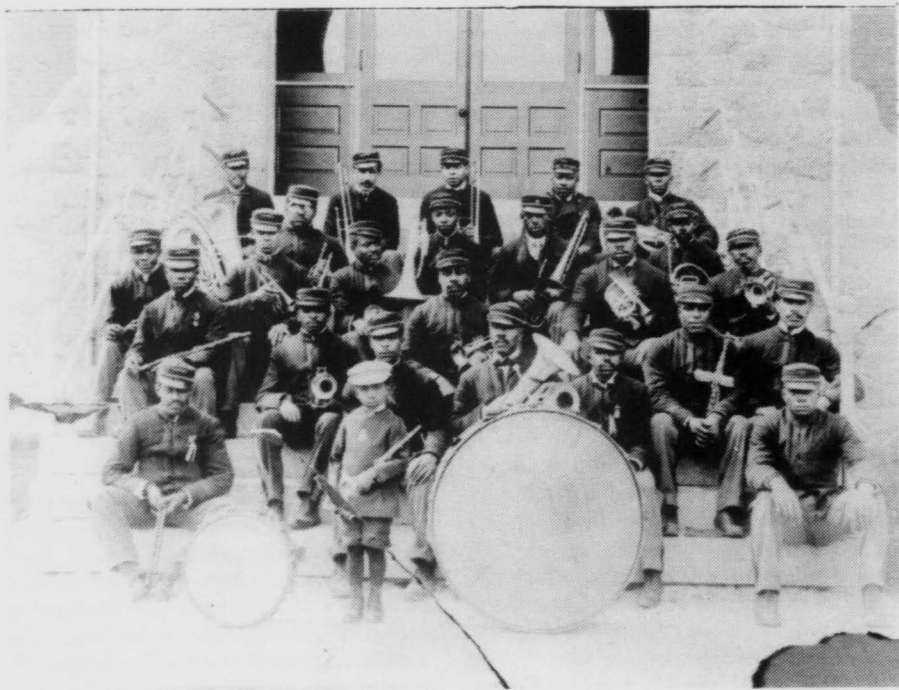


# "The Most Indispensable Man in His Community"; African-American Entrepreneurs in West Chester, Pennsylvania, 1865-1925

Robert Bussel

*Pennsylvania State University/Great Valley*

**Courtesy Chester County Historical Society**



*Liberty Cornet Band [between 1894 & 1895] on the steps of the Gay St. School, West Chester, Pa.*

Entrepreneurship and the pursuit of commercial success long have been regarded as essential elements of America's political, cultural, and economic vitality. Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, generations of working Americans, both native-born and immigrant, have looked to business enterprise as the surest route to respectability and social acceptance. For African Americans, however, entrepreneurship has been an elusive and often unattainable option. First barred by law and later by more subtle forms of discrimination from fully engaging in commercial activity, they have faced unique barriers in their attempts to enter the nation's economic mainstream. Despite these barriers, there is a long history of black entrepreneurship in America. Like many of their fellow citizens, African Americans have not lost their faith in the self-made man as a cultural icon.

African-American entrepreneurship long has been the subject of scholarly research and political controversy. At the end of the nineteenth century, in a discussion that reverberated widely, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois debated whether or not the embrace of entrepreneurship and capitalist values was appropriate for racial advancement. Pioneering African-American scholars such as Carter Woodson, Joseph Pierce, and Abram Harris, among others, uncovered a deeply rooted African-American tradition of economic self-help. They focused especially on the development of black-owned banking and insurance companies and identified the persistent problems African-American business people have historically encountered in establishing viable enterprises. Less sympathetically, E. Franklin Frazier condemned African-American business as a "social myth." He argued that African Americans lacked an entrepreneurial tradition and accused the black bourgeoisie of perpetuating this myth in order to uphold its privileged status. By the 1960s, however, with the advent of the civil rights movement and a resurgence of nationalist sentiment, black entrepreneurship regained favor as a means of establishing greater self-sufficiency and community control. As the entrepreneurial impulse has enjoyed a revival over the past two decades, African-American interest in business has accelerated, although the promise of commercial success has yet to be fully realized.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary scholars have by no means neglected the subject of African-American entrepreneurship. Studies of the ante and postbellum periods have revealed numerous examples of commercial activity undertaken by both slaves and free blacks. Black-owned insurance companies, banks, funeral parlors, and other enterprises have received particular attention, and biographies of leading African-American business pioneers such as beauty products tycoon, Madame C. J. Walker, also have been written. Nonetheless, African-American entrepreneurship tends to be treated episodically and impressionistically, in part because documentation describing black business activity is so limited. We lack detailed studies of how African-American business people actually operated their enterprises, overcame obstacles, and competed in the marketplace. Moreover, the role of black entrepreneurs as community leaders, mentors, and role models has not been fully explored or appreciated.<sup>2</sup>

It is in this context that the careers of Moses G. Hepburn, Charles H. Burns, and James Spence assume historical significance. This remarkable trio of African Americans established businesses in West Chester, Pennsylvania, following the Civil War and sustained their commercial success into the twentieth century. Raised in a town that prided itself on its racial tolerance, Spence, Burns, and Hepburn also became leaders within the African-American community and pressed West Chester's white elite to uphold its liberal heritage. Fortunately for the historian, their diverse activities were well-covered by the local press and also can be reconstructed from other documentary sources.

The experiences of Spence, Burns, and Hepburn permit us to understand more clearly the historical evolution of African-American entrepreneurship, the relationship between the black entrepreneur and the black community, and the multiple meanings of business success for black Americans. They also illuminate African-American strategies for maintaining a sense of community and securing a measure of equality during a period of rising racial antagonism and political retrenchment.

\* \* \*

Located 23 miles west of Philadelphia and 16 miles north of Wilmington, Delaware, West Chester gained a reputation in the early nineteenth century as a bastion of racial tolerance. The town was first settled by Quakers who strongly supported abolitionist activities and welcomed slaves seeking freedom. West Chester became a major stop on one branch of the Underground Railroad. The town vigorously supported the Union cause during the Civil War. After Frederick Douglass spoke in West Chester in July, 1863, and urged African Americans to join the war effort, approximately 60 of its black citizens opted to fight with the 54th Massachusetts regiment. When the war ended, it was two African Americans, Samuel J. Williams and Alexander Gladman, who brought the first news of Lee's surrender and were "allowed" by the town burgess to announce the armistice by ringing the courthouse bell.<sup>3</sup>

According to historian Carl D. Oblinger, West Chester was an "unusually tolerant Quaker town," in which "an amazingly open and diversified black occupational structure and large, geographically stable black population emerged by the late 1850s..." Especially when compared to other African-American communities in southeastern Pennsylvania, West Chester afforded blacks a substantial degree of mobility, resulting in the "persistence of a middling sort of black" by the dawn of the Civil War. Aided by Quaker employers with abolitionist leanings, African-Americans found steady work at several of West Chester's major businesses and in many smaller shops as well. In 1850, West Chester's population of 3,172 contained 451 African-American residents, approximately 14% of the total. By 1899, the town had expanded to 10,000 inhabitants, and the percentage of African Americans had risen to nearly 25%. The Bethel AME Church, established in 1816 with the approval of the town's Quaker elite, further helped to solidify West Chester's growing black population. The elementary school for African-American children was described by one observer as the "most imposing school building in the borough."<sup>4</sup>

Despite its liberal pretensions, West Chester was by no means immune from the racism that permeated nineteenth-century America. Of the nine people executed during the first hundred years of the town's existence, six were African Americans. Even before the Civil War, African-American workers in

the skilled trades were being supplanted by Irish and German immigrants, diluting the viability of the town's budding black middle class. The *Daily Local News*, West Chester's leading paper and a staunch supporter of the Republican Party, revealed as much about the attitudes of the town's white citizens as it did about the status of African Americans in this retrospective 1908 evaluation:

some of the negroes saved their earnings, bought homes for themselves, and established various lines of business. A few made snug little fortunes. Others who had not the spirit of commercial enterprise had less to show for their time spent in West Chester. It is a fact, however, that the race has several flourishing churches with good buildings, neat and comfortable, and scores of snug homes where sheriffs never pay a visit<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly, it was men like Moses G. Hepburn, Charles H. Burns, and James Spence that the *Daily Local News* had in mind in its recitation of African-American achievement. Hepburn was the oldest of the three, a native of Alexandria, Virginia, who was born around 1832. His father, also named Moses, was a slave, who "had been liberated by his paternal parent." "In him was united the blood of the African and the Anglo-Saxon," his obituary observed. In 1818, Hepburn's father sent his liberated son to West Chester to receive his education, perhaps inspired by the town's Quaker heritage.<sup>6</sup>

