

# *“The Negro Excursions”: Recreational Outings among Philadelphia African Americans, 1876–1926*

ON THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1892, a local journalist recorded the excitement as more than six thousand African American men, women, and children from “Philadelphia, Baltimore, Camden, and a score of towns throughout South Jersey” arrived in Atlantic City, New Jersey, aboard ten chartered excursion trains. The preceding weekend had marked the customary end of the summer tourist season in the seaside resort; indeed, many of the city’s larger hotels had already been shuttered in preparation for winter. The cheerful throng, however, was determined to make the most of this one-day outing by the surf. Thousands of the black visitors gathered around the Sea View Excursion House, where “scenes were enacted there during the afternoon and until late in the evening as are seen but once a year in Atlantic City. . . . The grounds around the Excursion House resembled nothing so much as an old-time camp meeting scene. The excursionists were hungry, and as in past years the tables were spread on the lawn and on the spacious porches of the building, stoves were scattered all round.” Before boarding their return trains, the travelers indulged in dancing and competitive cakewalk contests well into the night.<sup>1</sup>

In a paper published five years after this festive outing, W. E. B. Du Bois insisted that “the manner, method, and extent of a people’s recreation is of vast importance to their welfare.” While he agreed with other leading black activists that recreation was not the most pressing concern facing African Americans during an era of violent disfranchisement, lynching, and economic discrimination, the rising scholar maintained that adequate

<sup>1</sup> *Philadelphia Item*, Sept. 4, 1892, microfilm reel 11, William H. Dorsey Scrapbook Collection, Leslie Pinckney Hill Library, Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, Cheyney, PA.

and appropriate leisure-time activities were an essential component of the black community's cultural and social well-being.<sup>2</sup> Later commentators concurred. During 1919, a year marked by several violent racial riots throughout the nation, recreation advocate Thomas S. Settle suggested that improved and structured amusement opportunities might reduce interracial violence, asking "what now is the chief point of friction in race relations?" His answer: "The leisure time." Decades later, in 1947, the Municipal Research Bureau of Philadelphia, a volunteer reform organization, issued a report that argued that "if a group participates on terms of equality with other groups . . . in recreational facilities, its members are members of that total community. If participation is restricted or denied, the extent of that restriction is a measure of the extent to which that group is relegated to an inferior social position."<sup>3</sup> In light of these assessments, the outpouring of several thousand African Americans from Philadelphia and its environs to the seashore for a racially exclusive, post-season festival raises a number of questions: What opportunities were open to African Americans during nonworking hours for recreation and diversion in growing northern urban environments such as Philadelphia? To what extent was the black minority able freely to interact with and participate in activities open to the white majority? How was the distinctive socioeconomic hierarchy of the black community manifest in leisure-hour pursuits? What did African Americans' choices in amusement suggest about their self-perception during the post-Reconstruction era?

Scholars have paid considerable attention to both the substance and the implications of recreation and amusement activities in modern industrial life. Foster Rhea Dulles's 1940 sweeping survey of American urban and rural amusement preferences as they evolved from the eighteenth century into the twentieth was one of the foundational studies on the significance of diversions in American society. Dulles identified a persistent disapproval of amusements traceable to the early colonial era that was rekindled in the work of reformers alarmed by conditions in growing urban centers. The increasing diversity of life in the nation's expansive regions and in its growing cities, however, fostered an ever-widening

<sup>2</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Problem of Amusement," *Southern Workman* 26 (Sept. 1897): 181.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas S. Settle, *Play and Athletics for the Public Schools* rev. Nov. 1919, 3rd ed. (Richmond, VA, 1920), 508; G. Gordon Brown, *Recreational Facilities and Negro-White Relations in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1947), i.

spectrum of available amusements.<sup>4</sup>

Later scholars built upon Dulles's work. Helen E. Meller focused upon the efforts of urban reformers to reshape and control the amusement lives of the urban population of Bristol, England. Meller traced the attempts of a number of wealthy industrialists to guide the recreation of workers away from drinking and street amusements toward controlled and "improving" diversions. Paul Boyer drew attention to similar attempts by reformers in American cities to control and limit the recreations of the less-affluent classes. More recently, Roy Rosenzweig's study of leisure and recreation life among those who held working-class jobs in Worcester, Massachusetts, illustrated persistent attempts by activist employers to exert social control over urban amusements between 1870 and 1920. Rosenzweig also traced a transition from recreational activities sponsored by voluntary groups to commercial amusements operated by entrepreneurs and uncovered substantial differences in the amusement preferences of members of the city's various white ethnic groups. A few years later, Kathy Peiss explored the changing amusement preferences of young, white, working-class women in the New York area during the same period. Their experiences traced a gradual decline of the gender-segregated social spheres that had prevailed during the mid-Victorian era and a rise of less constrained, gender-integrated entertainments, which worked to change the social and cultural mores of the larger society.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars have also published significant research on recreation within the black community. In the 1920s, William Henry Jones investigated the leisure-time diversions of African Americans in Washington, DC. Jones portrayed a multifaceted environment, largely isolated from the white social sphere by the strictures of racial segregation. Within the boundaries of this separate black sphere, black people of differing socioeconomic classes interacted in some large theaters and parks, but did not mingle within the more exclusive circles of small neighborhood theaters or social clubs. E. Franklin Frazier touched upon some of these issues some years later as part of his study of the lives of young black Washingtonians,

<sup>4</sup> Foster Rhea Dulles, *America Learns to Play: A History of Popular Recreation, 1607-1940* (New York, 1940).

<sup>5</sup> H. E. Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City, 1870-1914* (London, 1976); Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, MA, 1978); Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge, 1983); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in New York City, 1880 to 1920* (Philadelphia, 1986).

which emphasized the pervasiveness of color discrimination within the black community. St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton noted the subtle social and class differences that defined how and where black Chicagoans spent free time in their comprehensive 1945 analysis of the African American community of Chicago, as well as the importance that an escape from the presence of the white majority during leisure hours came to have during an era of overt discrimination. James Coates's 1991 examination of the recreational activities of black residents of Baltimore between 1890 and 1920 documented a long-standing fissure between the quiet activities promoted by prosperous African Americans and the saloon and street amusements preferred by the majority of black Baltimoreans who worked in manual labor. This disagreement clearly echoed, within the confines of a single ethnic group, the reformist/popular tensions that other scholars have described as extending across larger metropolitan populations. David Nasaw's 1993 study of public entertainment between 1880 and 1910 also placed an emphasis upon the role of African Americans in the world of recreation, with a focus upon their exclusion from and disparagement within stage performances and other amusement venues.<sup>6</sup>

This article will examine some of the entertainment and recreational pursuits of African Americans in greater Philadelphia, one of the nation's largest centers of northern, urban, black residence. During the fifty-year period between 1876, when Philadelphia played host to the monumental Centennial Exhibition, and 1926, when the city attempted to recapture the glory of that event with a vast Sesquicentennial celebration, the situation of the city's African American community changed significantly.

<sup>6</sup> William H. Jones, *Recreation and Amusement among Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Sociological Analysis of the Negro in an Urban Environment* (Washington, DC, 1927); E. Franklin Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossways: Their Personality Development in the Middle States* (Washington, DC, 1940); St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York, 1945); James Roland Coates Jr., "Recreation and Sport in the African-American Community of Baltimore, 1890-1920" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 1991); David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York, 1993). Urban studies by Gilbert Osofsky, Allen Spear, and Kenneth Kusmer, among others, portrayed a transformation in northern black city life associated with the ongoing migration of African Americans from the American South: while residential and social segregation increased, a class of elite African Americans who provided goods and services to white customers was displaced by a rising class of black entrepreneurs, including commercial amusement vendors, who catered to an almost exclusively black clientele. See Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York, 1966); Allen H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago, 1967); Kenneth L. Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930* (Urbana, IL, 1976).

Already the largest black population north of the Mason-Dixon line at the time of the Centennial, the number of black residents in the city increased more than five-fold by 1926, primarily due to a sustained surge in migration from the South.<sup>7</sup> Black Philadelphians made limited gains in employment and established residences in wider sections of the city despite severe resistance from some of their white neighbors. Changes also occurred in their opportunities for amusement and recreation. In brief, as the black population expanded, an increasing number and variety of theaters, church halls, and playgrounds opened to meet its entertainment needs, but increasingly rigid segregation separated the black and white cultural and social spheres. As the following pages will illustrate, these developments were also in evidence when black Philadelphians took to the roads, rails, and rivers to seek diversion at out-of-town resorts.<sup>8</sup>

Focusing upon the experiences of black Philadelphians as they left the city on elaborate excursions, entered the gates of dazzling new amusement parks, and joined the ever-increasing throngs who crowded the nearby New Jersey seashore affords an opportunity to view African Americans in settings devoted primarily to amusement and pleasure.<sup>9</sup> It becomes clear that, to the degree that they could financially afford to, African Americans flocked to area resorts along with the Philadelphia area's much larger white majority. The degree to which racial discrimination limited their opportunities for diversion was quite uneven, but was least pervasive during the 1870s and increased sharply over time in some resort settings.

