

JAZZ AGE JESUS:
THE REVEREND ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, SR.,
AND THE MINISTRY OF BLACK EMPOWERMENT, 1865-1937

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by
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The purpose of “Jazz Age Jesus: the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. and The Ministry of Black Empowerment, 1865-1937,” is to illuminate the African American religious developments occurring during the Jazz Age. Additionally the goal is to expand the notion of who the thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance were—making room for religious figures, not simply as ministers, but active players in the developing cultural climate that was proud of being African American and sometimes even racially militant, signaling the beginning of a movement designed to empower African Americans to rise from their inferior status in the American body politic.

This is a social history that examines the life and ministry of the Rev. Powell, Sr., pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church (1908-1937). Analyzing the rise of African-American Protestantism in New York City, through Powell, Sr., illustrates that the Jazz Age was not singularly about decadence and secular creativity, but that there was a sacred or religious awakening occurring simultaneously. This study maintains that migratory patterns in the early decades of the twentieth century where African Americans moved from rural spaces into urban ones were not simply about the transmission of simply aesthetic culture such as food, clothing, music and speech, but important for this particular analysis is that African Americans brought their faith—believed and practiced.

Thus, “Jazz Age Jesus” is the title of this work and the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., during this period rose to acclaim pastoring the oldest African American Baptist church in New York State, and by the end of his pastorate had facilitated and encouraged its growth, helping it blossom into the largest Protestant congregation in America, if not the world.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Vernon Calvin Mitchell, Jr. received his Bachelor of Arts degree in History from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2001, and his first Master of Arts in History degree, also from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2003. In 2005 he began his work toward his doctoral degree at Cornell University, where he earned his second Masters of Arts degree in 2008. Mr. Mitchell's Masters thesis from the University of Missouri-Columbia examined the desegregation of the public school system in East St. Louis, Illinois. At that time he was very interested in urban history of the American Midwest, particularly in the decades after World War II and how smaller urban and suburban communities addressed concerns of unequal access to public education prior to the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Since entering Cornell his research has shifted to African-American religion and how the organization of spirituality informed political thought. His work in African-American religious and intellectual history in the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century served as the foundation for his dissertation.

This volume is dedicated to the people—family, friends and loved ones who did not live to see this study come to fruition. Though absent from the body, they are present with the Lord. I know they walk beside me.

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conference papers, and finally some of the dissertation chapters themselves—thanks to Jessica Harris for providing honest critique, laughter, and keeping me grounded when I needed it most. To the support staff—Barb Donnell, Katie Kristoff, Judy Yonklin, and Maggie Edwards, thanks for allowing me to pester you with questions or just to chat to get my mind off the work at hand.

Research can be very difficult at times, but it is made all the better with outstanding staff at the archives and libraries. A big thanks goes to Eric Acree at the John Henrik Clarke Library at the Africana Studies and Research Center (ASRC). Every year Eric worked tirelessly to make sure graduate students in Africana and other departments who worked with ASRC had access to databases, books, and archival material for our research and teaching. Thank you, my brother. Thanks, too, to Michelle Hubbell who was the most important person in Olin Library. She is a miracle worker and I am so appreciative of her compassion and support of graduate students. Finding primary documents on the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. was no easy task so I am also beyond grateful for the great work of Prof. Kevin McGruder, who worked as the head of the Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives and History Ministry when I was conducting my research.

In 2012, I moved back to my hometown of St. Louis, Missouri, where I wrote the bulk of the dissertation. The administration and faculty at Washington University in St. Louis were invaluable. They provided support and resources to help me complete my work. Special thanks to Vice-Provost Adrienne D. Davis, Prof. Jean Allman, the Chair of the History Department, and Prof. Marie Griffith, the Director for the Danforth Center for Religion and Politics. I am also truly blessed to have colleagues such as Prof. Lerone Martin, who offered critical feedback during the final stages of revision for the dissertation. Special thanks to the Dr. Evelyn Irving and Dr. Jenny Chang, you both taught me that mental health is vitally important. Thank you.

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me.

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Before I ended this academic and spiritual sojourn, I joined another family, the Hills. Mr. Wyndel Hill and wife Peggy Hill, are my new set of parents and I am beyond thankful for them. To my brothers, Wyndel, II and David, I appreciate the conversations and good times on Remington Lane. Finally, to my wife, Diana—I couldn’t ask for a better partner, friend, and supporter. Again, I couldn’t thank everyone, but I tried to. I alone bear the responsibility for the mistakes and limitations in the pages that follow. If nothing else, I did what my paternal grandmother, Mrs. Rosie Mae Mitchell told me to when I left Missouri to complete my doctoral work at Cornell. Miss you Gran’ma.

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PREFACE

Early on in my graduate career, I was told that every dissertation has an autobiographical thread weaving through it—something very integral to the project that links the dissertator to writing the dissertation. My situation was no different. While I did not start this process with the thought of analyzing or examining African American political and religious thought, this is where I ended up. I came to this place honestly. I am a proud product of the black church—that venerable and uneasily defined institution that some scholars of African American culture and life vehemently argue is no institution at all, pointing out that there is no organized centralized structure or buildings that are “the black church,” but yet the “black church” exists.¹ For many African Americans spanning generations and regions, it has been and continues to be, a crucible of not just religious rites and ritual, but culture. It has served as an incubator of thought and practice for the sacred and secular alike.

The problematic nomenclature, or reference of the phrase, “black church” for some is quite pragmatic for those outside of the academy. The term typically symbolizes the collection of African American Churches of Protestant denominations that are too numerous to count or name, and yet despite differences in ministry, theological praxis, ritual, and countless other things, is a single, unifying aspect that permeates the culture of African Americans—that while

¹ See “The Negro Church: A Nation Within a Nation,” in E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Church in America* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool, 1963), 29-46, for a classical study of this phenomenon or Curtis J. Evans’ more recent scholarship discussing the innate “religiosity” of African Americans in *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990); and also work of Barbara Dianne Savage, who refers to the “black church” as, “...an illusion and a metaphor that has taken on a life of its own, implying the existence of a powerful entity with organized power, but the promise of that also leaves it vulnerable to unrealistic expectations. The term is a political, intellectual, and theological construction that symbolizes unity and homogeneity while masking the enormous diversity and independence among African American religious institutions and believers.” *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008), 9. Lawrence T. Jones’ discussion cautions us to remember too that there is no ‘black church’ in the

not suggesting or hinting at a monolithic narrative, the institution comes to symbolize the brilliant nuances that make up the history of Africans and their experience in America. African American churches have been the one defining aspect of the culture that was seen as prototypically “unbossed and unbought,” meaning that it was created by and maintained for African Americans and by African Americans without corruption from oppressive forces, or so that is the popular understanding.

I grew up listening to the Baptist, fundamentalist fire and brimstone preaching of my late grandfather, the Rev. John Mitchell, Sr. Before I formally professed my own faith, I sat in the first pew of the St. John Missionary Baptist Church, of Kinloch, Missouri, with my feet dangling from my seat, looking up at my grandfather in the pulpit wondering what he was so angry about. His style of preaching was from an era of folk ministers where sermons were filled with screaming and the stereotypical whoopin’ --where he yelled about how God both loved me, but would also smite me with eternal damnation if I did not love him back or his Son, Jesus Christ in a barrage of almost melodic emphatic declarations followed by a shout of, “HA!”

Raised in such rigidly defined organizations of spirituality I was confused about what and why we believed, but I quoted scripture and sang in the choir as I was expected to. To be sure, I was an obedient child, but that did not mean I was not thinking about why there was so much fuss about my family and race’s Judeo-Christian leanings. As I grew older and began to question my faith within the sacred text of the Bible and the contradictions between what my grandfather said and what his ministry actually did, I wondered about the limitations of religion, but I also marveled at its keen ability to serve as a socio-political balm of liberation and comfort (more often the latter than the former). I never imagined that as I started my graduate studies at Cornell

conventional sense in his writings for Milton Sernett’s edited volume, *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham, N.C., 1985), 491.

University I would be able to further engage and indeed explore the questions I had about my faith.

I understood the limitations of the church—of the Afro-Baptist faith I was submerged in figuratively and literally. As Barbara Savage pointed out in her work, I agreed with and understood how the delocalization and the independence of churches proved to stifle any real national political power that you might find among other faiths, such as the political lobbies that exist for the Catholic church, but despite such limitations there was a real and tangible belief in what the “black church” could do, no matter how unrealistic those expectations were. The “invisible institution” of African American faith structures from the antebellum era was truly visible in the world I grew up in.² Those emancipatory interpretations of black religion and faith were placed squarely on the shoulders of the leaders of these congregations. Some gladly accepted the task and others made every effort to keep such concerns away from their ministries, focused largely on metaphysical concerns, such as my grandfather.

I was interested in analyzing activist ministers—those men and women of the cloth, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s and Pauli Murray’s of the world who dared to make the Christian gospels part of their lived experience, to give voice to the dispossessed and voiceless, outside the confines of the church.³ This was facilitated through several conversations with my professors. Still thinking that I wanted to examine urban history within the context of the post World War II era, I thought about examining the writings of the congressman and minister, the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. His candor and defiant tone in his writings, sermons, and public addresses to the oppressive structures in the local, state, and federal government always intrigued

² Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 81.

³ The Reverend Dr. Anna Pauline “Pauli” Murray, (b.1910-1985), was an American civil rights activist, women's rights activist, lawyer, and author. She was also the first black woman ordained as an Episcopal priest.

me. If you have ever seen a clip of Adam, Jr., speaking in the pulpit, in the community, or in a press conference, you know what I'm talking about. If you haven't, you will understand in just a few seconds of viewing and listening why he intrigues folks so. However, several professors and mentors encouraged me to first read up on Adam, Sr. They believed that looking into the life of the elder Powell there might exist a possibility for something for me to examine. Thus, I began my journey toward the study that became my dissertation, "Jazz Age Jesus."

INTRODUCTION

The "Jazz Age" is an accepted reference in American History typically thought of as the interwar period between the end of World War I, in November of 1918 and the beginning of the Great Depression, signaled by the crash of the stock market in October of 1929. The credit for the creation of the term "Jazz Age" is given to American novelist, F. Scott Fitzgerald. In 1922 he penned a book entitled, *Tales from the Jazz Age*, a collection of eleven short stories that personified the dawning of a new era for America.¹

In the popular imagination the "Jazz Age" conjures images of people dancing the night away in secret and not so secret clubs in America's urban centers—particularly in Chicago and New York City. In these clubs, sometimes referred to as speakeasies, the romanticized vision is one of alcohol liberally and illegally flowing from bottle to glass (due to Prohibition) and the style of dress of patrons is lavish and grandiose.² Most importantly, the music called "jazz" is just as flamboyant—permeating every fiber of the cultural landscape; this music provided a new backdrop for the American narrative.

Jazz originated in New Orleans' Congo Square, birthed from African rhythms and the associative expressive culture of the bonded persons that once gathered there, combined with European influences as well.³ From the antebellum period to the first decade of the twentieth

¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tales From the Jazz Age* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922). See the short story "May Day." Set in July of 1920 the story is considered the best example of the events that took place that ushered in the Jazz Age.

² Prohibition in the United States was a national ban on the sale, production, importation, and transportation of alcoholic beverages that was in effect from 1920 to 1933. The Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution served as the mandate for Prohibition. A speakeasy was an establishment that illegally sold alcoholic beverages during the Prohibition Era.

³ Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2008), 282; Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 16; see also Henry Kmen, "The Roots of Jazz and Dance in Place Congo: A Reappraisal," in *Yearbook of Inter-American Musical Research*, vol. 8 (Austin: University of Texas, Institute of Latin American Studies, 1972), 5-16.

century, jazz was part of the burgeoning evolution of American music—its influence grew into an enduring symbol of the marked economic growth, consumerism, and the rise of mass culture in the United States during the 1920s.⁴ Scholars have pointed out that this also was the first time that African Americans were given credit for a contribution that defined any era in American History.⁵

Indeed, African Americans were at the center of this change in the American cultural aesthetic. Musicians like Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, Bessie Smith, Joe “King” Oliver and of course Thomas Wright “Fats” Waller were some of the early inculcators of what is best described as a revolution of sound. Simultaneously, artists such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson along with Countee Cullen ushered in a new intellectual tradition for African Americans by, “shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority.”⁶ They wrestled with themes within African-American folk culture, celebrating it and finding purpose in their analyses of the past while pressing forward into a new future that found pride in race consciousness.

While Hurston, Hughes, Johnson, and Cullen were not the first African-American intellectuals, they were part of the first intellectuals to live in close proximity to each other and were part of a critical mass of collective brilliance in Harlem, New York. They were an African American community of scholars. These intellectuals and writers became synonymous with and were the foundation for the term “Harlem Renaissance.”⁷

The intellectual aspect of this cultural explosion became known as the “New Negro

⁴ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), see discussion in Chapter 1: “The Preshistory of Jazz,” 3-26.

⁵ Mark Robert Schneider, *African Americans in the Jazz Age: A Decade of Struggle and Promise* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 1.

⁶ Alain Locke, “Enter the New Negro,” *Survey Graphic*, March 1925, 2.

Movement.” This nomenclature emanated from the influential anthology edited by Alain Locke, himself another leading intellectual of the period. For Locke and his contemporaries, this era was filled with “a new vision of opportunity.”⁸

Scholars have typically understood the music and ideas of the Jazz Age and Harlem Renaissance as an era of great secular development. Initially, the intellectual growth and the music of the time were seldom linked. Those trends changed, but still overlooked in many historical analyses is the spiritual and religious dimensions that accompanied the era.⁹ Indeed, Alain Locke mentioned, that the New Negro Movement if nothing else would be a “spiritual Coming of Age.”¹⁰ While he does not explicitly discuss religion as an organization of spirituality, the writers, artists, and intellectuals of this new period demonstrated religious influences through their work.¹¹ For instance, Zora Neale Hurston and “Fats” Waller knew of and even discussed the integral influences that religion played in their upbringing.¹² Often seen as the “devil’s music”

⁷ See Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁸ Alain Locke, eds. *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925); see also, Locke’s, “Enter the New Negro,” *Survey Graphic*, March 1925. Locke makes several claims that reference the importance of the spiritual aspects of the “New Negro” that move beyond mere aesthetic.

⁹ Early studies of the Harlem Renaissance did not take into account the influence of the music on the intellectuals and vice versa. It was not until the end of the twentieth century that scholarship began to make overt associations between music and the intellectual developments of the Jazz Age. See Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., eds. *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990); and Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African American Culture, 1920-1930* (New York: Pantheon, 1995).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ Several Harlem Renaissance intellectuals engage religious themes or directly engage African American folk religion in their work. See Zora Neale Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1942) she spends an entire chapter discussing religion, 215-226. James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: Viking Press, 1927); Johnson also discusses the formation and growth of African-American churches in Harlem in *Black Manhattan* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 1930), 162-169. Countee Cullen’s “Black Christ,” was a part of book that was a collection of his poems called, *The Black Christ and Other Poems* (New York: Harper, 1929), but his earlier work “Yet I do Marvel,” taken from *Colors* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1925), deals with the existence God and why he would allow racial divisions to exist and be the basis for pain and suffering.

¹² See discussion of Hurston’s “respect” for religious practices that she studied although she questioned Judeo-Christian conception of God in Deborah G. Plant’s *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit* (Westport: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 98-103. Ed Kirkeby spends time illuminating the religious influences on Waller, mentioning that as a child he told his mother, “Momma when we going to church again? I love to go to

jazz was the personification of sacred and secular. Paul Barbarin, an early New Orleans jazz drummer explained, “You heard the pastors in the Baptist churches, they were singing rhythm. More so than a jazz band.”¹³ Whether they clearly defined their religious lives or beliefs is not of importance for this study. What is important is demonstrating that in the midst of this transformational time in Harlem there was a similar burst of growth occurring within African American religious life.

On February 9, 1930, the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., along with seven other New Yorkers, was heralded in a grand celebration at the Mount Olivet Baptist Church on Lennox Ave and 120th Street in Central Harlem in New York City. The occasion was the annual presentation of the Harmon Awards. That Sunday afternoon, John Haynes Holmes, a white minister of the Community Church, delivered a keynote address that dealt with the erroneous belief of race superiority and that such belief and practice is not instinctive, but learned. His view, as he shared with the audience, was that men and women should be grouped along the lines of culture and likes and not by race or nationality. Holmes declared, “There is no superior race...neither are there superior religions or nations. The idea that standards are racial is a fallacy.”¹⁴ After the conclusion of his address, Holmes received a thunderous applause from the two thousand people gathered for the event.¹⁵

The stage was now set for the presentations of the award medals. The winners, eight in total, were initially announced in the beginning of January of 1930. The ceremony was a formal

church. I feel so much like it...” *Ain’t Misbehavin’: The Story of Fats Waller* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1966), 11.

¹³ Paul Barbarin’s comments were taken from interviews conducted by New Orleans jazz scholar, Bill Russell. They were published posthumously in his *New Orleans Style*, compiled and ed. Barry Martyn and Mike Hazeldine (New Orleans: Jazzology Press, 1994), 60, 63; see also discussion in Chapter 2, “New Orleans Jazz,” in Gioia’s, *The History of Jazz*, 27-51.

¹⁴ “Racial Prejudice and Inequalities Hit by Holmes at Harmon Ceremony,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 12 February 1930, p. 11, col. 1.

affair, which was publicized heavily in most of the African-American periodicals a month prior. Newspapers including the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Chicago Defender* and *New York Amsterdam News* all ran stories about the coming event. Even normative papers such as the *New York Times* ran headlines honoring the awardees such as, “Six New Yorkers Among Awardees” or “Harmon Foundation Grants Awards.”¹⁶ The Harmon Foundation along with the race relations committee of the Federal Council of Churches financed all the pomp and circumstance.

The first of these awards were given in 1926. They were named after real estate developer, William Elmer Harmon, who founded the Harmon Foundation in 1922. The awards were administered to recognize African American achievement and they gained their greatest notoriety because of their impact on the art of the period. The awards were highly coveted by the artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance. Previous winners included Countee Culleen, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, Laura Wheeler Waring, and Langston Hughes, among others. Being a Harmon Award recipient was a guarantee of much needed exposure to African-American and white audiences alike. Such exposure provided economic security as well. Although mostly remembered now for fine art, there were eight categories of achievement: business, education, fine arts, literature, music, race relations, science and religious service.

On that Sunday afternoon the Rev. Powell Sr. received a bronze award and a cash prize of one hundred dollars in the category of “religious service.” According to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Powell Sr. was recognized, “for his leadership as pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church for the past 21 years.” In that time he “set an example for financing religious and social church activities among Negroes.” The Harmon Foundation was doubly impressed by the fact that he

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Harmon Foundation Grants Awards,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 11 January 1930, p. 17, col. 2; “Six New Yorkers Among Harmon Award Winners,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 8 January 1930, p. 1, col. 1; Dr. Moton receives \$1,000 Harmon Award,” *New York Times*, 6 January 1930, p. 20.

had moved his church from central Manhattan to Harlem--one of the “finest conceived and carried forward by Negroes in the world...built and paid for, at a cost of nearly \$400,000.”¹⁷ The pastor of Abyssinian had accomplished this feat in only six short years, all this while purchasing a home for the congregation’s elderly members. Powell Sr., the Harmon Foundation believed, made a sizeable impact in his community with the largest Protestant congregation in the United States, and had indeed become a model church and pastor.

Aside from Powell Sr.’s award acknowledgment there were other luminaries such as sculptor Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, musician Harry T. Burleigh, and civil rights activist and journalist, Walter White, who also was the executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The importance of this award was not the amount of money that Powell Sr. won, or how much money was put into the celebration. The simple fact that he won a Harmon Award is of great significance by itself. The religious service category signaled that the Harlem Renaissance was not simply a secular awakening, as the common plot line goes, it also witnessed a rebirth of African-American Protestantism, and as the Harmon Award signifies, the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. was an apostle of this remaking.¹⁸

Previous scholarship has mentioned Powell, Sr., but only in passing and focusing instead on his son, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. In his own autobiography, *Adam By Adam*, the younger Powell dedicated an entire chapter to his father that mostly reiterates his father’s narrative found in his autobiography, with the exception of a few stories from Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.’s childhood.¹⁹ Charles V. Hamilton’s *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography of an American Dilemma* spends even less time on the influence and importance of the elder Powell’s

¹⁷ *Pittsburgh Courier*, 3 January 1930, p. 17, col. 2.

¹⁸ Jon Michael Spencer, “The Black Church and the Harlem Renaissance”. *African American Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Autumn 1996), 453

life. He mostly is mentioned in terms of laying the foundation that would be his son's electoral base when he decided to run for the United States Congress.²⁰ Wil Haygood's *King of the Cats: the Life and Times of Adam Clayton Powell Jr.* however, is the first biography of the son to really offer a substantive understanding of the Rev. Powell, Sr. Haygood's introduction into the life of the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., is also limited in ways that are similar to the work by Hamilton and Powell, Jr.²¹

The first published study of the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., was Ralph Garlin Clingan's, *Against Cheap Grace in a World Come of Age*. Clingan's intellectual biography focused on the minister's Biblical hermeneutics, that is, how Powell, Sr., interpreted religious concepts, theories and principles. Clingan was especially interested in the impact that Powell, Sr., had on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work after he spent time with him during his pastorate at Abyssinian Baptist Church from 1930-31. Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and staunch critic of Hitler and the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer also founded the Confessing Church. His writings on the role of Christianity in the secular world are quite influential, particularly his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, which Clingan argues was heavily influenced by Bonhoeffer's exposure to Powell during his six months in Harlem.²² The thrust of Clingan's work is centered on how and why Powell, Sr., influenced the writings of Bonhoeffer. Additionally, Clingan situates Powell Sr.'s writings in context with other preeminent theologians.

¹⁹ Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. *Adam by Adam: An Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp, 1971), 1-12.

²⁰ Charles V. Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography of an American Dilemma* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1991), 43, 47, 71-89.

²¹ Wil Haygood, *Kind of the Cats: The Life & Times of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (Boston: Peter Davidson, 1993), 58-71.

²² Ralph Garlin Clingan, *Against Cheap Grace in a World Come of Age: An Intellectual Biography of Clayton Powell, 1865-1953* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 14,83-96.

There are also three unpublished dissertations that examine Powell, Sr.'s work.²³ Those works primarily focus on his theological stances such as whether or not he was a Christian fundamentalist; they do not investigate the larger context of his writings, ministry and life. The only text centered on Powell, Sr., in a broader context is his autobiography, *Against the Tide*. Powell Sr. wrote *Against the Tide* after he retired from the pulpit in 1937, handing his ministry over to his son, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., to serve as pastor.

Historians V.P. Franklin and Laurie Maffly-Kipp point out in their respective works, *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths* and *Setting Down the Sacred Past*, that African Americans have used autobiography in very deliberate ways that are part of continuing their literary and intellectual traditions. Franklin argues autobiography has been the most important literary genre in that tradition and Maffly-Kipp maintains that such narratives, including poetry, essays, songs, sermons, novels, and letters, share an anchoring in a "Protestant bedrock."²⁴ Considering the previous work on Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., focusing primarily on the theological aspects of his adult life and the analyses of African-American autobiography by Franklin and Maffly-Kipp, it is clear that there is a gap in the historical representation of Powell Sr.

At present, there is not a formal repository of Powell, Sr.'s collected personal or public papers. While Powell's *Against the Tide* provides keen insight into how he understood his world and himself it remains a biased account - as all autobiographies are - and must be assumed as

²³ Shelton Clark, "The Black Clergy as Agents of Social Change with an Emphasis on the Life of Adam Clayton Powell," Ph.D. diss., (Rutgers: The State University of New Jersey, 1978); John William Kinney, "Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., and the Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: A Historical Exposition and Theological Analysis," Ph.D. diss., (Columbia University, 1979); Derrick Harkins, "An Examination of the Uplift and Empowerment Preaching of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.," D. Min, thesis, (United Theological Seminary, 1992).

²⁴ V. P. Franklin, *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African American Intellectual Tradition* (New York: Scribner, 1995); Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down the Sacred Past: African-American Race Histories* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 3, 7.

such. For this reason, the present work does not rely heavily on that particular text as a primary source and instead utilizes many of the African American and normative periodicals of the time and a few personal writings along with his sermons for this analysis. Therefore, what makes the present work distinct is that it is the first time Powell, Sr., is addressed as the subject of a social history of African-American religion.

The first chapter, “From the Ashes of the Civil War” examines Powell’s early life during the Reconstruction Era in Franklin County, Virginia. This chapter begins at Powell Sr.’s funeral and traces his life backwards, attempting to understand the humble beginnings, particularly his family structure and just how Reconstruction Virginia looked and likely felt for Powell Sr. and his family. It also chronicles the family’s move from Virginia to West Virginia and Powell Sr.’s move away from his family to live in Rendville, Ohio in the Hocking Valley as a coal miner. The beginning of his life’s journey illustrates his love of learning and also his spiritual transformation from a self-proclaimed “cheap edition of a desperado” to born again Christian who felt the call to preach.²⁵

“Preparing a Foundation of Service and Uplift” is the second chapter of this study and details Powell Sr.’s life during an unsuccessful attempt to attend Howard University, ultimately enrolling as a student at Wayland Seminary. Living and learning in Washington D.C. served Powell Sr. very well as he developed professionally and personally, building upon his life’s experiences. It was here that a professor, George Mellen Prentiss King, heavily influenced him.

Chapter Three, “Iron Sharpens Iron...the New Haven Years,” analyzes Powell’s first full time position as a pastor. He accepted a position at Immanuel Baptist Church in New Haven,

²⁵ Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. *Against the Tide: An Autobiography* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1938), 13,14. Powell recounts how he became like those he was around—he acquired more uses for vice than anything that was productive and beneficial to his life. He gambled, drank, recalling, “The chief aim of the average man [in the

Connecticut. Powell Sr.'s exposure to Yale Divinity School where he was admitted as a special student proved to be incredibly valuable to him. The black graduate and professional students that he formed relationships with pushed the limits of what he learned at Wayland. Indeed, New Haven was Powell's dress rehearsal for his next position at Abyssinian Baptist Church.

“Exodus To Harlem: Preparing a Congregation and Community for Kingdom Building,” is the fourth chapter and follows the path of Powell Sr. to New York City and illustrates how he transformed the oldest African American Baptist Church into the largest Protestant Congregation in America. Also, it is in New York City that Powell Sr. evolves into a thought leader beginning with his exposure to Marcus Garvey as well as through interacting with elected officials on the state and national levels. Powell Sr. utilized his congregation as a crucible for change by not only addressing liberation, but also through providing opportunities for African Americans in his community.

Chapter Five, “Inhabiting the Promised Land: A Black Kingdom and Nation in Harlem,” deals with Abyssinian in Harlem and how Powell Sr. began to focus the church and himself on making the best use of this new façade and placement in the heart of the “Black Mecca.” Harlem gained the name, Black Mecca, because many of the country's best and brightest African American advocates, artists, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals had situated themselves there. Powell Sr.'s presence in Harlem illustrates that religious figures like him who built “institutional churches,” as Gayraud Wilmore points out, are carried by a tradition of radical thought that he maintains died with the passing of A.M.E. Bishop Henry McNeal Turner.²⁶

The final chapter, “Speaking to Harlem That They May Go Forward,” analyzes Powell's

Kanawha Valley of West Virginia] was to possess a pistol, a pair of brass knuckles and a jug of hard liquor. Fights were numerous and life was cheap. I soon became a part of all I met.”

²⁶ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, 2nd rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 190.

final years in the pulpit. During this time we see Powell Sr. as a man ready for life's next challenge after twenty-nine years of service. This chapter looks at some of his last sermons as active pastor of Abyssinian and some of the larger controversies, particularly his very public spat with long time friend, Nannie Helen Burroughs.

The conclusion of this examination of the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Sr. seeks to place him within the context of other activist ministers. With his retirement from Abyssinian, he was also ushering in a new era of ministers that would be at the forefront of a very public fight for equality, the civil rights movement. Powell was an important piece in the pantheon of not just African American ministers, but African American intellectuals who melded faith with secular pursuits all of which were sacred acts. Like Powell Sr.'s work, "Jazz Age Jesus" seeks to create space and discourse to expand our notion of just what the Jazz Age was and also how one man from Franklin County, Virginia was able to pull together so many for the cause of uplift of race, nation, and more importantly for him, God.

CHAPTER ONE:
FROM THE ASHES OF THE CIVIL WAR

Funerals are somber occasions where the living mourn and celebrate the life of the dead. Within African American, Judeo-Christian faith traditions, funerals can become grand fetes—the scale of which is dependent on the perceived importance of the life being commemorated. When the deceased is a man or woman of the cloth, and they have done their due diligence to uphold the responsibilities of their sacred office, it is an opportunity for not just the family of the deceased, but friends, congregants, and the community-at-large to say farewell—to a life of a servant leader.

In 1953 on the sixteenth day of June in Harlem, New York thousands paid their final respects and cast their eyes, one last time, on the earthly remains of such a minister. That warm, humid summer day, the Reverend Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., pastor emeritus of the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church, was before his congregation and his community for the last time. His voice was now silent. He was not in the pulpit, but in front of it. There he lay still. Gone was his inviting smile and imposing statuesque physical presence. Mourners from all walks of life came to bid him farewell from the mayor of New York City to countless nameless Harlemites. In very tangible and intangible ways, the former pastor left a mark on Harlem during his life and his funeral was no exception.

The somber nature of the event was both seen and heard once you reached 138th Street. There you would have seen masses of people flooding the sidewalks, openly crying and spilling out into the street as they made their way to Abyssinian. Traffic was at a standstill as scores of automobiles lined up for the procession following the funeral. Everything seemed to mourn the loss of Rev. Powell—even the church itself. The edifice of the grand gothic tabernacle,

constructed in 1923 under Powell's pastorate, was adorned with enormous black and purple draping that added to the solemn mood of the day and the occasion.²⁷

The main sanctuary only had a capacity of 2500 seats and those were gone even before the service began. Those unable to get a seat were ushered into overflow rooms within the church where they could at least hear the service. Still others, numbering in the hundreds, remained outside of the church's walls unable to enter, struggling and clamoring over one another to hear any part of the service that they could. There were even those that were so determined to have a seat at the funeral that they camped out in front of the church overnight, the way you might expect to see someone waiting for tickets to a widely publicized sporting event or the long anticipated performance of a pop culture star.²⁸ This was none of those things—it was simply a funeral.

Long standing black periodicals from the *New York Amsterdam News* to *The Pittsburgh Courier* ran front-page headlines and wrote exquisite, laudatory remarks. The *New York Amsterdam News* proclaimed, "No monument in a cemetery or on a public square will be needed to memorialize the Rev. Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr...his life is monument enough."²⁹ Even normative news sources like the *New York Times* ran very generous obituaries of the late Rev. Dr. Powell, mentioning that "the noted author and leader of Negro life," was heavily involved not just in the race problems in New York City, but throughout the nation. The *Times* article also pointed out that after Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1936, Powell aroused, "interest in application of the Kellogg-Briand Pact as a means of ending the war."³⁰ Powell Sr. was not simply interested in

²⁷ "Many Cry At Last Rites for Dr. Powell," *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 June 1953, 38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁹ "Dr. A. Clayton Powell," *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 June 1953, 18.

³⁰ "Dr. A.C. Powell, Sr., Minister, 88, Dead," *New York Times* 13 June 1953, 15; The Kellogg-Briand Pact was signed by Germany, France and the United States on August 27, 1928. The Kellogg-Briand Pact is named after its authors: U.S. Secretary of State, Frank B. Kellogg and French foreign minister Aristide Briand (Kellogg was

racial progress, but the progress of America generally.

There were several eulogizers at Rev. Powell Sr.'s funeral, but none stood out as much as the impassioned words and voice of Ms. Nannie Helen Burroughs.³¹ Burroughs, a long time friend of Powell Sr., was President of the Women's Convention of the National Baptist Convention and a renowned orator in her own right. As she rose to speak she called Powell Sr.'s funeral a "coronation day" and emphasized that the day was one of victory and triumph, "for one of the most useful men that has walked the earth—a man dogged, rugged, determined, dependable, human."³² As Ms. Burroughs concluded her remarks she looked down at Rev. Powell's casket lying in repose and declared, "When I get to Heaven I sure want to see Jesus, but shall also be looking for Adam Clayton Powell."³³

After Rev. Powell's earthly remains were committed to the ground at Flushing Cemetery, supporters, admirers, former church members, and family continued to celebrate his life on his birthday. Celebrations and memorials of his life were held at Abyssinian and in various other

awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for the pact in 1929). The pact is an international agreement in which signatory states promised not to use war to resolve "disputes or conflicts of whatever nature or of whatever origin they may be, which may arise among them," (*United States Statutes at Large* Volume 46, Part 2, Page 2343). Parties that failed to abide by this promise were to be denied the benefits outlined in the treaty. Practically speaking, the Kellogg-Briand Pact did not live up to its idealistic aims of ending war, and in this sense it made no immediate contribution to international peace and thus proved to be ineffective in the years to come. Additionally, it did not prevent U.S. intervention in Central America, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935, nor the German and Soviet Union invasions of Poland. Despite its shortcomings, the pact is an important multilateral treaty because, in addition to binding the particular nations that signed it, it has also served as one of the legal foundations for establishing the international norms that the threat or use of military force in contravention of international law, as well as the territorial acquisitions resulting from it, are unlawful.

³¹ As a national leader in education at age twenty-one, Nannie Helen Burroughs was catapulted to fame after presenting the speech "How the Sisters Are Hindered from Helping" at the annual conference of the National Baptist Convention (NBC) in Richmond, Virginia, in 1900. Her outspoken eloquence articulated the righteous discontent of women in the black Baptist church and served as a catalyst for the formation of the largest black women's organization in America—the Woman's Convention Auxiliary to the NBC. Some called her an upstart because she led the organization in the struggle for women's rights, antilynching laws, desegregation, and industrial education for black women and girls. Most people, however, considered her an organizational genius. At the helm of the National Baptist Woman's Convention for more than six decades, Burroughs remained a tireless and intrepid champion of black pride and women's rights. For further reading see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Religion, Politics, and Gender; The Leadership of Nannie Helen Burroughs," *Journal of Religious Thought* (Winter–Spring 1988); Higginbotham also in "Politics to Stay: Black Women Leaders and Party Politics during the 1920s" in *Women, Politics and Change*, edited by Louise Tilly and Patricia Gurin. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1990.

locations around New York City, but they did not last longer than five years after his death. As the decade of the 1960s began, his son, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., rose to prominence not just in Harlem but also nationally due to his congressional appointment in Washington, D.C. He owed much of his success to his father. In 1937 the church was handed over to him, effectively providing the younger Powell with a very influential platform to begin his public life. The Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. did not waste the opportunity. His effective community organizing in New York earned him the nickname "Mr. Civil Rights" and established him as one of the most prominent African American leaders of his day.³⁴

He was, in theory, the perfect melding of the sacred and secular--a well-known activist minister who was elected to public office. Again, without his father's tutelage or influence, as well as a thriving congregation, the younger Powell likely would have never been able to rise to the stature that he did. He was very much his father's son, and while he was certainly more flamboyant and in many ways altogether different, he was able to use his father's work at Abyssinian and in the Harlem community to his advantage. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., made a name for himself outside of this father's shadow, but it was the foundation that allowed him to hit the ground running. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., left an inheritance for his son that was not simply material but it was much more. He left his son both political and cultural capital that were invaluable to him. The elder Powell left the legacy of activism born out of the pulpit. That legacy was not just left to his son, but also to the host of other ministers who gained national and international acclaim as the Civil Rights Movement began to unfold later in the second half of the twentieth century.

³² *New Amsterdam News*, 20 June 1953, 38.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Charles V. Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography of an American Dilemma* (New York: Cooper Square Press, reprint 2002), 344.

The March on Washington, the watershed moment of the Civil Rights Movement, occurred a full decade after Powell, Sr.'s passing. By that time his name no longer had the national resonance it had during his life—or at the time of his death. Why did Powell's memory fade from the collective African American consciousness, aside from those who were familiar with him directly? When we think of activist ministry, the Black Freedom Struggle and its associative Civil Rights Movement, the name of the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., is not easily identified with the great pantheon of leadership that emerged from the ranks of African American Protestant churches. The elder Powell does not quickly come to mind as one of those influential men and women who worked tirelessly to help their race live as free and proud Americans against the backdrop of the socio-political segregation of Jim Crow. Many typically think of activist ministry in the Black Freedom Struggle as solely a “Southern” phenomenon. Furthermore our minds tend to follow the narrative of the second half of the twentieth century. Before there were protest marches to cities like Selma, or sit-ins in Greensboro, or bus boycotts that captivated a nation in Montgomery, there were those persons of faith that laid a foundation, much as the Rev. Powell had for his son. The tradition of activist ministry along with its intellectual aspects as well existed as far back as the pamphlets of David Walker.³⁵ His “appeal” demonstrates how African Americans have always had an activist, intellectual tradition that was steeped in Judeo Christian faith. That is not to say that such activism was the only form of response to the oppression, neither is it to suggest that African American Protestants had a

³⁵ David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, is thought to be the most radical anti-slavery document of its time. Published in September of 1829, caused a stir on the shores of America for his call to bonded Africans throughout the diaspora, but expressly to his fellow African-Americans, to overthrow their masters, by force. "...they want us for their slaves, and think nothing of murdering us...therefore, if there is an attempt made by us, kill or be killed." What is most captivating about Walker's Appeal is the sophistication of his arguments that point out the hypocrisies in Western Christendom and he also used the Constitution to justify his arguments. The pamphlet is likely the most radical and respected piece of activist intellectualism in America. For more see, James Turner's discussion *David Walker's Appeal: To the Colored Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly to those of the United States of America* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1993), 9-20.

monopoly on religiosity or organized spirituality that informed action. The point is that Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., was one part of a long history of men and women that bore the burden of the cross, not just for the salvation of souls, but more importantly to realize the Kingdom of God in the world they lived in. This study will expand our notion of activist ministry in the early part of the twentieth century. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., was standard-bearer in a long held tradition of faith and prophetic justice.

The goal of this chapter is to begin to analyze and understand how and why the elder Powell captivated so many people. Who was this minister that was so obviously beloved to the point that he is mentioned in the same sentence with Jesus Christ and had thousands of mourners from varied socio-political spectrums pay their respects at his funeral? Additionally, why was he so soon forgotten? Answering these questions and many more will require an examination of the life and times of the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. The pages that follow will begin to go through the process of unraveling just who he was as a man and how the society and people around him impacted him. Powell did not exist in a vacuum. Therefore we must put his life into its proper historical context. Doing so will help us to better understand not just his life but also allow us to use it as a lens to examine the overlooked nuances of the Black Freedom Struggle and the place of activist ministry north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

The Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., deserves to be rescued figuratively and literally from the footnotes of history. His name might be mentioned in passing when talking about ministers of his era, but there is seldom any in-depth engagement with his writings or his life. It is indeed perplexing that a man who had such a grand homegoing celebration only a year prior to the passage of the historic *Brown v. Board* decision is not as well remembered as some of his contemporary secular counterparts--A. Philip Randolph, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, or Marcus

Garvey.

The Rev. Powell' Sr.'s life before he occupied the grand marble pulpit of Abyssinian Baptist Church was very humble and filled with adversity. His early life is best characterized as a narrative of socio-religious transformation. However, this is not a reprise of some Horatio Alger narrative, but an examination of the man and the world he lived in. To truly grasp how and why he thought as he did one must analyze his belief in the importance of education and his conversion to Christianity. Both served as strong cornerstones in his moral, spiritual, and intellectual development. That foundation later helped the evolution of his racialized consciousness, his theology and his thoughts about nationalism. To tell the story of the Rev. Powell, Sr., and his development from a young boy born during Reconstruction to his rise as a leader of his faith and race of national prominence, we need to revisit his southern roots.

His roots were firmly planted in the state of Virginia. A month prior to Powell's birth the bloody American Civil War ended. And for the newly freed bondsmen and women, the promise of liberty lay before them. They had to carve out a living for themselves, which meant finding ways to acquire property and most importantly taking their rightful place in the body politic. Participating within that body politic still proved difficult as oppressive laws and policies were passed to keep African Americans from ever attaining the rights and privileges of citizens.³⁶

Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., was part of a generation of African Americans born into freedom, but raised during Reconstruction. Powell, Sr. was born on May 5, 1865 in Franklin County in a small area known as Martin's Mill. Franklin County is located in the southwest section of the state and is situated among the rolling hills of the western section of the Blue

³⁶ Virginia had several laws that were oppressive. For instance, the Chapter 311 stated in part, "any white person who shall intermarry with a Negro, or any Negro who shall intermarry with a white person, shall be confined to the penitentiary from two to five years." That law was passed in 1878. For more see June Purcell Guild's *Black Laws of Virginia* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969 reprint).

Ridge Mountains. The county seat is Rocky Mount about thirty miles from Roanoke, Virginia. Most of the area was vastly rural—lined with rich forested ridges and farmland cultivated since the forming of the county in 1785. It was named after the American Benjamin Franklin who was then governor of Pennsylvania, and where many of the original settlers of the county originated.³⁷ According to the 1860 census there were a little over twenty thousand inhabitants living in the area of which the total enslaved population was around thirty-two percent, therefore the African American population was far from the majority, but identifiable.³⁸

Previous studies on Powell, Sr. make two very important claims that are wholly inaccurate—or at least unconfirmed by any primary documentation. The common understanding pertaining to Powell's parents was that his mother, Sally Dunning, was born a slave. This myth was furthered by virtually all scholarship pertaining to the elder Powell. Even his son's autobiography continued the narrative of his father as a son of a bonded woman. Census records contradict this long held assumption and reveal that in fact Sally Dunning was a third generation free mulatto.³⁹

The second other widely held belief was that Adam, Sr.'s father was a local planter—a landowner by the name of Llewellyn Powell. In his autobiography the Rev. Powell lamented that his mother never told him who his biological father was.⁴⁰ However, there are no documents to confirm the identity unquestionably. Some scholars suggest that Adam's grandfather was Charles Powell, who was the father of Llewellyn. Charles Powell's family was of German ancestry and

³⁷ Henry Gannett, *The Origin of Certain Place Names in the United States* (Washington: Department of the Interior—United States Geological Survey, 1905), 131.

³⁸ According to census records the total population of Franklin County Virginia in 1860 was 20,098 and the total enslaved population was 6,351. University of Virginia Library, Historical Census Browser. <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/newlong3.php>

³⁹ *1860 United States Census, Franklin County, VA*, "Sallie Dunning", Free population schedule, p. 109. Sallie Dunning was classified as a free mulatto of eighteen on the 1860 census before the Civil War.

⁴⁰ Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. *Against The Tide: An Autobiography* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1938), 11.

fits into the lore about Llewellyn being of German descent.⁴¹ It is true that Llewellyn Powell owned land that was ten miles from Martin's Mill in Hale's Ford, Virginia, but there are no records that indicate any ownership of Sally or any of her family.⁴² The only father that Powell ever knew was his stepfather, a freedman by the name of Anthony Bush also from Franklin County.⁴³ In Franklin County Sally and Anthony carved out space in Virginia despite the adversities placed in their way. Powell recalled, "My earliest recollections were of the direst poverty. The wealth of the south had been destroyed by the Civil War and both poor white and poor colored suffered together."⁴⁴

Franklin County did not experience the war as other parts of the state did. The county was scarcely the scene of any battles or even skirmishes for that matter. What the county did experience were incursions by Federal cavalry commanded by Major General George Stoneman. They passed through in April of 1865 and were the only union forces to do so.⁴⁵ As the war came to an end, there was another federal presence. On March 3, 1865, Congress created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the Freedmen's Bureau). Through the mandate of the Freedmen's Bureau, the U.S. Army stationed a lieutenant at Rocky Mount whose primary duty consisted of teaching newly freed African Americans about their new civic responsibilities, which included (and likely not limited to) assisting with the securing of employment, enforcing

⁴¹ Genna Rae McNeil, Houston Bryan Roberson, Quinton Hosford Dixie and Kevin McGruder maintain in *Witness: Two Hundred Years of African American Faith and Practice at the Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem New York* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 78-80; that Llewellyn was indeed the father of Powell based on evidence found in U.S. Census of 1820, 1850, and 1860, Franklin County Virginia <http://persi.heritagequestonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/hqoweb/library/do/census/research/result> (accessed October 8, 2008, and November 11, 2009). However, they mistakenly claim that Powell, Sr., in his autobiography described his father as "handsome and brilliant...of German decent," when actually he recalled, "my mother's father" his grandfather in those terms. See Powell's, *Against the Tide*, 6,7. At the very least there is still conjecture regarding Llewellyn H. Powell and his fathering of a son by Sally Dunning.

⁴² *1860 United States Census, Franklin County, VA*, p. 109.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁴ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 7.

labor contracts and overall working on behalf of the freedmen to ensure that they were able to participate in the republic without being molested by whites. Over the course of Reconstruction there were four different soldiers that served in the area in the capacity of assistant superintendents of the county, concluding their work on January 1, 1869. During those brief years, First Lieutenants James K. Warden, William F. DeKnight, Newton DeWitten, and Augustus R. Egbert served consecutively. Their reports give keen insight into how Reconstruction affected race relations in Franklin County and the world that Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., was born into.

There is an argument for a consensus among these four men in terms of their view of race relations in the county during Reconstruction. The words of Lieutenant DeKnight best described the transition from war to Reconstruction, “the Freedmen in this county seem to be getting along well as they are almost everywhere else, and the feeling existing between them and the Whites, appears, comparatively more harmonious than in many other localities.”⁴⁶ Despite this “consensus” sentiment, William F. DeKnight was the most outspoken of the lieutenants about the conditions of the freedmen, particularly with regard to native whites’ attitude toward them and treatment of them. Warden, who served until July of 1866 thought generally the race relations were good, but noted in his reports a deterioration in the state of things as the number of Union troops were scaled down toward the end of his tenure. From August of 1866 to November of 1867, DeKnight recorded Presidential Reconstruction was a miserable failure that made way for Congressional Reconstruction later. The attitudes of native whites were at best merely lip

⁴⁵ John S. Salmon and Emily J. Salmon, *Franklin County Virginia, 1786-1986: A Bicentennial History* (Rocky Mount: Franklin County Bicentennial Commission, 1993), 300.

⁴⁶ Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (BRFAL), Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Virginia, 1865-1869, Acc. 20080. Records relating to the Court Cases Involving Freedmen: Narrative Reports of Criminal Cases Involving Freedmen, March 1866-February 1867, Reel 59, Report of W.F. DeKnight, 30 September 1866.

service to the rights of freedmen primarily because of the Union Army presence in Franklin County. Newton Whitten observed and recorded as much in his reports, but there was one who differed from the rest of his comrades. Augustus R. Egbert believed that the real victims in Reconstruction were the native whites. Whatever the freedmen faced in terms of lack of progress was only a product of “the natural indolence of the race.”⁴⁷

You were not hard pressed to find native whites that shared Lieut. Egbert’s view. A local Franklin County woman from Hale’s Ford, Fannie Burroughs, wrote to her parents in early July of 1865:

“The negroes are considered free by the Military Law. Some of them are behaving now as well as they did before & some of them are cutting up on a high horse. Some of them rejoice in freedom & some are cut down about it but a general thing they remain with their Masters & we have heard lately we are bound to keep them until next April. Some think they will never be free & some think they will. One thing is certain the most them are ruined and the next thing will be to send them off.”⁴⁸

Burroughs’ comments were not exceptional, but she is more representative of the prevailing feeling towards newly freed African Americans. There was a collective disbelief that the institution of slavery had indeed ended and that allowing African Americans to remain in the county would do more harm than good since they were now “ruined” by freedom. Nowhere was this more prevalent than the change in the relationship between African Americans and white farmers of Franklin County during Reconstruction. Farmers who heavily depended on slave labor to maintain their farms had to come to terms with hiring African Americans as wage earners and not chattel. Many of them were defiant about paying a “fair wage” to the freedmen and freedwomen. Despite their disagreement with the outcome of the war and with Reconstruction generally, the farmers in Franklin County did meet to discuss the matter and

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Letter of M.F. (“Fannie”) Burroughs, Halesford, Franklin County, Virginia, 6 July 1865, in the Booker T. Washington Files, Fairfax County Public Libraries.

spoke collectively to the freedmen and the Freedmen's Bureau proclaiming that while they did recognize the need to pay African Americans for their labor they maintained, "...in the present and unsettled and prostrated condition of the finances and business of the country, laborers must be content with the moderate wages or go without employment."⁴⁹ The wages that were agreed upon were five dollars per month for physically fit men and three dollars per month with board for boys and physically able women. The 1870 census recorded over half of Franklin County's African American citizenry as farm laborers, generally for white landowners.⁵⁰ The Powell's were part this statistic—both Sally and Anthony worked as farm laborers along with other extended kin. The Powell's were hard pressed like most others to find employment that provided them with a living wage. Regardless, they were able to create some semblance of stability through sharecropping.

