

## *Peter C. Blackwell and the Negro Community of Steelton, 1880-1920*

**B**LACKS who migrated into northern industrial areas during the later decades of the nineteenth century often found themselves segregated not only from the white community but also divided internally. The mass of transient black laborers who achieved little in the way of upward social and occupational mobility was frequently quite distinct from a "more stable" Negro settlement which sought to emulate, both socially and ideologically, the traditions of white, Protestant America.<sup>1</sup>

Steelton, Pennsylvania, located along the Susquehanna River south of Harrisburg, provides a clear illustration of the activities of this "more stable" Negro community and one of its leading spokesmen, Peter C. Blackwell. As the *Harrisburg Call* observed in 1886, in an article entitled "Views of the Dark Side of Life in the Industrial Borough," "there were some honest and wealthy colored citizens" in Steelton, but there was also "Coon Hollow," "A half-civilized community where few white men care to pass." The *Call* claimed that the Negroes living along the old Pennsylvania Canal in shanties and along Adams Street in "Coon Hollow" represented by far the majority of Steelton's black population.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> While this essay does not deal specifically with occupational and geographical mobility, additional research in Steelton, Pa., has shown that between 1880 and 1920 few of Steelton's blacks achieved positions above the unskilled level, and then usually in such nonmanual trades as barbers or grocers. Furthermore, persistence rates among blacks were lower than those of native white workers and Slavic and Italian immigrants. Richard Wright, who surveyed Pennsylvania's Negro population in 1912, wrote that in Steelton there were some twenty-five blacks in small businesses and nearly 500 employed at the steel company, chiefly laborers with a few foremen and one machinist. See Richard R. Wright, *The Negro in Pennsylvania* (New York, 1969), 218, 229. See also U.S. Bureau of Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915* (Washington, 1918); Lewis J. Carter, "Negro Migrant Labor in Pennsylvania, 1916-30" (M.A. thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 1930).

<sup>2</sup> *Steelton Reporter*, Aug. 21, 1886, 4, and Sept. 10, 1887, 4; taped interview with Mrs. Elcora McClane and Mrs. Charlene Conyers, Steelton, Aug. 14, 1971; *Harrisburg Call*, Aug. 13, 1886, 1-3.

Like many small industrial towns, Steelton grew up around a single industry. In this instance the Pennsylvania Steel Company, which began operations in 1866 and which was purchased by the Bethlehem Steel Company in 1916, provided the impetus for continued community growth. Indeed, the demands of the sprawling steel plant, which required a large supply of inexpensive labor, proved a magnet for Slavic, German, and Italian immigrants, and black migrants from Maryland, West Virginia, and Virginia.<sup>3</sup>

From the inception of its steel production, Steelton witnessed a continual influx of Afro-Americans. The Pennsylvania Steel Company and Bethlehem Steel both recruited black labor from the South, often as strike breakers. The *Steelton Press*, a Negro publication, mentioned a Liberian Migration Society that arranged for Negroes who were seeking employment in the North to come to Steelton. During the course of World War I, nearly 600 blacks were brought to Steelton and occupied barracks in a labor camp which was operated by Bethlehem Steel.<sup>4</sup>

To most of the Negro population in Steelton in the early decades, congregations formed the nucleus of community life. Jon Butler has pointed out that in some instances congregations did not include all of the black community. Indeed, as the *Call* indicated, the residents of "Coon Hollow" were on the periphery of Negro institutional life. However, 700 of the 1,200 Afro-Americans who lived in Steelton in 1900 were members of one of the three black churches: the African Methodist Episcopal (1871), the First Baptist Church (1884), and the Mt. Zion Baptist Church (1895).<sup>5</sup>

The influence of the black congregations can not be minimized.

<sup>3</sup> William H. Egle, *History of Dauphin and Lebanon Counties* (Philadelphia, 1883), 400-404.