John Kasson has described New York's Coney Island during the late 1890s and early 1900s as "a special realm of exciting possibility" where

<sup>7</sup> The black population of Philadelphia during the centennial year stood between the 22,147 recorded by the 1870 federal census and the 31,699 recorded by the 1880 census. Both figures comprised less than 4 percent of the city's total population. By 1925, an educated estimate placed the city's black population at approximately 158,500, or nearly 8 percent of the city's total. Armstrong Association of Philadelphia, *Report on Negro Population and Industries of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1927), pamphlet, URB 1, Urban Archives, Temple University, Philadelphia.

<sup>8</sup> Brian E. Alnutt, "African-American Amusement and Recreation in Philadelphia, 1876-1926" (PhD diss., Lehigh University, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> While the scope of this study does not include the many athletic and sporting pursuits that African Americans engaged in, such as bicycle clubs or spectator sports, its focus upon excursion recreation affords a perspective on African Americans as they sought to enjoy and express themselves away from familiar residential and occupational environments.

visitors could escape "conventional situational proprieties" and enjoy themselves in ways inappropriate closer to home. Such liberties were available to people of many ethnicities, including recent immigrants, for whom a trip to the bright lights and thrill rides offered "a means to participate in mainstream American culture on equal footing."<sup>10</sup> For black excursionists in the Philadelphia area, travel to recreation resorts permitted some loosening of behavioral restraints, but did not necessarily allow them to associate as equals with people of other backgrounds. Both the role of racially defined organizations in sponsoring excursions and racial discrimination of increasing intensity inhibited such interaction. Rather, outings provided an opportunity for African Americans to come together as a group and define an autonomous space in which to relax and socialize.

In 1892, when the thousands of visitors mentioned above poured into Atlantic City, African Americans comprised a relatively small proportion of Philadelphia's population (less than 4 percent) and were clustered on some of the lowest rungs of the city's socioeconomic ladder.<sup>11</sup> While Philadelphia was a growing industrial hub whose diversified manufacturing enterprises included major textile, metalworking, shipbuilding, and publishing concerns, African Americans had limited involvement in these developing fields. Rather, the black presence in the city's economy was largely restricted to humble, poorly paid positions in personal service or unskilled labor, as had been the case since long before the Civil War. A small subgroup of black caterers, barbers, merchants, and private waiters were able to earn a satisfactory living by providing goods or skilled services, often to a white clientele; but the exertions of most black workers as domestic servants, porters, or laborers held little or no prestige and produced far lower incomes.<sup>12</sup>

The workday experiences of black Philadelphians had changed little since the antebellum era, but the choices they were able to make about how to occupy their free hours away from the workplace had widened considerably. Before and during the Civil War years, prevailing customs of racial segregation had defined firm boundaries for public amusement

<sup>10</sup> John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1978), 41.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Census Office, *Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890* (Washington, DC, 1895).

<sup>12</sup> Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, MA, 1988); Theodore Hershberg et al., "A Tale of Three Cities: Blacks and Immigrants in Philadelphia, 1850-1880, 1930, and 1970," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 441 (1979): 67-68.

and recreation in the city. In 1860, one investigative reporter had concluded that "the prejudice against blacks extends to every class, and may be remarked in pleasure and business. At theaters and concerts, lectures and churches, the negro is restricted to a remote gallery." During a visit to the city in 1862, an indignant Frederick Douglass had thundered that "there is no place to be found a city in which prejudice against color is more rampant than in Philadelphia. . . . It has its white schools and colored schools, its white clubs and colored clubs, its white concerts and its colored concerts."<sup>13</sup>

By the time of the Centennial Exhibition in 1876, the walls separating white and black Philadelphians during their nonworking hours had become far more porous. African Americans who were so inclined and had the financial means to do so could now attend theaters and concerts with their white fellows, and black church congregations and other black organizations were now able to rent the Academy of Music and other prominent city venues for performances that attracted large and often integrated audiences. Many taverns and restaurants also catered to an integrated clientele. The Centennial Exhibition itself, that sprawling celebration of the nation's anniversary, was fully open to black visitors as well as white.<sup>14</sup> The change was so pronounced that one city official, addressing a black audience assembled in 1877 at the "Permanent Exhibition" that briefly succeeded the Centennial, stated that "there is no one within the hearing of my voice . . . who cannot remember a time when the people whom I see before me were denied admission to places of amusement. . . . Now, the doors of this building filled with attractions, and all similar places of resort, are at all times open as free to your race as to any other class."<sup>15</sup> The greater access African Americans now enjoyed to Philadelphia's recreational and cultural opportunities had come in the wake of other major victories: a lengthy campaign by black activists had ended seating segregation on Philadelphia streetcars in 1867, and black males in Pennsylvania had received the electoral franchise in 1871.

At public recreation events, then, black and white Philadelphians interacted more often as members of a single community from the 1870s

<sup>13</sup> *Philadelphia Press*, quoted in *Douglass' Monthly*, Oct. 1860; Philip S. Foner, "The Battle to End Discrimination against Negroes on Philadelphia Streetcars: (Part I) Background and Beginning of the Battle," *Pennsylvania History* 40 (1973): 266.

<sup>14</sup> Integrated attendance at public amusements is discussed in Alnutt, "African-American Amusement and Recreation in Philadelphia."

<sup>15</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 2, 1877.

onward than they had in prior years. In settings involving closer, more sustained contact, however, separation along racial lines remained the prevailing pattern. Dances and balls, for instance, were usually (though not always) all-black or all-white affairs. Social clubs, including fraternal orders and men's social and political clubs, were organized along racially exclusive lines. And church congregations, with their parallel black and white denominational organizations that had operated since the late eighteenth century, served as vital social and recreational centers. Thus religious worship and the many church-sponsored recreational events were also effectively segregated.

In his comments on African American recreation, Du Bois had characterized the black church as "the central organ of the organized life of the American Negro for amusement, relaxation, instruction and religion."<sup>16</sup> Philadelphia's black congregations were indeed active in providing excursion and travel opportunities. As was the case with congregations of other ethnicities, the church picnic was often an annual highlight of the summer for church members. Congregations held some picnics on their own grounds, but Philadelphia and its suburbs also hosted an abundance of privately owned groves and parks available for rental, from Rising Sun Park, located within the sparsely populated northeastern section of the city, to Lakeside Park in suburban Camden County, New Jersey. While roller coasters and Ferris wheels would eventually spread across the land like mushrooms after the success of the Midway at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, prior to that time the attractions at a typical resort park might include a "flying horses" merry-go-round, a dance pavilion, baseball fields, and picnic groves.

Excursions to such resorts involved significant expenditures of funds for both facility rental and transportation, since most of the Philadelphia-area parks were located miles from population centers and were thus accessible only by streetcar, railroad, or boat. T. Thomas Fortune's *New York Globe*, one of the nation's leading African American newspapers, gently chided its readers for participating in such costly outings, observing during the spring of 1884 that "there will be many dollars lavished upon the keepers of picnic resorts this season." The paper intensified its critique two years later by urging readers to build and patronize black-owned resort grounds rather than pay "many millions" in rental fees to white owners. Reinforcing the impression that some African Americans in the

<sup>16</sup> Du Bois, "Problem of Amusement," 181.



leadership class viewed their brethren as excessively given to outings, the *Christian Recorder*, the official weekly journal of the Philadelphia-based African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, ran a brief, scolding editorial in September 1889 that brusquely ordered: "Stop your excursions. It will require fully all your time and money to meet the approaching winter. Lay in your coal." Nonetheless, the excursion remained a favorite diversion among African Americans in the Philadelphia area and nationwide. In one landmark study of income and expenditures among working-class New Yorkers of selected ethnicities, black families cited excursions as their preferred means of recreation (when given a choice between parks, excursions, or the theater) to a far higher degree than did other families.<sup>17</sup> Railroad outings in the Philadelphia area for which price information is available usually accommodated adults for a fare of fifty cents, and it is likely that the affordability of such a full day's amusement held part of the appeal for black participants. It is also likely that these group excursions offered an attractive opportunity to escape with a convivial, and one might even say formidable, group of fellow African Americans to a festival environment removed from the daily challenges of racial friction and poverty.