Sharecropping is a system of agriculture where a landowner allows a tenant to cultivate part of the land in return for a portion of the crop harvested. In the American South, particularly after the Civil War, this system was used in very exploitative ways to keep African Americans tied to the land through unfair debt accumulation. It was not uncommon for white landowners to prey on newly freed African Americans as they strived to make a financial imprint in the world. The Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. recognized the disadvantages in the institutions of sharecropping, but he believed that it was a life saving opportunity for both races during Reconstruction given the dire economic straits of the time—going so far as to call it a “blessed

⁴⁹ *Lynchburg Virginian*, 24 July 1865, quoted in John Preston McConnell, *Negroes and Their Treatment in Virginia from 1865 to 1867* (Pulaski, Virginia: B. D. Smith & Brothers, 1918), 33-34.

⁵⁰ Virginia Census Schedules, List of Inhabitants, Franklin County, 1850, 1860, 1870, Reels 559, 1346, and 1647; Virginia Agriculture Census, 1870, Schedule 3, Franklin County, Roll 240; Auditor of Public Accounts, Land Tax Books, Franklin County, 1870.

necessity.”⁵¹ Sharecropping, as a new financial, labor, and indeed social institution, did not do much to impede the growing disdain of native whites about not only having to pay freedmen, but also provide food, shelter and other amenities. In several cases native whites in Franklin County expressed their frustration to each other regularly. After a year of having to work with sharecroppers one Franklin County man, in a letter to a close friend revealed, “They do but little work. I think the sooner we learn to live without them the better.”⁵²

Dealing with such attitudes was the purview, again, of the First Lieutenants that were assigned to the county by the Freedmen’s Bureau. Lieutenant DeKnight reported that it was “difficult for a great many of the whites to realize the changed condition of affairs,” during Reconstruction.⁵³ While the Freedmen’s Bureau ensured that fair contractual obligations were established with regard to labor relations between races and with judicial proceedings, they also were tasked with establishing schools to educate the newly freed. This objective was carried out with the help of northern philanthropic societies as well. Native whites in Franklin County expressed their disdain for the education of African Americans, just as they had for paying for their labor. Intimidation tactics were employed to dissuade educators from teaching. Certain factions in the county made it widely known that white men who attempted to educate the children of freedmen would never find a place to live in Franklin County and any white women who dared to teach black children would be treated like a “whore.”⁵⁴ With such vile threats erupting in the county it is hard to believe that African Americans were ever able to build a school for their children. Fortunately they were.

⁵¹ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 7. Powell mentions that the institution was, “a fine piece of co-operation between the races.”

⁵² Asa Holland Papers Acc. 902, Manuscripts Division, University of Virginia; letters of William E. Duncan to his wife, Sallie E. Duncan, 18 August 1867, and to Captain Craft, 30 October 1867.

⁵³ Reports of Operations and Conditions in Virginia: Monthly Narrative Reports of Operations and Conditions, July-October 1866, Report of 30 September 1866, Reel 45, National Archives Records Center and Archives.

After some work on his part, DeKnight was able to secure funds to establish a school in Gogginsville, which was six miles from the county seat of Rocky Mount. He believed that the passage of two Reconstruction acts helped to turn the tide to open the door for education for the freedmen.⁵⁵ The school was not what he initially wanted, but it was a start. It was the end of June 1867 and in his special report about the progress of the freedmen he excitedly mentioned the development of a Sunday school—which had forty-six members.⁵⁶ Additionally, the next week he reported the development of a second school in Rocky Mount itself. The development of the Sunday schools at Rocky Mount and Gogginsville served as precursors for the education that young African American children would have available to them four years later when a seven year old pupil, Adam Powell began his education.

In fall of 1871, Adam eagerly started school, a welcome break from the time spent at home. School and education generally, was the beginning of Powell's path toward something greater than the sharecropping and one room cabin his family lived in. His first day of class, occurring during the first week of October was a watershed moment for Adam. He had fond memories of that day. Just like other young students, Adam was introduced to literacy; and learning to read over the course of the next two years opened up his mind to the world outside of Franklin County. His five-mile trek to the log cabin where the school was located was made possible through the collective efforts of the Freedmen's Bureau and the dedicated work of soldiers like DeKnight and local African Americans and native whites, who decided to ease their concerns about teaching freedmen. It is highly likely that Powell attended the school at Rocky

⁵⁴ BRFAL, Report of 28 February 1867.

⁵⁵ Reconstruction Acts of 1867 (also known as Congressional Reconstruction Act of 1867) separated the South into five military districts. Each state was governed by a Union general. Additionally Congress declared martial law in these territories, dispatching troops as peacekeepers and to protect the former enslaved African Americans. Congress also declared that southern states must redraft their constitutions, ratifying the Fourteenth Amendment. Finally Republicans passed the Second Reconstruction Act, that placed Union troops in charge of voter registration.

Mount. No records indicate the construction of another school in the area and given the location, one can surmise that Rocky Mount was where he attended school during this time. In his special report to his commanding officer, Lieutenant DeKnight recorded that he questioned the change of heart by native whites regarding the education of the freedmen and he believed they were not as altruistic as some might believe, but assistance, no matter who provided it, was just that and without it, the education provided to Adam likely would not have been available for him as he celebrated his seventh birthday.⁵⁷

Reconstruction came to an end in Franklin County in 1869 and there was racial progress, begrudgingly so, but progress nonetheless. If nothing else, the children of the freedmen, like Adam, provided new hope for what the future held for themselves and their families. Anthony Bush was keenly aware of this and was an ardent supporter of his stepson's education. He exposed Adam to newspapers and clips of text wherever he could find them. Adam developed a voracious appetite, or "wanderlust" for knowledge.⁵⁸ He learned to memorize his texts from school, such as a dictionary. His stepfather provided his first book outside of the school readings young Adam had acquired, *The Gospel According to St. John*. During the late nineteenth century it was not uncommon to see the individual Christian Gospels printed alone as books in their own right. For all practical purposes, this was Adam's first exposure to not just reading outside of a school-based context, but his initial exposure to Christianity.

During his early childhood years, Powell never discussed the organization of his or his family's spirituality. It is particularly odd that a man of such great faith later in his life never mentioned his faith (or lack thereof) as a boy, or what if anything he did believe in. His early memories center around his thoughts of poverty, the racial dynamics of Franklin County, and

⁵⁶ Ibid., Reports of 30 April and 31 May 1867, Reel 47.

⁵⁷ Ibid., Report 30 June 1867.

how much he loved being literate. Young Adam was simply astounded by gaining knowledge and read anything he could get his hands on. The *Gospel According to St. John* was just another book to him as a boy, it was viewed in a different light, not because of its inherent value as a foundational part of the canonical Gospels, but because it was a book that his stepfather wanted him to read. His introduction to the spiritual realm was to come later. Anthony Bush's approval aside, Adam's new found love for reading and education was vitally important not just to him, but it had larger implications for his family.

As Adam's ability to read became more proficient it led the family to seek out new opportunities for advancement outside of the state of Virginia. Freedom for the Powells was an abstraction that they were now able to take advantage of due in large measure to the education that Adam received. They were truly living in freedom and defining and redefining that right in myriad ways. Unencumbered by a position of perpetual servitude, the Powells decided to move to West Virginia where, according to Adam, they made more money and thus had a more stable household. As the family was growing more money was definitely a good thing.⁵⁹

The 1880 census records indicate that Adam had five stepsiblings, three sisters and two brothers.⁶⁰ Also, his maternal grandmother, Mildred, lived with them. His stepsiblings ranged in age from five months to twelve years, so he ostensibly acted as not simply a wage earner, but also, as integral contributing member to the household economy. Given the documentary evidence it is safe to assume that Powell at this time was likely the only member of his household that was literate, thereby making his participation in the household integral to their collective success. As a teenager, Adam navigated the socio-economic sphere and contributed to the household of his parents. The census lists him as a "hauler of water" which confirms that he

⁵⁸ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 13.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11,12.

had a job and was contributor to the political economy of the family. Furthermore, such responsibilities likely forced him to mature a lot sooner than many of his peers. While in West Virginia Powell continued his education and most importantly for him, he listed making the acquaintance of Mattie Fletcher Shaffer, who later became Mrs. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., as the only thing about his time in the state that was not a disaster.

Powell left West Virginia in August 1884 and he tried to begin anew in the buckeye state of Ohio. Previous studies mentioned that he was involved in a physical altercation with a white man whom he injured and fearing the possibility of being lynched he left West Virginia and his family behind.⁶¹ There is no evidence to substantiate this claim, but Powell did indeed travel to Rendville, Ohio in search of a new beginning. Rendville was situated in the narrow valley of the east branch of Sunday Creek, and upon the slopes, hills and ridges, on either side. The coal-mining town was the site of many great changes in Powell's life. There he grew into adulthood and also it was the place that he wrestled with and indeed found his faith—both in himself and in God.

Rendville was founded by and named after William P. Rend, in 1879, and is located in the Hocking Valley of the southeastern portion of Ohio. During the closing decades of the nineteenth-century it was one of the most thriving mining districts in the state and region. A cluster of other small mining towns that were dependent on the coal trade as well surrounded Rendville. At their height of coal production the area was commonly referred to as the “towns of

⁶⁰ *Manuscript Census*, 1880, Cabin Creek, West Virginia; Kanawha County; 9 June 1880, 13.

⁶¹ The three most cited books on Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., give brief background information on Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.'s move from West Virginia to Ohio mentioning that there was some shooting or physical conflict that he was involved in that necessitated his flight to Ohio. See the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s, *Adam By Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (New York: Dafina Books, 1971, 1994), 5; Charles V. Hamilton's *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography of an American Dilemma* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1991, 2002), 42; and Wil Haygood's *King of the Cats: The Life and Times of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), 60-61. Additionally, Powell, Sr., explained, “to keep from being lynched or murdered I went to Rendville, Ohio, in August 1884,” (14).

black diamonds”—reflecting the bustling coal industry and demand in the market. However, there was also large iron and clay production that influenced growth as well.⁶² Regardless, it was coal mining that led to the existence of most communities in the Hocking Valley. Thus, not just the miners, but preachers, teachers and all other various forms of employment or profession saw their own economic conditions ebb and flow with the constant fluctuation of the coal market. Simply put, when the miners worked, the cities grew and prospered, when they did not the towns and the people who lived in them suffered because of their collective dependency on the miner’s wages. Labor figures from 1880 make this point crystal clear. Miners made up 54.4% of employed persons in the seven major towns in the valley. In Rendville, for instance, that number was lower—38.9% of the employed persons worked as miners and the rest of those numbers were occupied by skilled and unskilled labor (14.9% and 40.1% respectively).⁶³ Everyone in the Hocking Valley was incredibly dependent on the coal industry to live and work.

While native-born white workers typically dominated most of the towns, there were a large number of European immigrants working in the coal camps as well. Thriving off of cheap labor, the coal companies made sure that the adult labor in these towns came from a mixture of Irish, Welch, Scot, and English ancestry. One of the chief Ohio mine operators, William Rend, was himself the son of Irish immigrant parents. He made a name for himself in Chicago through his freight company, Rend Transportation, which he sold and began to dabble into coal mining. The first mine he owned was in the city or coal camp named Straightville in 1870.⁶⁴ Rendville however was a little more unique than other towns in the Hocking Valley. Rendville began as a

⁶² Ivan M. Tribe, *Sprinkled with Coal Dust: Life and Work in the Hocking Coal Region, 1870 – 1900* (Athens, Ohio: Athens County Historical Society and Museum, 1989), vii.

⁶³ Based on U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of the United States, 1880: Population Schedules, Athens, Hocking and Perry Counties, Ohio* (National Archives Microfilm).

⁶⁴ *The Black Diamond*, “Life and Work of William P. Rend, Coal Producer.” 4 December 1915, Volume 55, Number 23, 450.

coal camp developed especially for the importing of African American strikebreakers during the coal miners strike of 1874.

The Hocking Valley strike of 1874 erupted in Nelsonville and it was the first instance where black strikebreakers were brought in to quell a miner's strike in Ohio. A depression developed just a year prior that caused the demand for coal to drop drastically and mine operators slashed the wages of their employees. Ohio had a particularly active union presence (as did Illinois) and that year the Miner's National Association formed. In retaliation to the wage cuts, the union called its members from the mines on April 1, 1874.⁶⁵ The response from the coal companies was to bring in black strikebreakers. Numbering between four to five hundred men, they created both a real and perceived threat to the labor power and the community identity that basked in the light of whiteness. This perceived threat to the socio-political and economic standing of the white Ohio miners is best explained by the scholarship of William Edward Burghart Du Bois. In his historic treatise, *Black Reconstruction* he explained the "psychological wage" of whiteness and how the doctrine of racial separation was able to overthrow the promises of Reconstruction in the American South by uniting the planter and poor white alike. He argued:

It must be remembered that white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white.⁶⁶

This internalized, practiced and perceived racial hierarchy was not unlike the reasons that some white yeoman farmers in the South fought on the side of the Confederacy in the Civil War

⁶⁵ Michael Ray McCormick, "A Comparative Study of the Coal Mining Communities in Northern Illinois and Southeastern Ohio in the Late Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State Univ., 1978), 27-28, 30. See also the informative study by Herbert Gutman, "Reconstruction in Ohio: Negroes in the Hocking Valley Coal Miners in 1873 and 1874," *Labor History* 3 (Fall 1962): 243-64.

⁶⁶ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1935, 1995, 1998), 700-701.

because they believed that free African Americans created a threat to their households.⁶⁷ Thus, even though the view of such racial separation is typically viewed through a southern lens, much like slavery itself, it must be understood that this twisted, dehumanizing logic of race was exported to the Midwest and northern sections of America as well—and Ohio in 1874 is a perfect demonstration of this phenomenon.

The white miners' view of the black strikebreakers was that black scab labor would compromise the integrity of their homes--literally. The strike of 1874 was crushed by the import of black labor and it led to a drastic rise in racist sentiment in the Valley. Newspapers such as the *Hocking Sentinel* published racist epithets in their paper fanning the flames of hate and ignorance. African Americans were referred to as “the gang of Africans” that ended the strike.⁶⁸ The worst bigoted print came from the official organ of the Miner's National Association, the *National Labor Tribune*. In their pages they continued the rhetoric of white privilege and the attack on the white “home” by migrant black labor:

This Valley is their home; some of them have homes paid for out of the labor of their strong arms...; others have lots and houses on them partly paid for; others are trying to save enough out of their hard earnings to buy themselves homes. They have helped to build the churches and the schoolhouses, which they look upon with pride...These men, are citizens.⁶⁹

The rhetoric of race and nation were vitally important to how the white miners constructed their identities in the Hocking Valley. Instead of attacking the coal industry itself, particularly the mine operators who used the black labor to break the strike, the native white workers and the Southern European immigrants who were offered the aegis of whiteness collectively viewed

⁶⁷ See the explanation of the tenuous and unequal relationship of white farmers and planters in the antebellum South in Stephanie McCurry's work *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 93-96. Also see discussion of whiteness by Ronald Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), 86.

⁶⁸ *Hocking Sentinel*, 21 June 1877; 17 September, 29 October, 1874.

black labor as counterfeit labor and black people counterfeit members of the republic. The only “real” or authentic citizens were those that belonged to the labor union and the white race. African Americans were perceived at best as a pariah to their communities at the very basic level. In Ohio, such interactions set the tone for very complex race relations. Yes, the simplistic part was the view of African Americans generally as “other” but the white racism began to grow more nuanced as time went on.

The reality of living in Rendville—the very “homes” that many of the white miners were willing to fight to protect were a mixture of boarding houses and small homes that were erected by the Rend Coal Company. The “company houses” were mostly built in rows, but more to suit the ground, than upon parallel or corresponding lines. These “row houses” typically were in the same rows and were usually alike; but the houses in different rows were sometimes of different sizes, shape and color. In addition to the numerous neat Company houses, there were also “nice costly residences, erected for lease, or to be occupied by the persons owning them.”⁷⁰ Not everyone lived in such accommodations. There were also rough board shanties that were on the outskirts of the town. The population in 1880 was 349, but the town was then only a few months old, the population grew to an estimated 2,500, in just two years and continued to increase as more labor was needed due increased value (and demand) of coal.⁷¹

The link between labor and race grew tenuous as another decade began. At the end of 1879 wages began to stabilize for miners--they were making as much as \$1 a day but by the early part of 1880 the wages for miners hovered around 80 cents.⁷² During this time was also the beginning of the mines in Corning and Rendville. By the summer of 1880, there was trouble

⁶⁹ *National Labor Tribune*, 27 June 1874.

⁷⁰ Ephraim S. Colborn, *History of Fairfield and Perry counties, Ohio:*

Their past and present, containing a comprehensive history of Ohio; (Columbus: W.H. Beers & Co, 1890), 223.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

brewing in the Sunday Creek section of the Hocking Valley. Miners where the Ohio Central Coal Company (which was part of the mines in Rendville) was predominately working decided to employ a sliding scale when it came to paying their workers. All this meant was that the companies and the operators would pay the miners solely based on the market price of coal, not how much they mined per week. Frustrated and unable to come to a compromise for fear of financial ruin the miners refused to work in protest to the sliding scale. In response the companies began to import black labor into the towns, which only increased the resentment for the companies and for the black labor. The tension erupted into an armed conflict called the “Corning War.” Fearing a possible racial riot, then Governor Charles Foster sent in a company of 50 militia men, called the Ewing Guards of New Lexington. On the night of September 19, hundreds of white miners from surrounding towns demonstrated their solidarity with the Rendville and Corning miners with physical violence that left one miner dead and two militia men injured. After this skirmish, the Ohio Central Company abandoned the sliding scale practice.⁷³ What was learned in the Hocking Valley after the ‘Corning War’ was that the miners were indeed ready to fight and not just strike when it came to dealing with the coal industry, but the use of black workers was not about to end anytime soon.

Rend and his fellow mine operators in Ohio continued to introduce African American labor into the foray after 1880 by placing them in segregated “colonies” with names like Angola, Butchel, and Congo. All eventually grew from these coal colonies into small towns themselves. In other places such as Corning, there previously existed white workers, “black sections” of town were established in the hopes of keeping the peace. Such segregated living situations did not just hold true for the domestic or private sphere but the separation of the races was part of the work

⁷² *Perry County Democrat* 13 November 1879.

environment as well. Rendville's mine number three was known as the "Negro mine" and of course as the name suggests it was the mine that only African Americans were permitted to work in.⁷⁴ Mine six was known to be exclusively for white men. Consequently it was the most successful mine in the entire region as well. This was well known fact and it is safe to say that integrating that mine would likely have caused another racial dust up, especially as miners were associating their race to the existence of their homes and earning potential.

In 1884 there was another Hocking Valley Strike and this time, Rend dealt with the strike by bringing in diverse group of scab workers—so to speak. To crush the labor stoppage, and possible physical altercations, he imported fifteen hundred new workers and of them fifty were African American, the rest were white (or at least saw themselves as such). One of those fifty black men was Adam Clayton Powell. The strike was broken within a year and there seems to have been no record of racialized violence, to any of the new labor brought in—that however, did not mean that attitudes toward African Americans in the town changed. Although the town remained half black well into the twentieth-century white labor was able to hold on to autonomy in their own community. By the end of the strike, Rend offered equal wages for the black and white workers alike.⁷⁵ The coal industry was doing very well and so were the miners and the community grew.

For Adam Clayton Powell it was definitely a new day as he enjoyed the spoils of his newfound success. Since he moved to Rendville alone all he had to take care of was himself and the earnings he was now collecting from his labor provided a great deal of excitement and also temptation. Like many other miners, Powell recalled that he lost most if not all his wages to

⁷³ *New Lexington Tribune*, 30 September 1880; *Perry County Democrat*, 23 September 1880; Ephraim S. Colburn, *History of Perry County: Ohio Past and Present*, (La Crosse: Brookhaven Press, 2002), 19-40.

⁷⁴ *Hocking Sentinel*, 16 September 1886.

gambling and when he spent every penny he had and found ways to even borrow money to pay off gambling debts and the loans also allowed him to continue to gamble—continuing a cycle of indebtedness and mental despair.⁷⁶

The Hocking Valley had several diverse forms of recreation and entertainment in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. As wages rose for the miners, their families and the industries and businesses that developed as a response to leisure time and disposable income also grew. In places like New Straitsville one could find horse and foot racing as well as pugilism contests and gamecock fighting—all typical entertainments for the day. Each also attracted a subculture of gambling. Just as Powell lamented about how he lost his wages, some of the huge losses even made headlines in local papers. Nelsonville gamblers lost a reported \$1500 on the night of January 9, 1886 when the Silas Dew’s fighting rooster lost his first fight in four years. Other than the gambling, men were often seen in saloons spending their hard earned dollars. Rendville was no exception. In fact in 1882 it had eighteen saloons, one of the largest numbers of saloons in the Hocking Valley at that time.⁷⁷ Aside from saloons, prostitution also thrived in these areas, but it was likely not as entrenched as the practice in similar mining towns west of the Mississippi. One local newspaper editor, T. Erven Wells, objected in the *Nelsonville News* about the increases in so called, “bawty houses” in the town.⁷⁸ Thus it is safe to assume that Nelsonville was hardly alone in such practices, and if we are to take at least a fraction of Adam Clayton Powell’s testimonial to heart, Rendville was making similar strides in the secular world.

Rendville was not simply a rough and tumble town of miners looking to gamble, drink,

⁷⁵ Sheri A. DiBari, “Rendville, Ohio: An Historical Geography of a Distinctive Community in Appalachian Ohio, 188-1900,” Master of Arts (MA) thesis, Ohio University, 2011.

⁷⁶ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 14.

⁷⁷ Tribe, *Sprinkled with Coal Dust*, 89.

⁷⁸ *The Independent* 17 January 1883; *Republican Gazette*, 21 January 1884; *Athens Journal*, 20 March 1884, 14 April 1887.

and fornicate. Rendville had its share of nuances that complicate any single narrative about the coal-mining town. While it is true that vice was there (and made an identifiable impact), there also was a sacred side to the Hocking Valley that permeated the very soul of Rendville in 1885. It was this year that Powell had his own conversion experience. During the first week of March he explained that he hit rock bottom, no money, no food, and only the clothes on his back to his name—that and his mining attire for work. All that he had was consumed by his lust to gamble and drink. In his very gripping, descriptive account of how he came to Christ, he mentioned that for the first time that he could remember all of the saloons that he passed were empty. This was a very uncommon occurrence for a Saturday night. He vividly remembered seeing some of the “strong men” crying.⁷⁹

That Sunday while he was on his way to his usual saloon and gambling house, he passed by two churches, but for some unexplained reason he entered the First Baptist Church of Rendville. It was there that he witnessed the emotional worship and spirit-filled actions of the Rev. D.B. Houston. Although he never spoke a word, for Powell, “it was the most effective sermon” he ever heard.⁸⁰ Not long after, new converts to the faith rushed to the front of the church that could have been fifty or more persons—Powell was not one of them. He bolted for the door, overcome by what he saw and frightened by what he was feeling. As he looked around the outside of the church and around the neighborhood all he could see were converts around his age expressing passionate declarations of their faith. Seeing this not just that night but every night afterward for a week led Powell himself to accept Christianity as the organization of his spirituality. As he put it that evening’s events sent an “arrow of conviction” through his heart and

⁷⁹ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 15.

⁸⁰ Ibid., Powell explains his conversion experience in a very descriptive way. The *New Lexington Tribune* (3 March 1885) does not mention Rev. Houston’s “sermon” explicitly but does confirm the zeal with which Christianity was spreading in the area.

spirit.

There were several other revivals occurring that confirm the citywide wave of religiosity that swept over Rendville that week and in other parts of the Hocking Valley. At the Presbyterian Church, there was a revival that lasted for three weeks after Powell's conversion that boasted an increase of twenty-nine new members because of the revival they held and twelve of those joined the congregation as candidates for baptism.⁸¹ In nearby New Lexington, the Methodist Episcopal Church celebrated even greater numbers of converts. There, they had over 200 converts in the three weeks of their revival, which was led by the evangelist, Mrs. R.E.A. Smith, who "gained a place in the hearts of all the people."⁸² The revivals occurring in the Hocking Valley and particularly in Rendville seem to be happening across color lines as certain denominations were known to cater specifically to the African American members of the community such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and First Baptist Church, an all black congregation (there was also an all white Baptist Church in Rendville). Additionally, a class divide was evident for certain white Protestant congregations, such as the aforementioned Presbyterians. They were known to be the social elite of the entire Hocking Valley.

From the present research it has not been ascertained that such divides existed amongst the African Americans in Rendville. We can assume however, that there were the typical differences in terms of worship, but that like many black congregations the class lines were blurred—as 'well to do' blacks worshipped along side their working class brethren. For Powell Sr., however, his conversion was the beginning of his road to bigger and brighter things and a kind of newfound focus on his own future and his place within an ever-changing world. He left the mine and began taking classes at Rendville Academy where he worked as a janitor to pay for

⁸¹ *New Lexington Tribune*, 3 March 1885.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 4 April 1885.

tuition. His time in Rendville was coming to an end and he was determined to continue his education beyond the Hocking Valley.⁸³

Drawn to the histories of the exploits of great men and women like Louisiana Governor Pinckney Benton Stewart (PBS) Pinchback, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass, Powell Sr. wanted to carry the torch of black leadership—he yearned to be a leader of his people and he believed that the best way to do so was by being elected to Congress.⁸⁴ First however, he needed more education than the Hocking Valley could provide. Powell Sr. thought that becoming a jurist at Howard University was the perfect (and most pragmatic) place to begin his training for the betterment of his people. Entering the famed historically black university proved to be a bit more difficult than he anticipated. Regardless, armed with a new sense of faith in God and himself, he was ready to embark on his sojourn.

⁸³ From evidence compiled it is not known whether or not Rendville Academy was an institution that was only for African Americans or not. It is likely that it was, but again, research is uncertain.

⁸⁴ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 18. He mentions that beginning March 10, 1885 he began reading newspapers and books, along with word of mouth that he was introduced to these accomplished African-American leaders and their histories. Their stories of triumph and perseverance inspired him to seek elected office in Washington. It was through a federal appointment of some kind that he too could make a difference in the lives of African Americans.

CHAPTER 2

PREPARING A FOUNDATION OF SERVICE AND UPLIFT

Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., traveled to Washington, D.C., armed only with “high ideals and noble aspirations.”¹ What he did not foresee was that his subsequent travels further up the eastern seaboard would greatly impact the way he thought about his faith and the nation in which he lived. Powell’s time in the nation’s capital left an indelible mark on his mind and spirit. He learned to turn his ambition into opportunity but not without some setbacks. He was not admitted to Howard University but his time working at Howard House was its own education. From that part-time job he found his way to Wayland Seminary. Wayland opened many doors for him personally and professionally. Washington, D.C., was Powell Sr.’s classroom. It was not just sitting in class that he learned, but his life experiences also provided supplementary coursework to the class load he took in seminary. Drawn to Washington, D.C., Powell Sr. discovered he still had much to learn—not just with regard to formal education, but in the coursework of life. As the hymn “Jesus Savior Pilot Me”—suggests, Powell Sr. was on a journey and Washington was his next stop along the tempestuous seas of life.²

Youthful zeal is a funny thing—some might even call it a blessing and a curse. It can be an extraordinary gift in terms of optimism, but it can also be a curse when blind ambition and naiveté take control. In 1887, Powell Sr. made his way to the District of Columbia and much to his dismay, he came to painfully understand that it took more than just ambition to enroll at

¹ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 18.

² Richard Fuller, E.M. Levy, S.D. Phelps, H.C. Fish, Thomas Armitage, E.T. Winkler, W.W. Everts, George C. Lorimer, and Basil Manly, Jr. *The Baptist Praise Book* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1872), 397. “Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me” was a hymn that Powell often referred to in his autobiography and other writings and sermons. An avid lover of fishing in the ocean and sailing generally, it is no surprise that Powell enjoyed this hymn. The music was composed by John E. Gould and lyrics were penned by Edward Hopper, who was known for his nautical themed hymns and poems—which were part of his Church of the Sea and Land in New York City in the 1870s.

Howard University or to “go to Congress and receive Federal appointments.”³ Powell Sr. thought that he would simply show up and be admitted and start his education toward his juris doctorate. He had no previous correspondence with the university, and he thus had not the faintest idea of how to begin the process of enrollment, nor had he thought of the qualifications for incoming students. Reflecting back with embarrassment and pride he wrote, “It was a mistake to go to Howard University, but it was not a mistake to go to Washington. Here I made contacts and acquaintances that proved helpful through life.”⁴

While in Washington, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., learned the limits of his ambitious zeal, but he also learned how he still could actualize his dreams of becoming a beacon of hope and pride for his people, through his faith. Although his spiritual and intellectual journey began in Rendville, Ohio, the formal training of his mind and spirit began on the campus of Wayland Seminary.

The American Baptist Home Missionary Society (ABHMS) of New York City first opened Wayland in the 19th Street Baptist Church in 1865. That same year, the National Theological Institute (NTI) opened in Washington D.C. on Louisiana Avenue. Two years later Dr. George Mellen Prentiss King was appointed President of the Wayland. This was the beginning of a long-term association that would be the building blocks of a school that developed a curriculum that provided not simply theological instruction to many great African American ministers and intellectuals who came of age at the turn of the twentieth century, but became a spiritual and intellectual space that cultivated strong race pride as well. That ‘pride’ however—was a complicated one and is not beyond critique. It was facilitated by whites who in their well intentioned efforts, created problematic objectives that can easily be painted as

³Powell, *Against the Tide*, 18.

⁴ Ibid, 19.

paternalistic and at the very least benevolent—sewing the seeds of elitism and the ever present white missionary mentality that never truly saw the humanity of African Americans. Such relationships were inextricably linked throughout the struggle for black liberation in America—and this is illustrated in the institutional development of Wayland Seminary.

Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., arrived in the District of Columbia in 1887 with only the few belongings he had with him from Rendville. After being turned away from Howard University, he tried to figure out his next move and find a way to earn some money in the meantime. After some searching he secured a job at the Howard House located on Pennsylvania Avenue and 6th Street. It was a small hotel owned by Mr. J.B. Scott.⁵ Scott and Powell had subsequent conversations early on during his employment about what he wanted to do with his life. When Powell Sr. revealed that he had ambitions of going to school, Scott provided him with time off every night he worked to study and read. Powell Sr. used the time to read the plays of Shakespeare and also spent some of his study time memorizing entire sections of the Bible. Adam figured that doing this would help keep his mind sharp as he tried to find a suitable institution to further his academic pursuits. It paid off.

Powell Sr. was admitted to Wayland in September of 1888. He chose the school because he was filled, “with an unquenchable desire to preach.”⁶ He thought that attending seminary would give him the training needed to preach while also addressing his incessant need to learn. At Wayland Seminary all applicants were required to provide certificates of good moral character. It is not known who provided these documents on Powell’s behalf. Students were also

⁵ W. Andrew Boyd, *Boyd’s Directory of the District of Columbia* (Washington: R.L. Polk & Company, 1906), 645.

⁶ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 20.

expected to have at least some experience with basic math, spelling and writing.⁷

In 1869, the two schools—National Theological Institute and Wayland became one under the name Wayland, named for Dr. Francis Wayland, an American Baptist educator and economist from New York City and former president of Brown University, who had done a great deal to see such an institution made possible—from his critique of slavery to his activism against the peculiar institution.⁸ Under Dr. King’s leadership, Wayland moved from the 19th Street Baptist Church into a building on I Street opposite the church. By 1876, a new building located on Merridan Hill, near 16th Street was erected and it became the new home for the seminary. While the seminary was a great edifice it was the vision of the leader of the institution that laid the groundwork for decades of service and uplift. Such a spirit was evident in the school’s motto, “Be all that you seem to be, aim to be more than you seem to be.”⁹

Powell Sr. found that the school itself was divided into three sections or departments, that consisted of “Normal”; “Academic”; and of course the “Theological” courses of study. The “Normal” department was a three-year program that consisted of such classes as Reading, Spelling, Penmanship, Arithmetic, Rhetoric, Geography, Physiology, and Science of Government.¹⁰ These course offerings represented the core of a more pragmatic education for those enrolled and often served as a great pathway to more difficult study. Normal programs had many similarities, especially in the nineteenth century. Such programs in schools were to last

⁷ “Catalogue of Wayland Seminary,” (Washington: Wayland), 1877. See also the “Admission” section of document, reprint in Nellie Arnold Plummer, *Out of the Depths, Or, the Triumph of the Cross* (Hyattsville: Maryland 1927), 150.

⁸ See, Wayland, Francis and Wayland, H. L. *A memoir of the life and labors of Francis Wayland, late president of Brown university, including selections from his personal reminiscences and correspondence* by his sons, Francis Wayland and H. L. Wayland. (New York, Sheldon and company, 1867.) Additionally see discussion in Matthew S. Hill’s study, “God and Slavery in America: Francis Wayland and the Evangelical Conscience” (2008). *History Dissertations*. Paper 10.

⁹ “Catalogue of Wayland Seminary,” (Washington: Wayland), 1877. See also the “Admission” section of document, reprint in *Out to the Depths*, 151-160.

¹⁰ *Catalogue of Wayland Seminary 1887* (Washington: Wayland Seminary), 1887.

two or three years, but did not grant a bachelor's degree and there was no prerequisite of a high school diploma for admission, which was the same for those who entered into theological study, like Adam Clayton Powell Sr..

Most normal programs provided students with the equivalent of satisfactory tenth grade education. It is highly likely that like the Hampton Institute, Wayland's normal school was comprised of elementary school graduates who were seeking two additional years of schooling. Such students were typically less educated than other students and likely to be profoundly more disadvantaged economically—ultimately, many students in normal programs had the goal of attaining teaching certification.¹¹ “Academic” professors taught some overlapping courses given by the “Normal” instructors, but there were some contrasts in courses such as natural, moral, and mental philosophy, Cicero's Orations, and Butler's Analogy. The Theological Department was devoted to students, like Powell, who were dedicated to Bible Studies. When students were engaged in this course of study, which also was a three year program, they were required to register for the following courses: Miracles, Book of Acts, Pastoral Epistles, Epistle to the Hebrews, Biblical Geography, Interpretation of Scripture, Evidences in Christianity, Systematic Theology, Church History, Preparation of Sermons and Church Polity.¹² Students that desired to become ministers, and duly recommended by the Baptist Church where they belonged were allowed to receive what is best described as financial assistance. The only requirement of such students was that they “sustain consistent Christian characters, and make satisfactory progress in study.”¹³

Dr. King declared that Wayland's design was to be keenly situated to “afford an

¹¹ James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, Press, 1988), 34-35.

¹² Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 151.

¹³ Ibid.

opportunity for securing a thorough education at the smallest possible expense.”¹⁴ Additionally, the purpose of the institution was largely viewed as preparing black ministers for aid to their brothers and sisters in the American South and abroad on the continent of Africa. The school viewed the latter as vitally important because “millions in Africa are surrounded by intellectual and moral darkness.”¹⁵ Thus there was quite a paternalistic and indeed benevolent vision for the school, which reflects the white missionary zeal of the time. The leading scholarship on the white missionary tradition in the United States’ educational history does not paint a very favorable picture of them—no matter if they were well intentioned or not. For contemporary society, their work can easily be seen as a template for educational condescension and indeed pathologic genocide where the weapon of choice was education.¹⁶ It is important to note how the vision of the institution seems to not mention the need for ministers in the northern states or the incredible presumption about Africans as being in “darkness” spiritually. Such phrasing reeks of the stench of mythology with regard to black inferiority and white superiority. This fits right in line with the belief that Africans could only be lifted into the light of civility with the aid of whites, and through an education constructed and facilitated by whites.¹⁷ Yes, they would send black faces to Africa, but as ambassadors of empire, not nation building for the sake of the native born populace.

Whites who believed to be operating in the best interests of African Americans, particularly with regard to education had no problem wearing the robe of paternalism and the crown of benevolence when it came to helping to establish some of the early Historically Black

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 146, 154.

¹⁶ For more in-depth discussion of white missionary zeal in African American education please see Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*; David Wallace Adam’s *Education for Extinction* (1995); and Joe M. Richardson and Maxine D. Jones’ work, *Education for Liberation: The American Missionary Association and African Americans, 1890 to the Civil Rights Movement* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009).

Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). For instance, the ‘Hampton Idea’ of black education stressed (among other things) the need for intensive manual labor as a way to build character, work ethics and a Christian moral code. This was all to help to facilitate a brand of conservatism dedicated to keeping African Americans in menial jobs for labor—the thought was education would serve to reinforce white supremacist social, political, and economic hierarchies in the American South.¹⁸

Conversely, northern mission societies such as ABHMS established courses in their curriculum that only created manual labor or industrialized education as an insignificant part of their schools and saw such classes as anything but a benefit to the training of intellectuals and leaders. Additionally, the ‘Hampton Idea’ was created to advocate for political disenfranchisement and economic subordination of African Americans, as a race. Mission societies were advocates of literary and professional training of African Americans to help develop a viable black intelligentsia who they believed would be best suited to fight for civil and political equality. Although the ABHMS did believe in, “the thorough humanity of the black man, with the divine endowment of all facilities of the white man; capable of culture, capable of high attainments under proper conditions and with sufficient time; [not] a being predestined to be a hewer of wood and drawer of water for the white race,” there still existed another form of racial benevolence from white benefactors—although subtle, it was still there.¹⁹ Wayland was lock step with this ideology, if not a standard bearer for its time. The university officials, and Dr. King in particular, championed an environment for learning that pushed his students to things they thought impossible. However, students who believed otherwise, or lacked the proper focus

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, 36.

¹⁹ *Home Mission Monthly* 18 (April 1896): 123.

were “not made to feel at home” at Wayland.²⁰

Aside from maintaining a continued and sustained “Christian” work ethic, there were a few other rules that students of Wayland were expected to obey, such as no tobacco (chewed or smoked) on or off campus at any time as well as yielding not to the temptation of alcohol. There were also formal study hours that were to be observed. All such rules were in line with the overarching mission of the ABHMS. Above all, Wayland saw itself as a “home” for its students in the most idealized of ways and as such the administration sought to constantly fill the campus with those things and influences that cultivated high mindedness and progress for the students. One of those influences was George Mellen Prentiss King.

Working as President of Wayland was Dr. King’s last professional appointment. Previously, he spent time working as a professor at Maryland Agricultural College, now the University of Maryland—College Park. His departure from the University of Maryland was swift when certain factions in the university became aware of his more liberal and liberationist political views. According to the account of former student, Nellie Arnold Plummer, Dr. King was given his entire year’s salary to leave the institution when they were notified that Dr. King, “was a sympathizer with John Brown, that Abraham Lincoln was a man after his own heart in preserving the Union and liberating the slaves, [and] that no man is good or just enough to own another man, and that the best weapon to put into the hands of the slaves was Education!”²¹ Given the history of the state of Maryland, it is understandable why the institution might not want abolitionist educators in their midst.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Nellie Arnold Plummer, *Out of the Depths or The Triumph of the Cross* (Hyattsville, Maryland, 1927), 130. Plummer was an alumnus of Wayland and a well-known public school educator in Washington, D.C. and Maryland. Her service in public education lasted over forty years. *Out of the Depths* is a narrative she wrote of her family chronicling their lives and is thought of by many scholars as a “spiritual biography” that through the use of excerpts

Dr. King was born in Portland, Maine in 1833 and was a graduate of Colby College in Waterville, Maine, Class of 1857.²² His involvement with ministry began after attending seminary that same year. After attending seminary for just one year, he decided to serve as full time clergy at a church in Rhode Island. He remained in that state until the end of the Civil War. In 1865 he decided to move to Richmond, Virginia to work for the United States Christian Commission, an aid society created following the First Battle of Bull Run. While in Rhode Island Dr. King married Mary King and to their union two sons were born, Ernest and Harry. Outside of his love for his family, Dr. King was known for his commitment to the education of African Americans. Plummer spoke glowingly of her former instructor in her autobiography, recalling, “Prof. King did not stand in the pulpit only and declare the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, but he exemplified it, as hundreds of white ministers, teachers, and philanthropists, as well as thousands of colored ministers and teachers now living can testify...George Mellon Prentiss King was a wonderful personality.”²³

King was not only instrumental in Plummer’s life, but as she mentioned he had also served as a mentor to many students, among them was another product of Franklin County Virginia, the great educator, Booker T. Washington. Washington also attended Wayland and he and Adam Clayton Powell are the institution’s most celebrated alumni.²⁴ Washington attended the seminary in 1878 after graduating from the Hampton Agricultural Institute. Although he only attended Wayland for a year, Washington was very appreciative of the instruction and mentorship of Dr. King, reflecting back he testified, “...I was there but a short time, the high

from the diary of her father and letters by family members, give a fascinating account of their journey from being enslaved to living as a free family.

²² Lynne John Bevan, William Henry, and Dannat Pell (Eds.), *Catalogue of Delta Upsilon Fraternity* (New York: Delta Upsilon Fraternity, 1917), 49.

²³ *Ibid.*, 136, 137.

Christian character of Dr. King made a lasting impression upon me. The deep religious spirit which pervaded the atmosphere at Wayland made an impression upon me which I trust will always remain.”²⁵ Washington kept in contact with Dr. King after he left the District of Columbia. They kept cordial correspondence after he established the Tuskegee Institute located in Tuskegee, Alabama. In a letter dated, 18 January 1887, King wrote to Washington to check up on his former student and to congratulate him on his success, “Your progress in the great work which you are doing seems wonderful: it is no more than might have been expected from your practical good sense and natural push.”²⁶

After matriculating to Wayland, Adam Clayton Powell Sr., came to share the same sentiment of his fellow alumni, if not more so. During his first year at Wayland he faced incredible economic hardship—what he termed his “one painful mistake” during his time as a student in Washington. He left his position at Howard House to work as a caretaker for the Potomac estate of a Chicago businessman, “Colonel” A.B. Meeker. Meeker lost his fortune and was unable to pay Powell Sr. any of his salary for the summer, which he depended on to pay his tuition and other expenses. Powell Sr. was only left with a top coat and a hat that Mrs. Meeker sent to him, which was all she said they would be able to pay Powell Sr. for his labor over the course of that summer. Dismayed and unsure of his next move, Powell Sr. went to school still searching for a way to pay his tuition for the year. Whether an act of divine intervention or just plain dumb luck, Powell Sr. was called upon by Dr. King to give a description of the aims of Wayland to a group of visitors from New Bedford, Massachusetts during the middle of October

²⁴ See Douglas Morgan, *Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America* (Hagerstown, MD: Herald Publishing Association, 2010), 26,55.

²⁵ Louis Harlan, ed. *The Booker T. Washington Papers, Volume 1: The Autobiographical Writings*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1972), 25.

²⁶ George Mellen Prentiss King to BTW, 18 January 1887, *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Louis Harlan Eds, Vol 2, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), ALS Con. 118, 2: 324.

1887. So impressed was one of the visitors with Powell Sr.'s oratory that he asked to meet Powell Sr. in person after the event. When Powell Sr. met the unnamed visitor the gentleman informed Powell Sr. that he was going to award him a fifteen hundred dollar scholarship. The scholarship was to be contingent on Powell Sr. speaking throughout the South—teaching and preaching, essentially doing missionary work in southern cities pre-selected by the benefactor. Powell Sr. was expected to give Dr. King and the unknown benefactor his answer within a day's time. To most, this would sound like a great opportunity. Free education and all it will cost you is doing work to aid your fellows in the South who lay under the oppressive strangle hold of ignorance and segregationist policies. It is easy to see this as the opportunity that Powell was looking for when he left his home in Franklin County, Virginia—to make a lasting impact on his people. However, it is important to note that one of the key aspects about Powell's character or his personality is that he was a very proud man who championed self-sufficiency—particularly for himself and he guarded it with extreme prejudice. Outside of his need to help his race and to serve his God, he wanted to be known “as a self-made man.”²⁷ Thus, Powell Sr. would turn down the financial aid. Although he did devise a contingency plan to help pay for his education—he would work and take the road less traveled.

There are periods in Powell Sr.'s life where he felt inclined and indeed compelled to make more difficult decisions and this was one of those times. Later in life he testified:

“I have never had to pray for opposition. It has been a regular and often times as fierce as the inlet tide at Palm Beach and I have enjoyed it. I have never cared for smooth roads and placid lakes because they make small men and poor sailors. I have always removed cushions from my study chair placed there by benevolent church ladies, and only recently have been able to sleep on a soft mattress. I hate mediocrity. My life has been devoted to carrying the heavy end of the log and catching the big fish.”²⁸

²⁷ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

Armed with that same type of thinking, even as a young man, Powell Sr. once again took to the high seas of responsibility, this time too he would be guided by the winds of social ostracism.

During Powell Sr.'s time as a student at Wayland Seminary, there was no sewer system or running water, for that matter. The restroom facilities were confined to the outhouses or "water closets." It was brought to Powell Sr.'s attention that the school hired a student to clean these "closets." The payment for doing such an unenviable task was free room and board, as well as tuition. However, the school always had a hard time filling this position because the student that took this job lost all social standing with the rest of the student body. Powell Sr. was willing to entertain thoughts of applying for this job, rather than take what he perceived was a hand out. He would make his own way, no matter what and if it took cleaning the outhouses of Wayland, then that was what he was going to do.

When Powell Sr. arrived to Dr. King's office to inform him that he was going to decline the scholarship offer, he was a bit nervous, but his mind was made up. Dr. King did not seem to take the news well. Powell Sr. remembered King speaking in a voice that unnerved him only responding; "You may be excused," after hearing Powell Sr. reject the scholarship offer and asking for the job as water closet janitor. Powell Sr. did not feel good about the interaction at all, but all was not lost; Dr. King called Powell Sr. back to his office later that same day and offered him the position of headwaiter of the dining hall. Powell Sr. gladly accepted. He could not believe that after declining the scholarship and asking for what likely was the worst job on campus that he was offered one of the more prestigious jobs on campus. This interaction solidified a bond between student and pupil. Looking back, Powell Sr. proudly called Dr. King the "best friend I have ever known."²⁹ Their friendship had a profound effect on Powell and

²⁹ Ibid., 22.

again, that relationship was not just one sided.

Powell Sr.'s relationship with Dr. G.M.P. King was the beginning of his intellectual and spiritual maturation. Like other lauded alumni, Powell, gave a lot of respect to the instruction he received while under Dr. King's tutelage, "No man or set of men exercised the influence over my life that Dr. G.M.P. King of Maine exercised."³⁰ What made King such an integral part of Powell Sr.'s world, as well as others, was his ability to genuinely connect not just to his students, but his belief about what education would do for their race. As Mrs. Plummer pointed out, Dr. King came from a tradition that not only preached and talked about the brotherhood of man through Christianity, but he certainly practiced what he preached. His life for his students was an example of what America could be and that certainly gave them hope—no matter where they came from. Wayland was a place where students were given the tools to begin to help to retool and remake their race, not just as former slaves, but as free thinking people who would learn to be self-defining, no matter what obstacles were placed in their way.

