

The New Deal Era

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African Americans turn out to vote for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936.

In the winter of 1927, nineteen-year-old Richard Wright informed his boss that he was quitting his Memphis job and leaving for Chicago. It was a fateful decision. Little did he know that his move to Chicago would bring him fame as an author. Only one thing was clear to young Wright as he stepped jobless onto the Memphis street—he was about to move again. He and his family had done so several times before on their migration circuit: from their rural Mississippi roots to Tennessee, back to Mississippi, on to Arkansas, again back to Mississippi, and then once more to Tennessee.

With two other relatives, Wright determined yet again to escape the aching hunger, the violence, and the stifling racism of the South—to get away from what he would describe in his autobiography as the “terror from which I fled.” Arriving in Chicago, he believed he had reached the fabled Promised Land. He got off the train and saw no Jim Crow signs but rather blacks and whites mingling freely in the train station. His first employer treated him fairly. Becoming a postal clerk by 1929, Wright earned a salary that permitted him to move into a larger apartment and to feel for the first time “happy in my own way.”

Wright’s sense of security proved all too brief. Armageddon-like, the stock market crashed in October 1929. The American economy spiraled downward over a period of weeks, months, and then years. The nation’s jobless—1.6 million at the end of 1929—skyrocketed to nearly 13 million in 1933. There would be no quick fix. Wright saw his paychecks dwindle and then cease altogether. He sought public relief after losing his postal job. “I was making a public confession of my hunger,” he later wrote, recalling the stinging humiliation of waiting in line for a handout.

Richard Wright’s experiences tell a story not dissimilar from that of countless other African Americans of his generation. Joining the migration stream on the eve of the Great Depression, Wright, like so many others, became part of a historical process that brought the nation significant economic and also racial transformation. While the crushing poverty of the Depression years was prompting a new understanding of the federal government’s role in responding to the economic plight of Americans of all races, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal was also giving black Americans a unique opportunity to mount a political resurgence on a scale not seen since Reconstruction—for forging interracial alliances, switching party allegiances, demanding equal rights and economic justice, and challenging in unprecedented ways the fundamentals of the American political-economic system.

In the Throes of Economic Depression

In the late 1920s, as the stock market, corporate profits, and urban land values all soared, little attention was paid to a widening gap in the distribution of wealth. By 1929, the richest 5 percent of Americans had grown richer still, amassing 26 percent of national income, while the bottom 40 percent of income earners controlled only 12 percent. In his Inaugural Address on March 4, 1929, President Herbert Hoover had spoken confidently of a new era of abundance and prosperity: “I have no fears for the future of our country. It is bright with hope.” But he had spoken too soon.

In hindsight, one ominous sign of hard economic times ahead had been the migration of nearly 1 million blacks out of the South in the 1920s—a strong indicator of how the American agricultural system was collapsing. The black migration of the 1920s, considerably greater than that of the World War I years, attested to the painful reality that an economic depression had engulfed southern agriculture long before the stock market crashed. The

nation's agrarian population, which included the majority of African Americans, had not enjoyed the prosperity of the 1920s. Cotton farmers in particular found themselves caught in a destructive cycle of overproduction and falling prices. As cotton sold for fewer and fewer cents per pound, farmers produced more and more to make up the difference, driving prices even lower. The boll weevil continued to ravage crops in the 1920s, forcing many white and black farm owners who during the 1910s had been lucky enough to survive its destruction to join the ranks of tenant farmers or migrants.

When Roosevelt's New Deal began, in 1933, federal efforts to resolve the agricultural crisis only worsened the plight of tenants and sharecroppers. The Agricultural Adjustment Act (1933), which provided incentives for landowners to plant fewer acres and reduce farm production, unwittingly gave impetus to the eviction of tenants from the land. Landowners also abused their role as administrators of federal relief by denying black tenants their fair share. The dying plantation system hastened the urbanization of the South. A stunning demographic shift caused by the migration of millions of rural southerners regardless of race to urban areas in both the South and the North touched virtually all aspects of American culture, transforming politics, organized labor, race relations, popular culture, and urban life in general. Although economic factors were a major cause of overall migration, the decision of African Americans to leave the South was integrally linked to the racism of its Jim Crow society.

The Agricultural Crisis and Black Migration

Depression came early to black urban-dwellers. For them, the first signs of an economic downturn appeared in the mid-1920s, when thousands of African Americans lost their jobs. They were counted as no more than the casualties of a technological age in which several million people were expected to become unemployed because of low skills. After the crash of 1929, however, businesses closed and banks failed. In cities blacks were often the first to lose jobs, while in rural areas their wages were driven down to starvation levels. Black women especially suffered from the curtailment of household jobs and personal-service occupations. With small or nonexistent reserves of capital, blacks rapidly experienced dire want and suffering. Members of the black middle class did not escape the deteriorating conditions, because their fate was directly tied to the economic condition of the migrant populations they served.

While some southern black professionals joined the chorus of anxious local whites in discouraging massive migration out of the region, others followed their clientele to the North. Middle-class southern African Americans—whether in the professions (lawyers, teachers, newspaper editors, and ministers) or in business (undertakers, barbers, beauticians, insurance executives, and storeowners)—all depended on black patronage and on the income of skilled and unskilled African American laborers who, for the most part, worked for white companies and white employers. When adverse economic circumstances curtailed employment or reduced wages, the black middle class was immediately affected.

Unemployed, poverty-stricken African Americans did not wait passively for the New Deal to provide them with the necessities of life. At times they found it desirable to use what force they could command to secure employment and relief. In 1929 Albon Holsey of the National Negro Business League organized the Colored Merchants Association, which in New York tried to establish stores and purchase merchandise cooperatively. African Americans were urged to buy from these merchants, because their patronage would provide jobs for their racial community. The stores survived less than two years of the severe depression, however.

African American Efforts at Relief



African Americans seek relief

In 1937 Margaret Bourke-White took this picture of unemployed African Americans seeking food supplies.

Shortly thereafter the Jobs-for-Negroes movement began in St. Louis, where the Urban League led a boycott against a white-owned chain store whose trade was almost exclusively black but carried no black employees on its payroll. The movement spread to Pittsburgh, Chicago, Cleveland, and other Midwestern cities, and many African Americans found employment because of the pressure brought on white employers in black sections. The most intensive campaign was waged in New York City in 1934 by the Citizens' League for Fair Play, cofounded by Rev. John H. Johnson, minister of St. Martin's Protestant Episcopal Church, and Fred Moore, publisher of the *New York Age*. The league initially attempted to persuade white merchants to use black sales clerks. When this effort failed, the league resorted to picketing the stores and appealing to blacks with the motto, "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work."

Rev. Johnson urged his congregation: "I want our meeting this morning to begin a 12 day campaign to persuade Blumstein's department store where 140 persons (with 16 colored menials) [are employed] to hire colored girls as sales clerks." Some 400 to 1,500 persons attended the league's weekly meetings, and over a hundred, the majority of them women, carried picket signs daily. Picketers harangued their listeners about the injustice of whites refusing to hire black workers. Tensions rose to the point of physical confrontation to discourage shopping at the biggest department store in Harlem. Historian Cheryl Lynn Greenberg notes of the campaign: "While boycotts were a time-honored tactic for otherwise powerless black communities, pickets were newer, reflecting the shift toward broad-based

visible political strategies.” The campaign resulted in the hiring of fifteen black women, but the department store did not abide by its promise to hire more.

In 1935 growing poverty and racial tensions with white merchants and landlords in Harlem led to a riot. An African American youth was caught stealing a penknife from the counter of a store on 125th Street. He succeeded in escaping, but there were rumors that he had been beaten to death. Black crowds gathered, accusing the police of brutality and the white merchants of job discrimination. The mob began smashing store windows and raiding shelves, and the rioting went on during most of the night of March 19. Three blacks were killed, two hundred store windows were smashed, and more than \$2 million worth of damage was done. The city was both outraged and ashamed. Mayor Fiorello La Guardia appointed an interracial Committee on Conditions in Harlem. A staff of investigators, headed by black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, studied the causes of the riot and concluded that the lawlessness was provoked by “resentments against racial discrimination and poverty in the midst of plenty.” There was insufficient relief of a private and public nature to stem the tide of social unrest that prevailed in Harlem and other black communities. Picketing and other measures continued. Blacks were encouraged greatly by the decision of the Supreme Court in 1937 declaring that the picketing of firms that refused to employ African Americans was a legal technique for securing relief.