During the summer season, identifiably white churches and social clubs frequently hired Lakeside Park, a resort owned by a white partnership and located along a principal rail route in southern New Jersey several miles east of Philadelphia. Beginning in the early 1880s, rentals by black congregations punctuated weeks otherwise occupied by their white neighbors. An interesting pattern appeared during the summer of 1884: Lakeside management reported with satisfaction that most of the available rental dates for the coming September had been reserved—mostly by "colored" groups. One could imagine a number of causes for such a concentration of black excursions, but since the park rented only to one group per day, a desire to avoid friction with white visitors or a policy of segregation on the part of park management were probably not involved. Financial considerations were perhaps a factor, as black organizations, which drew from a notably impoverished population, may have taken advantage of lower late-season rates.<sup>18</sup> But though black excursions to Lakeside may have occurred disproportionately at the end of the summer

<sup>17</sup> *New York Globe*, May 24, 1884; *Christian Recorder*, Sept. 5, 1889; Robert Coit Chapin, *The Standard of Living among Workingmen's Families in New York City* (New York, 1909), 212–13.

<sup>18</sup> *Camden County Courier*, June 5, 1880, July 28, 1883; *West Jersey Press*, Aug. 20, 1884.

season, they were not confined to that time.

One outing that occurred during June 1885 may serve as a source for contemplation about the larger meanings excursions held for their participants. On the evening of Thursday, June 25, "a party of colored excursionists returning from Lakeside Park made a street parade" in the vicinity of Eighth and Lombard streets in Philadelphia, led by the all-black West End Fife and Drum Corps. This neighborhood was a center of black residence in the city, and large numbers of African Americans who happened to be on the sidewalks at the time joined in the celebration, which ran afoul of municipal parade regulations and ended with arrests.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the expansive high spirits of the returning outing party reflected the sense of freedom from everyday restraints Kasson and others have noted emerging when such groups recreated away from home.

Ordinary high spirits, however, were not the only sort of "freedom" excursion parties experienced, and the rapidity with which some traveling parties progressed from high jinks to dissolution prompted concern by a number of observers. In the same article in which the *Globe* called attention to the expenses incurred by church excursions, its editors also observed ruefully that dancing and beer drinking were becoming overly popular during such events. The paper warned black excursionists to avoid overexertion in dancing and "over-indulgence in ardent liquors," which could only result in an inability to work during the following day.<sup>20</sup> As it had done on other occasions when fretting about African Americans' supposed excessive fondness for dances and balls, the paper here joined in the long-established "reformist" critique of popular recreating, worrying that African Americans were devoted to short-term, unrestrained good times at the expense of self-control and self-improvement.

The *Globe's* successor, the *New York Age*, intensified its criticism of excursion behavior several years later by running a front-page letter from a correspondent in a Florida resort town. The writer had witnessed the arrival of several all-black excursions in his town during the previous week and railed that "the conduct of a majority of the excursionists is to be deplored. . . . Just picture in your mind a train of eight or ten coaches, literally packed with men, women and children until standing room is at a premium. Add to this whiskey in abundance, cigars, tobacco, bad language, whooping and yelling, and you have a fair sample of the average

<sup>19</sup> *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, June 26, 1885.

<sup>20</sup> *New York Globe*, May 24, 1884.

Sunday excursion."<sup>21</sup>

A black Savannah, Georgia, clergyman damned such outings in even more fervent language several years later. Excursions "are a curse to the people of the Negro race," the Reverend R. R. Downs exclaimed. Claiming that "excursions are mostly run by Negroes; it is but seldom that you see one run by the whites, who are more able," the minister laid out a hellish tableau: "on the excursion train, the abandoned woman glories and exults in her shame. . . . Whiskey drinking by men and women is to be seen everywhere out of upturned bottles, drunkards staggering about blowing their foul breath in the face of innocent females." Clearly, while such outings were frequently organized under the auspices of black churches, church leaders were unable to enforce the degree of control over the revelers that Downs and the *Christian Recorder's* editors considered appropriate, and Downs urged that they be stopped at once.<sup>22</sup>

The possibility of libertine behavior by groups on an outing was not confined to African Americans; and the managers of Philadelphia-area excursion resorts had the possibility of disorder very much upon their minds. In announcing the 1884 opening of Stockton Grove in eastern Camden as a "family outing park . . . well favored for Sunday school or church excursions," the streetcar company that owned the park emphasized its hiring of special police "to keep all rough, disorderly characters off the grounds." When asked to what he attributed his facility's "entire freedom from rows and troubles so common at most places of public resort," the manager of Neshaminy Falls Park north of Philadelphia cited a ban on alcohol and a force of special police.<sup>23</sup>

African American organizations with reputations for decorum sponsored a number of black excursions in the Philadelphia area, an example being a combined Sunday school excursion of St. Thomas Episcopal, Central Presbyterian, and Allen Chapel A.M.E. churches to Brandywine Springs Park in northern Delaware during June 1888. It does not appear that any of these manifested the problems of disorder attributed to African American church outings elsewhere. A number of Philadelphia's A.M.E. churches arranged a railroad excursion to Oakland Grove, located north of Philadelphia in Bucks County, in August 1889 to celebrate the abolition of slavery in Brazil and the West Indies. Detailed press coverage

<sup>21</sup> *New York Age*, June 2, 1888.

<sup>22</sup> *Christian Recorder*, June 29, 1893.

<sup>23</sup> *Camden County Courier*, May 17, 1884; *Philadelphia Record*, June 12, 1890.

reported that at least that day, which featured an address by veteran activist William Still (who had also been on the management committee of the aforementioned Brandywine Springs outing), passed as a well-mannered success.<sup>24</sup>

The excursion of the Erma Social Club, a secular black men's organization, to Lakeside Park on a June Thursday in 1889, however, brought critics' nightmares to life. The Erma was not a club of elites: those members who can be reliably identified included a laborer, a waiter, and a teamster, all but the latter of whom lived at humble addresses in central Philadelphia. Nothing in earlier accounts of this club's activities, however, would serve to label it as a congress of rowdies. The organization had held a costumed "grand ball" at the prestigious Philadelphia Assembly Hall in early 1883, which was remarked upon for its grace and ornateness, and three other dances that the Erma hosted between 1885 and 1891 at Philadelphia's Musical Fund Hall were characterized by that hall's management as small and orderly. Perhaps the escape into the fresh country air brought out the devil in the club, or perhaps the club had difficulty maintaining order among traveling companions who were nonmembers. Whatever the cause, shortly after club members and "several hundred colored people from Philadelphia" arrived at the Lakeside Park that June day, they "got loaded up with bad rum about noon, when they started to fight, and kept it up until about leaving time . . . knives, razors, and black-jacks flashed through the air. . . . The crowd virtually took possession of the flying horses and ran them to suit themselves. Finally, they broke the machine down." The brawl continued into the evening aboard the return train to Camden, where police made a number of arrests. Park managers later described this outing as "the most boisterous crowd of excursionists that ever visited Lakeside Park."<sup>25</sup>

There were other difficulties. During the picnic of an unidentified black social club at Lakeside in August 1895, police had to be dispatched from Camden to subdue widespread fighting. When eight hundred members and guests of the African American Robert J. Moore Republican Club of Philadelphia traveled to Lakeside two years later,

<sup>24</sup> "A Grand Combination Excursion to Brandywine Springs," broadside in Leon Gardiner Collection, American Negro Historical Society Records, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; *Christian Recorder*, July 4, Aug. 15, 1889.

<sup>25</sup> *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 24, 1883; Musical Fund Hall, engagement book no. 7, Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia Records, Special Collections, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; *West Jersey Press*, June 26, 1889.

several dozen male members of the rival Frank Harrison Republican Club followed them to the park and "a general riot commenced."<sup>26</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois characterized such political groups as rude gambling clubs that attracted a "crowd of loafers and idlers."<sup>27</sup> Such incidents likely served to confirm his opinion.

