory and Political Warfare

The twenty-five years following the voting rights movement had not delivered the “good freedom” that Joanne Bland’s grandmother had promised. Daily life in Dallas County

¹¹⁰ Penny Pool, “Welfare reform brings changes on many fronts,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 12, 1997.

played out against a backdrop of food stamps, underemployment, segregated schools, and divisive, power-obsessed politics. But what Selma lacked in industry, it made up for in history. The Chamber of Commerce had first turned towards historical tourism in the wake of Craig Air Force Base's closing as a way to capitalize on Selma's role in the Civil War and the civil rights movement, and by the 1990s, tourism had taken off as a revenue maker. Dredging up jagged and contested pasts, however, brought more than just tourism dollars; like had happened during the twenty-fifth anniversary of Bloody Sunday, historical memory grew into a potent tool for political mobilization.¹¹¹ Fierce, bitter, and racially-divided political organizing had dug a rift across Selma. On one side stood Joe Smitherman and backers like Cecil Williamson while Rose Sanders and her many organizations glowered back in opposition. Of course, there were many black and white Selma residents who fell in the middle, but the inflammatory and loud rivalry between the two extremes virtually drowned out more moderate voices. In the landmine-laden political terrain of Selma, remembering the Civil War and the civil rights movement became a story of white history versus black history and a battle between white and black political control.

The 25th anniversary celebration had brought together a group of African American movement veterans and activists interested in using history as tool to build strong communities and political power in Selma's black neighborhoods. In the early 1990s, Rose Sanders, commissioner Perry Varner, activists Marie Foster, Amelia Boynton, Albert Turner, and others decided to start a voting rights museum. A museum first needed a physical home, however, and raising funds proved a prodigious undertaking for local movement veterans.

¹¹¹ Jamie Wallace, interview by author, March 2013, Camden, Alabama.

While their first attempt to purchase a building fell through, all they needed was a little luck and some political rivalry. White commissioner Deans Barber owned the building that had been the former headquarters of the local White Citizens' Council, 1012 Water Avenue. In the midst of the museum group's search for a location, Mayor Smitherman, in his typical blustery fashion, did or said something that rankled Barber to the core. Choosing the sweetest revenge he could, Commissioner Barber then called up Rose Sanders and the museum committee and offered them the building for the cost of taking over the mortgage. "And that's how we started the museum," Sanders recalled. By November of 1991, Selma's new civil rights museum had found a home.¹¹²

The National Voting Rights Museum and Institute (NVRMI) grew from "a truly grassroots effort," explained Joanne Bland, the first director of the museum. While notable figures from the civil rights movement, like Rev. C.T. Vivian, Congressman John Lewis, and Dr. Joseph Lowery, sat on the board, Black Belt activists contributed the sweat and labor to build a museum from scratch. Marie Foster, Hank Sanders, Perry Varner, and Amelia Boynton designed the exhibits and collected artifacts showcasing the Selma movement and black history. They used the many services of the local Wal-Mart to copy and frame photos and build displays. The National Voting Rights Museum, however, would not have made it off the ground without the devotion of movement veteran, Joanne Bland. She had been working as director of Mothers of Many when the NVRMI first opened its doors in 1992, but she moved her entire operation - a computer, phone, desk, and files - into the red-

¹¹² Faya Rose (Sanders) Toure, interview by author, August 17, 2013, Selma, Alabama; Marty Roney, "Rights museum planned," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 3, 1991; Glen Eskew, "Selling the Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama," in *Destination Dixie: Tourism and Southern History* edited by Karen L. Cox (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 170.

carpeted lobby to unlock the door of 1012 Water Ave for visitors stopping by.¹¹³ I loved that little museum,” she explained. In 1993, the National Voting Rights Museum gained its other biggest advocate: Sam Walker, a native of Selma returned home to visit and stayed to help out.¹¹⁴



Figure 35: Original location of National Voting Rights Museum and Institute. Courtesy of author.

From its birth, the NVRMI sought to preserve the stories of the local men and women on the frontlines of the voting rights struggle. “Heroes” and “She-roes” were celebrated at Living History Exhibits, dedicated to recognizing and recording the memories of movement veterans. Every March, the NVRMI hosted the Bridge Crossing Jubilee where thousands of people from across the country flocked to Selma over a weekend to commemorate the voting rights movement. The NVRMI told history with an eye on the future. “The museum will explore the past and will also focus on how the past can make life

¹¹³ Joanne Bland, interview by Teri Tensh, Culture Clique, KQAL, Winona State University, PRX, www.prx.org/pieces/59934 (accessed Nov. 19, 2012).

¹¹⁴ Sam Walker, interview by author, August 12, 2013, Selma, Alabama.

better for us all in the future,” Rose Sanders explained at the grand opening in March of 1993.¹¹⁵

Existing groups, like BBACC, and MOMs, and new organizations like, 21st Century Youth Leadership Movement, the youth section of the Alabama New South Coalition, found a home in the National Voting Rights Museum.¹¹⁶ 21st Century Youth mobilized students, encouraging them to excel personally and academically while also teaching them the fundamentals of government and political systems. Meanwhile, the Museum worked to mobilize black adults by sponsoring voter registration drives outside on Water Avenue.¹¹⁷ From its earliest days, the NVRMI worked to preserve history and organize for change. To do so, Rose Sanders, Joanne Bland, and the rest of the Voting Rights Museum’s leadership protected the institution’s independence, turning down outside funding to ensure that the museum could organize in whatever ways it saw fit.¹¹⁸

The NVRMI also became a hub for black self-help projects. Adopting a mantra of personal responsibility, Sam Walker, NVRMI coordinator, started the TIC TAC project, which stood for Teens in Crises, Triumphantly Addressing Crime. The young men participating in TIC TAC spent four days of each week working for four hours and studying for four hours with a fifty dollar paycheck on the side. As Walker stated, TIC TAC helped

¹¹⁵ Rose Sanders “National Voting Rights Museum growing with community support,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 3, 1993.