Political Resurgence

The migration of 1.5 million African Americans to northern urban centers dramatically altered the political landscape. The concentration of African Americans in northern cities sparked a political resurgence that placed blacks once more in the thick of American politics at the local, state, and national levels. Their political resurgence had a lasting effect on national party politics. Whereas, in the late nineteenth century and throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, black leaders appeared to be satisfied with the patronage of Republican presidents, by the 1920s blacks as a group demanded a greater voice in politics.

Black disaffection with the party of Lincoln reared its head in 1928 when Republicans attempted to build a strong party in the South. Prominent African American Republican leaders, such as Benjamin Davis of Georgia, Perry Howard of Mississippi, and William McDonald of Texas, lost influence in their states as the Republican high command looked to white leaders in those states and began to seat white southern delegates at the national convention instead of black delegates who presented credentials. Black leader Robert Church of Memphis grew so incensed about the “lily-white” stance of the Republican movement in the South that he refused to serve on the party’s national advisory committee. Although the great majority of black voters remained loyal Republicans, in the 1928 presidential election influential black newspapers—the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, and the *Boston Guardian*—endorsed New York Democratic governor Alfred E. Smith’s bid for the presidency rather than Republican candidate Herbert Hoover. Smith was a Roman Catholic, an advocate of repealing Prohibition, and a reputed friend of African Americans.

Hoover’s dramatic victory (he carried Florida, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia) demonstrated both the Republican Party’s ability to win the votes of white southerners and the extent to which it was willing to alienate blacks in an effort to build up a following capable of breaking the Southern Democratic stronghold.

After the election, to add insult to injury, President Hoover was reported to have expressed his desire for building a new Republican Party in the South “such as could commend itself to the citizens of those states.” African Americans interpreted the president’s words to mean white citizens only.

It was not Hoover’s election but that of Oscar DePriest to the United States House of Representatives in 1928 that caused blacks to rejoice and to take an optimistic view of electoral politics. In the 1920s, the black population had doubled in New York, Chicago, and Cleveland and had tripled in Detroit. Awareness of black political power grew in direct correlation with the rapidly growing numbers of black migrants. In Chicago, black and white candidates alike realized the growing significance of the black vote as early as 1915. In that year, the black Republican candidate Oscar DePriest won a seat on the city council, representing the densely populated South Side. Born in Alabama, DePriest had moved first to Ohio and then to Illinois, settling in Chicago in 1899. He soon developed an interest in politics and worked his way up from a ward committeeman to become the first African American alderman.

In 1923 he was mentioned as a possible candidate for Congress, and with the cooperation of Chicago mayor William Hale (“Big Bill”) Thompson, DePriest’s influence steadily increased. Thompson’s own political ambitions had been helped by the black vote. With the fortuitous death of Martin B. Madden, the Republican congressional nominee in 1928, DePriest’s time had come. Announcing his candidacy, he overcame opposition with the help of powerful Republican interests and won Illinois’s First Congressional District seat by a plurality of 3,800 votes. The prediction of the North Carolina black congressman George White in his farewell address in 1901—that blacks would return “phoenix-like” to Congress—had finally come true. Moreover, for the first time in American history, a northern black sat in the national government’s lawmaking body.

DePriest’s position was a peculiar one. During his three terms in Congress, he served not only as the representative of his own Illinois district but also as the symbolic representative of all African Americans. One black newspaper said that his presence in Washington gave the race “new hope, new courage, and new inspiration.” DePriest’s presence in Washington certainly gave tangible evidence of the regeneration of blacks in politics and prepared the way for other black elected officials. However, his distinction in American political life alarmed and infuriated the white South. When his wife, Jessie DePriest, attended a tea at the White House for the wives and families of members of Congress, white southerners were outraged. Several southern legislatures passed resolutions “condemning certain social policies of the administration in entertaining Negroes in the White House on a parity with white ladies.” In Birmingham, where DePriest was scheduled to speak, the Ku Klux Klan burned him in effigy.

If African American victories in state and local elections proved that times were changing, nothing did so more dramatically than the shifting allegiance of blacks to the Democratic Party. More and more blacks began to place responsibility for the Depression on the shoulders of President Hoover. They grumbled that it would take a long time for the funds provided by Hoover’s Reconstruction Finance Corporation to trickle down through giant but defunct industrial firms and reach those at the very bottom of the economic ladder. Still, in the presidential election of 1932, two-thirds of black voters cast their ballots for Hoover. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s win, while not dependent on the black vote, presaged the change in black political behavior and in the Democratic Party.

The Republican Party had frankly overestimated its hold on its black constituents. Confident of blacks' fidelity to "the Party of Lincoln," Republicans failed to see the shifting tide—the many black men and women who benefited from New Deal relief. By 1934 many New Deal programs were underway. They were not free of racial discrimination, but the federal initiatives provided jobs for blacks, created training and educational opportunities, and included black advisors in the administration's policy making process.

The shift among black voters appeared dramatically in the Illinois congressional race of 1934, when black voters toppled their one-time hero Oscar DePriest in favor of the black Democratic candidate, Arthur W. Mitchell. DePriest's opposition to government-sponsored relief sounded eerily like the Hoover plan, which had failed to address the needs of millions of Americans of all races who had not only lost their jobs but could find no work of any kind. By 1934, 17 percent of whites and 38 percent of blacks were officially identified as incapable of self-support. Everywhere the relief rolls soared, and blacks disproportionately suffered from poverty. Economic considerations, more than any other, led black voters to question and ultimately reject old political allegiances.

In 1934 Arthur Mitchell himself personified the black political makeover. Four years earlier, he had been registered as a Republican; now his victory over DePriest made him the first black Democrat to sit in Congress. A migrant to Chicago from Alabama, Mitchell trumpeted the relief programs of the New Deal in his campaign speeches. As the national Democratic Party grew more interested in attracting the black vote, Mitchell gained more prominence, becoming the first African American to speak from the floor at a Democratic National Convention. That caused one irate southern senator to walk out of the convention. Mitchell's presence within the House of Representatives was a constant source of displeasure and embarrassment to his southern Democratic colleagues.

All over the country, African Americans were not only switching from the party of Lincoln to the party of Roosevelt but were also becoming increasingly active in politics. The shift to the Democratic Party reflected an attitudinal change toward the Republican Party, but it also entailed a growing sense of political efficacy. Black voters exhibited greater consciousness of and confidence in leveraging their own racial-group interests through the electoral process. By the time of Roosevelt's second presidential campaign in 1936, the majority of African Americans heartily supported him. Roosevelt's direct way of tackling problems, as well as his friendly and accessible-sounding "fireside chat" radio addresses to the nation, captured the imagination of blacks just as they did other Americans. His physical handicap and the strength he brought to bear in overcoming this enormous difficulty were a source of inspiration to them.

A Growing Sense of Political Efficacy

In Roosevelt's later terms, black leaders articulated a more critical position toward New Deal policies, but in 1936 many of them basked in the new Washington spotlight. The president frequently received African American visitors, and it was widely known that Robert L. Vann of Pittsburgh, Julian Rainey of Boston, William T. Thompkins of Kansas City, and F. B. Ransom of Indianapolis were high in the Democratic councils. Roosevelt visited and sent messages to African American organizations and institutions, thus adding to his popularity with black groups.

African Americans expressed even greater fondness for the president's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt. She was known to be on intimate terms with black-women's club leader Mary McLeod Bethune, and she invited the National Council of Negro Women, of which

Mrs. Bethune was president, to tea at the White House. Eleanor Roosevelt visited black schools and federal projects and spoke to numerous groups. When she was photographed while being escorted by two ROTC cadets at Howard University, African Americans circulated the picture widely as an example of the broad egalitarianism of the occupants of the White House. Southern whites circulated the same photograph to show the depth to which the occupants of the White House had descended. In 1939 Eleanor Roosevelt made a powerful public statement against segregation when she resigned from the elite Daughters of the American Revolution after they refused to grant permission to black singer Marian Anderson to perform in the DAR's Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C.

By 1940 when he ran for a third term, Roosevelt drew some opposition among blacks. For example, Roosevelt never endorsed the antilynching and the antipoll-tax bills—the two most crucial pieces of civil rights legislation of the era. Accusations that the administration allowed discrimination in some relief agencies and excluded blacks from preliminary defense preparations caused a decline in his black support. In the presidential election of that year, some African Americans preferred to believe Republican nominee Wendell Willkie's promises and were inclined to desert what they were pleased to call "The Dirty Deal." Most, however, voted for Roosevelt despite their criticisms.