The impact of Dr. King was especially important and noteworthy outside of the classroom. Nellie Arnold Plummer's recollections of the kindness and sincerity of Dr. King (and his wife) illustrates this point. Plummer often referred to Dr. King as her "white father."³¹ On the surface it may not seem that important, but it is a very telling descriptor of the professor, which deserves examination. Plummer also described Mrs. King as her "white mother." She explained that in terms of intellectual and spiritual matters they were completely just that—parents. Mrs. Plummer had parents of her own to be sure, which she knew and loved very much, but they both passed before she graduated from Wayland. Furthermore, her family had a long history upon the grounds where Wayland was erected. Plummer's parents had in fact been

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 138.

slaves on that very property. She was the living embodiment of the hopes and definition of freedom for her family and race—the land that her parents worked became the very land that she was educated on. Such context was not lost on Plummer or her contemporaries. More importantly, this was not lost on Dr. King. He admitted Mrs. Plummer to Wayland in 1875 at the age of fifteen and King and his wife, worked with her to make sure that she not only did well, but thrived at the campus. Plummer was always grateful for not just the Kings' empathic view about her particular situation, but she spoke of a deep sincerity that resided within the couple to actualize the possibilities for freedom for African Americans and to be a true part of not just providing education, but a holistic experience that would shape the lives of the students who they interacted with.

While sympathy and empathy are indeed noble sentiments, it is also the case that the Kings and Dr. King in particular not only taught lessons about theology, rhetoric, and the English language, but he too was educated by the students he taught. For example, Adam Clayton Powell Sr.'s refusal to accept the scholarship by the wealthy white philanthropist was initially met with some resistance by King, if we take Powell Sr.'s testimonial at face value. It is true that it was a great opportunity to gain a “free education” but Powell Sr.'s refusal to accept the position and his reasons for declining ultimately proved to work in his favor and teach King a lesson not just about Powell, per se, but truly helped to display the work ethic of African Americans as self defining individuals. Rather than serve as a roadblock in his educational and life path, King respected Powell's choice and did his best to work with him—this is very important. Many of the aid societies, such as the ABHMS had their fair share of such engagements with African Americans and the relationship with Powell Sr., and other African American students at Wayland helped Professor King to really engage how he truly could be a worthwhile ally to

African Americans and work for the betterment of the nation. Though it is true the ABMHS was dedicated to making sure that black men and women were not hewers of wood and drawers of water for the white race, but how did that translate from paper to practice? As a student, Adam Clayton Powell Sr. helped Dr. King expand the notions of African American humanity in a subtle, but truly powerful way.

What Dr. King was able to give Powell Sr. cannot solely be measured in any quantitative way. Yes, he expected much from his student in the classroom, but Powell Sr. internalized his relationship with King far beyond the confines of Wayland Seminary. His influence upon him was great and penetrating. King was able to give Powell Sr. not just education with regard to theology, but he gave him pragmatic ways in which to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For instance, Dr. King was a great help to Powell Sr.'s use of rhetoric, but Powell Sr. gave the most praise to King for his character as a human being—which culminated in purposeful life for Powell Sr. Remembering his days at Wayland, Powell could only recall, "...very few things he [King] said, but what he was is still molding and directing my life. To me he possessed the magnetism of the polestar. His life radiated beauty, goodness, courage, honesty, truth and love. These virtues cannot be taught by words. They can only be imparted by a life which possesses them in great abundance."³² Dr. King not only gave tools for Powell Sr. to be a great student, but it he gave Powell Sr. something greater, the tools to be a better man and Christian. As Powell Sr. would begin to make the transition from Wayland the lessons taught by King proved invaluable throughout his life and later would help to define his own ministry and his relationships to the community and parishioners alike. For Powell Sr., who King was spoke more loudly than anything he ever said.

³² Powell, *Against the Tide*, 25.

Despite the way that King was admired and seemingly revered by some of his students, there were contradictions that complicate his narrative as an instructor and a man. In June of 1885, a seven-page grievance was written against Dr. King by a committee of representatives from twenty-six churches, and presented to ABMHS through a meeting held at Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. The allegations against King said that he had physically and verbally abused a number of African American women students during his tenure at Wayland and the churches in the grievance wanted him removed from his position immediately.³³ Dr. King was never removed from his office nor faced any punishment it seems after the investigation. Additionally there were no charges filed with local law enforcement either.

Given the fondness that women such as Nellie Arnold Plummer had for him, if not an indebtedness it seems, it is difficult to reconcile these allegations and that so many churches were in agreement on the matter. Plummer however, never utters a word in the written record concerning this situation. Moreover, neither Powell nor Washington ever makes any mention of these allegations against their mentor, which they must have known about. Their collective silence about this situation is important to note. Did they not believe the allegations? Had they just decided to remain out of the investigation or did they want to only focus on his positives they mention in their collective writings to keep the focus on the good things King had done for them professionally and personally. We may never know. We can however, infer that knowledge of King's allegations was widely known in the African American community in Washington D.C. and within the African American Baptist community too.

Powell Sr.'s time at Wayland was also influenced by factors outside of the campus. The residents of Washington, D.C., also helped to shape his worldview and particularly his

³³ Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 51-55. See also "The Grievances against Prof. G. M. P.

theological praxis—especially in dealing with the dispossessed in society. Powell Sr. wrote about a chance encounter he had after he broke the rigid rules of leaving the campus at night to venture out away from the confines of Merridan Hill and 14th Street, during a bad snowstorm. He remembered walking down T Street not that far from campus and at a lamppost he came across a young girl who was cold and filled with tears. He approached the girl and she confessed that her mother sent her out in the storm and late hours of the night to see if she would be lucky enough to be a recipient of the generosity of a concerned citizen. Speaking to Powell Sr., the young girl shared that her father recently passed and her mother was at home tending to her newborn brother, leaving only her to see if she could secure some nourishment for the family. On this night it was Powell Sr. who was moved by the story and he recalled giving the young girl the only ten cents that he had to his name.

Such an encounter (whether true or not) has special meaning. Powell Sr. was moved by the little girl's boldness, bravery and some might even argue dedication to her family. Despite the odds stacked against the little girl--she stood in the snow hoping and praying for a miracle. This demonstrates a special type of resilience that Powell Sr. identified with in his own upbringing in Franklin County, Virginia. Yet on another level the girl is indeed representative of an underclass of African Americans in Washington at that time and helps to give context to the area and the people surrounding Wayland. The institution, nor Powell Sr., must be seen outside the context of the city and the citizens that surrounded them.

Washington, D.C. had been a major center for African Americans since the years following the Civil War—both in absolute numbers and with regard to the proportion of the city's total population. Part of that sizeable segment of African American culture was a sub

King, Principal of Wayland Seminary, Washington, D.C. as Stated by the Colored Baptists of the District of Columbia, Alexandria, Va. and Vicinity," Shiloh Baptist Church Archives, Washington, D.C.

grouping of so called “alley residents” who in most cases were from rural areas and were generally migrants who moved into the urban spaces of the nation’s capital.³⁴ Alley housing was a common form of residential establishment for folk migrants in other cities as well. Another similarity about Washington’s black experience, as with other urban areas in America, is that the city experienced several migrations of African Americans—not just one large exodus. The second large migration occurred after the Civil War and it laid the groundwork for the small communities of African Americans throughout Washington and was the precursor to the large ghettos that formed in the early twentieth century.

The dwellings of alley residents were referred to as “alley houses.” Many African American migrants were forced to live in these enclaves because of the work they were able to secure and because of racist attitudes of whites. The alley dwellings were at one point called the “secret city” in reference to the black alley community in Washington.³⁵ They faced directly into the alley and were separated by the main block’s outward facing house by a narrow alley, shed, or even fences. They were cheap houses constructed by landowners to deal with the increased population in the decades following the Civil War, especially after 1870. Additionally, there were no adequate transportation systems in a city with a burgeoning populace and some of the development of these alley communities was brought on by the existing and increased patterns of landlording in Washington. By 1880, African Americans made up 78 percent of the alley’s population, which was close to 10 percent of the city’s African American demographic.³⁶ The alley dwellers themselves were largely comprised of unskilled laborers whose households were of limited literacy, but there were a limited variety of occupations, education, family size, age,

³⁴ James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 1-6, 10-15.

³⁵ *Washington Star*, 19 December 1883.

and gender ratios—male to female.³⁷ It is highly likely that the parents of the young girl were indeed part of the unskilled labor pool of the city's alley dwellers—theirs was not a home of elite standing, since with her husband only being deceased a short while, she is sending her daughter out to depend on the kindness of strangers.

There is no true way of knowing, given the research compiled, to say for certain that the young girl that was searching for the kindness of a stranger to help her family was part of the alley dwellers, but it is highly likely given the area where Powell Sr. mentioned he was walking that evening. Truly the little girl left a mark on Powell Sr. about the limitations of lofty idealism and empty faith and religious zeal. Indeed, he was brought face to face with the fact that outside of his schooling and despite the gains made by African Americans in the two plus decades since emancipation, there were still those who were suffering and literally hungry.

Powell Sr.'s life was transforming on myriad levels. Not only were his mind and spirit expanded and challenged, but his personal life saw significant change, too. While in West Virginia, Powell Sr. met a young woman and became smitten with her. Her name was Mattie Fletcher Schaefer. She too found her way to Wayland and in July of 1889 they were married.³⁸ In terms of his personal development, he was operating on faith—a new situation as a student, a lack of disposable income and one can only imagine what it was like to go from a coal miner to a husband. Mattie surely was an important part of Powell Sr.'s life that he did not want to lose. However, in his published writings he never really discusses their relationship at length. Discussions of her in his autobiography only last half a page, but possibly in the world he lived,

³⁶ Paul A. Groves, "The Development of a Black Residential Community in Southwest Washington: 1860-1897," *Columbia Historical Society Records*, 49 (1973-4): 273

³⁷ Daniel D. Swinney, "Alley Dwelling and Housing Reform in the District of Columbia" (MA Thesis, University of Chicago, 1938), 94-105, 124-34; John P. Radford, "Patterns of White Nonwhite Residential Segregation"; Groves, "The Development of a Black Residential Community in Southwest Washington: 1860-1897," *Columbia Historical Society Records*, 49 (1973-4): 272.

such things were not part of his public narrative. Moreover, it is possible too, that he didn't want to go into a discussion of his "private" life. Regardless, Powell Sr. as a married student at Wayland was operating on faith—the substance of things hoped for the evidence of things not seen.³⁹

In May of 1892, Powell Sr. completed his college and seminary curriculum and was given the distinct honor of delivering the class oration that year. The title of his speech was, "The Elevation of the Masses---the Hope of the Race."⁴⁰ His time at Wayland came to an end, but it was also the beginning of his life as a minister. After graduation, King encouraged Powell Sr. to go to St. Paul, Minnesota to work for the Pilgrim Baptist Church. The thought was that he would become their pastor. The pay was listed at one hundred dollars a month and Powell felt that it would not have been difficult to become pastor. However, he chose not to remain there, as he believed that there was potential to have "caused great embarrassment and perhaps permanent injury" to the pastor that was already sitting, despite the fact that he had already sent in his resignation. The fact of the matter was, according to Powell Sr. that the unnamed minister wanted to stay in his position. Falling back on the teachings of King, Powell Sr. felt that to be "true to himself" he could not accept the position anyway as his heart was really in the East.

The second opportunity that Powell Sr. received to serve as a minister of a congregation was a vacancy at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There, he would really begin to use all his training, both theological and more pragmatic, to address the issues the congregation was facing. Primarily he would not solely be concerned with saving the soul of Ebenezer, but most of his time was spent trying to save and collect money so that the

³⁸ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 13.

³⁹ *Hebrews* 11:11 (KJV).

church did not fall victim to the auctioneer's gavel, like the convicted to the guillotine. The first week of his pastorate Powell Sr. received the unfortunate news that the church and surrounding property were going into foreclosure to be sold at auction in thirty days from his appointment. Powell Sr. was a stranger to the area, but that did not stop him from trying to save Ebenezer. He began a campaign to raise money in a place he was not from and did not know. Fortunately, he was able to secure the funds and prevent the sale, with the gracious help of the attorney that was overseeing the foreclosure proceedings.

Powell Sr. remained the pastor of Ebenezer until July of 1893. No details are given as to why he departed from the congregation, but one can surmise the politics of the congregation as well as the city generally may have taken its toll on the young minister and his wife. Regardless, Powell spoke very glowingly of his time in Philadelphia and seemed to hold no ill will toward the congregation. However, the lack of money became a common presence and hurdle in his life. From his days of poverty growing up in Reconstruction era Virginia, to his early days of ministry, the power of frugality was never lost upon him. At Ebenezer Powell was paid a salary of eight dollars a week. Half that amount covered his rent and two dollars and fifty cents was given to his wife to cover groceries. The remaining one dollar and fifty cents was used to cover the expenses of travel, healthcare, and clothing that the two of them might require. Powell Sr.'s stories of financial struggle were an enduring part of his early life as a married man. "We began at the bottom and worked our way up," Powell Sr. testified, "...the average young couple begins now at the top and falls down," commenting on younger generations that he believed did not see the value in thrift.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ralph Garlin Clingan *Against Cheap Grace in a World in a World Come of Age: An Intellectual Biography of Clayton Powell, 1865-1953*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), xvi.

⁴¹ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 27.

After leaving Ebenezer, Powell Sr. and Mattie made their way to Atlantic City, New Jersey. To make ends meet, Mattie Fletcher Powell secured a job as a seamstress, and Adam yet again donned a waiter's jacket as he got a position working at the Windsor Hotel. This brief stint in Atlantic City prepared them for Adam's next opportunity to work for a church. While working at the hotel that year, he was invited to preach at Immanuel Baptist Church in New Haven, Connecticut. Excited by the chance to preach again, Powell Sr. made plans to make the trek to New Haven. If he took the job, he would succeed the Reverend George H. Jackson, M.A., M.D., who was leaving Immanuel to serve a two-year stint as a medical missionary to the Congo, Africa. Such an opportunity really enticed Powell Sr., and he was anxious to impress the congregation.

Since his graduation from Wayland, Powell Sr. encountered situations that prepared him for future experiences and his time in Minneapolis, Philadelphia, and Atlantic City proved useful for his next challenge. Immanuel Baptist Church was unlike anything that Adam had yet to encounter during his young ministry. Situated in New Haven, Connecticut, it was located in the same city as the storied Ivy League institution, Yale University. This institution, like Wayland would have a lasting impact on the rest of Powell Sr.'s life and continue to expand his notions of what was possible for ministry and for his people. Indeed, New Haven would find myriad ways of preparing him for his next life's journey. For the moment however, he desperately needed a job and New Haven seemed like it could be the perfect place for Powell Sr.'s ministry and a town to anchor him and his wife as they began to think about starting a family of their own.

CHAPTER 3

IRON SHARPENS IRON - THE NEW HAVEN YEARS

In the fall of 1893, and only four months since his graduation from Wayland Seminary in Washington, D.C., the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Sr., searched for peace of mind—a place when he could grow with his wife and they hopefully could begin a family. Most importantly, Powell sought some semblance of financial stability.¹ At Immanuel Baptist Church, Powell found all that he wanted and much more. The intellectual and spiritual foundation that he gained from Wayland served him well as he met the pragmatic challenges of being a full time pastor. He learned to meet the needs of his church members and the African American community of New Haven, Connecticut. They too had an impact on him that was lasting.

New Haven had a very particular culture and history that defined it. Powell Sr. had to find ways to understand that culture so that his church could thrive, and along the way, his own beliefs and assumptions were challenged and refined. As the scripture in Proverbs 27:17 reads, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”² It was in New Haven that the Rev. Powell Sr. sowed seeds that germinated and grew into not just a ministry for the spiritual salvation of African Americans of New Haven, but into a thriving ministry of black empowerment—socially, politically, and economically. Also, it was a place where he would grow as well. There was no baptism in the waters of self-righteousness for him. Powell Sr. learned from New Haven and New Haven would learn from him. The people of New Haven had their own various affiliations—such as institutions of higher learning, other churches, and civic organizations worked together with Powell Sr. and all would benefit. It was Immanuel Baptist

¹ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 134.

Church that was Powell Sr.'s crucible of change in New Haven. He did not simply drift with the ebb and flow of the precarious tide of the status quo, but he learned to truly thrive holistically as he sailed his vessel of black Christian uplift against waves of indecision, discord, and fear.

When Powell Sr. arrived in New Haven he found an African American community that had a history of intra-racial, communal support. To be sure, New Haven was far from having a communal *tubula rasa*, or blank slate, when it came to its African American community and its activism for racial advancement and uplift. This was established (and maintained) through their institutions within both the sacred and secular realms, and those institutions benefited each other also. For instance, in the churches there it was not uncommon to find ministers who sought to move their congregations toward a view of political and economic empowerment as well as spiritual salvation. One minister, who preceded Powell to the Immanuel pulpit had a slogan, "Grace, grit, and greenbacks," that was dedicated to having frank conversations with the congregation about home ownership and ways to make improvements in their neighborhoods.³ In the secular realm organizations such the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) helped to bridge the sacred and secular gap as well. The New Haven branch of the YMCA helped to facilitate a place where young African-American men were able to engage each other in ethical subjects of the day (usually taken from the Bible) and later those discussions evolved into the Olympian Athletic Club in 1892. In its initial founding the YMCA was separated by race, however, by 1900 the Negro YMCA became the home of the Central YMCA. This was short lived, however, as the racial climate in New Haven did not allow for a united bi-racial organization to exist. Regardless, there were still other organizations that served the African

² KJV.

³ A.C. Powell, *A Souvenir of the Immanuel Baptist Church, its Pastors and Its Members*, (New Haven: Immanuel Baptist Church, 1895), 38. See also brief discussion in Robert A. Warner's *New Haven Negroes: A Social History*, (Arno Press: New Haven, 1969), 169.

American community during this time.⁴ Outside of the churches and the Negro YMCA, benevolent and fraternal orders such as the lodges of the Elks, the Freemasons, the Odd Fellows, and the Knights of Pythias were established in the antebellum era and maintained active rosters after the Civil War. Of the four organizations the Odd Fellows and Knights of Pythias were inactive by 1900.⁵ The Freemasons and the Elks however, flourished. The Elks, were located at 204 Goffe Street, and the Grand Prince Hall Lodge of Masons eventually purchased the building which had been the Goffe Street School. Membership in these fraternal orders, as well as their associative women's auxiliaries, provided some insurance and burial benefits, social interaction, and standing within the community—there was definitely a sense of distinction that membership created.

Together these organizations worked to create a functional community that after 1870 encountered migrations of African Americans from the South who entered into the city. It was still one of the largest the churches of New Haven that were the centers for socio-political and religious interaction. The migration of African Americans to New Haven had a great effect on the stability of the churches and they did their best to help to assimilate members to life in New Haven, while the migrants brought with them cultural aesthetics of their own—making a new reality for both parties within the African American community. For example, at Immanuel more than half of its most prominent members in 1900 were from Virginia, followed by South

⁴ In 1892 the “Negro YMCA” occupied the Goffe Street School. In 1895 it affiliated with the YMCA and became a branch of the central New Haven YMCA, but it withdrew for several years when African Americans were prohibited from using the pool and gymnasium of the newly erected facilities downtown which they helped to pay for.

⁵ Robert Austin Warner, *New Haven Negroes: A Social History*. (Arno Press: New York, 1969), 168.

Carolina.⁶

Immanuel itself played an integral role in the black community since its founding. The church was initially founded as the Third Baptist Church during the early 1840s and had a hard time securing a place of worship because of its inability to raise enough capital to erect or rent a place for worship.⁷ The church was formed from the Black members of the First and Second Baptist Churches in New Haven. From the related evidence it is easy to conclude that the African Americans in these two white congregations wanted a building and congregation of their own—they found out however, that keeping a church going would require more than mercurial or fleeting faith, it would take some sound business plans and effective leadership. Essentially their faith would have to be linked to organization and a plan of action. It was the Rev. Leonard A. Black, pastor from 1863-1871, who gifted his own property and was able to raise six hundred dollars that led to the development of a building on the corner of Chapel and Day Streets.⁸ After his departure the church was able to keep a stable flow of money and parishioners, however it is peculiar to notice that several of the church's trustees were white.⁹ These trustees were allowed financial supervision during this time.

During the latter decades of the nineteenth century the church changed the name to Immanuel Baptist Church. While the reason for the name change is not known, it did begin an era of spiritual and economic prosperity for the congregation. Under the new name the church continued to enjoy increased numbers in its membership rolls as well as improvements in the

⁶ Adam Clayton Powell, *A Souvenir of the Immanuel Baptist Church—Its Pastors and Members* (New Haven: Press of C.H. Ryder, 1895), 38.

⁷ *The New Haven Register*, 21 April 1855. See discussion by Rollin G. Osterweis in *Three Centuries of New Haven, 1638-1938* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 215-218.

⁸ Warner, *New Haven Negroes*, 67-68. See also Powell's discussion of him in *Against the Tide*, 33. The Rev. Black left Immanuel and was the pastor of the Harrison St. Baptist Church in Petersburg, Virginia. Upon his death in April of 1883, his funeral was said to have been one of the largest funerals in the state.

building itself. The pastor at the helm during this time period was the Reverend Dr. George H. Jackson, M.A., M.D. The Rev. Jackson could easily be labeled a renaissance man. Some have even referred to him as a “universal genius” because of his organizational skills with the church and his activities outside of the pulpit.¹⁰ Originally from Natick, Massachusetts, he worked in unskilled labor sector taking on jobs at a local shoe factory and with a town grocer until he finished high school. Upon his graduation he converted to Christianity and accepted a calling to the ministry and started this theological education at the former Madison University (now Colgate).¹¹ After completing his studies he accepted the pastorate in New Haven. While there he also found time to obtain two degrees from Yale University. He received a degree from Yale Divinity and also completed his training at Yale Medical School in 1892.¹² Although Jackson was happy at Immanuel, he left the church so that he could serve a two-year stint as a medical missionary and State-surgeon to the Lukunga District of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Africa.¹³ Before leaving however, Jackson had done a great deal to ensure the stability of the congregation as best he could, paying off a significant portion of the church’s debt, increasing the membership by 170 new members and helping to organize a chapter of the Christian Endeavor society.¹⁴

⁹ *New Haven Directory*, 1870. See also brief mention of white trustees by Warner in *Black New Haven: A Social History*, 86.

¹⁰ Warner, *New Haven Negroes*, 170.

¹¹ Madison University was founded in 1819 as a Baptist seminary and later became non-denominational. In 1890, the university changed its name to Colgate University in recognition of the family and its gifts to the school. It is named for the Colgate family who greatly contributed to the university's endowment in the 19th century. The theological side of Colgate merged with the Rochester Theological Seminary in 1928 to become the Colgate Rochester Divinity School, leaving Colgate to become non-denominational. Colgate/Madison was founded as an all male institution and became coeducational in 1970.

¹² *Yale Medical Journal, Volume II: November 1895 – June 1896* (New Haven: Connecticut State Medical Society, 1896), 103.

¹³ Lansing Burrows, ed. *American Baptist Yearbook*, (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, American Baptist Convention, 1893), 11.

¹⁴ The first Christian Endeavor Society was formed in 1881 in Portland, Maine, under the direction of Francis E. Clark. The society was formed in order to bring youth to accept Christ and work for Him. The youth were shown

Indeed, the richness of Immanuel’s history in New Haven and around the nation was not lost on Powell Sr. He knew that the church he was taking over was “rich in traditions, that there were men and women who either directly or indirectly connected with the church and its history who hope to build the religious, moral, political, economic, and social foundations of the Negro race in America. Its pastors were among the best-educated and the best known ministers of the race.”¹⁵ Yes, Immanuel Baptist Church was in very good shape—Powell Sr. thought it could be even better. While the church was well organized, he immediately noticed that there was a very obvious missing component to the other churches that he visited. One of the pitfalls of being situated in New Haven, Connecticut was dealing with Yale University—both directly and indirectly. The famous Ivy League institution seemed to cast a very dark and ominous shadow over the black community and particularly the black churches located there, and Immanuel was no exception. In Powell Sr.’s critique he lamented, “I did not find the evangelistic note in a single one.”¹⁶ While he believed that his predecessor was a great leader and organizer, too much of his time was focused on his studies at Yale and not on what Powell believed was vitally important to any Christian church—evangelism.

Powell Sr. thought that a majority, if not all, the black ministers in the town were preoccupied with trying to cater to what they perceived in Yale students who, in Powell Sr.’s observations, never seemed to attend the black churches in any significant number, if at all. If the students were not attending the question had to be asked, “Just who were these ministers preaching to then, and why?” Adam was convinced that there was a class divide or at least an air

that the church cared for young people. The Society enabled youth to express themselves while participating in useful tasks. It stressed a devoted, evangelistic spirit that was expressed in the Christian Endeavor pledge. Christian Endeavor created publications for youth, devised youth programs, and sponsored events. Christian Endeavor was maintained through private donations that often came from youth.

¹⁵ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

of respectability or false prestige that some of the New Haven churches were desperately seeking to convey, if only in the limited realm of the aesthetic and superficial. The churches in New Haven lacked substance in Powell Sr.'s view. So preoccupied with catering to the perceived notions of Yale, and its students, black churches stopped having Sunday morning services and opted for ones that began in the mid-afternoon or early evening. However, it was not simply the church that seemed to be caught up in the allure of Yale's mystique, but it was also the black literary societies and social functions that were equally consumed with at least "looking the part" when it came to how they conducted themselves. Powell Sr. was very critical of the secular and sacred black institutions in New Haven. For him they "were all shadows of Yale without the Yale intelligence, Yale wealth or the true Yale spirit."¹⁷ Most of the functions by secular organizations such as the YMCA or the various fraternal organizations were held on Saturday nights. These Saturday night gatherings were the primary reason Powell Sr. concluded that church services were held later—to accommodate those parishioners that had been out late the night before. This was unfathomable to him. The great dean of ministers, the Reverend Dr. Gardner Taylor once mentioned, "When the pulpit begins to reflect what is in the pew, it ceases the need to exist."¹⁸

In his usual way of never taking to calm seas, Powell Sr. decided to make his own waves in what he felt were dangerously stagnant spiritual waters. After he was officially given the title of pastor, Powell Sr. announced on September 10, 1893, that Immanuel Baptist Church would be having Sunday services at eleven o'clock in the morning and an evening service at seven thirty. This was a great departure from the standing tradition of having services at three o'clock in the afternoon. The change over to having eleven o'clock services proved very fruitful. That

¹⁷ Ibid.

morning, “the auditorium was packed with members; all the churches and all the pastors were present.”¹⁹

Powell Sr.’s second critique regarding the black churches in New Haven was the factionalism that emerged from denominationalism. Denominationalism is the tendency and practice of Christian churches to self-segregate based upon denominational affiliations founded in doctrinal or in many cases petty differences. This inclination of religious groups to experience such schisms can be about large theological debates or very minor doctrinal matters. According to H. Richard Niebuhr, denominationalism is largely a product not of religious forces, but rather social forces: class, racial/ethnic groups, regional divisions, and even nationalism. Neibuhr refers to denominationalism as an “unacknowledged hypocrisy” that invests in the very things that the founder of Christianity railed against. Neibuhr maintained:

The division of the churches closely follows the division of men into the castes of national, racial, and economic groups. It draws the color line in the church of God; it fosters misunderstandings, the self exaltations, the hatred of jingoistic nationalism by continuing the body of Christ in the spurious differences of provincial loyalties; it seats the rich and poor apart at the table of the Lord, where the fortunate may enjoy the bounty they have provided while the others feed upon the crusts poverty affords.²⁰

Similarly for Powell Sr., denominationalism was a cancer that severely hampered all the things that not only the church was called to do, but it hindered any type of movement of uplift or liberation efforts for African Americans generally. Powell Sr. saw the “petty jealousies” that existed between churches as stumbling blocks in the struggle to save what he referred to as a lost world. When denominational limitations were given up, the true gospel of Christ could be made manifest for the ministers and laity alike. To address this issue, Powell Sr. created an interdenominational ministers group that met and agreed on having a unity service on the fourth

¹⁸ Phone interview with Rev. Dr. Gardner C. Taylor, 15 April 2009.

¹⁹ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 30.

²⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Hamden: Yale University Press, 1929, 1954). 6.

Sunday afternoon of each month. Once this occurred there was an immediate impact for all parties involved. Such actions give evidence to the more general understanding of Powell Sr.'s version of uplift through religious institutions. The organization of spirituality, particularly within the same religion should be a unifying theme, not the cause of discord and dysfunction. Denominationalism was just part of the intra-race issues Powell Sr. observed and attempted to address while in New Haven.

Additionally, Powell Sr. was perplexed by the African American minister's continued disregard for the people of New Haven not associated with Yale. If black churches in New Haven were going to be more than mere "shadows of Yale" then the church leadership in New Haven had to change and be self-directed. In his view they could not set their calendars and time by the clock of those who he felt did not respect the institution of the church, the history of New Haven's black activism or Christianity itself. Powell Sr. advocated adhering to pragmatic and functional view of the Christian Gospels that did not seek popularity but stayed true to what he perceived were the basic tenets of the faith. Once that occurred, he believed the things would change for the better. Powell Sr. confessed, "when colored preachers...ceased trying to preach to the heads of Yale students and began to appeal to their hearts with a simple Gospel, it was not only an ordinary thing to count a dozen students at morning service, but many of them became helpful workers in the church and Sunday school."²¹ Those students not only came to work with the churches and people of New Haven, but they had a profound impact on Powell Sr. himself during his pastorate at Immanuel.

The students who worked at Immanuel were indeed some of the best and brightest minds not just in New Haven, but a select few gained national attention and prominence and made their

²¹ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 31.

marks in the history books in their own right. More importantly, these young men challenged Powell both in terms of his view of racial uplift and theological praxis. The students that Powell Sr. was particularly grateful to were: Isaac Napoleon Porter and William Fletcher Penn (School of Medicine) (1893,1897); A. M. Robinson (Yale Law); Henry Hugh Proctor, T. Nelson Baker, Clifford L. Miller, and William H. Ferris, who were all members of the Yale Divinity School. These young men came to Yale from various places, but their thirst for education and advancement both personally and for the race could not be understated.

Isaac N. Porter received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Lincoln University (Oxford, Pennsylvania) in 1890 and medical degree from Yale in 1893. He was from Summit Bridge, Delaware.²² After graduation he stayed in New Haven to practice medicine. William F. Penn, like Powell Sr., was a native of Virginia. He was born in Glasgow, in Amherst County on January 16, 1871. The son of Isom Penn, a mechanic-brakeman for the North and Western Railroad Company, the younger Penn spent time in Ohio, as Powell Sr. had, before coming to Connecticut.²³ He received his undergraduate degree from Virginia Normal School and Collegiate Institute and also spent time at Leonard Medical College located in Raleigh, North Carolina before coming to Yale. Penn claimed that he was a descendent of the William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania.²⁴ He and his siblings were very successful—his eldest sibling and brother, Dr. Irvine Garland Penn was a known advocate for civil rights and championed the cause of education for racial uplift through his fund raising efforts for several historically black colleges and universities. He was also a journalist. Not much is known from the research

²² *Yale Catalogue* (New Haven: Yale University, 1902), 326. *The Yale Banner*: Volume 51 (New Haven: Yale University, 1892), 32. *Alumni Directory of Yale University: Graduates and non-Graduates 1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), 468.

²³ Joanne and Grant Harrison. *The Life and Times of Irvine Garland Penn* (Bloomington: Xlibris Corporation, 2000), 5.

compiled about A.M. Robinson, other than he received his degree from Yale Law in 1895. His record becomes obscure after his graduation. That, however, is not the case with Henry Proctor.

Proctor was born in Fayetteville, Tennessee the son of former bonded persons. Like Powell Sr., he attended local schools intermittently and his education was interrupted by having to help with his family's farm. Despite those set backs, he still went on to gain enough education to become a teacher in a local school in his home town before attending Fisk University where he received his Bachelor's of Arts degree. After completing his degree he decided to enter Yale Divinity School where he completed his degree in 1894. That same year, the Rev. Proctor was ordained by the Congregational Church and pastored the First Congregational Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Proctor was not unlike Powell Sr. in the thought that Christianity would not just provide spiritual salvation, but he believed, the faith could provide a pathway for racial advancement in America.²⁵ If nothing else, Proctor saw religion—both Judaism and Christianity as being driving forces to develop racial pride. After leaving New Haven, Proctor wrote, “The Negro is nothing if not religious. He is a genius for religion. His religion touches his heart and moves him to action.”²⁶

The Reverend Thomas Nelson Baker was another very accomplished student—both before his matriculation to Yale and afterward he continued to do great things. Baker was born a slave in Northhampton County, Virginia in 1860. Despite growing up in bondage he became quite the scholar and student. He attended and received degrees from the Hampton Institute (1885); the Mount Hermon School for Boys in Gill, Massachusetts (1889); and Boston University where he earned the honor of valedictorian (1893). Once in New Haven, the Rev.

²⁴ *Symptom Record* (New Haven: Yale University, 1897), 25. The *Symptom Record* was the Yale Medical School's class book.

²⁵ Henry Hugh Proctor. *Between Black and White: Autobiographical Sketches* (Freeport: Books For Libraries Press, 1971; originally published 1925) 37-39.

Baker continued his scholarly path earning his Bachelor of Divinity in 1896 and continued on toward his doctoral degree in 1903. Baker was the second African American to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy anywhere in the United States, and the first former slave to accomplish such a feat. After graduation, Baker remained in New Haven, serving as pastor of the Dixwell Avenue Congregational Church, which, like Immanuel, was a predominately black congregation.²⁷ He left that post to explore an opportunity to lead the Second Congregational Church in Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

Baker had an interesting view about American slavery and what the barbaric, inhuman system had done for both black and white southerners alike. In an article entitled, “The Great Needs of the Southland” he proclaimed, “Slavery passed away leaving the southern white man inferior to what he might have been had it not been for slavery, and leaving the Negro superior to what he would have been had he remained in the jungles of Africa. The fact remains that more African heathen[s] have been civilized and Christianized under the influence of the southern white man than under any other.” Realizing a certain kind of post slavery gratitude, Baker felt that educated African Americans should think of southern whites as victims of a uninformed system and “children of Christian missionaries.” To do so, would keep educated African Americans from “growing bitter with race hatred; for race bitterness and prejudice mean little souls, and the Negro race has little need of any more little men,” Baker argued.²⁸ Truly there was diversity in thought among the young men that Powell Sr. knew at Yale.

Clifford L. Miller was the only student in the group that Powell Sr. regularly associated with who did not complete his degree. The reasons for not finishing the degree program are not

²⁶ Ibid., 51.

²⁷ Alexander McDonnell, William Revell Moody, and Aruthur Percy Fitt, eds. *Record of Christian Work, Volume 23* (East Northfield: W.R. Moody,1904), 331.

known, but it did not prevent the Rev. Miller from preaching full time. He ended up accepting a job as a full time minister in Newport, Rhode Island. There is not much known about his life after New Haven either.²⁹

William H. Ferris was the last of the students that Powell Sr. met and he came to know quite well. Ferris among all his fellow Yale students had a great potential to truly be a national figure given his academic pedigree, in intellectual circles, but for reasons both known and unknown, Ferris never developed into the towering intellectual that some believed he could or should have become. His contemporaries, such as historian, Carter G. Woodson had a very tragic and pessimistic view about Ferris.³⁰

Ferris was born and raised in New Haven in 1874, to David H. and Sarah Ann Jefferson Ferris. William graduated from Yale in 1899 and later went on to receive his Master's in Divinity from Harvard. He was most well known for his magnum opus, *The African Abroad, or His Evolution in Western Civilization, Tracing His Development under Caucasian Milieu* (1913). The text was a combination of history, autobiography and an analysis of then contemporary factions within the black leadership class. Ferris desperately wanted to be a force within the realm of ideas, but his text never received the reception that his peers had with their own masterworks. Although there are little records outside of his writings and a few pieces of correspondence here and there, we are still able to get a decent understanding of who Ferris was as an intellectual and there are inferences one can make about his relationship to those around him. For instance, Ferris definitely had a respect for Powell Sr. and his thought and there was a reciprocal respect for the mind of Ferris by Powell Sr.

²⁸ Ibid. 332.

²⁹ *Directory of the Living Non-Graduates of Yale University* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1914), 135.

Recalling back to his days at Yale, Powell Sr. was indebted to both Ferris and Porter among all the students that he knew and interacted with. These two men, in particular, were integral to Powell Sr.'s success in the classroom and outside of it as well. During the school year of 1895-1896 this talented group of young scholars were a force behind Powell Sr. enrolling as a special student at Yale Divinity School. Porter was a big help to Powell in his philosophy courses and Ferris was a great tutor for his Hebrew classes.³¹ Outside of class, Powell Sr. attempted to create an environment where the young men could relax from the pressures of schoolwork. Powell Sr. gave due credit to the students for not just encouraging him to enroll at Yale, but they helped the young pastor “shape the destiny” of Immanuel Baptist Church; that destiny was not yet fulfilled but it began to emerge.

Though some of the young men were not affiliated with the Baptist denomination, as the majority were Congregationalists—in line with the denominational ties of Yale, they chose to worship with Powell Sr. and his flock at Immanuel and not just on rare occasions. Some of them would go as far as to teach Sunday School classes at Immanuel even through some like Proctor spent most of their Sunday mornings with the congregations of their professors who were pastors of churches in New Haven and spent their Sunday evenings in the African American tabernacles.³² Despite this, Powell Sr. was ever so grateful for their presence in his congregation, however it was. His fellowship with the students from Yale helped to shape not just the way he saw the church, but also the way he saw his people and his nation. The graduate students and even his professors had a way of pushing the intellectual and theological limits of what he believed was the true calling, or the use of, the Christian Gospels in contemporary society.

³⁰ See discussion in Kevin Gaines', *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 101-107.

³¹ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 31-32.

The seven graduate students at Yale University we can assume from the collected evidence were able to challenge Powell Sr. in ways he might not have otherwise been challenged--to think critically not just about how he was pastoring his church, or the way he thought about theology, but the exchanges that Powell Sr. had in his home, at church and on campus had to provide him with a great resources to understand how racialized notions of uplift did indeed fit into his construction and understanding of his faith. One can only imagine the conversations that were had around a dinner table for instance between Powell Sr. and Proctor—or for that matter Powell Sr. listening to exchanges from the students with each other. This is not to say that Powell Sr. did not have an influence on them either, for he did. Powell Sr.'s years as a special student served him well to begin to really make concrete ties between the history of his people, and Powell Sr. was able to begin to think about ways in which the legacy of slavery would not serve to hold African Americans back, but would serve to embolden them with courage and pride in those who fought and died so that they could live. Likely not since his time at Wayland had Powell Sr. been so surrounded by young, questioning and energetic minds that were eager to aide in the cause of racial advancement.

With his intellectual juices flowing, Powell Sr. wanted to do something for the church that would serve a few interests. In an effort to combine his historical research of the church and the community, Powell Sr. took it upon himself to write and publish a brief history of the church and some of its notable ministers and laity. The volume was entitled, *A Souvenir of the Immanuel Baptist Church—Its Pastors and Members*.³³ The book was ambitious, but Powell Sr. hoped that it would serve as a reminder of who New Haven and Immanuel had been and compel them to continue the legacy of racial and spiritual uplift. In theory the creation of the book was a

³² Proctor, *Between Black and White*, 44.

stellar idea. The text could serve as an informative and yet inspirational piece for the community and the congregation one could suspect, but it also was a fund raising venture as well. Powell Sr. placed every cent he could muster of his own capital into this project and even borrowed forty dollars to cover the rest of the publication expenses he incurred. He gave himself a timeline of about a month to repay what he invested and the extra money he borrowed to cover all the publishing costs. Powell Sr. banked on his pastor's salary to cover any losses he would inevitably take. The solution seemed simple, but things are seldom that way. The fact of the matter was he was going to have about five weeks to sell and distribute one thousand books, quite a task in any era.

As the seasons were beginning to change from summer to fall, 1895 proved to be a very wet and dreary time in New Haven, as it could typically be in most of New England as winter creeps around the corner. The weather conditions were so dismal that Powell Sr. was forced to cancel church services the Sunday before payment was due on the books—due to rain. Understandably dismayed and disillusioned, he flirted with leaving the ministry and trying to enroll as a student at Yale law. He figured that was the pathway that he had originally wanted to follow when he left the mines of Rendville, Ohio and so it was looking like he needed to go back to that line of thinking, but his dreams of going to Congress never took flight.³⁴

Days turned into weeks and weeks ever so slowly to the end of the month and Powell Sr. really had not sold more than a handful of books. What is interesting to note is that going through this trial, trying to sell a self-published history book of Immanuel Baptist, pushed him to the brink more than anything he had experienced before. For it was not just simply the selling of the books that was at stake, but Powell's faith was tied into the writing, printing and the selling

³³ Powell, *A Souvenir of the Immanuel Baptist Church*, 32.

of the book. He was not selling them to make a large profit, but the venture was one of faith and love for his expanding mind. Given the number of things he encountered in his life, it is interesting to note how much the publication of this book meant to him. Possibly the thought was that this was the first time that he was fully invested into something outside of his schooling—his first real shot at being a full time pastor and he was understandably nervous about failing? Given the primary documentation all we know is that Powell Sr. lamented “For the first time in my life,” he wrote, “I surrendered to God soul and body, and that, like the Wise Men of the East, I found my lost star.”³⁵

After re-centering his spirit and sense of purpose, Powell was able to endure this latest test of his faith both in God, but primarily in himself. From the documentary evidence, it is safe to say that Powell was driven by a need to not just accomplish something for himself to prove to himself that he could accomplish his goal, but there also was likely the thought about how he would be able to support his family. So there was that notion swirling about his mind that asked if all he had done thus far to establish himself both as a productive member of society and as a man had been worth it? If he could not sell the one thousand books ordered, how was he going to lead his household? Thankfully that was a question he never had to ask himself again—well not while in New Haven. He was able to meet his deadline and pay back the loan he had procured.

With newfound determination he was dedicated to cultivating his mind even more. That cultivation was not merely for the sake of knowledge seeking, but he was one who looked at intellectual engagement that had purpose—an activist intellectual of sorts, a religious intellectual. While as a special student at Yale he took courses that would help his understanding

³⁴ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 34.

of the sacred texts of Judeo-Christian organization of his spirituality and additionally he wrestled with intellections that helped to develop both kingdom and nation building. Such training continued to help formulate his particular notions about racial uplift. Though not fully formed yet, at least in his writing formally, Powell Sr. was beginning to search for ways to incorporate the sacred and secular realms of ideas to benefit the plight of African Americans. As the last decade of the nineteenth century was coming to a close, Powell Sr. was able to attend an event that changed his life forever—as a minister and as an African American.

In 1895 the Cotton States and International Exposition was held in Atlanta Georgia. It lasted for almost four months (September 18 thru December 31) and was held in Piedmont Park, attracting hundreds of thousands of attendees. The exposition was created to promote the Southern United States to the world—and show particularly that Atlanta could and should, be the center for this New South. The brainchild of Atlanta businessmen, their goal was to demonstrate to the surrounding states in the nation and also inform the world that the American South was open for business.³⁵ This was not the first such event, as there was a similar event in Chicago and even in Atlanta in 1881 and 1887. It was also a showcase for products and new emerging technologies, such as electric lights and new breakthroughs in agriculture as well. Additionally, the event was also used as a platform to encourage trade with the United States southern neighbors in Latin America.

The theme for this exposition was to illustrate the progress that the South was making since Reconstruction, basically trying to convey that the South was ready for investment and development in the modernizing world. Men like Henry Grady, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*

³⁵ Ibid., 35.

³⁶ Theda Predue, *Race and the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition of 1895* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2010), 1-4.

during the 1880s, helped to provide the nomenclature and this unique vision of Atlanta as the center for the New South just as New York was the center for commerce in the more industrialized North.³⁷ However, the most lasting aspect of the exposition was how it became a watershed moment for the discussion of the cultural and historical construction of race in America.

The most enduring legacy of the exposition was the oration delivered by the great educator, Booker Taliaferro Washington, founder of Tuskegee University. His address, commonly known as the “Atlanta Compromise” speaks to the controversial nature of the speech some time after it was given, though initially there was much more fan fare than criticism. Washington spoke on the opening day of the Atlanta Exposition and he left a lasting impression even had he said nothing at all, for all eyes were upon him as he spoke—the audience consisting of white Southerners and African Americans were keyed in on him. Journalist, James Creelman, writing for the *New York World* described the scene vividly: “When among them a colored man appeared [Washington], a sudden chill fell on the whole assemblage. One after another asked, “What’s that nigger doing on the stage?”³⁸

Their questions would later turn to cheers when Washington did not declare a vociferous, impassioned critique of the racism faced by those of his race, especially in the American South, as some may have expected. Instead he encouraged African Americans to focus not on securing political rights and social equality, but to use their energies to embrace industrial education. Using the metaphor of “casting down your buckets where you are,” Washington pleaded:

“To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man who is their next door neighbor, I would say, cast down your bucket where you are, cast it down in

³⁷ *New York Times*, 14 March 1887.

³⁸ *New York World*, 19 September 1895.

making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded. Cast it down in agriculture, in mechanics, in domestic services and in the professions.”³⁹

Washington’s oral proclamation of industrial education was built upon a foundation of socio-political advantage for white southerners who were more than happy not to be forced into an immediate declaration of rights and privileges due all citizens and to take a more gradual response to addressing socio-political inequality of African Americans. To illustrate how segregation could in fact work in America, Washington gestured with his hands, “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”⁴⁰ Creelman observed that from the audience emerged, “a great sound wave resounded from the walls and the whole audience was on its feet in a delirium of applause.”⁴¹ Thus for Washington, the speech was a great success and it was the beginning of his ascendancy to power and influence both among African Americans and wealthy white philanthropists who believed in his vision of industrial training. The speech was not just a triumph of rhetoric, but one of agendas. Washington was very cautious and deliberate about what he said and what he did not.

Almost as soon the speech was given it was met with praise and simultaneously consternation. For instance, Creelman began his article in the *New York World* referring to Washington as a “negro Moses,” and praised the way he was able to speak before a great audience of white people. Washington’s oration in his mind marked, “a new epoch in the history of the South.”⁴² The renowned American scholar and activist intellectual William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) Du Bois, wrote to Washington congratulating him on a “phenomenal success

³⁹ Booker T. Washington, “Address By Booker T. Washington, Principal Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama At Opening of Atlanta Exposition,” 18 September 1895, 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 4.

⁴¹ *New York World*, 19 September 1895.

⁴² Ibid.

in Atlanta,” and mentioning that the speech, “was a word fitly spoken.”⁴³ Others, such as minister and politician, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, was one of the first to call attention to what he believed was the accommodationist overtones of the speech. Turner proclaimed, “The colored man who will stand up and say in one breath that the Negroid race does not want social equality, and in the next predict a great future in face of all the proscription of which the colored man is a victim, is either an ignoramus or is an advocate of the perpetual servility and degradation of his race.”⁴⁴ Despite protest and cautions, the reality was that Washington’s speech had done a marvelous job of putting him in a place to accomplish an agenda of his choosing. With the death of the great patriot and activist Frederick Douglass, earlier that year, Washington was keenly situated to be the new face of African American leadership. Washington’s speech had indeed calmed Southern white’s fears about what America should look like as the twentieth century approached.

