A conference sponsored by the American Historical Association and the National Museum of African American History and Culture with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and HISTORY™

The Future of the African American Past

May 19-21, 2016
Washington, DC

What Makes a Successful City?
The View from African American History

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A few weeks ago at Howard University's commencement, President Barack Obama argued, rightly for the most part, that "America is a better place today than it was when he graduated from college" in the early 1980s--1983. As part of his litany of progress—no doubt aimed directly at Donald Trump's repetitive braying to "take our country back"—Obama focused on the transformation some of America's cities have undergone. "New York City, America's largest city, where I lived at the time, had endured a decade marked by crime and deterioration and near bankruptcy. And many cities were in similar shape." The state of these cities was embedded in an 11% overall unemployment rate; and higher rates of poverty, teen pregnancy and high school graduation rates. Today, the number of black college grads has doubled, according to Obama; unemployment overall is at 5%; "Crime rates are down. And America's cities have undergone a renaissance."[1]

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[1] A transcript of the speech can be found at Politico Staff, "Obama's Full Remarks at Howard University Commencement Ceremony," *Politico*, May 7, 2016,

Imbedded in both visions of American cities are assumptions about what makes cities successful, and about how cities figure in the nation's success and self-definition. Few of these definitions, by historians, politicians or even by urban dwellers themselves, attend to African American histories in cities as a key element of defining success. In fact, arguably, the reverse has been true: the African American presence has been tied to a city's failures; and cities with large African American populations are seen as not emblematic of the U.S.

Regardless of the checkered ways in which the general public has regarded the African American presence in cities, from the time of the Great Migration through the end of the twentieth century, African American populations in cities have grown—even through the 1970s and 1980s, which many today see as a nadir of urban life in the U.S. Although many have focused on northern cities as the main beneficiaries of the "great migration" from rural to urban areas, southern cities too experienced this expansion. So in many cases, and regardless of how the general public has viewed cities, African Americans have seen urban areas as a site of opportunity and potential.

Defining Successful Cities

What do I mean by successful cities? We can use any number of measures: diverse economic and occupational opportunities; availability and access to services (housing, education, transportation, health care, etc.); cultural institutions; and a population that is healthy numerically—by which I mean one that occupies the space of the city well; as well as knowing that people find a city desirable to live in. In addition, the centrality of a city to the state's, region's or nation's sense of itself is both a sign of success, and integral to the continued health of a city. The fates of cities such as Detroit, Flint and New Orleans in the past decade or more

indicate what happens when cities are judged to be incidental to their state's, region's or nation's success: narrowing of economic opportunity (which becomes a self-reinforcing condition); inability to maintain infrastructure or to commandeer state or federal funds for the same; and finally, in extreme cases, catastrophic disasters that states, regions or nations feel little responsibility to prevent or redress. These disasters can be economic, as in the case of Detroit; infrastructure based, as in the case of Flint and New Orleans; or environmental, as in the case of New Orleans.

The experiences of Flint, Detroit and New Orleans make clear that how cities are judged as successes or failures is critical to their continued survival. Cities can become successful either through independently bringing in those who can increase the tax base, and thus maintaining self-sufficiency; or being viewed as critical to the state's, region's or nation's success, and thus attracting businesses, state and federal funds, and vigorous populations to create diverse educational and business opportunities, maintain and update infrastructure, and encourage education and the arts.

In the context of judging urban successes and failures, the history of African Americans in cities north and south is conflicted, paradoxical, and full of surprises. There is no moment in African American urban history that was easy; yet, some, even many, African Americans sought out urban spaces, northern and southern, as pathways to greater freedom, autonomy, and economic success in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Urban spaces have also allowed for the creation of African American institutions—churches, schools, fraternal orders, political organizations—that have then reached out to African American rural populations. Regardless of African Americans' self-perception as urban people, however, others

often viewed African Americans as inimical to the success and safety of cities, and indeed as markers of cities' lack of conformity to American ideals.

How then should we as historians look at the experiences of African Americans in U.S. cities? How have they contributed to the well-being of cities, regardless of stereotypical or racist judgements of their presence? What have been those limited judgements of African Americans? And regardless of those judgements, how have cities contributed to the well-being of African Americans? Below, I sketch out some ideas I've been playing with in response to these questions.