In the years that followed, black voters revealed greater divisions among themselves, although blacks in the large urban centers of the North tended to favor the politics of the New Deal. The black vote had become particularly influential in such pivotal states as Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York, causing anxiety in both Republican and Democratic circles. Urban black voters, just like white voters, took positions on labor matters, foreign policy, and other issues that affected them. African Americans, sensing their strength and importance as voters, believed that they could now demand a high price for their support. In addition to expecting that a candidate reflect their views on public questions that interested all Americans, blacks insisted that a candidate's views on questions of race be acceptable.

African Americans manifested their strength during this period of political regeneration not only in the consideration that both major parties gave them in national elections, but also in

Success at the State and Local Levels

their successes in state and local elections. An increasing number of blacks secured seats in state legislatures in the 1930s and 1940s. After 1932 black legislators became commonplace in California, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia, and there were sizable numbers of black voters in both the Republican and Democratic parties. The greater concentration of blacks in urban centers and their increased political consciousness were additional factors. In 1946 about thirty blacks won seats in ten state legislatures.

In 1930 two African Americans were elected to municipal judgeships in New York City, and thereafter other municipalities elected or appointed blacks to judicial positions. In 1947 there were black judges in Cleveland, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, and several other cities, and in New York City the number had increased to seven. In many American cities, African Americans helped to manage the affairs of government as members of boards of education and city councils, as members of the prosecuting attorneys' staffs, as police officers, and as tax commissioners and corporation counsels. The fruits of political activity were enjoyed in a very real way by the faithful servants of the parties, and there was an increasing recognition of the contributions that qualified blacks could make to the improvement of the life of the whole community.

Window in Time

Evaluating the New Deal

On the subject of the Negro, the Roosevelt record is spotty, as might be expected in an administration where so much power is in the hands of the southern wing of the Democratic party. And yet Mr. Roosevelt, hobbled as he has been by the Dixie die-hards, has managed to include Negro citizens in practically every phase of the administration program. In this respect, no matter how far behind the ideal he may be, he is far ahead of any other Democratic president, and of recent Republican ones. . . . This does not mean that the Roosevelt administration has done all that it could have done for the race. Its policies in many instances have done Negroes great injustice and have helped to build more secure walls of segregation. On the antilynching bill Mr. Roosevelt has not said a mumbling word. His failure to endorse this legislation, to bring pressure to break the filibuster, is a black mark against him. . . . His failure to act, or even speak, on the anti-lynching bill was the more glaring because, while mobs in America were visiting inhumanities upon Negroes, Mr. Roosevelt periodically was rebuking some foreign government for inhumanity, and enunciating high sentiments of liberty, tolerance, justice, etc.

Source: Roy Wilkins, "The Roosevelt Record," *The Crisis* 47 (November 1940).

The Black Cabinet

One of the most important indicators of black political clout was the New Deal's black advisors. The Roosevelt administration secured the assistance of African American specialists and advisors in various governmental departments. Seeking the advice of blacks was not a Roosevelt innovation. Presidents had long sought to gauge the pulse of the black population through one or more community leaders, most notably Booker T. Washington. For example, in 1889, on learning that the African American historian-lawyer George Washington Williams would be making a visit to the Belgian Congo, President Benjamin Harrison asked Williams to submit a report that could be used in determining the nation's policy toward that colony. In most instances, the African American advisors were faithful members of the president's party who gave counsel in the matter of patronage.

Franklin Roosevelt's group of black advisors differed from those of earlier presidents in several important respects. The number of "black cabinet" members was fairly large, in contrast to the small number on whom previous presidents had relied for advice. It is not possible to set an arbitrary number, because it was changing constantly and because it is difficult to be sure whether certain appointees were actually members of the select circle that could be regarded as a "cabinet." Nor can it be said that previous black advisors had access to the president. Time and again, they sought to speak with the president personally only to be rebuffed, told that he was too busy, or forced to see one of his many subordinates instead.





The Black Cabinet

Official photograph of government leaders known as the "Black Cabinet," about 1935. Mary McLeod Bethune is in the center of the first row.

But Roosevelt's black advisors differed from their counterparts in previous administrations in that they were placed in positions of sufficient importance that both the government and the African American population generally regarded their appointments as significant. Nor were they people whose relationship with the government was nebulous and unofficial.

Members of Roosevelt's black cabinet were not politicians but highly intelligent and highly trained people, called in to perform specific functions. To that extent, their appointments fell in line with the tendency of the New Deal administration to commandeer the services of the best-trained people in the country to assist in developing programs of relief, recovery, and reform. They were called by some the black brain trust, for among them were doctors of juridical science, doctors of philosophy, and college presidents. Some African Americans complained that it was most unfortunate to confine such experts only to the problems affecting their race. Few could deny, however, that they were well qualified to perform many functions, and indeed on occasion many of them worked in areas that only indirectly touched on racial issues.

In the early days of the New Deal, Harold L. Ickes, Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior who had once been a white president of the Chicago branch of the NAACP, began to hire racial advisors. Also within the Department of the Interior, Clark Foreman, a white liberal from Atlanta, employed African Americans on his legal staff as well as in such other agencies as the National Park Service.

Later, some of those black staffers transferred to other departments, thereby enlarging the area in which blacks exercised some influence in the national government. Eleanor Roosevelt is credited with having enlarged the size of the black cabinet, while Will W. Alexander, who was for a time the head of the Farm Security Administration, was also instrumental in having African Americans appointed to positions.

Among the African Americans who occupied high places in New Deal councils was Robert L. Vann, the editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, who served as a special assistant to the attorney general. William H. Hastie, the dean of Howard University Law School, entered government service as assistant solicitor in the Department of the Interior. He went on to serve as the judge of the American Virgin Islands and later as civilian aide to the secretary of war. In 1946 he was appointed governor of the Virgin Islands. Robert C. Weaver was the first black to be the racial advisor in the Department of the Interior. Subsequently he served in several agencies, including the Federal Housing Authority (FHA), the Office of Emergency Management, and the War Manpower Commission. Decades later, in 1966, Weaver became the first African American cabinet officer when the Housing and Home Finance Agency, which he headed, became the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Eugene Kinckle Jones, executive secretary of the National Urban League, went to Washington in the early days of the New Deal and for a period was advisor on "Negro affairs" in the Department of Commerce. Lawrence A. Oxley, a veteran social worker, was chief of the division of Negro labor in the Department of Labor. Mary McLeod Bethune, founder-president of Bethune-Cookman College, was active for several years as the director of the division of Negro affairs of the National Youth Administration (NYA). Edgar Brown, president of the United Government Employees, advised on Negro affairs in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Frank S. Horne, poet and teacher, did duty in several capacities, primarily with federal housing programs. William J. Trent served first as racial advisor in the Department of the Interior and then went to the Federal Works Agency as the racial relations officer.

The list of African Americans in such positions in the federal government continued to grow during the Roosevelt years. Numerous consultants served only temporarily: Abram L. Harris with the National Recovery Administration (NRA), William H. Dean with the National Resources Planning Board, Ralph Bunche with the Library of Congress and later with the Department of State, Rayford W. Logan with the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, and Ira D. A. Reid with the Social Security Board's Bureau of Employment. Some of these officials remained only a few months, but others found government service so much to their liking that they stayed on during the Truman administration.

With the onset of the war emergency their number was substantially increased. Crystal Bird Fauset, a former member of the Pennsylvania legislature, went to Washington as the racial relations advisor in the Office of Civilian Defense. Ted Poston, veteran New York newspaperman, served as racial advisor in the Office of War Information. Col. Campbell Johnson became an executive assistant to Gen. Lewis B. Hershey, head of the National Selective Service (which oversaw the military draft). Others served with the War Production Board, the War Manpower Commission, the Office of Price Administration, and the Social Security Board.

The black cabinet was never a formal body. But Wendell Pritchett, legal scholar and biographer of Robert C. Weaver, notes that by the late 1930s the New Deal's black appointees referred to themselves as the Federal Council on Negro Affairs and recognized Bethune as its chair and Weaver as its vice-chair. Weaver was often referred to as "chief recruiter," on account of his tireless and frequently successful efforts to secure employment for blacks as government advisors. The only woman in the group, Bethune functioned well as "titular head" of the group because of her close connection to the Roosevelts, especially the First Lady. She hosted meetings of the black New Dealers at her home, bringing them together in discussions of fair treatment and strategies for more black appointees in federal agencies.



