A "SPIRIT OF PERSEVERANCE": FREE AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN LATE ANTEBELLUM LOUISVILLE

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In his autobiographical history of Louisville's black population, William H. Gibson argued that whites and free African-Americans in antebellum Louisville were motivated by similar aspirations. The "same instinct" that led whites "to put their lives in peril . . . to enhance" their and their families' happiness was matched by a "spirit of perseverance . . . at the risk of becoming slaves" among free blacks. It was, Gibson wrote, evidence of free African-Americans' "spirit of indomitable courage."[1]

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1 William H. Gibson, *History of the United Brothers of Friendship and Historical Sketch of the Progress of the Colored Race, In Louisville, KY, along with the Semi-Centennial of the Public Career of W. H. Gibson, Sr.* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972 [first published in Louisville, 1897]), 84, 30-31.

Gibson, an African-American, countered prevailing white sentiments regarding free blacks in Kentucky. The public statements of prominent white Kentuckians illustrated the ambiguous position free African-Americans held in antebellum Kentucky. In an 1829 address to the Colonization Society of Kentucky, Henry Clay averred that free African-Americans "are, by far, as a class, the most corrupt, depraved, and abandoned." While the laws said free blacks were free, Clay continued, "prejudices more powerful than any law, deny them the privileges of freemen. They occupy a middle station between the free white population and the slaves of the United States, and the tendency of their habits is to corrupt both." Clay argued that the solution to the problem created by the existence of free blacks in a slave society was "total and absolute separation, by an extensive space of water or of land . . . of the white portion of our population from that which is free of the colored." "To Gentlemen of the Colonization Society of Kentucky," 17 December 1829, in James Hopkins, Melba Porter Hay, et al., eds., *The Papers of Henry Clay* (10 vols.; Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1961-1991), 8: 147.

Twenty-one years later, George Prentice was even more critical in a *Louisville Daily Journal* editorial. He equated abolitionists and free African-Americans as "among the greatest curses of the land." Abolitionists, wrote Prentice, "are fanatical, devilish unprincipled; [free blacks] are ignorant, lazy and thriftless . . . they both act as promoters of discontent among the slaves." *Louisville Daily Journal*, 20 August 1850, quoted in Hanford Dozier Stafford, "Slavery in a Border City: Louisville,

Free African-Americans found life difficult in antebellum Louisville, yet their numbers increased and many prospered in a hostile society which saw them as a threat. In spite of firmly embedded, increasingly restrictive laws, free African-Americans established themselves and their families in Louisville and became an integral part of the urban landscape. Gibson himself exemplified the "spirit of perseverance" of which he wrote. After arriving in Louisville in 1847, he pursued a career as a schoolteacher associated with the African Methodist Church; eventually he became a leading figure among black educators in Kentucky. Gibson built his life in Louisville. He married, fathered children, and established his family in the city.[2]

As ordinary people living ordinary lives, free African-Americans were constantly aware that their skin color imposed limited economic opportunities, restricted occupational choices, and, prior to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, always made freedom a precarious condition. Unlike a majority of southern free blacks though, Louisville's free blacks lived within sight of freedom. Why did they not just cross the Ohio River and take up residence in a free state? Perhaps the fact that conditions in the free North were little better than in the slave South meant there were few options. But a more compelling answer is found in the lives they built for themselves in Louisville. Free African-Americans worked in the city and raised families there. They had a stake in Louisville: family ties, jobs, and property were important considerations which created an investment in their own and in the city's future.[3]

1790-1860" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1982), 205.

2 For the evolution of Kentucky laws restricting free blacks, see Juliet E. K. Walker, "The Legal Status of Free Blacks in Early Kentucky, 1792-1825," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 57 (1983): 382-95.

3 Free African-Americans have long been a subject of interest to historians of the antebellum South. This anomalous group existed in a world in which they seemed to have no secure place. Neither slaves nor totally free in the full legal sense of the word, they lived in a society which restricted their daily lives in a variety of ways. Within the strictures placed on them, however, free African-Americans carved out a place for themselves. See, for example, Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974);

The free African-American population increased in Louisville every decade from 1820 to 1860, peaking proportionally in 1850 when it made up 4.1 percent of all free persons in the city. By 1860 their proportion of the free population decreased to three percent, despite an increase in absolute numbers. Free African-Americans peaked as a percentage of the total population in 1850 simply because thereafter the white population grew at a faster pace.[4]

Free African-Americans became more concentrated in the western part of the city during the late antebellum period. Free blacks were distributed fairly evenly throughout the districts in 1850 with the greatest number in the second and fourth districts. Leonard Curry has shown, however, that they were most heavily concentrated north of Broadway and west of Fourth Street (closer to the river and in the more commercial downtown districts), indicating a degree of residential segregation not apparent from the census schedules.[5]

By 1860 a distinct pattern of free-black segregation into the west end of the city emerged, a trend which became more pronounced after the Civil War.[6] A comparison of 1850 and 1860 population

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John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (5th ed.; New York: Knopf, 1987); Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); David C. Rankin, "The Impact of the Civil War on the Free Colored Community of New Orleans," *Perspectives in American History*, 11 (1977-78): 379-416; and Marion B. Lucas, *From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891*, vol 1 of *A History of Blacks in Kentucky* (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 1992) to mention just a few studies among many.

