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STANDING GUARD AT THE DOOR OF LIBERTY: BLACK POPULISM IN SOUTH CAROLINA, 1886–1895

OMAR H. ALI*

BLACK POPULISM—THE MOVEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN farmers, sharecroppers, and agrarian workers that paralleled the white Populist movement in the late nineteenth century—took initial form in South Carolina in 1886 with the creation of the Cooperative Workers of America (CWA).¹ The spread of the CWA, followed by the establishment of the Colored Farmers Alliance (CFA) and the subsequent election of George Washington Murray, an insurgent CFA black leader to Congress via the Republican party, provides a glimpse into the development of the movement in the two decades following the collapse of Reconstruction and before the consolidation of legal disfranchisement and segregation of African Americans under Jim Crow.

Within the larger continuity of black organizing in the nineteenth century, the CWA may be viewed as one in a series of sequential and overlapping civic and religious organizations created by African Americans. Following the Civil War, these organizations included black Baptist and Methodist churches, Union Leagues, black fraternal orders, and mutual benefit societies. Independent institution-building continued in the years following Reconstruction with the formation of the Colored Agricultural Wheels, the Knights of Labor, the CWA, and the CFA. These organizations, in addition to the vital role of black families and their immediate communities, served multiple functions. Most importantly, they provided African Americans the necessary vehicles and social space to more freely communicate, pool economic resources, and train new leadership.

The organizing process linking the southern branch of the Knights of Labor—which by 1886 had become de facto a black organization as it spread into the South—and the CFA, through the work of the CWA, may be traced through the actions of its local leaders in South Carolina: Sherman McCrary, Lee Minor, Hiram F. Hover, and C. J. Holloway.² Within one year, the

* Omar H. Ali is assistant professor of history at Towson University.

¹ For histories of the white Populist movement, see Lawrence C. Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993); Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (1951; reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).

² Sidney H. Kessler, "The Organization of Negroes in the Knights of Labor," *Journal of Negro History* 37 (July 1952): 269. Founded in 1869 by garment-cutters in

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mantle of the CWA was taken up by the CFA, whose state lecturer, George Washington Murray, was elected to Congress as a Republican in 1892, propelling a dynamic black leader of the burgeoning independent movement into national office. Murray, who served as the last African American Congressman in the state until the modern civil rights era, would lead the fight against the Democratic party and black disfranchisement. By 1895 that fight was all but lost, as a constitutional convention was organized in South Carolina that rewrote the state's constitution to effectively eliminate African American access to the ballot. Over a decade before, however, black workers had begun to presciently organize themselves into locals which, among other things, called for reforms regarding the electoral process.

THE COOPERATIVE WORKERS OF AMERICA

The CWA was born out of a northern union-organizing model grounded in the particular experiences of African Americans in the South. In 1885 Hiram Hover, a white labor organizer who had been speaking on behalf of the Knights of Labor in North Carolina's piedmont, broke from the national labor order. That year he moved to South Carolina to form the CWA, when his views had become too radical for the union's national and state leadership.³ The new organization focused primarily on the concerns of rural African Americans, specifically, issues of land reform, education, and the elimination of the poll tax. In 1886 the CWA, along with several other organizations in the South, helped give expression to Black Populism, which had begun to coalesce as an independent movement of black farmers, sharecroppers, and agrarian workers. Theirs would be a movement distinct from the white Populist movement, with its own separate leaders, tactics, and organizations.

As CWA historian Bruce Baker describes: "Around the 10th of February, Hover appeared in downtown Spartanburg, a growing cotton mill center, and spoke for two and a half hours to a crowd of [approximately] four hundred men, about three-quarters of whom were black."⁴ Hover charged that the Knights of Labor constitution did not sufficiently address issues such as land distribution and taxation, the electoral process, and the need for

Philadelphia, the Knights of Labor began to spread into the Upper South in 1885. As chapters were organized in the South, it became clear that biracial locals would be the exception, not the norm.

³ Bruce E. Baker kindly sent me an advance copy of his essay "'The First Anarchist That Ever Came to Atlanta': Hiram F. Hover from New York to the New South," in *Radicalism in the South since Reconstruction*, ed. Rachel Rubin, James Smethurst, and Chris Green (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, forthcoming).

⁴ Bruce E. Baker, "The 'Hoover Scare' in South Carolina, 1887: An Attempt to Organize Black Farm Labor," *Labor History* 40 (August 1999): 262.

