

LITTLE ROCK'S UNIQUE POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR BLACK ARKANSANS ISAAC CROSS

Introduction

From 1865 to 1905, black Arkansans experienced significant growth in political life, economic opportunities, social development, and legal protections. One of the most extraordinary and distinctive areas of change for black Arkansans was their increased involvement in political life, specifically office holding. After the Civil War, black Arkansans expanded their political opportunities in local elections, state positions, and federal appointments. However, this evolution did not provide equal opportunities to all black Arkansans. Urban areas of Arkansas experienced the most gains, for they contained significant pockets of middle-class black Arkansans able to take advantage of political opportunities. Cities in post-Civil War Arkansas showed promise as an area of substantial social mobility and political opportunity. According to U.S. Census Data from 1870, four Arkansas counties contained a population of 15,000 people or more. Three of these four counties held significant urban centers hosting influential black communities. By 1900, all three counties had almost doubled in population, with a majority of growth in the urban centers: Helena in Phillips County, Pine Bluff in Jefferson County, and Little Rock in Pulaski County. Each of these counties housed a politically active black community; however, Little Rock in Pulaski County held unique opportunities for black Arkansans seeking political offices. Unlike the other two Arkansas cities, Little Rock experienced tremendous growth in population in the late nineteenth century, became the largest urban center of Arkansas, and included a vibrant black middle class that held a significant number of local offices, won state government and representative positions, and received political office appointments. In post-Civil War Arkansas, Little Rock became the prominent urban center for African Americans seeking political opportunity at the local and state levels.

Research Purpose and/or Question(s)

By exploring the complex differences between Little Rock and other urban centers of Arkansas, we gain a more complete picture of black Arkansans' political opportunities. As John Graves states, there is a "tendency of historians to treat urban and rural racial developments as discrete, separate phenomena." Like Graves, this research understands those distinctions while exploring the importance of examining the connections of these areas to the African American experience in Arkansas political life. However, to understand Arkansas urban and rural political opportunities, it is essential to understand the distinction of Little Rock as the prominent urban center for black Arkansans seeking political offices. This research will significantly add to the current scholarship of post-Civil War Arkansas and the state's African American political experiences by providing an in-depth focus on Little Rock's political opportunities.

Method / Data Source(s)

One must drive into local documents to explore local and state political office opportunities for black Arkansans of Little Rock. Beginning with research into the black community of Little Rock, this research used population and economic data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, black experiences and political news from newspapers like the Arkansas Democrat and Arkansas Gazette, and other local documents that include Little Rock city directories and city council minute books. These sources were used to quantify the number of local and state offices obtained by Little Rock's black community and to qualify the black experiences in the city in the late nineteenth century.

Analysis

Little Rock city directories provided information on occupations of the city's black community in a given year. By analyzing the number of professions black Arkansans hold, city directories offer evidence of their might in local offices.

Little Rock City Minute books in the late nineteenth century contain the influence and positions of black Arkansans on the Little Rock City Council. Using these documents provides information on the positions held by the city's black community and their influence in these meetings.

Local and national newspapers provide information on black experiences in the city's political life. Using multiple newspapers, it is clear that the city's African American population held significant middle-class influence and political positions. Throughout these newspapers, black Arkansans held various positions in the late nineteenth century and gained the respect of white and black communities.

The U.S. Bureau of the Census provides statistical data on population demographics, occupations held, economic growth, school attendance, and the size and might of the black community of Little Rock. This information also provides opportunities to compare Arkansas communities with Little Rock for quantitative analysis throughout the late nineteenth century.

Findings/Results

Other urban centers of Arkansas did not contain an equally significant middle-class African American population compared to Little Rock, for "examples of negro social mobility and progress were most pronounced in Little Rock." African Americans of Helena and Pine Bluff did contain an influential middle-class African American community; however, these communities were small and still had to contend with limited opportunities due to the agrarian white society. These cities contained smaller economies and fewer opportunities for wealth building, thus leading to limited political office holding ability. In addition to their more limited economic mobility, those cities only contained a few members of their communities in middle class careers, like occupations in the professional service industries. Due to their smaller middle-class African American populations, other urban centers of Arkansas did not achieve the same level of wealth, influence, and political opportunities when compared to Little Rock, making the city a truly remarkable and unique center of Arkansas.

Local offices provided black Arkansans of Little Rock with opportunities to influence their communities. Despite a white majority, the city's African American population still gained significant advantages in local office positions in the city and county government, law enforcement agencies, fire departments, and educational boards without using the "fusion principle." These opportunities proved valuable to the African American community in shaping the city in their interest. With local political opportunities, Little Rock blacks would extend their political island to all levels of government, including the state government.

With their prominent middle-class community, Little Rock African Americans were able to influence the major political parties of Arkansas and gain positions in the state government. However, the other urban centers of Arkansas, like Helena and Pine Bluff, did not gain equal political opportunities to Little Rock. Helena and Pine Bluff had to contend with political state offices acquired by a compromised ticket and share state offices with their rural counterparts. Due to the situations of other urban centers of Arkansas, black Arkansans had to take the political opportunities available to them. However, due to its unique position, Little Rock became a beacon of political possibility to black Arkansans in the state government.

Discussion

Although only holding a minority of the city's population, Little Rock blacks could earn significant political influence through their middle-class gains. With the combination of Republican influence, the lack of a compromised ticket, and the city's tolerance for differences, the black community of Little Rock could win elections in city and county offices, local positions, state government offices, and Governor's Office appointments. While the rest of the state lacked the ability to win such advantages, Little Rock held a unique position in the state for Arkansas African Americans seeking political offices.

Conclusion(s) / Implication(s)

Throughout the late nineteenth century, the black community of Little Rock shaped the opportunities for all Arkansans. However, it is significant to explore the unappreciated unique political opportunities of Little Rock as it held a prominent position for black Arkansans seeking those advantages. Unlike other urban areas of Arkansas, Little Rock contained a significant African American middle-class community that penetrated the state's political world. With their prominent middle-class community, black Arkansans were able to gain positions in local offices, seize opportunities in the state government, and influence the Constitutional Conventions of 1868 and 1874, all while holding a minority position in Little Rock and Pulaski County and without using a compromised ticket. However, the other urban centers of Arkansas, like Helena and Pine Bluff, did not gain equal political opportunities to Little Rock. Other areas of the state had to contend with local offices acquired by a compromised ticket, share state offices with their rural counterparts, only gain a few pockets of middle-class society, and sacrifice other freedoms for the limited political power. On the other hand, Little Rock became a beacon of political possibility to black Arkansans.

References

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