Afterwards, Hepburn returned to Virginia. Supported by a "bequest of several thousand dollars" from his father, he began a business supplying water for the city of Alexandria, where he supervised "nine teams and nine men." His ambitions for his children were thwarted, however, by a Virginia law that barred African Americans from attending public school. He responded by sending his son, Moses Garrison, to Washington, where he was educated under the auspices of the AME Church. Apparently, this act of defiance prompted Virginia authorities to threaten Hepburn's ability to conduct his business, for he returned to the more welcoming atmosphere of West Chester in 1853. According to 1860 federal census records, Hepburn described his occupation as "gentlemen." With \$9,000 in real estate holdings and \$30,000 in personal property, this description accurately reflected both his economic and social status. Upon his death in 1861, Hepburn left one-third of his estate to his wife and divided his remaining assets equally among his five children. Supported by these inherited resources, the younger Moses Hepburn, who had moved to West Chester during the Civil War, was now poised to launch his own business career.<sup>7</sup>

Like Hepburn, Charles Burns and James Spence were also native southerners. Burns was born a slave in Culpepper, Virginia, in either 1855 or 1856. Over twenty-five years later, he recounted for the local West Chester

Courtesy of Chester County Historical Society



*Moses Hepburn, 1832-1897. Portrait from West Chester Past and Present. . . Centennial Souvenir, 1798-1799. Published by Daily Local News, 1899.*

paper a harrowing incident where the mistress of the plantation threw him onto a fireplace grate after an argument with his mother, leaving young Charles with a "terrible sear" that "has ever since remained with him." He also recalled that his grandmother was so severely whipped by the son of the plantation owner that she eventually died of her injuries. His father was sold to another slaveowner and taken south, but Burns, his mother, and his two siblings were able to make their way north during the Civil War. The family apparently came to West Chester, but young Charles "was put to work" in Princeton, New Jersey,

before returning to West Chester around 1875. He then worked for a local attorney, and opened a small "oyster and eating saloon" shortly thereafter.<sup>8</sup>

Less is known about James Spence's background. He was reportedly born of free parents in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, and came to West Chester in 1849 when he was six years old. Circumstantial evidence suggests that members of his family served as cooks for some of West Chester's most prominent citizens, thereby gaining the contacts and expertise to enter the restaurant business. After purchasing a lot in 1850, Spence's father, Henry, gained his first tavern license in 1854. His mother, Amanda, also became involved in the business, buying additional space in 1868 for an expansion. Along with his brother Henry, Jr., James worked as a barber and also moonlighted as a bartender in a local tavern whose owner was of Irish descent.

Tragedy struck this enterprising family in 1871 when Amanda Spence was found murdered in the restaurant's kitchen, a crime for which her niece's husband was convicted and subsequently executed. After his father died in 1874, Spence and his brother took over the business, with James assuming total control after Henry, Jr.'s death in 1881.<sup>9</sup>

In a culture that extolled entrepreneurship as the surest path to upward mobility and social influence, African Americans encountered extreme difficulties in pursuing commercial success. Even after the Civil War, they were generally forced by either law or custom to serve a racially segregated market. They were further limited by a lack of capital, restricted access to credit, inadequate training, and poor location. Not surprisingly, the restaurant, hotel, and catering business became one of the few arenas in which African Americans could gain a toehold. Entering the restaurant business did not require large amounts of capital and provided African-American business people with access to a broader market, for many whites were more than willing to be waited on by blacks and appreciated the high quality of their cuisine and service. In nearby Philadelphia, as W. E. B. DuBois noted in his classic study, *The Philadelphia Negro*, caterers were not only successful businessmen but also community leaders, a status that Moses Hepburn, James Spence, and Charles Burns emulated in West Chester. Yet due to increased fees imposed by the state for obtaining liquor licenses, black catering declined in Philadelphia by the end of the nineteenth century as a remunerative occupation for African Americans. In West Chester, however, Hepburn, Spence, and Burns were able to buck this trend because of their business skills and sterling reputations in the community.<sup>10</sup>

The careers of Burns, Spence, and Hepburn richly document the varied strategies that each entrepreneur employed in order to establish a clientele and solidify his reputation. Lacking the parental resources enjoyed by Spence and Hepburn, Burns was the most self-made of the three. Described by the *Daily Local News* as a "thrifty and enterprising colored man," he began his oyster and eating saloon in 1880. His success did not come overnight. In 1884, he reported taking a job on Pullman cars running out of Philadelphia, presumably to earn capital in order to support his embryonic business.<sup>11</sup>

Epitomizing the robust entrepreneurial spirit of the late nineteenth century, Burns' career was characterized by a devotion to expansion, innovation, and diversification. In generating sufficient capital to fund improvements and broaden his product line, Burns avoided the constraints that typically undermined African-American entrepreneurs. In addition to serving fried oysters to "the leading families in West Chester," he later added roasted peanuts, a fruit stand, a bakery, and ice cream to his offerings. Burns eagerly embraced technological innovation, purchasing a new steel range that was one of the largest in West Chester and boasting that his ice cream machine made it possible

Courtesy Chester County Historical Society



*Spence's Restaurant, East Gay St., West Chester, Pa. Photo by J. Max Mueller, ca. 1890.*

for him "to sell ice cream at 18c a Quart." By 1891, Burns was able to purchase a building at 34 West Gay Street for \$5,250. In this strategic location near the county courthouse, he established "Burns' Great Oyster House," which catered to a largely white clientele. A frequent advertiser in the local press, he concluded his promotions with the declaration "Nuff Sed," using black vernacular to underscore the superior service that he offered his customers. His success enabled him to expand into real estate, which by 1910 included three dwellings and a lot whose value was assessed at \$2,000.<sup>12</sup>

Like Charles Burns, James Spence obtained a favorable Gay Street location adjacent to the courthouse for his cafe. Because he served alcohol, Spence was compelled to obtain an annual tavern license, a sometimes difficult task in Chester County, a stronghold of temperance activity. Spence's petitions for a liquor license were invariably supported by some of West Chester's leading figures, including attorneys, politicians, and businessmen, with whom he enjoyed cordial relationships. Spence served the town's elite, who accepted the *Daily Local News'* assessment of his talent: "James know how to cater to the human appetite and when he is snugly fixed in his improved quarters, we fully expect to find the delicious bivalves done up in a style approximating perfection." Testifying to his stature, Spence was the sole African-American member of the West Chester Board of Trade and took out a full-page advertisement in its promotional literature.<sup>13</sup>

Spence was continually engaged in upgrading and expanding his property. In 1883, he put a second story on the restaurant "in keeping with the growing business." By 1891, he had purchased additional land for "the erection of a handsome building for a residence and cafe" that would include sleeping apartments and private rooms. Catering to West Chester women who wanted their own preserve for relaxation and refreshment, the cafe featured a "saloon for ladies on the second floor" that "is strictly private." Spence's business success was underscored by the fact that in 1900 he owned "free of mortgage" a dwelling and stable worth \$6,500. By 1906, he was confident enough to begin extensive remodeling in order to combine two buildings into one and establish a hotel in addition to his restaurant.<sup>14</sup>

Moses Hepburn's career followed a somewhat different course from that of Charles Burns and James Spence. The Magnolia House, which he operated from 1866 until his death in 1897, principally served African-American patrons. Hepburn's 1868 petition for a tavern license acknowledged the segregation in public accommodations that continued in most northern cities despite its legal proscription. The petition noted "that the public houses now established refuse to entertain this class of people [African Americans] visiting the town, and they seek accommodations in private families and inconvenient places."<sup>15</sup> Hepburn's petition was supported by over a dozen of West Chester's most prominent businessmen, attorneys, and public officials. His cause also was boosted by John Hickman, a former Congressman and state legislator well-known for his anti-slavery views and advocacy of civil rights. Located in West Chester's largely African-American east ward, the Magnolia House was described as a "three story brick building, containing nineteen rooms, well-furnished and in good condition, and stabling for fifteen horses." The hotel attracted such leading African Americans as Frederick Douglass, the journalist William Howard Day, and visiting members of the black clergy. It also provided lodging for members of African-American fraternal and civic organizations attending meetings in West Chester. This ongoing contact with African-American dignitaries, as well as his status as "a perfectly respectable man" among West Chester's white elite, prepared Hepburn well for the leadership role that he subsequently would assume within the black community.<sup>16</sup>