"a free cooperative school system"—issues of particular importance to African Americans, whose access to decent land, political options, and public resources had withered away with Redemption (that is, the Democratic-party takeover of the South in the late 1870s).⁵ For advocating land reform, Hover was variously called a "communist" and an "anarchist" by his detractors.⁶ To most African Americans, however, Hover was merely calling for economic justice.

While Hover may have been the one to launch the CWA, African Americans led its further expansion. As Baker notes, it was "a handful of local black organizers who did the legwork of establishing CWA locals."⁷ The *Charleston News and Courier* described the typical CWA organizer as going through the country "talking to the colored people wherever he could find them alone, in the fields or in the houses."⁸ In describing the organizing process, the paper went on to note that the traveling organizers would "read the labor catechism and constitution to his hearers," an approach reminiscent of black Union League organizers in the South during the mid 1860s.⁹ According to Reconstruction historian Eric Foner, Union League organizers convened in black churches, schools, homes, and, when necessary, in the fields or the woods.¹⁰ Their meetings, which were guarded by armed sentinels, began with a minister leading a prayer, followed by a pledge to the Republican party. Displayed on a nearby table were "a Bible, a copy of the Declaration of Independence, and an anvil or some other emblem of labor"—religious and secular symbols linking the spiritual, political, and material realities of African Americans in the South.¹¹

In South Carolina, CWA locals comprised as few as five dues-paying members. Small in size, so as not to draw attention from white planters and others potentially hostile to their organizing efforts, local members elected a secretary, treasurer, and president. CWA members briefly established a cooperative store, but were unable to sustain their initiative for lack of funding.¹² Forced to take precautionary measures whenever and wherever they met, meetings were usually held after midnight, often in churches, with armed sentries posted at entrances to guard against raids.¹³ Like the

⁵ *Preamble and Declaration of Principles of the Co-Operative Workers of America*, North Carolina State Archives (Catawba County records, Series C.R. 021, Box 928.3, Folder: Secret Political Organizations, 1887).

⁶ *Concord Times* (North Carolina), April 15 and 22, 1886.

⁷ Baker, "The 'Hoover Scare' in South Carolina," 264.

⁸ Quoted in *Greenville News*, July 1, 1887.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 283.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Baker, "The 'Hoover Scare' in South Carolina," 265.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 264.

Knights of Labor, from which the CWA was in part derived, the organization attempted to raise wages, improve working conditions, and reduce the hours that black agrarian laborers were compelled to work during certain seasons or risk losing employment.¹⁴ The CWA's call for an inheritance tax and a guarantee of weekly wages—that is, in addition to a repeal of the poll tax, the implementation of a free cooperative school system, and land reform—placed the organization on the left wing of the political spectrum of organizations in the era. Nevertheless, the CWA's call for the direct election of U.S. senators and a "free ballot" placed it within the broader Populist camp that would soon challenge the Democratic party at the polls.¹⁵

One of the more dynamic black leaders of the CWA, Sherman McCrary, was an agrarian worker from the Laurel Creek section of Greenville County. (Born in 1886 near South Packlett, North Carolina, he would later attend the seminary at Lincoln University and pursue a career as a minister).¹⁶ McCrary's grandfather, Isham McCrary, was as an outspoken community leader during the height of Reconstruction, who, on July 8, 1871, stood up to the Ku Klux Klan by testifying before a Congressional investigating committee in Spartanburg.¹⁷ While Sherman McCrary's older brother Aaron was also active in the CWA, it was the younger sibling who assumed a leadership role. In April 1887, McCrary formed a club at the Pleasant View Baptist Church in the Fairview community of southern Greenville County, where meetings, "guarded by four armed pickets," were held late into the

¹⁴ There are similarities between the constitutions of the Knights of Labor and the CWA. See Baker, "The 'Hoover Scare' in South Carolina, 1887," 262. The preamble of the 1881 constitution of the Knights of Labor makes certain demands, including "the establishment of co-operative institutions, productive and distributive," and "secur[ing] for both sexes equal pay for equal work." Terence V. Powderly, *Constitution of the General Assembly, District Assemblies, and Local Assemblies of the Order of the Knights of Labor in America* (Marblehead, Mass.: Statesman Publishing Co., 1883).