Adam Clayton Powell Sr. traveled to the expo to see with his own eyes how far his beloved South had progressed since the “destruction wrought by Sherman’s Army,” and from his earliest days growing up in Reconstruction Virginia. Powell Sr. was especially interested in seeing and hearing Booker T. Washington. He and Washington were both from Franklin County, Virginia, and had also attended Wayland Seminary. Washington spoke highly of the venerable character, insight and mentoring by the institution’s first president, Dr. George Mellen Prentiss King. Thus the preacher and the educator had more than a few things in common. Powell, like many others at that time, heralded the Atlanta Exposition Address:

“That the white south invited one of its former slaves to speak at its first great exposition was the

⁴³ Autographed letter signed by Du Bois to Booker T. Washington, 34 September 1895, *Booker T. Washington Papers*, Container 113, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁴ Henry McNeal Turner, “The American Negro and his Fatherland,” in Bowen, *Africa and the American Negro...Addresses and Proceedings of the Congress on Africa* (Atlanta: The Franklin Publishing Company, 1896), 69-78.

most conclusive evidence of its progress, and that a black south could produce in three decades a man who pronounced the only platform ever offered upon which the two races could live and work together furnishes the strong illustration of the program made by ex-slaves.”⁴⁵

Praise aside from the speech, Powell Sr. viewed it as a starting place in dealing with the racial antagonism in America, particularly in the South. “Dr. Washington’s notable speech was not a solution,” Powell Sr. argued, “but a great inspiration to those who were working for a solution of the race problem.”⁴⁶ Powell Sr. had indeed had a great experience in Atlanta, but it was not solely limited to the oration of his fellow Virginian. The Atlanta Exposition was much more than speeches to be sure. Some scholars have argued convincingly, that it was also just as much about the performance of race as it was about commerce in the New South.⁴⁷ Race and commerce have been at the heart of the American republic since the first African slaves were brought to the shores of colonial Virginia in 1619 and in 1895 it was still the case, though the physical manacles of slavery were broken, the vestiges of the system still lingered and Atlanta wanted to show the world and the nation that they were ready for the new century.

Part of the exposition was about illustrating American dominance and sheer benevolence, sold as the inquisitive study of other cultures from the continents of Asia, Africa, as well as North and South America. Cultural exhibits were created to give visitors a close look into the lives of primitive peoples and societies across the globe. As for African Americans and women (white women) it was a chance to thrust themselves into the national conversation as true inheritors of the American fabric as contributors to the nation’s future. Thus, there was a Negro

⁴⁵ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 39.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 39,40.

⁴⁷ Theda Perdue does an excellent job in discussing the role of race in constructing the Atlanta Exposition and how African Americans sought to use the exposition as a sort of advertising of the talents, creativity, and humanity of culture in her text, *Race and the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition of 1895* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2010). Also, equally as fascinating is her discussion of how the exposition was used to categorize the world by race from the side show-equine villages of the Dahomey, Japanese and Chinese to the ethnographic exhibits by the Smithsonian Institute.

and Women's Building dedicated to doing just that. The Negro Building was located in the park and was quite impressive. The overarching theme for the Negro Building was "progress." However the African American and white organizers could not agree initially on how that was to take place. Under the leadership of Irvine Garland Penn, as chief of the Negro Building, a vision of "progress" took shape that all were satisfied with.

Penn was a teacher and journalist dedicated to racial uplift. He was a newspaper editor and wrote several essays about African American progress since emancipation and was linked to more conservative elements of racial uplift while living in Atlanta. Additionally, he was a close friend and supporter of Booker T. Washington, who had turned down this position of chief of the Negro Building because of his responsibilities as principal of the Tuskegee Institute. However, it was Penn according to Washington that really solidified his speaking opportunity on the opening day of the exposition. While managing his stress and fears over the reception to Washington's address, Penn was seeing to other matters of importance as well. Taking the opportunity to make tangible advances for African Americans, Penn urged his colleagues to use the exposition to help make the case for improving conditions for African Americans on railroads—especially those who were going to and from the exposition.⁴⁸

Penn also had a connection to Powell Sr. William Penn, one of Irvine's younger brothers, was one of the graduate students at Yale who had been so integral to Powell Sr.'s time at the institution as a special student. It is not known if Powell ever corresponded with either Penn

⁴⁸ Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Irvine Garland Penn, and Ferdinand L. Barnett, *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbia Exposition*, ed. Robert W. Rydell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 44-64. See also Christopher Reed, "All the World is Here!" *The Black Presence in a White City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) and Walter G. Cooper, *The Cotton States and the International Exposition and South, Illustrated. Including the Official History of the Exposition, by Walter G. Cooper...Also Including Portraits and Biographical Sketches of Distinguished Visitors. Histories of Each of the Cotton States and Various Illustrations of Scenery, etc.* (Atlanta: Illustrator, 1896), 9. Lastly, see *Atlanta Constitution*, 20 January 1895 and 6 November 1895. An article in the *Washington Bee* 26 October 1895 reported the Southern Railroad promised African Americans "fine first class Pullman or coach accommodations for the colored people especially."

before his trip to Atlanta, but it is not impossible to see the likelihood that a conversation or correspondence between the two could have occurred given the nature of the contact between Powell and the younger Penn. Moreover, the Negro Building did not open to the public until October 21 about a month after Washington's address. It is not out of the realm of possibility that certain persons were given tours of the exhibits before the formal opening.

The Negro Building had just as a profound impact on Powell Sr. as the address given by his fellow Virginian. The building featured works of art, music and literature. Also there were other aspects of the building that attempted to draw attention to the great accomplishments of African American breakthroughs in science in technology as well. For instance, Granville T. Wood's "underground electric propulsion and synchronous multiplied railroad telegraph."⁴⁹ Additionally, there were also artifacts on display to highlight the various cultures of Africa, several of which were borrowed from the private collections of persons such as Bishop Henry McNeal Turner. Despite efforts that seemed contrary to this at least in the spirit of the exhibit, there was a decidedly somewhat egocentric and imperialistic viewpoint of how to best help the "Dark Continent" instead of looking upon the people and the continent as the cradle of civilization.⁵⁰ Thus, in some ways African Americans who were working to change the images of themselves by others as well as uplifting each other also shared some of the same basic ignorance about those areas outside of the continental United States.⁵¹

Of the artwork found just inside the entrance to the Negro Building was an imposing, life size statue—a sculpture entitled, "A Negro In Chains Broken but Not Off." The artist was W.C. Hill, and the sculpture is of a young, adult African American man standing nude with the chains

⁴⁹ Perdue, *Race and the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition of 1895*, 38. Woods was an African-American inventor who made key contributions to the development of the telephone, street car and many appliances for use on electric railways.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

from his bonded past broken. The artwork, according to Penn, was created to symbolize the condition of African American men across the nation, not just in the South.⁵² As Powell Sr. prepared to make his way back to New Haven, the words of Washington and the exhibits in the Negro Building made a great impression upon him.

So moved by the sculpture was Powell Sr. that he delivered a lecture entitled, “Broken but Not, Off” not long after his return to the Northeast. This address was added to lectures he already had given (i.e., “The Stumbling Blocks of the Race” and “My Black Cats”). Powell Sr. was particularly drawn to the phrasing around the base of the sculpture: “Broken but, Not Off.” In his lecture he argued that the, “...chain of slavery had been broken but the handcuffs of ignorance, superstition, prejudice, intolerance, and in justice were still on the Negro.”⁵³ In the lecture he never mentioned anything about religion, at least no explicit references to any Judeo-Christian leanings on his own part, or how African Americans could find deliverance through the spiritual salvation of Jesus Christ. Powell Sr. is addressing the needs of the people where they are and his notion of uplift is not only for Christians, but to those who love justice and seek to live with dignity. Powell Sr. immersed himself in a notion of racial uplift that while for him is grounded in understanding of Christianity as empowering, he only addressed the self-determining aspect of racial uplift ideology. Powell Sr. was not constrained by his faith in that regard, if at all. Where some would and have cloaked their message in a garment of religiosity, he is steeped in a pragmatism that harkens back to the emboldened pleas of Frederick Douglass.

“Broken But Not Off,” was a great success for Powell Sr., in as much as he was drawing attention for his oration. He started to receive invitations to speak all over the country, after

⁵¹ *Atlanta Constitution*, 28 July 1895.

⁵² *Ibid.* 22 September 1895; Ruth M. Winton, “Negro Participation in Southern Expositions,” *Journal of Negro Education* 16 (1947): 37-38.

news spread of his eloquence and passion from New Haven. For instance, he traveled as far as California to give the lecture to standing room only crowds in San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco. Moreover, other lectures he penned enjoyed resurgence as well. The “Two Black Cats” lecture made him enough money to finally purchase a home for him and his wife, and it occurred right in time for the birth of their first child, Blanche in 1898. Powell Sr.’s newfound success with secular speaking made him very much a public intellectual. Newspapers from both coasts were praising his powerful oratory.

The *California Eagle* and the *New Haven Palladium* were two periodicals that gave very positive responses to Powell Sr.’s lectures. The *Palladium* gave a full overview of the “Two Black Cats” lecture. In the speech, Powell Sr. spoke of two black cats metaphorically, that a neighbor gave him. As the cats grew from kittens into adult felines he said that when he arrived home one would pull the other down from trying to pet him. This type of behavior he associated with African Americans who were trying to tear each other down in hopes of seeking some socio-economic or political gift from whites. A journalist from the *Palladium* described how Powell talked about one of the cats dying prematurely:

“You will notice up until this time I have been talking about two cats. One of them died about six months ago.’ He described in a humorous manner, telling how the neighbors gave one reason or another for its death, consumption, heart diseases and the like. The real reason is because he lacked push. ‘So do the colored people,’ said Powell. ‘Nowadays a colored man must stand on his merits. They must not expect the white man to put them in positions as in the past; they must earn places themselves.’”⁵⁴

Powell Sr.’s comments are fused with a doctrine of self help and accountability that borrows from Washington’s notions of self preservation, but does not offer a narrow perspective about how to best ensure that African Americans are able to create opportunity for themselves in the American body politic—namely the use of industrial education or ‘casting down your bucket

⁵³ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 39.

where you are.’ Instead of presenting a detailed program for success, Powell Sr. endorsed larger, sweeping notions to secure rights in a changing world. He closed his speech by recommending to the audience and African Americans generally, to listen to the words of Chauncey M. Depew’s message to the graduating class of Syracuse Medical School from 1888. Depew closed his remarks by encouraging the new graduates to, “Stick, dig and save.”⁵⁵ From his own life, Powell Sr. was keenly aware of the discipline required and powerful effects of thrift and perseverance. Self-determination was a very integral part of how Powell Sr. viewed racial uplift, and throughout his life it was a stalwart part of his prescription to remedy African American socio-political and social dispossession. There was not a mutual exclusivity between the two, in Powell Sr.’s mind, but indeed a connection that helped to strengthen both aspects—economic management was essential to the struggle for holistic freedom.

Powell Sr. started to command the attention not only of lay church members and community folk at his talks, but members of the established class of African American leadership of the era were also taking notice of Powell Sr.’s empowering rhetoric, The abolitionist, great activist minister and black nationalist, Alexander Crummell, of a generation prior, was a prime example of someone who took a keen interest in Powell after hearing him speak. He wanted Powell Sr. to leave Immanuel and go on a speaking tour to black communities all over the nation, particularly in every town that had at least one hundred or more African Americans.

After hearing Powell Sr.’s “The Stumbling Blocks of the Race” speech in Newport,

⁵⁴ *New Haven Palladium*, 10 February 1896.

⁵⁵ “Stick, Dig, and Save,” *The New York Times*, 15 June 1888. Chauncey Mitchell Depew was an attorney for Cornelius Vanderbilt’s railroad interests, and was president of the New York Central Railroad System. He also served as a United States Senator from the Empire State from 1899 to 1911. His “Stick, Dig, and Save” oration was a very popular and compiled into a book a year after it was given, along with other popular speeches he gave

Rhode Island, Crummell believed Adam was of best use to the race traveling with his message, not just limited to New Haven. Powell Sr. declined the invitation, but thanked Crummell publicly for the potential opportunity. Crummell was from that venerable class of men and women whose shoulders Powell Sr. and his contemporaries would later stand upon, if he was not already.⁵⁶ A younger Powell Sr. might have jumped at the chance to take up Crummell on his offer, but with a family and feeling somewhat settled in New Haven, it is understandable that Powell Sr. declined the invitation. Fellow Yale alum, William Ferris discussed the effect that Crummell had on Powell that day, “I remember in the fall of 1896,” Ferris chronicled, “a Baptist preacher [who we can assume was Powell Sr.] lectured in Newport, R. I. At the close of the lecture, a tall, slender, venerable looking man, with an aristocratic air, arose and stirred the audience with his heroic words. The Baptist preacher was so touched that he sought Crummell out. And then an influence entered his life that made him a new man, a stronger moral force in the Baptist denomination.”⁵⁷

As a new century dawned, life was going well for the young pastor. His family was situated comfortably, he no longer worried about how he would pay rent and feed his family. Mattie Fletcher, his wife, did not have to work as a seamstress, and his daughter, Blanche, was two years old and healthy. Powell Sr. was courted by institutions of sacred and secular origins to speak on issues pertaining to race in America from around the nation but he would soon see what the world abroad had to say. In June of 1900, Powell, Sr. traveled to London, England. He was elected as a delegate to the World’s Christian Endeavor Convention. He was among several notable persons of African decent attending the meeting. While the participation of such

entitled, *Orations and After-Dinner Speeches of Chauncey M. Depew* (New York: The Cassell Publishing Company, 1899), 389.

⁵⁶ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 42.

delegates was very small there were thirty-five delegates from Liberia, Nigeria, Gold Coast (modern day Ghana), Sierra Leone, United States and Canada. There also was representation from the Caribbean as well, such as Haiti, Jamaica, St. Lucia and Trinidad.⁵⁸

The goal of the convention or “object of the Union” as treasurer William Shaw put it, “is to unite the Christian Endeavorers in closer fellowship and to promote and conserve the principles of the Christian Endeavor throughout the world.”⁵⁹ Such rhetoric never discusses race or nation explicitly, but Powell Sr. and others gathered to hopefully have some impact on relations toward people of African decent. However, such a goal seems more than lofty when you consider that in the weekly periodical, *The Outlook*, a Christian paper published the comments of “Mr. Arnold White” who proudly declared that the meeting in London was anything but open to anyone other than white Christians, “Fashionable society knows nothing about it, but the advent of thousands of members of this society from America to meet thousands more who have journeyed from all parts of the United Kingdom is a remarkable example of the unity of the Anglo-Saxon race.”⁶⁰ The editors of *The Outlook* did nothing to refute the claims of Mr. White, other than to say that they must be weary of factionalism based upon denominational affiliation. A review of the sources shows no inclination that Powell and others in attendance, throughout the diaspora, felt uncomfortable about attending or had any view about the ethnic and rational nationalism found in the White quote.

⁵⁷ William H. Ferris. *Alexander Crummell: An Apostle of Negro Culture*. (Washington, D.C.: The American Negro Academy. Occasional Papers Number 20, 1920), 7.

⁵⁸ Ramla Bendele, “Henry Sylvester Williams: Progenitor of Pan-Africanism Movement,” *Political Atlas of the African Diaspora 1900-1989*, The Institute of Diasporic Studies, Northwestern University, <http://diaspora.northwestern.edu/mbin/WebObjects/DiasporaX.woa/wa/displayArticle?atomid=462>.

⁵⁹ William Shaw, “The World’s Christian Endeavor Union and Its Work,” *United Society of Christian Endeavor: Official Report of the Twentieth International Christian Endeavor Convention* (Boston: United Society of Christian Endeavor, 1901), 137.

⁶⁰ *The Outlook*, May-August, 1900, Volume 65, (New York: The Outlook Company, 1900), 763. The Outlook was previously called *The Christian Union* until 1893 when the name was changed by its editor, Lymon Abbott, a

The convention lasted three weeks and it left quite a mark on Powell Sr., but his trip like his Atlanta one was not about a singular event or experience, but the collective energy of the trip and the people he was able to meet and speak with. While in Europe, he was able to visit with his pastoral predecessor, the Rev. Dr. George Henry Jackson, M.D., who was newly appointed consul by President William McKinley at the United States Consulate in La Rochelle, France. Powell spent another ten days, there.⁶¹

Powell Sr.'s European Tour, like his visit to the Atlanta Exposition, served as another inspiration for a lecture. "Twenty Balmy Days in France," was a popular address. On December 13, Powell Sr. delivered the oration to a very skeptical crowd that gathered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Journalist, William Tribitt, described the event as one where the presentation of the Rev. Powell Sr. was anything but the usual 'dry' lecture that many African Americans were usually exposed to. Powell Sr.'s commanding voice, quick witted humor, and engaging descriptions of visits to see Queen Victoria to the walls around La Rochelle were great points that Tribitt says left the audience "spellbound." The centerpiece of the lecture, as Tribitt saw it was Powell's discussion of the "Afro-American exhibit, in the American Building where the many industries and arts of the American Negro were exposed to the eyes of the world..."⁶² When discussing this, Powell Sr. declared that the Paris Exposition did much to "prove the Negro equal in intellect to any other race."⁶³ The famous exposition in Paris culminated with a reception that featured a list of influential African Americans such as: George H. Jackson, the Rev. Powell Sr., the renowned and prolific scholar, W.E.B. Du Bois and the man in charge of the

Congregationalist theologian, pastor, and author. *The Outlook* echoed the efforts of its editor, promoting social reform.

⁶¹ "Consuls for Many Posts: President Changes the Diplomatic Title of William W. Rockhill, Minister to Greece." *The New York Times*, 24 May 1898.

⁶² *Philadelphia Tribune* 14 December 1900.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

exhibit, Thomas J. Calloway, among others.⁶⁴ Powell Sr. was in good company and was now making his mark on the international scene. Moreover, he too would begin to see himself as a radical of sorts and out of the mainstream thought in some ways.

Back in New Haven things were going extremely well. The church grew in size despite the increasingly demanding speaking schedule Powell Sr. kept. His earnings from public speaking now had eclipsed what he was earning as pastor of Immanuel. Fortunately, it did not seem to change his focus on his ministry and the community that he served. Immanuel grew so much that a ten thousand dollar construction was set up to accommodate the new members and assembling masses that were coming to worship at Immanuel on Sundays. Powell Sr. managed the church's debt as he had his own. Knowing what it was like to pull finances from the brink of ruin, Powell relied on a special blend of thrift, coalitions, and prayer. By the time the church was rededicated they only owed six hundred dollars on the new construction. Powell Sr. secured very solid and generous donations from white members of the New Haven community that were ardent supporters of the work he was doing. Such fund raising was not out of the norm for black New Haven churches. Similar programs of aid were employed by generations of ministers before Powell.⁶⁵

As he secured donations and got back into preaching on a regular basis, Powell Sr. continued to write and do research—influenced largely by the classes he took as a special student at Yale Divinity School. He was very fascinated with American abolitionists and the next three lectures he penned reflected such. For instance, the titles consisted of “John Brown”, “William

⁶⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois. *Public Opinion: A Comprehensive Summary of the Press*, v.29, n.20 (15 November 1900): 620-621.

⁶⁵ See Warner, “Rise of Negro Society” in *New Haven Negroes*, 91-97; the Revs. James T. Holly and Amos Gerry Beman. In this chapter, Warner discusses how several prominent churches in the city were saved or largely dependent upon white patronage or support at some time or another. The Congregationalist churches in particular were more prone to receive such help it seems because of the number of white denominational adherents.

Lloyd Garrison” and another very popular essay entitled, “The Religion of Frederick Douglass.” These lectures and essays displayed the growth of Powell, not just in his popularity, but increasing nuances of his ministry and the very real associations he was making between race, religion, and republicanism. In April of 1902, *The Colored American Magazine* published “The Religion of Frederick Douglass,” in its entirety. This was Powell’s first published essay.

Powell Sr.’s discussion of Douglass was one that took a different view of him. Of course, there is the discussion of his abolitionist efforts as well as his own march toward self-emancipation, but what is unique about the lecture, as the title suggests, is that he addresses the Christianity that Douglass practiced and believed in. Most of the arguments made about Douglass are taken from the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845). Powell Sr. asserted, “Douglass never claimed to have been converted to the visible church, but to Christianity.”⁶⁶ Thus, Douglass, as Powell Sr. maintained, was not an adherent to any particular church, or denominational affiliation, but he was a follower of Christ in the most holistic way. A quote used by Powell Sr. mentions how Douglass loved the “pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ; I therefore, hate the corrupt, slave holding, woman-whipping, cradle plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.”⁶⁷ In the essay, Powell Sr. analyzes the text of Douglass not only to give evidence to the influence of Christianity upon the great American patriot, but what is more important for Powell Sr. was that Douglass’ writing demonstrated the very power in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Douglass, in Powell Sr.’s opinion, lived, as a Christian ought--one who is not disillusioned by the corruptible churches of men, but instead is more focused on the redeeming and indeed transformative

⁶⁶ Adam Clayton Powell, “The Religion of Frederick Douglass.” *The Colored American Magazine*. Vol., IV., No. 5, April 1902, 338.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

aspects of the life of Christ. Douglass exemplified long-suffering, patience, love for humanity, but also a need prophetically to speak out against injustices simultaneously just as the prophets of the Old Testament. This was not a typical endorsement of the “meek and mild” cultivated aspects of Christ that have come down through the ages, but one that is more in tune with the very politicized nature of Christ and the sacred Christian gospels.⁶⁸ In Frederick Douglass, Powell seems to have found a kindred spirit, one that is equally speaking for justice in an unjust, racist society, and who recognized the gross hypocrisy of Christianity as practiced in America. Furthermore, Douglas’s also embodied an unwavering faith in the possibilities of what can be, or the redemptive qualities of Christianity.

Powell Sr. uses the end of the essay to focus on two major themes in Christianity: forgiveness, faith, and love. The “faith of Douglass,” Powell argues “was not the kind that waits with folded arms for God to do everything. He felt it his bounded duty to assist Providence. No man was more strenuous in his efforts to show his faith by his works. He believed God helped those who helped themselves.”⁶⁹ Nothing better illuminates this point than Douglass’ timeless quote, “I prayed for many years for God to deliver me from slavery, but he never answered me until I made my legs pray.” Douglass’ faith as Powell explains it was a function of work and action together.

Forgiveness and love are displayed through a meeting Powell Sr. discusses that occurred between Douglass and his former enslaver, Thomas Auld. Auld is on his deathbed and the two men meet for a painful yet inspiring tribute to both the depths of human depravity and the heights of genuine human empathy that invoke the language and spirit of I Corinthians,

⁶⁸ For further discussion see, “How Jesus the Revolutionary Became Meek and Mild” in Obrey Hendricks, Jr.’s, *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus’ Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted*. (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2006), 74-98.

⁶⁹ Powell, “The Religion of Frederick Douglass”, 341.

Chapter 13, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”⁷⁰ Love as discussed in Powell Sr.’s essay is not a love shared between two people, but more along the lines of the term *agape*, meaning a love that is wholly selfless and spiritual. When Powell Sr. explains how Douglass forgives Auld, it is not simply words, but he holds his former master accountable, while speaking directly to the tragedy of the institution of human bondage. “I regard you as I regard myself,” Douglass confesses, “a victim of circumstances, of birth, education and custom. I did not run away from you, but from Slavery. It was not that I loved Caesar less, but Rome more.”⁷¹

Powell Sr. concludes his treatment of Douglass by commenting, “the religion of Frederick Douglass loved and lived was the religion of Jesus Christ and his Apostles.”⁷² Douglass’ life, in Powell Sr.’s analysis, was a metaphor for a life of service, humility, and justice seeking that can be exported for the reader and hearer of his words. The religion of Douglass, was not confined to the walls of a temple, but to the transformation of his mind and heart.

The publication of the Douglass essay was one of many positive things that awaited Powell after 1900. His alma mater, Wayland Seminary, invited him back to award him with a Doctor of Divinity degree. Wayland had gone through some changes since Powell Sr. graduated. It merged with Richmond Theological Seminary in 1899, and was now called Virginia Union University, located in Richmond, Virginia. George Mellen Prentiss King, mentor to both Booker T. Washington and Powell Sr., as well the former president of Wayland, retired from the institution in 1897, but with no pension to support himself or his family, he was forced back into teaching. He took a position as professor of English language and literature that he held until his

⁷⁰ I Corinthians 13: 12, KJV.

⁷¹ Powell, “The Religion of Frederick Douglass,” 342.

⁷² Ibid.

death in 1917.

The year 1906 was particularly fruitful as well. The national Baptist paper, *Watchman-Examiner*, lauded Powell Sr. for his lecture on William Lloyd Garrison before the New Haven Minister's Conference in March of that year,

“Rev. A.C. Powell, D.D., the highly honored pastor of the Immanuel Baptist Church read a valuable paper on William Lloyd Garrison. The diction was choice, the spirit and manner of presentation manly, the estimate of the Reformer's character and result of life's work admirable. The colored Baptists of New Haven have a strong leader in Dr. Powell.”⁷³

Powell Sr.'s meteoric rise did not stop there. At the dedication of the new building for the First African Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Powell Sr. was asked to preach. The First African Baptist Church was the third oldest black Baptist congregation in the country. It was located on the southwest corner of 16th and Christian Streets and the new edifice roughly cost the church one hundred thousand dollars. The Reverend Dr. William Creditt, then pastor of First African, had been with the church since 1896. He was called, “the most impassioned preacher in the Baptist denomination,” by William Ferris.⁷⁴ The sermon delivered by Powell that day became one of his most famous of his lifetime. It was called “The Significance of the Hour.” The sermon's scripture text is based on the seventeenth chapter of the book of John. In it, Christ utters the enduring phrase, “Father, the hour is come.” The chapter deals with Christ's last moments amongst his disciples and his preparation of them for his departure—his eventual death. Powell Sr. uses this Christ narrative not to simply talk about “the hour of the world's redemption from sin,” but to point out that the hour for the Christian church is at hand. Powell Sr. discusses all the great progress made in science and technology and just the overall advancement of civilization, and he calls for the church to modernize and reconstruct itself for an

⁷³ *Watchmen-Examiner*, 15 March 1906.

⁷⁴ William Henry Ferris, *The African Aboard: Or, His Evolution in Western Civilization, Tracing His Development Under the Caucasian Millieu, Volume 2* (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Press, 1913), 818.

ever-changing world. Powell Sr. drives home the point that one denomination or another will not facilitate such a feat, which is right in line with his disdain of denominationalism. He scolds the church:

“Instead of the church developing the purpose of Jesus, it has been fighting over doctrines for 1,800 years. I do not believe it is stretching the truth to say that enough blood has been shed by church members since the crucifixion of Christ to float a great steamship.”⁷⁵

Powell Sr. goes on to compare “all manner of free thinkers” to the lava erupting from church volcanoes that do more to destroy the hopes of humanity than uplifting it. The larger critique that Powell Sr. makes is that the churches of the world are failing to do the most important work in the Christian religion, as he sees it. Instead of creeds and all matters of pomp and circumstance, he urges churches to “go into the highways and hedges during the week, caring for the sick, the wounded, the distressed and all that are needy, and then on Sunday they will hear us and believe us when we tell them of ‘Jesus, the mighty to save.’”⁷⁶

Powell Sr. pleaded with the assembled masses gathered for the dedication of First African Baptist Church to remember that their mission as Christians was to give hope, to uplift and help, and not to preach and teach men into the grave. In the new century, people were looking for the church to teach mankind how to live, not how to die. Powell Sr. reminded his audience the church should function as a reservoir of life in a cauldron of death. Concluding his sermon, Powell testified, “The chief work, then of the church, *is not to get men ready to die, but get men ready to live.*”⁷⁷ Powell Sr.’s message was clear and so was his intent. He was a minister dedicated to kingdom and nation building. His sermon spoke to addressing needs in the community, which would thereby also allow for great affect in the church itself—do what the

⁷⁵ Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., *Palestine and Saints in Caesar’s Household*. (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1939), 99.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

founder of the religion called for them to do. His message was taking flight in Philadelphia, but it was already being heard in New Haven.

Immanuel was growing and Powell Sr. was pleased, considering what the church was like when he first arrived to New Haven in 1893. He was glad to see the growth of Immanuel, but the forward thinking Powell Sr. was always looking for the next challenge that awaited him. His time at New Haven was to come to an end and in many ways was preparing him for his next assignment in kingdom and nation building. “I was too full of energy to remain long in New Haven,” Powell Sr. recalled, “I needed a heavy load to steady me.” In November of 1908 he got his wish. The oldest Baptist church in the state of New York, Abyssinian Baptist Church, presented him with the opportunity to lead their congregation. This would be his ultimate test. It would require the total use of his most unique of skill sets to accomplish his goal. Founded in 1808, Abyssinian was in the midst of celebrating its centennial anniversary and wanted Powell Sr. to serve as their sixteenth pastor.

When Immanuel and the rest of the New Haven community received the news, it was indeed a bittersweet situation. New Haven showed its gratitude and affection for Powell Sr. by having three farewell receptions that had interdenominational as well as interracial support. Powell Sr. made great connections and established relationships with black and white clergy alike during his tenure in New Haven. The town benefited greatly from Powell Sr.’s leadership and commitment, but the people and institutions he worked with during his tenure as pastor transformed him as well. Powell Sr. grew and developed not only in his faith, but also intellectually. The time spent with the students and faculty at Yale Divinity School left their mark on Powell Sr. just as much as the mentorship of Dr. King at Wayland had. Attending the Atlanta Exposition had expanded his notions of racial uplift and attending the Christian

Endeavor Convention in Europe expanded his notion of faith based reform and organization.

The fifteen and a half years spent in New Haven were symbiotic for sure.

Powell Sr. came to New Haven with thoughts and youthful ambition about how he could help God's people and his nation and race. By the time he was ready to leave, he found ways to address all three. Racial uplift was not simply a phrase but a lifestyle that he incorporated into his oratory and his written work. From his lecture on the "Two Black Cats" to the more religious based, "The Religion of Frederick Douglass," Powell Sr. displayed a commitment to education, economic stability and self-sufficiency, and to moving African Americans to a place where they could live with dignity in the United States. Powell Sr. also employed a style of rhetoric where he did not solely use his faith as the answer to the myriad socio-economic and political maladies of African Americans, but he never ran from the organization of his spirituality. Powell Sr. seemed at this stage in his career as a minister to establish himself as a religious intellectual and activist minister that never emphasized class differences and did a masterful job of not creating intra-race class antagonisms with his words—written or spoken. Powell Sr. reflected a sincere desire to help the least of his brethren from the point that they were at, not where he believed they should be. His critique of the Christian church was not simply about the "black" or "white" church at this point, but getting back to simple understanding of the basic mission of the church. Likewise his drive for equality and equity in that opportunity was about opening the doors not to an elite understanding or desire to see all black men and women as doctors, lawyers, and ministers, but that they could define what their place in society could be without hindrance from the color of their skin. Powell Sr. had learned a great deal in New Haven and his education in ministry and with institutions of higher learning came together beautifully. Iron had indeed sharpened iron—Powell Sr. did not arrive to his present state alone, it took many people and

experiences to transform his mind and spirit and he welcomed the challenge; he wanted to grow.

In one of the farewell fetes for Powell Sr., his long time friend and colleague, Dr. William Ferris, who now was a rising intellectual in his own right, commented on just what Powell Sr. meant to New Haven, and he also offered his thoughts on what made the Rev. Powell Sr., so distinctive as a minister and human being. Dr. Ferris concluded that there were four sources of Powell Sr.'s, 'power,' they consisted of, "...a manly personality, native preaching ability, a desire to broaden his knowledge and widen his horizon and a passion for serving humanity."⁷⁸

Before Powell Sr. departed for Harlem, he received yet another blessing. On November 29, 1908, his wife bore him a son. The Reverend Adam Clayton Powell was now the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. He and Mattie Fletcher's second child was named Adam, Jr. His daughter Blanche, was now ten years old and the Powell family welcomed their new son and brother, with the hopes and promises of many great things yet to come, so too were they optimistic about the move to New York City—they would need to be. New York was nothing like New Haven, by comparison it was entirely figuratively and literally a world a part.

⁷⁸ Powell, *Against the Tide*. 48.

CHAPTER 4

EXODUS TO HARLEM: PREPARING A CONGREGATION AND COMMUNITY FOR KINGDOM AND NATION BUILDING

On December 31, 1908, the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. began his tenure as pastor of the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City. The church had just recently celebrated its centennial and was now in the midst of transition with a new pastor in its one hundred year old pulpit. Transitions are the very thing that life is about—at least how we deal with or respond to them. For the Rev. Powell Sr., moving to New York City from his former pastoral home at Immanuel Baptist Church in New Haven, Connecticut was a transition, and one he welcomed. The members of Abyssinian were understandably anxious about their new pastor and how his ministry would affect their congregation; Powell Sr. however, seemed very confident—even optimistic. He was finally in a place where all his ministerial training and education would be put to the test. He declared that in life, particularly after leaving Wayland Seminary, he needed to be steadied by a ‘heavy load’ and what heavier load can one find than being pastor of one of the oldest African American churches in the country, in the largest city in America?¹

To paraphrase an oft-used quote, “success is where preparation meets opportunity.” It is not known whether or not Rev. Powell Sr. was familiar with this saying, but it can be used to describe his life in many respects—especially once he moved his family to New York City. His preparation to occupy the pulpit at Abyssinian came through a series of challenges in other ministerial posts, in the classrooms of Wayland Seminary and Yale University, and by way of the interpersonal relationship with historic luminaries such as Booker T. Washington, the Rev.

Alexander Crummell, and the everyday folk trying to better themselves and the world around them. Powell Sr. was prepared and now he had the opportunity. Where would he go from here? How would 'success' be defined? His need for a 'heavy load' notwithstanding, Rev. Powell Sr. used Abyssinian as a crucible for kingdom and nation building.

Kingdom and nation building is best understood as the point where theological praxis, in this case informed by Judeo Christian principles (particularly the Afro-Baptist faith), work in tandem with a nationalistic philosophy of empowerment and self-determination for the dispossessed in an oppressive republic. The Rev. Powell Sr. utilized many of the characteristics of racial uplift and combined them with the value system and morals found within Christianity. Racial uplift or uplift ideology, as some scholars refer to it, is rooted in a group struggle and the desire for solidarity in the advancement of the race through intra-race class cooperation. In such a philosophy black elites and the masses of African Americans were unified in their desire to destroy those barriers that prevented them from enjoying the rights and privileges afforded every American citizen. Furthermore such ideology, like African Americans, is not easily defined by one belief system. Racial uplift was just as nuanced and complicated as the very people who believed in it. African Americans who adhered to this ideal were not simply seeking to be "white," seduced by the sirens of the free market or a psychological need to identify with the white majority, but were engaged in a "struggle for a black positive identity in a deeply racist society, turning the pejorative designation of race into a source of dignity and self affirmation through an ideology of class differentiation, self-help, and interdependence."²

¹ Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. *Against the Tide: An Autobiography* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1938), 45. *New York Times* 28 October 1890, p. 8. See also typescript manuscript from Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture: Ellen Terry, "Abyssinian Baptist Church," (11 pp., dated 13 June 1938).

² Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, Press, 1996), 3. Also read his discussion of "racial uplift ideology" in the introduction. He does a masterful job of illustrating the complicated nature of the term and its many nuanced manifestations. It is

Indeed, Powell Sr. adhered to a humanistic philosophy and theology of liberation. He wanted to empower his race not only through faith but also through education, racial pride, and economic literacy. Faith, however, was the glue that held everything together. Powell Sr. believed this variation of racial uplift would also help to strengthen the United States to be the nation it claimed it was in its founding documents. Powell Sr.'s transition to New York City provided him the platform to better articulate what kingdom and nation building was—through his words and deeds. Just like his other periods of transition, he expanded his notions of what he could do, despite challenges. Regardless of the trials and joys he experienced, his life and ministry were intimately connected to his love of God, race, and nation.

While Powell Sr. was not the first, nor the last, to employ faith melded with strong notions of nationalism, better understood as black nationalism, he represented a new generation of activist ministers who built on the ideals of a generation prior. This new generation continued the tradition of utilizing the organization of their spirituality to engage the social, political, and cultural maladies of their time—with regard to racial oppression. This form of religious and racial nationalism manifested itself in myriad ways—beginning with the writing of David Walker's *Appeal* in 1829 and re-emerging in the twentieth-century where the Rev. Powell, Sr., sought to build from that legacy of militancy from his pulpit.³

Alexander Crummell, along with such luminaries as Henry Highland Garnet, Edward Wilmont Blyden, and Henry McNeal Turner, to name a few, were part of a pantheon of activist

truly hard to scale it down to just one all encompassing definition, but a variety of basic interpretations is the best way to engage the topic, demonstrated through the intellections and organizing efforts of African Americans in the early decades of the twentieth century.

³ David Walker's *Appeal* is viewed by many scholars is the first articulation of black nationalist thought, as well as radical anti-slavery in America. Written in 1830, Walker called for his bonded brothers and sisters to use any many means at their disposal to end their perpetual servitude. Noted scholar and activist James Turner regards the manifesto as "the most seminal expression of African American political thought to come forth in the early nineteenth century,(9)." For more see Turner's discussion, "David Walker and the Appeal: An Introduction," from

ministers from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who were stalwart adherents to what is termed “the Golden Age of Black Nationalism.”⁴ These activist clergy called for a total dedication to a group ethic and a loyalty to duty. Such devotion to race, however, was split into a few camps of thought. Some were separatist, believing that African Americans should physically live outside and away from whites in America where they could build their own institutions that often times mimicked that of their white counterparts. Still others such as Garnet and Crummell, for a time, supported emigration schemes that called for the repatriation of African Americans back to the continent of Africa itself. Such thinking reeked of the ethnocentrism and paternalism, which are the main ingredients in the mythology of American exceptionalism. Finally, there were those who believed that by transforming the socio-political reality of African Americans, the United States itself would also be remade. Powell Sr. believed in this interpretation. Though he never used the words or the term ‘black nationalism,’ Powell Sr. can be viewed in this light given the source material examined.

Crummell, who Powell Sr. met before he left New Haven, Connecticut was not important for what he did in the pulpit, but for what he and his contemporaries did to advance the practice of black intellectual development generally.⁵ It is easy to confine Crummell and the early articulators of black nationalist thought one-dimensionally—as solely radical intellectuals. It is important to see them both as religious leaders and intellectuals simultaneously, neither part was more important than the other, for they were firmly planted in their faith and in their belief of the importance of their activist intellections for the sake of freedom for their fellow African

reprint of *David Walker's Appeal To the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1993), 9-20.

⁴ Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1978), 19.

⁵ Crummell had a notoriously poor track record for addressing the needs of his parishioners. He excelled at writing down his theological and political musings but tending to the needs of a congregation was one of his weaknesses.

Americans. As such, there were some aspects of Crummell's intellectual, spiritual, and pragmatic thoughts that would bear fruit within the mind and pulpit of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. One of the things that Powell Sr. shared with Crummell was his belief in accountability. His entire life Crummell held fast to the belief that African Americans "themselves were responsible for their condition." He argued, "There are evils which lie deeper than intellectual neglect or political injury." Crummell firmly believed that before political organization could be made into a fruitful endeavor for African Americans first and foremost the race needed to address, "The Status of the Family"; "The Conditions of Labor"; and "The Element of Morals." These three categories he referred to as "three special points of weakness in our race."⁶ He frequently combined those thoughts of accountability with his faith.

Not unlike other black nationalists of his era, Crummell believed that African Americans were chosen of God and had a trajectory as a people that paralleled with that of the biblical Israelites. He implored his fellow African Americans in 1877:

"...let us bless God and take courage. Casting aside everything trifling and frivolous, let us lay hold of every element of power, in the brain, in literature, art, and science; in industrial pursuits; in the soil, in cooperative association; in mechanical ingenuity; and above all in the religion of our God; and so march on in the pathway of progress to that superiority and eminence which is our rightful heritage, and which is evidently the promise of our God!"⁷

To be sure, Crummell was a man who invested in lofty idealism. For Powell Sr., he wanted to operate in the middle of ideal and realism, or pragmatism fueled by the ideal. Crummell was not the lone religious intellectual that influenced Powell, but as he entered into his most important

See Wilson Jeremiah Moses, "The Struggles of a Young Priest (1841-1847)," in *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 34-51.

⁶ Alexander Crummell, "The Need of New Ideas and New Motives for a New Era," (1885), in *Africa and America: Addresses and Discourses by the Rev. Alexander Crummell* (Springfield: Wiley and Company, 1891. Reprint New York: Negro University Press, 1969), 24.

⁷ Crummell, "The Superiority of the Negro" Address/sermon given November 1877. Found in V.P. Franklin, *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African-American Intellectual Tradition* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 21.

appointment yet, his ministry utilized some of Crummell's ideas. Powell Sr. was not a separatist, nor did he ever believe in emigration schemes. His belief in race and nation came from a strong passion for making America what it should be, no matter what it had been. That is not to say that he sought to cast aside the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, but he believed that in spite of such vile inhumanity and evil there was a pathway to continue to make American democracy truly functional and fair to all its citizens. It did not come easy, but he never liked to engage in tasks that were simple. Powell Sr. never seemed to have any preconceived notions about becoming pastor at Abyssinian. He was very familiar with the history of the church and he hoped that as the seventeenth pastor he could continue the tradition of good shepherds that served the congregation.

As the oldest African American Baptist church in the state, Abyssinian had a century in New York and was founded to address the hypocrisies of Western Christendom with regard to the historical construction of race, particularly as practiced in the United States. Abyssinian was birthed in protest in 1808. It was a far too common story for many black churches in America. African Americans angry at the practice of racially segregated seating in the sanctuary of the First Baptist Church of Gold Street decided that they would leave and start their own congregation. They found a place to worship on Anthony Street, which later would be Worth Street in lower Manhattan. Among those who separated from the First Baptist congregation with the African Americans were a group of Ethiopian immigrants. They were the inspiration for the new company of equals gathered for worship. They assembled under the new name, "Abyssinia," the former name of the nation of Ethiopia, as used in the Christian Bible. The new congregation unapologetically embraced their cultural and ethnic roots, not only of some of their congregation, but also the name Abyssinia was important because of its rich history within

Christianity as some of the faith's oldest churches are located there.⁸

The group was given assistance by the Rev. Thomas Paul, a free black minister, from Boston who also did missionary work in Haiti.⁹ Much of the earliest history of the church has been lost, but there are enough remaining documents to confirm the selling of the first property on Worth Street for \$3,000. The Broadway Tabernacle became their new home for almost fifty years as they sought more property. During this time, the church went through a number of pastors—twelve in total. The church split from within under the leadership of the Rev. Sampson White who took his faithful faction and started the Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, which later also grew into a very successful and influential congregation in the city.

The first true edifice for Abyssinian, located at Waverly Place in New York's Greenwich Village, was acquired under the leadership of the Rev. William Spellman. The membership during this time was around sixteen hundred, making it one of the more influential congregations in the city. His tenure however, was not without incident. Rev. Spellman became very unpopular and was asked to resign. The reason for the shift in his popularity at the church is not known, from the documentary evidence compiled for this study. What is known, however, is that Rev. Spellman refused initially, but the majority of the church eventually supported his departure. His exit did not end his influence however. Spellman gathered his most staunch supporters and established a new congregation called Antioch Baptist Church, though the venture never took off, largely due to Spellman's sudden passing not long after.¹⁰

⁸ Some of the oldest churches in Christianity are located in the country of Ethiopia. See Bengt. G. M. Sundkler and Christopher Stead, *History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 36; Holland Cotter, "Bedrock of Art and Faith," *The New York Times*, 20 April 2012.

⁹ James O. Horton and Lois Horton, *In the Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 194. See also, Stephen D. Glazier, eds., *Encyclopedia of African and African American Religions* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1; J. Marcus Mitchell, "The Paul Family," *Old Time New England*, LXIII (Winter 1973): 74-76.

¹⁰ "The Abyssinian Church Sues to Get Back into the Association," *The New York Times*, 27 February 1893. The Rev. Spellman was sometimes referred to as "Father" Spellman.

The Rev. Robert D. Wynn succeeded Spellman as pastor of Abyssinian in 1885. When he introduced the thought of the church moving from lower to upper Manhattan, he and the idea were met with great hostility, leading to his resignation after sixteen years. The congregation was opposed to the move because there was a fear about losing the money in the property they were currently using. The thought amongst many in the church and particularly the church elders was that the property value at their current location would skyrocket to one million dollars and they did not want to miss out on the possibility of making that type of money on their initial investment.¹¹ It was in May of 1902 that the Rev. Dr. Charles Satchell Morris became the next pastor of Abyssinian. He, like Wynn, argued for moving to upper Manhattan, or Harlem, to take full advantage of the influx of African Americans into the city and Harlem in particular during this time. Unfortunately, Morris was unable to get the congregation to invest in his vision of a Harlem Exodus. He did however, get the congregation to move to Fortieth Street, which was further north than they had been. Morris' tenure as pastor was cut short due to illness after just six years, but he helped lead the way for Powell Sr. to succeed him and continue the work both he and Wynn believed was necessary if Abyssinian was truly going to do the work of God and nation. However, there would have to be the right conditions—the right leadership, membership support, and investment in a program that the members and the community could internalize and make their own. As Powell Sr. took over the reins of leadership, Abyssinian and no less the entire city of New York was rife with change. The early twentieth-century witnessed the mass exodus of African Americans from the rural South to locales in the North--large urban centers, more often than not. One such location that experienced a great deal of growth in its African American population was New York City. Pushed by the rise of Jim Crow legislation and *de*

¹¹ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 69.

facto segregationist policies and the pull of economic, social, and political opportunity, the promise of life anew in the North was more than enticing to many African Americans.

The increased population of African Americans in northern cities did not just begin in the twentieth-century—it occurred as many large-scale changes do—over time. During the 1870s approximately 70,000 African Americans left the South. A decade later that number rose to 88,000 and by the turn of the twentieth-century that number was 194,000. As the first decade of the twentieth-century marched on, and particularly by 1906, there were declines in the black population in every southern state.¹² This was the beginning of what historians later termed the “Great Migration,” the population of southern blacks to all parts North and West in America.

While there is some subtle debate about when it began and ended, it is important to focus on the larger issue—African Americans were leaving the South *en masse*. From the first decade of the twentieth-century well into the second half of the century, every African American family in the South was faced with a decision--stay or leave. This population shift was not just in big urban centers, although it is primarily identified with places like Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Detroit and New York City. Smaller cities like Milwaukee, Flint, St. Louis, Oakland, Newark, and Gary also became depots for black migrants to settle. They did so in urban spaces that were already overcrowded and uniquely foreign to their rural sensibilities. Even in the places where there were pre-existing black enclaves, the culture of the city was a world away from life in southern locales. In the larger places, like New York, the population of

¹² William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 105-6; Thomas Jesse Jones, “The Negroes of the Southern States and the U.S. Census of 1910,” *Southern Workmen* 41, no. 8 (August 1912): 460 Richard R. Wright Jr., “The Migration of Negroes to the North,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 27 (May 1906): 98-99.

African American migrants began to trump that of native African Americans.¹³

A large portion of the migrants that made the trek to New York prior to 1930 took up residence in Manhattan. In that borough alone the population of African Americans increased by more than 24,000 from 1900 to 1910. By contrast, the number of African Americans that moved into the borough of Brooklyn was only 4,341 during that same decade. The increase of the African American population in Manhattan can be attributed to the fact that over seventy percent of the city's industry was located there, which meant that there was a demand for unskilled labor. Migrating African Americans frequently met that demand.¹⁴ Often what these migrants found was not a land flowing with milk and honey, as their relatives and friends spoke of and labor agents from companies promised, but they found an industrial jungle. For many the move offered only piecemeal social freedom and higher wages, but those increased wages were meaningless in the face of higher costs of living such as inflated rent. Migrants came to understand that the urban spaces had their own set of unique hardships to overcome.¹⁵

Some African American leaders expressed fears for migrant safety as they moved into the urban metropolises of the Middle West and Northeast. The loss of power was part of their concern. This was definitely the case for some northern newspapers in particular. Some began to fill the pages of their newspapers with all types of stories and columns that covered myriad troubling topics ranging from violent race riots and rampant unemployment to bad weather, in an attempt to get migrants to rethink leaving the South.¹⁶ The impact of such tactics is not known. Even if scholars could quantify or qualify such, there is likely nothing that could have stopped

¹³ Marcy S. Sacks, *Before Harlem: The Black Experience in New York City Before World War I* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 9.

¹⁴ *Report of the New York City Commission on Congestion of Population* (New York, 1911), 11.

¹⁵ Gilbert Osofsky. *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890-1930*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971; 2nd Edition), 29.

the exodus North, short of the end of the world. Truly, the Great Migration was a voluntary movement unlike any other the United States had seen or experienced. And while the North was not holistically what many had hoped it would be, black migrants, together with those already in these urban locales, worked to fundamentally transform the cultural, socio-political, and religious landscape of New York City.