Mary McLeod Bethune in the federal service

Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman College and the National Council of Negro Women, served the New Deal as Director of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration. Here she confers with Eleanor Roosevelt and Aubrey Williams, Director of the NYA.

The group, according to Pritchett, was primarily responsible for urging the appointment of William Hastie to a federal judgeship. Roosevelt appointed Hastie a district court judge in the Virgin Islands in 1937.

The task of these black advisors in the federal government was difficult and delicate. They pressed for economic and political equality for their race in America, while also seeking to increase opportunities for the employment of blacks in government and in industry on the basis of ability and training rather than color.

Expanding Job Opportunities in the Federal Government

They worked closely with the black press and with other agencies of influence, through members of Congress, and through powerful white citizens in public and private stations. The aggressive temper of the African American population during the Great Depression and the subsequent war emergency, as well as the inclination of many New Dealers to increase equal opportunities, all made possible the achievement of a measure of success by black New Dealers.

If some of these officials smarted under the roles assigned to them as advisors on "Negro affairs," they could nonetheless look with satisfaction at the increasing number of blacks who were serving their government in many capacities. Thanks to new Civil Service regulations, it was no longer necessary to indicate one's race on applications or to attach a photograph; but after personal interviews, officials sometimes avoided hiring African Americans by availing themselves of the Civil Service Commission's "rule of three," by which they could select a white who ranked second or third over a black who ranked first. Even with such practices, the number of African Americans on the federal payroll increased from about 50,000 in 1933 to approximately 200,000 before the end of 1946. The majority of

the newly employed blacks worked in the low, unskilled, and semiskilled brackets. There was only a sprinkling of economists, statisticians, chemists, physicists, and other specialists. In some portions of the government the segregation of whites and blacks was abolished, and most government cafeterias were opened to blacks. Although those in the black cabinet were not responsible for all the improvements in the condition of African American federal employees, they could claim a considerable number of the changes as their handiwork.

New Deal Programs

As the Roosevelt administration established its numerous agencies to aid the total population in recovering from the severe depression, African Americans benefited from the slowly improving conditions. However, because of the long American tradition of discriminating against blacks, it was inevitable that in these agencies there were variations between black and white relief grants, numbers of workers, salaries, and the like. The National Industrial Recovery Act, the 1933 law that tried to stimulate industry, established “fair competition” codes providing for a minimum wage scale of \$12 to \$15 per week, a forty-hour week, and the abolition of child labor under the age of sixteen. But the law also set up cost-of-living differentials that discriminated against occupational groups (such as domestic servants) in which large numbers of black workers were found.

In the steel, laundry, tobacco, and other industries, African Americans frequently received lower minimum wages than did whites for similar work. The compliance boards that were set up to enforce the codes were frequently made up of employers who were themselves violating the codes. Blacks seldom complained for fear of losing their jobs, and few of them were represented at code hearings. When wages were raised in compliance with the codes, employers frequently dismissed black workers and paid higher wages to whites. Thus African Americans had little to lament when in 1935 the Supreme Court declared the National Industrial Recovery Act unconstitutional.

A larger number of blacks were adversely affected by the various New Deal measures to provide relief to farmers and agricultural workers. Under the crop reduction program of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), farmers received cash benefits for plowing under their cotton, wheat, and tobacco **The Agricultural Programs** crops and for slaughtering their hogs. While the farmers’ cash benefits rose to billions of dollars under the AAA, grants intended for African American farmers were often dissipated and misappropriated. Many landlords took advantage of illiterate sharecroppers and tenants by keeping the checks intended for them.

This dishonesty, which hurt both white and black farm workers, led the victims to organize, forming such groups as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. Planters vigorously opposed such unions and appealed to racial prejudice in an effort to break up cooperation between black and white farmers. Even after administrative rules were changed to provide for payments directly to the tenants rather than through landlords, many blacks suffered, for then white landlords merely removed them from the land and collected the benefits themselves. Aside from the benefits that some African American farmers received in the form of cash payments, blacks obtained valuable experience in voting in AAA referenda on such important questions as establishing marketing quotas. They demonstrated conclusively that blacks and whites could vote together on important economic questions, even though in most southern states blacks were still effectively disenfranchised in regular elections.



Nat Williams and E. H. Anderson, Farm County Security Administration official

Williams was the first black person in the United States to receive a loan under the Tenant Purchase program, Guilford County, North Carolina.

From the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), the Federal Land Bank, and local production credit associations, African Americans received benefits, though frequently not in proportion to their numbers or their needs. They were substantially aided by the program of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which in 1937 took over the work of the Resettlement Administration (RA). Unfortunately, the FSA had an appropriation only one-fifth the amount appropriated for the AAA, but it undertook to establish communities of small farmers who rented land from the FSA and made loans to those who desired to purchase their own farms. An extensive educational program was carried out in which, among other things, new methods of production and marketing were introduced.

Under the program, African Americans received a large share of the benefits, and thousands, for the first time in their lives, were able to purchase land. The FSA, largely because of the capable leadership of Will W. Alexander, insisted that there be no discrimination between white

and black farmers. Because of its racial policies and its program of settling farmers in communities, it was almost always under fire. The attacks grew so vehement that in 1942 congressional enemies of the FSA managed to cut its appropriations so drastically that the greater part of its program was ended.

The National Youth Administration (NYA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) undertook to provide relief for the youth of America. Under Aubrey Williams, a white Mississippian, the NYA set up a liberal program for the benefit of African American youth. Not only was Mary McLeod Bethune invited to Washington to head the division of Negro affairs, but black state and local supervisors were appointed in districts in which large numbers of African Americans lived. In the out-of-school programs, 13 percent of enrollees were blacks, and they learned a variety of trades that were to be beneficial in the war emergency. In the student work program, more than 64,000 participants, or 10 percent, were black. Young African Americans, all the way from grade school to graduate school, found it possible to continue their education by means of the benefits obtained from the NYA.

The CCC maintained a policy of strict segregation, but during its lifetime from 1933 to 1942 approximately 200,000 African American boys and young men worked in camps established by the agency. In addition to the work of conservation, reforestation, and prevention of soil erosion, the agency set up an educational program under the supervision of black advisors. A measurable amount of illiteracy was eliminated, and juvenile delinquency was doubtless curtailed. Although many critics raised serious doubts as to the wisdom of the program, there can be no doubt that the CCC relieved the suffering of many young men during the depths of the Depression.

The New Deal housing program aided blacks' efforts to keep their homes and acquire better accommodations, and it provided employment on projects under construction. Some African Americans secured loans from the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) in

Window in Time

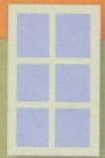
Life in the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1935

According to instructions, I went Monday morning at 8 o'clock to Pier I, North River. There were, I suppose more than 1,000 boys standing about the pier. . . . The colored boys were a goodly sprinkling of the whole. A few middle-aged men were in evidence. These, it turned out, were going as cooks. A good many Spaniards and Italians were about. A good-natured, lively, crowd, typical of New York. . . . When my record was taken at Pier I a "C" was placed on it. . . . But before we left the bus the officer shouted emphatically: "Colored boys fall out in the rear." The colored from several buses were herded together, and stood in line until after the white boys had been registered and taken to their tents. This seemed to be the established order of procedure at Camp Dix. . . . We were taken to permanent camp on a site rich in Colonial and Revolutionary history, in the upper South. This camp was a dream compared with Camp Dix. There [was] plenty to eat, and we slept in barracks instead of tents. An excellent recreation hall, playground, and other facilities. . . . During the first week we did no work outside camp but only hiked, drilled, and exercised. Since then we have worked five days a week, eight hours a day. Our bosses are local men, southerners, but on the whole I have found nothing to complain of. The work varies, but is always healthy, outdoor labor. As the saying goes, it's a great life, if only you don't weaken! . . . On the whole, I was gratified rather than disappointed with the CCC. I had expected the worst. Of course it reflects, to some extent, all the practices and prejudices of the U.S. Army. But as a job and an experience, for a man who has no work, I can heartily recommend it.

Source: Luther C. Wandall, "A Negro in the CCC," *The Crisis* 42 (August 1935): 244, 253–254.

order to make payments on their homes during the Depression. A limited number were able to borrow money to build homes with loans guaranteed by the Federal Housing Authority (FHA). In many communities, however, banks were not inclined to lend money to African Americans, because they regarded them as poor risks and considered the future value of houses that blacks had occupied uncertain.