Hepburn was not content, however, to simply run his hotel. Whether he was motivated by his father's example of property ownership, the diversified financial interests of his white peers, or a desire to transcend the limits of a strictly African-American market, he began to invest heavily in land and real estate. At the time of his death, he owned a 56-acre farm and 11 other properties valued at over \$15,000 along with personal property and bank accounts totaling over \$14,000. These holdings made him the "wealthiest and best known colored man in Chester county." His assets rivaled those of West Chester's most prominent white entrepreneurs and landlords.<sup>17</sup>



Hepburn's accumulation of property also may have stemmed from his mixed success in an omnibus service that he started in 1873. Designed to transport passengers, mostly white, from the train depot to their homes in West Chester, the business got off to a rocky start. Reportedly, not one of the fifty passengers on the train used the service on its maiden voyage. Hepburn persisted and claimed in August 1874 that the omnibus was "doing a good business," but at the same time announced his willingness to sell the route. A year later, though, he was still operating it, apparently attracting enough customers to maintain the service. Subsequently, Hepburn plowed his profits into safer investments that enhanced his economic independence.<sup>18</sup>

\* \* \*

The business success enjoyed by Hepburn, Spence, and Burns and their frequent contact with West Chester's white elite did not separate or distance them from the African-American community. Rather than viewing themselves as aloof "aristocrats of color" they became vitally involved in black West Chester's fraternal and civic life. All three were active participants in the Liberty Coronet Band, an African-American musical group formed in 1867. Along with his brother Henry, James Spence was one of the band's founders, sang bass, and led the organization during its first decade of existence. Ultimately, he was forced to resign his duties due to the "pressure of business upon his time" but remained an active supporter. Moses Hepburn was a long-time member of the band's board of directors, and Charles Burns, who was an organist and church choir leader, became the group's president in 1891. A *Daily Local News* article on Burns' election underscored both the band's status and the difficulties involved in sustaining viable voluntary organizations: "Its leader is now the enterprising Charles H. Burns, the well-known colored businessman, next to the Court House, who is determined to bring it up to its former enviable standard of excellence as a first-class musical organization."<sup>19</sup>

The Liberty Coronet Band served important functions for West Chester's African-American community. It was a form of popular entertainment under the control and direction of African Americans that enabled a broad cross-section of the community to collaborate on an equal footing. The band enjoyed a high profile, participating in parades and concerts, and traveling throughout Pennsylvania and along the mid-Atlantic coast. It performed at political rallies and frequently serenaded West Chester public figures, both black and white, who had won the support of African Americans. While Moses Hepburn's role appears to have been largely managerial, James Spence and Charles Burns not only contributed their business expertise but also their musical abilities. Their ongoing participation suggested that commercial success had not led them to

a “dusty desert of dollars and smartness,” as W. E. B. DuBois had feared might occur once African Americans began to embrace business values.<sup>20</sup>

Hepburn, Burns, and Spence were also attached to churches and fraternal organizations that provided West Chester’s black citizens with networks of mutual support, fellowship, and spiritual comfort. Burns and Hepburn were both members of the Bethel AME Church, the oldest and most prestigious African-American church in West Chester. Burns was an organist and for a time the church’s choir director. Hepburn again played a behind-the-scenes role, using his property as collateral to assist Bethel AME when it was building an addition. James Spence and his wife, Minerva, were active in helping to establish the Second Presbyterian Church in 1887. Spence was a founding trustee of the church, which broke away from the white-dominated First Presbyterian Church so that African Americans could assert greater control over their worship and build an institution more suited to their needs.<sup>21</sup>

In part, Bethel AME and Second Presbyterian embodied the values of a small but self-conscious African-American middle class. According to a Bethel AME church historian, “within the group there was a manifest concern as to the property accumulation and better home conditions.” This attitude was also manifested at the Second Presbyterian Church. In an 1894 debate on the issue that “money is more advantageous to the colored race than education,” the church’s pastor had to break a tie vote among those assembled (he cast his ballot in favor of education).<sup>22</sup>

The emphasis of Bethel and Second Presbyterian on acquisition and accumulation echoed Booker T. Washington’s arguments on behalf of black entrepreneurship. Yet their church experience did much more than simply confirm the social status of Charles Burns, Moses Hepburn, James Spence, and their upwardly mobile peers. Indeed, many church activities reflected W. E. B. DuBois’ advocacy of African-American cultural and intellectual achievement. For example, in 1902, Bethel AME hosted a meeting of the West Chester Progressive Literary society which featured musical presentations, a paper on “history and the Bible,” and a debate on whether “U. S. Senators should be elected by popular vote.” Burns participated in this debate with James H. Patterson, a waiter, as his partner. They were opposed by Franklin J. Wood, a teacher and community activist, and William Smith, an undertaker. This event and others like it allowed members of the African-American middle and working classes to join in educating the community. It also gave both workers and professionals an opportunity to develop leadership skills and establish working relationships that helped to unite African Americans during subsequent political struggles with West Chester’s governing white elite.<sup>23</sup>

The participation of Burns, Spence, and Hepburn in church and fraternal organizations also served other important social functions. At an 1892 church fair commemorating the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ arrival, Burns spoke

proudly about the history of some of his artifacts, including a 150-year-old looking glass and a 300-year-old picture. Burns' presentation, along with a talk by a church member whose father had served as a bodyguard to George Washington, affirmed both the historical rootedness of African Americans and their contributions to the nation's advancement. At an 1889 event at the Second Presbyterian Church, a Liberian student from nearby Lincoln University presented James Spence's wife, Minerva, with a bullwhip used by an African slave dealer. In each of these instances the church was consciously engaged in the transmission of historical memory and the reinforcement of mutual obligation among its members.<sup>24</sup>

A similar theme was evoked by Charles Burns at a 50th anniversary celebration of the Free and Accepted Masons Harmony Lodge #2. At this 1902 gathering, Burns as presiding officer asked that the families of deceased members donate their photographs "to adorn the lodge room." This effort to preserve the memory of lodge members' contributions to the community attempted to ensure a sense of continuity from one generation to the next. The success of this effort was affirmed by the presence of two men who also spoke at the meeting. J. W. Smothers, Moses Hepburn's son-in-law, gave a speech on "Our Grand Officers," and Spence's son, James, Jr., lectured on the subject of "Music in the Lodge Room." The involvement of children and relatives in both church and fraternal activities underscored the important role that these institutions played in instructing the next generation about both its private and public responsibilities.<sup>25</sup>

The Liberty Coronet Band, the churches, and fraternal organizations were deeply intertwined in West Chester, with many African-American men joining Spence, Burns, and Hepburn in holding multiple memberships. For example, Burns and Hepburn were both members of the Knights Templar and the Free and Accepted Masons, in addition to their involvement with the Liberty Coronet Band and Bethel AME. The message of these organizations was partly explained by a white political leader who had been invited to speak at the Free and Accepted Masons' fiftieth anniversary celebration: "The keynote of success is earnest and hard work." In addition to a personal work ethic, African-American fraternal organizations, the band, and the churches equally stressed public responsibilities such as service, mutual obligation, and setting an example for the community. For Charles Burns, Moses Hepburn, and James Spence, mingling with other blacks in civic, church, and fraternal settings diminished the class distance between themselves and less successful members of the community. It also affirmed that their business success was not simply an individual triumph but one which occurred within a communal context.<sup>26</sup>

Fraternal bonds and business activities evolved into a close personal friendship in the case of Spence and Hepburn. Spence's wife helped plan an 1880 anniversary celebration for Hepburn and his wife, Christiana; his son,