Powell's own transformation and formal entree into New York City's changing milieu took place when he was officially installed as the seventeenth pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church on March 5, 1909. Just like the President of the United States' inaugural address, by all accounts, Powell Sr.'s installation was full of the pageantry and rhetoric meant to set the tone for a ministry and its congregation. The installation service began on that Friday evening, promptly at eight-thirty. The Reverend R.D. Wynn, D.D., pastor of Bethany Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey presided.¹⁷ He was one of nine other ministers/pastors involved in the ceremony. The Rev. Dr. W. Bishop Johnson, a long time friend from Powell's days at Wayland Seminary, delivered the sermon for the event. Johnson's sermon dealt with themes that were not unfamiliar to Powell Sr. and ultimately reinforced what Powell Sr. was hoping to do in New York City.

The title of the sermon was, "The Christian Ministry, Its Equipment and its message to the World." The scripture text came from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Saint Luke, verse eighteen, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the good tidings to the poor: He hath sent me to proclaim release to the captives, And recovering of the sight to the blind, To set at liberty those that are bruised, (R.V.)."¹⁸ Rev. Johnson discussed what Christ calls for ministry to do and to whom it was to preach to and how Rev. Powell, Sr., fit into

¹⁶ Eric Arnesen, *Black Protest and the Great Migration: A Brief History with Documents*. (Boston: Bedford, 2003), 11.

¹⁷ "Out of Town Correspondence," *The New York Age*, 2 July 1914.

that plan. Additionally, he urged the members of Abyssinian to stand with, and not against, their new pastor through the good times and tough ones as well.

One of the themes that arose in Johnson's sermon was a discussion of the innate need for a "clean ministry." He defined such a ministry as those led by ministers that were of deep conviction and dedicated to edifying the Body of Christ in totality, and not simply answering the call of ministry for the sake of fortune, fame, or prestige. "Clean ministry" was evidently a common term used during this era and Johnson sought to clarify his position on it. "Nowadays we hear much about 'a clean ministry.' I am sorry to confess that I do not understand the significance of the word, 'clean' as used. I have always understood whatever God cleansed was clean," Johnson proclaimed.¹⁹ As Johnson understood it, all of God's people were clean, but he made sure that there was a distinction regarding whom he spoke of. "I am speaking," he clarified, "of the men who have heard the CALL and have laid themselves upon the Alter [sic], and have said, HERE I AM LORD SEND ME. These are the men I reference to, and not the men who enter into the ministry for the loaves and fishes."²⁰ Johnson believed that many congregations that discussed, professed to have, or supported the concept of a "clean ministry" mistakenly used the term. Typically he thought there was a focus on things that had more to do with empty aesthetics and than true transformative substance. "Equipment," Johnson affirmed, was needed to accomplish the task of fulfilling a true "clean ministry." The equipment needed was a pastor—a "man" with vision and integrity. For him, Powell Sr. embodied these most sacred characteristics. Speaking of Powell specifically, Johnson proclaimed, "God has given this

¹⁸ "The Installation of the Reverend A. Clayton Powell As Pastor of the Abyssinian Church," as recorded by W. Styohesson Holder. (New York: Abyssinian Baptist Church, 1909), 2.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. It is important to remember that during this time, particularly within the Baptist denomination, as with most Christian churches no matter the denomination or racial makeup, that occupation of the pulpit was almost

people such a man in the person of Rev. Dr. Powell Sr.. He comes not as a follower, but as a success, and a leader.”²¹

Rev. Johnson’s sermon also had another important theme. In his charge to both minister and congregation, he also brought forth a black nationalist interpretation of Christianity. In concluding his discussion on clean ministry, Johnson professed, “There is no individual that needs the message [of clean ministry] more than the Negro of the United States of America.”²² He believed that once African American congregations adopted clean ministries the church could lead the race into a new era of opportunity and socio-political promise. At the conclusion of his sermon, Johnson elicited a strong warning to the congregation. He asked that the church follow the Rev. Powell, Sr., but revealed that such a task would not be an easy one if the congregation succumbed to the temptation of undue and unfair criticism. “I do not know of any other race,” Johnson scolded, “that vilifies and slanders its leaders like the Negro Race!!” As soon as he uttered the sentence, a quick “True!” was shouted from someone in the audience. As the Rev. Johnson closed his sermon, he praised both Rev. Powell and Abyssinian:

“God has given the Baptist Denomination Truth to defend, and upon one common principle we stand...It is my wish and prayer that God may give him a rich benediction in his new field, and may he be a blessing to the whole city of New York. And now may God help you to pray him up, praise him up, and talk him up Amen.”²³

As Rev. Johnson took his seat, a long and thunderous applause erupted from the congregation. Now that the sermon was completed the rest of the service continued along a more formal tone. It involved a number of area pastors who read statements that reaffirmed the Rev. Powell as pastor of Abyssinian. Later the secular community leaders were allowed to

universally seen as the bastion of paternalistic authority—thus out of the purview of female Christians. Women could support the church in all matters except in leadership positions.

²¹ Ibid., 4.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 6.

welcome the new pastor and offer their words of encouragement and support. Afterwards, Dr. Wynn again rose and gave his closing remarks to end the service. One can only think of the thoughts going through Powell Sr.'s mind as he was experiencing this service. Maybe he felt more confident? Maybe he had more questions about his next steps? Maybe, just maybe, now things were starting to settle for him. He was Abyssinian's new pastor. Powell Sr.'s installation was his ceremonious welcome to the community-- a religious house warming if you will. Now it was time to work in the vineyard.

With their pastor installed and duly charged with the responsibilities therein, Abyssinian officially marked the beginning of a new era for the church and for their new leader. Toward the end of March, the Rev. Powell Sr., continued to see success. The crowds gathering to hear him preach at Abyssinian were the measure of his early achievement. "Not since Abyssinian moved to 40th Street have such large audiences assembled as now under the pastorate of Dr. A. Clayton Powell," recorded *The New York Age*.²⁴ Many of the crowds that gathered at Abyssinian and around the borough of Manhattan were not only a testament to the power of Powell's sermons, but were also reflective of the migration of African Americans into New York City.

Abyssinian was located on 40th Street between 7th and 8th Avenues, which was, during that time, one of the most infamous red-light districts in all of New York City. Prostitution was rife in the neighborhood and also quite aggressive. "To make men follow them," Powell Sr. recalled, "prostitutes would snatch their hats and run into hallways."²⁵ Other local ministers shared Powell's observations and criticism of the area, calling it, "The Terrible Tenderloin" or referred to it as a "corner of hell."²⁶ The Rev. Dr. Morris even commented during his pastorate, "Fathers and mothers, away down south, or far off in the West Indies know little of the shame

²⁴ "Among the Churches." *The New York Age*, 25 March 1909, 3.

²⁵ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 49.

and degradation that have overtaken many of their sons and daughters who have come to the city...”²⁷ Vice was not limited strictly to prostitution. The area was replete with saloons and gambling houses as part of the socio-cultural landscape.²⁸ The Rev. Powell Sr. and his family saw these things firsthand. They lived in a cold-water flat across the street from the church. It was a far cry from their lovely home in New Haven. Gone were the lush yards and walkways and quietude of the middle to upper middle class (either by stature or aspiration) enclaves. Now, they were in a place where prostitutes lived above and below them. Powell Sr. wondered what on earth he had done to deserve such living quarters for his family? After speaking with church trustees he found that his living arrangements were part of a ploy by certain factions in the church who, in their disagreement with his appointment, were going to try to make him and his family as uncomfortable as possible. While Powell Sr. dealt with internal issues and disgruntled congregants at Abyssinian, he still had to reconcile the dilapidated state of the neighborhood where the church existed and where he now lived. Even if he lived in a palatial estate far from the vice, crime and corruption he was seeing around the church, what good was his living arrangement if the house of God was in bad shape? Undaunted, Powell Sr. took a seemingly hopeless situation and turned it into an opportunity for his ministry. He struck out to address the activities that took place around the tabernacle. He invited the prostitutes and the rest of the associated culture of crime and vice to services at Abyssinian. Powell Sr., proudly reflected:

“...under the constant gospel bombardment, the neighborhood began to crack. Pimps, prostitutes, keepers of dives and gambling dens were drawn to the meetings, confessed conversion and were baptized. Many of them remained faithful followers of Christ until death, but the majority went back to wallowing in the mire because they had no place else to go. The neighborhood was never again quite the same and neither was Abyssinian.”²⁹

²⁶ Reverend Charles S. Morris, “The Terrible Tenderloin,” *The New York Age*, 22 February 22, March 29, 1906.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Richard J. Latimer, “History of Negro Saloons” (WPA research paper, Schomburg Collection); James Weldon Johnson, *Along this Way* (New York: Viking Press, 1933).

²⁹ Ibid.

It was another year before his family moved into a modern apartment on 134th Street. Things seemed to be moving in a positive direction holistically at this juncture for the new pastor; however, there was still work to do. Commenting on the unique nature of the Great Migration, Powell Sr. commented, “This migration differs from all others in that it has no visible leader.”³⁰ He did not want to be the visible leader. He did want to help in any way that he could. Powell was very much aware of the immense impact that a flood of African Americans could have on the city and potentially the world. Not only did migrants bring their talents and hopeful spirits, but many also brought their faith. For those that may not have brought their faith, Powell Sr. was determined to bring faith to them. Before that could happen, however, he had to get his congregation to support an idea that was brought to them before by his predecessors, Revs. Morris and Wynn. In order to serve God’s people and to have the best possible engagement for kingdom and nation building, Powell Sr. believed that the church had to move to Harlem. As Harlem’s African American population increased, Powell Sr. operated under the thought that during biblical times Christ did not wait for the people to come to him to hear his message, he went to them. Likewise, but not in an effort to create or facilitate his own messianic tinge, Powell Sr. was unwavering in his attitude about the move to the heart of Harlem.

The first step in such an undertaking would not only take money, but Powell Sr. had to facilitate a way, a well thought out and executed plan, that the congregation of Abyssinian would buy into and sustain as their own. This was going to be no easy task. His predecessors had failed to generate the necessary excitement and support to make Abyssinian “Harlem minded.” How would he fare any different? What lessons could he learn from their attempts? The

³⁰ “Hold Big Migration Meeting in New York,” *The New York Age*, 5 July 1917.

cornerstone of Powell Sr.'s campaign was a sermon entitled, "A Model Church." First delivered in 1911, it went through several revisions, but the message of the sermon was clear, Powell Sr. challenged his congregation to live up to what he argued Christ intended for churches to be and not what they currently were. The sermon itself was a call to arms as well as a critique of contemporary church practices.

The sermon's scriptural foundation came from the second chapter of the book of Acts. That particular chapter deals with the day of Pentecost and also the disciple Peter's preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem, who become some of the first Christians. The day of Pentecost was the miraculous event that the Bible chronicles as the spiritual awakening of the early believers through the descending of the Holy Spirit. During this time, there were Jews (or converts to Judaism) who were from all over the known world living in Jerusalem. Each of the believers that were "filled with the spirit" began speaking in the various languages that represented the diversity of Jerusalem's inhabitants. This event both astonished and amazed those who witnessed it. Some even mockingly mentioned that the persons speaking in other languages were likely drunk. It is at this point that the Apostle Peter stands up and declares that the persons "speaking in tongues" were anything but drunk, but were fulfilling the prophecy first given by the prophet Joel.³¹ Moreover, the display was just but one small example of the power of God. Afterwards, Peter preached to those gathered, explaining the importance of Christ's sacrifice to mankind.

For Powell Sr., it is through this chapter that, "...a clear and striking picture of the model church," is provided.³² Moving away from the biblical narrative, Powell Sr. explained the ways to achieve a "model church" by outlining six major points. First, a church must have an understanding of the "conviction of sin." The conviction of sin was important because the

³¹ Joel 2: 28-31.

church must not simply have members that realize that sin is wrong, but there must be a call to conscience. Powell Sr. argued that, “No man can repent until he is convicted.”³³ Therefore, one could not simply acknowledge sin, but there had to be an associative transformative quality to change the believer’s life and actions. Second, there was “saving faith.” Powell Sr. defined such faith as more concerned with action instead of mere belief. Saving faith should build upon the conviction of sin. “Faith,” Powell Sr. informs the congregation “consists of more doing than it does in believing.”³⁴

The third characteristic of a model church is one that understands its stewardship. According to Powell Sr., “Stewardship implies that ownership is vested in another. A steward does not handle his own goods but [the] possessions of another.”³⁵ For a model church there must be an understanding that Christians have a responsibility to carefully manage those things, which they have been blessed with. Moreover, it is imperative that whatever goods and services a church has, are used for the betterment of the community. “Since God owns all things,” Powell Sr. declared, “we must give an account to Him of ourselves, our faculties, and facilities.”³⁶

Recognition of social responsibility was the fourth characteristic endemic in the make up of a model church. Here, Powell Sr.’s thoughts are more aligned with the self-help aspects of Booker T. Washington along with the social gospel movement prevalent during the early twentieth century.³⁷ The Social Gospel was a Protestant Christian intellectual movement during

³² Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., *Palestine and Saints in Caesar’s Household*. (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1929), 129.

³³ *Ibid.* 130.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 132.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 132, 133.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ See also the early work of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr.’s “A Critical Period in American Religion, 1875-1900,” *Massachusetts Historical Society, Proceedings* 64 (June 1932); 523-47; James Dombrowski, *The Early Days of Christian Socialism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936); Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism and on the Eve of the Civil War* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957); Ronald C. White, Jr., and C. Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America*

the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that sought to apply Christian ethics to social injustices. The term, and those who championed it during its heyday have been heavily criticized for its inability to speak to racial problems, if not outright ignore them. Scholars have given Harlan Paul Douglass credit for being one of the first ministers to use the term social gospel. Douglass, a white man, was involved in the education of African Americans after witnessing a horrific lynching in 1906 in Springfield, Missouri. Frustrated with the impotence of his own pastorate to deal with racial tensions, he dedicated fifteen years of his life toward “evangelical neoabolitionism,” meant to empower African Americans against racial violence and second-class citizenship. He was quite aware of the racial implications of the social gospel, but not all adherents to the movement shared his thinking. However, Powell Sr., saw the church as not only a place for worship, but as a center for socio-political and economic change and more importantly supportive discourses. The term social gospel refers generally to “a fresh application of the insights of the Christian faith to pressing problems of the social order,” especially to dispossessed populations.³⁸ Powell Sr. preached to his members:

“It is just as much our duty to get men and women good positions as it is to get them into church. A poor man out of work will not serve God long. It is hard for a very rich man to be a Christian, but is also a mighty big job for [a man] who lives from hand to mouth to follow God.”³⁹

Economic responsibility went hand in hand with saving souls for him. Economic empowerment was a constant part of Powell’s sermons and ministry. That in mind, he also urged personal responsibility in dealing with economics. The church was not simply to “give money out to every tramp and professional beat who comes along,” but to be ready to help those who are

(Philadelphia: University of Temple Press, 1976), 80, 101; Ralph E. Luker. *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885-1912*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Ronald Cedric White, *Liberty and Justice for All: Racial Reform and the Social Gospel, (1877-1925)* (Louisville: Westminster, 1990).

³⁸ Luker. *The Social Gospel in Black and White*, 2.

sincere in their conviction to better themselves. Powell Sr. believed “every church must discover the real needs of the people in the community in which it is located, “and then those needs must be met in earnest according to the spirit of Christ.”⁴⁰

The fifth aspect of a model church, in Powell Sr.’s view, was a “soul-saving church” or church where soul saving was an individual responsibility. “One of the great weaknesses of the modern church,” Powell Sr. maintained, was that many churches left their missionary or “soul saving work”—the work of bringing people to Christ, primarily to their ministers and a few missionaries. This was a mistake to him. Powell Sr. felt that it was the responsibility of everyone in the church to be ready to engage and compel non-believers and believers alike to Christ. His thoughts were predicated on the notion that in the first church in Jerusalem, all persons that were part of the church were active in ministry. Powell Sr. reminded his congregation, “The members [of the church in Jerusalem] did not wait for the unsaved to come to church, but they carried the church to them.”⁴¹ Powell Sr. goes on to explain that there are two ways to save souls: a defensive way, when you have new believers or non-believers come into the church; and an offensive way, where you bring the church to those in need. To make his point, Powell Sr. employs the Jerusalem church as a perfect example where an offensive campaign was able to reach more people than merely sitting inside of the church.

The last aspect to solidify Powell Sr.’s notion of a model church was through what he called a “spirit filled membership.” Such a membership was one that was filled with the same Holy Spirit that descended on those gathered in the upper room as mentioned in the book of Acts. Spirituality was the most important piece to the puzzle for the model church to work effectively. “A church without the Holy Spirit is like a tree without sap, a watch without a

³⁹ Powell, *Palestine*, 134.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 135.

spring; an automobile without a motor,” Powell Sr. asserted.⁴²

With all six characteristics in tow: 1) conviction of sin; 2) saving faith; 3) stewardship; 4) recognition of social responsibility; 5) soul saving as an individual responsibility; and 6) spirit filled membership, a church could be what he believed Christ called all “New Testament” churches to be. At the end of the sermon, Powell Sr. asked whether or not there were any model churches in the world. No matter what the answer was by those who heard his message, he was going to make sure that Abyssinian Baptist Church surely became a model church. At the same time, he also challenged other congregations to be model churches. To move Abyssinian church from 40th Street it was vitally important that every member of the congregation want a model church—as long as it was located in Harlem.

Powell Sr. and his predecessors at Abyssinian were not the only ministers who attempted to compel their congregation to be “Harlem-minded.” There were others who also wanted their churches to move to Harlem. From 1900 to the early 1920s several other churches moved to Harlem ahead of Abyssinian from Midtown Manhattan. The edifices they constructed were expensive and the land equally as pricey. Salvation may have been free, but the prices to erect places of worship were very costly.⁴³ St. Phillip’s Protestant Episcopal Church finished their new building in 1911 at \$200,000 on West 134th Street. On 137th Street, St. James Presbyterian Church started construction of their new church in 1914, at a cost of \$87,000.⁴⁴ These were only a few of the larger congregations that moved into Harlem. The difference between these other congregations and Abyssinian were their economic plans. Powell Sr.’s was an extension of the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. 136.

⁴³ Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900-1950*. (New York: Farrar Straugs & Giroux, 1982), 253-255.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 254. See also, Study by the Greater New York Federation of Churches: *Negro Churches of Manhattan*, 1930, 10-28.

fiscal policy he had implemented in New Haven at Immanuel. It was a policy based on thrift. He dared not extend his church further than what he believed them capable of, but he wanted to be in Harlem.

Powell Sr. decided to begin his efforts in earnest in 1911. He decided that he would really begin to set the groundwork for movement to Harlem. There was no indication as to why it took three years before he started to implement his plan other than he felt that the time was just right to begin to plant his own seeds for the move to Harlem. Additionally, that gave his economic plan a three-year window, too, to take hold within the congregation. The tool that Powell used to implement his vision for racial uplift and movement for his congregation was thoughtful rhetoric rooted in faith. This oration would be much more than just another articulation of his clear view of the Christian Gospel applied to disposed socio-political reality. This address was crafted to tie his belief in the importance of education, racial pride, and economic literacy—all things germane to his brand of racial uplift into an easily understood message. This speech was not just for the sacred, but also the secular as well.

“Some Rights Not Denied the Colored Race” was the title of the oration, and while it was not explicitly a sermon, he made sure that there was a Judeo-Christian component that was essential toward making his solution work for the race. Powell Sr. believed that faith was the integral component in his racial uplift. Moreover, that is the place where he spoke from—his training had been in the seminary and in theology and so that was his basis for his thought. “Some Rights Not Denied the Colored Race” was aimed not only to draw attention to the problems he saw with the state of race relations in America, but provided very pragmatic solutions to the systemic issues African Americans faced in a racist society. The address was given to a packed crowd, not at Abyssinian, but at Young’s Casino. Ironically enough, Mr. Gibb

Young, the owner of the casino, attended Abyssinian every Sunday and frequently donated the use of his business for such activities. When these events occurred, none of the games of chance were open and the bar was closed. Powell Sr. pointed out how he preached against everything the casino stood for, but he and Mr. Young were indeed good friends, despite his choice of entrepreneurial endeavors.⁴⁵

Powell Sr. began his speech by first mentioning that 1912 marked the “golden jubilee” of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and that despite this, African Americans were, especially in the South, exposed to all types of wanton violence, intimidation and discrimination. “Even during this year of our golden jubilee,” Powell Sr. soberly remarked, “dozens of colored men and women are being shot, hanged, burned and tied upon railroad tracks by mobs composed of the ‘the best citizens.’”⁴⁶ Powell Sr. was very much aware of the hostilities that African Americans faced, but he was more concerned with how they could respond to life in spite of such dire socio-political circumstances. The focus of his address was on the things that African Americans could do without molestation from white supremacy, at least as he saw it. The rights he outlined were education, thrift, purchasing land, and what he called Christian optimism.

When discussing education, Powell Sr. first acknowledged that public education in the South was segregated and indeed inferior. He argued that there was not a law on the books that made it illegal for African Americans to be educated. Likely drawing on his own childhood “wonderlust” growing up in Reconstruction Virginia, Powell Sr. felt that even in the face of poor facilities and myriad examples of racially antagonistic situations, African Americans should

⁴⁵ Powell mentions in his autobiography that Mr. & Mrs. Young never gave any less than five dollars every Sunday during offering. See Powell, *Against the Tide*, 71.

⁴⁶ Adam Clayton Powell, “Some Rights Not Denied the Colored Race: An Address by Rev. A. Clayton Powell, D.D.” (New York: Publisher Unknown, 1912), 2.

educate themselves.⁴⁷ By contrast, he railed against blacks in the North who did not have to engage the same types of domestic terrorism typically found in the South, but still failed to seek out education. To Powell Sr., New York City in particular, was well positioned to aid African American educational efforts, although racism was just as rampant in New York as it was in any of the southern states.

Powell Sr. presented education as the key to progress and racial uplift and advancement. To illustrate his point, Powell remarked, “A colored boy can enter kindergarten and graduate from college in New York without investing a single cent in tuition.”⁴⁸ Moreover, Powell Sr. reminded the crowd about how one of the best minds of the nineteenth-century, Frederick Douglass, “did not owe his education to any school except the school of affliction, poverty and persecution.”⁴⁹ Douglass was the perfect example of someone who was born in the dire circumstances of human bondage and yet still became self-defining and self-determining. Powell Sr. felt that if Douglass could do what he did in his life there is no reason that anyone else of the race should be limited because of racial hostility. Powell Sr. also referenced President Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Franklin, and William Lloyd Garrison as other examples of men, who like Douglass, were respected for their minds, but were not so called, men of letters. Powell Sr. believed that there was no justifiable reason why in America, men and women, no matter what the race, should be left in the darkness of ignorance. However, he spoke poignantly and directly to the transformative aspects of education in relation to African Americans:

“...there is no excuse for any man remaining unformed anywhere in America. The history of our race teems with illustrations of men and women who have risen from the dark valley of ignorance and superstition to the sunlit plains of intelligence and

⁴⁷ In his autobiography, Powell Sr. refers to being captivated by “wonderlust” as a youth and even in young adulthood, but it is likely “wanderlust” that he is describing, but he spells it incorrectly. Here in this study his spelling is used for consistency and to remain true to his words.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

usefulness despite a thousand handicaps.”⁵⁰

Powell Sr.’s urgings for education demonstrated his black nationalist rhetoric, the infusion of racial empowerment with the liberating aspects of Christianity, reminiscent of his activist minister forebears of the late nineteenth century.⁵¹ Education operated as the primary solution for overcoming not only the dubious status of secondary citizenship for African Americans, but arguably education was the key to the transformation of society generally. Closing his discussion on the benefits and need for education for African Americans Powell Sr. proclaimed:

“My friends knowledge is power...If I could on this occasion say something that would start all the young people of this audience either to school or to systematic, patient, persistent course of reading. I would consider myself highly paid for my four years’ labor in New York and would lie down to-night with a feeling that I had done much toward getting Ethiopia to stretch forth her hands unto God.”⁵²

The use of Ethiopia by Powell Sr. is consistent with black nationalist rhetorical devices of his day and even prior. Such imagery in texts and orations whether from sacred or secular authors is referred to as “Ethiopianism” which is classified as part of an African American literary and religious tradition common in English-speaking Africans regardless of their nationality. The use of the Ethiopian rhetorical device emerged from shared political and religious experiences during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These expressions can be found in the pages of slave narratives, the exhortations of slave preachers who believed in divine redemption from bondage, and in the songs and folktales of generations of those locked in forced servitude. The name for the device sprouted from Psalms 68:31 and the verse was seen as prophesy that Africa and its sons and daughters throughout the diaspora would be saved from the vile, abhorrent practice of human bondage. Moreover, the scripture inspired a belief in socio-

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism: 1850-1925*, 22, 23.

political, economic and cultural renaissance. Powell Sr.'s words did not stray from such thinking. Education, particularly the education of African American children, was the pathway that Ethiopians in America would take toward that renaissance. And it would be Abyssinian Baptist Church that would aid in the effort of helping the children of its congregation, community, and nation toward that in—stretching their arms out in liberation.⁵³

Powell Sr. then introduced three other rights that had not been denied to African Americans: “the right to save money, buy property and engage in business.” It is here that Powell introduces to his audience his notion of thrift, reinforced by Christian principles. Similar to education, Powell maintains here that while there are racialized situations that can hinder the African American experience in the market place, there is no law that says that black people have to spend their money. Powell Sr. favored a very disciplined approach to monetary concerns and strongly believed that having control over their wealth would be central to the race’s future success. Along with conserving capital, Powell felt that acquiring land was especially important to uplift as was solid entrepreneurial efforts, or what he called, “decent business.”

Powell Sr. introduced a term in this discussion called the “gospel of economy.” Too often ministers he found, and Powell Sr. included himself in this, did not see wealth as conducive to Christianity. “We have preached too much grass hopper religion and not enough of the ant Christianity to our people,” Powell explained.⁵⁴ He thought that with the types of audiences that black ministers were able to sustain and hold, it was a travesty to not discuss responsible economics. According to Powell Sr., the black minister had the ear of the people like no other

⁵² Powell, “Some Rights”, 4. The mention of Ethiopia comes from the Book of Psalms 68:31, “Princes shall come from Egypt and Ethiopia will soon stretch her hands unto God.” This verse was very important to black nationalist efforts a generation prior to the Rev. Dr. Powell, Sr.

⁵³ For more discussion about Ethiopianism, see Wilson Jeremiah Moses, “The Poetics of Ethiopianism,” in *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism*, 156-169.

⁵⁴ Powell, “Some Rights,” 4.

person in African American society. It has long been the case, even in some facets of contemporary society, that Christianity maintains a relationship to poverty. Powell Sr. argued that, “The Lazarus story has been worked to death. Christ never intended to teach that by that parable that every man who has money must of necessity go to hell and that every fellow who lies around with sores on him and begging crumbs is going to Heaven.”⁵⁵ Wealth was not, in itself, a bad thing as far as Powell Sr. was concerned. He was very much aware that the world in which he and his audience lived, and his race had struggled, was governed by a market structure that required capital--period. Speaking to the men assembled, he mentioned, “you need money everywhere and for everything, as long as you are here and your wife and children will need it after you are dead.”⁵⁶ Moreover it was not simply the saving of money that would help the race to ascend up the ladder of equality, it would take some kind of collective effort to ensure lasting success. Similar to his discussion on education, Powell Sr. used New York City as a model for black business interests. “Nowhere in the world has the colored man ha[d] such an opportunity for making his money work for him as in New York.”⁵⁷

Just like moving his congregation to Harlem, Powell Sr. had a plan to get African Americans deeply involved in his proposed gospel of economy. Speaking directly and very pragmatically to those assembled, Powell Sr. urged them to think about where they buy their necessities for day-to-day life—food and clothing. He presented a plan that would allow African Americans to profit from the staple items they buy in large quantity annually. He issued figures that illustrated that “white people are growing rich by selling to these colored people the necessities and the luxuries of life.”⁵⁸ After sharing with listeners just how much money was

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

being made off the black inhabitants of Harlem, Powell Sr. proposed a plan or what he called a “sensible way for the race to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of freedom in New York.” His plan was to set up a chain of stores that were black owned and operated and sold those items most needed by the black community. Powell Sr. believed that such an investment in the community would be a boost holistically—uplifting young people with employment, providing much needed capital in the black community, and also begin to create some economic and political influence in New York City. “A dependent race is a poor race and a poor race is a despised race,” Powell Sr. soberly informed the audience.⁵⁹

The last right that Powell Sr. argued that had not been denied his race was what he called, “Christian optimism.” Instead of explicitly defining the term, Powell Sr. explained Christian optimism as embodied in:

“...a kind of man who realizes that the world is still very much out of joint, that things are a long way from being in tune with the Infinite, but who despite of the existence of gross injustices and inequalities, believes that God is at the head of the affairs of the universe and that He will finally make every crooked path straight, every hilly way level, and every rough way smooth.”⁶⁰

Powell Sr. found a biblical reference for his understanding of a Christian optimist in the eighth chapter of the book of Romans. The book itself is one of the most important in the Holy Scriptures and it is written by the Apostle St. Paul. In this particular chapter he explains to the Christians in Rome how believers can be delivered from the body of death.⁶¹ The death he refers to in this chapter is not simply physical death, but spiritual death that can prevent one from living a fulfilled life holistically. Additionally, Paul points out that whatever suffering you may endure in life during your Christian walk, or daily life, as long as one is with God he/she will be in God’s favor. Powell keys in on this in his reference of verse 28, “And we know that all things

⁵⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

work together for good for those who love God who are called according to his purpose.”⁶²

The Christian optimist, as far as Powell Sr. was concerned, had nothing to fear in life if he/she held firm to their abiding faith in God. Explaining the unique situation of African Americans, Powell Sr. again hinges on black nationalist ideology when he says, “I thank God that my race possesses this spirit of optimism to a larger degree than other people in the world.”⁶³ Powell Sr. goes on to describe how African Americans’ unique faith and optimism kept them during slavery and at the same time helped them seek freedom. Powell Sr. is not saying that African Americans are particularly suited for faith, but that through enduring slavery, African Americans were much aware of the faith needed to bear dire situations and circumstances and persevere, if not defy the odds of fate.⁶⁴ Here he also taps into the ethos of seeing African Americans as contemporary Israelites--people of faith who through suffering are able to persevere with the aid of God. Of course this thinking was nothing new. Christian black nationalists of a generation prior argued the same point, as well as other dispossessed populations that were engaged in liberation movements.⁶⁵ The spirit of Christian optimism and prayer, Powell Sr. argued, were key factors in fighting slavery and they must be used again in any future uplift of the race.

Powell Sr. goes on to illustrate examples during antebellum times of how African Americans utilized prayer and Christian optimism to their benefit to further support its importance. For instance, he cites prayer and action by the likes of Nat Turner and Dred Scott, as

⁶¹ Romans 7:24 (KJV).

⁶² Romans 8:28 (KJV).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁴ The scholarship of Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) addresses this point directly, where the main argument of the text engages the stereotypical thought that African Americans are “naturally” predisposed to be pious and faithful to God. His intriguing and compelling thesis is vitally important to the future of study of black religion.

⁶⁵ For discussion of biblical analogies of African Americans see, Cain Hope Felder eds., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 74-75.

well as those African and African Americans who fought for not just their personal freedom, but for the creation of the United States of America by participating in the Revolutionary War.

Above all else, Powell Sr. urges his audience, "...we cannot and will not surrender the right to pray."⁶⁶

Though Powell Sr.'s religious rhetoric is again replete with black nationalism, it must not be confused with black separatism. Neither, is Powell Sr. an accommodationist or necessarily an integrationist devoid of accountability for those who oppress either. Powell Sr. supports the United States but wants to ensure the continued progress of his people—mind, body, and spirit, despite subjugation by racist practices. He understands and supports the development of the race while also enlisting the help of non-blacks dedicated to liberation efforts as well. Powell Sr. mentions in the last lines of his message the ultimate sacrifice of the radical abolitionist John Brown and says that imbued with such a spirit, along with other "good white people of the country who will insist upon an open door and square deal for all men, fifty years hence there will be no race problem."⁶⁷ "Some Rights Not Denied the Colored Race" cannot be separated from the time in which it was written and how those times may have had an effect on the thoughts of Powell Sr. The migratory patterns of African Americans undoubtedly caused a new hopefulness as well as a new anxiety for many. Tomorrow was far from promised, but with this

⁶⁶ Powell, "Some Rights", 9.

⁶⁷ Ibid. John Brown was the leader of the historic and controversial raid at federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry on October 16, 1859. He was an American abolitionist who believed armed insurrection was the only way to overthrow the institution of slavery in the United States and became a willing martyr for the cause of freedom. Historians have long argued over whether or not he was a patriot or terrorist. I believe he was the former. He wanted America to be its best self and he was willing to give the ultimate sacrifice to that end. Before he was sentenced to hang for his crimes he testified: "Now, if it be deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children, and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I submit: so let it be done." For further reading see William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *John Brown* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Company, 1909); David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005); Tony Horwitz, *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid That Started the Civil War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011).

zeal for movement, Powell Sr. saw an opportunity for revitalization of race, nation, and kingdom.

The first two decades of the twentieth-century was truly the nadir of African American history, as Powell Sr. alludes to in the opening of his “Some Rights” speech. Nevertheless, it was also a time where many of Powell Sr.’s contemporaries both in and out of the pulpit were finding new ways to encourage race pride and uplift.⁶⁸ To be sure, racial uplift not only emerged from the Abyssinian pulpit; it was found in other places as well. With that in mind, Powell Sr. not only found inspiration and support solely from his brothers and sisters in Christ—or at least within the church walls. He soon found allies of similar mind and ability outside his congregation. For instance, Powell Sr. found reassurance and hopefulness in secular movements such as Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA); that movement along with the rise of black intellectuals and artists that later came to define the cultural explosion called the Harlem Renaissance. The very artists and intellectuals that are commonly associated with this historic era too, later formally recognized Powell Sr.’s relevance to the community and the race.⁶⁹ First and foremost however, Powell had to get his congregation to Harlem, to that Jerusalem of Black America. It was not a time for parades and pomp and circumstance, but a time for work and diligent patience—for the new leaders and the people that later followed and challenged them.

Powell Sr. laid the groundwork to articulate his vision for a model church and a model

⁶⁸ The “nadir” or low point of African American History is typically thought of as the period in which wanton racialized violence toward African Americans was at its zenith than any other period after the Civil War. The term is usually credited to the scholar, Rayford W. Logan. See his treatise, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954).

⁶⁹ Powell was awarded a Harmon Award in 1926, which were given typically to artists and intellectuals within the Harlem Renaissance. Music scholar, Jon Michael Spencer argued that it was the awarding of the Harmon Award that provided a platform for the institutionization of the black church into the Harlem Renaissance. For more see Jon Michael Spencer, “The Black Church and the Harlem Renaissance”. *African American Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Autumn 1996), 453.

race. He borrowed and expounded upon the tradition of activist ministers and was ready to run with it. He was focused on success, but well aware of the failures—that is moving his congregation to Harlem and the limitations of his rhetoric⁷⁰. As his installation came and went, Powell Sr. knew that there were always pragmatic concerns for his congregation and his community that he had to address. If he did not, his words carried little weight to a people dealing with and focused on transition.

As the first decade of the twentieth-century passed and another one began, African Americans found new ways to redefine themselves as they moved northward and settled—especially in the borough of New York called Manhattan. They traveled and hoped to settle in that special place from 130th to 145th Streets. This was black Harlem. Powell Sr.’s influence upon those masses, as well as other leaders like Garvey, and a core group of intellectuals and artists, were integral in the revitalization of faith and particularly African-American culture that in very clear ways merged the sacred with the secular to create a new reality in a nation that even in freedom, marginalized the sons and daughters of Africa. For Powell Sr.’s efforts, the changes that occurred were part of his program of kingdom and nation building. The kingdom was indeed God’s and the nation on earth was black and aware of their duty to God, and stood tall with pride and their capital city was Harlem, New York.

⁷⁰ As the Rev. Powell began to get settled in New York, he realized that he could not “save” everyone with his words or deeds, no matter how earnest he attempted to. For instance, when dealing with crime and prostitution he was able to move a great deal of those elements away from the church, but there were those who were resistant to what he offered, no matter what. In his autobiography, Powell laments about the generational effects of the lack of opportunity illustrated by the death of one of his members’ daughter, who like her mother he revealed, had succumbed to syphilis at age fourteen. The sexually transmitted disease was part of the cruel reality of her mother introducing her to prostitution Powell argues. Thus, Abyssinian was not immune from the dark side of the environment they were located around. This is just one example of limitations of his gospel of racial uplift. See discussion of story in Powell, *Against the Tide*, 56-57.

CHAPTER 5

INHABITING THE PROMISED LAND: A BLACK KINGDOM AND NATION IN HARLEM

“And I have said, I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt unto the land of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.” Exodus 3: 17

The second decade of the twentieth century brought many changes to the United States and to its citizens. It was during this decade that it could be argued that as a nation, America came of age. For the citizens, there was the emergence of a new sense of optimism, a sense of newness about almost everything. Most of it was fostered by prosperity or the promise of prosperity. To be sure, such feelings were not just solely for the captains of industry to hold fast to—families like the Rockerfellers, Carnegies, Morgans, and the rest of that exclusive lot of powerful families who made unimaginable fortunes during this time, but there was also a sense of redefinition by the dispossessed of America as well. African Americans, for instance, made their wishes known and in very tangible ways. They too were creating space for themselves, and their culture, in a nation that treated them collectively as a “problem” and not citizens.¹ Of course this was not all that was occurring in America. There was a national sense of redefinition that had long lasting implications both at home and particularly abroad.

On April 2, 1917 President Woodrow Wilson appeared before a joint session of Congress to request a declaration of war against Germany. That move effectively and quite deliberately plunged the United States into the international stage as an actor in the “Great War,” or World War I, as it is more commonly known. Yes, America was not simply fighting to protect

¹ Frederick Douglass likely gave the most concise, direct and engaged discussion of the “Negro Problem” in his address from 1892, where he emphatically declared that there was no ‘Negro Problem,’ the problem as he articulated it, was whether or not white Americans had, “honesty enough, loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough to

democracy abroad, but involvement in the war had longstanding and irreversible effects domestically. The theatre of war was not limited just to the battlefield but also the boardroom, on the streets of America, and in the minds and hearts of its citizens as well. What it meant to be “American” changed and persons of African descent played an integral role in reshaping the American socio-political, and religious landscape. The Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., the new pastor of the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church, was well aware of the changes occurring in America and the world, too. Prior to American involvement in the war he maintained that there were several domestic and international events that occurred “quick and fast” and their impact was just as lasting. Of those occurrences there were a few that “drastically altered the psychology of the race, and the world and all of them changed the psychology of Abyssinian Baptist Church.”²

The heart of these changes, or this movement of redefinition, emerged from the borough of Manhattan, in the enclave of Harlem. The name of the area took on larger meaning, not just some passing double entendre from a blues or jazz song, nor was it simply the metaphoric meaning ascribed to the lines of the most wonderful prose and poetry from an avant-garde writer. Harlem, as the Rev. Powell, Sr., articulated it, was, “...a symbol of liberty and the Promised Land to Negroes everywhere.”³ Thus, Harlem was more than just merely a name of Dutch origin, it became a statement for progress, piety, and power for a people and race looking to lay claim to the promise of what America could and should be. Those claims emerged in various ways and there was no one particular way that emerged or a way that was important than others—as they worked in tandem to impact each other. Indeed there was a communion of

live up to their own constitution,” 25 August 1892, Chicago, Illinois. When Douglass made these remarks he put his prepared speech to the side and spoke extemporaneously after being heckled by a person in the crowd of 2500.

² Adam Clayton Powell, *Against the Tide: An Autobiography*. (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1938), 69.

³ *Ibid.*, 70.

thought that made the quilt that was Harlem and the culture it came to represent. For instance, there was no increased notion of piety without racialized pride. There was no power or vision for the future if there was no understanding of history. Self definition and self determination were expressions that were birthed through programs of empowerment that were equally guided by sacred and secular concerns, and the Rev. Powell Sr. was convinced that he could positively effect changes in Harlem—the Promised Land—but he knew full well that it was not to be his task alone. He just needed to do his part.

Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., spent the first decade of the new century attempting to compel his congregation to move to where the mass of African Americans and other Africans of the diaspora called home. His deep-seated belief was that just as Jesus Christ went to Jerusalem, so too must Abyssinian uproot itself and relocate to Harlem. Many migrants called Harlem home, and they were not just solely from the American South. Too often lost in the story of the mass exodus of African Americans from the South is the fact that the migration of African Americans occurred from places outside American shores as well. The Caribbean also was a launching pad for those of African decent to leave their native islands immigrating to the United States for the promise of new life and liberty in the United States, just as their European immigrant counterparts. The way for these immigrants was not as pleasant as they hoped. Just as their fellow African-American migrants, the Caribbean immigrants faced harsh receptions from native born African American New Yorkers, as well as from the Southern migrants in many cases.

The level of disdain for black immigrants did not stop there, the normative white population, already in arms and more than anxious about the “invasion” of African Americans from the South, were just as racially antagonistic to those from outside the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century. For instance, there were reformers that believed the

increase in black women would drastically effect the social climate. White women reformers like Frances Kellor believed with complete certainty that black women would fall victim to “immoral habits, vice and laziness.”⁴ Kellor and other white women reformers like her were racist, social hypochondriacs—fueled by adherence to racialized stereotypes. Keller and her sororal kindred spirits were determined to save black women from lives of prostitution and the belief that their new home in the city meant that they did not have to work. It must be understood that the reformers were not concerned with the well being of African American women necessarily, they were more interested in keeping up the perceptions of the racialized status quo—which meant black immigrants were fine as long as they knew their place—under the foot of white superiority. The reformer’s plan was to make certain that black women did not plunge their city into immoral decay—the increased number of black women among the Caribbean immigrants was a cause for alarm, and they were fearful of losing their Victorian grip on the new world being created in America’s urban centers. However, there were places that Caribbean immigrants found that hostilities were not quite as overt, if not welcoming. The niche that they carved out in the urban landscape in fundamental ways greatly differed than that of their native born migrant cohorts.

Caribbean immigrants were able to find that whites, in varying degrees, because of their perceived class background or educations, accepted them or at least were more tolerant of their existence in the city. Some Caribbean immigrants arrived in New York as skilled laborers and also armed with education. Of course there were also some not so subtle differences as well. The Jamaican born poet, Claude McKay, who was arrested in a draft dodging raid upon a railroad and was able to avoid jail time or a fine once police and even the judge heard him speak.

⁴ Frances A. Kellor, “The Problem of the Young Negro Girl from the South,” *New York Times*, 19 March 1905, sec

His accent kept him from jail and a hefty fine that the other native born African American men were unable to escape.⁵

Immigrants of African ancestry also found themselves victims of the intra-race antagonisms founded upon the basis of color. In some instances this manifestation of color translated into mythologies of superiority as well—but not the way one would typically think. There is evidence of Caribbean immigrants who genuinely held the belief that they were harder working, more industrious and more ambitious than native-born southern migrants.⁶ Whether from the Caribbean or from the American South, there was a harsh reality to come to grips with—race impacted the lives of all peoples of African descent in very stark ways. Despite this, there were immigrants who fought to move beyond petty jealousies and clannishness and attempted to work together for the betterment of the race as a whole.

One such immigrant from the island of Jamaica left an indelible mark on both his home nation, but also the masses of persons of African decent that were calling the American shores home—his name was Marcus Mosiah Garvey. Garvey arrived to America on March 26, 1916 aboard the *SS Tallac*, guided by the notion that he was invited to see the great Wizard of Tuskegee, Booker T. Washington.⁷ The principal at Tuskegee had limited correspondence with the ambitious young man, but in a letter he urged Garvey to see Tuskegee to take his observations back to his homeland of Jamaica to institute a similar project of uplift and

4, 8.

⁵ Irma Watkins Owens, *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants in the Harlem Community, 1900-1930* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1996), 5. Please see the recent scholarship of Mary S. Sacks, *Before Harlem: The Black Experience in New York City Before World War I* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 25-31.

⁶ Sacks, *Before Harlem*, 30-35.

⁷ “Booker T. Washington, to Marcus Garvey,” 27 April 1915. Robert A. Hill, ed. *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Volume I, 1826 - August 1919*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 116. The correspondence was not signed by Mr. Washington, but by his assistant secretary, Charles H. Fearing, operating in his stead.

education. Of course, after examining the correspondence, it is arguable if Washington sincerely was “inviting” Garvey to the United States formally, or that his response to Mr. Garvey was just a cordial and complementary grace of formal communication. No matter the intent the seed was already planted, and Garvey was ready to make his mark on the United States and the world.

Garvey, like Powell Sr., viewed Washington as a true race leader. His program of uplift generally impacted Garvey’s thought about the possibilities for black people, going forward. Booker T. Washington was truly a hero for both men. And like Washington and Powell Sr., Garvey came from less than humble beginnings, but rose to prominence due to education and purpose fueled by faith in himself and in God. It must not be forgotten too, that there were those who provided unique opportunities for growth and Garvey did not waste them. Drawn to the Black Mecca like so many others, Garvey soon found out that his journey toward greatness was not to be a smooth paved road, but a very rocky one that he could succumb to at any point.

Similar to his contemporary, Rev. Powell Sr., Garvey found work where he could. He used (and likely embellished) his abilities as a “master” printer, but that allowed him a pathway to begin to earn wages so that he could eek out some form of existence in New York. Although he articulated his belief succinctly a couple of decades later, he still could have proclaimed to the world in 1916 that he was a “public lecturer and President-General of the Universal Negro Improvement Association,” and that he would have to charge admission for those who sought to hear him speak but he believed a nominal fee was just that, nominal, compared to the benefit the public would gain from his lectures. Explaining further Garvey testified, “I do not speak carelessly or recklessly but with a definite object of helping the people, especially those of my

race, to know, to understand, to realize themselves.”⁸

Even as a new immigrant Garvey stood behind these beliefs about himself and his organization. He certainly would stumble, but he persevered. His first oration, for instance, was a tragic spectacle. According to various accounts, Garvey lost his balance while at the podium as he was attempting to speak and fell to the ground in embarrassment. There are conflicting accounts as to whether the fall occurred because he was awash with nervous fear or if he gave to the faint spell because he had not been eating, a result of his impoverished living conditions. Either way, it was a less than stellar start to a career that would provide a foundation for large-scale socio-political and religious change.

Garvey’s importance to Harlem and those of African ancestry living there, and hoping to migrate or immigrate there, generally was a thought strongly supported by the Rev. Powell, Sr. “The coming of Marcus Garvey to Harlem,” he testified, “...was more significant to the Negro than the World War, the southern exodus and the fluctuation of property values up—and downtown. Garvey, with his Black United States, Black President and Vice-President, Black Cabinet, Black Congress, Black Generals, Black Cross Nurses, Black Negro World, Black Star Line and Black Religion with a Black God had awakened a race consciousness that made Harlem felt around the world.”⁹

Truly, Garvey was an integral part of the black nation and kingdom building that developed in the United States and centered in Harlem during this period. His influence, created through his rhetoric and organizational mastery benefited, not only his most ardent supporters and followers, but his contemporaries and even his enemies and detractors were able to profit in

⁸ Marcus Garvey, *Black Man*, October 1937, 8-11, the transcript from a speech delivered at Bethel Church, Halifax (Canada).

⁹ Owens, *Blood Relations*, 70-71.

meaningful ways from his involvement in racial uplift. Garvey was able to create a platform that for some might have seemed as the epitome of radicalism on the far left, yet it created space for others to have less perceived radical dogmas and ideologies, but still hold on to race first or race pride agendas nonetheless.