The most widely beneficial federal housing program for African Americans was the encouragement that local housing authorities received to construct low-cost housing projects with subsidies from the United States Housing Authority, later the Federal Public Housing Authority. In some northern communities the projects were occupied jointly by blacks and whites, but segregation was maintained in each southern community. Approximately one-third of the units constructed were occupied by African American families. These modern units, equipped with electric or gas appliances and recreation facilities, gave thousands of families an opportunity to live in a kind of environment that previously was wholly unknown to them.



Under the Public Works Administration (PWA) and similar federal agencies, a considerable number of black hospitals and other public buildings were constructed. Through an arrangement with local and state governments, these agencies subsidized the construction of buildings at black colleges, playgrounds, community centers, and the like. Despite provisions in the contracts that called for the employment of a proportionate number of African American workers in the construction of these buildings, these stipulations were frequently disregarded. In some cities, where as many as a score of buildings were constructed with public funds, no African Americans were employed. Other cities, however, did employ some black workers. In very few instances did African Americans secure the amount of employment to which they were entitled under the contract provisions.

During the darkest days of the Great Depression it was not possible for either the government or private business to employ enough people to relieve satisfactorily the plight of the unemployed. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and later the Works Progress Administration (WPA, later renamed the Work Projects Administration), provided relief both in kind—food, clothing, and commodity surpluses—and in employment. There was a greater inclination toward fairness to African Americans in providing material relief than in providing employment. Under the WPA, policy varied so much from place to place that no general statement can be made about the treatment of blacks.

In some communities blacks secured employment on professional and clerical levels. Thus African American actors, writers, and artists in such cities as New York and Chicago carried on their activities under the WPA. In other localities, however, it was almost impossible even for unskilled blacks to secure any benefits from the relief agencies. Wage differentials in some communities were great, and administrators made no apologies for them. Even so, more than a million blacks owed their livelihood to the WPA in 1939, and this and similar relief agencies became so important that they were surpassed only by agriculture and domestic service as sources of income.

When the Social Security Act was passed in 1935, provision was made for old-age assistance and unemployment benefits in a large number of occupational categories. Since agricultural and domestic workers were excluded, however, a huge proportion of the black population failed to qualify for the benefits provided by the act. Even in the old-age assistance program, there was a tendency, especially in the South, to grant lower sums to aged blacks than to aged whites.

One of the most outrageous abuses of African Americans in this period was a study conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service in Macon County, Alabama. Begun in 1932 during the closing months of the Hoover Administration and known as the **The Tuskegee Study** Tuskegee Study, it charted the progression of untreated syphilis in more than four hundred impoverished black men, most of them sharecroppers or day laborers. Later investigations produced “no evidence that informed consent was gained from human participants in the study.” The subjects were offered free medical care, free meals, burial expenses, and other “unethical inducements” to participate.

They were never informed that they had syphilis, and standard treatments for a disease with serious health consequences, including the possibility of death, were deliberately withheld. It is estimated that at least “one hundred men had died of syphilis or related complications, at least forty wives had been infected, and nineteen children had contracted the disease at birth.” The study was discontinued in 1972 only after it was revealed in an Associated Press article. Two years later the federal government began to make reparation

payments to survivors. In May 1997, President Clinton, in a ceremony at the White House, formally apologized to the eight remaining survivors, declaring that the attitudes that had led to such a study were “clearly racist.”

Although outright discrimination against African Americans occurred in the local administration of most New Deal programs in the South, many white southern leaders still found the New Deal distasteful, because it concentrated too much power in Washington. Furthermore, despite its limitations, New Deal officials occasionally forced rather than merely required equality in the administration of benefits. Southern leaders could ill afford to break with the Roosevelt administration because it gave them national power through their control of congressional committees and their voice in party politics. For the most part they had to pay lip service to the liberal measures of the New Deal and to compromise on many issues. The entrance of highly trained blacks into the government in Washington and federal agencies in the South gave white southerners a new experience in their relationships with blacks. The full consequences of this new experience could not be measured until years after the New Deal had ended.

Organized Labor

Labor unions gained power in the 1930s, owing to federal support of workers' rights and the growing militancy of workers themselves. Section 7a of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which established the NRA, provided that employees should have the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing without “interference, restraint, or coercion of employers of labor.” The National Labor Board (NLB) was set up to enforce those provisions of the statute. In 1935 the Wagner Act gave permanency and strength to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which had replaced the NLB the previous year. The act established clear-cut rules for collective bargaining and set up twenty-two regional boards to conduct elections in industry to determine what group of employees was entitled to bargain with employers. The NLRB also received wide powers in handling labor disputes and settling strikes. It was indeed, as it was called at the time, “labor’s bill of rights.”

For black workers, the challenge was to break the barriers that excluded them from unions so that they could enter into a new period of security and prosperity in the enjoyment of these rights. However, in an effort to keep whites employed during the Depression, labor unions had maintained their exclusionary policies more strictly than ever. The bulk of African Americans who found employment fell into the unskilled and semiskilled categories, where there was little or no union organization. Thus they lacked the protection that the NLRB granted to skilled workers.

The formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1936 gave African American workers an entrée into the trade union movement. John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers established the CIO after he clashed with the AFL **The CIO** over organizing strategy. Whereas the AFL insisted on organizing workers on the basis of craft, which excluded unskilled workers, Lewis and his followers subscribed to the concept of industrial unionism, in which all workers in a given industry joined in a single union. The CIO was also committed to organizing workers regardless of race or gender, and it succeeded in organizing black workers in several key industries, including steel workers, garment workers, longshoremen, and automobile workers.

Encouraged by the National Urban League, the vast majority of black steelworkers joined the CIO-affiliated Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) in its organizing drive of 1936. In 1937, when the great steel companies finally agreed (after prolonged and sometimes violent resistance) to bargain with the SWOC, thousands of black workers benefited from the pay raises called for in the contract.

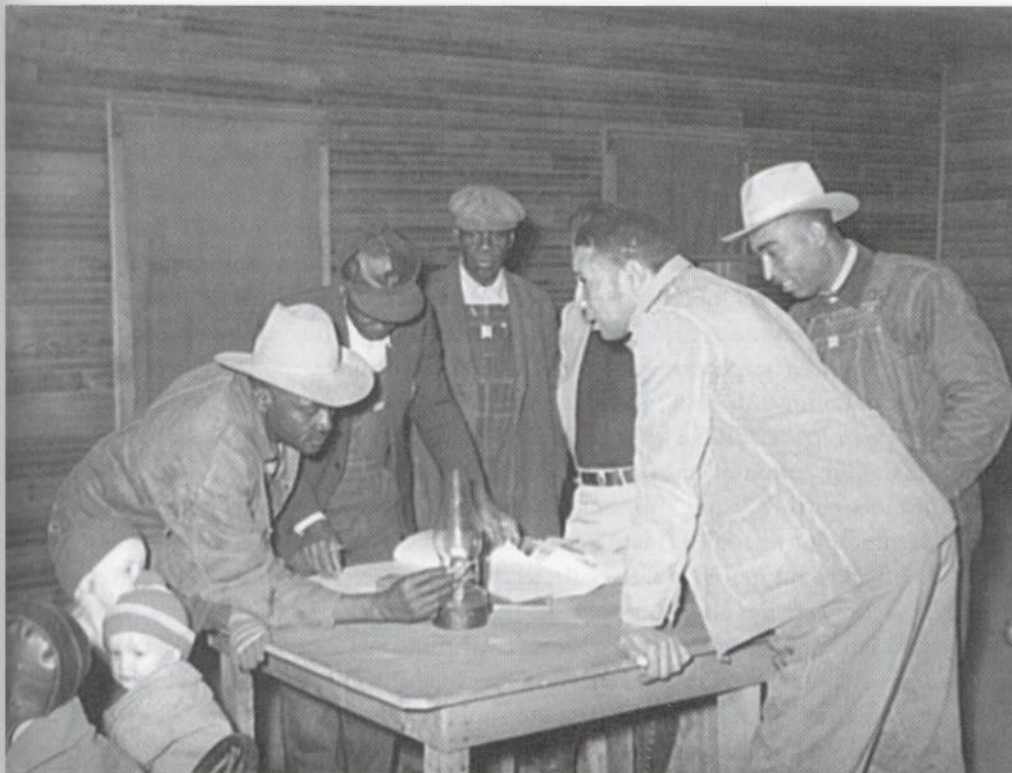
In 1937 the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (IL&WU), which had been organized on the West Coast, was affiliated with the CIO. In the beginning, it did not seem to welcome African American workers, but after a major strike in 1934 Harry Bridges, the union's leader, made it clear that black labor would receive equal treatment in the IL&WU. Special antidiscrimination committees were organized to see that no worker was discharged or intimidated on account of race or color. The unionizing of automobile workers was largely the work of the CIO, and the United Automobile Workers of the CIO succeeded in forcing all the major automobile manufacturers to recognize it as the legal collective bargaining agent for the workers—Ford finally capitulated in 1941 after a bitter fight. Although some white members opposed the union's fight for equal opportunities for blacks in the automobile industry, the union continued its struggle. World War II created new opportunities for the employment of African Americans in the automobile industry.