4 Louisville's free-black population, numbering ninety-three in 1820, increased to 1,538 by 1850 and ended the antebellum period at 1,948 in 1860. See the *Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington, DC, 1852) and Mary Lawrence O'Brien, "Slavery in Louisville During the Antebellum Period, 1820-1860" (MA thesis, University of Louisville, 1979), 13.

5 Curry, *Free Black in Urban America*, 63 and 65, figure 6.

6 For the postwar period, see George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), especially 111, table 6. Wright shows, in fact, that in the city's west end, blacks increasingly became a substantial minority, or even a majority of the population, particularly in the ninth and tenth wards, where in 1920 they constituted forty-five and sixty-four percent of the ward populations, respectively.

distribution makes the westward concentration of Louisville's free African-Americans evident.

Table 1[7]
Population Distribution
Free African-Americans, 1850 and 1860

1850			1860				1850/1860	
District	*FA-A*	%	*Ward*	*FA-A*	%		*Comparable*	%
First	266	17.4	First	151	7.8			
			Second	261	13.5	}	21.3	
Second	418	27.4	Third	202	10.4			
			Fourth	120	6.2	}	16.6	
Third	311	20.4	Fifth	117	6.0			
			Sixth	230	11.9	}	17.0	
Fourth	532	34.8	Seventh	454	23.5			
			Eighth	400	20.7	}	44.2	

7 Both census districts and political wards follow an east-to-west configuration. The 1850 census districts were each composed of two of Louisville's political wards. The 1850 districts, however, were not differentiated by ward. The 1860 percentages reflect the combination of wards in each district, as the census that year was reported by ward. The first district included the first and second wards, the second district the third and fourth wards, the third district the fifth and sixth wards, and the fourth district the seventh and eighth wards (including Portland in 1860). All districts were bounded on the north by the Ohio River and on the south by the city limits. The east-west divisions are: first district, eastern city limits to Floyd Street; second district, Floyd Street to Third Street; third district, Third Street to Seventh Street; fourth district, Seventh Street to western city limits beyond Tenth Street. See Henry Tanner, comp., *Louisville Directory and Business Advertiser for 1859-60* (Louisville, 1859), 309-310.

The statistical data presented here is based on the 1850 Manuscript Federal Census, Seventh Census of the United States (hereafter 1850 Census), microfilm M432, reels 206 and 207, Free Population, and reel 225, Slaves, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC. (hereafter NARA). Schedule 1, Free Population, was the primary source of data. Names of slaveholders and numbers of slaves owned were matched to the free schedule from Schedule 2, Slaves. Of the 37,762 free residents of the city on 1 June 1850, 37,680 were coded for computer input. The remaining eighty-two were not coded because of information left out of the census by assistant marshals, primarily data regarding age, making it impossible to determine relationships within households. Of the 5,432 slaves in Louisville in 1850, 5,163 were successfully matched with owners. Those unmatched fell into two categories: 1) the owner was not a resident of the city; or, 2) ownership was not in an individual's name but in that of a company, and the company was not specifically

Proportional decline in the second census district, accompanied by substantial growth in the fourth district, was primarily the result of two factors which worked to create an increasingly separate black community in antebellum Louisville. First, the growth of the white middle class spawned a demand for more housing meeting middle-class standards of luxury, spaciousness, and ostentation. The southward spread of the middle-class residential district evidenced this demand. The consequent increased costs of residential property created divisions along both class and race lines in the city. Those with the lowest income found themselves pushed out of the central residential area, and they spread into the downtown area and the east and west ends in ever greater numbers. Recent immigrants, poor whites, and especially free African-Americans found themselves in this category.[8]

A second factor was solidarity. Immigrants grouped together, especially in the 1850s, in response not only to economic pressure but also to ethnic hostility. In the African-American community, too, economics and racism operated to form a community clustered

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indicated in the census. The statistical data for 1860 was coded from the 1860 Manuscript Federal Census, Eighth Census of the United States (hereafter 1860 Census), NARA, Microfilm M653, Reels 375 and 376, Free Population, and Reel 403, Slaves. A total of 64,787 residents were coded from the manuscript census for evaluation. The other forty-nine free persons could not be coded because of various errors on the part of the assistant marshals, especially missing data regarding age. The uncoded residents represent .0756% of the total population and will not, therefore, bring any significant errors to the results of the procedures computed on SPSS/PC+, the program used for all results reported.

8 For a discussion of the growth of the middle-class residential district, see my dissertation, "The Formation and Growth of an Urban Middle Class: Power and Conflict in Louisville, Kentucky, 1828-1861" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 1993), especially chapters I and IV.