¹¹⁶ Patrice Darden, “Voting Rights Museum to pay tribute to Pope,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 27, 1992; Jean Martin “Resource Center, MOMs teach drug-free life,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 29, 1988.

¹¹⁷ Faya Rose (Sanders) Toure, interview by author, August 17, 2013, Selma, Alabama; Cheryl Graffo, “Museum hosting voter registration,” *Selma Times-Journal*, July 21, 1993.

¹¹⁸ Each year, 21st Century teens also went with Senator Hank Sanders to become Alabama legislators for a day at the state capitol; Glen Eskew, “Selling the Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama,” in *Destination Dixie: Tourism and Southern History* edited by Karen L. Cox (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 168 – 170.

male teens understand and address “problems of low self-esteem, negative peer pressure and miseducation” that hurt themselves and their communities. “Making the right moves, the right choices, can lead to a victory over crime, apathy and a digressive community,” Walker explained. Personal responsibility gained popularity across black America in response to the epidemic of poverty, drugs, and poor education. In October of 1995, sixty black men from Selma traveled to Washington, D.C. to join the Million Man March promoting black unity and self-help.¹¹⁹ In a local march one month later, attendees spread the message to a crowd of seven hundred people who pledged to support black businesses, avoid violence, and “improve themselves spiritually, morally, mentally, socially, politically, and economically.”¹²⁰

But the NVRMI was not the only organization that turned to history for tourism dollars and political mobilization. In the wake of Craig Field’s closing, city authorities hung their hopes on historical tourism as a means of economic expansion.¹²¹ In the late 1960s, local boosters transformed one of Selma’s antebellum Greek Revival mansions into a lavishly maintained period house called Sturdivant Hall. By the mid-1970s, Sturdivant became the centerpiece of the annual Historic Pilgrimage that sold the magnificence of historic homes and a romanticized version of Old South to tourists.¹²² Then in 1987, the first reenactment of the Battle of Selma, hosted by the Kiwanis Club, gave antebellum and Confederate history

¹¹⁹ Penny Pool, “D.C. march offers positive experience for many Selmians,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 18, 1995.

¹²⁰ James Ross, “Speakers urge men to improve selves in Black Belt version of million Man March,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 26, 1995.

¹²¹ Selma and Dallas County Chamber of Commerce Progress Report 1977, Selma Public Library, Vertical Files, Selma, Alabama.

¹²² Eskew, “Selling the Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama” in *Destination Dixie*, 166.

a broader platform.¹²³ The weekend featured a replay of the face-off between Nathan Bedford Forrest's Confederates and James H. Wilson's Yankee troops, as well as an "antebellum" ball where costumed guests danced in Sturdivant's glory.¹²⁴

Though not as large as the NVRMI's Jubilee celebration, the Battle of Selma reenactment became a staple of the city's tourism calendar.¹²⁵ The local chapters of the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy rallied behind the event. Cecil Williamson and Patricia Godwin, a white housewife who the Southern Poverty Law Center later labeled "a hard-line neo-Confederate activist," became outspoken advocates of a romanticized version of Civil War history. Williamson explained in an interview with the *Times-Journal*, "we're foolish indeed in Selma, if we do not emphasize all of our history to get tourist dollars into this city." As a minister, periodic council member, and later chairman of the Dallas County Republicans, Williamson actively mobilized Confederate history to help champion conservative causes.¹²⁶

Each year, the annual reenactments of Jubilee and the Battle of Selma celebrated Selma's history, but the stories they told had little common ground. White Selma residents stayed home when black citizens marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, vowing to take up the civil rights movement's fight for justice and equality. Meanwhile, few if any local black residents came out to the battlefield a month later to watch the cannons and smoke of

¹²³ John Jackson, "Blacks worried weekend battle may reflect racist point of view," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 19, 1987.

¹²⁴ Eskew, "Selling the Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama" in *Destination Dixie*, 166.

¹²⁵ Andrew Williford, "Visitors boost local economy," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 6, 1990.

¹²⁶ Leesah Faulkner "An Interview with Selma City Council President Cecil Williamson," Aug. 1, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scm6vekREyw>. (accessed Feb. 12, 2014); "Activists Confront Hate in Selma, Ala." *Intelligence Report* 132 (Winter 2008).

Confederate and Yankee troops. Here, contemporary issues of states' rights and privatization drew the most cheers. As the historically-costumed guests danced at the Sturdivant ball in the evening, they twirled in an antebellum house where the tour only mentioned slavery once and then called enslaved men and women "servants." For the NVRMI and the Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy, historical memory became another way, as historian Glen Eskew claimed, to "engage in grassroots organizing to gain political power."¹²⁷

The Black Farmers' Lawsuit

The last quarter of the twentieth century had been difficult years for the Alabama Black Belt, and African American residents shouldered the worst of the hardship. The tangible improvements that had come after the civil rights movement - paved streets, indoor plumbing, early childhood education, and higher graduation rates - had not ended poverty. Meanwhile, agricultural shifts and discrimination had pushed thousands of black farmers off the land in the seventy years prior, sending them to join the ranks of those looking for hard-to-find jobs. A moment of hope came at the very end of the century, however, when federal courts awarded redress to black farmers for years of racial discrimination within federal agricultural programs. In a class-action lawsuit filed by black attorneys across the South - including the Chestnut, Sanders, and Sanders law firm - the U.S. Department of Agriculture agreed to a multi-million dollar settlement with black farmers in the 1999 *Pigford v. Glickman* decision. Included among the plaintiffs were twenty-eight Dallas County farmers and 152

¹²⁷ "In Alabama, a 'Wizardess' Disputes Her Title," *Intelligence Report* 118 (Summer 2005); "Honoring the Confederate Dead," *Selma Times-Journal*, April 25, 2006; Eskew, "Selling the Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama" in *Destination Dixie*, 160.