As the CIO ventured into the South, its organizing efforts confronted longstanding regional obstacles to the labor movement, including limited industrial development, the absence of a history of labor activism, and most significantly, the Jim Crow system that divided white and black workers, while easing class tensions among whites. According to such historians as Michael Honey and Robert Korstad, southern industrial unionism, with its linkage of economic and racial justice, provided an early model for the civil rights movement. Workers could not advance toward economic justice without also attempting to dismantle racial segregation. The biracial unionism favored by the left-leaning CIO unsettled Jim Crow and suggested that the labor movement could encompass such larger social goals as civil rights for blacks.

The CIO launched its first southern organizing drive in 1937. It also organized get-out-the-vote campaigns in every state, targeting both whites and blacks despite the latter's disfranchisement. Union organizers found their strongest support among black workers, who drew on a long tradition of protest and applied it to the labor movement. Union meetings in the South took on a different quality, with African Americans incorporating prayer and religious song. The CIO successfully organized R. J. Reynolds Co. tobacco workers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. A union (called Food, Tobacco, and Allied Industries) won a contract in 1944.

What Robert Korstad terms "civil rights unionism" waned in the South with the onset of World War II, as the federal government turned its attention to the international scene and conservative white leaders steered CIO unions away from civil rights objectives. Then, beginning in the late 1940s, Cold War red-baiting further thwarted this nascent movement with the rise of popular anticommunism, the repeal at the federal level of labor gains, and the stifling of public debate over workers' rights. Nevertheless, the stand of the CIO Committee to Abolish Racial Discrimination and the liberal program of the Political Action Committee gave new hope to many African Americans. They were no longer suspicious of labor organizations per se and were inclined to join strikes with as much enthusiasm as other workers.

By the mid 1930s, conditions in rural Arkansas had become bad enough to convince not only urban workers but also black and white tenant farmers to set aside centuries-old racial hate and join together in protest. In July 1934, seven black and eleven white tenant



Conference of officials of local chapter of UCAPOAWA in Tabor, Creek County, Oklahoma, February 1940

Pomp Hall, the man leaning on the table at right, was an active leader among both blacks and whites in the union and in his community.

farmers refused to work the cotton crop unless they secured better wages. As expected, the landowner summarily evicted them. Led by socialist organizers Harry Leland Mitchell and Clay East, these eighteen tenant farmers formed the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU)—perhaps the most dramatic example of interracial labor activism on a grassroots level. By 1939 the STFU claimed 30,000 members in four states.

Organizing Activity in Agriculture

The collapse of the agricultural economy and the failure of the New Deal agricultural policies spurred the growth of the STFU, whose members demanded better wages, better working conditions, and a role in the administration of federal funds. Like other southern labor organizations that included blacks, the STFU met with a campaign of terror, from evictions and arrests to mob violence and lynching. The publicity around the STFU and its brutal repression drew national attention to the cause of tenant farmers and was a catalyst for the founding of the New Deal's Resettlement Administration (which became the Farm Security Administration), as well as Senator Robert La Follette, Jr.'s, committee to investigate antilabor violence.

In 1937, the STFU attempted to join the CIO, but its leaders bridled when it was placed under the umbrella of the existing CIO-affiliated United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPOAWA). Although UCAPOAWA had achieved remarkable success in organizing ethnically, racially, and gender diverse workers, the merger soon

soured. The Socialist leaders of the STFU distrusted the Communist leaders of UCAPAWA. The STFU demanded more autonomy, and its black members wanted more leadership roles. The STFU severed the alliance in 1939 and never recovered.

On the Left

In his autobiography, Richard Wright recounts his disaffection with the Communist Party, emphasizing the party's failure to bridge the cultural divide between radical whites and African Americans. However, new scholarship by Robin Kelley, Bill Mullen, Mark Solomon, and others has reassessed the relationship between blacks and white radicals in the Depression era, finding a more complex story of interracial alliances than was previously recognized.

Certainly before the 1930s African American intellectuals and writers (for example, A. Philip Randolph, Cyril Briggs, Eric Walrond, and Claude McKay) were associated with socialism and/or communism. In the 1920s, and in some cases earlier, black writers flirted with leftist ideas. McKay and Langston Hughes had consistently drawn on working-class life in their writings during the Harlem Renaissance years. Yet protest themes and economic critiques would be more popular during the Depression years. The poetry of Sterling Brown, especially in *Southern Road* (1932), captured the defiant spirit of rural black folk in the face of oppression. The collaboration of black poet Waring Cuney and blues musician Josh White resulted in songs that carried words of protest. In the 1930s, Langston Hughes published in leftist magazines, such as *New Masses*, and supported radical initiatives. Countee Cullen's poem on the Scottsboro case appeared in the Communist Party newspaper *Daily Worker*.

Despite his later denunciation of communism, Richard Wright was the best-known black leftist in the 1930s. Although working as a supervisor in the New Deal's Federal Writers Project in Illinois, Wright conveyed unmistakable leftist sympathies in his poetry and fiction. His stark and tragic descriptions of race and poverty exemplified the then-popular literary style of social realism. Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and *Native Son* (1940) put him among the leading American writers of the day.

The message of racial equality that was preached, if not always practiced, by whites in the Communist Party USA appealed to a cross-section of African Americans in the 1930s. It

The Appeal of Communism appeared to be one of the few organizations willing to make bold, public attacks against Jim Crow. Historian Robin Kelley's study of communist influence in Alabama during the Depression suggests a multifaceted, grassroots approach to achieving racial and economic justice. Recognizing the link between economic and civil rights in Alabama, black communists organized protests against lynching and police brutality and launched right-to-vote campaigns. Communist leaders organized the unemployed in Birmingham in the early 1930s, staging public demonstrations to demand relief and forming neighborhood relief committees that presented their demands to local welfare boards.

Rural blacks also allied with the Communist Party by forming the Share Croppers Union (SCU), which had two thousand members by 1933. Using organizational skills gained in social and religious organizations, black women took leadership roles in the neighborhood relief committees of the SCU. Although the SCU won a few strikes, it was brutally repressed by police and white vigilante violence. Communist influence in Alabama culminated in a wave of strikes in 1934, but it waned after 1935.

Two landmark civil rights cases brought the Communist Party and racial justice into the national—and international—spotlight. On March 25, 1931, nine black youths hopped a

freight train traveling west through northern Alabama. The train already carried a group of white boys and two white women, also down-and-out and looking for work along the southern rail lines. The white and black boys fought on the train, which was stopped at the end of its ill-fated ride by a posse of white men in Paint Rock, Alabama. That sealed the fate of the black boys. Immediately arrested on the charge of rape, they were taken to Scottsboro, the seat of Jackson County, Alabama, and there only narrowly escaped a lynch mob.

Landmark Cases: Scottsboro and Herndon

Within days, four juries convicted eight of the nine boys and sentenced them to death. While the vast majority of white Alabamans took pride in that justice was peacefully done (as opposed to a lynching), a growing number of African Americans and a small contingent of sympathetic whites believed the boys to be innocent, but likely to lose their lives. While the NAACP hesitantly debated whether and how to handle the case, the Communist-affiliated International Labor Defense (ILD) took over the appeals process. The ILD appealed the case three times between 1931 and 1937. By 1937 five of the nine were freed, and by 1950 the last of them had been released.

Similar mockery of justice pitted the ILD against the Jim Crow South and once more before an international audience. In June 1932, Angelo Herndon, a nineteen-year-old coal miner and Communist agitator, was arrested for organizing an interracial protest of the unemployed in Birmingham, Alabama. He was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to eighteen years in prison on a charge of inciting insurrection. After a five-year court battle, the ILD secured his freedom.