Property price inflation was illustrated by an 1850 *Louisville Daily Courier* article which reported the sale at auction of a piece of property on Sixth Street between Main and Market. The price was "$118 per [front] foot for that portion of the lot nearest Main street, and $110 per foot on the residue." The lot had a 46.5-foot front. The article continued: "A year ago the same property was offered at private sale for $90 per foot." The price had increased by 26.7 percent in one year. *Louisville Daily Courier*, 22 April 1850. This property was in the third district (sixth ward).

around churches and schools for racial solidarity, which instilled a limited sense of security.

Increased population was accompanied by a significant increase in the number of free-black households recorded by the census takers. In 1850 there were 389 separate African-American households. By 1860 the total grew to 450 households (a 16.7 percent increase).[9] During those ten years, the composition of free-black households showed little change. Perhaps the most striking feature was the number of nuclear households, composed of husband and wife (with or without children), which constituted 48.0 and 49.8 percent of the total, respectively, in 1850 and 1860. Households headed by single females increased from 27.8 to 30.2 percent. Decreases occurred, on the other hand, in households headed by single males (9.3 to 7.3 percent) and in households composed of both single females and males living alone (9.3 to 7.3 and 7.7 to 6.9 percent, respectively). The balance of the free-black population in both years was composed of employees (such as household servants, porters, cooks, carriage drivers, and so forth)

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9 Both the 1850 and 1860 censuses used rather loose definitions of "family"; boardinghouses, hotels, and other public and private institutions were included. The instructions to the marshals specified:

> By the term family is meant, either one person living separately in a house, or a part of a house, and providing for him or herself, or several persons living together in a house, or in part of a house, upon one common means of support, and separately from others in similar circumstances. A widow living alone and separately providing for herself, or 200 individuals living together and provided for by a common head, should each be numbered as one family.
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> The resident inmates of a hotel, jail, garrison, hospital, an asylum, or other similar institution should be reckoned as one family.

Carroll Wright and Wm. C. Hunt, *History and Growth of the United States Census* (Washington, DC, 1900), 151.

For purposes of this study, I examined each free black listed and divided the families into households on the basis of the "house number" and "family number" listed. The categories used reflect cohesive units within a single "family," regardless of whether the family was in a single or multi-unit dwelling. Free blacks living with their employers were listed separately.

living in their employer's household, boarders, or inmates of government facilities, such as the poorhouse or workhouse.[10]

Undoubtedly, in-migration played a part in both the population and household increase. Among free African-Americans who made their first appearance in Louisville's 1860 census schedules were hack driver Allen Scott, his wife Rachael, and their three children. Coach driver Washington Watson, his wife Ophelia, and their three children, as well as day laborer Nelson Jones, his wife Margaret, and their three children were also first recorded in 1860.[11]

The free African-American population, however, increased by 26.7 percent, while households only increased by 16.7 percent. Perhaps a more important factor in the disparity between the two rates of increase was the birthrate, which would, of course, increase household size without increasing the number of households. Over the decade the number of free African-Americans between the ages of birth and ten years rose by 37.2 percent, a substantial birthrate. Average household size over the decade increased by one-half to three-quarters a person in all census districts except the second, which experienced a one-half person decline. Increased family size

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10 This analysis should not be interpreted to either support or refute the argument over "matriarchy." The data is inconclusive because we are dealing with a very limited period of time and specifically with the period in which slavery was still a fact of life in Louisville. There is no way to know how many of these single female- or male-headed households were the result of imposed separation. There was one exception in the 1860 census, however, which may indicate that marriages between slaves and free people occurred, although there is no proof. Mariah Garnett, a twenty-five-year-old black female was indicated to have been married in the twelve months prior to 18 June 1860. However, she lived alone. Either she had separated from her husband; he had died or lived elsewhere, or he was a slave. See 1860 Census, First Ward, House 1069, Family 1839.

The debate over "matriarchy" arose in the 1960s with the publication of the Moynihan report, which met with criticism from many sides. See, for example, Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977). For the Ohio Valley specifically, see Paul J. Lammermeir, "The Urban Black Family of the Nineteenth Century: A Study of Black Family Structure in the Ohio Valley, 1850-1880," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 35 (1973): 440-56.

11 See 1860 Census, Second Ward, House 1672, Family 2773 for the Scotts; House 1782, Family 2923 for the Watsons; House 1963, Family 3240 for the Joneses.

and birthrate indicated that in spite of restricted opportunities, free African-Americans felt some sense of security in their lives and that they believed their families' futures were tied to the city. For example, William Gibson, a newly-wed in 1850, must have felt some confidence that his teaching could provide a secure future for his family, for by 1860 he and his wife Mary Jane had parented four children, ranging in age from four months to seven years.[12]

That Gibson's experience was not unique was evidenced by other free African-Americans residing in Louisville. Steamboat steward Clark Barber and his wife Eliza had three children in 1850. By 1860 two more children brought the household total to seven.[13] In 1850 the Reverend Henry Adams, a Baptist minister, headed a household which included his wife, their three children, three young women and two young men, apparently unrelated, and two of his sisters, Nancy and Mary. In 1860 there were two more children; the unrelated young men and women were absent, but Nancy and Mary remained.[14] Generational stability was exemplified by Washington Spradling's son, also named Washington (and also a barber), who by 1860 had married and established a separate household with his wife Maria and their five children ranging in age from one to nine.[15]

These were just a few people among many who demonstrated the "spirit of perseverance" and also a degree of satisfaction with their lives and a confidence free African-Americans felt about their

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12 For Gibson, see 1850 Census, Third District, House 181, Family 181; 1860 Census, Seventh Ward, House 215, Family 294. Gibson is also an example of the westward movement of free African-Americans, as the 1850 address was in the fifth ward.