James, Jr., served as an usher at the wedding of Hepburn's daughter. The two men supported each other on less festive occasions, too. Hepburn was present in 1872 when Spence had to commit his brother, Henry, to an asylum. At Hepburn's funeral in 1897, Spence was a pallbearer. Given the age difference between the two, it is quite possible that Hepburn served as a mentor to his younger friend. Presumably, both Spence and Hepburn also were acquainted with Charles Burns through their common ventures, although direct evidence of this connection is sketchy. Certainly for Hepburn and Spence, their personal ties provided a form of mutual support and solidarity as they conducted their businesses and assumed roles as community leaders.<sup>27</sup>

The authority conferred by their commercial achievements and prominence in African-American civic life thrust Burns, Hepburn, and Spence into leadership roles in the political arena. Following the collapse of Reconstruction and the Republican Party's increasing unwillingness to press for enforcement of African-American rights, the situation of black Americans rapidly deteriorated. In West Chester, a Republican stronghold, this retreat provoked an especially bitter reaction, for African Americans deeply resented the town's renunciation of its liberal heritage. As black community leader Franklin Wood observed in 1886, "You can now see what the sons of their Abolitionist fathers have become within a few years within the old Republican Chester County." One area in which this anger manifested itself was a series of fights over education. Between 1880 and 1910, African Americans repeatedly complained about the lack of black teachers, inadequate facilities for black children, and segregated schools. As one anonymous letter-writer declared: "Our school board owes its splendid majorities to the colored vote, and yet it fails to recognize the just claims of the colored portion of its constituency."<sup>28</sup>

As agitation heightened, S. R. Barton, a black citizen who earned his living as a barber, explained his expectations of men like Burns and Spence, underscoring their pivotal role within the African-American community: "But there is no use in my making a fight about it. The colored men who own property and pay taxes of some considerable amount can work more successfully, and I expect them to do it." Burns and Spence did not disappoint Barton; they were clearly willing to use their influence on behalf of their fellow African Americans. In 1894, Burns informed the local press that a committee was being formed to protest school segregation. "It is not right to compel us to send children from the neighborhood of one school to another," he asserted, "and we intend to have this practice stopped if we can."<sup>29</sup>

Fourteen years later, James Spence supported protestors seeking to rebuild the Gay Street School, which had served generations of West Chester's African-American children and was destroyed by a fire. In a poem that appeared in the December 5, 1908, issue of the *Daily Local News*, he offered a revealing plea for the school's continuation:

Give us back our Gay street school house.  
Build it up; it is our pride.  
Let the parents and children  
In their choice be satisfied.

Let the good Lord be your guidance;  
Then we know you'd never sell  
Our beautiful Gay street building,  
Which we always love so well . . .

Treat us as if we, too, were human;  
Let not color enter in.  
We have feelings, same as 'you uns.'  
Please, let your good judgment win . . .<sup>30</sup>

Spence's poem invoked a variety of sentiments that African Americans historically have balanced in their political discourse: racial pride, religious sanction, assertion of a common humanity, the necessity for equality, and the right of self-determination. Drawing on his relationships with West Chester's white elite, he delicately appealed to the white community's "good judgment" and religious values while firmly asserting the black community's humanity and insistence on equal treatment. His argument proved persuasive, affirming his ability to act as community leader and negotiator. The fundamental demands of the black community remained unresolved, however. While the Gay Street School was eventually rebuilt and more African-American teachers and administrators were hired, schools remained segregated until students reached high school. The quest for educational opportunity in West Chester continued unabated well into the twentieth century.

While Moses Hepburn did not openly join James Spence and Charles Burns in the struggles over education, he was a central figure in the ongoing fight by African Americans to obtain political representation in West Chester. From 1850 to 1880, West Chester's nomination for borough council offices were held at town meetings. In a Republican stronghold such as Chester County, gaining the Republican nomination was usually tantamount to winning election. By the 1870s, African Americans, most of whom were loyal Republicans, began to mobilize and vote as a unit at these meetings, insisting upon representation in local office. The frustration driving this quest was explained in 1879 by Oliver Reynolds, a community spokesperson: "We can't get any skilled labor to do, we have no offices, we can't even get to be foreman in a coal yard, and that is black as sin."

As West Chester's most visibly successful African American and a staunch Republican, Moses Hepburn became the black community's designated

candidate for a seat on the borough council. For nearly a decade, however, Republican leaders thwarted the concerted efforts of West Chester's African Americans to win his nomination and election.<sup>31</sup> *The Jeffersonian* newspaper, a Democratic Party organ, offered an openly racist analysis in 1872 that nonetheless captured well the machinations of GOP leaders and the frustrations of African-Americans:

the 'coons' were out in force . . . The darkies were a little soured because they failed to get the negro landlord of Georgetown Mose Hepburn upon the ticket . . . They [GOP leaders] want the niggers only to vote them into office but are unwilling to return the compliment and vote any negroes into any of the many lucrative offices which they control in the county<sup>32</sup>

Purportedly, Hepburn and his supporters had been assured of his nomination and were later double-crossed by Republican leaders. In 1874, Hepburn ran on a "Reform" ticket with other Republicans who were bucking the party machine, but lost. A year later, he was the "unanimous choice of his people" but again failed to win party support, spurring African Americans to walk out of the meeting in protest. Faced with persistent Republican duplicity, the choices for African-Americans were nonetheless limited. Black loyalty to the Republican Party ran deep, the GOP was becoming less dependent on the African-American vote, and the Democratic Party was hardly a palatable alternative. Yet some black activists, such as Philadelphia's William Still, an abolitionist leader and businessman, argued that African Americans owed the Republican Party no special allegiance and should reconsider their traditional loyalties.<sup>33</sup>

African Americans in West Chester responded to Still's advice, recognizing that the black population was large enough to constitute a potential swing vote. Seeking to assert their political independence, black Republicans sent a strong message to the GOP hierarchy in 1879. "Owing to the fact that the colored voters were dissatisfied with the Republican nomination for Chief Burgess," African Americans in the town's predominantly black east ward supported the Democratic candidate and sharply diminished the Republicans' usual margin of victory. Frustrated yet again during an 1881 attempt to secure Hepburn's nomination, African-American leaders issued a pointed threat to the GOP: "We will not become Democrats but may the day soon approach when the colored citizens may withdraw from the political world and become resolved to let any party triumph over the Republican party by our silence."<sup>34</sup>

Finally, with the support of black GOP delegates who included James Spence, party leaders agreed to a *de facto* ward system that allowed the town's east ward to be represented on borough council by an African American. Moses

Hepburn was elected to the borough council in 1882 and served on the body's gas and police committees. Apparently, African Americans decided to rotate their designated seat on borough council and give other leaders the opportunity to serve. After finishing a two-year term, Hepburn gave way to four other African Americans who represented the east ward until 1892. He remained active in local politics, however, especially as some Republicans began a determined effort to undermine African-American gains. Their initial strategy was to partition the east ward, which was racially mixed, in order to dilute African-American voting strength.<sup>35</sup>

Hepburn was elected treasurer of a newly formed organization opposing this move. He prophetically explained the implications of the GOP's counterattack. The east ward, he feared "would be afterward known as the Negro Ward" were it divided. Diplomatically choosing his words, he noted that "we have in a general way gotten along very well with the white people, and I see no reason why we should be cut off." Not surprisingly for a man of means, he went on to observe that the proposed partition "would depreciate the value of my property and that of others." Hepburn's conciliatory tone scarcely obscured the grave concerns accompanying his message. He well understood that the Republican plan would increase residential segregation, threaten West Chester's small black middle class, and undermine the interracial amity that he had attempted to nurture throughout his career.<sup>36</sup>

Not all white Republicans supported this naked attempt at disenfranchising West Chester's African-American community. Some prominent white leaders, whose Quaker values had long led them to champion political and civil rights for African Americans, joined black Republicans in their opposition to the new representational plan. Despite the protests of Hepburn, other African-American leaders, and their white allies, the county commissioners approved the partitioning of the east ward. When this move failed to deter African Americans from being elected to borough council, Republican leaders moved even more decisively. In December 1892, they voted to replace the ward system with at-large balloting. This scheme compelled all candidates to run city-wide, an arrangement that fatally eroded the black voting strength that had evolved under the *de facto* ward system. The effects were devastating. After 1892, there was no African-American representation on the borough council for nearly 75 years. The amendment to GOP rules was passed without a quorum, albeit by a slim 9-8 margin. Appropriately enough, undemocratic means were used to secure undemocratic ends, adding insult to injury as West Chester's brief flirtation with political inclusion for African Americans abruptly ended.<sup>37</sup>