In a later report issued from the “Great Convention” which was the reference to the International Convention of Negroes of the World, in 1920, sponsored by the UNIA, they argued the bulk of the criticism against the UNIA, particularly intra-race criticism was by editors of black newspapers who “delight in styling themselves conservative; a word that fitly expresses their willingness to accept the principle of ‘standpatism’ on the Negro question, in the relation to the Caucasian race—the principle of ‘las[i]ez faire,’ which means being satisfied with conditions as they are, and letting things take their course, in the belief that everything eventually will work out satisfactorily.”¹⁰

The significance of Marcus Garvey and his organization, the UNIA, was that both provided a pathway to understand race and nation in a pragmatic sense that also delved into the theological in ways that Powell Sr. had not yet fully conceived, but did not have to as he viewed the UNIA as a cornerstone of self-determination for African Americans and the African diaspora. Powell did not have to agree with everything that Garvey did (or said), and neither did Garvey have to accept all of Powell Sr.’s beliefs, but they agreed on one thing, and that was the holistic liberation of African Americans and Africans. Each in their own way maintained a solid “race first” understanding of their goals.

Liberation for both men did not just come with discussions about the life hereafter, but both men pointed to developing institutions in the present to actualize the potential for race and

nation. Garvey heavily criticized ministers who only engaged in emotional fervor and did nothing to ameliorate the sad social, political, and economic conditions that were laying waste to black people in America. Garvey was not alone in that thinking. Some of the leading black intellectuals of the day were both encouraged and arguably disillusioned or at least shared a healthy skepticism of the possibilities of the “black church.” They wanted it to be what it could be, but were weary of capitalizing on what they believed was an untapped resource in the twentieth century. As an institution, the black church had come to mean so much for so many. Furthermore, it was an institution that African Americans and others of African descent primarily controlled. The pre-eminent activist scholar, William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) Du Bois was joined by his contemporaries Mary Church Terrell and Kelly Miller, in calling for a religious rebirth for blackfolk—one that was not immersed nor solely consumed by emotionalism and empty rhetoric, but was committed to truly becoming “a mighty social power...the most powerful agency in the moral development and social reform of 900,000 Americans of Negro blood.”¹¹ It is safe to say that Garvey and Powell would have agreed with such an assessment—as a minister of burgeoning congregation, and one that was in the midst of transition, to Harlem, Powell Sr. met their challenge head on, but then again as a pastor he never reveled in flowery rhetoric about salvation beyond the grave and a passive voice in the world of men. Powell Sr. spoke for justice and accountability in the pulpit and out of it.

In 1914, two years before Garvey began his voyage to America, Powell Sr. gave a

¹⁰ “The Great Convention,” New York, 17 August 1920, Robert A. Hill, ed. *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Volume II, 27 August 1919 – 31 August 1920* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 593.

¹¹ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, eds. *The Negro Church: Report of a Social Study made under the direction of Atlanta University; together with the Proceedings of the Eighth Conference for the Study of Negro Problems, held at Atlanta University, May 26th, 1903* (Atlanta: The Atlanta University Press, 1903), 207-208. See also article written by Barbara D. Savage, “W.E.B. Du Bois and ‘The Negro Church’,” *Annals of the American Academy of*

cautionary and highly publicized New Year's sermon entitled, "Going Forward." In the message Powell Sr. staunchly criticized his fellow African Americans for indulging themselves too much in meaningless displays that were void of purpose. Powell Sr. made two key points of critique. His first had to do with the proliferation of popular culture, specifically music and its associative display, dancing. "Our young people are too frivolous because they feed on too much trash... You can see the effect of the Tango, the Chicago, the Turkey Trot, the Texas Tommy and the ragtime music not only in their conversations but in the movement of their bodies about the home and on the street. Grace and modesty are becoming rare virtues," Powell Sr. scolded. "The Negro race is dancing itself to death," he continued. "We could not even celebrate our fifty years of progress without advertising 'dancing every afternoon.'"¹² Powell Sr. went on in his sermon to encourage African Americans to support businesses and "professional men" within their communities (and race) such as doctors, lawyers, dentists and the like., "the race problem can never be solved as long as Negroes talk race loyalty and race rights and then spend their money with white businesses and professional men," Powell Sr. declared.¹³

As Harlem's African American population grew, so did criticism from ministers like Powell Sr. and his contemporaries like Charles Martin, a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal denomination. In his own critique entitled, "The Harlem Negro" written just a couple years after Powell Sr.'s "Going Forward," Rev. Martin provided a cultural portrait that has been accepted as largely accurate—in terms of characterizing the "Harlem Mindset." Martin claimed that African Americans in Harlem were engrossed by decadence and over consumption—of food and alcohol. Many had fallen into lives of crime and vice of varying degrees from pickpockets,

Political and Social Science, Vol. 568, The Study of African American Problems: W.E.B. Du Bois's Agenda, Then and Now. (March 2000), 235-249.

¹² "Race is Dancing Itself to Death," *The New York Age*, 8 January 1914.

¹³ *Ibid.*

to burglars and con men. Martin also wrote of groups of men who gathered on street corners where they remained most of the day with not a care in the world. He also discussed the achievements of some—at least socially that were making headway into largely white areas of endeavor.¹⁴

Powell Sr. was uniquely positioned to be able to agree with large aspects of the UNIA philosophy and vice versa. The two men, from the existing evidence did have a respect for one another, if nothing else. However, it was likely much more than respect. As a child, the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., recalled with certain fondness how his father allowed him to ride with Garvey in his car during parades held by the UNIA where Garvey would don his festive plume adorned hat he was famously known for. The younger Powell Jr. also spoke of another thrill of his young life was to sit at Garvey's feet, presumably during a meeting or a visit to home or office—maybe even to hear a lecture.¹⁵ As his influence and prominence grew, Garvey was not simply just spouting rancorous, incendiary rhetoric, (if he ever did) but he preached a policy and advocacy of love of race and nation. More importantly he also couched his race first intellections with a theological grounding that Powell Sr. and several other ministers and lay folk alike, who were “God fearing” could stand behind. In 1921 Garvey gave one of his greatest and most memorable speeches, where he proclaimed: “We have prayed to God for a vision and for leadership, and He Himself is our leader and He has given us a universal vision—a vision that will not limit our possibilities to America, that will not limit our possibilities to the West Indies, but the vision that says there must be a free and redeemed Africa.”¹⁶

It is safe to say that the two luminary figures of this era had a good rapport with each

¹⁴ Charles Martin, “The Harlem Negro,” *Zion Quarterly Review*, October, November, December, 1916.

¹⁵ Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., *Adam By Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (New York: Kensington Publishing, 1971, 1994), 50-51.

other. The elder Powell Sr. was quite cognizant of the influence that Garvey had upon the masses of African Americans that came to Harlem. Ironically enough, as Abyssinian made its purchase of land effectively moving to the center of Harlem on 138th Street between Seventh and Lennox Avenue, their new edifice was to be erected right next door to the UNIA headquarters, Freedom Hall. Even with the move to Harlem becoming a reality—getting to that place, selling their previous property and motivating the church members to take ownership of the transition was no easy task and it was not simply preaching alone by their pastor that allowed that to occur.

The church was reluctant to leave its former home of Waverly Place, believing that if they were just a bit more patient they might be able to garner a one million dollar selling price, hoping to cash in on the rising real estate prices in Manhattan at the time. During a business meeting in 1916, Powell Sr. announced not one million dollars, but that the church could get around two hundred and forty thousand dollars for the property. This caused immediate and visceral reaction from those who wanted to wait out for a higher price. “The Pastor is trying to kill the goose which will lay us the golden egg,” proclaimed one disenchanted member.¹⁷ His voice would be the rallying cry for the majority, who chose to stay put at Waverly Place. The pastor’s suggestion, unfortunately, was not given serious consideration. For the time being Abyssinian stayed put, but it was not the end of the fight to move the church. It took seven years for the church to move from Waverly Place and there would be a great internal battle each step of the way for pastor and congregation alike. For the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., moving the church to Harlem was at the forefront of his mind, but it was not his sole concern. Indeed, there were many things occurring outside New York that also garnered his attention—if not demanded it.

¹⁶ Untitled speech by March Mosiah Garvey, 21 August 1921, *The Negro World* 11:2 (27 August 1921), 2,3.

As a figure in the community and pastor, there were many things on his plate. One of the pressing things he addressed during this time was international conflict that America was preparing for—World War I. The end of July 1914 saw the beginning of the “Great War,” rooted largely in the rising imperialism of Europe.¹⁸ However, America did not enter the war at its outset preferring a policy of non-intervention, hoping to broker peace while not engaging in the theatres of war. The publication of the infamous Zimmerman telegram and the sinking of U.S. merchant ships led to Congress declaring war April 6, 1917, with President Wilson’s full support.¹⁹ This was yet another way that Powell Sr. believed that African Americans could prove their patriotism and dedication to the nation. His words preceded and on the surface seem to share the accommodationist tone in an editorial written by W.E.B. Du Bois entitled, “Close Ranks.” Du Bois at this time served as the editor of the *Crisis*, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) the monthly journal. The activist scholar called for African-Americans to withhold their “special grievances” with the United States and support the war effort. Du Bois wrote, “That which represents German power today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and democracy.”²⁰ Rev. Powell Sr., in the same way, wanted to bolster support for the effort and indeed assist in creating an African American regiment. Powell Sr. used a public platform and his oratory to bring his message home and to provide pressure to local and state politicians to make a serious effort to

¹⁷ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 69.

¹⁸ Elbert Francis Baldwin, *The World War: How it looks to the Nations Involved and What it Means to Us* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1914), 207-210. The naming of the World War I as the “Great War” can be found in the October issue of Canadian periodical, *Maclean’s Magazine* (October 1914) as well.

¹⁹ The “Zimmerman telegram” was a correspondence sent by German Empire’s Foreign Secretary, Aruthur Zimmerman that sought to garner Mexican entry into the war as allies of the Germans, in the event that the United States entered World War I. The telegram was intercepted by British intelligence and shared with U.S. officials, who were enraged by the contents of the letter and since American popular sentiment at the time was anti-Mexican and anti-German, thus it did not take long to drum up support for war.

include African Americans in the raising of troops for support and combat.

In the summer of 1916 during a rally in late May, which was originally scheduled as a fund raiser for the Booker T. Washington Memorial Fund, Powell Sr. provided a great introduction to the governor of New York, Charles S. Whitman:

“Permit me to say that the Governor has the distinction of addressing an audience without a hyphen. We are not pro-British, or pro-German, or pro-African; we are not even Afro-Americans. We are just simple, thorough-going Americans from the peeling to the core, and from the core to the peeling. We do not know any flag but the Stars and Stripes, and we do not wish to know any other. We have no country but America, and we do not want any other. We have always stood ready, as Boston Common, Bunker Hill, Fort Mifflin and San Juan Heights will testify, and we now stand ready to give our blood in defense of the sacred principles enunciated in the Declaration of Independence.”²¹

After Powell’s grand introduction, Gov. Whitman told the audience, “You are here, you are part and parcel of America, and there can be no progress in which you are not considered.”²²

The governor went on to suggest that the greatest way to pay respect to the life and legacy of Booker T. Washington was to join the war effort. Whitman also shared with the audience that he had just issued orders that authorized the formation of a black regiment of the National Guard. The 15th New York National Guard Regiment, as authorized by Whitman, became famously known later as the “Harlem Hellfighters” of the 369th Infantry Regiment. Among the scores of African-Americans at that rally to hear Powell Sr. and Gov. Whitman were the entertainer J. Rosamond Johnson, the Rev. William H. Brooks, who later became a military chaplain, and the first officer of the regiment, Vertner Woodson Tandy.²³

²⁰ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, “Close Ranks,” *The Crisis*, (July 1918). Later in life Du Bois came to resent this editorial, as it became the most controversial writing of his long, storied career.

²¹ *New York Age*, 1 June 1916.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Tandy was an admired citizen of Harlem, who was equally respected for his work as an architect. He received his education from Tuskegee and Cornell University. While at Cornell, Tandy, along with seven other students, founded Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., the first African-American intercollegiate fraternity at Cornell University in 1906. He designed the St. Philip’s Episcopal Church, the first black congregation to move to Harlem in 1911. After passing the officer’s exam, Tandy’s name was used on all types of flyers seeking to garner support from African American men for the war.

Powell Sr.'s introduction may or may not have put Gov. Whitman on the spot, as he had not come to Harlem to announce his plans for forming an African American regiment. Regardless, Powell Sr. played a role in providing the nationalistic rhetoric that allowed for the formation of this group of black national guardsmen, or at least in the mind of African Americans he likely was. Powell Sr.'s rhetoric may have seemed like a departure from his earlier views, demonstrating a more racially conservative tone that asks for African-Americans to be seen as just American, no more or less than their white countrymen. It could be argued that he is denouncing race or other nationalistic associations. If that was the case, was his thought that by sacrificing race rhetoric in the moment, it would it pay dividends in the bank of political equity after the war's end? There is no way to knowing for certain, given the assembled evidence if this was actually occurring in Powell Sr.'s mind, but it is a reasonable conclusion to draw.

Powell Sr.'s tying of historical fights for American liberty and African American participation in those struggles for the maintaining of the republic is compelling and also interesting given his association to Garvey. However, Powell Sr.'s words cannot simply be written off as merely accommodationist—to do so robs them of their complexity. If anything he was walking a tight rope between the “second sight” that Du Bois spoke of in his seminal work, *The Souls of Blackfolk*—meaning Powell Sr. was keenly aware of who he was talking to both in the audience and also Gov. Whitman. Powell Sr. in a short introduction made space for both black and white to exist and support the war effort without fear of lost ground for either side.

The pastor's rhetoric made it safe for Whitman to announce the formation of a unit at a time where the normative population of Americans was indeed weary of perceived subversive elements. At the time there was significant mistrust of non-whites primarily due to the escapades

of Pancho Villa in the American Southwest.²⁴ Thus, painting African Americans as just “American” helps to ease tensions about African Americans serving in the US military, which had also been stoked by the release and popularity of D. W. Griffith’s 1915 racial fantasy, *Birth of a Nation*, a drama that depicted African American men after the Civil War as wild, animalistic oversexed beasts, who lusted for the flesh of white women and used their guns and federal appointments to subject white men to all type of dubious treatment. The release of this film led to a rise of membership in the Ku Klux Klan. If that were not enough, imagine the type of racialized climate when President Woodrow Wilson, who thought of himself as a historian, allegedly declared after screening the film in the White House that it was “like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that is all so terribly true.”²⁵

Understanding the context of the time, it is easier to see why Powell might have used the language that he did when speaking of African Americans and the United States in his introduction. Moreover, the very mentioning of African Americans as participating in the protection of the republic inherently is a political statement. What better pathway to demonstrating and authenticating the manhood or citizenship of a dispossessed population than military service? The argument here is that once one has served their nation on the battlefield, once the sacrifice was made to serve honorably, the notion of counterfeit citizenship is moot.

With that understanding Powell Sr.’s introduction is much more nuanced and can truly be heard

²⁴ Pancho Villa’s raid on Columbus, New Mexico on March 9, 1916, seventeen citizens were murdered. The raid forced the United States to deploy some of the New York National Guard regiments to the U.S.-Mexico border, which played an integral part in convincing US officials that the state of New York needed another National Guard regiment. For further discussion see Stephen L. Harris, *Harlem’s Hellfighters: The African-American 369th Infantry in World War, I* (Washington: Brassey’s, 2003), 25-34.

²⁵ *New York Post*, 4 March 1915. Also see discussion by historians John Hope Franklin, “Birth of a Nation—Propaganda as History,” *Massachusetts Review* 10 (Autumn 1979): 425, 434; Michael Rogin, “The Sword Becomes a Flashing Vision’: D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*,” *Representation* 9 (Winter 1985): 151; Scott Simmon, *The Films of D.W. Griffith* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 112; or the more recent scholarship on the film by Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith’s the Birth of a Nation: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 111.

different ways. His rhetoric must be viewed as layered with undertones of equal citizenship and manhood. The support and enlistment of black soldiers is inherently a political act and the pastor of Abyssinian was very deliberate about his choice of words.

As the nation entered World War I the property values in the 40th street district collapsed with the socio-economic transitions taking place all over the city. Columbus Circle and not Times Square was now the heart of New York. Powell Sr. himself took advantage of the situation and boasted of paying six thousand dollars for a home that cost seventeen thousand five hundred to build. He later sold it for fifteen thousand dollars. Powell Sr. saw the move as not just a way to help speak to the disinherited populations in Harlem, but equally important was the substantial profit the church could possibly make. Frustrated, the Rev. Powell Sr. continued to compel his congregation and African Americans in general to buy property in Harlem. His belief was that if his advice had been heeded early on, African Americans would not be renting in Harlem, they would own Harlem.

In 1919, Powell Sr. convened a series of meetings to address the move to Harlem. These meetings were held in Young's Casino owned by businessman and sportsman Mr. Gibb Young. Powell Sr. wanted to hear his congregation's feelings on moving the church to Harlem. Despite the contradictory elements of holding church business meetings in a casino, Powell Sr. relied on the building space for the meetings, and in kind, Young kept his bar closed during meeting times and also, along with his wife became members of Abyssinian. Though Powell condemned the activities inside the casino during business hours, Powell Sr. respected Young as a dear friend.²⁶ Such interactions signal that Powell was able to separate the secular and the sacred or it might be better understood that the pastor was able to truly understand how the sacred and secular are able

²⁶ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 75.

to coexist. These meetings proved quite useful in preparing for Harlem.

By 1920, the church finally purchased six lots on West 138th near Seventh Avenue. Now that there was land in hand, a great deal of work still had to be done. To help reach the community and generate interest in the move from those both within and outside Abyssinian's walls, Powell Sr. conducted a series of tent revival meetings that summer and the following summer. The tent meetings were much akin to revivals, and Powell Sr. sent several of his best deacons along with associate ministers periodically to get the people of Harlem ready for the arrival of Abyssinian. Indeed, the revivals served as a form of outreach ministry. They were like the opening act for the main event, or the appetizer before a dinner meal.

The revivals prepared the congregation for Harlem, and Harlem for the congregation. Edward Waller, Chairman of the Board of Deacons, was one of best street orators that Abyssinian had, and Powell Sr. had great trust in him. Waller was the Rev. Powell Sr.'s Joshua. Just like biblical Moses sent Joshua out to see the Promised Land ahead of the rest of the Israelites, Powell Sr. sent Waller ahead of him. The deacon's family was very active at Abyssinian. Waller wore a few hats in the congregation, for he was also the Superintendent of Sunday School. His wife, Adeline, was a dedicated member in the choir and quite a popular fixture in the community. Out of the Waller union one of the larger than life personalities of the Jazz Era emerged, their third born son, Thomas Wright Waller, known to the musical world as "Fats" Waller.²⁷

The Wallers migrated from Virginia, just as Powell Sr. himself had as a young man. They were a young family that like so many others moved North seeking better opportunity for themselves and their children. Caught up in the exodus of the Great Migration, Edward started a

hauling business and established his first residence ironically in Waverly Place (the former home of Abyssinian) and they moved to Harlem ahead of the church. Edward and Adeline raised six children in Abyssinian and although they eventually left before the church was constructed they did their part to spread the gospel as Powell Sr. thought it should be shared with the people. At Abyssinian, Edward's propensity to conduct street sermons was valued and made all the better because of his very deep captivating voice that was all the more effective because of his earnest religious conviction. He was a believer in family and faith and wanted to change the landscape of Harlem as much as his pastor did. If it were left up to Powell, Harlem would be the African American's Jerusalem and with Abyssinian in the community, "Harlem had never seen so religiously refreshing."²⁸

The Waller Family in many ways represented the best of what Abyssinian members were—they were prime examples of the "Harlem minded-ness" that their pastor preached about. Truly, Powell Sr. did not move Abyssinian to Harlem just on a whim, a prayer, or because of a few popular sermons. The Waller family was evidence of how members of the church played quite active roles in this new period of transition for the church and their pastor. Aside from the tent revivals, Powell Sr. made another push to advance the transition of the church out of Waverly Place and into Harlem but it would not bear the fruit he thought it would.

In the meantime, again there were other things to contend with. The Great War officially ended in 1919 with millions of soldiers coming home from a conflict that would ever change the international landscape. As the American soldiers returned from fighting among them were the "Harlem Hellfighters" the nickname given to the soldiers of the 369th, that group of men that

²⁷ Ed Kirkeby, *Ain't Misbehavin': the Story of Fats Waller*, (New York: DaCapo Press, 1975), 4-20. See also, "10,000 Attend Last Rites For Thomas "Fats" Waller, Musician." *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 December 1943, 4,5B.

²⁸ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 72.

aided the war effort after Gov. Whitman's actions created the New York 15th Regiment. As the soldiers returned home, Powell Sr. spoke on their behalf. In a more accountable tone than his introduction years earlier, Powell delivered a sermon, "[The] Kind of Christianity Needed."²⁹ Powell Sr. began his sermon mentioning that the world was practicing a "Christianity of man" that failed every nation and every race of people on the earth. It was only through a commitment to the "Christianity of Jesus" that would allow "the world to be a safe place to live."³⁰ The sermon railed against the inequalities the war perpetuated and exacerbated. Powell Sr. mentioned that young men fought and died in rat-infested trenches of Europe for thirty dollars a month, while other men at home profited from the war effort, "America," he proclaimed, "produced seventeen thousand millionaires. God cannot destroy injustice, dishonesty, and ungodliness in the world, except through men and women who have the spirit of Jesus."³¹ Powell Sr. openly castigates against all forms of Western Christendom and adherents to the faith in America as counterfeit, in a parallel way that a counterfeit democracy was practiced in the United States. Powell Sr. insisted that there were two principles that were fighting for supremacy in the twentieth century—self-advantage and unselfish service. He argued that the former brought on World War I and it was the latter that would usher in peace instead of the industrial unrest that was plaguing the world. He labeled the newly rich in America, "profiteering pirates" who were driven by greed and nothing noble. The sermon is a prototypical jeremiad, where at the end of the sermon Powell Sr. warns of the eminent downfall of society, including America. Powell Sr. soberly opines, "...we are bound to have a repetition of the French revolution in this country and our present civilization will go the way of Egypt,

²⁹ "Our Weekly Sermon," *Chicago Defender*, 30 April, 1921, 16.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Greece, and Rome.”³²

“The Kind of Christianity Needed” also represents a more somber tone that Powell has with Abyssinian as well. Disillusioned with the prospect of ever moving his congregation into Harlem—the thought of not being able to inhabit the Promised Land of Harlem, Powell Sr. began to investigate other avenues for his future, outside of the pulpit of Abyssinian. Known across the nation for his lectures and sermons by this time, Powell Sr. began to ponder leaving Abyssinian and pursuing public lecturing and preaching wherever he could be heard full time. Later in 1921, he figured that he had enough speaking engagements to last him for at least three years, and therefore would be able to earn enough money to support his family. This came on the heels of a very successful St. Louis engagement where he sold one thousand copies of his sermons after a lecture.³³ The pastor communicated his frustration with the current stagnant movement with regard to the building of the Harlem edifice and spoke of the possibility of leaving the pastorate, but church officials greeted the news with disbelieving amusement. To illustrate just how serious he was, Powell Sr. read his resignation to the congregation on the second Sunday in December 1921. The event so shocked the church and the community that Lester Walton, then editor of the *New York Age* as well as a special correspondent to the *New York World* described the event in the pages of their respective newspapers on December 17th:

“If an earthquake had shaken Manhattan last Sunday, it would not have surprised the congregation of Abyssinian Baptist Church, more than did the reading of the Rev. A. Clayton

³² Ibid. A jeremiad is a cautionary or sometimes angry harangue written or spoken to warn society about its present course and that failing to yield to more noble ends will end in the destruction of a republic or group of people being analyzed. The word is also an eponym, as it is named after the Biblical prophet Jeremiah, and comes from Biblical works attributed to him, such as the *Book of Jeremiah* and the *Book of Lamentations*. The Book of Jeremiah prophesies the coming downfall of the Kingdom of Judah, and asserts that this is because its rulers have broken the covenant with the Lord. Similarly, in the American context many activist ministers or political leaders/freedom fighters have used this form of oration or writing to warn about the treatment of the dispossessed. Writers and activists such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth represent nineteenth century authors of jeremiads. In this case, the Rev. Powell, is penning his own jeremiad, in this sermon (as he did others) as he speaks of the downfall of America if the nation does turn from their wicked and oppressive ways.

³³ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 75.

Powell's resignation as pastor at the close of service. The *Age* learns from authoritative sources that Dr. Powell has been talking with his officers and other leading members of the church for the past year about resigning from the pastorate and devoting the remainder of his life to evangelic work, the lecture platform, and the publishing of sermons; but no one not even Mrs. Powell, expected him to present it last Sunday."³⁴

With his announcement and the public stir that it caused, Abyssinian needed to act.

Nelson Dixon, chairman of the trustee board, moved that the church refuse to accept Powell Sr.'s resignation. Walton chronicled that John H. Page and William H. Taylor, chorister and chairman of the board of deacons respectively, seconded the motion by Dixon. Added to this were hundreds of members who opposed accepting the pastor's resignation. Describing the scene in the church that fateful Sunday, Walton reported, "Every available space in the church was occupied and the visitors were as strong in their protest against the pastor severing his relations with the church as were the members."³⁵ It is hard to say whether or not the move by Powell was a calculated bluff on his part to force the church's hand into action in some way. The comment he gave to a *New York Age* reporter suggests that the gravity of the situation was not lost on him. "I will say...that if this popular protest together with the unanimous vote of my church did not weight heavily upon my mind and make me think seriously of reconsidering the step taken last Sunday morning I would be both ungrateful and unhuman."³⁶

This event and the attention it generated stirred the pot of complacency that Powell Sr. needed to move forward with his Harlem dream. He claimed that his move to leave the pulpit was not a tactic to force the hand of Abyssinian, but a sincere effort to do something different. Regardless of his motives within two weeks of reading his resignation to the church things began moving forward. Moreover, the church officers met and pledged to give seventeen thousand dollars toward the building of the church. A little after two weeks of reading his letter of

³⁴ *New York Age*, 17 December 1921.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

resignation, Abyssinian sold the 40th Street property for two hundred thousand dollars.³⁷ A consortium purchased the church with the desire to develop the property for commercial use. It seemed that Harlem was finally becoming a reality for pastor and congregation alike.

The church's original designs were outfitted with all the finest of amenities of the day. Even by contemporary standards the design of the church was a huge undertaking. Once completed, the new edifice of Abyssinian would not only be a place of worship and Christian fellowship but it was to function as the cornerstone of service to the community of Harlem. The groundbreaking was held on April 9, 1922. Powell Sr. felt that that day was memorable for reasons other than the beginning of construction for the church. As a child of Reconstruction, Powell found that the date chosen was quite fitting. The groundbreaking was to occur on the anniversary of General Robert E. Lee's surrender to Union forces. The church in his mind was a representation of not just how far the race and congregation had come, but it is hard not to think that Powell Sr. thought about his own journey from Franklin County, Virginia to Harlem, New York.

As the construction commenced so did the talking of people in the community and around the city. Periodicals such as the *New York World* and *New York Age* ran stories about the progress of the building and even in the *Richmond Planet*, a white newspaper, caught wind of the project and gave it admirable attention. John Mitchell penned an editorial written a day before the ground breaking. He implored African Americans to rally behind Powell and raise the capital necessary to see the construction completed. Mitchell believed that such an undertaking would be a venture that likely would imbue African Americans with not only race pride, but also show whites and others around the nation that African Americans were making strides and

³⁶ *New York Age* 17 December 1921.

progress. “When colored folks have nerve to risk such an undertaking,” Mitchell wrote, “they are ready to soar in the realm of finance. The Rev. A.C. Powell Sr. is one of the most popular Divines in the country.”³⁸

The next key event was the laying of the cornerstone. The first Sunday of July 1922 served as the date for this historic event. Mr. Joseph Gilbert, manager of the Religious Department of the *New York American*, was one of the journalists there and gave a detailed look of the impressive scene on that day.

“Work on what will be the largest black Baptist Church in the country is now under way on 138th Street between 7th and Lennox Avenues. The cornerstone of the new Abyssinian Baptist Church was laid amid appropriate ceremonies last Sunday afternoon. The building when completed will cost three hundred thousand dollars. Thousands of persons who at times blocked traffic witnessed the cornerstone laying exercises. The ceremonies were in the charge of the Nergo Masonic Lodge of the State of New York of which David Parker is Grand Master. The big crowd watched in hushed silence the sacred and impressive rights of the Masonic Order as the stone was laid.”³⁹

This was a solemn and jubilant moment for the congregation and the community. Before the cornerstone was leveled into place, by the Prince Hall Masons, the entire procession of dignitaries, congregation and laity alike, were led by the Jenkins Orphan Band, which marched from the Metropolitan Baptist Church to 135th Street. Some newspapers reported that there were ten thousand in attendance.⁴⁰ This was not just empty pomp and circumstance. Powell was charting a path for not just place, but meaning in Harlem. He did not desire to have ceremony

³⁷ “Syndicate Pays \$200,000 for Abyssinian Church,” *Chicago Defender*, 4 February 1922, 4.

³⁸ *Richmond Examiner*, 8 April 1922.

³⁹ *New York American*, 10 July 1922.

for ceremony's sake, but to have an interaction and indeed an engagement with the community that was inclusive and welcomed all to experience and witness. The church was not scheduled to be ready for use until January of the following year—and that did not occur, as delays are common in any construction project of such magnitude. The pastor and congregation would be forced to wait. While construction commenced, starting January 28, Abyssinian held its services at the Palace Casino.⁴¹ On the second Sunday of worship at the casino the Rev. Powell Sr. delivered a sermon, “The Unconquerable Convictions of Job.”⁴² In this sermon Powell Sr. used the story of Biblical Job to reference what churches should be doing not just to edify the body of Christ, but Powell Sr. spoke on what the church needed to do so make a difference in the community. His sermon was indeed timely as the congregation was only weeks away from moving into their new tabernacle in Harlem.

“The great trouble with the church today is that it has neither the positive convictions nor the proper moral courage. Job stood with God when his friends and his family forsook him. The church will never appeal to men and women of the world as long as it is charged with committing all the sins that the unconverted commit...the church can never reign with Christ until it suffers for Christ. Its professions of faith must be translated into its everyday acts.”⁴³

Powell Sr. was calling for the church generally and the members of his congregation in particular to be who they are called to be, not just when they are in service, but in service to others. Moreover, his critique of the church was a warning or caution that there would come times where the church would have to take unpopular stances to be the bedrock of not simply morality, but an institution that was committed to both the Christian Gospel and the community, informed by their faith. The use of Job also drums up the idea of redemptive suffering, which at this point for the congregation had to endure some growing pains with their pastor as they

⁴⁰ *Chicago Defender*, 1 July 1922, column 6, 9.

⁴¹ “Crooked Actions Crooked Thinking,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 January 1923, 9.

⁴² “News of Churches,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 February 1923, 6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

followed him to what he viewed as the Promised Land. Powell Sr. was never naïve to believe that Harlem was a land flowing with milk and honey, but it was a place where his talents and the institution of the church could be of best use to his race. Harlem, it can be argued, was full of potential and Powell Sr. was committed to tapping into what he saw as a great sea of possibilities.

Powell Sr. was one church leader who attempted to make “everyday acts” a part of his ministry and the hope was that the congregation would adopt those teachings and actions as well. Once Abyssinian moved into their new building and all the elaborate fetes were over and other celebrations had ceased, Abyssinian as a church had a job to fulfill—a job to not just reinforce their faith amongst each other, but also to show and prove to the people of Harlem that Abyssinian was a church that did not shy away from helping those in need when church services or worship was not occurring—meaning, serving the community not just Sunday, but every day.

It was a chilly morning on February 25, 1923 when Abyssinian was ready to open its doors to serve both the faithful and those who were without faith or simply did not belong to the congregation, but were residents of Harlem. Local and national newspapers heralded the new edifice and community building. The church was filled beyond capacity that day. Even in places that were designated as ‘standing room only’ were overflowing with eager members, community observers, and curious visitors--all excited and intrigued by what this new church would do not just for the people of God, but for Harlem and African Americans. Powell Sr., never one to waste opportunity to keep his congregation focused on the goal ahead, preached a familiar and popular sermon, one that he used when he first began his pastorate—“A New Testament

Church.”⁴⁴ Again, he reiterated the call that a New Testament Church must serve the people.

The construction of the new buildings initially cost around \$315,000 (that number increased after all construction was complete) and the remarkable thing was that outside of the church being one of the first kind of building erected for an all black congregation, the pastor made sure that Abyssinian was to be free of debt. At the first service all but \$72,000 of the funds for the new construction was paid—that was a tremendous accomplishment for any congregation black or white. The money was raised strictly through tithes and offerings—there were no fundraisers or special events held outside of the tent revivals a couple years prior. Of the funds left to pay, \$25,000 was set aside to hopefully be collected from the people. The thought was that since those funds were strictly for the community center, built adjacent to the main sanctuary, and moreover, since it was for the entire community regardless of their connection to the church, the congregation and pastor did not see a problem to fundraise in Harlem. No such fundraising was done for the main sanctuary however.⁴⁵ Thus, they asked for donations from the community and they got them. Such an act created an immediate investment in Abyssinian not simply as just part of the Kingdom of God, but part of the Black Kingdom of Harlem; Abyssinian became part of the community.

Throughout the first year of operation in the new Harlem edifice, Abyssinian and its pastor played host to several welcoming and dedication services. These programs were mainly scheduled for the warmer months, as there was still a small amount of construction continuing through the remaining winter. The dedication services began in late-May and culminated with a large dedication service on Sunday, June 17, 1923. As a completed facility, the church sanctuary

⁴⁴ “Abyssinian Church Holds Services in New Community Edifice,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 28 February 1923, page 9.

⁴⁵ “Abyssinian Members to Hold Services in Their New Church,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 21 February 1923, 9.

could now hold 2,000 with another 1,000 in the lecture room. The final cost for the building and community center was estimated to be \$325,000, an increase of \$10,000 from the quoted price on the first day that services were held in the new church. On that warm June day of the dedication, Colonel William Hayward, U.S. District Attorney presided and there was great anticipation of the other invited speakers.⁴⁶ Among them was Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, but he gave no grand oration since he failed to appear for the fete, but that did not stop the affair from being beyond grand. Once the services were completed and the church was empty, we can only imagine how the Rev. Powell Sr. must have felt. There had to be a sense of accomplishment, but also a great load was taken off his shoulders, he moved his congregation to the Promised Land of Harlem—that Black Jerusalem where there were many in the community to be served and saved. As he began his pastorate with the same congregation, but different location, Powell Sr. faced new challenges on the horizon that were personal, public, and also found him at a crossroads between what he preached from the pulpit—things that forced him to grapple with his own spirituality, his own faith.

Powell Sr.'s biggest test since moving Abyssinian to Harlem occurred just three years after arriving there with his congregation. In many of Powell Sr.'s writings and sermons he seldom spoke of his family. If he did, it was only as a function of some sort of biographical vignette where he attempted to convey a larger point. He very rarely said anything outside such occurrences and nothing of them in any revealing way—a way that might give some window into his feelings and concerns for his blood kin. However, it is sometimes what is not said that can also illuminate feelings, or lack thereof, as well.

On March 15, 1926, Powell Sr. lost his only daughter and eldest child, Blanche Fletcher

⁴⁶ “New Home of Baptist on 138th St. Dedicated,” *Chicago Defender*, 26 May 1923, 9. *New York Amsterdam News*,

Rhodes. She was only twenty-seven and from the existing evidence she was initially misdiagnosed for what actually was appendicitis. She complained of feeling ill about a week or so prior and from reports she seemed to be on the mend, but she was never to leave the Edgecombe Sanitarium alive.⁴⁷ The elder Powell Sr. was just recovering himself from a mental breakdown, as was alluded to in the local papers and the stress and strain of losing a child had to be beyond difficult.⁴⁸

Blanche's funeral was understandably somber and utterly sad, but also a majestic affair that celebrated the life of what could easily be considered one of the community's daughters. The event also could have been mistaken for the funeral for a head of state, politician, or maybe royalty. Flowers were donated that covered the entire church and so many were received that they could all not be displayed. The flowers that were there completely covered the rostrum. It is hard to even imagine that if you were in the main sanctuary that sad Thursday afternoon that you would be able to see anyone that approached or stood in the pulpit, such as the Rev. Dr. William P. Hayes, pastor of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church and long time friend of Rev. Powell Sr. The choir wore white and black robes and offered songs of praise and mourning on behalf of the family—both Blanche's biological family and her church family as well. Blanche arrived with her parents, and younger brother, to New York City at ten years of age and grew up during her father's rise to prominence.

By trade she was a stenographer for the Board of Education of New York City, but was

9 May 1923, 7.

⁴⁷ "Abyssinian Pastor's Daughter Succumbs," *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 March 1926, 1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Also, some papers make mention of the Rev. Powell's 'breakdown' but do not give reasons to why or how long he was out from the pulpit, etc. Powell never discussed this situation in his autobiography, but his son does mention it briefly but like the scant mentions in the paper, he just skims over it in passing in his own autobiography, where he calls it a "nervous breakdown" that occurred not long after the younger Powell was ordained to preach. See Powell, Jr., *Adam by Adam*, 36-37; "Blanche F. Rhodes, Daughter of Rev. Dr. A. Clayton Powell, Dies," *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 March 1926, 1.

known more so for her dedication to her father's church through organizing young women and her distinctive voice in the choir. As she was eulogized both at Abyssinian and in the papers, all spoke about her favorite song, "His Eye Is on The Sparrow." Powell Sr. himself recalled how when she sang that song one Sunday morning over thirty people joined the church. As she lay in her white coach casket, adorned in white broadcloth, she held a bouquet of lilies, one cannot imagine the emotions and memories channeling through the mind and spirit of her father.⁴⁹ Parents never intend to bury their children. Her brother, Adam, Jr., painfully recalled that when Blanche died, during his second semester of college he initially felt, "That was the end...of college, of church, and of faith!"⁵⁰ Her father could have responded in kind and his family, congregation and the community would have understood. The Rev. Powell, Sr., however, found solace in an old Latin proverb, "*Labor omnia vincit*" (Work conquers all things). He retreated to what he knew best, preaching. So the next Sunday, Abyssinian's pastor was back in the pulpit after burying his daughter.

Reflecting back, Powell Sr. said that he preached with all the spirit he could muster at all three services and he could hear his beloved Blanche singing, "I sing because I am happy, I sing because I am free, His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me." That is not to say that that the Rev. Powell Sr. was not still grieving for the loss of his daughter, for he surely was, but he channeled his efforts into his work—and he immediately started plans for the creation of a rest home for the elderly members of Abyssinian.⁵¹

The rest of the decade proved to be one that allowed for the church to thrive—just as the

⁴⁹ "Abyssinian Church Unable to Hold Mourners at Blanche Rhodes' Funeral," *New York Amsterdam News*, 24 March 1926, 1.

⁵⁰ Powell, Jr., *Adam By Adam*, 27.

⁵¹ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 154-155. See also discussion of property acquisition in article, "Abyssinian Baptist Church Holds Annual Corporate Meeting," *New York Amsterdam News*, 19 May 1926, 7. Article recounts that the

rest of the United States was, well at least until the paralyzing stock market crash in 1929. Indeed it was for the time being, the ‘roaring 20’s, and Abyssinian was in the midst of a rebirth spiritually and physically. For example, they celebrated paying off the entire amount of the debt by January 18, 1928. This celebration rivaled anything the church had done to this point. The service held to commemorate this achievement, a mortgage burning ceremony, was not out of the ordinary for congregations to do.⁵² For many churches, at the turn of the twentieth century and even into the second half of the twentieth, the monthly mortgage payment was (and sometimes still is) usually the largest expense for a congregation. Through generous donations—tithes and offering and paying off a mortgage is no small act. Though not a common practice among all churches, but it was found among larger congregations similar in size to Abyssinian. The formality of the service depends largely on the church, but the end result is always setting the mortgage note on fire while the congregation watches and celebrates the end of debt. The service can be held in conjunction with normal Sunday morning worship or in many cases churches hold a service that is set apart from regular services, though often these ceremonies rival if not exceed the grandeur, excitement and fervor of a typical service.

For the Rev. Powell Sr., this was extremely important, so was it to the members of Abyssinian given the relatively quick turnaround in paying off the debt. Alleviating crippling debt was one of the tenets that Powell insisted upon for African-Americans both in their homes and in their institutions and his biggest test of ministry—Abyssinian Baptist Church now personified that strategy of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Paying off the mortgage in the four and a half years was definitely an accomplishment. The buildings were dedicated "to the

church purchased property at 732 St. Nicholas Avenue at a cost of \$34,800, \$17,800 was paid at purchase and opened its doors July 1, 1926.

⁵² “Fitting Climax to a Week’s Celebration of their 75th Anniversary,” *Chicago Defender*, 27 May 1922. Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, had a similar service and celebration on May 22, 1922.

worship of God and the service of humanity," and they were doing just that. The hope was that they now would be able to do more, since the mortgage was a thing of the past. Moreover, the mortgage burning service was an illustration of how people within the walls of the historic church bought into Powell Sr.'s social and spiritual program of thrift and effective spending. Now all were witnessing the dividends of their investment. It was not simply an investment in Powell, nor the church--it was bigger than that, it was an investment in themselves and by extension an investment in the community—Harlem.

The pastor boasted, "Not a ticket or a dish of ice cream was sold to pay for the erection of Abyssinian Baptist Church and Community House. Every dollar of the money was brought in through tithes and offerings, and God fulfilled His promise by pouring out a blessing upon us that our souls were not able to contain."⁵³ Even amongst the pomp and circumstance of such an event, there were no doubt detractors that saw the opulent structures that Powell Sr. and his contemporaries were building as distractions and detractions from true racial and social uplift.⁵⁴ To those that felt that he and his congregation were spending too much money up on the 138th Street edifice Powell responded:

“Thousands are drawn to Abyssinian Baptist Church by its simple beauty. Aside from the sermons they voice appreciation for the vested choirs. The membership of the church has increased fifty percent since we came from 40th Street to Harlem. The ornate church is great inspirational influence. It brings many outsiders of the fold to the church to admire its architectural beauty, and thereby plays an important part in deepening spiritual life.”⁵⁵

Truly, the Rev. Dr. Adam Clayton Powell Sr. had ushered in a new era not just for Abyssinian, but also for African Americans in Harlem. With the help of his congregation and thousands of well-wishers and supporters, Powell Sr. was able to create space and place in New York that was cause for everyone to stand and take notice. Whether they agreed with him or not,

⁵³ *Advance*, 14 January 1928.

⁵⁴ “New York Baptists Put Up Churches Worth Millions,” *Chicago Defender*, 31 October 1925, 6.

Powell came a long way from his beginnings in Franklin County, Virginia and he had endured a great personal loss along the way. However, Powell Sr. stood poised to address a new set of challenges that no doubt came his way. Most notably, the fall of the Great Crash of 1929 was not that far away and Powell again had to answer a community that was in need. For the time being, on that January day of the church mortgage burning Powell was thinking of only the experience. He was thankful and he was appreciative of the work accomplished and he let nothing take him away from that moment—he earned it.

In the latter chapters of the book of Exodus, in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible tells the story of how God instructed Moses and the children of Israel to raise a tabernacle. Within the sanctuary of the tabernacle God commanded Moses to offer up burnt offerings in praise of their release from the bondage of Egypt. Their journey was a long and trying one from the oppression of Pharaoh to entering into the wilderness and finally the Promised Land. As Mrs. Mary E. Taylor struck the match and lit the last documents pertaining to the mortgage on the new building with her husband, Deacon William H. Taylor at her side, the congregation of Abyssinian Baptist Church sang, “Praise God from whom all blessings Flow,” for they too, in their own way, were partaking of an analogous journey to the Promised Land, personified by the move to Harlem.⁵⁶ Led by a Moses of their own, Adam Clayton Powell Sr., Abyssinian Baptist Church was starting a new journey, but now that the construction of the church was complete, and their mortgage debt was paid off, it was time to give thanks to God.

“Thus all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of the congregation finished: and the children of Israel did according to all the Lord had commanded Moses, so did they.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ “Abyssinian Baptist Church Pays Mortgage,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 14 January 1928, A7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Exodus*, 39:32 (KJV)

CHAPTER 6

SPEAKING TO HARLEM THAT THEY MAY GO FORWARD

On Sunday morning, January 15, 1928, only four days after holding a grand mortgage burning service—celebrating the end of his congregation’s largest debt, the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., pastor of the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York stood before his congregation again. From the marble white pulpit, his voice echoed in a low tone, but that demanded the attention of his members and the visitors in the main sanctuary. His words did not allow his congregation to rest on the highs of being debt free, but pastor’s goal was to refocus his church’s attention on their efforts going forward. Yes, it was a great accomplishment to be able to burn their mortgage papers, but there was still work to be done in Harlem for the race and for the nation. On that cold Sunday morning Powell Sr. preached from the book of Amos and laid the groundwork for the second half of not just his pastorate, but of his life too, “Woe to them that are at ease in Zion.”¹

Powell Sr.’s message, “Progress, The Law of Life” was a sermon that encapsulated who Powell had always been in terms of his vision for his ministry and those who followed him, but also it was equally characterized by his clarion call for racial progress, not among the normative white population, but he was speaking directly and plainly to the black community in Harlem and the African American community generally. This sermon illuminated his growth as a leader of his race and of his religion. This message was more than merely sacred oration, it is better understood as a blueprint of how he would spend the rest of his days in the pulpit of Abyssinian and also how he hoped to live his life as he prepared himself for life outside of the pastorate.

Moreover, understanding "Progress The Law of Life" helps to understand how Powell saw the world around him and how he dealt with the local and national adversities he encountered in the next twenty-five years.

As the second decade of the twentieth century came to a close, the use of the book of Amos was fitting, well at least in Powell's mind it was. The 1920s in the United States is stereotypically characterized in the popular imagination by decadence and increased investment into leisure culture as never seen before in American History, and despite the rise of Jim Crow segregation and the escalation of wanton racialized terror against African Americans, they were not left entirely behind in participating in leisure culture—it could be argued that they were the very face of the associative culture of this period, often seen in popular culture images, dancing or playing instruments, smiling and enjoying themselves with not a care in the world. Images like the German painter, Winold Reiss' *Drawing in Two Colors/Interpretation of Harlem Jazz I* which displayed African American men and women dancing to the beat of syncopated rhythms dressed in ostentatious clothing come to dominate thoughts of this period instead of images similar to those found on the August 1927 cover of the NAACP's "The Crisis" which featured a young black man and woman seeking knowledge and progress. Additionally, the rise in popularity of artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance created a picture—a one-dimensional framework only focused on aesthetic for both white and African Americans alike.

Fearful of losing ground and wanting to push forward in the struggle for racial progress as seen in *The Crisis* cover, Powell spoke plainly and boldly to his race. Abyssinian's pastor was no stranger to critiquing the embrace of the flamboyant, celebratory culture around jazz music. For instance, in 1914 he railed against investment into what he saw as "frivolous" thinking,

¹ Amos 6:1 (KJV).

declaring that African American youth were feeding, “on too much trash.”² The ‘trash’ that he spoke of then was over indulgence in alcohol and dancing and a preponderance of engagements into vice and a lack of concern with racial progress.

In Powell Sr.’s mind, the minor prophet Amos spoke directly to the African American community, who after being exiled in the inhumanity of slavery made progress, but there was no time to waste basking in the glow of small victories such as church mortgage burning services. The prophet of the same name, found in the Old Testament of the Hebrew Bible, wrote the book of Amos. During Amos’ ministry (792-740, B.C.) the Israelites enjoyed great prosperity and achieved great new heights politically and militarily as well. The Israelites were immersed in extravagance, luxurious living, corruption, idolatry and oppression of the dispossessed and poor. Truly, during the eighth century B.C., Israel was in a good place on the surface but Amos warned them about God’s impending wrath if they did not stray from their disobedient ways. Amos wrote and preached warnings to the Israelites to not allow the fact that they were the chosen of God to allow them to become lazy or take for granted that while they were the beloved of God, they were required to still do the work to uplift the kingdom of God and provide support and encouragement to each other. Thus the Book of Amos is heavily laded with themes of social justice and the expression of true piety. Therefore, it is not hard to understand why the Rev. Dr. Powell Sr. found this book of the Bible relevant to the times in which he lived.³ Maybe in some ways he saw himself as a neo-Amos prophet of sorts.