13 See 1850 Census, Second District, House 346, Family 403; 1860 Census, Fourth Ward, House 595, Family 613.

14 See 1850 Census, Fourth District, House 614, Family 697; 1860 Census, Seventh Ward, House 210, Family 289.

15 See 1850 Census, Third District, House 419, Family 464; for Washington Spradling, Sr., 1860 Census, Fourth Ward, House 385, Family 411; for Washington Spradling, Jr., Fifth Ward, House 998, Family 1044. Maria may have been his second wife, for in 1850, Washington's wife was listed as Malvina, and there was a four-year age gap between the two oldest and the three youngest children.

condition and their prospects for the future. Raising children in a hostile environment was a conscious decision based on a sense of ability to both care for them and to provide for their needs. It may also be an indication of the need for a secure refuge in a world which did not welcome, and often did not tolerate, their existence. Solidarity, warmth, and mutual trust existed for free African-Americans in the family circle as they did not in the world outside. Raising a family created stability in their lives and made free African-Americans a more stable part of the city.[16] Raising a family also must have had a special significance to men like Spradling and Merriwether, who were born slaves, for marriage to free women also meant that their children were free.

The 1850 and 1860 federal censuses provide information previously neglected by listing each member of free households with detailed information regarding age, sex, color, wealth, and occupation. This detail has enabled historians to reconstruct late antebellum society more accurately.[17] Several distinct occupational patterns emerge from an analysis of Louisville's free African-American population.

Racism and legal restrictions relegated free African-American males and females to low-paying jobs. Free-black males enjoyed wider employment opportunities than free-black females, who were largely confined to occupations closely related to domestic duties. African-American males did not, however, have nearly the range of

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16 For an excellent study of free African-American strategies for survival in the lower South, see Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, "Strategies of Survival: Free Negro Families and the Problem of Slavery," in Carol Bleser, ed., *In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 88-102.

17 For a discussion of the changes wrought by Congress in 1850, as well as their effects on social history, see Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

Classification as "black" or "mulatto" is based on the "color" specified in the census returns by the assistant marshals. The marshals were instructed to "leave the space blank" when the person named was white; "in all cases where the person is black, insert the letter B; if mulatto, insert M." The marshals were cautioned that, "It is very desirable that these particulars be carefully regarded." Wright and Hunt, *History and Growth of the U. S. Census*, 152.

occupational choices as their white counterparts. Manual and service occupations were the predominant means of getting a living in antebellum Louisville. Both the 1850 and 1860 censuses reveal similar patterns. Over two-thirds of the 433 free-black males who had occupations listed in 1850 were employed as laborers, barbers, servants, boatmen, or draymen (N=293, or 67.7 percent). There were also four free-black teachers and eight ministers. Only one merchant was listed (a hardware merchant) and, contrary to Kentucky law, one bartender.[18] In Louisville, as everywhere else in nineteenth-century America, employment opportunities for African-Americans were limited by law, custom, and racism.

The situation remained largely unchanged in 1860. Laborers, barbers, servants, boatmen, draymen, and unskilled workers made up 53.3 percent (N=449) of the 843 free African-American males with occupations listed. With female laundresses and seamstresses added, 86.7 percent (N=730) of Louisville's free African-Americans were employed in occupations traditionally dominated by free people of color in both northern and southern cities.[19]

In part, the influx of European immigrants in the 1850s, along with a perceived threat from white workingmen, created a hostile environment. As competition for jobs increased, so did wage

18 Under Chapter XCIII, Article VIII, Section 7, if a "free negro . . . shall sell to any person, in any quantity, whiskey, brandy, or other spirituous liquor, he shall upon indictment and conviction be fined a sum not less than fifty nor more than three hundred dollars[.]" This was the result of an act of the legislature of 1846. See C. A. Wickliffe, S. Turner, and S. S. Nicholas, comps., *The Revised Statutes of Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1852), 643. As late as December 1857, an indictment was brought by the state against a free black, Charles White, in the case of *Commonwealth v. White*. Helen T. Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro* (5 vols.; New York: Negro University Press, 1969 [first published 1926]), 1: 429. It is not possible to determine, however, whether or not this provision was enforced regularly nor how frequently it was violated.