Alabamians.¹²⁸ In November of 1998, hundreds of black farmers from across the South gathered in Selma at the black Elks' Club to hear the terms of the proposed settlement. Each farmer who could verify that they had filed a complaint against the USDA between 1983 and 1997 was eligible for \$50,000 or more, plus debt forgiveness.¹²⁹

The settlement came too late for most of the African Americans who had farmed Dallas County land over the past fifty years. Agribusiness and its large capital investment, as well as discrimination, had forced the majority of black farmers from the land well before 1983.¹³⁰ By 1997, black farmers operated only 83 of Dallas County's 435 remaining farms. Their combined 9,439 acres, however, totaled only 4.8% of all farmland in the county.¹³¹ Calvin Strong was a part of one of the lucky black farm families in Dallas County that had survived. The Strong uncles, brothers, and cousins grew peas, beans, watermelons, greens, and other vegetables on their three hundred acres of land. After having been denied loans at the local USDA office for farm equipment in the past, the Strong family planned to invest in implements and irrigation with their settlement money. "We're hopeful that the opportunities will come to us," said Strong. At the end of the twentieth century and thirty-

¹²⁸ K.A. Turner, "Black farmers eye settlement in national suit," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 17, 1998.

¹²⁹ Laura Robertson, "US to black farmers: We're ready to pay up," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 19, 1998; For a detailed account of racial discrimination within the USDA and the *Pigford v. Glickman* decision, see Pete Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Valerie Grim, "Between Forty Acres and a Class Action Lawsuit: Black Farmers, Civil Rights, and Protest against the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1997 – 2010," in *Beyond Forty Acres and a Mule: African American Landowning Families since Reconstruction*, edited by Debra A. Reid and Evan P. Bennett (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 271 – 298.

¹³⁰ Pete Daniel, "African American Farmers and Civil Rights," *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 73 (February 2007), 3.

¹³¹ Bureau of Census, *U.S. Census of Agriculture: 1997*, vol. 1, pt. 1 Geographic Area Series, Alabama State and County Data (Washington, D.C.; U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999), 167, 432.

five years after the voting rights movement, African Americans in Dallas County, like Calvin Strong, had a long list of things they were still waiting for.

White people in Selma used to have all of the political and economic power, NVRMI director Joanne Bland explained. But that equation had changed. “Blacks have political power,” Bland continued on, “But economic power? It’s still in white hands, and a lot of those white hands are not exactly reaching out to shake the black hands.” In the 1990s, black citizens secured meaningful representation on local governing bodies after decades of litigation and formidable white resistance. But political power did not bring with it desperately needed high-paying jobs, nor did it make the region’s entrenched poverty disappear. By the time a black majority controlled the Selma City Council, the War on Drugs had arrived, sending young black men to prison and decimating poor black neighborhoods. It was obvious that the vote on its own was not enough to bring economic justice. With no help available from the tight-pocketed federal government, African Americans turned inwards for help. The National Voting Rights Museum was born out of this mission, using history as a tool to mobilize and empower in the present “You must understand, Selma is still Selma,” Bland explained, “We’re still chasing the dream, and we’re still behind.”¹³²

While economic hard times plagued Dallas County, divisions between black and white Selma citizens grew deeper. When the white-majority board of education decided not to renew Superintendent Roussell’s contract in 1990, it galvanized black residents’ frustrations and led to spiraling protests against the city schools. The decades of

¹³² “Activists Confront Hate in Selma, Ala.” *Intelligence Report* 132 (Winter 2008).

unwillingness by white political leaders to transfer political power to African Americans had only fueled black discontent. When the crisis settled, the distrust between white and black Selma residents had grown, and the city schools were re-segregated. Meanwhile, the refusal of Mayor Smitherman and white supporters like Cecil Williamson to concede power fostered a backlash amongst black activists. The twentieth century drew to a close as public animosity came to a boil between the mayor and Rose Sanders, who together represented the political extremes of Selma. All of these issues resulted in a final fight over who would be the city's first mayor in the new century.

INTERLUDE 9: JOE GOTTA GO

After beating out Mayor Chris Heinz in a contentious overthrow of Selma's old guard in 1964, Joe Smitherman masterfully tended and cultivated his position as Selma's political kingpin. In the words of *Montgomery Advertiser* reporter Al Benn, Smitherman "wound up redefining 'political establishment' in Selma." He renounced his segregationist past when black voters became an increasing part of the electorate. The mayor made much to-do about paving all of the city's streets and appointing African Americans as city department heads, as well as holding barbecues in black neighborhoods.¹ Throughout the years, black candidates had thrown in their lot against the mayor but came up short against a combination of Smitherman's politicking and low turnout amongst black voters.

James Perkins Jr., a businessman and Selma native, emerged as the mayor's most formidable and determined challenger in the 1990s. Perkins entered his first race in 1991 with the slogan "Moving Forward, United," and he pledged to prioritize economic expansion and "real issues" over "political struggles."² When Smitherman secured re-election in 1992 with the help of absentee ballots, Perkins, undeterred, entered the race again in 1996.³ This time, however, the mayor actively charged Perkins of being in league with Rose Sanders, the political nemesis of white Selma. After the mayor's campaign signs were

¹ Alvin Benn, *Reporter: Covering Civil Rights – and Wrongs in Dixie* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2006), 373; David Firestone, "Old Southern Strategy Faces Test in Selma Vote," *New York Times*, Sept. 10, 2000, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

² Victor Inge, "Perkins begins bid for mayor," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 17, 1991.