Black excursion parties held no monopoly on riotous behavior. Managers of resort facilities were girded for potential trouble from any number of those who sought fun in their groves. Barely a year after the Erma Club's fiasco at Lakeside, the general-circulation *Philadelphia Times* regaled its readers with tales of the alcoholic mayhem that occurred during a boat excursion to nearby Oakland Grove sponsored by a Polish American social club. "I saw men knocked down with beer bottles," one witness complained, "women insulted, and every instant it seemed a fight would break out in some new corner of the grove." Rioting during the 1894 excursion of a Philadelphia German American organization to Camden's Stockton Park was so fierce that police were "helpless . . . driven some distance away from the park."<sup>28</sup> Still, black commentators lamented the particular difficulties African Americans allegedly had in maintaining order at such events. In his authoritative study *The Philadelphia Negro*, W. E. B. Du Bois complained that among the Seventh Ward African Americans he had been closely observing "excursions are frequent in summer, and are accompanied often by much fighting and drinking."<sup>29</sup> The 1896 national convention of the Federated Colored Women's Clubs, a distinctly middle-class reform organization, adopted a resolution declaring "the fact that the miscellaneous excursions, as conducted during the summer, that beguile so many of our people, many of whom can ill afford to ride at any price, are as injurious morally as they are financially, prompts this federation of women to express its disapproval of the same. We are intensely anxious of our girls, for not a few ruined women can date the beginning of their downfall to their first ride on one of these short trips."<sup>30</sup> The wording of this resolution, in the context of the numerous

<sup>26</sup> *West Jersey Press*, Aug. 14, 1895; unidentified news clipping, Aug. 20, 1897, reel 11, William H. Dorsey Scrapbook Collection.

<sup>27</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Black Vote of Philadelphia," in *Black Politics in Philadelphia*, ed. Miriam Ershkowitz and Joseph Zikmund II (New York, 1973), 31-39. Originally published in *Charities*, Oct. 7, 1905.

<sup>28</sup> *Philadelphia Times*, June 30, 1890; *West Jersey Press*, July 11, 1894.

<sup>29</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia, 1899), 320.

<sup>30</sup> "Club Work among Colored Women," *Colored American Magazine*, Aug. 1906, pp. 83-90.

other indictments of the "colored excursions," draws attention to one aspect of these outings that clearly caused consternation among critics: here was an activity in which women might become active participants in what Kathy Peiss has termed the "homosocial" environment of male recreation.<sup>31</sup> In enough instances to arouse the indignation of concerned observers, the excursion became an opportunity for male passengers to engage in the drinking and coarse behavior characteristic of the period saloon, and to draw in female passengers either as fellow revelers or as victims of boisterous behavior. In leaving home for a time, black excursionists might indeed, like Kasson's Coney Islanders, put conventional controls and constraints aside, but sometimes to a degree that offended black reformers who feared that a race already hobbled by deep discrimination could not afford to loosen its rules of propriety.

Such disorders do not appear to have marred the majority of black excursions of which the Philadelphia historical record speaks. Rather, the outstanding feature of such outings was their racially exclusive nature. African Americans who participated in organized excursion travel almost always joined entirely black outing parties. Such separation might seem surprising given the lack of overt segregation in public amusement venues in Philadelphia during the late 1870s and 1880s, but excursions were in large measure extensions of in-town organizational and religious life, and churches, fraternal groups, and social and political clubs in Philadelphia were overwhelmingly organized along racial lines. Indeed, in many cases racial solidarity spoke more loudly in structuring excursions than did associational or denominational boundaries. In other words, black congregations of diverse denominations were more likely to conduct a joint excursion than were black and white congregations of the same denomination. Three black congregations of varied denominations conducted a joint excursion to a resort in Delaware during 1888, and similar outings were common during the following summers.<sup>32</sup> During August 1894, Lakeside Park recorded its largest excursion crowd ever, as more than eight thousand people thronged the grounds in a combined outing of black Sunday schools from both Philadelphia and Camden.<sup>33</sup> African Americans living quite some distance apart could associate in arranging such trips. For example, an assault occurred at Neshaminy Falls Park during June 1898

<sup>31</sup> Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Du Bois, *Philadelphia Negro*, 61.

<sup>33</sup> *West Jersey Press*, Aug. 22, 1894.

when a group of "colored residents of Germantown and the members of the colored church at Twelfth and Melon [in a North Philadelphia neighborhood quite a distance from Germantown] got up an excursion."<sup>34</sup>

In addition to churches and social clubs, a variety of other sponsors organized excursions meant to have wide appeal to the black community. Many of these events were held at Stockton Park in nearby Camden, New Jersey, which due to its proximity to central Philadelphia could be reached via ferry and local streetcar and thus involved lower ticket prices than did railroad excursions. When the Robert Bryan post of the Grand Army of the Republic held an excursion there in September 1891, adults could join the outing for a quarter, half the usual rate for the longer trips. Thirty-five cents admitted an adult to the "Mid-Summer Benefit Excursion" for Philadelphia's new black-controlled Frederick Douglass Hospital in 1896, which featured classical singers in concert. A more plebeian tone prevailed during the excursion to Stockton given by beer distributor J. A. Wright a year later, who promised among other attractions a buck dancing contest and a "scientific" boxing match and invited members of "all prominent social and political clubs" to attend.<sup>35</sup>

Such all-black retreats did provide some tangible benefits. At a time when individual African Americans might be liable to rebuff or actual physical harassment at unpredictable times, and at a time when a large proportion of black Philadelphians were employed in personal service or unskilled occupations subject to close and often demeaning supervision from white employers, an excursion gathering large numbers of African Americans together for an affordable planned day of recreation must have been an inviting relief. On at least one occasion, an excursion party did encounter the sting of overt discrimination, when several hundred African Americans on a boat outing organized by a consortium of churches was turned away from its intended destination, Augustine Park in Delaware.<sup>36</sup> For the most part, however, black Philadelphians partaking of such trips were able to spend the day in the company of their fellows without interference. Rather than mingle with white excursionists,

<sup>34</sup> Unidentified news clipping, June 17, 1898, reel 12, William H. Dorsey Scrapbook Collection. The involved church would have been Zoar Methodist.

<sup>35</sup> "Second Grand United Excursion, Robert Bryan Guards of Post 80, G.A.R."; "Mid-Summer Fete, Stockton Park, for the Benefit of Frederick Douglass Memorial Hospital"; and "Maj. J. A. Wright, Betz's Beer Man, Third Annual Picnic at Stockton Park," broadsides, Leon Gardiner Collection, American Negro Historical Society Records.

<sup>36</sup> *Christian Recorder*, Aug. 7, 1890.

African Americans assembled amid the security of large numbers, voluntarily removed themselves from those who so frequently asserted social superiority over them, and sought diversion in a structured amusement environment of their own making.

Participation in a group excursion, however, was not the only way in which black Philadelphians could enjoy time away from home. Philadelphia fun-seekers could find relaxation just across the Delaware River at nearby Gloucester City, New Jersey. During the 1870s, when Philadelphians of means frequently made Cape May, New Jersey, the destination of their summer outings and vacations, Gloucester advertised itself as "The Poor Man's Cape May."<sup>37</sup> While boat or rail fares to the seashore resort stood at two dollars or more, a twenty-cent round-trip ferry ticket would suffice to convey Philadelphians, even "those of most limited means," to the beach, boardwalk, and attractions of Gloucester.

The prevailing tone of the Gloucester resort changed with time. During the summer of 1876, advertisements touted Gloucester as "the perfect family resort," and visiting journalists observed that "everybody and his wife and children are down from Philadelphia." Once arrived, patrons could relax on the riverside beach or stroll among "bands of music, merry-go-rounds," and other entertainments. By 1880, however, at least in the eyes of temperance-minded observers, Gloucester became sullied by "sporting" and rough behavior. An increasing number of taverns opened their doors to thirsty Philadelphians, and complaints of drunken disorder soon followed. By the mid-1880s, crowds estimated at twenty thousand and more gathered in Gloucester on weekends and holidays.<sup>38</sup>

Certainly, based upon income figures, many if not most black Philadelphians numbered among the lowest classes of the city, but the extent to which they mingled among the crowds at Gloucester is uncertain. During the summer of 1888, the mayor of Gloucester ordered the closing of a beachfront "African Dodger" attraction and fined its proprietors for "disorderly and insulting conduct," raising the possibility that black visitors had been present at the resort and had raised a complaint.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Public Ledger*, July 12, 1876; *West Jersey Press*, July 2, 1879.

<sup>38</sup> *West Jersey Press*, June 28, 1876; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Aug. 8, 1876; *Camden County Courier*, June 23, 1888.

<sup>39</sup> *Camden County Courier*, Aug. 25, 1888. The "African Dodger," a booth at which patrons attempted to hurl a ball at the head of a live African American who occupied the "bulls-eye" of a canvas target, was a common, blatantly racist attraction at American amusement resorts and carnivals well into the twentieth century.



"Majah" James Teagle, a well-known black Republican operative in Philadelphia, operated an oyster stand at Gloucester. Teagle may have had black patrons, or he may have merely continued black food caterers' long-standing tradition of serving a white clientele. Whether African Americans avoided the Gloucester crowds or were merely inconspicuous among them remains an open question.