19 There were still seventy-three males and 380 females aged fifteen or over without occupations listed in the 1860 Census. The 1850 Census requested assistant marshals to list occupations only for males aged fifteen and over; in 1860, they were required to include occupations for employed females. As a result, we get a better idea of the occupational makeup of free African-Americans in 1860 than in 1850. Many of the females with occupations shown were heads of household, even though they worked in their homes, often as washwomen.

differentials. For example, white bricklayers in the mid 1850s could demand $2.50 a day or more. Hired-out slaves or free blacks could get only $1.60 to $1.75 a day. This situation led white bricklayers to think they were competing in an unfair job market. Rather than demanding that wages be raised for blacks, however, they demanded their exclusion from the workplace.[20]

Many other occupations were unattainable by African-Americans. The medical and legal professions, for example, required education which was inaccessible to blacks. Because free blacks were not permitted to possess firearms by state law, they could not become gunsmiths, fill any occupations which required the use of a weapon, or own a store which sold firearms. Because they were disenfranchised by the 1799 state constitution, free blacks could not hold elective office, nor would they be appointed to any governmental position by the largely slaveholding members of the city council.[21] Because they could not sell liquor, they could not own an inn or tavern (though they might run a boardinghouse), become a brewer or distiller, or own a liquor warehouse or other business which dispensed spirits. In addition, fear of insurrection led to restrictions on occupations such as printing. Unlike many other southern states, Kentucky did not prohibit education to blacks, free or slave; free blacks could be, and were, teachers. Other occupations were beyond the means of most free African-Americans because they required large capital investments. Even if they had the necessary money to invest in mercantile or manufacturing operations, the question of staying in business in the face of white racism might discourage free blacks from contemplating such ventures.[22]

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20 Stafford, "Slavery in a Border City," 122.

21 See Walker, "The Legal Status of Free Blacks in Early Kentucky," 386-87, for the 1798 law, which became part of the 1799 Constitution and denied free blacks the right to bear arms or vote.

22 I coded a total of 478 occupations for the 1850 census. Of these, fifty-eight were filled by free African-Americans. Because of the size of the data base for the 1860 census, many of the occupations were combined into categories, resulting in a total of eighty-six classifications. Free people of color were listed in forty-three of

The majority of Louisville's free African-Americans lived on the edge of poverty. One striking indication of this was the high employment rate among African-American females. The assistant marshals in 1860 were instructed to inquire of all residents aged fifteen or greater whether or not they were gainfully employed. Nearly half of the 734 free African-American females in this age group (N=362) responded by declaring occupations. In stark contrast, immigrant and native-born white females declared occupations at rates of 23.3 percent (2,395 of 10,264), and 15.9 percent (1,363 of 8,592), respectively.

The only black women in 1860 with high-skilled occupations were three teachers. Laundresses made up seventy percent of free-black women declaring occupations in 1860. Another sixteen percent were servants, and seven percent were seamstresses. The balance were day laborers, cooks, nurses, and other service workers.[23]

In spite of the large number of nuclear households, the high proportion of African-American females who were single heads of household may have contributed to the number of laundresses and seamstresses. Both occupations were disproportionately drawn from single female heads of household. These occupations could be performed at home and required little capital investment.[24] Of 281 black laundresses and seamstresses, 44.5 percent (N=125) were single heads of household. Another 18.1 percent (N=51) were spouses. Thus, nearly sixty-three percent of the free-black

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these occupational categories. This does not mean, however, that opportunities increased for free African-Americans over the decade; the jobs they filled were almost identical to those they held in 1850.

23 The figures reported here are the result of the computations made from the coded census returns on SPSS/PC+, using the procedures indicated in note 7.

24 Nearly four times as many blacks as whites were single female heads of household in both 1850 and 1860.

Single Female Heads of Household, 1850 and 1860

Year	*Black*	*% Black*	*White*	*% white*
1850	143	16.9	786	4.7%
1860	178	16.7	1,517	4.9%

laundresses and seamstresses were either single heads of household or spouses contributing to the support of their families. Overall, more than half of the free-black female heads of household or spouses (200 of 382) declared occupations in 1860; a proportion which contrasts strikingly to the 9.5 percent (1,069 of 11,257) rate at which white female heads of household or spouses declared occupations.[25]

The large number of free-black households in which both parents declared occupations also says something about strategies to preserve the family. If it was necessary for both parents to work to make ends meet, the large number of employed female spouses who were laundresses or seamstresses is an indication of the importance these families placed on at least one parent remaining at home to assure that children were not left to their own devices.

Occupational restrictions, however, also led to racial interaction. Since most merchants, grocers, and other providers of goods and services were white, blacks had to patronize them. Conversely, whites often had to patronize black barbers or laundresses, employ black household domestics or cooks, as well as patronize black peddlers and hucksters. In addition, with so many black servants, there was constant contact between blacks and whites. Louisville, while growing, was not a large city by twentieth-century standards. Contacts occurred on a daily basis. Since antebellum banks were controlled by whites, property transactions also led to racial interaction. This does not, of course, imply that racism was not present. But racism was not reinforced by separation as occurred later in the century when residential segregation became more pronounced and interaction between the black and white communities became less frequent.[26]

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25 Ibid.

26 Elizabeth A. Perkins has demonstrated that as late as 1890 blacks made up an overwhelming proportion of domestics in the city: 80.6 percent of male servants, 55.2 percent of female servants, and 84.9 percent of laundresses were black that year. The balance were native or foreign-born whites. "The Forgotten Victorians: Louisville's Domestic Servants, 1880-1920," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 85 (1987): 111-37, esp. 119, table 2.