Although Moses Hepburn, Charles Burns, and James Spence shared common experiences and values, they each responded differently to the Republican assault on their citizenship and dignity. Hepburn placed a small notice in the April 6, 1894, issue of the *Daily Local News*. He declared: "I was

the first colored man to be elected a member of the Borough Council of West Chester. Since then, all of the members of the Council at that time have died but myself and that has been but ten years ago." This cryptic statement epitomized Hepburn's understated style and reflected the delicacy of his role as an emissary to West Chester's white community. His reference to his officeholding was not simply a nostalgic yearning for a better past but also a proud assertion of African-American resiliency in the face of white betrayal. It both articulated Hepburn's pride in his individual achievement and affirmed his role as an instrument of collective community sentiment.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps influenced by his bitter memories of slavery, Charles Burns adopted a more militant stance. He became a leader in the Independent Republican Colored Club, a group that attempted to establish an alternative to the state Republican machine headed by the powerful Senator Matthew Quay. At a November 1900 meeting, Burns moved that the independents censure the Quay machine for endorsing a Jim Crow policy for GOP clubs and urged African-Americans "to leave such a set." Several weeks later, he chaired a mass meeting convened to protest a racist letter opposing black suffrage that appeared in a New York newspaper. The letter was written by R. P. Sharples, scion of a prominent West Chester Quaker family. The meeting approved a resolution denouncing Sharples as "a traitor to his Quaker ancestors and his family." This language, with its implications of treason, condemned the betrayal of West Chester's liberal heritage and underscored the meaning that African Americans attached to voting as an expression of their citizenship. In contrast to Moses Hepburn's understated, gentlemanly approach, Charles Burns reflected the rising anger of a younger generation that began to challenge aggressively racial insults and the reemergence of Jim Crow.<sup>39</sup>

James Spence maintained a much higher social profile than either Moses Hepburn or Charles Burns, traveling to Washington for parties with the African-American elite, hosting Frederick Douglass' grandson at his home, and frequently entertaining black dignitaries. These contacts with politically well-placed African Americans left him less estranged from mainstream politics than Charles Burns. Despite the setbacks African Americans had suffered in West Chester and across the nation, Spence remained both a patriot and a Republican. Two of his sons, William and James, Jr., served in the Army, while a third, Percy, worked as a supervisor at the United States Navy Yard in Washington, "the first colored man to ever hold that position." Being a "first" was clearly an important matter to Spence. His continuing loyalty to the Republican Party was rewarded in 1904, when he became "the only colored man from Chester County who has served on a United States District Court jury." Spence was made jury foreman on his last case and exulted that "I was treated as well as any of the white men and was shown every courtesy."<sup>40</sup>



Yet Spence was disturbed by the Republican Party's eroding commitment to African Americans. Explaining his decision not to attend the Charleston, South Carolina Exposition in 1902, he observed:

The Civil Rights Bill guarantees us a right, so long as we were respectable, cleanly, sober and have the money to pay for it, to get accommodations the same as the white people. I consider myself clean and should not be obliged to go in a "Jim Crow" car. . . . It is somebody's fault that things are not different but so long as they are not, I see no use in attempting to change impossibilities<sup>41</sup>

Spence displayed a businessman's pragmatism and a community leader's careful judgment. While he knew where to find fault, he was unwilling to "name names" and burn his political bridges. Yet as an African American, he regretted that the social bargain upon which he had based his career was being abrogated. He had hoped that embracing business values, patriotism, and upright behavior would result in gains not only for himself and his family but for the race as a whole. This faith, which approximated Booker T. Washington's prescription for African-American advancement, was accompanied by a fierce commitment to egalitarian and republican values that reflected the contrasting approach of W. E. B. DuBois.

Like many African Americans of his generation, Spence looked to the state as the guarantor of these values. His faith in the state's commitment was tested not only by national events but also by personal tragedy. His son, William, who had served two tours of duty in the Army, disappeared mysteriously in 1904 following his return from the Philippines. Possibly, the discharged soldier, who had landed in San Francisco, was killed for his recently received back pay. A newspaper article recalling the disappearance fifteen years later described James Spence's frustration: "His father is still active in endeavoring to locate him but has received no aid from the government."<sup>42</sup> Spence had to suspect that the government's reluctance to investigate his son's disappearance was racially motivated. If the state was unwilling to meet its obligation to African-American citizens who had fulfilled their patriotic duty, one of the fundamental principles that had guided his life was seriously compromised. As a result, Spence's pride in his personal achievement was tempered as his faith in the state ebbed, and he watched the collective progress of African Americans fade.

\* \* \*

Their political and community involvements notwithstanding, Hepburn, Burns, and Spence remained businessmen whose primary attention was focused on sustaining their successful enterprises. As saloon keepers and restaurateurs,

however, they could not remain insulated from the political and cultural conflicts over temperance that raged throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An active Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) chapter existed in West Chester, led by the wives of some of the town's most prominent citizens. The chapter frequently filed remonstrances against applications for liquor licenses, helped carry Chester County's vote for prohibition during an unsuccessful 1889 statewide referendum, and supported a high licensing fee aimed at limiting the liquor trade. Notably, the African-American community in West Chester was split over participation in the temperance movement. Pastors at Bethel AME and Second Presbyterian publicly supported the cause, and an African-American branch of the WCTU was formed in 1885. Yet blacks were angered by the WCTU's refusal to include African Americans into its ranks despite their repeated offers of assistance. Moreover, Spence's and Hepburn's livelihoods depended on leading elements in the white community, including fellow businessmen who enjoyed a drink with their meals and believed that turning West Chester into a dry town might diminish their own customer base.<sup>43</sup>

Spence, Burns, and Hepburn all had brushes with the law during their tenures in the restaurant business. Spence experienced the most serious difficulty in 1874. Working for a local tavern owner named Patrick McCabe, he was convicted of selling liquor without a license and providing minors with alcohol. The court fined Spence \$100 and sentenced him to fifty days in jail, rebuking him for thinking that he "could give liquor to boys, corrupt their taste, and blight the hopes of their parents." Noting that McCabe had lost a leg in a railroad accident, the judge showed leniency and spared him a prison term. The fact that Spence was imprisoned while his boss avoided jail raised the specter of unequal treatment, although Spence was not the only tavern employee to be jailed during this period.<sup>44</sup>

Charles Burns and Moses Hepburn were more fortunate than Spence in their dealings with the legal system. Burns avoided conviction on allegations of "nuisance" and selling liquor to a minor. A grand jury failed to indict Hepburn for "keeping a gambling house" and selling liquor "to a person of known intemperate habits." It was not legal harassment that ended Moses Hepburn's career, however, but rather a mysterious altercation with an "obnoxious white stranger" in 1897. Hepburn had been suffering from pulmonary problems for some time and after arguing with the unnamed white man, died of what the coroner ruled was a "hemorrhage of the lungs." Initial reports from eyewitnesses suggested the possibility of a physical assault, but these claims were not repeated at the official inquest. Since there was no subsequent outcry from the black community, it appears that most African Americans accepted the coroner's judgment. The Magnolia Hotel did survive

Hepburn's death, however. His son-in-law, J. W. Smothers, took over its management and was able to sustain the business until 1922.<sup>45</sup>

The careers of Charles Burns and James Spence did not end so dramatically. Nonetheless, their troubles reverberated throughout the community. With the election of the staunch temperance advocate, A. P. Reid, as chief burgess in 1906 (his wife was a prominent WCTU member), a systematic crackdown began on tavern owners and alleged violators of Sunday blue laws. This crackdown was also spurred by concern over an "influx of foreigners who were rapidly leading West Chester into 'wide open' Sunday customs." Notably, the list of people indicted during this period included numerous African-American, Italian, Polish, and Irish surnames. This discriminatory enforcement of liquor laws clearly indicated the racist and nativist overtones animating the actions of West Chester's Protestant elite.<sup>46</sup>