“Progress the Law of Life” begins with Powell proclaiming, “Inactivity is death. Activity means life. To the live we must go forward. To go backward always spells death. Here is a new

² *New York Age*, 8 January 1914, 1.

³ Consulted NIV Study Bible, Introductions to the Books of the Bible, and Jason Radine’s *The Book of Amos in Emergent Judah* (Mohr Seibeck: Tubingen, 2010).

incentive to work. According to this law of life we must work physically, mentally, and spiritually in self-defense.”⁴ Powell, Sr. also encouraged African Americans to re-engage with their faith through prayer and education. The education piece was always very important to him. Powell was a staunch advocate of religious education—meaning that he wanted young men and women to have theological training as a supplement to whatever field of scholastic endeavor they chose. For instance, it was through the training of Foreign Mission Board that Mrs. Laura Bayne, was able to use her expertise as a nurse, trained through a partnership with Columbia University and Abyssinian to establish a hospital in the French Congo. Aside from Mrs. Bayne there was also Ruth Morris, daughter of the previous pastor of Abyssinian, the Rev. Dr. Charles S. Morris. Miss Morris was trained by professors from on the nation’s top schools, but her religious education in Powell Sr.’s mind made her and Mrs. Bayne valued assets to Abyssinian’s Foreign Mission Board. These women were trained in their profession and their efforts were also guided by their Christian training. Powell, Sr. believed in a correlation between occupation and service. To that end he mentioned that Abyssinian must move to fund students from their congregation and their community to attend schools such as Virginia Union University, his alma mater. He suggested the establishment of an endowment to aid with education costs so that after the initial investment and maintained year after year the church could send several young African-American men and women to school. Powell Sr. called for not just Abyssinian to partake in this program, his hope was that other African American churches should and could do the same following the blueprint he submitted to the church. Powell Sr. believed that within a five year time span there should be at least one hundred African American congregations that had students involved in religious education that were fully funded by their respective churches.

⁴ A. Clayton Powell, *Progress the Law of Life: A Message By A. Clayton Powell, delivered to the Abyssinian*

Indeed Powell Sr. believed in the power of education that was married to sacred and pragmatic purpose.

Economic self-sufficiency or better described as a plan for economic literacy is where Powell next turned his attention in the sermon. However, some might still just call it purposeful thrift. Funerals, in Powell Sr.'s view, were prime targets where spending could be reigned in. Indeed for him, these ceremonies were the ultimate example of how African Americans were wasting too much money. He urged members to roll back their expenditures on funerals and use the majority of such funds to pay off their homes, or provide education to their children or pay off other outstanding debts. Powell Sr. used European Jewish immigrants as an example of purposeful spending, declaring that, "As Negroes we ought to learn many lessons from the Jews and one of the most important is financial modesty which characterizes the funeral of that rich race."⁵ Such rhetoric must be understood in the time in which it was spoken of course. That is not to excuse what Powell Sr. said, for surely in the twenty-first century such language would be labeled at the very least bombastic or highly offensive, and possibly flirting with a dash of anti-Semitism. From the given evidence, however, there was no backlash from the Jewish Community once this sermon was published. Powell Sr. utilized the stereotype concerning European Jewish financial practices to illustrate his larger point about creating economic power in America.

Powell Sr. continued by lambasting his members and African Americans in general for being wasteful with their economic power, among other things. Picking up where he left off in his sermon from New Year's Day 1914 message, Powell Sr. scolded, "Extravagance is the outstanding sin of the members of our race. We eat too much, drink too much, sleep too much,

Baptist Church, New York City, (New York: Abyssinian Baptist Church, 1928), 6.

frolic too much, show off too much and bury too much money in the ground.”⁶ To drive his point home he focused on how much money he believed was being wasted in what he termed “show-off” funerals. Funerals were indeed a touchstone for Powell Sr. He continued to argue that many of the services he saw or was directly involved in, were more about displaying wealth than many of his congregation and members of his race really did not have. The funeral itself was a fete of conspicuous consumption in the pastor’s mind. Problematic analogies and examples aside, we see here that Powell Sr. is focused on economics as an integral piece to uplift and progress.

The conclusion of the sermon centers on Powell Sr.’s plan for the Abyssinian pulpit after he retired and the continued growth of the church, not just for Abyssinian but the church as an institution. Powell Sr. does not specify the “Negro” or “Black Church” but from his words it is easy to pull from his sermon that he was not talking about all of Christendom, but he very well may have. In this sermon, you can see that Powell Sr. was more than ever, openly aware of his own mortality. He gave one last word about funerals by using himself. He mentioned that he had already taken steps to cover his funeral costs and that he would not be buried in a metal coffin not just because he felt that his race was placing too much money in the ground, but more than that Powell Sr. exclaimed with great comedic timing that his second reason for not having a metal coffin was because he might have “trouble getting out of that box when the trumpet sounds.”⁷ Powell Sr. was not so rigid in his thinking that he refrained from employing a little humor in his message. The “trumpet sounding” was a reference to the common Christian belief

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Ibid., 5,6.

⁷ Ibid. 6.

that before the judgment of mankind that God will send the archangel Gabriel to blow his mighty trumpet to awaken the faithful who are dead that they may be called to join him in heaven.⁸

Powell Sr. spoke directly to Abyssinian during the close of his message. He implored them to never put a minister in the Abyssinian pulpit that was more concerned with fame and fortune than with serving the people of the church and the community. “My blood and tears are in these walls,” he proclaimed, and he advised that all offerings generated by the church should pay for the spreading of the gospel both at home and abroad and “to educate the poor boys and girls of our race.”⁹ For Powell Sr., he was preparing the congregation for their future. “My ambition was to live to pay for the church. This ambition has been realized. My ambition from now until the day I fall on sleep shall be to enlarge our program of service.”¹⁰

The message that the pastor conveyed can be summarized by the close of his sermon where he shared his hope to “Christianize Harlem.” Powell Sr. pleaded to the congregation in sobering tones, “We must save Harlem or be lost ourselves.”¹¹ The saving of Harlem, as far as Powell Sr. was concerned was a task that his congregation was uniquely situated to deal with and accomplish. By adopting his program of education, purposeful spending and thrift, along with what he termed, “a church on fire,” which was a congregation that was invested and excited about providing services to their community while also spreading the true gospel of Jesus Christ. Throughout “Progress, the Law of Life” Powell Sr. employed examples that he believed proved his point about what the church and the people could do to see progress and he reminded them,

⁸ *1Thesolonians* 4:16-17, **16** For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. **17** After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever, (NIV).

⁹ Powell, *Progress the Law of Life*, 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

that he alone could not do it, it would take the same effort, if not more than what was used to pay off the church mortgage.

Powell Sr. also employed some very fiery and condemning language in the sermon that on the surface could be written off as simply his attempt to shore up support for the politics of respectability—those many times empty, aesthetic changes such as dress, speech, actions—such as dancing that oppressed populations sometimes buy into as a way to show themselves as equal to their oppressors, or in this case decent, upright citizens. However, the folly of such thinking, which even emerged in African American culture even during the mid-nineteenth century (and before), is that there is never a plan presented to deal with the lingering effects of racist public policy or there is seldom a program suggested that demonstrates how the politics of respectability can be utilized to reinforce a larger plan of uplift. Powell Sr. did not take the easy or lazy route to his thinking, but instead embraced a sweeping program that was steeped in pragmatic ideas that he believed would bear fruit for future generations.

Abyssinian was now in Harlem, and Powell Sr. was not about to let his congregation forget why he worked so hard to get them to invest into his vision. Progress, as Powell Sr. understood it was summed up in the scripture he found in Exodus, “And the Lord said unto Moses...’speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward.”¹² It was good to celebrate accomplishment, such as the mortgage burning, but just like biblical Amos, Moses, and the other such prophets, Powell Sr. hoped that his message would speak to the souls of the faithful of Abyssinian, that they were charged to “Go forward in preaching the gospel at home and abroad. Go forward in a larger program of Religious Education. Go forward in a burning campaign of personal evangelism until every man and woman shall know the Lord, whom to know aright is a

¹² *Exodus* 14:15 (KJV).

life eternal.”¹³ Under no uncertain terms did Powell Sr. see progress devoid of a strong spiritual foundation and he made sure his congregation and those that would read his sermon after its publication understood that too.

As Abyssinian was held accountable by their pastor, there were still more grand fetes and high praise heaped upon the Rev. Powell Sr. from the congregation and from those outside Harlem and outside the African American community. People were paying attention to the recent heights the congregation had reached. On May 14, 1929 around five o’clock in the evening, a telegram was delivered to the pastor. It was addressed from the White House:

I congratulate the Rev. Dr. A. Clayton Powell upon his service to Abyssinian church and the community house, and wish for him and his co-workers to still further achievements in benefiting the congregation and other charges committed to their care.

(Signed) HERBERT HOOVER¹⁴

That following Tuesday, the telegram was read to over two thousand people that gathered in the main sanctuary to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of service (as well as the 64th birthday) of the Rev. Powell Sr. After the telegram was read, there was a standing, thunderous applause that resonated in the sanctuary and lasted by some accounts almost three minutes.¹⁵ The pastor likely never thought that he would be in such a place in his life, that back in 1908 when he arrived to New York that he would be celebrating his twentieth year as pastor of the oldest African-American Baptist church in New York State in a new edifice, located in the heart of Harlem, with a large congregation, not to mention being formally congratulated by the President of the United States. Powell Sr. had indeed come a long way from his time in New Haven,

¹³ Ibid. 10.

¹⁴ Telegram, Adam Smith to Rev. Powell, Sr. (on behalf of President Hoover), 14 May 1929. Hebert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum. Hebert Hoover Papers, Presidential Personal File, 1929-33, Box 14, Baptist Churches Folder.

Connecticut, or his beginnings in Franklin County, Virginia. While he cautioned his congregation, community and his race about not being like the biblical Israelites that were forewarned by the prophet Amos, they were going to take time to show how much they appreciated their pastor and leader. One can attempt to imagine the look on Powell's face or possibly imagine too the feeling inside he had after hearing not just that telegram read aloud, but hearing the standing ovation he received that evening. Maybe Powell Sr. kept his steely resolve and graciously accepted the applause in a dignified way and was hard to read the emotions on his face; however, it is likely that there was surely joy in the heart of the Baptist minister that day.

Aside from being congratulated by the President of the United States, Powell Sr. received accolades from other secular institutions the following year as well. It seems strange to receive an award amidst the folly of a very troubling year for America. That year the nation plunged into the financial abyss that later came to be known as the Great Depression after, "Black Tuesday," October 29, 1929. It was on that day that investors on Wall Street, traded more than sixteen million shares on the New York Stock Exchange in a single day and billions of dollars were lost, including the livelihoods of millions of American citizens either directly or indirectly. The Great Depression was truly the greatest long-term downward spiral in American history, but even that did not keep Powell from being selected as a Harmon Award recipient.¹⁶

¹⁵ "President Hoover Congratulates Church," *Chicago Defender*, 25 May 1929, 11.

¹⁶ The William E. Harmon Foundation Award for Distinguished Achievement among Negroes (commonly referred to as 'Harmon Awards') was a philanthropic and cultural honor created by William E. Harmon in 1926 and administered by the foundation of his name for what they labeled as renowned accomplishments within the fields of literature, music, fine arts, business and industry, science and innovation, education, race relations and religious service. The Harmon Award was predominately known for its impact within the realms of the African American artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, particularly the visual artists.

Previous Harmon Awards winners included poets Claude McKay and Countee Cullen, Hale Woodroff, Palmer Hayden, Archibald Motley, among others.¹⁷ Harmon Awardees were required to be African American with the exception of the race relations award. For instance, in 1928 Julius Rosenwald and James Hardy Dillard were considered, along with Will W. Alexander the previous year to be, “person(s) of American residence regardless of color who [has] made outstanding contribution toward improving relations between the white and Negro in America.”¹⁸ The award itself came in as either a gold and bronze medal along with an associative monetary prize of \$400 or \$100 in the arts and the prize for race relations was much larger, where the honorarium varied between \$500 and \$1000.¹⁹ From the evidence given, it is not known why there were differences in award money. On the surface it is safe to say that the award for racial relations was seen as more important if nothing else likely due to the thought of the time and effort placed into dealing with race relations on a mass scale. Of course too, the race relations award could also have been given to a man of the cloth given the criteria and what the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., was doing with his ministry in Harlem.

Rev. Powell Sr. received a bronze medal and \$100, “for his leadership as pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church for the past 21 years.” The Harmon Foundation believed that Powell Sr, “set an example for financing religious and social church activities among Negroes.”²⁰ Additionally, Harmon Foundation found it worthy to recognize that Powell Sr. was instrumental in creating the largest vacation bible school in the state of New York, as well as a home for aged

¹⁷ “Negro Advancement” 9 December 1926, *New York Times*, 26; “Judges selected for Negro awards: Leaders in all branches will bestow second annual Harmon Prizes,” 5 July 1927, *New York Times*, 13; “Bishop Hurst formally given Harmon Award,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 8 January 1927, 1.

¹⁸ Cary D. Wintz & Paul Finkelman, *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance: Volume 1* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1940.

¹⁹ The gold prize in 1926 would be worth a little over \$5300 (\$5,339.85) in inflated 2013 dollars, for example, so this award was a notable sum.

²⁰ “Harmon Foundation Grants Awards,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 11 January 1930, 17, col. 2.

members, and they paid close attention to not just the cost of the new Abyssinian structures (the church and adjoining community center) but also the miraculous way in which the building was paid off in six years time.²¹ Aside from this great achievement and notoriety at the time, some scholars believe that Powell Sr. receiving a Harmon Award suggests that Powell and his contemporaries, such as Bishop Robert E. Jones who received the Harmon Gold Medal for religious service the same year as Powell means a great deal more. It has been argued that the awarding of the Harmon prizes offer a tacit example of how black churches came to aide in institutionalizing the Harlem Renaissance within their walls.²² Moreover, this line of reasoning maintains that it was the social gospel movement that operated as the mechanism for delivering churches from simply being houses of worship into institutions dedicated to addressing the needs of the communities they served through programming and education.

The theology of the social gospel movement is understood to have its foundations in Walter Rauschenbush's 1910 text, *For God and the People: Prayers of the Social Gospel*. This text set the stage for a revised understanding of what the calling of the church should be—focused on empowering dispossessed populations were not just hoping to gain white robes, wings, halos and harps in heaven, but “people want some *suits and dresses* and shoes to wear *down here*.”²³ Simply put, the social gospel was dedicated to dealing with the social ills of society such as poverty, economic inequality, and alcoholism. The main shortcoming of this predominately white, Protestant movement was its impotence in engaging American racism and the institutions created to maintain racist and exclusionist policies and structures in the body politic. The Rev. Powell Sr., as well as other ministers, like Bishop Reverdy Ransom, a pastor of

²¹ Ibid.

²² Jon Michael Spencer, “The Black Church and the Harlem Renaissance,” *African American Review*, Volume 30, Number 3 (Autumn, 1996), 453-460.

the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, had ministries that implemented social gospel tenets while also squarely dealing issues of race. For their ministries, race was just as important as the faith itself, and ministers like Powell Sr. believed that the true Christianity founded by Jesus Christ was not one that supported or maintained racist dogma. Such churches, called “institutional churches,” became the first line of defense in dealing with black migrants from the South, as well as striving to provide employment opportunities and food for the poor and hungry. The institutional church was created to deal with the rising tide of problems—socio-political as well as economic that their communities faced, whether in the rural South or the urban North. Black congregations that started such churches typically were outside of the realm of mainstream denominational affiliations.²⁴ These institutional ministers, as some religious scholars and historians refer to them, knew that the nation in which they lived the notion of citizenship was circumscribed by race and compromised by the mythology of race superiority.²⁵ Indeed, the mixture of race and faith came to define their ministries and test their limits too. These churches were a huge help to organizations like the National Urban League and the NAACP, as the second wave of the Great Migration was occurring. The activist scholar William Edward Burghardt Du Bois observed that early in the migration, at the close of the nineteenth century, that institutional churches such as the Church of the Crucifixion in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was “the most effective church organization in the city for the benevolent and rescue work.” He continued mentioning that the church was able to reach “a class of neglected poor whom the other colored

²³ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” Speech delivered at Bishop Charles Mason Temple, Memphis, Tennessee, 3 April 1968.

²⁴ Ralph E. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 170.

²⁵ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Church Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 237-38; See also discussion of “institutional churches” in Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White*, xi, 170-178.

churches shun and forget and for whom there is little fellowship in white churches.”²⁶ The leader of this particular church, a black priest, the Reverend Henry L. Phillips, believed that the point of an institutional church was “to have well organized institutions for the immediate relief of all pressing wants...while provision is being made by which these people will have an opportunity for providing for themselves.”²⁷ Powell Sr. and his cohort of institutional ministers were put to the test with the impending doom of the financial crisis and the time for awards was over and the time of action began.

The Great Depression laid waste to lives and opportunities to all Americans, truly there was mass suffering by all in similar and sometimes unique ways that were dependent on geography or the type of labor citizens were involved in. Income nationally dropped by fifty percent and unemployment rose to twenty-five percent for the total American labor force. Twenty million Americans retreated to public and private relief agencies for help at this time, thankful for any help they could get. However, the labor situation for African Americans was even worse. Discriminatory policies best summed up as a “last hired first fired” doctrines, only exacerbated pre-existing racially antagonistic conditions. African Americans found that by 1933, it was all but impossible to find work of any kind in agriculture or in industry.

Cotton prices plummeted in the market that year forcibly eradicating the fragile economic standing of thousands of black sharecroppers in the South. This in turn caused another migration of African American migrants to move toward locales in the Midwest, North, and West—usually

²⁶ William Edward Burghadt Du Bois, *Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899, 1996), 219.

²⁷ Henry L. Phillips, “The Social Condition of the Negro,” *Charities* 9 (February 1900): 575-578.

to urban centers. Even though there was an increasing dearth of employment opportunities in the cities, African Americans continued to leave the agricultural centers of the rural South.²⁸

In New York City, the situation was just as dire, truly the Great Depression was not just a Southern or a Northern problem, it was a disaster that had a great tragic effect on all—and some suffered more because of their race. African Americans indeed were discriminated against before and even more so after where they were relegated to jobs that previously no one wanted, occupying unskilled, low class and high turnover and layoff rates. As the Depression deepened those trends continued a downward spiral, particularly in fields that were dominated by unskilled labor. Preferred employment went to whites and African Americans experienced limited access to employment and opportunity.

After the first year of the Depression, the unemployment rate quadrupled and as a result the standards of living fell dramatically. Those ravaged by the economic calamity sought help from private and public assistance programs to navigate the crisis and the uncertain futures from which many were now suffering. Lack of clothing, food, and even shelter were commonalities of the urban sprawl as elsewhere. Such a disastrous situation had collateral consequences that emerged in family life, increased crime rates, health rates, increased child labor and within other aspects of the social strata.²⁹ Harlem was not the place flowing with the milk and honey of vibrant rhythms, good times, and leisure culture of jazz that so characterized the public imagination. In the *Dunbar News*, Beverly Smith commented explicitly on the reality and fiction of Harlem. She brought attention to the fact that for white New Yorkers, Harlem was this place in their minds that was nothing but jazz clubs and gambling, when in reality Harlem was a

²⁸ Joe W. Trotter, "Impact of the Great Depression on African Americans," *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*. ed. Robert S. McElvaine. Volume 1. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 8-17.

²⁹ Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode?: Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 42-51.

population of 220,000 of the city's "poorest, unhealthiest, [and] unhappiest and the most crowded single large section in the city."³⁰

Something had to be done. Both public and private agencies expanded their programs to address the concerns of the poor. As such, the large black institutional churches were an integral part of that reform. Powell and other ministers were called to be the transformative agents of change that the black intelligentsia of the Harlem Renaissance believed they could be.³¹ For instance, Alain Locke, an intellectual most closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance believed, "Social Christianity," his reference to the social gospel movement, could prove invaluable to the African American community.³²

Powell Sr. and his contemporaries were put to the test, however there was a challenge issued that was not solely limited to the class of black ministers such as Powell Sr., but it was issued to all African American leaders by Nannie Helen Burroughs. Burroughs, a well-known and respected educator, religious leader, social activist and powerful orator helped to found the Women's Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention (NBC). Like Powell Sr., Burroughs was also a product of Virginia. She was born in Orange, Virginia in 1879 and after completing her schooling in Washington, D.C., she later worked for the NBC in Louisville, Kentucky. Thereafter, she was able to forge a career as one of the most influential members of a network of African American Club Women of her day. Burroughs was just as savvy and powerful with her pen as she was with her voice.

³⁰ Beverly Smith, "Harlem's Distress Intensified as Growing Property Values Threaten Impoverished Tenants," *Dunbar News*, 26 February 1930.

³¹ Du Bois, *The Negro Church: Report of a Social Study Made Under the Direction of Atlanta University* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903); See also Barbara Savage's "W.E.B. Du Bois and "The Negro Church" *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science and Social Science*, Volume 568, The Study of African American Problems: W.E.B. Du Bois's Agenda, Then and Now. (March 2000), 235-238.

³² Alain Locke, Letter to Floyd Calvin, 21 February 1928. Alain Locke Papers. Manuscripts Collection, Moreland-Springarn Research Center, Howard University.

On December 6, 1930 the *Baltimore Afro American* published her passionate critique of African American leaders during a time she felt their voice was needed most by the people, not just for guidance but serious solutions to the Depression, for all Americans but particularly African Americans—the communities they served the most. In her op-ed, you can sense her profound frustration from the outset:

“What on earth is the matter with our organizations—church, fraternal welfare, and educational—national and state—that they are so impotent in the present economic crisis and industrial depression? The people are out of work; they are hungry; they are indulging in all kinds of vice; they are like sheep without a shepherd. Where are the leaders? What are they thinking and what are they doing? Are they hibernating until the next convention season? Are they going to sit around all winter and depend on charity to feed the people and then come out in the summer time all regaled to leader the people (to conventions)?”³³

Burroughs was adamant about what she saw as a severe lack of leadership. She went on further to say the American people, and African Americans specifically did not need what she termed, “ground hog leaders,” which were “those who tuck themselves away comfortably all the winter and then peep out in February to see whether winter is over. No, the winter will not be over,” she proclaimed, “until something definite, constructive, and permanent is done about unemployment.”³⁴ Burroughs wanted to see action and she continued with her critique beyond her very audible anger that literally leaped from the pages of the Baltimore periodical. From there Burroughs discussed how ‘idleness’ was bad for the race and the nation. She questioned whether or not the leaders had their ears attuned to the needs and voices of the masses or were they only concerned with the thoughts of those who were able to make it through the Depression relatively unscathed? Burroughs sounds eerily reminiscent of the Rev. Powell, Sr.’s brief engagement with respectability politics in his “Progress the Law of Life “ sermon. Here Burroughs is supporting an argument against “laziness” for all practical purposes. She believed

³³ Nannie Helen Burroughs, “Leaders Mark Time with Many Idle, says Nannie Burroughs,” *Baltimore Afro American*, 6 December 1930, 1.

that “idleness” was a stepping-stone into moral and communal decay. She fortified her warning, by quoting the book of Proverbs, mentioning that idleness would allow dispossessed populations to “eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence; they do not accept they have done mischief.”³⁵ If nothing was done to help ameliorate the problems that the masses of African Americans were facing, Burroughs argued that they would succumb, “to the vile, lustful imbruting, all destroying power of it [idleness].”³⁶

Ms. Burroughs continued her call for leadership by imploring those of the leadership class of African Americans to not resort to “wordy resolutions,” but to speak to the American people with a sincerity and a plainness that “put the case squarely” before them, offering “clear, dispassionate, challenging, courage appeals for economic justice.”³⁷ Burroughs scolded that such solution seeking was needed for nothing of that sort was ever presented to the people, and in the present condition, it was not platitudes that would feed the hungry and employ the jobless, but a direct course of action desperately needed to be implemented.

The critique finally opens up where she speaks directly to American politicians and white Americans generally. She makes the case that during times of war there is no discrimination (though armed forces were indeed segregated at this time). Her point likely here was that African Americans have always been willing to defend America from foreign enemies and it was high time that the nation saw that it was in its best interests to employ African Americans fairly, for by not doing so, and holding fast to discriminatory, prejudiced racialized

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *Proverbs* 4:17 (KJV)

³⁶ Burroughs, *Baltimore Afro American*, 6 December 1930, 1.

³⁶ Ibid.

employment policies, Burroughs feared would be far worse for the nation than any war could ever be.

Her solution to the problem of impotent leadership centered around unity and a grounded spiritual response. Burroughs believed it best for the leaders to speak in one collective voice, to and for the people, to address the economic catastrophe together, because far too many of them, in her view were not, solely consumed by petty jealousies. Speaking directly to the African American ministerial class, Burroughs urged them specifically to understand that this was an opportunity for men of the cloth to “preach a message of faith, courage, and indomitable will.” Burroughs believed “it was time for the men of God to speak. Deliverance will not come in a day, but it will come if the Christian leaders would only stand up in the midst of ‘A perverse and crooked generation and speak and challenge the people to try God.’”³⁸ Burroughs strongly supported preachers who “would take it upon themselves to preach the kind of gospel that will so quicken and deepen the spiritual life of the people that they will decide to go to turn their adversities into stepping stones.”³⁹

Burroughs ended her call to arms by suggesting in the most pragmatic way that African American institutions and organizations could aide in the cause of employment to begin to become increasingly self-sufficient. Until there were more sustainable solutions available to the masses of African Americans she suggested that fraternal, sororal, benevolent, and women’s organizations pool their resources to help. One particular solution she offered was the creation of a factory to produce all the clothes and uniforms, and paraphernalia that they usually buy from non-African American vendors. Burroughs believed that doing something like this was a sure way to both employ unemployed and also provide a way for economic self-determination for the

³⁸ Ibid. Burroughs is also quoting scripture from *Philippians* 2:15 (KJV).

race. Burroughs' suggestion was one that would put women to work—sewing. She did not forget about the men. She also suggested that although there might not be work for the men, that they still could be used to keep their homes and communities beautiful despite the circumstances. She asked women to request their husbands to take to the “task of cleaning up the homes, yards, and communities. It would give the men the necessary exercise to keep them from getting too lazy to work and would also transform neglected yards—front and back—make a new name for residents and create a wholesome and clean atmosphere in which children can live.”⁴⁰

The critique by Burroughs while passionate and direct ends with an ode to the politics of respectability. Although there was neither employment, nor leadership as far as she was concerned, making sure that the men clean up the neighborhoods and homes would be essentially good for morale is quite simplistic—in any time period. Equally uncomplicated is the notion that African American club women could go to their sewing machines to provide some serious semblance of relief to many suffering from the Depression. Granted Burroughs attempted to provide a pathway out of leaning upon notorious vices such as alcohol, gambling, etc., to self medicate against the mounting problems facing masses of African Americans, she was passionately expressing her love for race and nation. Her solutions, however are replete with puritanical and Victorian notions of ‘hard work’ and straying from perceived laziness, and her overall critique of African-American leaders, the central theme of her editorial, was one that generated quite a response.

One of the first notable responses was that of the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. Being the minister that he was and also one who felt that the church must speak to the needs of the people—just like his call to move to Harlem in the first place, he spoke up and spoke loudly.

³⁹ Ibid.

The following Monday after Ms. Burroughs challenge was printed in the paper, Powell Sr. issued his own challenge from the Abyssinian pulpit, that found its way into the papers. Powell Sr.'s own spirited challenge called for any churches that did not meet the needs of African Americans suffering from the effects of the Depression "should close their doors and never be remembered again." Powell Sr. indeed had a hardline stance that seemed to match the intensity of Burroughs' 'groundhog' characterization of black leadership. Powell Sr.'s answer to the article was more than a simple one-line response. In his reply to his fellow clergy, he provided context to the national disaster claiming that not since emancipation had African Americans faced such hard trials. He also referenced the then recent study compiled by the Urban League's T. Arnold Hill that documented the level of unemployment of African Americans in the entire country. According to the report, nearly one-fourth of African Americans in the twenty-five largest cities at that time were both without employment and suffering in abject poverty.⁴¹ Powell referenced the current situation as the most "pathetic challenge to every race leader and race organization but to every Negro individual who has a job and is living comfortably."⁴²

For Powell at the very least the church—the black church—as an institution, he argued should have some salient, clear, cogent response, as Ms. Burroughs was pleading for. Powell maintained if individual churches could not come to some semblance of a tangible response in such dire times in the lives of so many, including their very members, said churches "ought to shut up and close up."⁴³ Speaking for his own church Powell informed his congregation that he, along with four other churches in Harlem had already started a free food kitchen and would be

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "Powell Flings Challenge to Pulpit: Abyssinian Minister Pastor Says Ministers Should Give Jobless Aid, or Quit," *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 December 1930, 2. See also, "Preachers Should Feed The Hungry..A. Clayton Powell," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 December 1930, 1,4.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

working in conjunction with each other to also distribute non-perishable food items and clothing for the needy. The four churches established a central relief bureau where food, clothing and even coal could be picked up by those seeking assistance. Powell also informed those listening that Monday, that there was also often financial assistance provided to the 35,000 unemployed men and women in New York.⁴⁴ Powell was attempting to show his congregation that not only was their church actively involved in addressing the concerns laid out in Ms. Burroughs attack on church leaders, but he was also hoping to illustrate that there were several churches that were standing up to help and not all interested in closing their doors. Truly there seemed to be a spirit of cooperation amongst the men of the cloth that Burroughs was looking for.

The assistant rector of St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church, the Rev. Shelton Hale Bishop, headed up the collective effort to secure employment for those suffering and seeking aid from the four churches. Abyssinian's relief bureau was headed by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. who at the ripe age of twenty-two was starting to be more engaged and active in his father's ministry than he had ever been previously. Powell, Sr. boasted that Abyssinian's efforts had been underway for the last three weeks, primarily with distributing clothing to the masses. Powell Sr. mentioned that there also was some real success in finding employment for part time workers in non-skilled jobs that included washing windows, cleaning homes, and other such domestic tasks. Powell Sr. knew that such labor was only a drop in the large bucket of unemployment but he continued to move even further.

The next step that he took was taken two weeks prior to the service at which he announced the collective relief bureau amongst the churches. The Rev. Powell, Sr. covered the expense of the soup kitchen through a one thousand dollar reduction in his salary. The church through its

⁴⁴ Ibid.

various auxiliaries, members and supporters raised another fifteen hundred dollars that allowed the relief kitchen to open with a twenty-five hundred dollar operating budget, a claim that Powell Sr. was proud to inform his audience and the newspapers. Additionally, Powell Sr. said that he would refuse any outside money given to him directly from members or donations from other entities in the church. Powell Sr. did not want any “handshake money” as he referred to it, and asked for those who wanted to help him in that way to direct that their financial gifts toward the poor.⁴⁵

Powell Sr. was not done, he had a challenge of his own to his fellow ministers, “If every Negro preacher in this country would refuse to accept donations from his church during the holidays, not a single person of the race would go hungry the week we are celebrating the birth of the Man Who became poor for our sakes, that we through his poverty might be made rich.”⁴⁶ Powell Sr. calculated that there were 10,000 African American preachers who should give their salaries back to the congregations they serve, from January to March to feed the hungry and clothe the naked; another 10,000 he thought should give back half their earnings from the church during those same months and yet another 10,000 should give back one-fourth of their salaries toward the goal of feeding and clothing those in need. In Powell Sr.’s mind, if ministers followed his plan, it would create for them unimaginable influence in their communities. Moreover, this would seriously begin to make headway toward addressing the widespread suffering caused by the Depression.

This way of thinking, at least theologically speaking, was hinged on the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, where Christ uses the parables to illustrate the coming judgment of man and the need for believers to be ready to receive him upon his return. This

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

chapter is of great importance to the Christian faith not solely because of the metaphoric way in which Jesus Christ talks about judgment, or his second coming, but what is more important is how he will judge. For many devout Christians, and laypersons alike it is easy to only come away from these scriptures consumed with the doom and gloom of judgment. However, the parables in Matthew 25 are created to really discuss how mankind treats each other. Likely the most well known part of the scriptures in this chapter is Christ's response to the 'righteous' who ask how will they know that they have fed, clothed, and visited him. His answer to them was simple--they welcomed him, clothed, and fed him every time they did so "for the least of these."⁴⁷ Thus, the general interpretation of these scriptures is that Christ is calling for those who follow him to treat the most vulnerable in society—the dispossessed as they would treat him. For to treat those who suffer as they would Jesus is indeed taking care of him. Those who refuse to engage in such selfless acts, Christ said that they would be cast away from him to live in eternal torment with "fire prepared for the devil and his angels."⁴⁸ Powell Sr.'s interpretation of this scripture is quite literal and is likely driving his very strong stance on churches with ministries that are not meeting the current challenge. With the editorial article written by Burroughs freshly in his mind, he felt that if there ever were a call for the church to help and be of service it was now. This is the reason that he speaks so strongly about this issue, it is at the core of his faith and his religion. Powell Sr. finds no other path, but to respond and respond boldly—as the situation necessitated it. He continued to speak strongly, particularly to those who held influence in African American communities.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *Matthew 25:40 (KJV).*

⁴⁸ *Matthew 25: 41, 42, (KJV).*

Powell Sr. was ever mindful of thrift and as he discussed how churches could both save money and how those in the pulpit and the pew could assist in this effort. The pastor then as Ms. Burroughs had, included those outside of the realm of religion, calling on all African American organizations to be mindful of their duty to their members and to those they pledge to aide in their constitutions and by-laws, and flowery rhetoric. Indeed Powell pleaded with church and [Masonic] lodges alike:

“For the sake of the God Whose name our acts have often blasphemed, and for the sake of our starving brothers and sisters, whom we have often robbed under the guise of religion, friendship, love truth and charity, let us restore unto them this winter at least enough of that money to keep them from starving and freezing.”⁴⁹

From his pulpit and also through media outlets such as the national black newspapers, Powell Sr. thought he could truly “meet Nannie Helen Burroughs’ challenge.”⁵⁰ However, his rebuttal to Burroughs was not without its critics. Powell Sr. did more than ruffle a few feathers during this period. His article became a hotbed of discussion and heated debates both publicly and privately—from the church to the streets, people were talking. Two weeks after Powell Sr.’s comments were printed emotions still ran high for ministers across the country.

Close to home Powell Sr. dealt with his brothers of the gospel such as the Rev. George H. Sims, pastor of Union Baptist Church in New York City; and the Baptist Ministers Conference, a group of which Powell Sr. was a member, had a response as well. Sims was inclined to take Powell Sr.’s words with a grain of salt, but he thought Powell Sr. had not gone far enough, suggesting that ministers that have been robbing their congregations and communities by not speaking to the need of the people should not just close their doors, but according to the Rev. Sims, “If the ministers, fraternal and welfare leaders are guilty of the charges brought by Dr. Powell they should not be let off the with giving one, two or three months salary, but they should

⁴⁹ “Powell Flings Challenge To Pulpit,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 December 1930, 11

to jail!”⁵¹ Additionally he argued that Powell Sr.’s suggestion of closing down churches was not a total solution for he maintained that all churches were suffering. Very few churches were in the same financial shape as Abyssinian, and if they were to give as Powell Sr. asked they too would be in the bread lines. Sims, was looking for another solution, though he did support the efforts of the Prosser Committee, which was part of cooperative effort that Powell Sr. discussed.⁵² As the president of the New York Colored Baptist State Convention, Inc., and vice-president of the National Colored Baptist Convention Sims was a voice of many and also carried the influence that represented 75,000 Baptists in the state.

A more biting, defensive rebuttal came from Baptist Ministers Conference of Baltimore and New Jersey. They, like many others, began creating resolutions pertaining to Powell directly instead of the issues he was illuminating with his commentary. The initial push is easily understood as falling along class lines, as the arguments given by said factions believed the Rev. Powell Sr. was a minister at a wealthy church and thus out of touch with the rank and file struggles of smaller congregations and the ministers that served them. In their public decrees they attempted to portray Powell Sr. as an ideologue and elitist.⁵³ Their “prayers” for the pastor of Abyssinian were hopes that “God will touch your heart sufficiently to make you more liberal in the gift of human kindness for your (imaginary) weak brother...Let not your ambition for cheap notoriety spoil your real worth.”⁵⁴ The Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. had become public enemy number one it seemed. He was dismissed as attention seeking and consumed with self-serving pride.

⁵⁰ Ibid. See also “Hundreds of Jobless Given Work,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 3, December 1930.

⁵¹ “Sims Hits Back at Charges of Powell,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 31 December 1930, 11.

⁵² Ibid. Sims’ supported the larger efforts and his congregation gave \$750 in addition to the \$1387 pledged previously although, Sims pointed out that his congregation was still reeling from their own debt, listed at \$120,000. See also, “Sims Elected Head of State Baptists,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 22 October 1930, 14.

⁵³ “Baptist Ministers Strike Back at Powell,” *Baltimore Afro American*, 27 December 1930, 1.

Going into the New Year, the criticisms continued at what seemed a fever pitch in all the major African American periodicals. The last of the organizational letters of resentment emerged from a coalition of New York City ministers of various denominations. Led by the Rev. Richard Manuel Bolden, along with several other prominent ministers drafted a long declaration of their great deeds within their congregations and their vehement disapproval of the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. In their decree they discussed how they were doing the very work that Powell seemed to be demanding. After lauding their accomplishments in response to Powell, they like their New Jersey and Baltimore brethren, end their letter by demanding that the elder Powell, “seek forgiveness at the feet of Jesus...for he [Powell Sr.] well knows the services of the ministries in the city and nation have been.”⁵⁵

Earlier in January, educator and minister, the Rev. Miles Mark Fisher issued an open letter to the Rev. Powell Sr. and to all his fellow men of the cloth. Fisher was a former professor of church history at Virginia Union University and was currently serving as minister of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and Community Center in Huntington, West Virginia. Fisher’s letter chastised Powell Sr. for what he perceived as not just a bombastic tone for calling churches to close that were not fully taking up the calling of Matthew 25, but Fisher also argued that there were organizations already in existence to meet the needs of people that were much better positioned than some churches.

For Fisher the solution was not to “shut up or close up” because churches, he rebutted, “keep the preached word alive and that has inspired others to undertake the task of saving folk

⁵⁴ “Church Has Helped Needy Without Flare or Publicity,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 17 January 1931, 1.

⁵⁵ “New York City Ministers Resent Attack Made by Rev. A. Clayton Powell,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 17 January 1931, A6. See also the discussion in John William Kinney, “Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: A Historical Exposition and Theological Analysis” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1979), 159-163.

physically and otherwise.”⁵⁶ Fisher went on to cite the efforts of the National Urban League, and those in leadership positions who come from the church or were involved with the church in some way. He was gratified to know that “some exigency has called forth another champion of the social gospel. But all churches must stay open and all ministers must preach the gospel, including that in ‘the 25th chapter of Matthew.’ Maybe New York preachers can reach Wall Street.” His literary barbs aside, Fisher spoke more to a qualitative effort by the black church instead of the quantitative positioning taken by Powell Sr. However, Fisher addressed Powell Sr.’s quantitative solutions too, questioning, “Are 10,000 Negro preachers 90 days in cash removed from the poorhouse?”⁵⁷ Fisher held fast to the belief that a selected number of ministers who refused pay in some way would do little to nothing to address the Depression’s effects on churches, their members and the communities they served. Fisher suspected that many preachers and churches were the first to feel the devastation of the Great Depression, years before it became a national issue and surely long before Ms. Nannie Helen Burroughs wrote her opinion piece.

Fisher closed his open letter by telling Powell Sr. that his call for ministers to refuse donations so that those in need could be fed for a week was inadequate and “such a solution is not yet been thought out.”⁵⁸ Fisher did not mix his words. It is fair to say that he was not alone in his thinking. Moreover, it would follow that more than just a few ministers agreed with Fisher’s critique of Powell Sr. This critique was balanced and fair, but there were sections of the open letter that were biting and pointing to a possible class consciousness with regard Powell Sr. With a church free from debt Powell Sr. and Abyssinian operated in a very unique space and that

⁵⁶ Miles Mark Fisher, Open Letter, “What The People Think!” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 3 January 1931, A3.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

was what Fisher attempted to point out to Powell. Instead of reaching out to him personally, he felt that penning an open letter would be “helpful if it is given to the ministry at large.”⁵⁹

Fisher’s rebuttal to Powell and thereby Burroughs signifies the very stark differences within the African American Christian community. For sure there was no monolith with regard to faith or in this instance response to economic fallout. Fisher believed that no matter what Powell Sr. stated, “churches were doing their part,” the former professor of church history proclaimed, “It is the perpetual encomium of the churches that throughout their histories they have continually adjusted themselves to world conditions and have thus lived and developed a unique survival technique.”⁶⁰

Fisher’s response was not the only formal or public retort—there were several others. Nannie Helen Burroughs herself also responded publicly to her dear friend in the marble pulpit at Abyssinian. She picked up not too far off from where Fisher entered into the conversation. For Burroughs, the entire discussion got way out of hand—it was becoming dominated by misinterpretations of her words and the very people she wanted to see helped were becoming lost to the fodder of the cult of personality. Additionally, it is safe to say that as a woman, in one of the most patriarchal institutions in the country, she likely received her fair share of harsh criticism as well.

“Brethren I am not guilty,” Burroughs began her response. She refuted, through several key points, that her words were not just taken out of context, but that she was being blamed for saying things she never in fact said. Her suggestion to those offended by her remarks, namely African American preachers, was to re-read her original article. She clarified that she only mentioned black preachers in the third paragraph of her article, but that her challenge was for all

⁵⁹ Ibid.

leaders, not just ministers. “The brethren HEARD that I made an attack on ministers,” she continued, “Get a paper and read my entire article and then read Dr. Powell’s. Compare scripture for scripture. That is good homiletics you know.” She continued her scolding, “It is surprising that the men whose chief business it is to ‘interpret the Word’ should be guilty of such gross misinterpretation...I have never made a wholesale attack on ministers of the gospel and I never will. Thank God I have a higher calling.”⁶¹

Burroughs went on to say that despite the gross misinterpretation of her words she was thankful that she was guided by two scriptures: Matthew 6:3 and Nehemiah 6:3. The first of the two verses is where the oft used phrase, “don’t let the left hand know what the right hand is doing,” which in full context the verse is suggesting that in matters of giving to the needy there should be no loud fanfare—such giving should be done with discretion. The verse from Nehemiah refers to when the minor prophet was being coerced into coming down from a wall built for the protection of Israel and as much as enemies called for him to come down so that they could talk about the issues besieging the people, Nehemiah replied, “I am carrying a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?”⁶² The suggestion here by Burroughs is that the larger work she is doing to help the poor is bigger than the anger she is facing from black ministers, which you can see in her “Thank God I have a higher calling” comment.

Burroughs then addresses the gendered aspects, or the sexism, of the debate and negative press. “You know Dr. Powell’s Christian name is ‘Adam,’ and like his progenitor, he has tempted—not to eat an apple—but to get his brethren “told” –and he fell for it, and ‘as it was in

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Nannie Helen Burroughs, “Dr. Powell Better at Publicity Than Barnum & Bailey, says Nannie Burroughs,” *The Baltimore Afro American*, 17 January 1931, 3.

⁶² *Nehemiah 6:3* (KJV).

the beginning is now,' Adam uses a woman as a smoke screen. That's all!"⁶³ Burroughs lashed out at the newspapers for aiding in the continued misinterpretation of her words as well and that it is easy to do because she is a woman. Moreover, she claimed that most of uproar by the black minister leadership class would not exist if she were a man. She went on to continue to compare herself to biblical Eve mentioning that she was being pushed in front of a bad situation, and Burroughs suggests that it was easier for preachers to display anger and bitterness toward her than to address the concerns of the masses. She maintained that despite these very trivial factors if her words will help leaders deal with the dire economic situation she "would take her medicine like a woman."

Burroughs closed her rebuttal to Powell Sr. and the black minister class by declaring that although Powell had created more publicity for himself and his church that would rival the circus of Barnum & Bailey she still considered the pastor of Abyssinian as "the best of friends and will always be."⁶⁴ Ms. Burroughs, in an effort to take the focus back to her initial challenge urges, "Only the hit are 'hollering.' Come on, let's get together and get work for the four million who are on the bread-line. Come on."⁶⁵ It is interesting to note here that Burroughs accuses Powell Sr. of seeking publicity. Why would he need publicity given the size of his congregation and his influence in African American religious community? Moreover, Burroughs was very familiar with Powell Sr. and his ministry so the accusation seems odd. It is possible that her rebuttal was written in anger or frustration so that could possibly account for her accusing Powell Sr. of seeking attention but given the evidence surround this situation there is no way to know for certain.

⁶³ Burroughs, *The Baltimore Afro American* 17 January 1931, 3.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Burroughs and Fisher’s public critiques of Powell Sr. are important. They symbolize the challenges not just to his authority in the pulpit, but help to eradicate the notion that Powell Sr. lived in a vacuum or that all Christians—particularly those within predominately black congregations, held his vision of the church. Burroughs’ and Fisher’s responses both as educated believers and intellectuals in their own right whom Powell Sr. respected are meaningful in this regard. They are not simply lay folk, but they were quite engaged with the limits and power of the influence of religion for African Americans. Fisher was a former professor at Powell’s alma mater and Burroughs a trusted friend, who was no stranger to holding black preachers accountable.

Years before she had categorized ministers into three distinct groups. The first of these were those ministers, like Powell Sr. who were well trained—meaning they had attended seminary and had a keen understanding of the theological and social problems that black congregations faced. The second grouping she mentioned were those ministers who were not as educated as Powell Sr.’s contemporaries, nor did they have the access to the same types of financial resources that would allow them to have a grand mortgage burning ceremony or program. Lastly, there were those men who took up the cloth and used it solely as a tool to enrich themselves and exploit congregations or anyone that they could. Burroughs called them “grafters.”⁶⁶ To be sure, in her critique of the black leaders, all the classes of black ministers were in some way affected by her words—however, they heard them. Ultimately, Burroughs’ critique points out the complicated ways in which women within the confines of black churches had the ability to publicly engage men of the cloth. Women, especially those of the Baptist

⁶⁶ *National Baptist Convention, Twelfth Annual Session of the Women’s Convention, 1912, 61-62. National Baptist Convention, Fifteenth Annual Report of the Executive Board and Corresponding Secretary of the Women’s Coalition, 1915, 47-48; See also discussion in Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).*

denomination had nuanced ideas regarding division of labor within the confines of the church—some who supported separate roles for men and women, but they would not simply sit back and “speak unless spoken to” when it came to dealing with the liberation of African Americans from the oppressive practices of the United States.⁶⁷ As Burroughs stated, she was not after ministers, but black leaders generally speaking.

To his credit, Powell Sr. spoke up about the lack of living wages as a source for communal decay in early February 1930, some ten months ahead of Burroughs well publicized and misunderstood challenge. Powell Sr. argued during a community forum sponsored by the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters that, “No man can be moral in Harlem on \$15 a week.” Powell explained, “The conditions of vice which exist in Harlem may well be traced to the low economic wages of the people. Bootlegging and the sale of “hot” goods are the result of the low wages which workers received.”⁶⁸ Indeed Powell Sr. was not just moved by the word of God, but it was actions too—in the form of economic justice that he believed would pave the way to retool African Americans to truly participate in making America the nation it should be and the African Americans the people they needed to be. Powell was invested in creating economic, political, cultural and spiritual self-determination and stability. As the new decade continued, dealing with the economic devastation of the depression loomed large, but he continued to fight battles on other fronts as well. Moreover, he would also provide inspiration for ministers and clerics abroad as well.