Defining Success and African American Success in Pre-Civil War Cities

When I completed my book on African Americans in pre-Civil War New York City, I was pleased to have joined a small but significant group of scholars in clarifying and securing a place for African American history in what historians seem to have judged to be *the* representative city of the nation. But as I turned to urban areas in the South, and as I began to focus in on the history of New Orleans in particular, I began to question the ease with which historians have seen New York as most emblematic of labor history, immigration history, and any number of other trends in US urban history and in the nation's history. New York is probably the most studied city among historians. It has reigned as the most populous city from 1790 through the 2010 census. And New York embodies many of the nation's most treasured beliefs about itself: a nation of immigrants; an economic powerhouse; the seat of the nation's democratic traditions; the melting pot; a cultural mecca—the list goes on and on. And yet, many of these myths bypass African American history. The melting pot and immigrant nation myths were explicitly modeled on beliefs about European immigrants that completely ignored the varied migrations of African Americans. The idea of New York as the center of the nation's

economy relies on the roles of Wall Street and industrialization, but privileges urban contributions to the nation's wealth over very necessary rural ones; indeed, the southern U.S.— the slave south--was the wealthiest region in the nation up to the Civil War, not the North. And New York's very exceptional nature arguably makes it less like the rest of the nation. Indeed, if we look at all the large cities of the nation's history, it would be difficult to posit any one city as emblematic: New York, New Orleans, Chicago, Detroit, L.A., Atlanta—instead, each city in any time period possesses a set of characteristics emblematic of the new cutting edge of the nation in that moment, and perhaps contributes disproportionately to the nation's economic, cultural or political identity. But each is also emblematic of the region in which it is embedded, and perhaps as well reflective of a unique interaction with an international frame.

Viewed through the lens of African American history, another layer of analysis emerges in thinking about the centrality of some cities vs others. If thinking about the cities with the largest numbers of people of African descent between 1800 and 1860, three cities emerge as leaders: Baltimore, New Orleans, and Charleston; New York City rather quickly falls away as fourth. Charleston held the largest urban black population for the first two decades of the nineteenth century. In 1800, New York edged out Baltimore and New Orleans for the largest population of blacks; by 1810, New Orleans had moved into second place behind Charleston, followed by New York and then Baltimore. But by 1830 and down to the Civil War, Baltimore and New Orleans occupied the top two spots, with Charleston nipping at their heels. Northern cities on the whole were eclipsed.

Historians have of course long known that the South held the largest black population, but the role of southern cities as incubators of economic possibilities and political activism has been investigated only in fairly limited ways. No doubt the existence of hybrid black

populations containing enslaved and free people can and should complicate our understanding of success for African Americans in southern urban settings before the Civil War. But if we understand slavery, pro-slavery politics, and structural racism as national, not regional, problems, we can complicate our understanding of what was possible for African Americans in both the "free" north and the slave south.

Comparing free black urban populations across the Mason-Dixon line in terms of employment and property holding is revealing of the limits of both slavery and freedom—limits imposed by racism. In terms of property-holding as wealth, the city in which antebellum free blacks had the greatest amount of wealth as a group, and in which there were the largest number of free black property owners, was New Orleans. 650 people held $2,354,640 worth of real estate. In second place, Philadelphia's 77 property owners held only $327,000 worth of real estate. Washington, D.C., had the second highest number of free black property owners, at 178, but the value of their property was only $108,816.[2] There are a number of reasons for New Orleans's extravagant lead, not least perhaps the migration of free people of color from the Haitian Revolution, who had owned real estate and slaves in Saint Domingue and were able to re-establish themselves similarly in New Orleans. In addition, free women of color owned substantial amounts of land via relationships with white men.[3] But just as important to note is that the *percentage* of the free black community that were property owners in the three cities that were capitals of the anti-slavery movement—Boston, New York and Philadelphia—were among the lowest in the nation, at less than 1% each. In contrast, 6.56% of free blacks in New Orleans

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[2] Curry, <u>Free Black in Urban America</u>, p. 261, Table C-1.
[3] Natasha McPherson's forthcoming book on Creole women of African descent in New Orleans will explore this in detail.

owned property.[4] Similar patterns prevailed in terms of skilled labor employment for blacks, with over 60% of free black men employed as artisans in New Orleans and Charleston; in contrast to 8.35% in Philadelphia, 5.77% in Boston, and 5.44% in Boston.[5] These upside-down figures are a result of one of the paradoxes of black freedom: enslavement created more space in the economy for blacks than did freedom. One New Yorker's attitude towards emancipation in the pre-Civil War era says it well: "The laws freed him; let the laws take care of him." In other words, if blacks were not owned, they were not employed concomitant with their potential or actual skills; and over the course of the post-emancipation era, were excluded from full participation in the economy.