¹⁵ Kessler, "The Organization of Negroes in the Knights of Labor," 267-68. Culminating in the Omaha Platform of 1892, radical economic and political demands (including the eight-hour work day and the direct election of U.S. senators) were articulated by the Knights of Labor, followed by the CWA, and then by the People's party.

¹⁶ Sherman McCrary was most likely given his first name in honor of Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman, known for leading the Union army advance on Atlanta during his "march to the sea" in 1864. *African American Biographical Database*, <http://aabd.chadwyck.com/> (accessed January 14, 2006).

¹⁷ *Charleston News and Courier*, July 3, 1887 (from the *Greenville News*, July 1, 1887); U.S. Congress, *Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Conditions of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States (The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy)* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872), 538.

night.¹⁸ Over the next two months, he organized two other clubs in areas south and northwest of Fairview and two additional clubs by July—one in Simpsonville, near Hopewell Church, and another in Fountain Inn. As McCrary established these clubs, he trained others, many his senior, to carry on the work of the organization. Among those he directed were Riley Owens, Allen Dorroh, and Lee Harrison.¹⁹

Recruitment efforts by leaders such as McCrary and Hover were successful, and the CWA began to grow. The planters reacted swiftly, but singled out Hover for attack. In part, this was due to Hover being less careful in keeping his activities covert than his black colleagues, whose collective history cautioned prudence, but it might also have reflected another dynamic—white prejudices. By targeting Hover as the sole leader of the movement, planters and farm operators were helping to reinforce their racial ideas of African Americans as incapable of organizing without white leadership. In some ways, that bias continues to be reflected in the manner in which Black Populism is characterized by most scholars today: a movement of African Americans under white leadership, as opposed to a movement of African Americans, principally led by African Americans, but which also included key white leaders.

Over the course of 1886 and 1887, Hover, who had been traveling westwardly across the northern rim of South Carolina, is reported to have established as many as a dozen black locals. The “Hoover Scare” that broke out among white planters in the area soon rippled across the broader white community.²⁰ Various attempts to infiltrate and uncover the plans of the CWA had been thwarted, which only served to fuel the rumor mill. Fear of reprisals and “Negro domination” loomed large. Soon, word spread that the CWA was organizing “against the whites [and encouraging] hostility between the races.”²¹ White militia committees were hurriedly formed and deployed, with vigilantes scouring the countryside on horseback in search of suspected black leaders.²²

One CWA member who was cornered in the panic divulged information about others he knew to be involved in the organization. Threatened, the member revealed a “club list” that included the names of seventeen black leaders in the area.²³ Planters launched a local inquisition, and the

¹⁸ Greenville *Enterprise and Mountaineer*, July 6, 1887.

¹⁹ Baker, “The ‘Hoover Scare’ in South Carolina,” 266.

²⁰ As Baker has pointed out, “Hoover spelled his name ‘Hover’ in a letter to Terence V. Powderly, May 22, 1886.” *Ibid.*, 261.

²¹ Charleston *News and Courier*, July 6, 1887.

²² Baker, “The ‘Hoover Scare’ in South Carolina,” 274.

²³ Presumably, few such lists were ever made. Of those that were, hardly any have survived, probably because they were destroyed for fear that they would be discovered by planters or other white employers. As experience taught black

people named were quickly tracked down. The captives were initially brought into a large public room for questioning, but they were subsequently transferred to an isolated location. Although one newspaper reported that "the colored people were assured that no bodily harm should befall them," the move was clearly intended to intimidate them into compliance.²⁴

Under cross-examination, more names surfaced. It was later revealed that the CWA had upwards of two thousand members in the Spartanburg area alone.²⁵ More people were rounded up and ordered to disband their locals. While most complied, a few apparently remained obstinate. In early July, a young black barber named Lee Minor spoke at a meeting in Greenville, where more than 150 African American men and women gathered in the city park and heard him emphatically deny that "the Co-operative Workers had ever made threats of any kind against the whites or encouraged hostility between the races in any shape or form."²⁶ In hindsight, knowing that at least some of the members of the CWA went on to join other black agrarian organizations (based, for instance, on CFA membership claims), one may interpret what Minor reportedly said as an effort to simultaneously dissipate tensions while keeping an eye towards further recruitment. Without detailed records, however, scholars are left to discern what happened through circumstantial evidence.