In July 1908, Charles Burns was arrested and charged with selling liquor without a license. "Well-known to be a temperance man himself," he was assured by his distributor that a new drink he had begun to serve was non-alcoholic. Upon examination by a chemist, however, the drink was found to contain a small amount of alcohol. Refusing to accept the jury's guilty verdict, Burns appealed his \$500 fine and three-month jail sentence to Superior Court. For his lawyers, he hired a prominent local Democrat and a former chief burgess, a maverick Republican. They argued that the drink in question was non-intoxicating and described the lower court's action against a "reputable citizen" and "caterer of long experience" as an "outrage." "The people so regard it," they continued, and the Commonwealth ought to be ashamed of herself in thus seeking in such a red-handed manner to send an innocent man to jail."<sup>47</sup>

The Superior Court rejected Burns' claim, and on March 16, 1909, he began serving his sentence. The fact that Burns was being jailed for a relatively minor offense underscored the power of West Chester's cultural conservatives and signified the precarious status of even the town's most respectable African-American citizens. Upon his release, Burns did resume his business and public activities, serving as a Chester County commissioner for a fiftieth anniversary Emancipation celebration in 1913. He suffered from "tubercular trouble," however, and his health rapidly failed. Returning to West Chester after an extended stay in a sanitarium, Burns died in 1917 at the age of 61. His business was apparently unaffected by his legal troubles, for he left an estate valued at \$8,000 that approximated his assets from earlier periods.<sup>48</sup>

James Spence's clashes with the law were even more visible than Charles Burns'. He had extensively remodeled his building in order to provide guest lodging and create what the local press described as "one of the finest business places in the borough." In 1906, Spence applied for a hotel license that would have permitted him to sell not only beer and wine but "spirituous liquors" which carried a higher profit margin. In a ruling that "came as a surprise to

many people," he was denied the hotel license by the county judge. Undaunted, Spence vowed to continue his quest and threatened further legal action. In July, 1909, several months after Charles Burns' sentencing, he, too, was charged with illegal liquor selling. The case generated widespread public attention. Spence's stature as one of the community's most prominent African-American businessman made him a high-profile target, and his indictment represented a renewed effort by pro-temperance forces to break the back of alcohol sales in West Chester.<sup>49</sup>

Questioned about the charges, Spence declared: "All I ask is fair treatment. This is only an action brought because of a grudge or something of that sort. . . . As you and others well know, I have always kept an orderly house." Characteristically, Spence couched his complaint as a simple plea for equal treatment, affirmed his commitment to ethical behavior, and did not identify his opponents by name. It is impossible to know precisely the degree to which the "grudge" against Spence was motivated by racism, the fears of his competitors, or the pro-temperance sentiment of the authorities. Still, to indict a man of Spence's reputation had to be seen as a slap at West Chester's African-American community, and an "anxious crowd" gathered outside the courthouse when he arrived for a bail hearing. Convicted of illegal sales in October, 1909, Spence retained Colonel A. M. Holding, one of Chester County's ablest attorneys and most prominent Democrats, to handle his appeal.<sup>50</sup>

Following an unfavorable review from Superior Court, Spence took his case to the state Supreme Court, showing a grim determination to challenge the local mores impeding his ability to run his business. In 1911, Spence's persistence was rewarded, when the high court reversed his conviction. In defiance of state law, the court found, Chester County had pandered to local temperance sentiment and granted Spence a restricted liquor license that it "had no power to exact from him." The decision represented a stinging rebuke to local authorities and a strong assertion of state power over local prerogative.<sup>51</sup>

Spence's victory proved Pyrrhic, however. While appealing his conviction, he was forced to close his restaurant in 1910. Without a hotel license, he lacked the ability to recoup his investment in renovating the building. In 1913, Spence reopened the restaurant in a hotel, but the new location was removed from the courthouse crowd that had comprised the bulk of his clientele. Perhaps, too, his legal triumph had alienated some of his customers, for his willingness to challenge the local power elite had strayed far beyond acceptable boundaries, especially for an African American. Adding to his woes, some of the traditional problems that had historically plagued black businessmen (lack of capital, poor location) finally caught up with him. According to 1920 tax records, his new building was worth only \$2,800, a nearly 50% decrease from the value of his better-located property of two decades earlier. Although Spence remained in business until his death in 1925, he was unable to replicate his earlier success.<sup>52</sup>

\* \* \*

A 1901 letter from a boyhood friend to James Spence, which he permitted the *Daily Local News* to publish, recreated the mythic image of West Chester that had inspired the careers of the town's three most prominent African-American entrepreneurs. Nostalgically recalling his home town, Daniel Webster Nields wrote: "I am glad to have been born and raised in a community where prejudice found no foothold, where a man's worth in the community was not established by the color of his clothes or the shade of his skin but by his deportment."<sup>53</sup> Throughout their careers, James Spence, Moses Hepburn, and Charles Burns attempted to hold West Chester's white citizens to this color-blind endorsement of individual merit. All three hoped to demonstrate their worthiness in America's quintessential proving ground, business. They parleyed their business success into community leadership, seeking to deal with their white counterparts on an equal footing. The achievements of Spence, Hepburn, and Burns did win them respect from those elements of the white community who remained loyal to West Chester's egalitarian tradition. When they entered the political arena, however, their experience graphically revealed the limits of white tolerance in West Chester. Like their counterparts in both Pennsylvania and throughout the nation, they could not overcome the white community's fear of growing black political power. And in Chester County, they were unable to quell the determination of cultural conservatives who displayed no qualms in undermining the town's most visible symbols of African-American success.

The careers of James Spence, Moses Hepburn, and Charles Burns illuminate the crucial role played by African-American entrepreneurs in postbellum America and suggest the insights to be gained from closer examination of the black experience in smaller towns. In the words of Booker T. Washington's National Negro Business League, Spence, Burns, and Hepburn became "the most indispensable [men] in the community."<sup>54</sup> While the League viewed indispensability in terms of providing a valued service, West Chester's leading black entrepreneurs offered a more expansive definition. Each took W. E. B. DuBois's classic notion of "double consciousness" and found ways to proclaim themselves both "Negroes" and "Americans." As self-made, self-reliant men who simultaneously insisted on citizenship rights and social inclusion, they embodied vital strands of America's republican ethos. As committed participants in the life of the black community, they insisted upon celebrating their achievements within a collective African-American context. This powerful synthesis affirmed their credibility as community leaders who embodied the aspirations of their people and could speak forcefully on their behalf.

The demise of the Magnolia House, Spence's Restaurant, and Burns' Great Oyster House reflected an early twentieth-century trend that limited black businesses to a largely segregated market. Moreover the deaths of Moses

Hepburn, Charles Burns, and James Spence deprived West Chester's African-American community of vital sources of leadership. As Hepburn had predicted, twentieth-century West Chester's repudiation of its earlier commitments to racial justice led to *de facto* segregation that resembled the visibly oppressive culture of the deep South. Regarding the tone of race relations in post-World War II West Chester, local resident Robert London recalled: "If you asked for a soda, you got a paper cup instead of a glass. If you asked for a banana split, it was given to you in a paper container instead of a glass container. It was as if you were someone who would contaminate others." It was not until the changed circumstances of the 1960s that another generation of "indispensable" men—and women—emerged to win the battles that Hepburn, Spence, and Burns had begun nearly a century before.<sup>55</sup>

## Notes

The author would like to thank Laurie Rofini and Barbara Weir of the Chester County Archives and Records Services for their generous assistance in the preparation of this manuscript. The staff at the Chester County Historical Society also provided advice and guidance. Samuel Stretton, Esq., granted me access to his extensive research on the history of African-American disenfranchisement in West Chester. Professor Jim Jones of West Chester University and his student, Christopher Waychunas, alerted me to useful sources. Finally, I have benefited from the critical readings of Gerald Eggert and Nick Salvatore.