By the autumn of 1893, the success of the Midway at the World's Columbian Exposition introduced the possibility of amusement resorts operated on an entirely new scale. William Thompson, Gloucester's leading tavernkeeper, reacted by beginning construction of Washington Park, a massive new amusement resort located along New Jersey's Delaware riverfront a dozen miles south of Gloucester.<sup>40</sup> Thompson was one player in a national trend. As his new Washington Park opened its gates during the spring of 1895, Sea Lion Park, the first fenced-in, mechanized amusement park in New York's Coney Island also opened to the public for the first time. Like Gloucester, Coney Island had been known as a rather disreputable drinking resort, but by offering thrill rides and spectacles to attract an inclusive audience of men, women, and children, the owners of Sea Lion gave Coney Island a new reputation as a place where whole families could revel in a land of fantasy, a "grown-up toyshop" as the owner of the new Luna Park later described it.<sup>41</sup>

Washington Park did not displace Gloucester, which remained known as a tavern resort for "the lowest classes of Philadelphia," but it did establish a more reputable alternative. The park's manager described the typical midweek visitor as being a mother accompanied by children, which clearly suggests a more family-friendly tone than the fallen Gloucester beachfront. As with Gloucester, it is difficult to substantiate the degree to which black Philadelphians were part of these merry crowds. The Citizens' Republic Club of Philadelphia, however, a prestigious political club led by some of the city's successful black businessmen, sponsored an excursion there during the summer of 1912, just a year before the park was gutted by fire and closed.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Albert J. Corcoran and Harry F. Green, *The History of Gloucester City, N.J.* (Gloucester, NJ, 1964); Edith Blez, "Remember Washington Park?" *Haddon Gazette*, Feb. 9, 1978, in Washington Park folder, Camden County Historical Society, Camden, NJ.

<sup>41</sup> Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 127-28; Frederick Thompson, "The Profit from Laughter," in *Reflections of a Decade, 1901-1910* (Indianapolis, 1980).

<sup>42</sup> Henry Pincus, "Common Errors in Park Construction," *Street Railway Journal* 16 (1900): 461; *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 15, 1912.

By the time the Citizens' Club visited Washington Park, the park had an abundance of competitors in the Philadelphia area, as new resorts opened and older "excursion" parks reinvented themselves along the new Coney Island model. According to John Kasson, immigrants used outings to such amusement parks as "a means to participate in American culture on an equal footing."<sup>43</sup>

If the experience of the children of prominent African American Methodist pastor Charles Tindley can serve as a guide, at least some black Philadelphians were able to enjoy this new form of amusement along with Philadelphians of other ethnicities. Emma and Elbert Tindley recalled many occasions during the first decade of the new century when they defied their father's wishes and "profaned the Sabbath" by traveling with friends by streetcar to nearby Woodside and Willow Grove parks, especially enjoying the illuminated fountains and the concerts of a John Philip Sousa band at the latter. While only twenty-one of the one hundred recently arrived black migrant families whom Sadie Mossell surveyed in 1921 reported making any expenditures at all for amusement or recreation, seven of those families who did so had spent such funds on outings to Woodside or Willow Grove.<sup>44</sup>

Another amusement park, Chestnut Hill Park, also known as "White City," opened in 1898 just outside the border of one of northwestern Philadelphia's most affluent residential neighborhoods. Chestnut Hill Park attracted substantial numbers of black visitors in its early years. When the park permanently closed in 1912, a columnist for the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the city's leading black weekly, recalled that "our people, who make less money than any other class, used to go there in droves and spend more money than any body else." Jack Jones, the son of a black Episcopal pastor in the nearby Germantown section of Philadelphia, recalled annual all-black outings to the park sponsored by

<sup>43</sup> Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 41.

<sup>44</sup> Ralph Jones, *Charles Albert Tindley, Prince of Preachers* (Nashville, 1982), 87; Sadie Tanner Mossell, "The Standard of Living among One Hundred Negro Migrant Families in Philadelphia," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 98 (1921): 196. According to contemporary studies of black-owned amusement parks in the Washington, DC, area that catered to black patronage, most visitors were middle class. If this pattern held in the Philadelphia area, neither the most affluent nor poorest blacks numbered among regular patrons of these resorts. See Jones, *Recreation and Amusement among Negroes in Washington, D.C.*, 100; Forrester B. Washington, "Recreational Facilities for the Negro," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140 (1928): 281.

that neighborhood's black churches.<sup>45</sup> These black customers joined crowds of white visitors from neighborhoods throughout the city and adjoining suburbs. After a few seasons, however, "the managers . . . engaged officers and had them stationed at the gates to inform colored people that their patronage was not welcome," an action which constituted one of the few identified cases of blatant racial exclusion by Philadelphia-area parks. Even after this new policy was adopted, though, "wealthy Chestnut Hill residents . . . argued that the park lowered the tone of the entire suburb." A consortium of these concerned neighbors bought the park in 1912 and promptly demolished it, which brought a certain satisfaction to one *Tribune* columnist who jeered that apparently "even the white people whom the managers of White City catered to . . . [were] undesirable."<sup>46</sup>

Commercial amusement parks in southern states were segregated as a matter of course, in accordance with state and local segregation laws, spurring black entrepreneurs in cities such as Jacksonville and New Orleans to find opportunity in such exclusion and, following T. Thomas Fortune's earlier advice, open all-black parks as alternatives. In some northern cities, too, segregation such as at Chestnut Hill Park was more evident than in Philadelphia. By 1914, for instance, despite a state civil rights law dating from the 1880s, amusement parks in several Ohio cities had barred African Americans altogether, and black businessmen in Akron and Columbus had opened Dahomey Park and Crown Gardens as all-black alternatives near their respective cities. A black real estate developer in Washington, DC, joined them in the early 1920s, responding to the whites-only policy of that city's principal amusement park by opening an elaborate resort for African Americans known as Suburban Gardens. To bypass recreational segregation in the Baltimore area, a black industrial foreman operated an excursion boat and resort grove which hosted all-black outings. However, although by the early 1920s at least one amusement park in southern New Jersey had begun excluding African Americans on all but the annual black-only "Jim Crow" dates and Woodside Park in the city had by the same time begun barring black visitors from its swimming

<sup>45</sup> Oral history, Jack Jones, in Negro History folder, Germantown Historical Society, Philadelphia.

<sup>46</sup> David R. Contosta, *Suburb in the City: Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia 1850-1990* (Columbus, OH, 1992), 157-58; unidentified news clippings, Feb. 28, 1912, and Mar. 15, 1912, in Joan Campbell Scrapbook vol. 65, Germantown Historical Society; *Philadelphia Tribune*, Mar. 21, 1912.

pool and merry-go-round, access to Philadelphia-area resorts was never restricted enough to prompt an attempt to open a black-owned park.<sup>47</sup> Such policies were in marked contrast to those of Philadelphia's theaters: the relatively open access to theatrical venues black Philadelphians had enjoyed since the 1870s gave way to increasingly sharp discrimination after 1910, prompting a number of entrepreneurs to open distinctly African American theaters.

From plebeian Gloucester to mannered Willow Grove, colorful amusement resorts ringed Philadelphia. While we do not know whether a majority of the area's African Americans spent the warmer months among the barkers and gaudy lights, it appears that those who so chose had satisfactory access to these attractions and satisfactory experiences among white customers, despite a peripheral tightening of discrimination. The potential black customer base in Philadelphia was larger than in most of the other urban areas where black-owned amusement resorts were founded, and it is impossible to state what might have happened had a black businessperson established such a venture in Philadelphia. The fact that no credible attempt was ever made suggests that conditions were never difficult enough to make the establishment of such an alternative venue an imperative.

For Philadelphians of all ethnicities seeking summer recreation slightly further afield, the New Jersey seashore has beckoned since the early nineteenth century. From Long Branch in the north to Cape May at its southernmost point, an increasing number of resort settlements lined the coast of New Jersey during the nineteenth century. Atlantic City, founded in 1854, quickly became the preeminent seashore destination for Philadelphians due to its proximity (sixty miles east of the city) and its canny promoters who built a convenient railroad link to Philadelphia as an integral part of the resort's initial development. During the 1870s, which saw the completion of a competing rail link to Philadelphia and a corresponding decrease in ticket prices (the cost of single-day excursion tickets abruptly dropped from two dollars to one dollar in 1877), Atlantic

<sup>47</sup> David A. Gerber, *Black Ohio and the Color Line, 1860-1915* (Urbana, IL, 1976), 312-13; Kusmer, *Ghetto Takes Shape*, 58, 180; Jones, *Recreation and Amusement*, 100-102; Coates, "Recreation and Sport in the African-American Community of Baltimore, 1890-1920," 153; Washington, "Recreational Facilities for the Negro," 281; Hannibal Gerald Duncan, "The Changing Race Relationship in the Border and Northern States" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1920), 68-69. Duncan was here referring to Clementon Park in Clementon, NJ. Sylvia Dixon, Rose Whitfield, and Helen Park, interview by author at Zoar United Methodist Church, Philadelphia, May 5, 2001.