Just as the public feud regarding Powell Sr.’s comments concerning the preachers and churches was at its height, simultaneously his ministry inspired a young German theologian by

⁶⁷ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 3-7.

⁶⁸ Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., “BLAMES LOW PAY FOR IMMORTALITY: Rev. A.C. Powell Sees Moral Status Impossible for Man Earning \$15 Week,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 12 February 1930, 3.

the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was in America attending classes at Union Theological Seminary in New York City from 1930-1931, under the tutelage of such famous theological minds as Reinhold Niebuhr. It was the awarding of a Sloane Fellowship that allowed Bonhoeffer to come to the United States.⁶⁹ While Bonhoeffer began lifelong friendships with several of his colleagues in America it was his relationship with Frank Fisher, a young African American theology student from Alabama that changed the course of his life. Fisher, who was doing work at Abyssinian, invited Bonhoeffer to visit church services in Harlem.

Bonhoeffer was eager to attend as he had grown disillusioned with the contradictions in America with regard to race and the lack of seriousness about theological praxis in the predominately white liberal congregations he was allowed to visit, so he was ready for a change in spiritual and religious atmosphere and he certainly got it. He heavily criticized the large churches in New York, such as Riverside Baptist Church as basically “charitable churches” that were concentrated on trying to coerce new residents of Manhattan to join as members.

Bonhoeffer dryly opined, “One cannot avoid the impression...they have forgotten what the real point is.”⁷⁰ The point for him was found in Harlem. After his time at Abyssinian, Bonhoeffer later wrote that it was in the “negro churches” that he found value in his year in New York. He spent much of his time in Harlem, teaching and interacting with the congregation whenever he could—according to some accounts he even taught Sunday school there. It was within the African American community in Harlem and inside the walls of Abyssinian that he saw the Christian Gospels come to life—there was truly transformative power in the ministry of the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. His combination of intellect, social action, and the fiery spirit of a

⁶⁹ *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931, Volume 10, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed., Clifford J. Green, trans. Douglas W. Stott (New York: Fortress Press, 2008), 138.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 313-314.

revivalist evangelical preacher moved Bonhoeffer greatly. At Abyssinian Bonhoeffer found what he was looking for—a congregation that took the theology he learned in Berlin and applied it practically to the dispossessed. By some accounts during his six months in New York, the young German was allowed to grace the marble pulpit of Abyssinian to address the congregation, however, there has not been sufficient evidence to say for sure, but it would not be out of the realm of possibility.⁷¹

Bonhoeffer’s fellowship with the members of Abyssinian through his good friend and colleague, Frank Fisher introduced him to another aspect of American life. It left an indelible mark on his view of his faith both believed and practiced. Outside of the preaching of Rev. Powell, Sr., it was the complete experience with African American expressive culture that transformed Bonhoeffer. For instance, hearing the choir at Abyssinian as well as being welcomed into the homes of several members helped him to realize that the sacred and secular aspects of African American culture were vitally important.⁷² Bonhoeffer scoured local record shops in Harlem searching for any recording of Negro Spirituals he could find. The link between music and worship was crystallized for him and he took the recordings back to Germany to play for his students there. Theologically, Bonhoeffer borrowed from Powell the concept of “cheap grace.”⁷³ Powell Sr.’s largest theological criticism of the predominately white congregations of America and Western Christendom as a whole was the problem of cheap grace. It was grace without the price of accountability. Bonhoeffer explained cheap grace as the “preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline - communion

⁷¹ Scott Holland, “*First We Take Manhattan, Then We Take Berlin: Bonhoeffer in New York,*” *Cross Currents* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2000): pp. 369-82.

⁷² *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931, Volume 10, Dietrick Bonhoeffer Works*, ed., Clifford J. Green, trans. Douglas W. Stott (New York: Fortress Press, 2008), 313.

without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.”⁷⁴ This term became the central theme of Bonhoeffer's most influential tome *The Cost of Discipleship*, published in 1937. Additionally, Bonhoeffer borrowed the phrase, "world come of age.” The phrase was oft employed in Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* and was used by Powell in his preaching: "The world come of age asks only one question: What can you do to make the world happy? What can you do to uplift humanity?"⁷⁵

After leaving America, Dietrich Bonhoeffer took Powell's words to heart. He became a preeminent theologian, pastor, musician, author and some argue a martyr. He was thoroughly consumed with trying to address issues of inequality and oppression in his home country of Germany. During his time abroad, the Nazi Party took control of the German government and armed with what he saw as the truly transformative and liberation aspects of faith, Bonhoeffer was deeply involved in a scheme to assassinate Adolf Hitler. The plan failed and after his capture as an accomplice, Bonhoeffer was sent to a Flossenburg, a concentration camp where he was later executed not more than twelve hours after being found guilty for his involvement in the assassination plot against the chancellor and dictator.⁷⁶

Through the lived experience of Bonhoeffer, we are given a glimpse into the impact that Powell and Abyssinian had on one person outside of the United States that had the chance to witness what was occurring on West 138th Street. While Bonhoeffer is an exceptional case, he

⁷³ Clingan, *Against Cheap Grace in a World Come of Age*, x-xiii. See also Ruth Zerner, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's American Experiences: People, Letters, and Papers from Union Seminary, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. XXXI, No. 4, (Summer 1976), 261-282.

⁷⁴ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: SCM Press, Ltd, 1954, 1995), 43-54. Originally translated from the German *Nachfolge* first published in 1937 by Chr. Kaiser Verlag Munchen by R.H. Fuller, with some revision by Irmgard Booth. See also discussion in Ralph Garlin Clingan, *Against Cheap Grace in a World Come of Age: An Intellectual Biography of Clayton Powell, 1865-1953* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

⁷⁵ Powell, *Palestine and Saints in Caesar's Household* (New York: Richard and Smith, 1939), 187.

⁷⁶ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy - A Righteous Gentile vs. The Third Reich* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 530-542.

serves nonetheless of as a testament to what Powell was doing with his congregation and his ministry. Despite claims that he was out of touch with the faith and should be seeking forgiveness from the Lord above (according to many of his contemporaries), a German theologian found solace and purpose in the words and actions of Powell Sr.

Powell Sr. and Abyssinian came to provide a certificate of authenticity for not just Christianity in America, but the faith as a whole. While it is not readily apparent, from existing evidence that Powell Sr. knew the ultimate sacrifice that his former pupil gave, it is safe to assume, however, that Powell Sr. would have respected the convictions of Bonhoeffer and his passion and dedication to the cause of liberation—fueled by his undying faith. “Silence,” Bonhoeffer preached, “in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”⁷⁷

The expressive aspects of African American religious culture practiced and believed faith made an immediate, lasting impact on Bonhoeffer. Whether he was aware or not, Powell Sr. served as an ambassador not only of faith in action but of culture as well. Even as he was under fire from those within the black church, he also defended them from attack from outside. In February 1931, Powell Sr. was called upon by the Urban League to respond to an essay that is better understood as a virulent diatribe by the cultural critic and journalist, Henry Louis “H.L.” Mencken. Mencken was the founder and co-editor of the *American Mercury* along with drama critic George Jean Nathan.⁷⁸ During the 1920s and 1930 they were able to publish what some consider the most important writers in the United States. Mencken had very complicated and contradictory views on African Americans both politically and culturally that were for all practical purposes just paternalistic and racist as the American southerners he enjoyed berating in

⁷⁷ Ibid.

his essays. He was quick to mock overt racist dogmas and utilized irony through satire in some of his works that left many, including African Americans who read and supported his work surely wondering how racist Mencken himself was. Mencken never saw himself as a racist and in fact some scholars argue that Mencken saw himself as “completely devoid of racism,” and while he was quick to label groups of people by racially problematic stereotypes, he felt that he was a champion against the vilest expressions of racism, although he constantly bathed linguistically in the waters of Social Darwinist rhetoric when referencing minority groups.⁷⁹

The National Urban League decided to publish an article by the famed journalist in their journal *Opportunity* and informed their readers that in the next month’s issue, “Rev. A. Clayton Powell, pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church of New York City, one of America’s leading Negro clergymen, will reply in behalf of the Negro Church.”⁸⁰ So like a title fight, there was to be an intellectual sparing or mental pugilism between heavyweights in their respective fields of endeavor. Mencken’s essay was entitled “The Burden of Credulity.” It was a fierce challenge to the black church as an institution for the betterment of African Americans. Mencken argued that African Americans as a race subscribed to a “hog-wallow” Christianity that degraded the race to the level of poor whites who also patronized a very low form of the faith.⁸¹ Mencken, an avowed atheist, saw Christianity as “extraordinarily stupid, ignorant, barbaric and preposterous.”⁸² Having this view of the religion to begin with, it is not difficult to see how Mencken argued too that since it was Southern whites that exposed African Americans to Christianity and they were

⁷⁸ “Bichloride of Mercury,” *Time*, 31 December 1923.

⁷⁹ According to Jeffery B. Ferguson, Mencken was known to utilize many pejorative and deeply offensive names to reference non-white races and various ethnicities, which made so called racial progressives he associated with more than uneasy. See Ferguson’s discussion of Mencken in *The Sage of Sugar Hill: George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 160-165.

⁸⁰ *Opportunity*, February 1931, 40.

⁸¹ H.L. Mencken “The Burden of Credulity,” *Opportunity*, February 1931, 41.

already of the “lowest class” of their own race it would then lead to “further debased” form of the religion. Mencken referred to African-American ministers of this form of Christianity as “moron Negro theologians” who were dragging an already sullied faith down even further to be “a disgrace to the human race.”⁸³

Mencken argued that African-American clerics of this genre would effectively hold the entire race behind; by keeping at bay the kind of “brave future leaders of black America” he believed were needed to actualize progress and equality. Members of these congregations or those persons who followed such men were subjugated to the “superstitions of the slave quarters.” African Americans in his view were being kept in perpetual servitude mentally, economically, and politically—a “bondage to credulity” by submitting to such “bold and insatiable parasites.”⁸⁴ Mencken went on to suggest that by and large African Americans were committing themselves to a “dunghill variety of Christianity” as found among evangelicals.

There were some aspects of black Christianity that he found tolerable, however, such as the black Episcopalians that he knew in his hometown of Baltimore. He found them to be “intelligent and [a] civilized people.” Baltimore was the backdrop and anecdotal center for his sociological rant disguised as intellectual critique. Mencken goes through continued verbal barbs and disrespectful epithets with rhythmic prose only to say that “typical” black churches are destroying the economic vitality of African Americans. For him, Baltimore was a lens by which to view all African American faith practices and he closes his essay by declaring that the “barnyard theology [that] lies over the whole of America,” is not just debilitating holistically for African Americans, but it is in fact destroying the nation. African Americans were just suffering

⁸² Ibid. See also H.L. Mencken, “On the Meaning of Life,” *Mencken on Mencken: A New Collection of Autobiographical Writings*, ed. S.T. Joshi (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 158-160.

⁸³ Mencken, “The Burden of Credulity,” *Opportunity*, 41.

the worst effects from “appalling doctrines” of Christianity. “So long as Negroes believe in rubbish,” Mencken concluded, “they will never get beyond the level of the Southern poor whites. In other words, they will never get beyond the level of the most ignorant and degraded white men now known on earth.”⁸⁵ Indeed, Mencken did not stray too far from earlier thoughts on the future of African Americans or Christianity for that matter.

The Rev. Powell, Sr. penned his response, or likely dictated it, from a hospital bed. In March, the pastor of Abyssinian was “quite ill” at the Presbyterian Hospital.⁸⁶ Despite suffering from an unknown illness, Powell Sr. was able to provide a rebuttal to the racist journalist. Powell’s essay poked fun at Mencken in the same way that he typically made ironic and satirical jabs at his intellectual opponents. “H.L. Mencken Finds Flowers In a ‘Dunghill’,” was the title of the Rev. Powell Sr.’s response and *Opportunity* lauded their champion as having responded to Mencken with his “characteristic vigor.”⁸⁷

Powell Sr. began his response by going through a list of so-called “achievement” by African Americans of the era both celebrities like the famed entertainer Burt Williams and Paul Robeson and within the professions and in business and emphatically states, “Negroes of the United States! Stop boasting about your economic progress. You have scarcely made any,” employing a sarcastic tone reminiscent of some of Mencken’s previous work or the great American satirist, Samuel Clemens, known more widely by his pen name, Mark Twain.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ “New York Society,” *Chicago Defender*, 14 March 1931, 11. “A. Clayton Powell Goes to Hospital,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 March 1931, 1.

⁸⁷ *Opportunity*, March 1931, 72. There is a small insert on the page where the editors of *Opportunity* have written a blurb to the reader.

⁸⁸ Ibid. Powell, “H.L. Mencken Finds Flowers in a Dunghill,” *Opportunity*, March 1931, 72; “Mencken on Negro Ministry,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 28 February 1931, 16.

After talking about limited reaches of African American achievement in the arts, business, and intellectually, Powell Sr. mentions that his tone does not misrepresent the article written by Mencken whom Powell refers to as “the most distinguished, and learned iconoclast on the continent.” Powell Sr. revealed that Mencken found two flowers amongst the dunghill Christianity that he characterized amongst African Americans—Catholics and Episcopalians. Powell thanks Mencken for recognizing this fact, but quickly admonishes the reader, “...beware the Greeks bearing gifts, for his scholarly discoverer know that the same flowers can be found in the Negro Methodist and Baptist churches.”⁸⁹

Powell Sr. went on to say that there were many African American clergy that were far removed from the “barnyard theology” Mencken attempted to characterize the great majority of black ministers of having. Referring to such ministers as the Revs. Vernon Johns, Mordecai Johnson, Miles Fisher and others, Powell Sr. asserted that from ministers of his generation and beyond, including newly ordained ministers, all were continuing a tradition within their respective denominations that had “the same decorum, dignity and intelligent seriousness he [Mencken] finds in the isolated Baltimore church.”⁹⁰ Speaking of dignity Powell made reference to the lynching of Raymond Gunn in Maryville, Missouri on January 12, 1931. Gunn was in the custody of the authorities for the murder of Velma Carter, a twenty-year-old, white schoolteacher at Garrett School, not far from Maryville. On the evening of January 12, Gunn was forcibly removed from the custody of the police by a lynch mob of 10,000 by some accounts and burned alive on the roof of the school.⁹¹ Powell Sr. used this example to illustrate that he

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid. See also “School Teacher Killed Tuesday after Assault,” *Burlington Junction Post*, 18 December 1930, 1; “Negro Formally Charged with Murder of Teacher,” *Burlington Junction Post*, 1 January 1931, 1; “Negro Murder Meets Death at Hands of Mob,” *Burlington Junction Post*, 1 January 1931, 1; “Lynch with Fire,” *Kansas City Star*,

was quite sure that the men who participated in the kidnapping and lynching of Mr. Gunn were not just simply “poor white trash” but that the white men involved in this murderous act of vengeance reeked of the stench racism. Moreover, Powell Sr. claimed the white men were Fundamentalists, and unlike Mencken’s characterization of them as poor, uneducated and backward, they held public and political office “composing the executive, legislative and judicial departments of that state” and thus considered of a higher class of men.⁹² Attacking the inhumanity of the perpetrators, Powell Sr. questioned the rule of mob law and human dignity along racial and gendered lines as well, as he also questioned the “decency and dignity” of women who would watch a naked man be lynched and burned, “without the slightest affront to their modesty.” Powell Sr. also questioned why Mencken’s paper had not spoken up against the injustice of Mr. Gunn’s grizzly mob murder.

Powell Sr. lashed out, proclaiming that Mencken or anyone else would have a difficult time finding any African American clergy who has not “thundered against this un-Christian, inhuman, anarchistic carnival.”⁹³ Powell Sr. maintained that the “Negro Church” is the only church that has continually spoken out against the lynching of African Americans while other churches have been silent. “The Negro Church,” Powell Sr. continued to argue, “is the only church that has...unceasingly preached the brotherhood of man.”⁹⁴ Powell Sr. then gave a litany of examples of how the progress and uplift of African Americans since the nineteenth century has come through some integral connection to the “Negro Church.” Calling his examples “flowers” to the dunghill that Mencken spoke of, Powell Sr. then boldly professes, “Had Mr. Mencken gone farther, he would have discovered that the average Negro is also superior to the

14 January 1931, 1; Patricia Jean Maxwell-Schurkamp, “Maryville to Mobville: the Lynching of Raymond Gunn,” diss. (Maryville: Northwest Missouri State University, 1995).

⁹² Powell, “H.L. Mencken Finds Flowers in a Dunghill,” *Opportunity*, March 1931, 73.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

average white American in long suffering, patience, meekness, veracity and love.”⁹⁵ Powell Sr. spoke of “veracity” throughout the remainder of his essay as a speaking of truth or seeking of truth more closely associated with justice. Powell Sr. argues that this same type of truth is what allowed for the formation of black and white congregations in America. White Americans can join a predominately black congregation, but things tend to get very tense if the opposite were to occur, which Powell Sr. argues is truly hypocrisy of faith and democracy.

The veracity that Powell Sr. believes existed within the African American community and their culture, as a whole, was a seed planted through the formation and development of “The Negro Church.” While Powell Sr. did concede that there are African American ministers who are not at all concerned with such things, as Mencken noted, Powell Sr. agreed too that they are a hindrance to racial progress. However, Powell Sr. affirmed also that such ministers are not just found amongst African Americans, but within all faiths and he questioned why Mencken would even waste an entire essay talking about them.

Powell Sr. was much more optimistic about the “future leaders of black America,” and believed that the African American church would be able to stem the tide of any rise in belief or behavior that would retrograde any forward motion toward true equality in the nation. Powell Sr. concluded his essay by stating a profound sense of pride and hope despite the circumstances under which African-Americans were brought and have lived in the United States. He offers a damning critique of American Christianity as well:

“When I think that the Negro was brought out of a jungle religion in Africa, into a worse jungle American Christianity: when I recall that the Negro was not only brought here by racketeers, but that he existed for two hundred and forty years in the most damnable racket know to the United States and that he has lived for the past sixty five years in the racket of peonage, chain gang labor, and industrial exploitation, it is a miracle that has made any appreciable progress toward genuine religion.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

A greater miracle still, is that the Negro believes in any sort of a religion or any kind of a God presented to him by the white American. Had it not been for his ignorance he would have cursed God and died.”⁹⁶

Powell Sr. spoke with a force and conviction that he had in his first sermon after the mortgage burning. The perceived intellectual superiority and fame of Mencken did not intimidate him, and Powell Sr. used his rebuttal essay as an opportunity to speak to African Americans and white Americans alike about the hypocrisy of practiced religion and governance. His essay was itself an example of “veracity.”

For Powell Sr., there seemed to be a link between the two. You could not claim love for mankind in church on Sunday and yet lynch and oppress the rest of the days of the week. Powell’s rebuttal is not simply a response on behalf of the “The Negro Church” but the response represented a courageous activist intellectual who was a man of faith. The engagement with Mencken was not simply scriptural or theological, but it was a pragmatic, if not organic intellectualizing that sought to speak to injustice while shoring up and indeed affirming a sense of purpose for African Americans who were Christians and even for those that were non-believers as well. His own faith within his family also gave Powell Sr. reason to celebrate as his son, Adam, Jr., now at school at Colgate University accepted a calling to the ministry and was ordained in May of 1931.⁹⁷ It seemed as though the son was preparing to follow in his father’s footsteps, at least in regards to the ministry. His personality was much more flamboyant, and he developed a love for Harlem and everything it represented. He was now a young man of twenty-three years, and the elder Powell was sixty-six. The question had to rumble in the pastor’s thoughts about the future of Abyssinian’s pulpit during those quite moments, but for now, he

⁹⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁹⁷ “Rev. Powell Sees Son Ordained Minister,” *Chicago Defender*, 2 May 1931, 2.

enjoyed seeing his son ordained a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There was still work Powell Sr., had to attend to and was needed for.

While 1930s saw a general decline in the production of work by African American writers and intellectuals, Powell Sr. remained wedded to his passion for the purpose of faith and progress.⁹⁸ You could not have one without the other according to his writings and his preaching. He seemed to write and engage the public sphere more during the turbulent years of economic uncertainty. After leaving the hospital, the Rev. Powell Sr. was back in stride again-- active in service to Abyssinian and Harlem and the community. He was called to speak at the 23rd Annual Mass Meeting of the N.A.A.C.P., on January 3, 1932. The mass meeting was held at St. Mark's Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City. Powell Sr. picked right up from where he left off with his "Flowers in a Dunghill" essay continuing his discussion with race and religion in America.

Entitled, "The Attitudes of Jesus Toward World Problems," Powell Sr. warned the crowd, "The kind of preaching you are going to hear will not be recognized as preaching by perhaps more than half a dozen people here."⁹⁹ What Powell Sr. gave the audience was no pie in the sky theology, or 'dunghill religion', focused solely on heavenly reward and salvation. If people arrived to hear that type of sermon or address they were in the wrong place that day. Powell Sr. spoke about social and economic justice. He argued that if Jesus were to return to walk the earth now, he would not be received or recognized by anyone—especially if he was African American.

⁹⁸ Jeffery B. Ferguson argues for a decline of African American intellectual and artistic work, as was the case with most Americans because of the large reaching and debilitating aspects of the Great Depression. See his discussion in *The Harlem Renaissance: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 26-27.

⁹⁹ Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., address, "The Attitudes of Jesus Toward World Problems" (New York: Publisher Unknown, 1932), 1. Printed pamphlet. Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. Collection, Series-Scrapbook, Folder 4.

To prove his point, he declared, “If Jesus came to America as a Negro not 15 white churches would admit him to fellowship.”¹⁰⁰

Powell Sr. continued to create a broad context for his address, not simply labeling it for African Americans or their white counterparts. When he discussed what Jesus would do in the world of 1932, it was something that America could learn from and mull over. His address was layered and nuanced. The pastor soberly opined that, “the nearer a preacher and his congregation gets to fundamentalism, the further they get from social justice, from God and the Brotherhood of Man, as preached by Jesus. The slaves of religious tradition,” he continued, “have always been the advocates of intolerance and the masters of persecution.”¹⁰¹ The address was a warning to churches—black and white, about the seduction of fundamentalism. More importantly, Powell Sr. also offered a salient, clear argument for economic justice.

His address laid out his view of economic justice with relation to Jesus in three subjects. Powell Sr. addressed the notion of Jesus and how his teachings related to capital, labor, and finally race. “Jesus is clearly and unconditionally opposed to the selfish use of wealth. His parables and His straight forward teachings clearly set forth His attitude on this questions,” Powell Sr. told the crowd. He used the commonly known parable of the rich man who was a fool, found in the Gospel of Luke.

In the parable, a rich man took an arrogant, conceit filled moment to relish in all his wealth and decided to sit back and wallow in self-adulation. According to the scriptures (Luke 12: 13-21), before the rich man could enjoy, relax, and partake in his self-tribute, his soul was taken from him by a “voice” which typically is understood to be God. Powell Sr. admonished the crowd to rethink the parable and consider that the man did not lose his soul because he was

¹⁰⁰ “Minister Flays Prejudice at Annual N.A.A.C.P. Meet[ing],” *Chicago Defender*, 9 January 1932, 4.

rich, but he lost his soul because “he did not devote his wealth and time to the social good of his community. He lost his soul because he settled down to do nothing, saying, “Soul take ease!”¹⁰² Powell Sr. then urged the audience to not think of the rich man of dying physically, but that he died a spiritual death. For Powell Sr., “A live soul and selfishly hoarded wealth cannot live together.”¹⁰³ Powell Sr. also pointed out that he was not suggesting that every rich person was going to die spiritually. His point was simply to say that self-serving existences that are driven by wealth accumulation are fast tracks to losing one’s soul. “Corporations or individuals who amass wealth solely for the sake of comfort and luxury, to neglect the needs of Society,” Powell Sr. continued, “will certainly loose their souls.”¹⁰⁴

In the contemporary moment, Powell Sr. suggested that W.E.B. Du Bois had “completely expressed” his thoughts on a solution to the economic problem plaguing the country. Du Bois presented a platform at the Non-Partisan Negro Conference, the year before that utilized the political power of African Americans mainly for economic emancipation.¹⁰⁵ Like Du Bois, Powell Sr. stridently called for a redistribution of the wealth in America. If it did not occur, there were soon to be very dire and unrecoverable consequences. “There is bound to be a more equal distribution of wealth if we are going to stave off an economic world revolution,” Powell Sr. noted, “that will make all other revolutions look like a dog fight in a backyard.”¹⁰⁶ Such rhetoric for Powell Sr. did not seem sensational or radical in the slightest given the fact that only fifteen years prior that no one ever could have foreseen the dismantling of the monarchy in Russia.

¹⁰¹ Powell, “The Attitudes of Jesus Toward World Problems,” 1.

¹⁰² Ibid. 2.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 3. See also, *Non-Partisan Conference. Letter from Non-Partisan Conference to W.E.B. Du Bois*, 27 October 1931. *W.E.B. Du Bois Papers*, (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. Additionally, Nannie Helen Burroughs was part of the four member organizing committee.

¹⁰⁶ Powell, “The Attitudes of Jesus Toward World Problems,” 4.

Large-scale change could happen for any nation, no matter the circumstance in Powell Sr.'s view and it was time that America learned to deal with its issues before facing a revolution that would rival any previous national transformation.

Labor was equally as important to economic stability as capital in Powell Sr.'s mind. He cautioned the crowd, "Let us not fool ourselves into believing that what happened in Russia cannot happen in America, England, or any of the great countries in a few years. This growing democracy is a dangerous thing. Ten percent of the people can not forever rule 90% of the people for democracy means, "government of the people, for the people, and by the people.""¹⁰⁷ The tide could be turned, "...we can ward off the clash between Capital and Labor by adopting the attitude of Jesus, Powell suggested in a hopeful tone. Powell believed that by engaging in fair, just and equitable business practices the nation could avoid all disaster and turn the worsening economic storm into a bright ray of employment and opportunity. Powell Sr.'s comments suggested a humanizing of labor and by doing that you were doing the will of Jesus too. Referring back to the Gospel of Luke again, Powell Sr. mentioned, "the laborer is worthy of his hire," quoting a passage that spoke to working and paying laborers fairly for their work.¹⁰⁸ Powell Sr. also scolded, "I believe that 75% of all the unemployment, dissatisfaction, lawlessness, crime and immortality in the civilized world today may be traced directly to unfair wages and to the unequal distribution of wealth."¹⁰⁹

Powell Sr. transitioned to talking about the race problem in America by discussing the interconnectedness of capital and labor mentioned previously. They all were about recognizing common humanity and following the "implied attitudes of Jesus in the Golden Rule," and he

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ *Luke* 10:7 (NIV). See also *1 Timothy* 5-18 (NIV).

¹⁰⁹ Powell, "The Attitudes of Jesus Toward World Problems," 5.

went on to mention that if the nation could accomplish this task and go about it effectively within fifteen years America would be a very different place. Powell Sr. seemed quite optimistic and truly hopeful in the face of dire circumstances. The biggest dire circumstance in America then for Powell was the issue around race hatred and the mythology of race superiority. Placing it squarely in the context of Jesus and Christianity generally speaking, Powell Sr. used examples from Jesus' ministry where He helped or healed persons who were not of his ethnic, racial, or national makeup. Examples such as the "Good Samaritan" and "the woman at the well" also were employed by Powell Sr. as yet another example of how Jesus Christ did not believe in race superiority, but the brotherhood of man.¹¹⁰ "God is no respecter of persons," Powell Sr. told the capacity crowd in a stern voice and began to explain that the Biblical Jews felt they were superior because of their 'chosenness' by God, which was a mistake.¹¹¹ It was through the ministry of Jesus, Powell Sr. reminded them, that such considerations were meaningless and empty. The power of the parable of the "Good Samaritan" and the experience of "the woman at the well" were that in both stories the main point is that you have people of different backgrounds helping people who are not of their culture—and such assistance while discouraged previously, under the ministry of Jesus, was expected. Powell Sr. stated simply that Jesus wandered, "over Palestine until the day of His death hammering race prejudice." Powell Sr. warned those within the main sanctuary at St. Mark's M.E. Church that Americans can not begin to believe in a "superiority complex[sic]," which Powell Sr. then transitioned to discuss the evil of "social Darwinism."

¹¹⁰ The parable of the "Good Samaritan" is found in *Luke* 10: 25-37 (NIV); "The woman at the well," story is found in the entire Fourth Chapter of the *Gospel of John* (verses 1-54). In both parables there are Samaritans used as main characters that are helping or being helped by people of different cultures, ethnicities and nations. Therein lies the eradication of race problems for Powell—that people are helping each other, including Jesus despite racial or ethnic affiliations.

¹¹¹ Powell, "The Attitudes of Jesus Toward World Problems," 6.

“In my humble opinion,” Powell Sr. proclaimed, “Darwin’s “Origin of the Species” is the most harmful and havoc working book ever written.” Powell Sr. clarified his position. For him it was not the theory of evolution that made the text so dangerous to him. Powell Sr. boasted, “if either God or evolution can take monkey and produce men such as Plato, Buddha, Luther, Gladstone, Lincoln, Douglas, Springarn, Dubois and Gandhi, I say and say reverently, that I have no quarrel with either God or evolution [sic].”¹¹² The problem with Darwin’s magnum opus was the advocacy of the “survival of the fittest” or “the conservation of the races” narrative that emerged from the text that Powell believed created a philosophy of race superiority. Powell Sr. maintained that this was the same attitude fostered amongst the biblical Israelites and in the contemporary era, Powell Sr. believed that “this superiority complex on the part of nations has been the cause of nearly all wars, including the World War.”¹¹³

Powell Sr. finished his discussion about race by declaring, “In God’s view there are no superior races.” Such categorizations were truly of no use in this world or the world hereafter in the pastor’s view. All human beings were one under God for Powell Sr. He turned from talking about race to again embracing a universal humanistic tone in his rhetoric based on justice and fairness. “You can measure the strength of any nation,” he reminded the audience, “by its attitude toward weaker people...The struggle for the ages is the struggle for national freedom, national independence, national self direction and universal equality.”¹¹⁴

Powell Sr. closed his speech by urging modern writers to de-emphasize the terms “modernity” and “relativity” because they were concepts that were large and meaningless to the American people. He explained:

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

“What the masses want is not *relativity*, but *social righteousness*. What the masses want is not *modernity*, but *meat and bread*. What the masses want is not a feminine, sentimental Jesus, that never existed anywhere, except in art galleries and in outmoded, silly theology, but they want a robust, athletic, Jesus in a carpenter’s shop with a job in His hands for every man, and universal justice in his heart.”¹¹⁵

Powell Sr.’s closing remark encapsulates his feelings not just about his race, religion, or his nation, but more importantly it certainly sums up his beliefs about the world around him, as informed by his practiced faith. Powell Sr. brought the crowd to its feet with thunderous applause and cheering. One can only imagine what those at St. Mark’s said and felt after hearing his message that cold Sunday afternoon in early January. Before the evening concluded all attendees were asked to rise and join in the singing the Negro National Anthem, “Life Every Voice and Sing.” The chill in the air outside the church was surely the last thing on the minds of those at the N.A.A.C.P. Annual meeting. Powell Sr. effectively touched on everything from social Darwinism to the folly of Christian fundamentalism. The combination of Powell Sr.’s rhetoric with such an anthem surely left a mark on both head and heart of those that were there. This was a message that was given to a majority African American crowd, aside from the white supporters of the N.A.A.C.P., and with it Powell Sr. provided a clear pathway—philosophically speaking, that illustrated how the teaching and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth could and should be applied to the world’s contemporary ills.

Powell Sr.’s speech that day was to be his last major oratory outside of the confines of Abyssinian Baptist Church. It was a fitting last public address as pastor, for he melded the sacred and secular as he had always sought to, going back to his days as a young scholar at Wayland Normal School and Seminary in Washington, D.C. This address was an achievement not only in terms of whom he spoke to, but of what he spoke. “Jesus and His Attitudes Toward World Problems” was in line with the way that Powell attempted to live, preach and teach.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

As a minister he learned that the masses in Harlem, “did not want *modernity*, but *meat and bread*.” Since first arriving in Harlem in 1908, Powell Sr. provided the meat and bread necessary not just for survival but for transformation of a people, culture, nation and ultimately the world. Now into his late sixties, Powell Sr., was beginning to think about life outside of the marble pulpit that he helped to erect in Harlem. Indeed, life was starting to change even within his family. His wife, the former Mrs. Mattie Schaefer Fletcher, three years his junior, likely thought of their life away from Abyssinian as well. In 1934 they celebrated 45 years of marriage and it would not be beyond reason to think that they wanted to spend more time together—away from the responsibilities of church life.¹¹⁶ They both thought of their son, and last remaining child. For several reasons, Powell Sr., had his mind on his son, who in 1933 finished his education at Colgate University and Columbia University, where he earned a Master’s degree in sociology. The elder Powell also was able to see his son ordained at Abyssinian. It is certain that he believed that his son would be his successor, no matter what his congregation thought.¹¹⁷

Powell Sr. did not remain in the Abyssinian pulpit much longer—at least not as acting pastor. The decade of the 1930s closed with him as pastor emeritus, and he also changed his political affiliations. After decades of service and support of the Republican Party, he switched his allegiances to the Democratic Party and threw his full support behind the former governor of New York, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It was Roosevelt’s support of social justice with which Powell agreed and found favor in. The pastor was “especially impressed” when the President declared “the greatest objective of Church and state for every man, woman and child,

¹¹⁶ “Together 45 Years,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, 6 October 1934, 2.

¹¹⁷ “Rev. Powell Sees Son Ordained Minister,” *Chicago Defender*, 2 May 1931, 2; “Rumor Split Abyssinia,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, 25 September 1937.

is a more abundant life.”¹¹⁸ Such rhetoric was the type of oratory that Powell Sr. himself could invest in and so with the promise of a return to economic stability and a more optimistic outlook, Powell, like many African Americans of his generation, and younger, placed their trust in the Democratic Party—a political move that had implications that ran well into the twenty-first century.

The second life-changing announcement that Powell made was a formal letter of resignation sent to his congregation on September 5, 1937. That letter, his third attempt at resigning his office as pastor, was his last and final one. He was understandably thankful for the “loving cooperation during the last twenty-nine years,” and vowed to remain active, though as pastor emeritus.¹¹⁹ Powell Sr. believed that seventy-one was as good a time as any for a minister to retire from active service and he stuck behind that thought as he entered his seventy-second year of life. Once his resignation was accepted, Powell Sr. seemed at peace with his decision. He planned to go to a warm climate to write and spend time with Mrs. Powell. He had accomplished everything he had set out to do in his sermon after the mortgage burning, “Progress the Law of Life.” He had remained active and engaged. He was able to move the church to Harlem and serve the community. He had the largest Protestant congregation in the United States. His accomplishments were impressive and noteworthy.

The institutional church he helped Abyssinian become had not covered in the shadow of the Great Depression, but the church and its pastor sought to face the socio-economic leviathan head on, like biblical David against Goliath. “Whereas in many sections of the country the institutional church proved a failure because it was so difficult to unite the spiritual work of the

¹¹⁸ Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Formal Letter of Support for President Roosevelt (no date) *Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives*, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Collection, folder 4. It is speculated by the author that Powell’s Sr. Letter was written likely in October of 1936 or few months prior. That however, is a best educated guess.

church with the material interests of the people,” revealed Powell Sr., “we have made it a success here at Abyssinian.”¹²⁰ Powell Sr. had accomplished not just his task or his dream, but what he believed was the will of the God he served.

Truly, his sermon in 1928 became a rallying cry for him for his pastorate of twenty-nine years, and it served him well as he entered life as a retired military commander might; he was preparing to be a regular civilian. However, on October 31, 1937 before he gave his farewell sermon “Twenty-Nine Years Ago and Today” Powell Sr. was reminded by the more than three thousand people in the main sanctuary that he was anything but regular or just a layman. On that Monday night of his farewell as he entered the main sanctuary greeted by friends, family, dignitaries and the common folk of Harlem, and countless well wishers, both the Rev. Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., and his wife, Mattie Fletcher Powell, knew that after cheerfully enduring several minutes of elated, vibrant cheers and thunderous applause, they would always be the pastor and first lady of not just Abyssinian, but of Harlem.¹²¹

Powell Sr., like biblical Moses, had “spoken to the children of Israel that they may go forward.”¹²² His Israel was his race and especially the congregation of Abyssinian and the people of Harlem. His faith and his intellect were not simply confined to the church or to the town square. He was not simply just clergy or intellectual, he was in fact both. He was not the first, nor the last, but one of many influential individuals who utilized activist ministries to uplift and empower African Americans. As the second half of the twentieth century approached, along with the myriad socio-political and economic changes it brought both locally, nationally and

¹¹⁹ Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Formal Letter of Resignation, 5 September 1937. *Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives*, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Collection, folder 4

¹²⁰ “Rev. Powell Quits Church,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, 2 October 1937, 19.

¹²¹ “Powell Cheered,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, 6 November 1937, 11.

¹²² *Exodus* 14:15, scripture quoted in his sermon, “Progress the Law of Life.”

internationally, and his son prepared to take the reins of leadership, the next generation of activist ministers could trace their intellectual and spiritual genealogy to the great work of the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.

CONCLUSION

Powell Sr.'s retirement from the pulpit did not stop him from working. While he staunchly believed that "preachers should retire at seventy," he remained active—lecturing and preaching around the United States periodically until his death in 1953.¹ Additionally, he went on to write five books that included his autobiography and reprints and commentaries of some of his most popular sermons. Most the texts were very short books or pamphlets that were mainly reprints of his most popular sermons with new commentaries added. Of note, however, are *Picketing Hell* and *Riots and Ruins*.²

Picketing Hell, written in 1942, was a fictional narrative that addressed what Powell believed was the hypocrisy of organized religion. The retired pastor's novel has protagonist who was once a miscreant who then becomes a minister that is proficient at keenly flushing out the corruptions and disingenuous nature of religious leaders and their flock. Although fictional, it is difficult to not assume that story follows some of the twists and turns of Powell, Sr.'s own life.

Riots and Ruins was a direct response to the Harlem Riots of 1943.³ Powell, Sr.'s thesis was that "inter-racial hatred was rife" in America, "these smoldering fires are fanned into violent

¹ "Noted Baptist Preacher Finishes New Book," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 10 December 1938, p. 19.

² The books that that Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., penned in retirement aside from his autobiography were: *Palestine and Saints in Caesar's Household* (New York: Beehive Publishing, 1939); *Picketing Hell* (New York: Wendell Malliet and Co., 1942); *Riots and Ruins* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1945); and *Upon This Rock* (New York: Abyssinian Baptist Church, 1949).

³ Late in the evening of August 1 and into the early hours of August 2 of 1943, a race riot occurred in Harlem, New York, after a white police officer shot and wounded Robert Bandy, an African-American soldier who inquired about a woman's arrest. Bandy, attempted to have the officer release a woman charged with disorderly conduct, supposedly hit the officer, and was shot while trying to flee from the scene of the incident. A crowd of nearly 3,000 people gathered around Bandy and the officer as they attempted to enter a hospital for treatment. Someone in the crowd incorrectly reported that Bandy had been killed. That rumor spread quickly and a riot ensued that lasted two days and led to \$5,000,000 in damages, between 500–1,000 African-American arrests, and six deaths. Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia ultimately restored order over the borough on August 3 with the recruitment of several thousand officers and volunteer forces to contain the rioters. For more see, Dominic Capeci, Jr., *The Harlem Race*

fury now and then, and riots break out.”⁴ Powell Sr. argued that both races suffer from such violent situations and it sets back overall American progress. The text is a clarion call for equity of opportunity for African Americans, and if not met Powell, Sr., maintains that riots will continue.⁵

For all practical purposes, he became somewhat of a public intellectual, commenting on the racial climate in America, and the role of Christian faith within that discourse. Powell Sr.’s retirement seemed to be just as busy and active as it was in the pulpit. The focal point of this examination of Rev. Powell, Sr., however, was on his years of active formal ministry while also providing background and context to the life he lived.

It is remarkable for anyone, much less a child of Reconstruction Virginia, to leave their home state to become arguably one of the most well-known and respected ministers of his generation. When Powell Sr., did finally decide to step down from the pulpit of Abyssinian in 1937, he did something grander—he was passing the torch of the African-American Protestant activist and intellectual tradition to his son and his contemporaries, a new group of ministers who emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Powell Sr., never saw his role as pastor of Abyssinian as a lifetime job. He knew when it was time to allow for the next generation to take hold of the fight for liberation and equality. This study demonstrated a few things about Powell Sr. that are important to remember as we think of his larger impact.

First, Powell Sr.’s life establishes the continuing of the intellectual tradition of African American Protestants, one aspect of a larger tradition of activist intellectualism. Secondly, it also creates space for religious intellectuals like Powell, Sr., among the Harlem Renaissance, or

Riot of 1943 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977); Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode? Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 211-213

⁴ Powell, *Riots and Ruins*, x.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 79-95.

New Negro Movement, thinkers and activists. Lastly, it situates Powell within the continuum of similar ministers both before and after him. For instance, if Alexander Crummell is viewed as the nineteenth century link to the early twentieth century impact upon Powell Sr., then it is understandable that his life and ministry was another part of the “river” that historian Vincent Harding spoke of when explaining the long continuous movement of the black freedom struggle. Indeed, Powell Sr., is an integral part of a very long tradition, a metaphoric river, “sometimes powerful, tumultuous, and roiling with life; at other times meandering and turgid, covered with ice and snow of seemingly endless winters, all too often streaked and running with blood.”⁶

Such an understanding of the African American religious experience, again in the Protestant aspects of it, weakens the line of reasoning maintained in some scholarship that the so called, “black church” was no longer radicalized with the death of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner.⁷ The radicalization evolved to meet the needs of the communities it served. When Turner passed in 1915, the Powell Sr., was already working as pastor of Abyssinian, well on his way to creating an institution that rose far beyond anything Powell or Turner himself could have realized. Also, Powell Sr. had contemporaries that were making strides in their respective cities, some in Harlem, too. Bishop Reverdy Ransom’s Institutional AME Church in Chicago and H.H. Proctor’s First Congregational Church in Atlanta were all doing yeomen’s work to not only preach, but using the church as a crucible of change.⁸

⁶ Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981), xix.

⁷ Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 3rd Edition, 1998), 163-174. Turner was also Editor of *The Christian Recorder*. See Jean Lee Cole, eds., *Freedom’s Witness: The Civil War Correspondences of Henry McNeal Turner* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2013).

⁸ Powell and Ransom also worked together in New York with the National Independent Equal Rights League where they along with other ministers in the New York City area add pressure to President Woodrow Wilson to desegregation among the employees of the federal government. See copy of letter sent by Reverdy Ransom to city

With the sheer broad and nuanced scope of African American religious life, and even looking solely at African American Protestants, it is hard to say that no one person was able to match the radicalism of Turner. Moreover, it is even more difficult to say that any individual could have such an impact on a religious institution. The religious experience is one that is far from static and one that is ever changing, and for African Americans that situation is no different.

This is not to suggest that after Powell, Sr. retired from active service that no one before or since, has had the impact he did. When he left Abyssinian's pulpit Powell had a ministry of 14,000, which in effect was likely the first ever "mega-church"—a phenomenon we see occurring *en masse* in the twenty-first century. Nor am I suggesting that Powell was able to accomplish what he did because he was in the North. To be sure there were contemporaries in New York City and around the country that were what have been labeled "institutional churches" that could easily be seen as precursors to social welfare agencies as they met the needs of swelling urban populations due to the Great Migration.⁹

Although Powell was able to take advantage of the burgeoning population during the height of the migration, he was hardly alone in his attempt to meet the needs of the congregation and community he served. In the Midwest and South there were others embracing the same

editor of the *New York Age*, 11 December 1914; discussion in Annetta L. Gomez-Jefferson's *The Sage of Tawawa: Reverdy Cassius Ransom, 1861-1959* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2002), 134-140. Wilmore gives credit to Proctor, Ransom and Powell, but argues none of them had the lasting impact or demanded the attention that Turner had at his greatest years of influence. Turner for him, is a stand alone type of figure and staunch Pan Africanist. Such hard-line reasoning is hard to reconcile given the changes that were occurring in America. The Great Migration and World War I had deep impacts on African American identity that Turner never faced. Moreover, I believe it is difficult to compare eras as Wilmore seems to. There has never been or will there ever be a African American monolithic engagement with regard to anything within the American body politic, much less the cause for freedom and equality.

⁹Tamelyn N. Tucker-Worgs, "Get on Board Little Children, There's Room For Many More: The Black Megachurch Phenomenon," in *The Black Megachurch Theology, Gender, and the Politics of Public Engagement* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 177-203; see also Jonathan L. Walton's, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

social gospel aspects that Powell's ministry had. They all shared a love of progress of race, nation and the Kingdom of God. Other than H. H. Proctor in Atlanta, there was the great educator, minister and intellectual in his own right, Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays.¹⁰ Known more for his work in establishing Morehouse College as a first rate institution of higher learning and having influence over an entire generation of African-American men, which included the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Dr. Mays was an institution all his own, much like the elder Powell had been. Mays shared many of the same beliefs as Powell with regard to race relations and progress for African Americans too. He encouraged his students, "Seek to serve your state not as a Negro but as a man. Aspire to be great—not among Negroes, but among men! God knows I want to be a great teacher, but I want no racial adjective to modifying it. I want to preach the gospel of peace, good will, justice and brotherhood—not to Negroes for Negroes, but to men and for men."¹¹

Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., definitely did not stand-alone. What this study affirms is expanding our understanding of an understudied nuance of the Harlem Renaissance movement. Ministers within the African American Protestant faith and culture, such as the Rev. Powell Sr. were just as much a part of the make up of the cultural movement as the artists and secular intellectuals of the Jazz Age. Furthermore, it is important to note the type of church and pastor that Powell headed. Under his leadership, he was able to facilitate the growth of the oldest African-American Baptist Church in New York State into arguably the largest Protestant

¹⁰ Benjamin Elijah Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971, 2003). New scholarship by Randal Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays: Schoolmaster of the Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012) gives new insight into the far reaching impact of Dr. Mays. Jelks' biography explores the origins, development and influence of the great educator's ideas.

¹¹ Benjamin Elijah Mays, "Address delivered at Older Boys' Conference, Benedict College, February 26, 1926," in Asa H. Gordon, *Sketches of Negro Life and History in South Carolina* (1929; reprint, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1971), 192-212.

Congregation in America and possibly the world.¹² That was no small feat. Additionally, Abyssinian saw no decline in stature during one of the most tumultuous economic periods in American History.

The Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., then was both exceptional and representative. Exceptional in terms of what he was able to accomplish and representative because there were other ministers like him. This study of Powell Sr. is just one story of an influential minister that was able to fuse sacred faith with secular mission. One testimonial sums up the pastorate of Rev. Powell. As word got around Harlem, and the rest of the nation, that Powell Sr. was retiring, there was a letter mailed to the *New York Amsterdam News*. It read in part, "...his twenty nine years of service will never be forgotten because he has not built this church around himself, but has built up a great work around Christ. Just twenty years ago, when I walked into old Abyssinian Baptist Church in Fortieth Street drunk, and Dr. Powell told me I looked like an intelligent young man, I knew that I was an old fifty-eight-year old fool. But I left that church that night, purposed in my heart to make his word true and now it's Rev. George J. Grandy, instead of the old man of twenty years ago."¹³ Such a story is one of many, and speaks to the essence of who Powell Sr. was to his community and how many people felt about him while he served in the pulpit.

"If I had the privilege of selecting the race into which I wanted to be born and to work, I would select the race in which I was born and in which I have lived and worked, for this race needs me more than any other race," Powell Sr. reflected in the last page of his autobiography. "If I had the privilege of selecting a career," he continued, "I would select again the Jesus Way

¹² Nora Holt, "Abyssinian Baptist Largest Protestant Church in the World," *New York Amsterdam News*, 2 December 1950.

¹³ "An Old Fool Now is 'Rev.,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 30 October 1937, p. 14, col. 7.

of living and the Jesus Way of working.”¹⁴ The Rev. Powell Sr. was indeed an apostle of remaking of race and religion in America.

¹⁴ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 327.

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