<sup>4</sup> *Steelton Press*, Aug. 29, 1903, 1; *Harrisburg Telegraph*, May 9, 1918, 4; *Reporter*, May 4, 1889, 4; U.S. Immigration Commission, *Immigrants in Industry*, I, Part 2: *Iron and Steel Manufacturing* (Washington, 1911), 602; *Reporter*, July 7, 1894, 4, and July 21, 1894, 4; *Telegraph*, May 9, 1918, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Butler, "Communities and Congregations: The Black Church in St. Paul, 1860-1900," *Journal of Negro History*, LVI (1971), 118-134. Butler challenges E. Franklin Frazier's view that Negro community life and Negro congregations were inseparable. See Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York, 1964), 44. Pennsylvania Department of Welfare, *Negro Survey of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, 1927), 35; *Call*, Aug. 13, 1886, 1-3; Wright, *The Negro in Pennsylvania*, 229; *Press*, May 26, 1906, 1, and Oct. 3, 1908, 1; *Reporter*, Feb. 8, 1889, 1; "African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Monumental Church, Programme of Dedication" (Steelton, Apr. 21, 1907); A. M. E. Church, *Historical Record* (Steelton, 1905).

The *Steelton Reporter* argued that the "colored churches" deserved credit for their moral endeavors. Sermons by Negro ministers frequently urged blacks to avoid "Sabbath breaking," drinking, gambling, and disorderly conduct. Often two sermons on Sunday were the rule. And blacks could find solace in their prayers:

Vainly we offer each ample oblation  
Vainly with gifts would His favor secure  
Richer by far is the heart's adoration  
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.

They could also listen to sermons such as the "Future of the Negro in this Country" or "The Negro and the White Man of the South."<sup>6</sup>

Black congregations, like their white immigrant counterparts, also showed definite initiative on the part of laymen. Blacks often formed congregations before they secured ministers. And, even after the arrival of ministers, laymen still exercised much control. In July, 1895, for instance, the deacons of the First Baptist Church concluded that their church could not prosper under conditions where the pastor desired to run things "to suit himself." The deacons agreed to dispense with the services of the Rev. J. J. Jones. But Jones secured a temporary injunction from the Dauphin County Court to prohibit the deacons from interfering with his preaching. When the deacons obtained a similar document to restrain the pastor from entering, an impasse was reached and the church was closed. Jones finally was forced to leave after receiving three months' salary.<sup>7</sup>

Black institutional life extended beyond the religious sphere. In 1888, Negroes formed the Home Club of Steelton in order to improve "home life" and advance the education of black children. Also, a Negro Widows and Orphans Committee held frequent entertainments to raise funds for the needy. Other organizations included the Galilean Fisherman Lodge of Steelton and the Black Union Republican Club. The all-Black Odd Fellows fraternal order, which paid sick and death expenses much like the white immigrant lodges,

<sup>6</sup> *Reporter*, Feb. 9, 1889, 1, May 28, 1909, 1, Oct. 15, 1892, 4, Apr. 22, 1893, 4. The prayer is quoted from the *Reporter*, Dec. 31, 1887, 1. See also *Press*, Mar. 9, 1907, 1, May 29, 1909, 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Reporter*, July 20, 1895, 4, and Aug. 3, 1895, 4.

had fewer than 100 members as late as 1910, indicating that it attracted only a small part of the black community. A Negro chapter of the American Legion, a separate Negro football team, and a black Young Men's Reform Association sought to end "rowdyism and drunkenness [*sic*] among their people."<sup>8</sup>

In all such activities Negroes acted separately from whites. While all Negroes were not fully integrated into the black community, a black community did indeed exist apart from the Irish, Croatian, German and Italian communities in Steelton. The Negroes were forced to hold separate Memorial Day parades, usually after the "regular" parade, consisting largely of Irish and German organizations, had ended. (Slavic immigrant groups held no parade at all prior to 1910.) Actually the annual black Memorial Day parade was a frequent source of friction among Negroes. In 1894, feelings between Baptists and Methodists became so intense that there were two black Memorial Day parades.<sup>9</sup>