City experienced rapid growth. Its permanent population increased from just over one thousand in 1870 to more than fifty-four hundred by 1880, including more than seven hundred African Americans drawn by personal service jobs in the hospitality industry.<sup>48</sup>

Organized groups of black Philadelphians were among those who took early advantage of the new lower railroad excursion fares to Atlantic City, but early on the same pattern that developed at Lakeside Park appeared in Atlantic City: the three organizations identified as "colored" among the score or more chartered excursion trips scheduled by the Camden and Atlantic Railroad during 1877 scheduled their outings for consecutive dates in early September.<sup>49</sup> Black organizations may have been attracted to lower postseason fares, or the reasons for this distinctive scheduling may have been more social than economic, but for nearly the next thirty years black excursions to Atlantic City overwhelmingly took place in early September.

Writing from the town in July 1883, a correspondent for the *New York Globe* boasted of Atlantic City's attractions for black visitors, citing several small black-owned cottages as the best hotel accommodations. He did not refer black guests to the Shelbourne, Haddon Hall, or any of the other massive, well-publicized hotels in the city. All-black excursions were not strictly limited to September, as he described a recent excursion which had brought more than six hundred members of the "Atlantic Social Club" of Philadelphia to the city. The *Globe* correspondent was sanguine about race relations in Atlantic City: "we learn of one or two places kept by colored men which refuse colored patronage, but . . . it is not general and our race do a good deal of business. Prejudice is not felt here."<sup>50</sup>

On September 1, the same journalist observed that "the season just drawing to a close was both brilliant and successful," while a reporter for the *State Journal*, a black weekly published in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, noted that merchant Joseph Seth and physician William Warrick, among other Philadelphians, had attended an elaborate end-of-season party during the last week of August, and that by the turn of September "our summer travelers are now wending their way homeward."<sup>51</sup> These state-

<sup>48</sup> U.S. Census Office, *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870* (Washington, DC, 1872); and *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880* (Washington, DC, 1883).

<sup>49</sup> *Camden Democrat*, June 9, 1877.

<sup>50</sup> *New York Globe*, July 28, 1883.

<sup>51</sup> *New York Globe*, Sept. 1, 1883; *Harrisburg State Journal*, Sept. 1, 1883.

ments defining the close of the season emphasize the fact that African Americans of differing economic classes experienced different "seasons" by the seashore, for while many black visitors were indeed wrapping up their affairs by the first of September, the brief season for lower-priced black excursions was just beginning.

Year after year, the largest numbers of black visitors streamed into Atlantic City on or after September 1, after the recognized tourist season had ended. The Reverend Benjamin F. Lee, editor of the *Christian Recorder*, exulted in the fact that such trips were possible: "A trip to the seaside is the delight of the city-pressed millions during this season of the year. . . . Cheap railroad excursion tickets, at one and a half dollars to Asbury Park . . . or \$1.00 to Atlantic City, a 75 cent boat ticket to Cape May—these enable many very poor Philadelphians to sniff old ocean's pure breath and bask in her healing waters once or more a year." Yet in an era in which a typical black male servant might earn between six and eight dollars per week and a female domestic between three and four dollars per week, Lee may have been overly optimistic in his portrayal of how many of the poorest African Americans could actually afford to go. Such fares were also substantially higher than those for inland excursions or for tickets to popular Philadelphia theaters and church entertainments.<sup>52</sup>

Still, many black Philadelphians did find the resources to travel to Atlantic City. Noting the arrival of more than five thousand black excursionists on September 1, 1891, a writer for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* asserted that "one of the harbingers of fall is the annual excursions of colored citizens from Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey. . . . The beach below Texas Avenue [close to the excursion terminal] was devoted exclusively to the dusky bathers." An even larger throng arrived on September 1 of the following year, which, like most of these annual excursion dates, happened to be a Thursday, the domestic servants' customary day off. As African Americans heavily concentrated in personal-service occupations, Thursday was a prime day for recreations of all sorts.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> "Light Star Lodge No. 1, United Hod-Carriers and Laborers Union, Third Annual Excursion to Atlantic City," broadside, Leon Gardiner Collection, American Negro Historical Society Records; *Christian Recorder*, Aug. 21, 1890; Isabel Eaton, "Special Report on Negro Domestic Service in the Seventh Ward, Philadelphia," in Du Bois, *Philadelphia Negro*, 446-47.

<sup>53</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sept. 3, 1891; "First Grand Annual Combination Excursion of H.H. Garnet Lodge No. 1, Wyoming Lodge No. 6, Philadelphia Division No. 2, Knights of Pythias to Atlantic City"; "Don't be Misled! This is the Grand Joint Masonic Excursion to Atlantic City. . . ." broadsides, Leon Gardiner Collection, American Negro Historical Society Records; *Philadelphia Item*, Sept. 4, 1892, reel 11, William H. Dorsey Scrapbook Collection.

Distinctions between those who vacationed or made extended stays in Atlantic City and those who came as single-day excursionists were not limited to African Americans. After an estimated twenty-five thousand white excursionists had packed the city during one summer weekend in 1886, certain hoteliers complained about disorderly behavior and proposed that the Sea View Excursion House (the excursionists' principal entertainment headquarters) be relocated southward to "relieve the board walk in that locality of many undesirable characters." By 1890, a railroad proposal to build a large new excursion house caused indignation among local businesspeople at the potential "desecration of the beach by turning it into a headquarters for the excursion element" who would then "crowd out the respectable classes."<sup>54</sup>

Economic status, therefore, along with personal preferences, contributed to where and when black visitors, like other tourists, could be found in Atlantic City and other New Jersey shore points. Some of Philadelphia's most affluent African Americans spent much of the season at Cape May; and Asbury Park, a resort well north of Atlantic City, also attracted black Philadelphians. Indeed, the number of African Americans who sought recreation in Asbury Park sparked a controversy that was an early harbinger of difficulties to come at all of the seaside resorts; for while we have seen that one black observer of the Atlantic City scene opined with satisfaction that "prejudice is not felt here," racial tensions did begin to intensify in Asbury Park shortly thereafter. A "colored question" regarding beach usage broke the summer tranquility at that resort during 1885, and by June 1887 an investigative reporter observed that James Bradley, the founder and "proprietor" of what was still a privately governed resort town, had appointed a "beach superintendent . . . for the ostensible purpose of enforcing the rule for modest bathing suits but in reality to prevent the colored people from monopolizing the beach to the exclusion of visiting white people." The mere fact that a sizable number of African Americans mingled on the beach with their white peers apparently raised the specter of displacement of white visitors. An observer for the general-circulation *Philadelphia Times* later marveled at the demographic mix on the Asbury Park strand but hinted at a tendency to identify black behavior as insolent: "Sit on the beach for an hour and you see the widest diversity of human types. The saleswoman brushes her best all-wool against the silk of the millionaire's wife, and the millionaire him-

<sup>54</sup> *West Jersey Press*, Aug. 18, 1886; *Philadelphia Times*, July 6, 1890.

self is jostled by the waiter who handed him his bill of fare at dinner. The exquisite dude and his cane are found beside the colored citizen, that is if the colored citizen is gracious enough to make room for him."<sup>55</sup>

The presence of a substantial and increasing number of black workers and tourists was also associated with a gradual increase in tensions in Atlantic City. During the same month that the journalist in Asbury Park remarked upon the mingling of black and white visitors upon that beach, a news writer in Atlantic City noted that "all nations and races" strolled the famed boardwalk and observed that the year-round population of black workers had swelled to more than fifteen hundred during the summer of 1890 (his estimate was actually low, as federal census figures for that year indicated that the resort's permanent black population had grown to more than twenty-one hundred). The increasing numbers of black workers and visitors "has brought about two results: lower wages and greater restrictions in rights and privileges. . . . 'You can't sit here' or 'You can't be served here' only receives 'All right, boss' as a reply. But they draw the line at the flying horses. . . . If the flying horse goes they go on it, much to the disgust of the would-be exclusive patron." Though the number of African Americans at the resort during July was sufficient to cause distress, the main wave was yet to arrive; the writer noted that "the season for colored guests from Philadelphia, New York, Washington and the South" typically opened during August, while "the first of September the excursions from Philadelphia will enliven the island."<sup>56</sup>

African Americans, of course, were not alone in making August a popular time for Atlantic City sojourns. "The last two weeks of August," wrote one correspondent "is the popular holiday time for the great company of Philadelphia store girls, and for the respectable working classes generally." Therefore, when the *New York Age* observed during late August 1891 that "Professor Kelly Miller . . . and hundreds of others prominent in business and social circles" were enjoying the season, they were among a greater throng of white visitors of rather modest means.<sup>57</sup> A substantial and sustained in-migration of black southerners was visible throughout the Delaware Valley by the early 1890s (indeed, between 1890 and 1900 Philadelphia's black population increased by nearly 60

<sup>55</sup> *Camden County Courier*, June 25, 1887; *Philadelphia Times*, July 20, 1890.