Few free African-Americans could achieve any degree of stability in their lives by acquiring property. Only seventy-one declared any real property holdings to the assistant marshals in 1850, and of these, all but one declared $4,000 or less. William Gilchrist (or Gilcrease), a mulatto boatman, declared $25,000 in property.[27] Gilchrist was born in Virginia, but his wife and children were born in Indiana. He appeared in only one city directory and in the 1850 census. It is possible that he lived in Louisville only briefly — his occupation and previous residence in a free state may have made living in a slave state uncomfortable for him.[28]

David Straws, a black barber, owned two slaves (an eighteen-year-old mulatto male and a fourteen-year-old black female) in addition to the $4,000 in real property he declared in 1850. Straws was born a slave but purchased his freedom. By 1860 Straws had accumulated $10,000 in real and $500 in personal property (he no longer owned any slaves). Part of his real property was an annex to the Louisville Hotel where his barber shop was located. At least once during this period, in 1858, Straws paid to place an advertisement in the city directory.[29]

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27 It should be noted that in Gilchrist's case, Leonard Curry suggests that the $25,000 may be an erroneous entry, since he worked in what Curry termed a "low opportunity occupation"; $2,500 may be the correct amount. This would, of course, reduce the total for 1850 by $22,500. Since Gilchrist did not appear in the 1860 census, the disputed amount cannot be verified. See Curry, *Free Black in Urban America*, 295n.

28 Gilchrist appeared in the 1850 Census with his name spelled this way (see First District, House 198, Family 264). In John B. Jegli, *A Directory for 1851-1852, Containing Lists of the Civil and Military Officers . . . in the City of Louisville on the First Day of October, 1851* (Louisville, 1851), however, his name is spelled Gilcrease on page 125.

29 For information on Straws, see Gibson, *Historical Sketch*, 26. For 1860 information, see 1860 Census, Schedule 1, Free Population, Sixth Ward, House 245, Family 286. In the 1850 Census, Straws was at Third District, House 123, Family 123. Also see *City Directory, 1851-1852, 255;* Tanner, *Louisville Directory and Business Advertiser for 1859-60,* 255: *Louisville City Directory and Business Mirror; for 1858-1859* . . . (Louisville, [1858]), 262 for the advertisement, 169 for residence address. The barbershop was on the west side of Sixth, between Main and Market in 1850; his home was on Centre between Green and Jefferson. Ten years later his shop was in the same location, but by 1858 he was residing at the location of his barbershop.

It is not only probable but quite likely that the slaves owned by Straws were related. A law which originated when Kentucky was still a Virginia county stated that, "No free negro shall be capable of acquiring, in fee, or holding or owning for any length of time, as hirer, or otherwise, any slave, other than the husband, wife, parent, or descendant of such free negro."[30]

It is extremely difficult to get a clear idea of the wealth of free African-Americans from the census schedules. One suspects that there was an assumption on the part of the assistant marshals that free blacks owned little or no property. As a consequence, real and personal property values were very likely under-reported. Washington Spradling best illustrates this phenomenon. No property was reported for this free-black barber in 1850. However, in 1860 he was the wealthiest free African-American in the city with $25,000 in real property and $950 in personal property.[31] Other information, however, makes these figures problematic. One source, for example, indicates that in 1847 Spradling was assessed taxes on $9,325 in property. Another source reported that in 1850 Spradling owned property worth $30,000.[32] In 1866 he was

30 *Revised Statutes*, chapter XCIII, article I, section 6, 628. Enforcement of all the laws on the books, of course, was a different matter than their mere existence. In the case of David Straws, the children held as slaves could have been his or his wife's children. In 1850 Straws was fifty-five, his wife Ann sixty-two, and they had an eighteen-year-old daughter living with them.

31 Free-black barbers were among the most prosperous free African-Americans in the Upper South, though less so in the Lower South, in the antebellum period. In the postbellum South, however, increasing opportunities as wholesalers, retailers, contractors, and restaurateurs made these categories more prosperous, and barbers declined in income leadership. See Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 124, 217.

In many ways Spradling was reminiscent of another free-black barber, William Johnson of Natchez, Mississippi. Unfortunately, Spradling, unlike Johnson, did not leave a record of his personal and business dealings, for it appears that he engaged in much the same activities as Johnson, especially real-estate transactions. See William Ransom Hogan and Edwin Adams Davis, eds., *William Johnson's Natchez: The Ante-Bellum Diary of a Free Negro* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951).

32 Henry Clay Weeden, ed., *Weeden's History of the Colored People of Louisville* (Louisville, 1897 [typescript in the Louisville Free Public Library based on copy in Library of Congress]), 54; Lucas, *From Slavery to Segregation*, 113. As a reflection

assessed on twenty-eight houses and lots valued at $71,952. Earlier, in 1835, he had leased a lot he owned to a group for what became the Center Street African Methodist Church.[33] Obviously, Spradling had considerably more property than the census schedules indicated.