The Scottsboro and Herndon cases had a tremendous impact on African Americans' perception of the Communist Party in its fight for civil rights in the 1930s. As a result of these high-profile cases, Communist Party membership rose from a few hundred African Americans in 1930 to 2,500 in 1935. More generally, these legal crusades spurred black protest during a time when the prospects for black freedom seemed bleak. The Scottsboro case in particular empowered many African Americans to engage in active resistance, despite the risk of violent repercussions. These cases also sparked media frenzies, exposing the ugliest features of Jim Crow to the nation and the world. As one historian said of Scottsboro, "in the darkest of times, it linked the fortunes of every American to black liberation, and in many ways helped set the stage for the next wave of struggle for racial equality in the postwar years." The embarrassment to the nation caused by the South's barbaric racial climate would become a major catalyst for the civil rights movement during the Cold War. Finally, the ILD's victories in the Scottsboro and Herndon cases strengthened the legal protections for African Americans, including the right to counsel, the right to a jury of one's peers, equal protection under the law, and free speech.

The growing influence of the Communists also had a divisive impact. Such was the case of the National Negro Congress, which was founded as a result of a meeting at Howard University in 1935. The meeting of the Joint Committee of National Recovery brought together African Americans of various backgrounds, but its leaders agreed that the strategies of the moderate civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP and the National Urban League, as well as of the black churches, were inadequate responses to the persistent privation afflicting blacks in the Depression. Those gathered at Howard also denounced the racism of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the limitations of the New Deal in addressing the crisis. In their call for a single federation to unite all black organizations, the idea of the National Negro Congress was born.

The National Negro Congress and the Popular Front



The Scottsboro Boys

Fearing a mob lynching, Alabama Governor B. M. Miller called the National Guard to the Scottsboro jail to protect these young black men accused in the Scottsboro rape case. From left to right, they are Clarence Norris, Olen Montgomery, Andy Wright, Willie Roberson, Ozie Powell, Eugene Williams, Charlie Wiems, Roy Wright, and Haywood Patterson.

In the mid-1930s, the international Communist movement was pursuing a Popular Front strategy in many countries, including the United States. This meant that instead of attacking liberal and leftist (but non-Communist) political parties, labor unions, and other civic movements, Communists would invite these former political enemies to join them to form a “Popular Front” dedicated to resisting fascism and other right-wing forces. The National Negro Congress was one such organization. It convened in Chicago in February 1936, with 800 delegates representing 551 organizations and more than 300,000 people. With A. Phillip Randolph at its helm, the NNC launched a three-pronged platform that endorsed a labor-black alliance, civil rights, and antifascism.

The National Negro Congress represented a coalition of Communists, middle-class black organizations, and workers, united against fascism and racial oppression. This interracial, cross-class coalition dissolved after 1940, as a result of the Communist Party USA, like other Communist parties around the world, supporting the Hitler-Stalin Non-aggression Pact. (That pact, signed in August 1939, had enabled Hitler to attack Poland, thus beginning World War II.) Everywhere, news of the Hitler-Stalin Pact shocked anti-fascist liberals,



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socialists, and others on the left who had supported or been sympathetic to the Soviet Union and the Popular Front movement. The withdrawal of many non-Communist members from the NNC was typical of this widespread reaction.

While it lasted, the Communists' Popular Front, bringing African Americans of varying political persuasions into common cause with the Communist Party, had been the most successful of all efforts on behalf of the Scottsboro boys. Another example of successful use of the Popular Front strategy was the launching of the Southern Negro Youth Conference (SNYC). In 1936, representatives of southern black youth groups attended the first convention of the National Negro Congress (NNC), which passed a resolution calling on "all Negro youth to fight for the eradication of the evil from which they suffer." The result of that appeal was the first meeting of the SNYC, held in February 1937 in Richmond, Virginia, with roughly 534 delegates present. Prominent, traditionally moderate black leaders supported SNYC.

The group's initial principal advisor was Charlotte Hawkins Brown, the president of the Palmer Institute in Sedalia, North Carolina. Mordecai Johnson, the president of Howard University, gave the keynote address at the founding meeting. According to the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, Johnson's keynote address thrilled his young listeners. He admonished them to shun individualistic motives, to overcome racial oppression, and to fight for the black community. "We have come first of all," Johnson told his audience, "seeking the right to creative labor, to be gainfully employed with equal pay and employment opportunity—economic security. We have met for freedom, equality, opportunity."

From the first conference emerged a set of recommendations to improve economic and interracial conditions in the South. These proposals included petitioning the United States Congress to allow the teaching of African American history in southern public schools and calling on blacks "to use the ballot and political pressure to get more blacks elected to local school boards and hired as teachers in both black and integrated schools." Additionally, the SNYC planned to fight against racial disparities in access to health care and supported legislation to improve educational opportunities for black youth. The SNYC, like other civil rights organizations of the time, supported traditional leftist economic and social programs.

By the time it held its second convention the following year, the Youth Congress had crystallized its goals into a four-point program for development in the areas of citizenship, education, jobs, and health. One of the earliest examples of SNYC group activism is its participation in the black tobacco workers' campaign in 1937. SNYC began to show a distinct leftward turn, when its field representative C. Columbus Alston helped organize black workers into a union, the Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Industrial Union (TSLIU), in Richmond, Virginia, at the Carrington and Michaux Tobacco Stemming Company on April 16, 1937, and at the I. N. Vaughn and Company on May 7, 1937. Alston assisted them in developing a set of labor demands to present to their companies, including higher wages, shorter working hours, and better working conditions. Franck Kruch of the State Labor Department helped the black tobacco workers arrive at an agreement with their employers within forty-eight hours, and, according to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, the agreement included "granting pay increases ranging from 10 to 20 percent, and an eight-hour day and forty-hour week with time-and-a-half for overtime."

After its second convention, however, the SNYC moved its headquarters to Birmingham, Alabama, where it faced more restrictive segregation codes and harsher opposition. In Birmingham, the SNYC's Right to Vote Campaign was chaired by black leftist

James E. Jackson, Jr. Targeting political discrimination in the form of poll taxes, unfair voter registration requirements, and political intimidation, Jackson declared that black southerners would exercise their right to vote in the next presidential election year, 1940. He asserted that “only the enemies of all that is American—of freedom, of justice and democracy—will dare seek to thwart [them]!” By 1946, however, internal dissension and the government’s crackdown on left-wing organizations had considerably weakened the SNYC.

In the 1930s, the American Left was the strongest that it would ever be. Many influential writers, artists, and intellectuals, as well as workers, responded to its demands for economic

The Southern Conference for Human Welfare

and racial justice. It was not unusual for members of liberal organizations during the early period of the civil rights movement to include left-wing members or to dialogue with such organizations as the Socialist and Communist parties. Members of the radical left and leaders from liberal to moderate ideological persuasion came together in conferences and umbrella organizations to further the budding interracial struggle for black freedom. In November 1938, an interracial and interclass coalition—businesspeople, labor leaders, sharecroppers, journalists, students, and politicians, including members of Congress—convened in Birmingham, Alabama, to discuss the economic crisis in the South.

The egalitarian credo of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare [SCHW] was quickly put to the test when the city’s police chief, Eugene “Bull” Connor, interrupted a meeting and ordered the participants to comply with the segregated seating required by city ordinances. In response, the SCHW passed a resolution never to meet in a place where segregation was legal. Arriving late at that same meeting, the conference’s most important dignitary, Eleanor Roosevelt, entered the now-segregated conference room and took a seat among the black attendees. When asked to move, Roosevelt placed her chair right on the black-white dividing line, making an important symbolic statement against Jim Crow.

The conference tried to promulgate a program of aggressive action to raise the general level of underprivileged groups in the South. Through its state committees and local chapters it endeavored to create wide interest in political affairs and in some instances went so far as to throw its support behind some candidates for public office while opposing others. It took unequivocal stands against lynching, discrimination, the poll tax, and similar matters, and it usually allied with liberal labor forces. It was frequently accused of left-wing leanings and in the early 1940s was listed as a subversive group by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which had been established in 1938.

A Harvest of Artistic Expression

Despite conditions in the Depression years, black artistic creativity continued to blossom during the 1930s and 1940s. The richness of the musical and literary flowering of the 1920s served both as a stimulus and as an inspiration for the wealth of talent in the decades to come. Far from inhibiting cultural and social activities or stifling the creative expression of blacks, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) encouraged writers and artists by funding a variety of creative projects during these lean years. Sculptor Augusta Savage (1892–1962) made a profound contribution to the arts movement by serving as a dedicated mentor for young African American artists. She opened the Savage Studio of Arts and Craft in Harlem in 1931 and served as the director for the Harlem Community Art Center, established under the WPA.