<sup>56</sup> *Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890*; "The Negro by the Sea," *Philadelphia Times*, July 25, 1890.

<sup>57</sup> *Philadelphia Times*, Aug. 16, 1890; *New York Age*, Aug. 29, 1891.



percent).<sup>58</sup> The growing black presence, and the sharp economic depression that marred the summer of 1893, threw the racial balance at the seashore resorts into sharper relief. By mid-July an Atlantic City journalist mourned that, while the larger hotels, which served "the fashionable and moneyed classes are doing very well . . . the class that is absent this season is that represented by the young man with a hundred-dollar bill in his clothes and two weeks vacation before him." Without the business of this coveted man and his family, more modest hoteliers were "tottering on the balance," beaches were empty, and amusement rides grew "dusty and rusty." More importantly to the purposes of this article, the reduced number of white visitors made the presence of black residents and visitors more conspicuous: "The boardwalk and Atlantic Avenue [the city's principal commercial street] fairly swarm with them . . . and the beach is dotted with them during bathing hours like the fruit in a huckleberry pudding." Local businesspeople worried that this was "offending the sensitive feelings of many visitors, especially those from the South. . . . Hundreds of visitors who possess race prejudices will be driven away."<sup>59</sup>

This troubling scenario prompted Asbury Park proprietor James Bradley to take a drastic action that contributed to the shaping of race relations at seashore resorts for years to come. At the beginning of July 1893 he posted signs officially barring African Americans from the boardwalk and adjoining open-air pavilions on the beachfront. As Bradley had always enjoyed cordial relations with the A.M.E. Church, this development came as a surprise to area church officials, who scheduled a meeting with the proprietor in protest. The *Christian Recorder* argued that "you can not find any colored person who has any idea of right and wrong who will uphold that class of colored people who make themselves objectionable" and chastised Bradley for not discriminating "between the civil and the uncivil among colored people." In other words, the *Recorder* did not take absolute exception to the exclusion, but, rather, meekly protested that it was too broad in application. Bradley held firm in his position, stating that "I have no ill will against the colored race" but "most of the colored people are employed and the white people are the employers. In their city homes they do not associate with their servants and they rightly do not desire to do so when they arrive at the seashore."

<sup>58</sup> *Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890*, U.S. Census Office, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*, pts. 1 and 2 (Washington, DC, 1902).

<sup>59</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 15, 1893.

The *Christian Recorder* editorialized in response that such sentiments were "equally true of our race here in the Park. They are guests and employees and do not desire to be placarded with or as servants." But the *Recorders* objections were of no avail. Bradley's segregationist stand drew admiration from a concerned journalist in Atlantic City who noted that since "there is no such one-man power here" similar "decisive actions" should be taken by the city's hotel owners.<sup>60</sup>

African Americans in Atlantic City, whether residents or tourists, did not face sharp restrictions immediately. The informal pattern of segregation that had been initially observed during the summer of 1890, however, tightened over time like a slowly constricting serpent. In 1896 a black delegate to that year's Republican political convention was forcibly removed from a boardwalk ride. As the twentieth century opened, according to oral histories collected by Herbert Foster, African Americans were excluded from most restaurants and entertainment in the commercial center of the city, and ocean swimming became restricted by custom to one stretch of beachfront near Missouri Avenue. At the beginning of the 1906 summer season, most of the major hotels issued strict instructions to their black employees (who may be viewed as proxies for black tourists, as well) to remain away from the beaches directly in front of their buildings during nonworking hours.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, while African Americans did have access to the fun and excitement of most Philadelphia-area amusement parks, if we pose the question of whether the fantasylands of Atlantic City or Asbury Park allowed black visitors to participate freely in this aspect of mainstream American life to the same degree that Coney Island amusement parks welcomed white immigrants, the answer would be an emphatic "no." Developments at shore resorts conformed to a trend toward increased exclusion clearly evident in Philadelphia and throughout much of the North from the late 1890s onward as commercial theaters, dance halls, and even playgrounds and public parks became ever more strictly segregated.

As in Philadelphia, the increasing level of racial segregation at the seashore created commercial opportunities for businesspeople who wished to cater to the black trade. In Asbury Park, a bathhouse and

<sup>60</sup> *Christian Recorder*, July 27, Aug. 3, 1893; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 15, 1893.

<sup>61</sup> Martin Paulsson, *The Social Anxieties of Progressive Reform: Atlantic City, 1854-1920* (New York, 1994), 36, 38; Herbert James Foster, "The Urban Experience of Blacks in Atlantic City, New Jersey: 1850-1915" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 1981), 187.

changing building "set aside for colored persons" opened in 1894. George Walls, a black migrant from the South, opened a similar bathhouse near the Missouri Avenue beach in Atlantic City in the late 1890s. Indeed, so intent was Walls on exploiting a captive black trade that he unsuccessfully petitioned the Atlantic City government to formally restrict African Americans to that beach in 1906, after the white hoteliers announced their beachfront exclusion policy. During April 1899, B. G. Fitzgerald, a black man recently arrived from the South, asserting that the city's "numerous music halls and pleasure pavilions . . . were accessible to most anybody except people of color," opened an impressive two-story hall on Kentucky Avenue. Fitzgerald's Auditorium, as he named his venture, featured a saloon, café, and poolroom, together with a large dance hall. During the summer of 1906, a writer for the *Colored American Magazine* agreed with the principle of constructing an alternative black amusement sphere in Atlantic City, stating that "the few places that may object to our presence are only teaching us a lesson the meaning of which is to spend your money among your own people."<sup>62</sup>

In spite of these restrictions, black visitors poured into Atlantic City in ever-increasing numbers. At the same time, chronological distinctions between the visits of various social classes of African Americans persisted. During mid-August 1898 the *Tribune* noted that the Atlantic City season "is at its zenith now," while the *Scranton Defender's* correspondent wrote during mid-August 1904 that "just now the season is at its height. . . . The great Mecca of the Afro-Americans is [George] Wall's pavilion and bath house. This place is of the colored people, by the colored people, and for the colored people. Hence, if you want to know or meet an acquaintance, go to Wall's." The 1912 Atlantic City season for black tourists from Philadelphia was "officially" opened on July 6 of that year with a proclamation by *Tribune* publisher Christopher Perry and respected banker and scholar W. Carl Bolivar, and registration lists of guests at the various black hotels during that week included the names of many prominent Philadelphians.<sup>63</sup> The *Tribune* routinely noted the "closing of the season" at the end of August.

<sup>62</sup> *Asbury Park Daily Press*, July 3, 1895; Paulsson, *Social Anxieties of Progressive Reform*, 37; "An Enterprising Young Man," unidentified news clipping, Apr. 9, 1899, reel 8, William H. Dorsey Scrapbook Collection; "Atlantic City," *Colored American Magazine*, Oct. 1906, pp. 260-62.

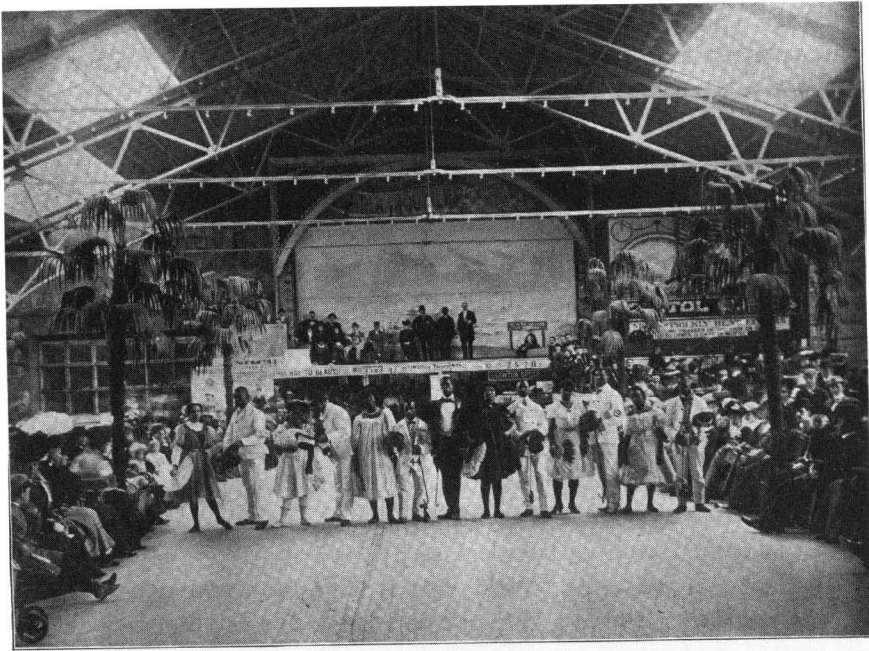
<sup>63</sup> *Philadelphia Tribune*, Aug. 20, 1898, reel 22, William H. Dorsey Scrapbook Collection; *Baltimore Afro-American Ledger*, Aug. 17, 1901; *Scranton Defender*, Aug. 30, 1904; *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 13, 1912.