Negroes were also required to attend an all-black school throughout the first eight grades well past the First World War. The *Reporter* observed: "In Steelton, the schools have been separated for several years and it has been found to work to the great interest and advantage of the colored children. . . . We also have colored teachers. . . . It does away with all petty bickerings and dissensions. By all means separate your schools."<sup>10</sup> Negroes attended the Hygienic School building, and Charles F. Howard, a Negro, was principal. Commencement exercises for blacks, after eight years of schooling, were usually held in one of the black churches. While blacks could attend Steelton High School, many chose instead to seek employment. In the thirty years prior to 1910, less than forty Negroes graduated from Steelton High.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Jan. 28, 1888, 4, Sept. 19, 1891, 4, Aug. 8, 1902, 4, July 23, 1892, 4, June 23, 1894, 4, Nov. 2, 1895, 4; *Press*, Aug. 15, 1903, 1, Nov. 14, 1903, 1, Dec. 2, 1905, 1, May 28, 1910, 1, June 11, 1910, 1; Mark T. Milnor, "Veterans Organizations of the United States With Special Reference to Dauphin County, Pennsylvania," *The Dauphin County Historical Review*, V (1956), 23-28.

<sup>9</sup> *Reporter*, June 3, 1893, 4, and June 2, 1894, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, June 29, 1895, 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Steelton Item*, Aug. 26, 1881, 5, and Nov. 11, 1881, 5; *Harrisburg Patriot*, May 24, 1913, 9; *Press*, June 15, 1907, 1; taped interview with Mrs. Elcora McClane and Mrs. Charlene Conyers. Mrs. McClane and Mrs. Conyers are daughters of Charles Howard.

While blacks never seemed to protest the actual separation of educational facilities in the early years, they did make certain demands. In 1890, Negro citizens severely criticized a school board decision to lease an old hall for the accommodation of the "colored school." Blacks claimed that the hall was not a proper place in which to educate children, and charged the school board with acting in a "prejudiced manner." Negroes organized an American Protective Association, led by Joseph Hill and Peter Blackwell, which investigated the hall in question, found it unfit, and "demanded a proper school room for our children." The Association also discovered that there were four classrooms empty in the fifth ward and asked why blacks should be crowded into a room "unfit for school purposes." It demanded rooms in the present high school or the construction of new rooms. The black organization concluded by charging that the school board was dependent upon the power of the local steel company to enforce its mandates, since the company discharged all men who did not send their children to school.<sup>12</sup>

The school board eventually found space in the Hygienic School. But the *Reporter* declared that a debate should be held to examine whether the "colored in Steelton were receiving proper recognition," and whether Negroes failed to receive good positions "because they were not the same color as the managers of the steel company."<sup>13</sup> The debate was never held. And in 1910, Steelton's blacks were again aroused when conditions at the Hygienic School became intolerable.<sup>14</sup> They continued, however, to remain separated in the public schools.

Although blacks could attend Steelton High School, they were barred from joining its very active alumni association. In 1902, Charles Howard, Franklin Jefferson, H. H. Summers, W. J. Bailor, and Vernon James started the Douglass Association. The organization, named for Fredrick Douglass, was intended to be a black counterpart to the all-white Steelton High Alumni Association. Its initially stated objectives were "the promotion of education among our people, the encouragement of those who are seeking an educa-

<sup>12</sup> *Reporter*, Aug. 9, 1890, 4, and Sept. 6, 1890, 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 6, 1890, 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Press*, July 16, 1910, 1.

tion, and the mental and moral improvement of its members.”<sup>15</sup> The Douglass Association’s annual banquet for its members became a social highlight of the black community, persisting until after World War II.<sup>16</sup>