To discourage further organizing among black workers, planters in Cedar Grove, Woodruff, and Dacusville formed militia companies. For good measure, they distributed additional firearms to the local white adult male population. The apparent fear aroused by the formation of the CWA led the Dacusville militia to swell to over 180 men; the Cedar Grove militia even formed a cavalry.²⁷ (Ironically, if anyone had anything to fear, it was the black population. After all, it was their leaders who were summarily arrested, held captive, and interrogated against their will. Added to this, African Americans now faced armed, roving squads.) Despite what can only be called a massive paramilitary presence, African Americans continued holding meetings throughout July 1887. Out of these meetings, new leaders emerged. For instance, when Republican attorney D. R. Speer of Greenville, the announced speaker, failed to appear at a gathering of some thirty African Americans, a young white man named Tom Singleton rose on behalf of the CWA and spoke out against the machinations of the Demo-

organizers, virtually everything needed to be done covertly, without written record, so as not to jeopardize the people involved in the organizing process.

²⁴ Baker, "The 'Hoover Scare' in South Carolina," 274-76.

²⁵ *Greenville Enterprise and Mountaineer*, September 28, 1887; *Spartanburg Carolina Spartan*, September 28, 1887.

²⁶ *Charleston News and Courier*, July 6, 1887.

²⁷ Baker, "The 'Hoover Scare' in South Carolina," 281.

cratic party. Immediately following his speech, a group of Democrats swept in to break up the meeting.

Baker, the historian who has done the most work to shed light on the CWA, concludes: "The CWA, as a viable movement with the potential to effect change for laborers in South Carolina, was dead."²⁸ The CWA was indeed dead, but while the particular organization may have been destroyed, individual organizers had not been silenced. The "movement" continued. As would become clear, a transition was underway between the two major phases of Black Populism in the region—from the earlier economic-organizing phase of the movement towards the independent electoral phase, including the formation of third parties, the running of insurgent and independent candidates, and the use of fusion with the Republican party. From this perspective, the demise of the CWA may be understood as the beginning of a different period in the South Carolina movement, one in which its black organizers took added precautions so as not to leave a trace. Hover, however, remained public in his organizing of black workers—and it nearly cost him his life.

During the winter of 1886, Hover went on to organize black agrarian workers in eastern Georgia, where he placed advertisements for upcoming meetings. In the spring of 1887, while "speaking incendiary doctrine" at the pulpit of a church in Warrenton, he was almost killed. A group of mounted and masked, white-robed men rode up to the church and shot him through a window.²⁹ Hover narrowly survived the attempted assassination, but lost an eye, the bullet lodging in the left side of his face near the back of his ear. Apparently, no one else was injured in the incident. Known thereafter as the "one eyed orator," Hover covered his left eye with a green patch. As soon as he could, he fled to New York, where he remained briefly before returning to the South—first to Atlanta, then Greenville, South Carolina, and finally Hickory, North Carolina. Most African Americans in the South, unlike Hover, lacked the financial resources to leave the region, even if they wanted. Lee Minor and other black leaders, whose family roots lay in the immediate vicinity, along with rank-and-file members of the CWA, simply returned to work—no doubt with suspicion by their bosses surrounding their every move. Some waited for the alarm regarding the "hostilities" to subside before making their next move. For instance, when directly confronted by a southern white journalist about whether or not he was planning to attend a Fourth of July meeting, Minor replied that "he didn't believe it would be best for him to go outside of Greenville . . . until the excitement had died out." Given the ongoing efforts to organize black agrarian workers, Minor's statement to the newspaper—like the earlier one he gave in front of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 277.

²⁹ *Athens Weekly Banner-Watchman* (Georgia), May 24, 1887.

a crowd in Greenville—suggests a tactical retrenchment, rather than a signal of final defeat.³⁰

THE COLORED FARMERS ALLIANCE

The CFA, launched in Texas in December 1886—the same year the CWA was founded in South Carolina—had organized chapters in Arkansas and Tennessee by 1888. Within one year, CFA organizers made their way into South Carolina. The connection between the Knights of Labor, the CWA, and the CFA has been summarized by Black Populism historian Gerald Gaither: “In South Carolina, the Colored Alliance movement was inspired by a forerunner, the Cooperative Workers of America, a subsidiary of the Knights of Labor.”³¹ An incident pointing to the connection between the CWA and the CFA was when Tom Briar of the South Carolina CWA urged his fellow members to listen to the CFA’s Cornelius J. Holloway in the summer of 1889. While Holloway invited members to join the black alliance, the details of his appeal, and the response he received, were either never recorded or subsequently destroyed. The *Greenville Enterprise and Mountaineer*, however, noted the following: “[Holloway] read the proceedings of the colored Farmers’ Alliance Association and urged the people to go into something that was known to be good.”³² Although the evidence is thin, the incident affirms some of the ties between independent black organizations at the grassroots.