1. For a representative sampling of general works on African-American entrepreneurship, see John Sibley Butler, *Entrepreneurship and Self-Help Among Black Americans: A Reconsideration of Race and Economics* (Albany, 1991), 38, 42, 72-75, 143; Joseph A. Pierce, "The Evolution of Negro Business," in Roland W. Bailey (ed.), *Black Business Enterprise: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York, 28-31; St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, "Negro Business: Myth and Fact," in Bailey, *Black Business Enterprise*, 63-65; J. H. Harmon, Jr., Arnett G. Lindsay, and Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro as a Businessman* (College Park, 1929), 1-30; Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (Garden City, 1963), 156-171; W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Millwood, 1973, reprinted edition), 41-60; E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York, 1957), 53-59, 153-173; Abram L. Harris, *The Negro As Capitalist* (College Park, 1969).
2. Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters* (New York, 1974), 241-249; A'Leila Perry Bundles, *Madame C. J. Walker* (New York, 1991); W. E. B. DuBois, "History of the Black Artisan From Africa to Emancipation," in Julius Lester (ed.), *The Seventh Son: The Thought and Writings of W. E. B. DuBois*, Volume I (New York, 1971), 334-353; Earl Ofari, *The Myth of Black Capitalism* (New York, 1970); Carl R. Osthaus, *Freedmen, Philanthropy, and Fraud: A History of the Freedman's Savings Bank* (Urbana, 1976); Michael A. Plater, *African-*

*American Entrepreneurship in Richmond, 1890-1940: The Story of R. C. Scott* (New York, 1996); Juliet E. K. Walker, "Racism, Slavery and Free Enterprise: Black Entrepreneurship in the United States Before the Civil War," *Business History Review*, Volume 60, No. 3, Autumn 1986; and Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South: A Social History of the North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company* (Chicago, 1973).

3. W. W. Thomson, *Chester County and Its People* (Chicago, 1898), 60-1, 68-9, 111-13, 303, 873-74; Charles William Heathcote, *History of Chester County, Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, 1932) 3; Chester County Historical Society, *Sesqui-Centennial, 1799-1949* (West Chester, 1949), 11; Herbert Aptheker, "The Quakers and Negro Slavery," *Journal of Negro History*, Volume 25, No. 3, July 1940, 351-55; Henry J. Cadbury, "Negro Membership in the Society of Friends," *Journal of Negro History*, Volume 21, No. 2, April 1936, 168; Douglas R. Harper, *If Thee Must Fight: A Civil War History of Chester County, Pennsylvania* (West Chester, 1990), 367-68; J. R. Paul Brock, Letter to Editor, *Daily Local News* (hereafter *DLN*), West Chester, Pennsylvania, August 18, 1919.

4. Carl D. Oblinger, "Freedoms Foundation: Black Communities in Southeastern Pennsylvania Towns, 1780-1860," *Northwest Missouri State University Studies*, 1972, 7, 9-10, 21-22; and Dissertation Prospectus, Johns Hopkins University, May 3, 1971; H. Rush Kervey, "Official Program, West Chester Centennial, 1799-1899" (West Chester, 1899); *Directory of the Borough of West Chester, 1857*; Florence Sechlar Miller, *A Legacy of Learning: The History of the West Chester Area Schools* (West Chester, 1994), 61; *DLN*, July 29, 1887.

5. Kervey, *West Chester Centennial*, 18; Carl D. Oblinger, "Alms for Oblivion: The Making of a Black Underclass in Southeastern Pennsylvania, 1780-1860," in John E. Bodnar, *The Ethnic Experience in Pennsylvania* (Lewisburg, 1973), 101-03; *DLN*, January 25, 1908.

6. *Village Record* (hereafter *VR*), January 22, 1861; *DLN*, August 30, 1892; *Pennsylvania*

*Negro Business Directory-1910* (Harrisburg, 1919). Both the *Village Record* and the *Daily Local News* generally reflected the views of the Republican Party in Chester County.

7. *VR*, January 22, 1861; *DLN*, August 30, 1892; *Alexandria County, Virginia Free Negro Registers, 1797-1861* (Bowie, 1990), Volume 3, 57; *Alexandria County Deed Books*, 13, June 1, 1850, 577, M3, 1851, 178, 478; Moses Hepburn Will, #13877, 1861 *Federal Census, Chester County, West Chester Borough*, 662, Chester County Archives and Records Services (hereafter CCA); Christopher M. Waychunas, "Moses G. Hepburn: West Chester Tavern Keeper," unpublished undergraduate paper, West Chester University, May 13, 1996. I am grateful to Christopher Waychunas and Professor James Jones of West Chester University for calling to my attention the Virginia documents on the elder Moses Hepburn.

8. *DLN*, December 1, 1882, April 17, 1917.  
9. *West Chester Star*, May 30, 1914; *DLN*, October 5, 1871, February 14, 1874, March 4, 1874, April 26, 1874, April 7, 1876, May 11, 1881, February 11, 1909, January 15, 1925, July 23, 1989; *VR*, October 10, 11, 12, 1869; *West Chester Borough Census, 1870*, 192; *Chester County Deed Books L5, Volume 108*, August 11, 1850, and *N7, Volume 160*, October 29, 1868; Henry Spence, Sr. Tavern Petitions, 1853-54; Quarter Session Docket S, April 25, 1874, 50-51, all in CCA.

10. Roger Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia and Ours: On the Past and Future of the Black City in America* (New York, 1991); 111-114; Butler, *Entrepreneurship and Self-Help*, 38, 42, 72-5, 143; Pierce, "The Evolution of Negro Business," 28-31; Drake and Cayton, "Negro Business: Myth and Fact," 63-5; Harmon, Lindsay, and Woodson, *The Negro as a Businessman*, 1-30; Charles L. Blockson, *African-Americans in Pennsylvania: A History and Guide* (Baltimore, 1994), 50; Harris, *The Negro As Capitalist*, 24.

11. *DLN*, November 13, 1880, March 5, 1881, September 20, 1881, October 14, 1881, February 14, 1884, July 4, 1905.

12. *DLN*, December 6, 1887, August 8, 1891, May 1, 1893, July 26, 1893, October 13, 1893, March 5, 1894, December 5, 1894;

*Chester County Deed Book, C11, Volume 250*, 554, CCA; 1910 *Chester County Tax Records, West Chester Borough*, CCA; Drake and Cayton, "Negro Business," 64-65; Butler, *Entrepreneurship and Self-Help*, 75. Attempting to diversify his business still further, Burns operated a laundry in 1902. He sold it five years later, perhaps suggesting that his venture into an unfamiliar enterprise was unsuccessful. See *DLN*, October 13, 1902, January 22, 1907.

13. Henry and James Spence Eating House Petition, April 26, 1875, February 12, 1876, CCA; *DLN*, August 19, 1874; West Chester Board of Trade, *West Chester, Pennsylvania: The Most Important Suburb of Philadelphia* (West Chester, 1888), 5-7, 65.

14. *DLN*, July 30, 1883, June 6, 1891; Board of Trade, *The Most Important Suburb*, 65; *Chester County Deed Book, T10, 235-36*, CCA; 1900 *County Tax Records*, West Chester Borough, CCA.

15. Moses G. Hepburn Tavern Petition, January 18, 1868, CCA; *DLN*, August 30, 1892. The motives of Hepburn's backers may not have been altogether altruistic. The Board of Trade publication in 1888 cited the need for a "large modern hotel" to entertain "families from the city," but the town's business elite and rival hotel owners were apparently disinclined to grant Hepburn the right to compete for this clientele.

16. John W. Smothers Tavern Petition, February 2, 1899, CCA; *DLN*, August 30, 1892; Edward Price, "The Black Voting Rights Issue in Pennsylvania, 1890-1900," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, June 1976; Samuel T. Wiley, *Biographical Portrait Encyclopedia of Chester County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1893), 200-201; Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia*, 103-104, 218; Kusmer, "Introduction," *From Reconstruction to the Great Migration*, Volume 4, Part II.

17. *DLN*, August 30, 1892, December 2, 1897; "Inventory and Assessment of all the goods, chattels, and credits of Moses G. Hepburn," December 8, 1897, CCA; *Chester County Tax Records, West Chester Borough, 1895*, CCA. On the meaning of property ownership to African-Americans, see Berlin,



*Slaves Without Masters*, 241-249.

18. *DLN*, December 5, 8, 1873, March 17, 1874, August 28, 1874, September 11, 1875.