Actually, while blacks created a vital but segregated community, they were ambivalent in their attitude toward segregation. While they demanded quality educational sites for their children, they never openly protested elementary school segregation. Ironically, however, they protested quite loudly when the Pennsylvania legislature appropriated \$20,000 for an Industrial School for Negroes in Philadelphia. Dr. W. R. Gullins, of the AME Church, spoke for a Steelton committee opposed to the project, claiming such an appropriation constituted a “distinct drawing of the color line, which shall never be tolerated in Pennsylvania.”<sup>17</sup> The appropriation in question was for the Berean Manual Training and Industrial School which began in 1905 in the basement of the Berean Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Backed by William Wanamaker, Isaac Clothier, and other members of Philadelphia’s merchant elite, the school hoped to train Negroes for industrial jobs.<sup>18</sup>

As with Slavs and Italians in Steelton, World War I tended to lessen the social divisions between Negroes and native Americans for a time. While black soldiers were serving abroad, their pictures were carried in the local press along with those of white soldiers. An article headlined “Our Negro Soldiers’ Brilliant War Record.” And, in 1919, both blacks and whites were urged to turn out to welcome Steelton’s black soldiers returning from France. The patriotic parades of the previous year had allowed Negroes to march with the “regular” parade.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Reporter*, May 20, 1904, 2; taped interview with Mrs. Elcora McClane and Mrs. Charlene Conyers.

<sup>16</sup> Interesting accounts of the annual Douglass Association affairs can be seen in *Press*, June 10, 1911, 1; *Reporter*, June 2, 1905, 1, and June 5, 1908, 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Press*, Feb. 4, 1905, 1, and Feb. 11, 1905, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Anderson to Samuel Pennypacker, Apr. 12, 1905, Samuel Pennypacker Papers, R. G. 171, Box 38, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg; *Press*, July 4, 1908; *Patriot*, Feb. 14, 1905, 1, 4. Blacks also attended the Avery College Trade School near Pittsburgh, where both black and white youths were sent from Juvenile Court, and a Negro industrial school near Downingtown which was intended to be similar to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. The Downingtown school later became Cheyney State College.

<sup>19</sup> *Harrisburg Telegraph*, July 11, 1918, 4, Feb. 22, 1919, 15, Mar. 7, 1919, 7, Mar. 13, 1919, 3, Mar. 15, 1919, 10.

Black teachers and ministers, such as Charles Howard, H. H. Summers, and Dr. Gullins, were intent on creating a community whose activities and institutions paralleled white society. Peter C. Blackwell became their most articulate spokesman. After graduating from Harper's Ferry College, Blackwell came to Steelton around 1885. By 1886, he had founded a night school in the basement of the AME Church for Negroes "in order to improve their education."<sup>20</sup> During the late 1890's, Blackwell began publishing a Negro paper, the *Steelton Press*. Several years later he joined the Executive Committee of the National Colored Voters League. In 1903, Blackwell, along with Robert J. Nelson of Reading, was largely responsible for calling a National Suffrage Convention in Washington, D. C. One of the resolutions reached at the convention was a demand that the Republican platform of 1904 contain a plank calling for the enforcement of the Fifteenth Amendment.<sup>21</sup>

By 1904, Blackwell was seeking election as the first Negro councilman in Steelton. He used the *Press* to push his campaign. Comparing his opponent to Ben Tillman of South Carolina, Blackwell declared that the "colored voters of Steelton were thoroughly aroused as to encroachment upon their rights by this class of men."<sup>22</sup>

The *Steelton Reporter*, which invariably reflected the views of the steel company, boosted Blackwell's candidacy: "There is no reason why any white or black Republican should vote against Blackwell. . . . This is a late day for the party to split upon the color line."<sup>23</sup> The *Reporter's* kind view of Blackwell's candidacy is even more striking when one listened to Blackwell's remarks in city council once he was elected: "Pennsylvania Steel holds a relative and corporate interest to the people of Steelton which demands that they should have a voice upon this [council] floor at all times."<sup>24</sup> The following year Pennsylvania Steel donated \$500 to the AME Church to help them erect a new structure.<sup>25</sup> While blacks who lived in shanties were ignored, Pennsylvania Steel aided the "more stable" element.