A new generation of post-Reconstruction leaders was emerging, including younger African Americans such as Sherman McCrary, who helped mobilize their communities to action. These leaders carried on the work of their predecessors by creating agrarian labor associations and clubs built on already-established networks created by the black churches and mutual aid societies formed during Reconstruction. But as political and economic conditions deteriorated for black farmers, sharecroppers, and agrarian workers, leaders of the new movement turned to the electoral arena.³³ In the

³⁰ *Columbia Daily Register*, July 1, 1887; *Atlanta Constitution*, March 13, 1889.

³¹ Gerald H. Gaither, *Blacks and the Populist Revolt: Ballots and Bigotry in the “New South”* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 8. A revised edition of Gaither’s book, renamed *Blacks and the Populist Movement*, was published in 2005 by the University of Alabama Press.

³² Baker, “The ‘Hoover Scare’ in South Carolina,” 271; *Greenville Enterprise and Mountaineer*, July 3, 1889.

³³ Cotton prices had fallen precipitously in the last third of the nineteenth century, negatively affecting farmers, sharecroppers, and agrarian workers alike. The average price of cotton fell from approximately thirty-one cents per pound in 1866, to nine cents in 1886, and then down to six cents by 1893. See *Prices of Farm Products Received by Producers*, Statistical Bulletin 16, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Annual Report for South Atlantic and Middle South States (Washington,

coming years, CFA leaders in the South and Midwest would help establish third parties and run independent and insurgent candidates for public office.³⁴

In different parts of the South, CFA leaders, such as James H. Powell of Mississippi, were shepherding Black Populism from agrarian organizing towards the formation of a national third party. Locally, political circumstances did not always permit, or favor, forming or joining a third party. In certain Congressional districts, black leaders saw the Republican party, despite its having been largely rendered impotent in the South with the collapse of Reconstruction, as the tactical means of building opposition to the Democratic-party establishment. Among the most prominent CFA leaders in the region-wide transition towards independent politics were North Carolina's Walter A. Pattillo and Virginia's William Warwick, the latter accused of "introducing politics" and "getting his nefarious work in the secret conclave [i.e., Colored Alliance]."³⁵ In South Carolina, George Washington Murray, the CFA's state lecturer, took the lead. In 1893 he was nominated and subsequently elected to Congress as a Republican. But whether through an independent party (notably, the People's party, as was the case in Georgia and, later, Texas), fusion (for example, between the People's party and the Republican party in North Carolina), or largely through the Republican party (as in South Carolina), African Americans sought a variety of electoral tactics to strengthen their leverage against the Democrats.

The idea of uniting black and white voters in a new party apparently had support among African Americans in South Carolina. In August 1890, Joseph J. Rogers, a white CFA superintendent from Virginia (and later North Carolina), reported that the organization in South Carolina, comprising 40,000 African American farmers and sharecroppers, was prepared to vote *en masse* for candidates mutually agreed upon with white Populists.³⁶ Four months later, Texas-based CFA general superintendent Richard M. Humphrey observed, "[From] the inception of the Alliance movement among Negroes[,] they have been in favor of a new political party."³⁷ Moreover, when the Virginia CFA was falsely accused of encour-

D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1927), 46, 77, 91, 106, 119, 150, 165, 179, 194, 207, 238.

³⁴ Omar H. Ali, "Independent Black Voices from the Late 19th Century: Black Populists and the Struggle against the Southern Democracy," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 7 (Spring 2005): 4-18.

³⁵ William Edward Spriggs, "The Virginia Colored Farmers Alliance: A Case Study of Race and Class Identity," *Journal of Negro History* 64 (Summer 1979): 198.

³⁶ Lynchburg *Daily Virginia*, August 21, 1890; Spriggs, "The Virginia Colored Farmers Alliance," 194.

³⁷ *New York Sun*, December 4, 1890, quoted in *New York Age*, December 13, 1890.

aging its members to vote for Democrats in early August 1891, the organization made an official statement: "The colored [people's] . . . salvation rests in neither of the old political parties and [we] are no longer slaves to either."³⁸ It would be safe to assume that at least some African Americans in South Carolina concurred with the sentiment from Virginia.