I want to mention one set of institutions that has been largely overlooked in our understanding of what was possible in southern urban centers, and that is the establishment of religious institutions. We know the story of the suppression of the AME Church in Charleston in the wake of the Denmark Vesey plot. However, I believe we may have underestimated the resilience of black religious institutions in urban areas throughout the south, and their impact on hybrid slave and free black communities in cities and in some cases perhaps in rural hinterlands. These institutions have literally been hiding in plain sight: in Savannah; in Charleston; in New Orleans; just to name a few places. Charleston and New Orleans retained AME churches in the antebellum period; Savannah established numerous Baptist churches, with First Baptist, the oldest, completing the brick building that still stands in 1859, its pastor having traveled as far as Virginia to raise funds for it. As in the north, these churches were sites of subversive activities, even after Vesey and Turner. There is more to be investigated in terms of how they survived, and why whites allowed them to survive, but survive they did.

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[4] Curry, Free Black in Urban America, p. 268, Table C-2.
[5] Curry, Free Black in Urban America, p. 260, Table B-2.

Churches are a great location in which to pivot to the experience of enslaved African Americans in cities. Black Protestant churches in cities were locations where enslaved and free people gathered, information was exchanged, and in some cases, enslaved people found freedom. The leaders of the Baptist churches in Savannah moved from slavery to freedom via church ways: information on purchasing freedom was no doubt exchanged among members of the congregation. And in Savannah's Baptist Churches as well as AME churches in Charleston and New Orleans, church congregations and/or buildings provided less visible passage ways to freedom. Savannah's First Baptist Church held secret schools, teaching children to read and write. After the Charleston AME Church building was burned down in the wake of the Vesey plot, the congregation continued to meet in secret. In New Orleans, St. James AME Church was chartered by the state in 1844, and although it was not supposed to admit enslaved participants, its second pastor did allow enslaved people to attend, resulting in harassment, but not closure. More needs to be done on the survival of black Protestant religious organizations in other southern cities throughout the south.[6]

In thinking about the labor of enslaved blacks, it's clear as well that the owners' control of black labor encouraged wide dispersion of laborers throughout the economy. This is very clear in urban areas, where enslaved people performed a wide variety of skilled and unskilled tasks, north and south, central to the economies of these locations. Indeed, emancipation, northern and southern, and white backlash against black freedom induced the excessive unemployment and underemployment that remains endemic in black communities today. And

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[6] Harris and Berry, Slavery and Freedom in Savannah; Historic St. James Church, "About Us," http://www.stjamesameno.com/?page_id=9 ; Albert Raboteau's foundational Slave Religion focuses largely on rural religious practices; historians have not adequately grasped the significance of urban black churches and religious practices in the antebellum era and their potential for exposing southern free black struggles against slavery.

how can we not link the inequality of black earnings to the nation's tradition of unremunerated slave labor?

The decline in black male skilled labor in northern urban areas in the aftermath of pre-Civil War northern emancipation has been well-documented. In southern cities following the end of slavery after the Civil War, and again after Reconstruction, whites—including both former slave owners and northern migrants to the south--attempted to hold on to black labor via convict lease systems; and also used violence to drive blacks out of high-skilled and entrepreneurial positions. During what historian Rayford Logan termed the nadir, the post-Reconstruction era of racial violence (which should not obscure the racial violence that occurred during Reconstruction), black populations in small and medium-sized cities throughout the south and the nation experienced racial violence directed at politically and economically successful blacks. Although racial violence continued long past Logan's dates of 1877-1901, of course, there is a particular violence that occurred in that time period that is relevant to urban areas and that reflects a white supremacist anger against black economic sustenance. The 1898 Wilmington, N.C. Race Riot is emblematic of this moment. As the 2000 Wilmington Race Riot Commission report states, "Prior [to the riot]African Americans were employed in all segments of the workforce, as professionals, skilled artisans, government employees, maritime crew members, industrial workers, laborers, and domestics. After 1898 the number of blacks employed as professionals (aside from ministers), as skilled artisans and in government jobs declined while the number working in lower status jobs increased."[7] In Wilmington and a host of