<sup>20</sup> *Press*, Mar. 26, 1898, 1, and Dec. 19, 1903, 1; *Reporter*, Sept. 18, 1886, 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Press*, Dec. 26, 1903, 1, Jan. 16, 1904, 1, Sept. 24, 1904, 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Jan. 16, 1904, 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Reporter*, Feb. 13, 1904, 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Feb. 13, 1904, 1, and May 27, 1904, 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, Feb. 9, 1906, 1.

Blackwell was elected a Republican councilman by twenty-seven votes in a ward that had a majority of nearly 300 Republicans. The *Reporter* complained that at least 120 Republicans failed to support Blackwell because they refused to vote for a "colored man." Once on the council, Blackwell immediately began to call for such measures as more police protection on Adams Street. He decried the prevalence of drunkenness and gambling halls. "We want our young people to press onward and upward but the present incentives are the reverse."<sup>26</sup> Blackwell remained the dominant spokesman of blacks in Steelton for the next decade.

Back in 1895, Blackwell had been one of the driving forces behind the formation of the Pennsylvania Afro-American League. At a meeting in Pittsburgh, he was named the league's first president. The league's initial resolution declared that its object was to further the interests of the Negro race along all lines tending to its elevation. Its resolution said, "We feel that with proper and persistent effort the barriers of prejudice now existing in Pennsylvania will gradually be broken down and more opportunities will be open for us." By 1905, the league claimed to have a membership of more than 55,000.<sup>27</sup>

W. E. B. DuBois criticized this effort. DuBois claimed that the League was essentially attempting to acquire political appointments for blacks who, the League argued, formed a significant part of the electorate. DuBois suggested that the League was overlooking the crucial problems which affected Afro-Americans and denounced "political morality" which said, "Here is my vote, now where is my pay in office or favor or influence?" He called the League a small faction of "outs" who were striving to get "in."<sup>28</sup>

Despite such criticism, Blackwell's organization continued to seek political rewards for Pennsylvania's black voters. Robert J. Nelson of Reading, F. C. Battis of Harrisburg, W. H. Merriman of Pottstown, F. L. Jefferson and the Rev. W. R. Gullins of Steelton all served with Blackwell as officials of the organization. They consistently backed Republican candidates. The *Steelton Press*, which became the League's official organ, not only carried lengthy endorsements of Republicans, but called on Republican congressmen to oppose

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, Feb. 27, 1904, 1, and Apr. 10, 1897, 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Press*, June 24, 1905, 1, and Oct. 5, 1907, 1.

<sup>28</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (New York, 1967), 374-375.



such activities as disfranchisement and the lynching of Negroes in the South.<sup>29</sup>

In 1903, the activities of the League illustrate its attempts to secure political positions for blacks. Soon after Samuel Pennypacker took office as Governor of Pennsylvania in January, F. L. Jefferson of Steelton, secretary of the Pennsylvania Afro-American League, and other league officials, asked the new administration for the appointment of blacks to political offices. William Sample of the League's executive committee wrote: "In view of the large colored population of Pennsylvania with a voting strength of 51,668, nearly all of whom loyally support the Republican ticket, we go on record in expressing the belief that such loyalty is entitled to favorable consideration."<sup>30</sup>

Apparently, the league was seeking to secure a position for one of its officials, Robert J. Nelson. During the election campaign Nelson had written a pamphlet *Why the Colored Man Will Vote for Judge Pennypacker*, and had distributed more than 35,000 copies. Blackwell fought for the appointment of Nelson to office. "I think, Governor, that the time has come when some substantial recognition should be accorded to the active colored men who help to make the Republican majority," he argued. Such an appointment, Blackwell felt, would gain Pennypacker widespread influence among Pennsylvania blacks. He would be the "Moses of the hour."<sup>31</sup>