Particularly difficult organizing conditions for black independents existed in South Carolina. Redeemers in South Carolina made plain that they would take decisive measures to suppress African Americans from gaining any organizational power that might infringe upon the political and economic interests of whites, as witnessed by the strong reaction to the CWA. In the face of such hostility, the CFA nevertheless organized some black support for the People's party in 1892. African Americans had to build support underground, though, without any assistance from the white alliances. As J. W. Bowden, a white Populist, remarked just weeks before the general election: "We are not considering the negro. This is a question the negroes will have to settle for themselves. I have reason to believe that thousands of them will not go with the Republicans any longer. Especially do I believe this will be the case among the Colored Alliance."³⁹ Most African Americans in South Carolina ended up supporting the Republican ticket in 1892; no People's party ticket even made an appearance in the state in 1894.⁴⁰ Without a functioning third party in South Carolina, black voters necessarily turned to the Republican party, through which the CFA's leading organizer, George Washington Murray, was soon elected to Congress.⁴¹

³⁸ *Richmond Dispatch*, August 11, 1891.

³⁹ *National Economist*, October 8, 1892.

⁴⁰ Black Populism, as an independent movement of African Americans from the mid 1880s to the mid 1890s, comprised men and women who affiliated with a number of agrarian organizations and political parties, including the People's party and the Republican party, depending upon local tactical considerations and calculations. The narrow (albeit dominant) historical interpretation of Black Populism comprising only African Americans affiliated with the People's party misses the breadth and depth of the movement. See Ali, "Independent Black Voices from the Late 19th Century," 4-18.

⁴¹ Another prominent black member of the South Carolina Colored Farmers Alliance was Isaiah D. Williams. Williams, an agriculturalist and educator, was born in Marion, South Carolina, in 1860. He taught schools in the Marion County communities of Savage, Ariel, Oakton, Campbell's Bridge, and Bostic, where he counted a total of 360 pupils. Together with E. H. Williams, he owned 160 acres of land worth \$480, with buildings and other improvements on the property worth \$250. Williams noted that his "aim is farming and merchandise" and optimistically reported that "the condition of the people is favorable, considering their circumstances. They are improving in many respects." *African American Biographical Database*, <http://aabd.chadwyck.com/> (accessed January 14, 2006).

Murray, born to slave parents in Sumter County, South Carolina, on September 22, 1853, was orphaned after the Civil War. He attended public schools and later studied at the State Normal Institute at Columbia and the University of South Carolina. He earned a living farming and teaching (he would later become a successful inventor of agricultural technologies). Described by one contemporary as "well-proportioned and straight as a South Carolina palmetto," Murray was elected "State Lecturer" of the CFA.⁴² While still closely associated with the Colored Alliance, he entered Republican-party politics and was appointed an inspector of customs at the port of Charleston in 1890. The appointment set the stage for his run for Congress two years later.⁴³

THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

In 1892 Murray, building on his growing grassroots popularity, sought and won the Republican party's nomination for Congress in the Seventh District, defeating three seasoned party leaders in the process. That autumn he went on to defeat Democrat Edwin M. Moise, a former attorney-general who had opposed political boss and state governor Benjamin R. Tillman. Unlike other elections, in which Republicans had their votes changed or invalidated, state-election-board canvassers in the Tillman camp refrained from tampering with the returns due to Murray's stance on "free silver" (contrary to the Republican sound-money policy).⁴⁴ Murray was declared the winner. As it turned out, an endorsement of Tillman by the CFA in 1890 (for his taking a public stance against lynching) appears to have additionally worked in Murray's favor in the 1892 Congressional election.⁴⁵ Over the next year and a half, as the state's CFA began to dissolve (it claimed 25,000 members at the end of 1892, down from 40,000 the year before), African Americans refocused their energies on electoral politics. Murray, serving in a highly visible public office, would shoulder much of the responsibility in combating the Democrats and their efforts to legally disfranchise African Americans in the state.⁴⁶

Serving in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1893 to 1895, Murray was an active member of the Committee on Education. He won a second

⁴² William J. Gaboury, "George Washington Murray and the Fight for Political Democracy in South Carolina," *Journal of Negro History* 62 (July 1977): 258-69.