³ Sue Hite, "Perkins' election contest claim goes back to courtroom," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 6, 1993.

vandalized and police found a young man driving the Sanders' van with twenty-five cans of spray paint, Smitherman publicly claimed that the incident "verifie[d] that Rose Sanders is running Perkins' mayoral campaign."⁴ That August's election brought in 4,656 votes for Smitherman to Perkin's 4,295, returning the mayor to office with a 371-vote majority.⁵

Repeated confrontations and accusations of fraud over the next four years hardened the battle lines between Mayor Smitherman and the "Jeff Davis crowd."⁶ Cecil Williamson, the vocal conservative, joined forces with his former enemy, Mayor Smitherman, as the political control of white citizens slipped away. In a 1997 editorial, Williamson told a fable of how the sheep (black citizens) and the cattle (white citizens) live harmoniously in Selma until the "a pack of jackals masquerading as sheep" (Rose and Hank Sanders) came to town. Local historian Alston Fitts accused Williamson of utter absurdity. Fitts agreed that while the area had serious problems to deal with, no solution was possible "by demonizing our opponents, whether they be black or white, sheep or cattle."⁷ Tensions continued to fester, however. In a city council meeting soon after, Council President Carl Morgan tried to silence Rose Sanders by shouting "Shut up!" which then prompted Sanders to try to physically grab Morgan's gavel from him.⁸

⁴ Joe Smitherman quoted in Nan Smith, "Smitherman: Racial posters are hate crimes," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 11, 1996.

⁵ "Joe T.' takes photo finish," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 28, 1996.

⁶ J.L. Chestnut, "Critics don't mention civic deeds," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 22, 1996.

⁷ Letter to editor by Alston Fitts, *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 27, 1997.

⁸ "Adults prove poor examples of city leadership," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 29, 1997.

Fanning the flames of political rivalry, Smitherman filed a complaint against Sen. Hank Sanders with the Alabama Ethics Commission for “unethical use of public funds.”⁹ He charged that the state senator used his chairmanship of the Senate budget committee to channel excessive amounts of money to Sanders’ wife’s civic projects.¹⁰ The Attorney General, however, deflated Smitherman’s crusade when he refused to open an investigation against Sanders, finding no “credible allegation of criminal wrongdoing.”¹¹ The same could not be said for the City of Selma. Shortly after the ethics probe cleared Sanders’ name, Selma Police Chief Randy Lewellen, City Clerk Mary Ramsey, and Assistant Building Inspector Craig Smitherman (nephew of the mayor) were either fired and/or resigned when their alleged misuse of hundreds of thousands of dollars of public funds led to investigations by the FBI, IRS, and other bodies.¹² One year later, Joe Smitherman found himself in front of the Alabama Ethics Commission facing charges of inappropriate use of city-owned vehicles. He was fined four thousand dollars.¹³ Hank Sanders highlighted the absurdity of the circumstances, as well as accusing the *Times-Journal* of unfair reporting. “Imagine the kind and number of stories which would have appeared if I and/or my wife had been anywhere remotely connected to the widespread theft in City Hall,” he wrote in a letter to the editor.¹⁴

⁹ Keysha Garrison, “Mayor to file ethics charges,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 18, 1997.

¹⁰ Phillip Rawls, “Sanders triples funding to wife’s private projects,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 22, 1997.

¹¹ Attorney General Bill Pryor quoted in Phillip Rawls, “Sanders not under AG investigation,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 2, 1997.

¹² Veto Roley, “Ethics probe clears Sanders,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 22, 1997; Robyn Harris, “City Council Oks investigation,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 7, 1997; Robyn Harris, “Investigation still taking place,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 16, 1997.

¹³ Robyn Harris, “Commission says Smitherman violated ethics law,” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 7, 1998; Chuck Chandler, “Ethics fines mayor \$4,000,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 5, 1998.

¹⁴ Letter to the editor from Sen. Hank Sanders, *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 20, 1998.

When James Perkins Jr. declared his candidacy for mayor for the third time in late December 1999, he could not avoid the divisions that dominated Selma's political scene. His "Moving Forward, United," campaign again promoted strengthening education and economic development, as well as building stronger community bonds through "truth and reconciliation." In front of a crowd of supporters gathered at city hall, he declared, "Know this – No one, I mean no one, controls me. Not my mother, not my father, not city hall, not Chestnut, Sanders and Pettaway Law Firm – no one controls Perkins."¹⁵ By the beginning of June, black former councilman Yusuf Salaam, Mayor Joe Smitherman, and black state representative Edward Maull had joined Perkins in the contentious race for mayor.¹⁶

The hot summer air in 2000 hung thick with accusations of voter fraud, vandalism, and everything in between. Cecil Williamson again manned the frontlines of voter registration, filing complaints against the board of registrars chairwoman Synethia Pettaway (who was also the sister of James Perkins) and Rose Sanders for registering to vote at addresses inside of the city instead of at their county residences.¹⁷ Williamson also represented Mayor Smitherman as an absentee voting manager where he issued more charges of fraud against black citizens.¹⁸ Alabama's Attorney General resolutely avoided the

¹⁵ Mona Taylor, "Perkins, Is third time a charm?" *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 29, 1999.

¹⁶ Mona Taylor, "Mayoral candidate complains of wrong-doing," *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 31, 2000; Mona Taylor, "Smitherman goes for 40," *Selma Times-Journal*, Apr. 6, 2000; Mona Taylor, "Maull wants no part of mayoral endorsements," *Selma Times-Journal*, June 1, 2000.

¹⁷ Penny Pool, "Registrar under fire for voting practices," *Selma Times-Journal*, July 30, 2000; Jonathan McElvey, "Sanders' voting practice disputed," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 2, 2000.