The League enlisted the support of Senator Boies Penrose, who wrote to Pennypacker that the appointment of a Negro would disarm the criticism made of previous administrations that blacks were not sufficiently recognized.<sup>32</sup> After several months of waiting and pressuring, the league achieved its most significant, albeit modest, victory. Nelson was appointed to a clerical position in the Bureau of Mines.

Blackwell continued to carry out his efforts in the *Press* to uplift Steelton's Negroes. In addition to urging blacks to stand by the "party that broke the chains of slavery from your feet," Black-

<sup>29</sup> *Press*, Aug. 22, 1903, 1, Dec. 19, 1903, 1, July 2, 1904, 1.

<sup>30</sup> F. L. Jefferson to Matthew S. Quay, Jan. 21, 1903, Samuel Pennypacker Papers, Box 12; William A. Sample to S. W. Pennypacker, Jan. 21, 1903, *ibid*.

<sup>31</sup> P. C. Blackwell to S. W. Pennypacker, Jan. 23, 1903, *ibid*.

<sup>32</sup> Boies Penrose to S. W. Pennypacker, Mar. 27, 1903, *ibid*.

well's editorials spoke out on a number of other issues. He frequently attacked lynching in the South and called anyone a murderer who lynched or burned a Negro. He urged blacks to take out insurance policies from Negro-owned concerns and organize their own institutions. He supported the organization of a Negro savings bank in Steelton, saying that, "The time has come when the colored man must learn to foster his own institutions as much as possible. He must prepare the way for the rising generations of boys and girls."<sup>33</sup>

Blackwell also ranged into discussions on property ownership. The Pennsylvania Department of Welfare had discovered as late as 1925 that a mere 13 per cent of the blacks in Harrisburg and Steelton owned their own homes.<sup>34</sup> Blackwell continually complimented Negroes who purchased property in Steelton. If Negroes kept erecting homes, he claimed, it demonstrated the fact that the Negro was becoming enlightened to the need of being a property holder. "Now is the time for Negroes to seek homes in every part of this country," he wrote: "A poverty stricken race is not a race of money earners but of money savers."<sup>35</sup>

Blackwell further refined his arguments on property ownership. When a Harrisburg developer attempted to build a housing development for Negroes in 1907, Blackwell protested. He stated that he certainly had no objections to blacks buying property, "but we do object to them being herded together on one street and that street labeled at each end—nobody lives here but Black Folks."<sup>36</sup>

A few blacks in Steelton sought to improve their condition by emulating the institutions of the dominant white society. Yet, the mass of blacks remained largely unskilled at the bottom of Steelton's social order. Blackwell offered them a vaguely defined formula of success—purchase property, buy insurance, create all-black institutions such as banks—and attacked lynching and disfranchisement in the South. But at no time did Steelton's black elite or

<sup>33</sup> *Press*, July 25, 1903, 1, and Apr. 30, 1904, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Welfare, *Negro Survey of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, 1927), 43.

<sup>35</sup> *Press*, Sept. 26, 1903, 1, and Nov. 21, 1903, 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 10, 1907, 1. Blackwell last appeared as a property owner in the 1915 tax list, after which I have located no additional data about him.

Blackwell criticize the social structure of Steelton that kept them in ghettos on Adams Street. At no time did Blackwell attack the pervasive power of the local steel company, rather he defended it. School facilities were criticized but never the segregation of the races. The pages of the *Steelton Press* are noticeable for their lack of any mention of local social problems. Blackwell was a more effective spokesman for the attitudes of the dominant white community than he was for the oppressed blacks.

*Pennsylvania Historical and  
Museum Commission*

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