Mr. Spradling was one of the most prominent free African-Americans in Louisville. In addition to his skills as a barber, he was renowned for his legal talents, which, it was said, he acquired from "the first judges and lawyers of the State," who were counted among his customers. Spradling could not, of course, argue a case, but "nearly every colored person who was in trouble (more or less) first consulted him . . . ; he selected the lawyer and prepared the case."[34]

Other free African-Americans also managed to accumulate some wealth in the late antebellum period. The importance of the Ohio-Mississippi River system made the "occupation of steward... a position of rank, commanding a salary of from $150 to $200 per month." William Rankin, for example, declared $2,400 in real property in 1850. In 1860 stewards Clark Barber and Marshall Woodson declared $4,000 in real property. In addition, Barber had $2,000 in personal property, while Woodson had $800.[35]

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of the racism of his own time, Weeden found it necessary to justify his work and include endorsements from "Prominent White Citizens," 57-65. Gibson, too, justified his work, stating that "the principal and greatest reason for this historical sketch should be to place before the world the history of a Negro organization whose growth has been unprecedented . . . .", *Historical Sketch*, iii. Another late nineteenth-century study, W. D. Johnson, *Biographical Sketches of Prominent Negro Men and Women of Kentucky* (Lexington, 1897), dealing primarily with African-Americans in the postbellum period, also included a justification for publication as well as an endorsement by Governor William O. Bradley. Comparing British and Southern ex-slaveholders, Johnson declared "emphatically and without fear of contradiction, that the American ex-slave holders did foster and encourage the educational training of ex-slaves, and consequently did not abandon them" (3).

33 Weeden, *History of the Colored People of Louisville*, 54, 52.

34 Gibson, *Historical Sketch*, 25-26.

35 Gibson, *Historical Sketch*, 31; for William Rankin, see 1850 Census, District Four, Family 340; for Barber and Woodson, see 1860 Census, Fourth Ward, Family 613 and Eighth Ward, Family 1476.

As W. H. Gibson pointed out, however, their very mobility put a special burden on steamboat stewards. Plying the rivers and ports in both slave and free territory, they "were compelled to use discretion in their intercourse with their slave brethren."[36] The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law as part of the Compromise of 1850 made the lives of stewards as well as all free blacks even more precarious.

Free African-American females with substantial property in 1860 included laundress Emily Marshall, with $3,000 in real and $250 in person property, Julia Bell (no occupation listed), with $2,500 in real and $500 in personal property, and Malinda Jackson, a day laborer, who declared $2,000 in real and $6,000 in personal property. While these women, as well as others, did not own large amounts of property, such ownership must have instilled some degree of stability into their lives.[37]

Ira Berlin noted that the 1850s was a decade in which free African-Americans "prospered as never before."[38] This was evidenced not only by Mr. Straws and Mr. Spradling, but also by many who reported little or no property in 1850 but had accumulated substantial wealth by 1860. Levi Evans, a cook, reported $250 in 1850. In 1860 he was employed at the Louisville Hotel and reported $5,000 in real and $1,000 in personal property. Clark Barber, a servant in 1850, declared $1,500 in real property; in 1860, listed as a steamboat steward, he declared $4,000 in real and $2,000 in personal property. Maria Buckner, wife of drayman Armstead Buckner, reported $3,800 in real property in 1850. In 1860, Armstead reportedly had $4,000 in real and $300 in personal property, a slight increase.[39]

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36 Gibson, *Historical Sketch*, 32.

37 Emily Marshall: 1860 Census, Third Ward, House 521, Family 745; Julia Bell: 1860 Census, Second Ward, House 1910, Family 3150; Malinda Jackson, 1860 Census, Seventh Ward, House 134, Family 197.

38 Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 344.

39 Clark Barber: 1850 Census, Second District, House 346, Family 403; Levi Evans: 1850 Census, Fourth District, House 616, Family 699 and 1860 Census, Sixth Ward, House 81, Family 85; Armstead Buckner: 1850 Census, Fourth District

Jesse Merriwether, a carpenter, married, fathered a child, and acquired $500 in personal property between 1850 and 1860. Richard Holmes, a teamster, lived with his wife Rosanna and their five children in 1850. By 1860, the family's size had not increased, but Holmes, who declared no property in 1850, had acquired $600 in real and $200 in personal property.[40]

Reformed Baptist minister Henry Adams, on the other hand, lost ground. In 1850 he listed $3,050 in real property. By 1860, his real property (which was reported in the name of his one-year-old son C. W.) declined to $2,000. An additional $1,000 in personal property brought the total to $50.00 less than the 1850 total.[41]

Then there was the case of James Cunningham. The English-born mulatto musician had property totaling $10,000 in 1860 ($8,000 in real, $2,000 in personal property). In 1850 the apparently very light-skinned Cunningham was not classified as either black or mulatto. Nor did the 1848 city directory list him as "of col," the designation applied to free African-Americans that year. He first appeared as "free cld" in the 1851-52 directory. In 1850 Cunningham indicated $2,000 in real property, and he was also listed as the owner of three slaves.[42]

(Eighth Ward), House 352, Family 407 and 1860 Census, Eighth Ward, House 1707, Family 2094.