¹⁸ Penny Pool, "City voting scandal surfaces," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 18, 2000.

landmine-ridden ground of Selma's politics. He refused to send election observers, claiming that his office was not a law enforcement agency.¹⁹

On August 22, 2000, Selma citizens went to the polls to cast their vote for the next mayor. According to campaign finance reports, Smitherman dwarfed his competitors by raising \$57,764.46 and spending \$31,741 on his campaign; Yusuf Salaam came second, raising \$10,638.38, and James Perkins third at \$8,865.05.²⁰ When the results came in, it was Mayor Smitherman versus James Perkins in a run-off election scheduled for September 12. Perkins had maintained a lead with 3,735 votes to Smitherman's 3,311 in the city ballot boxes until the absentee ballots came in. Then Smitherman vaulted ahead with 4,065 votes or 46% of the vote over Perkins' 43%.²¹ Reporter Jonathan McElvy of the *Times-Journal* laid out what Selma was in for in the lead-up to the run-off. The "mayoral campaign will turn ugly fast," McElvy predicted "Smitherman won't take the lead in attacking Perkins; and Perkins won't take the lead in attacking Smitherman. Rather, supporters of both candidates will drop everything they're doing and sling mud in every direction they turn."²² The next three weeks proved all-too-true to his forecast.

While James Perkins publicly maintained his distance from the Sanders, the animated "Joe Gotta Go" campaign organized by Rose Sanders, the Alabama New South Coalition, and the National Voting Rights Museum was vital to his success. Instead of threatening to split the black vote by supporting one candidate, this cadre of black citizens bombarded

¹⁹ Penny Pool, "Selmians to decide city's future," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 22, 2000.

²⁰ Jonathan McElvy, "Smitherman leaves others in fiscal dust," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 22, 2000.

²¹ Penny Pool, "Run-Off: Perkins and Smitherman go at it for fourth time," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 23, 2000.

²² Jonathan McElvy, "Campaign is going to get ugly," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 23, 2000.

Selma's streets with the message that Joe Smitherman's time was up. NVRMI director Joanne Bland remembered grabbing her "Joe Gotta Go" sign at lunchtime and joining the crowd of activists at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, waving and yelling at the cars driving by.²³ The Joe Gotta Go activity only gave Mayor Smitherman another reason to charge that James Perkins was in the Sanders' pocket.

Hell broke loose at the end of August when a car with a "Joe Gotta Go" sign parked in front of the Chestnut, Sanders, Sanders, Pettaway, and Campbell law firm was doused in gasoline and set on fire. The whirlwind of fanatical accusations that followed highlighted how the mayoral run-off had become yet another battle in the political war between Mayor Smitherman and the Sanders. The Sanders blamed the car burning on the mayor and Cecil Williamson, calling it a political fear tactic and accusing them of fear-mongering to rally white votes. Williamson, in return, suggested that the Sanders' had set the car on fire themselves: "If our political opponents did this, it sure is an expensive publicity stunt," he claimed. Smitherman also retaliated, charging that the Joe Gotta Go campaign was creating a hateful atmosphere in the city.²⁴ A political scientist from the University of Alabama pegged the political environment in Selma when he charged that the mayoral race was entirely about racial politics, not concrete issues.²⁵ A Smitherman campaign poster illustrated this,

²³ Letter to editor from Linda Stewart, *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 16, 2000; Author's field notes, conversation with Joanne Bland, Selma, Alabama, May 2005.

²⁴ Jonathan McElvry, "Car set ablaze at Sanders' firm," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 29, 2000.

²⁵ Jonathan McElvry, "Expert: Organization, not issues, key to election," *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 6, 2000.

proclaiming “Joe Gotta Stay! YOU DON’T WANT ROSE RUNNING SELMA!” Nowhere was the actual candidate, James Perkins, mentioned.²⁶

On September 12th, the campaign circus came to an end as James Perkins unseated Mayor Joe Smitherman to become Selma’s first African American mayor. He won by 1,336 votes, or a 58 percent majority.²⁷ His victory came by the combined efforts of his own “Moving Forward United” campaign along with the “Joe Gotta Go” movement; Perkins’ described them as working “separately but in concert.”²⁸ Smitherman agreed, blaming Rose Sanders for his loss. “It’s almost like I was running against the whole world,” the mayor claimed. “They say Joe gotta go and Joe’s gone.”²⁹

On the weekend of October 1st, thousands of black Selmians celebrated their victory. After parading through the downtown, the crowd ended up at Memorial Stadium to watch the inauguration of the city’s first black mayor. The Selma High choir marked the occasion by singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the anthem of black America.³⁰ The song matched the feelings of Selma’s black residents; thirty-five years after the voting rights movement, black Selmians had finally succeeded in securing the political representation they had fought for.

²⁶ Photo, “Judgement Day,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 12, 2000.

²⁷ Penny Pool, “**JOE GOES:** Perkins finally unseats Smitherman,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 13, 2000.

²⁸ Carol Prejean Zippert, “Winning a victory for Selma – and a strong Black woman,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct. 7, 2000, Proquest Historical Newspapers.

²⁹ Penny Pool, “**JOE GOES:** Perkins finally unseats Smitherman,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Sept. 13, 2000.

³⁰ Arlethea W. Pressley, “Selma gets Perk-ed; Parade ushers in reign of Perkins as Selma’s mayor,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 1, 2000.