While the numbers of in-season black tourists were sufficient to sustain Walls's bathhouse and other black seaside enterprises, the inexpensive excursions that followed the close of the "season" remained as a distinctive festival gathering for African Americans from throughout the mid-Atlantic region. An estimated sixteen thousand black visitors passed through the Camden railroad terminal during the September 1894 excursion to Atlantic City, accompanied by "several brass bands."<sup>64</sup> September 1, 1898, saw a crowd of more than ten thousand African Americans "from all parts of Pennsylvania" and elsewhere receiving the ceremonial key to Atlantic City from its mayor. The city again "was given over to the colored folks" on September 5, 1907, "the occasion of the annual colored excursion, bringing a great crowd of happy, pleasure-seeking negroes from Camden, Philadelphia, Wilmington, Chester and as far south as Baltimore and Washington. . . . The colored help employed in the local hotels joined in the festivities." During that day and evening, amusement venues that "discouraged colored patronage" during the season now welcomed these customers.<sup>65</sup> Estimates of the size of the 1907 crowd, however, indicated some reduction in participation; the annual postseason excursion tradition apparently ended shortly thereafter.

The annual black excursions to Atlantic City drew the attention of white spectators. During the September 1898 gathering one observer noted that "their white brethren enjoy the antics of the care-free colored folk who . . . have certain sections of the island practically to themselves. . . . It is a rare sight to see several hundred dusky swells and their gaudy partners indulging in the amazing waltz at the excursion house." The excursion dates in September 1905 also made quite an impression: "Yesterday," one correspondent recorded, "the boardwalk was filled from dawn to dusk with throngs of colored people down on the great colored excursions . . . their dark faces smiling happily all the time and the picturesque costumes of the women with their great love of color interested and amused the spectators." Pastor Elijah Jenkins of Atlantic City's Second Baptist Church saw a dark undercurrent in the attention and questioned the image African American revelers presented to white onlookers. He denounced the cakewalk competitions that accompanied

<sup>64</sup> "Grand Lodge Knights of Pythias to Atlantic City," broadside, reel 6, William H. Dorsey Scrapbook Collection; *West Jersey Press*, Sept. 12, 1894.

<sup>65</sup> *Philadelphia Press*, Sept. 1, 1898; *Philadelphia Item*, Sept. 8, 1898; *Camden Post-Telegram*, Sept. 6, 1907.



THE CAKEWALK ON THE PIER

Cakewalk competitions, such as the one pictured above, drew the attention of white spectators. This photograph is one of very few of African Americans published in the many illustrated promotional booklets of Atlantic City. *Atlantic City* (Philadelphia, 1902). Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

the excursions as "the most degrading spectacles which Atlantic City offers her visitors. . . . The white people go because they always like to see the colored man make a fool of himself."<sup>66</sup>

As time progressed, the temporal segregation that resulted from the scheduling of black excursions in September diminished, resulting in a higher black profile during the main late-spring and summer season, but these gains were more than offset by a sharp increase in spatial segregation. The *Tribune* angrily editorialized during the spring of 1916 that "the white people who have a monopoly of the ocean front insist that Negroes be satisfied with fresh air and keep out of the salt water, except for one twenty-foot space." If the situation persisted, the paper urged African Americans to "follow the example of the Jews when barred from

<sup>66</sup> *Philadelphia Record*, Sept. 4, 1898; *Philadelphia Item*, Sept. 8, 1899; *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Aug. 24, 1900, Sept. 8, 1905.

Saratoga” and “flock by ourselves to Whitesboro [a small all-black community many miles south of Atlantic City] or elsewhere.” Black visitors did not follow that advice, but continued to visit Atlantic City while adapting to more intrusive discrimination. In noting the 1924 closing of George Walls’s bathhouse, a *Tribune* reporter noted that “with the passing of Wall’s Bath House has come the disappearance of colored bathers from that section of the strand. Where once their sable forms dotted the ocean like mosquitoes in a rain barrel, they are to be seen now and then, sandwiched between bathers of other groups. . . . The scene of their activity has shifted far up the beach to North Carolina and Indiana Avenues, where on Sunday they may be seen by thousands disporting themselves in the cooling waves all unmindful of the probability of becoming the victims of more embarrassing restrictions in a few years to come.”<sup>67</sup> In fact, informal but potent social pressures soon concentrated black visitors again at the Missouri Avenue beachfront, which became known as the “Chicken Bone Beach” of later legend.

In the years following World War I, large crowds of black visitors crowded Atlantic City throughout its popular season, and especially during the Easter and Independence Day holidays. The “Soap Box Minstrels,” a comedy revue troupe drawn from the prominent Citizens Republican Club of Philadelphia, attracted crowds of up to five thousand African Americans to annual mid-August performances beginning in the early 1920s. During the Easter holiday of 1926, the boardwalk was remarkably crowded with black visitors: “colored Philadelphia moved to Atlantic City last Sunday,” reported the *Tribune*, “the boardwalk was checkered with members of the race. . . . Arctic Avenue had been almost completely deserted in favor of the wooden esplanade. The most bitter representative of the Bourbon South jostled side by side with negroes in an effort to get some salt water taffy. . . . ‘My,’ observed one woman, ‘I wonder where all these colored people came from?’” Black tourists were now a season-long presence in the city by the sea and obviously not shy about keeping a high profile in certain public places; but in fact the hotels, restaurants, and dance clubs that welcomed black patronage had become concentrated along Arctic Avenue and neighboring streets in the northern part of the city. While during 1893 a white journalist had complained about large numbers of African Americans strolling along Atlantic Avenue, one of

<sup>67</sup> *Philadelphia Tribune*, Mar. 11, 1916, Aug. 15, 1925.

the city's principal streets, in the 1920s the *Tribune* implied that African Americans were usually to be found only in the Arctic Avenue area.<sup>68</sup>

During the waning years of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth, African Americans in the Philadelphia area, like their fellows in other parts of the nation, were as eager to seek amusement afield as they were to find recreation in settings close to home. Putting distance between oneself and one's immediate neighborhood for a time allowed black Philadelphians, as well as those of other ethnicities, to enjoy a change of scene, to take advantage of resort grounds specifically designed for leisure and fun, or even to "sniff old ocean's pure breath" on a hot summer day.

However, the African American experience during outings seems to have differed from that of other Philadelphians in the degree to which ethnic homogeneity prevailed. Many recreational venues in the city and resorts in the region were initially (in the late 1870s and 1880s) open to integrated patronage, but African Americans joining Philadelphia-area excursions quite often did so under the auspices of a racially defined religious or secular group, and on that basis they frequently gathered and enjoyed themselves in monoracial, all-black parties. This was to a large extent the logical extension of the racial basis upon which organized social life was structured in Philadelphia; it is also apparent, particularly in the case of the annual postseason festivals in Atlantic City, that a desire for fellowship with other African Americans, regardless of denomination or club affiliation, was operative. Furthermore, despite the absence of the legally ordained segregation prevalent below the Mason-Dixon line, and the presence of state civil rights laws intended to mandate open access to public accommodations, a growing matrix of racial discrimination circumscribed black recreational opportunities after 1890, particularly at New Jersey's oceanside resorts. Painful and restrictive, this last development also fostered opportunities for black entrepreneurs, who furnished a growing array of separate commercial entertainment venues for black visitors to the seashore.

To the extent that growing segregation tended to ensure that African Americans would spend excursion times together, these outings were not generally opportunities for free participation in "mainstream" recreational life. They were, though, occasions in which black urbanites could break

<sup>68</sup> Foster, "Urban Experience of Blacks in Atlantic City," 211; *Philadelphia Tribune*, Apr. 10, 1926.

the bonds of routine and have extra-ordinary experiences, meeting their social and recreational needs in a self-contained sphere protected from the sharpest edges of discrimination. Black Philadelphians traveled on roads, rails, and rivers to what had become an autonomous and substantially separate world of resort amusement.

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