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[7] LaRae Umfleet, Principal Researcher, and Wilmington Race Riot Commission, The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report. (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2000), p. 2. I learned of this report and of the fates of black populations in these smaller cities at a 2006 conference, "Reparations Across the Americas," organized by William Sandy Darity through the Institute for African American Research at UNC-Chapel Hill.

other smaller cities that historians have often overlooked in urban history generally as well as in African American urban history, blacks had carved out a healthy economic and sometimes political space in the decades after the Civil War. Indeed, in many of these cities, black-white populations might be 40%-60% or 55%-45%, with the result that there were enough blacks to sustain businesses among themselves, as well as to provide some services to whites. But white intolerance towards an independent black economic and political presence mounted in these areas, erupting in violence, and often leading a significant proportion of blacks to flee these locales. Those who stayed, as described above, faced a foreshortened economic and political horizon.

Defining Urban Success and African American Success in the Post-World War Two Era.

Whites' use of violence to drive African Americans out of urban areas is a dramatic hallmark of urban Jim Crow, in which mainstream American defines successful cities by the degree to which black populations are either under white control, made largely invisible via residential segregation, or completely removed. Under slavery, the black urban presence was presumed to be under control, even as blacks lived apart from their owners. Although travel writers, newspapers and others expressed anxiety about enslaved people behaving in ways that looked free, ultimately that anxiety simply defined publicly the boundaries and limits of slavery. And similarly, the need for physical segregation was unnecessary because slavery was the ultimate segregation, by status: no one could easily make the mistake that slaves, and by extension free blacks, were equal to whites. But once slavery ended, whites believed that other methods of controlling black urban populations were necessary; the idea of actually sharing economic or political gains with former slaves was impossible. And as stated most recently by

Gavin Wright, segregation actually aligned with and might even be stricter in newer cities like Atlanta, as opposed to older cities like New Orleans.[8] Successful racial segregation could be a mark of a city's success.

Patterns of racial segregation in cities across the nation, not only in southern cities, limited black possibilities. But throughout the 20th century, blacks moved from rural to urban locales in search of greater opportunities than the declining rural landscape could provide. Compared to rural sites, cities appeared to provide a greater variety of opportunities in terms of education, housing, and occupations. And although northern and western segregation was real, when compared to the constraints of the south, it was a better bet for the 6 million who left the south between 1910 and 1970. But as new mid-western (Chicago, Detroit) and western (Oakland, Los Angeles) cities emerged as possibilities for black migrants, the white supremacist ideas about blacks endemic to cities in the nineteenth century became part of the new cities as well. For many migrants, however, this was a distinction with a difference: there was just enough space to move into the urban working class instead of being part of the impoverished rural class. Adding to the move north and west was the fact that southern cities were in a slow decline for much of the twentieth century. Many blacks did move from the rural to the urban south, a movement has been under-researched. But the sluggish twentieth-century economies of former slave centers like New Orleans, Savannah and Charleston; and the more deeply entrenched patterns of racial segregation in both these older and in newer cities (Atlanta, for example), hampered black economic success to a greater degree than northern locales.[9]

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[8] On segregation and newer cities, Gavin Wright, Sharing the Prize: The Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution in the American South (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 16.

[9] Bruce Schulman, From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980 (1991. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) is a

By the time of post-World War Two Civil Rights movements and resultant desegregation, *integration* with African Americans as a strategy to demonstrate being a successful city was unthinkable for many whites.   The often-violent hostility towards school integration for three decades after *Brown* was mirrored in the struggle to integrate cities via housing, politics, and occupationally, across the nation. Combined with highway projects and new suburban housing that relied on racial covenants to keep blacks out, by the early 1970s cities experienced absolute declines in the numbers of whites; and rise in absolute numbers and in percentages of blacks as part of their populations. For blacks, this new numerical majority gave them access to political power in urban areas that they had not experienced since the Reconstruction era. Black mayors, city council and school board members, school superintendents, made southern cities in particular newly attractive to blacks, although a number of northern and western cities also experienced such changes. A new urban black middle class grew, sometimes with different goals and experiences than older black elites. Some had come up through post-WW2 and even 1930s civil rights struggles; others had not been visible participants in the courts or streets, but were among the first to take advantage of newly desegregated schools and contributed to the increase in high-school diplomas and college and advanced degrees, often as the first in their families. Both corporate and public-service government jobs were more widely available than ever to blacks. The growth of a black middle-class followed, and more quickly than probably anyone could have predicted.[10]

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detailed, searing indictment of the ways in which white supremacists beliefs became policies that limited not only black people, but the south as a whole. Wright, Sharing the Prize, details some of these economic limits as well as he recounts how the Civil Rights movement changed some things for blacks.