EPILOGUE

When Barack Obama came to Selma in 2007, James Perkins, Jr. was nearing the end of his second term in office. Many of Selma's black residents pinned their hopes on the city's first African American mayor, but it had been uphill battle from day one. Five days into his first term, the United Daughters of the Confederacy unveiled a monument of Nathan Bedford Forrest - the Confederate general who had defended the city in the Battle of Selma - on the grounds of the city-owned Joe T. Smitherman Historic Building. The bronze bust of Forrest gazed out over the surrounding black neighborhood from the top of a four foot granite pedestal boldly marked by the stars and bars. The engraved dedication honored him as "Defender of Selma; Wizard of the Saddle; Untutored Genius; The First With the Most." What it did not list was the rest of Forrest's résumé, which included the massacre of black Union troops at Fort Hood in Tennessee and serving as the Ku Klux Klan's first Grand Wizard. Protestors connected with the National Voting Rights Museum disrupted the Saturday afternoon dedication ceremony, changing their familiar slogan of "Joe Gotta Go," to "Nate Got To Go!"¹

The historical controversy unfolding on public property took Mayor Perkins completely by surprise. When he insisted on the monument being relocated, the newly-organized Friends of Forrest Committee paraded for the "tolerance of Southern heritage" and prepared for a court battle.² Meanwhile, General Forrest found himself under attack. His

¹ Jonathan McElvy, "Monument of Nathan Bedford Forrest draws protest," *Selma Times-Journal*, Oct. 8, 2000.

² Arlethea Pressly, "Friends of Forrest hosting parade," *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 16, 2000.

dissenters dumped trash over the monument, lobbed a cinderblock at his head, and at one point, slung a noose around his neck in an attempt to wrench him from his glory. After six months of raucous protest, white council member and former *Times-Journal* reporter, Jean Martin cast her vote with four of the black council members, sending the monument to keep watch over the Confederate dead buried in Old Live Oak Cemetery.³ The fight over Forrest highlighted the fierce factions and political rancor that continued to hang like smog over Selma. While the names of the players shifted some each election, the acrimonious rivalry between arch conservatives, like Cecil Williamson and Patricia Godwin, and black activists, such as Rose Sanders and Ward 7 councilwoman Bennie Ruth Crenshaw, all but consumed municipal politics. The battle between the Civil War and Civil Rights, white or black history (as if it divided so cleanly), played out again and again in newspaper editorials, radio broadcasts, and in city council chambers as the new century began. These symbolic struggles consumed Selma partly because the causes of and solutions to Dallas County's dismal economic realities remained so elusive, so seemingly unsolvable. As the rival factions thundered louder and louder, many Selma residents felt like their needs and the best interests of the city had gotten lost in the storm.

Raised in the early years of desegregation and baptized in Selma's fierce political rivalries, Mayor James Perkins was a product of his environment. Any African American who stepped into what had been Joe Smitherman's office of thirty-five years was bound to face some tribulations, but Perkins' ties with the Sanders and his forceful and at times

³ Arlethea Pressly, "Monument gets trashed," *Selma Times-Journal*, Dec. 13, 2000; Allen Tullos, *Alabama Getaway: the Political Imaginary and the Heart of Dixie* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 256.

arrogant personality attracted targeted censure. White council members from Ward 1 and 2 consistently positioned themselves against the mayor, publicly opposing him and questioning his leadership. Meanwhile, Perkins gained a reputation as being a “micromanager,” ordering all communications between council members and city department heads (who reported to the mayor) to be channeled through his office.⁴ Even though the mayor’s attempts to annex Valley Grande, a wealthy white area north of the city, and to cut funding to the Selma public library infuriated some, he won a second term with 56% of the vote, no runoff election required.⁵ However, the 2004 election also put Mayor Perkins’ most vocal adversary, Cecil Williamson, on the council, and the level of animosity and discord in city government reached new heights. Council meetings stretched on for hours as members grandstanded, accused, and argued, and city business sat unaddressed. While the mayor began holding his own work sessions over the authority of council president George Evans, Williamson accused councilwoman Bennie Ruth Crenshaw, a vocal supporter of Perkins, of working to undermine and overthrow local government. “Selma city officials cannot seem to hold a meeting without breaking into mud-slinging contests,” the *Times-Journal* reported in the lead up to the 2008 election.⁶ As mayor, Perkins swore he would attract much needed jobs to the area, but when George Evans challenged Perkins in the 2008 mayoral race, the council

⁴ “Council says mayor has gone too far,” *Selma Times-Journal*, June 20, 2002.

⁵ “Selma Says Four More Years for Mayor,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 25, 2004; Selma City Council Minutes, November 29, 2002, February 24, 2003, July 12, 2004, Selma City Hall, Selma, Alabama; “Library among services that could be cut,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 21, 2004; “Probate Judge responds to questions,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 23, 2004.

⁶ “Stop antics at meetings,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 17, 2006; “Council debates work sessions,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 22, 2007; Cecil Williamson, letter to editor, “Who is really in control of mayor?” *Selma Times-Journal*, May 6, 2007; “Much ado about city ballyhoo,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 5, 2008.

president told the *Times-Journal* that “Industry is not coming here as long as we’re fighting and fussing.”⁷

Regardless of personalities and rivalries, James Perkins also responded to the bleak situation that faced his city at the dawn of the 21st century. One mayor could not single handedly repair the economic straits of the Alabama Black Belt, even with a friendly city council and economic development team. The legacies of cotton and white supremacy kept poverty growing in Dallas County like kudzu vines in a watermelon patch. For one short decade after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, it seemed like the vote could dismantle this world of disparity. Then, during the last quarter of the twentieth century, the federal government, followed by industry, all but abandoned the Alabama Black Belt. Interstate 85 came to a dead stop in Montgomery, leaving a Black-Belt-sized hole between it and where Interstate 20 continued due west on the Mississippi state line. The closing of Craig Air Force Base took with it millions of dollars, hundreds of people, and dozens of local businesses. Black Belt industries and jobs fled overseas just as Reaganomics shredded the social safety net.