⁴³ Letter from George Washington Murray to Booker T. Washington, July 7, 1894, in *Booker T. Washington Papers, Volume 3: 1889-95*, ed. Louis R. Harlan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 451-52, n. 1; George B. Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes, 1877-1900* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1952), 56-58.

⁴⁴ Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes*, 57.

⁴⁵ Gaboury, "George Washington Murray," 258-59.

⁴⁶ Gaither, *Blacks and the Populist Revolt*, 95.

plause from the Republican side of the aisle," Murray entered Congress on June 4, 1896—seven days before the end of the first session.⁴⁸

Called "The Black Eagle of Sumpter," Murray aligned himself with Populist-oriented colleagues in Congress, condemning corporate interests opposed to the "producing and laboring masses."⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Murray's staunch opposition to disfranchisement, which pitted him directly against Tillman and his forces in the mid 1890s, propelled the Republican Congressman into the position of principal leader in both local and larger battles to protect black voting rights in the South. He spoke out against laws designed to have election managers representing only one party, voters intimidated when they went to the polls, ballot boxes stuffed or miscounted, and discriminatory registration procedures upheld in the courts. Among the most notorious of the procedural injustices devised by the Democratic party was the "eight-box rule," which required separate ballot boxes at the polls for each office. The rule was designed to induce black voters who were illiterate to miscast their ballots, thereby providing a legal pretext for invalidating their votes. Tillman boasted that despite the "enormous negro majority . . . under our registration and eight-box laws[,] two-thirds of the negroes can't vote."⁵⁰

Murray introduced and attempted to pass legislation guaranteeing federal protection of voting rights. He presented numerous petitions on the floor of Congress and called for a return to a "republican form of government."⁵¹ In February 1895, as the political situation at home grew worse, he took a leave of absence from Congress and returned to South Carolina to help organize the campaign against the rewriting of the state constitution. Despite his efforts, a constitutional convention was held that drafted, following what was called the "Mississippi plan," a new state constitution effectively disfranchising the entire African American voting population.⁵² By 1900 Tillman would state: "We have done our level best [to prevent blacks from voting] . . . we have scratched our heads to find out how we could

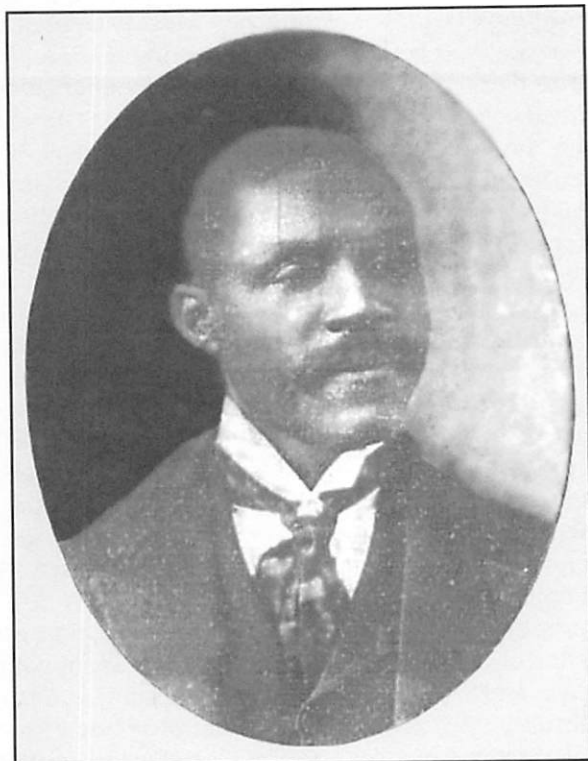
⁴⁸ Gaboury, "George Washington Murray," 262, 266; *Congressional Record*, 54th Congress, 1st Session (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1896). I would like to thank Tia Bynum at Towson University for her research assistance on Murray's Congressional record.

⁴⁹ *Congressional Record*, 53rd Congress, 1st Session (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1893), 860; Gaboury, "George Washington Murray," 258.

⁵⁰ *Charleston News and Courier*, October 11, 1892.

⁵¹ *Congressional Record*, 53rd Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894), 2092.

⁵² George Washington Murray, *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M001106> (accessed January 15, 2006). See George Washington Murray, *Race Ideals: Effects, Cause, and Remedy for the Afro-American Race Troubles* (Princeton, Ind.: Smith & Sons Publishing Company, 1914).