19. *VR*, December 2, 1867; *DLN*, March 21, 1877, February 11, 1887, January 20, 1891, February 12, 1891, May 30, 1891; Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., "Aristocrats of Color: South and North, The Black Elite, 1880-1920," in Kusmer, *From Reconstruction to Migration*, 251; W. H. Burton, *The Lives of Some Negroes Who Made Contributions to the History of West Chester, Pa.* (West Chester, 1986).

20. Nick Salvatore, *We All Got History: The Memory Books of Amos Weber* (New York, 1996), 59-67; Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia*, 284-285; Louis R. Harlan, "Booker T. Washington and the National Negro Business League," in Raymond W. Smock (ed.), *Booker T. Washington in Perspective Essays of Louis R. Harlan* (Jackson, 1988), 108; DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 11-12, 50. Although James Spencer's participation in the Liberty Coronet Band diminished as a result of his business commitments, members continued to hold him in high regard, serenading him on his birthdays throughout his life.

21. *DLN*, July 20, 26, 1880, May 2, 1887, undated, March 10, 1900; Burton, *The Lives of Some Negroes*.

22. Maria L. Brock, "History of Bethel AME Church," Bethel AME Church File, Chester County Historical Society (hereafter CCHS); *DLN*, January 28, 1894.

23. *DLN*, January 16, 1902; *Boyd's Chester County Directory*, (Philadelphia, 1896-97).

24. *DLN*, October 14, 1892, October 4, 1889. On the transmission of historical memory among African-Americans, see Nick Salvatore, "Whose History? Whose Footnotes? The American Working Class and Its Historians," 1997. Unpublished manuscript cited with permission of the author.

25. *DLN*, December 12, 1888, May 8, 1902.

26. *DLN*, September 25, 1889, May 8, 1902. On the role of African-American churches and fraternal organizations, see C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, 1990), 7-15, 241-247; James Oliver Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American*

*Community* (Washington, 1993), 34-35, 153; Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston, 1964), 78-81; Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 11-12; and Salvatore, *We All Got History*, 188.

27. *DLN*, December 14, 1872, February 11, 1880, April 11, 1894, *Morning Republican*, December 6, 1897.

28. Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia*, 208-220; Bess Beatty, *A Revolution Gone Backward: The Black Response to National Politics, 1876-1896* (Westport: 1987); *DLN*, November 2, 1880, March 1986; Miller, *A Legacy of Learning*, 63.

29. Miller, *A Legacy of Learning*, 64, *DLN*, August 29, 1894.

30. *DLN*, December 5, 1908.

31. *DLN*, February 20, 1879. For a succinct overview of African-American political disfranchisement in West Chester, see In the Matter of the Petition to Establish Wards in the Borough of West Chester, Pennsylvania, Court of Common Pleas, Chester County, Pennsylvania, Civil Action Docket No. 85-07949, 1987. I am grateful to Samuel C. Stretton, Esq., for making this document available.

32. *The Jeffersonian*, March 23, 1872.

33. *DLN*, February 6, 1874, February 13, 1875, February 18, 19, 20, 1879, February 14, 1881. On attempts by African-Americans to forge a more independent political stance, see Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia*, 222-25; Michael L. Goldstein, "Preface to the Rise of Booker T. Washington: A View from New York City of the Demise of Independent Black Politics, 1889-1902," in Kusmer, *From Reconstruction to the Great Migration*, Volume 4, Part II, 219-37; Salvatore, *We All Got History*, 213-14; and Eric Ledell Smith, "Asking for Justice and Fair Play": African American State Legislators and Civil Rights in Early Twentieth-Century Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History*, Volume 63, Number 2, Spring 1996, 170-2.

34. *DLN*, February 18, 1879, February 14, 1881. African-Americans in Harrisburg used similar tactics during this period in seeking to prod the Republican Party. See Gerald G. Eggert, "'Two Steps Forward, A Step-and-a-

Half Back': Harrisburg's African-American Community in the Nineteenth Century," *Pennsylvania History*, Volume 58, Number 1, Winter, 1991, 7.

35. West Chester Borough Council Minutes, April 3, 1882, Microfilm LR 52.1, CCHS.

36. *DLN*, March 11, 1886, April 20, 1886.

37. *DLN*, December 20, 1892; Civil Action Docket No. 85-07949; Harper, *If Thee Must Fight*, 369-70.

38. *DLN*, April 6, 1894.

39. *DLN*, November 2, 23, 1900; Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia*, 222-225; August Meier, "Negro Class Structure and Ideology in the Age of Booker T. Washington," in Kusmer, *From Reconstruction to Migration*, Volume 4, Part II, 2-10.

40. *DLN*, October 17, 1902, January 2, 1904, February 2, 1904, April 5, 9, 26, 1904, June 26, 1904, April 19, 1912, April 23, 1919.

41. *DLN*, January 8, 1902.

42. *DLN*, April 23, 1919.

43. *DLN*, April 8, 1886, February 27, 1888, April 13, 1888, March 5, 1894, September 12, 1894, March 25, 1908, March 12, 1949; West Chester WCTU Branch #2, Ephemera File, West Chester Organizations, CCHS; *Morning Republican*, undated, June 1894; Wayne C. Woodward, *Courthouse Cavalcade, 1786-1886: A Political History of the Courts of Chester County* (West Chester, 1988), 145. On African-Americans attitudes towards temperance, see Roger Lane, *Roots of Violence in Black Philadelphia, 1860-1900* (Cambridge, 1986), 113-16, and William Dorsey's *Philadelphia*, 106; Donald Yacavone, "The Transformation of the Black Temperance Movement, 1827-1854: An Interpretation," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Fall 1988, 296-97; Robert C. Kenzer, "The Black Businessman in the Postwar South: North Carolina, 1865-1880," *Business History Review*, Volume 63, Spring, 1989, 75; and Salvatore, *We All Got History*, 182-83.

44. *DLN*, February 14, 1874.

45. *DLN*, December 30, 1889, January 28, 1893, March 24, 1902, March 7, 1922, May 10, 1922; Quarter Session Docket R, January 1873, 553, Quarter Session Docket August

1895, 288, CCA. The December 2, 1897 issue of the *Daily Local News* contains an extended discussion of the circumstances surrounding Hepburn's death. See also Coroner's docket, 1897-1915, 111, CCA.

46. *DLN*, March 1, 1889, undated 1907, May 16, 1908, July 1, 1908; Woodward, *Courthouse Cavalcade*, 157; *Commonwealth v. Burns*, Pennsylvania Superior Court Paper Book, Volume 38, Biddle Law Library, University of Pennsylvania (hereafter Biddle Library). Of the 17 people in Chester County indicted for liquor-related offenses in 1909, the year that James Spence was charged, five were African American, four were Irish, two were Italian, and one was Polish. The race or ethnicity of the others could not be identified. Therefore, it is possible that the percentage of indicted African Americans and immigrants was even higher. See *DLN*, January 29, 1909, September 1, 1909, August 31, 1909, October 1, 1909; and Quarter Session Dockets, January, April, August, and October, 1909, CCA.

47. *Commonwealth v. Burns*, 13, Biddle Library; Robert E. Carlson, *Chester County (Pa.) Legal Practitioners to 1960* (West Chester, 1988), 36, 66-67.

48. *DLN*, January 30, 1911; *1920 Tax Records, Chester County. West Chester Borough*, 28, CCA. For Burns' obituary, see *DLN*, April 13, 1917.

49. *DLN*, December 7, 1904, March 15, 30, 31, 1906, April 3, 5, 1906, May 25, 1906, July 20, 21, 1909.

50. *DLN*, July 21, 1909.

51. *DLN*, July 22, 1909, *Commonwealth v. Spence*, 43 Pennsylvania Superior Court, April 18, 1910, Biddle Library; *Commonwealth v. Spence*, 230 Pennsylvania Supreme Court, State Library of Pennsylvania, Harrisburg, March 20, 1911.

52. *West Chester Star*, January 10, 1913, May 30, 1914, September 25, 1914; *DLN*, February 3, 1910, January 15, 1925, July 23, 1989; *1920 Chester County Tax Records, West Chester Borough*, CCA.

53. *DLN*, November 20, 1901.

54. Butler, *Entrepreneurship and Self-Help*, 68.

55. Miller, *A Legacy of Learning*, 61.