Selma’s first African American mayor took charge of a city plagued by economic problems much bigger than itself. The unemployment rate when Perkins began his term in office hovered around 10.7%. After the recession in the early 2000s sent that number soaring to 15.6%, it sunk down to 7.1% in 2007, the lowest rate in decades. But the relatively low number masked the hundreds of people who stopped even looking for jobs. During Perkins eight years as mayor, over 1,500 Selma residents either moved or dropped out of the

⁷ “Tuesday Elections Present Options for Mayor,” *Selma Times-Journal*, August 23, 2008.

job market entirely. The recession belied any ideas of lasting growth as the unemployment rate jumped to 18.6% in 2009.⁸

Selma, a Symbol of American democracy

So the Selma that Barack Obama visited in 2007 looked far dingier and divided than the shining legacy of the civil rights movement that he hoped to claim. Bloody Sunday had cemented Selma and voting rights together in a grand story of American democracy, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had turned Selma into a symbol of the civil rights movement's overarching success. Historian Taylor Branch authored an epic and beautifully-told trilogy of the United States during the years of Martin Luther King, Jr., best-selling books that historian John Dittmer called "most important" in shaping Americans' understanding of the civil rights movement.⁹ In the opening paragraph of his final volume, *At Canaan's Edge*, Branch wrote "every ballot is a piece of nonviolence, signifying hard-won consent to raise politics above firepower and bloody conquest." Selma, he goes on, was "the last revolution," to secure this right, the battle that made possible the guarantees of the Fifteenth amendment.¹⁰ And he is right. The Voting Rights Act did extend the power of the ballot to all American citizens, regardless of race. Southern voting rolls exploded with newly registered African Americans, and over time, black elected officials began showing up to work in city council chambers and county courthouses.

⁸ Selma City Civilian Labor Force, 2000 – 2012, Alabama Department of Labor in Cooperation with the Bureau of Labor Statistics. <http://www2.labor.alabama.gov/LAUS/default.aspx> (accessed January 17, 2014).

⁹ John Dittmer, "Taylor Branch's America," *Reviews in American History* 26 (Dec. 1998), 791.

¹⁰ Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965 – 68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), xi – 3.

But unfortunately, that is neither the whole story, nor where it ends. African Americans had never seen the vote as an end in itself. It was the brick and mortar needed to build a community with well-funded schools and qualified teachers, accessible mortgages and loans, good jobs, self-sufficiency, and security. All of these things – political representation, economic opportunity and independence, quality education, and hope for a better life – were part and parcel of what National Voting Rights Museum director Joanne Bland called the “good freedom.”¹¹ While the vote brought political power, it did not come with the rest. Only by overlooking these parallel demands, only by focusing solely on achieving voting rights does Selma become a triumphant story. It is this voting rights story that is told and told again in the most common tales of civil rights.

High school textbooks - arguably Americans’ main source of knowledge about the movement – are some of the staunchest perpetuators of mythic Selma. Told in one, maybe two paragraphs, the best accounts trace the leadership of Dr. King and the brutality of Sheriff Clark, then move on to the vision of President Johnson that led to the passing of the Voting Rights Act. In the worst case scenarios give all credit for the act to the president’s political acumen.¹² Documentaries, news coverage, and commemoration events reinforce this partial story. Rows of marchers build into a grainy American flag in opening segment of

¹¹ Hasan Kwame Jeffries has called these diverse but interlocking demands of the black freedom struggle, “freedom rights,” or “the assortment of civil and human rights that emancipated African Americans identified as the crux of freedom;” Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* (New York: New York University, 2009), 4.

¹² These United States history textbooks are some of the most common used in secondary school and college-level, according to the independent American Textbook Council; Robert A. Divine, et al., *America Past and Present*, 4th edition (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1995) 905 – 906; James West Davidson, et al., *Nation of Nations: A Narrative History of the American Republic*, 6th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2008), 868; James A. Henretta, et al., *America’s History: Volume 2: Since 1865*, 2nd edition (New York: Worth Publishers, 1993), 954-955; Mary Beth Norton, et al., *A People and A Nation: A History of the United States*, 2nd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), 946 – 947.

the *Eyes on the Prize* documentary, before settling on an iconic photograph from the Selma-to-Montgomery march. Accompanying the sequence, a woman sings “well the one thing we did right was the day we started to fight,” implying that the “prize” of integration had been won.

Likewise, Bill Clinton became the first president to attend Jubilee, the annual commemoration of Bloody Sunday hosted by the National Voting Rights Museum, in 2000. Coretta Scott King, speaking to a crowd from a raised platform at the base of Broad Street, first thanked the president for coming on the 35th anniversary, saying to him, “your presence here today acknowledges the final contribution of the march for voting rights to American Democracy.” As the President stepped up to the microphone, the Edmund Pettus Bridge towered behind him, a powerful symbol of all that had transpired in Selma. He thanked those who chose to risk everything for the right to vote. “It has been said that the Voting Rights Act was signed in ink in Washington,” Clinton stated, “but it was first signed in blood in Selma.”¹³ The President was not wrong; he just left out how voting rights did not begin to touch entrenched economic disparity.

¹³ *Eyes on the Prize* (Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1987), NCLive Video Collection. <http://media.nclive.org>. (accessed January 20, 2014); Coretta Scott King; President Bill Clinton quote in “President Clinton Speaks at 35th Anniversary Ceremony For Selma to Montgomery Civil Rights March,” CNN, March 5, 2000; <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0003/05/se.01.html>. (accessed January 20, 2014).



Figure 36: A line of prominent figures lead the Jubilee commemoration march in 2007. Front row, from left , Rev. Joseph Lowery of the SCLC, Senator Barack Obama, and NVRMI director Joanne Bland; from right, attorney Faya Rose (Sanders) Toure, former President William Clinton, Senator Hillary Clinton, and Representative John Lewis. Courtesy of New York Times.

The Edmund Pettus Bridge has become a site of pilgrimage, a place where politicians, modern day civil rights activists, students, and ministers come to cast themselves in the history and legacy of the fight for voting rights.¹⁴ Obama came to claim the legacy of the civil rights movement, to situate himself as the inheritor of the struggle to make American democracy truly democratic. But there's a saying in Selma that Selma did more for civil rights than civil rights did for Selma. The triumphal narrative of voting rights is part of that problem.