40 For Merriwether, see 1850 Census, Fourth District, House 604, Family 689; 1860 Census, Seventh Ward, House 217, Family 296; Lucas, *From Slavery to Segregation*, 246; Gibson, *Historical Sketch*, 27. Merriwether, born a slave, purchased his freedom in 1847, went to Liberia for a year, and then returned to Louisville. Freedom undoubtedly held a special meaning to him. Merriwether served on the black "Board of Visitors" of the Louisville school board after the Civil War. For Holmes see 1850 Census, First District, House 707, Family 1061; 1860 Census, First Ward, House 190, Family 332.

41 Henry Adams: 1850 Census, Fourth District (Seventh Ward), House 614, Family 697 and 1860 Census, Ninth Ward, House 21, Family 289.

42 The three slaves, a twenty-seven-year-old female, a seven-year-old female, and a one-year-old male, all mulattoes, do not match up with the wife and children listed in 1860. Cunningham's wife Lucy was listed as thirty, a son Robert was ten, and another son was eight. It may be pure speculation that Cunningham was either "passing" for white or that the compiler of the city directory and the assistant marshal in 1850 did not realize that he was an African-American, but his age, occupation,

While the total wealth of free African-Americans increased substantially from 1850 to 1860, it decreased relative to the white population. In 1850 Louisvillians reported real property totalling $16,463,638. In 1860 real property was valued at $38,428,464, an increase of 133.4 percent. Free blacks owned $95,670 (.58 percent) of the 1850 total. By 1860, they claimed $136,150 in real property, an increase of $40,480, but a decrease to .35 percent of the total real property declared. Overall, their share was only .35 percent of combined real and personal property.

The contrast between free-black and white property ownership is striking. Spradling's $25,000 in real property diverged sharply from the sixty-four white citizens who declared property worth $50,000 or more in 1850. By 1860 that number increased to 173, an increase of 170.3 percent, while the white population grew by only sixty-nine percent. (These values relate only to real property, as the 1850 census enumerated only this figure. If combined real and personal property values of $50,000 or more are included, the number of whites with property in excess of $50,000 increased to 293.)

A total of 13,107 people reported property in the amount of $68,918,810 in 1860. Only 389, or 2.97 percent, were free African-Americans; they declared $227,700. Even though they owned property in close to the same proportion as their presence in the population, free African-Americans owned less than one-half of one percent of the total wealth declared on the census. In addition, the three largest property holders owned slightly over twenty percent of the total wealth declared by free people of color.[43]

Free African-American females declared even less property: 155 black women, aged fifteen or older, declared property in 1860

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and birthplace match up, as does his residence at either 241 or 243 Green between Sixth and Seventh, in the city directories. See 1850 Census, House 159, Family 159; 1860 Census, House 343, Family 429; Gabriel Collins, *Louisville and New Albany Directory, and Annual Advertiser for 1848* . . . (Louisville, [1848]), 49; *City Directory, 1851-52*, p. 95.

43 See note 6.

totalling $49,760. Only twenty-three declared real estate, ranging from $250 to $3,000 in value, while the rest declared only personal property.[44] White females, on the other hand, declared a total of $7,222,455. The contrast between native-born white women, foreign-born white women, and free-black women is striking. Native-born white women declared, on average, $6,768.69 total property. Foreign-born white women, on the other hand, had an average of $1,006.81, while free-black women declared only $321.03. Further, while 14.5 percent (155 of 1072) free-black women of all ages declared property, it is evident that these property holdings were very small. Contrasted with Irish-born women, the next poorest specific large group of women, it is apparent that free-black women were on average the poorest of the poor in the city in 1860. Of 3,448 Irish-born women aged fifteen or older, 240 (seven percent) declared property; the average was $715.19, more than twice the average of free-black women. While a smaller proportion of Irish women reported wealth, what they reported was significantly higher. Even so, in spite of the small size of their property holdings, free-black women also had a stake in the city.[45]

The precarious position of free African-Americans in antebellum Louisville was illustrated by the lack of economic and occupational opportunities. Their courage and fortitude in the face of these restrictions, however, demonstrates that even under the most trying circumstances free blacks forged opportunities for themselves and their families. Some were able to acquire substantial amounts of property, make educational opportunities, and instil stability into their own and their family's lives. Owning property, however, was no guarantee of freedom. In a society which found them a threat to the existence of an inhumane institution, free African-Americans enjoyed few choices. They had no political voice to bring about changes in their condition, nor did they have the

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44 The total value of real estate reported by free African-American females in 1860 was $25,150.

45 See note 6.

power to oppose unjust treatment. But they had planted roots in their own community; they were as much a part of the city as were their white counterparts. As a result, they forged alliances and had business dealings with whites on a regular basis. In addition, they formed a nucleus of leadership within Louisville which proved beneficial after the Civil War in developing a large African-American community. Free African-Americans held an anomalous position in a slave society. Indeed, they did "occupy a middle station," one which was not always comfortable, but one which did, nevertheless, survive and prosper.