[10] Wright, Sharing the Prize.

Yet, black successes remained uneven; and cities in America from the 1970s through the 1990s were economically weak. That weakness resulted from white- and middle-class flight and the resultant loss in wealth; from deindustrialization; from the difficult national US economy of the 1970s, including the oil crisis; and from a general sense that cities were not the center of the nation's well-being. In addition to these structural issues, however, the face and fault of urban failure, not always, but often enough, remained black: in discussions of crime, of political corruption (at levels far lower than the unequal politics of the segregation era), of failing urban schools, of joblessness. From New Orleans to Chicago—from New York to Oakland and L.A., if there was a problem with a city, the black presence was part of it, often termed the "underclass."[11]

Today's Urban Renaissance: Does it Mean Anything For Blacks?

Much evidence suggests that the renaissance of America's cities is racially limited. For many cities, "renaissance" means the movement of whites back into the urban core, displacing blacks of all classes who held on through the economic and political disinvestments of the post-Civil Rights era. Conversations about economic revitalization and race are held separately, for the most part, with an assumption that rising tides will lift all boats. Those of us committed to city living have many personal anecdotes that suggest otherwise. A few months after I moved into my majority black neighborhood in Atlanta in 2001, the real estate section of the *Atlanta*

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[11] Michael B. Katz, ed., The "Underclass" Debate: Views From History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (1965); Thomas J. Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality In Postwar Detroit (1995. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Robert Self, American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Brenda Stevenson, The Contested Murder of LaTasha Harlins: Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the L.A. Riots (New York: Oxford, 2013); Kent Germany, New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship and the Search for the Great Society (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007); and many others.

Journal-Constitution featured the neighborhood on the cover. Its capsule history: founded as one of Atlanta's first suburbs in 1899, the neighborhood flourished until the 1970s. Then, in the 1990s, *people began moving back in.* This in a neighborhood that has two large, 100+ year-old black churches that are still active: one where the neighborhood, in all its diversity, still goes to vote during the elections; and the other is the frequent meeting place of the well-integrated neighborhood association. I've been pleased to see that many whites are moving into the neighborhood because of, not despite, the opportunity to live a truly integrated life, in race and class terms. But I continue to wonder how long that will last as the neighborhood increases in popularity and housing prices continue to rise.

In other cases, whole cities are ripe for renewal, but again it remains unclear who gets to claim these spaces. Detroit and New Orleans, for different catastrophic reasons, lost huge populations—one over a fairly long period of time; another, suddenly. In both cases, ideas about rebuilding seem neutral but have been marked by racial dissension and tension: Who gets to be a (re)builder? Who is or was a destroyer? One young person moving to Detroit following graduation from college described his excitement: "I moved to Detroit because the city is full of empty spaces, just waiting for me — for us — to fill them up."[12] Unfortunately, this well-meaning remark is full of assumptions about those who built that "empty space," worked in it, lived and loved in it, long before he arrived—and who may still be there. In New Orleans, local populations often lost as non-natives won struggles to rebuild places they assumed had been washed clean by the floodwaters of Katrina. Latino migrants were caught in the middle—invited to rebuild by craven developer Bush policies, but with nowhere to live and no wage protections, ended up squatting in "empty" spaces left by those who could not afford to return.

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[12] Max Nussenbaum, "Move Where You Can Matter," Huffington Post, last updated May 14, 2013.

Thus, Obama's renaissance is at best complicated, and at worst, not a renaissance at all, but the same dog chasing its tail, in which populations of blacks and whites continue to circle urban and suburban areas, driving each other in and out of neighborhoods rather than sharing urban space. Historically, the possibility for urban "integration" (residential or economic) has only existed in limited times and spaces, under slavery, Reconstruction and Jim Crow, when the racial hierarchy was clear. We have yet to live into a moment of *equity*, beyond the false choices of segregation or integration.