In all of the iconic images and presidential homages, there is little mention of the economic objectives that had always been the other half of the local freedom struggle to black residents. Those parallel demands for equity in jobs, loans, and land remained pressing long after African Americans in Dallas County could exercise their right to vote. Missing

¹⁴ Allen Tullos, *Alabama Getaway*, 256.

from the triumphal narrative is the dramatic transformation that fundamentally altered the economic landscape of the Black Belt. From cotton to cattle, industry to unemployment checks, black citizens perpetually found themselves on the losing end of economic change. Many had neither savings nor a high school education to rely on. At the start of the 21st century, nearly four decades of federal divestment and globalization had sapped Dallas County of jobs. Now the major presence of the government came in disability checks, housing projects, and SNAP cards. The political rights that black Dallas County citizens had shed their blood for in 1965 could not undo alone this legacy of economic disparity. When African Americans finally secured meaningful political representation in the last decade of the twentieth century, it could not single-handedly fix a resegregated school system, the steady stream of jobs overseas, and the long miles to the nearest interstate. As politicians – even the United States’ first African American president – come and go, the harsh economic realities of Selma carry on unchanged.

Nathan Bedford Forrest Lives On

In March 2012, Nathan Bedford Forrest broke free from his reign over the Confederate dead resting beneath the Spanish-moss in Old Live Oak Cemetery. A cemetery worker looked up from spreading gravel one morning and noticed that the bronze bust was missing. “I’ll be honest, I don’t make a habit of looking over there every day,” cemetery superintendent Michael Pettaway told the *Times-Journal*, but sometime, when no one was watching, kidnappers had made off with the General. Calls to local scrap yards turned up nothing, and the reward of \$20,000 put up by the Friends of Forrest failed to return the

bust.¹⁵ By the sweltering days of late summer, Forrest's supporters had raised enough money to start construction on a new fence and elevated pedestal for the monument's replacement. But disagreements arose over the design of the soon-to-be twelve-foot-tall, handicap accessible, and L.E.D.-lighted monument, as well as who rightfully owned the land under Confederate Circle – the United Daughters of the Confederacy or the city.¹⁶

From there, the controversy divided into the all too familiar factions. The Friends of Forrest, represented by councilman Cecil Williams and activist Pat Godwin, pointedly suggested that Rose Sanders had stolen the statue, while Sanders (who had changed her name to Faya Rose Toure) accused Forrest supporters of hiding the bust to attract sympathy. After protesters, of whom Toure was one, physically threw themselves in front of the cement mixer churning wet concrete for the new walkway, the city council called a halt to all construction. Only the Friends of Forrest seemed confident that they owned the land in Confederate Circle and could proceed in whichever way they fancied. Meanwhile, Malika Sanders started an online petition to drum up support for her and her mother's cause. "Here we are on the 150th anniversary of the Civil War," she wrote, "and we're still having the same fights."¹⁷ A year and a half of legal battles and bitter exchanges ended when the city council voted 5 – 4 to deed the one acre tract of land in the cemetery to the local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in January 2014. Shouts echoing from the incensed

¹⁵ Tim Reeves, "Monument is now headless," *Selma Times-Journal*, March 13, 2012; Tim Reeves, "\$20K reward offered for bust," *Selma Times-Journal*, Mar. 28, 2012;

¹⁶ Tim Reeves, "Confusion surrounds cemetery land deed," *Selma Times-Journal*, Aug. 10, 2012.

¹⁷ Robbie Brown, "Bust of Civil War General Stirs Anger in Alabama," *New York Times*, Aug. 25, 2012.

protesters, who had been removed to outside the council chambers, got so loud that council members were forced to temporarily stop proceedings.¹⁸

From a birds-eye view, round two of the Forrest battle (or maybe round three depending on who was counting) looked an awful lot like what Malika Sanders had called “the same fights.” But a view from Dallas Avenue, just north of Old Live Oak cemetery, made the situation seem fuzzier and not so certain. A group of two-story, brick apartment buildings – a public housing complex called Valley Creek Homes - stood across the street, on the other side of the stone wall surrounding the cemetery. Originally built for poor white residents, they now housed mostly black families, some of whom now faced the prospect of putting their children to bed at night with the spotlighted Confederate general illuminating their bedroom. But while African Americans opposed the monument or were plain sick of the Forrest saga, many, like those in the Valley Creek Homes and other public housing projects across Selma, faced more immediate problems.

As Cecil Williamson and Faya Rose (Sanders) Toure swung figurative punches at each other, many residents worried about how their part-time job at Wal-Mart or McDonalds was going to pay for the rent, medical bills, groceries, and school supplies. Black and white parents alike wondered about the quality of the segregated public or private schools and how safe their children were in the city’s streets. Many questioned how business could grow when bitter arguments in city hall and on radio talk shows made it seem like everyone in Selma fit into one of two extremes. The fighting and fussing of a few drowned

¹⁸ Josh Bergeron, “Monument fight ends with split vote,” *Selma Times-Journal*, Jan. 15, 2014.

out the majority of voices – black and white - in the middle, those that were sincerely concerned about Dallas County’s daunting economic woes.

Pinpointing how those deeply-rooted troubles came to be, or harder yet, figuring out a genuine solution to them continues to be a daunting and elusive task. In the absence of apparent direction, of a guaranteed way to bring true prosperity to Dallas County and all of its residents, the almost-crazed battles about the past – wielded for political purposes, personal power, and grandstanding in the name of justice - continue to tower above all else. Only when African Americans’ dreams of freedom come true, only when political rights and economic justice are extended to all Americans, can Selma possibly be heaven.

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