George Washington Murray (1853-1926). From *Twentieth Century Negro Literature* (1902).

term of office in the autumn of 1894, but only after fighting off several Republican challengers to win the party's nomination and overcoming Democratic attempts at fraud during the general election.⁴⁷ After receiving a slew of reports on flagrant violations in the voting and tabulating process, Murray demanded that the state Board of Canvassers overturn the election. Registrars appointed by the Democratic party severely manipulated vote counts in Charleston, where Murray commanded a strong following. In a city with over 8,000 eligible black voters, Murray officially received less than 400 votes (5 percent of the total). Throughout the district, election managers prohibited ballot-box inspections. Citing a mountain of evidence of fraud in the election (including testimonies), Murray took his case to Congress to the House Committee on Elections. After a protracted legal fight, the election was overturned, his rival, William Elliott, unseated, and "amid loud ap-

⁴⁷ Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes*, 58; *Charleston News and Courier*, May 11, 1894.

eliminate the last one of them. We stuffed ballot boxes. We shot them. We are not ashamed of it."⁵³ Murray had given a lengthy rebuke in Congress. He declared: "I know that the Sumners, Logans, Lincolns, Jeffersons, Grants, and Conklings are dead and sleeping beside the liberty of a class of their countrymen in whose behalf they have spoken and labored, but I do not despair. I have no apology to make for the truth, upon whose adamantine walls I am always willing to live or die."⁵⁴ Populist-leaning colleagues from the Midwest, including Indiana representative Henry Underwood Johnson, were supportive. But time, it seems, had run out for the Black Eagle, his fellow Black Populists, and their Republican allies.

In the end, Black Populism in South Carolina, as in other areas of the South, was unable to sustain itself as a movement in the face of paramilitary attacks, intimidation, and other extra-legal tactics orchestrated by the Democratic party. The next half-century witnessed periodic efforts to reclaim black voting rights in the South. But it would take a new generation, and a new movement—the modern civil rights movement—for African Americans (along with their white allies) to finally dismantle the laws, state constitutions, and local codes and practices that disfranchised millions of men and women across the region. Put another way, Black Populist leaders from South Carolina (from McCrary and Minor to Holloway and Murray) were part of a long line of independent black organizers in the South beginning during Reconstruction and continuing through the modern civil rights movement—each, in their own way, standing guard at the door of liberty.

⁵³ Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro, from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 91.

⁵⁴ *Congressional Record*, 53rd Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894), 2161.

**“TO SPEAK WHEN AND WHERE I CAN”:
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S
POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN SOUTH CAROLINA
IN THE 1940S AND 1950S**

CHERRISSE JONES-BRANCH*

HISTORIANS HAVE DONE MUCH EXCELLENT WORK IN exploring black political participation in the South (or the lack thereof, as it were), but they have not been as conscious about examining political activism on the part of black women.¹ They have been even less mindful about highlighting black women’s impact on political changes through African American mixed-sex and female political and social organizations. That said, black women in South Carolina were critical actors in African Americans’ epic struggle—from emancipation through the civil rights movement—to obtain access to electoral politics in the state. During Reconstruction, after black men gained the right to vote, black women assumed important roles in African American political participation. After the vast majority of African Americans in South Carolina were disfranchised by the Constitution of 1895, this was no less the case.² Well into the twentieth century, black women in South Carolina worked as leaders and followers at the grassroots level to enact political change for African Americans. This article examines the collective and individual parts they played in South Carolina in the 1940s and 1950s as they fought for greater access to the political arena for all African Americans through such gender-integrated and female organizations as the South Carolina Progressive Democratic party, the South Carolina Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, and the Columbia Women’s Council.

In August 1940, in the upcountry courthouse town of Gaffney, Lottie Polk Gaffney, teacher and principal of Petty Town School, went with four other women and several ministers to register to vote in the Cherokee County general election.³ When their turn to register came, the registrar

* Cherisse Jones-Branch is assistant professor of history at Arkansas State University.

¹ One recent exception is Peter F. Lau’s *Democracy Rising: South Carolina and the Fight for Black Equality since 1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006).

² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Clubwomen and Electoral Politics in the 1920s,” in *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*, ed. Ann D. Gordon (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 135.

³ John McCray, “Democracy Is Costly,” *Lighthouse and Informer* (Columbia, South Carolina), June 28, 1942.