Augusta Savage, *The Harp*, 1939

commanding 15-ft. high piece, *The Harp* was the only work by a Black artist to be commissioned by the 1937 New York World's Fair Board of Design.

the impossibility of becoming a celebrated artist in the segregated South. He also joined the great exodus of rural black southerners headed for the urban centers of the North, and, like Savage, settled in New York, where he arrived in 1918 with hopes of pursuing artistic training. The eager and gifted young artist was accepted at the prestigious National Academy of Design, where he studied under his devoted mentor, the prominent artist Charles Hawthorne.

In 1926, with the help of funds raised by Hawthorne, Johnson left for Europe, settling in France where he would later meet and marry the Danish textile artist Holcha Krake. Johnson returned briefly to the United States in 1930 to enter several of his paintings in the Harmon Foundation competition, for which he won the gold medal for Negro artists. He continued to live in Europe until 1938, when the growing Nazi threat impelled him and his wife to return to the United States.

They found Harlem still in the throes of the Great Depression. Yet despite barren economic conditions, Harlem's cultural life from the mid-1930s through the 1940s was blossoming as artists experimented with new styles and their work grew in prestige. Moreover, through projects sponsored by the WPA, particularly community arts education initiatives,

Augusta Savage began her sculpting career at an early age, fashioning animals and other objects from the mud and clay of her hometown, Green Cove, Florida. She moved to New York in 1921, a time of black migration to the city and the flowering of art. Within three years, she had completed the four-year art program at Cooper Union in the city. She enjoyed her first major success with the piece *Gamin*, which is a bust of her nephew Ellis Ford. The best known of Savage's works, *Gamin* won her a Rosenwald Fund fellowship that financed her travel to Paris in 1929. In France, Savage continued her artistic training, exhibited her work, and communed with other African American artists there, such as Henry Tanner and Hale Woodruff. She returned to New York City in 1931, determined to make an impact on the black arts community. Savage's sculpture *The Harp*, also popularly called "Lift Every Voice and Sing," is made of plaster and painted black.

William Johnson (1901–1970) also benefited from the New Deal's support of artists. Born in Florence, South Carolina,

William Johnson

Johnson demonstrated a passion and talent for artistic expression at an early age. Like his contemporary Augusta Savage, Johnson realized



William H. Johnson, *Going to Church*, 1940–1941

In *Going to Church*, Johnson masterfully employed bold, bright colors and simple flat shapes to convey rhythm through subtle repetition, as in the repeated bar patterns and numerous sets of pairs—the buildings on either side of the composition, the two pairs of figures, the pair of wheels, the pair of trees, and the two pairs of legs on the animal pulling the cart.

veteran African American artists trained younger artists and established venues for collaboration and sharing ideas and resources. This was certainly true of Johnson, who secured a teaching position at the celebrated Harlem Community Arts Center (active from 1937 to 1942), where he met, among other notable black artists, Gwendolyn Bennett and Jacob Lawrence. At this time Johnson also worked on several WPA-sponsored mural projects, and he exhibited with the Harlem Artists Guild, founded in 1935 by Augusta Savage, Elba Lightfoot, Charles Alston, and Arthur Schomburg.

During this period, Johnson's style and subject matter invoked the black folk art style of untrained painters. He drew on his memories of the rural South to portray sharecroppers picking cotton, convicts working on a chain gang, and families driving to church in ox-drawn wagons while wearing their Sunday best. In works like *Going to Church* (1940–1941), Johnson's visual idiom is simultaneously simple and sophisticated. If reminiscent of folk art, his style is also modern and deliberate. In May 1941, Johnson debuted his new style at his first major one-man show in New York at the Alma Reed Galleries on 57th Street—the center of the New York art scene. The opening received notices in all the major New York newspapers, and several important mainstream art publications, such as *Art News*, reviewed the show. Johnson was lauded by critics, collectors, and dealers.

The 1930s and 1940s were years of rich harvest for blacks in almost all fields of creative activity. Blacks in film were highly visible in the New Deal Era. Bill “Bojangles” Robinson played an Old-South avuncular role opposite white child-star Shirley Temple in *The Little Colonel* (1935) and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1938). Compared to most black male actors, however, Robinson was granted a rare dignity of presentation. His dance duets with Temple also gave filmgoers the only interracial male-female dance team in film history, and Bojangles’s skill as a dancer brought him an unprecedented tribute when the famed white dancer Fred Astaire, tap-dancing in black-face, performed “Bojangles of Harlem.”

Blacks in Films

Far more typical was Hollywood’s negative characterization of black men in infantilized, emasculated roles, such as played by Stepin Fetchit, Willie Best, and Mantan Moreland—all three of these actors specialists in the comic arts of mumbling foolishly, grinning moronically, and shuffling slowly (unless scared, whereupon their eyes would buck and special effects would make them appear to run faster than humanly possible).

The 1934 film *Imitation of Life*, based on Fannie Hurst’s bestselling novel, gave a modern twist to the old dilemma of the tragic mulatto. A white-looking young woman named Peola, played by the African American actress Freddie Washington, breaks the heart of her dark-skinned, self-sacrificing mother (Louise Beavers) by refusing to accept her mother’s racial identity, running away from home, and passing for white. Beaver’s character “Aunt Delilah” becomes a domestic servant whose pancake recipe makes possible the wealth and elite status of her white employer, who is also Aunt Delilah’s friend. In the film, both women are single mothers, attempting to raise daughters of similar age. For the black daughter, Peola, “passing” affords her—as a woman of white appearance—the same possibilities for romantic love and acceptance that are afforded to the daughter of the now-wealthy white employer. The death of her mother, however, brings the repentant Peola to her racial senses. At the funeral, her guilt-filled sobs and her confession of her racial identity and love for her mother provide the moral solution to a complicated story of race, color, and class.

If black actors were restricted primarily to the role of servant, black women played the role in diverse ways. The passive resignation with which the actress Louise Beavers portrayed her servant characters on film differed from the sassy, physically imposing role with which Hattie McDaniel imbued her film characters. McDaniels’s character, called Mammy in the romanticized Old-South saga *Gone with the Wind* (1939), barely disguises her sense of moral authority. The movie’s rakish male lead character, Rhett Butler, played by Clark Gable, confesses that Mammy was one of the few human beings whose respect he actually craved. McDaniel was awarded the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress—the first black actor to win an Oscar; there would be no other until Sidney Poitier in 1964. At her award ceremony, McDaniel stated simply: “I sincerely hope that I shall always be a credit to my race.”

Hollywood stars Paul Robeson and Lena Horne both made their film debuts in “race pictures,” but unlike McDaniel, who would come under fire from the NAACP for accepting servant roles, they spoke openly against racism. Robeson and Horne achieved unprecedented star status as film leads in Hollywood productions in the 1930s and 1940s, and they attempted to resist, not always successfully, the racial stereotypes that undermined positive images of blacks. Robeson’s most widely viewed role on the American screen was Joe in the 1936 version of *Show Boat*. Dispensing with the camera-filming convention of “lip-synching” a prerecorded song, Robeson sang “Ol’ Man River” live during the film take. He won tremendous praise for the emotional intensity of his performance.

Paul Robeson and Lena Horne

However, Robeson did not hesitate to level criticism even at the films in which he acted. He expressed a sense of betrayal in the British film *Sanders of the River* (1935), for instance, when he charged that the editing of certain scenes had caused him to be an unwitting tool of British colonialism. He went so far as to attempt to buy the film back from the studio to prevent its release, but his efforts proved unsuccessful. Robeson also reacted negatively to his last film *Tales of Manhattan* (1942). Its characterization of blacks angered him so much that he joined the protest against the New York premiere of the film, and afterward he retired altogether from Hollywood filmmaking.

Lena Horne was similarly bedeviled by Hollywood's racial insensitivity. Horne began her career as a singer and dancer at Harlem's Cotton Club. In the 1940s, she was among the first blacks to integrate white big bands, in her case the Charlie Barnett band. After meeting Paul Robeson, as well as the NAACP leader Walter White, Horne became more conscious of her image as a racial representative. Thus the contract she signed with Hollywood's MGM Studios included an explicit clause that she would not play a servant or other racially stereotyped role. Her star rose considerably in the 1940s, when she was featured in the Hollywood-produced all-black musicals *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) and *Stormy Weather* (1944). *Cabin in the Sky* also featured black actors and musicians Ethel Waters, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and dancer John "Bubbles" Sublett, who had been the original Sportin' Life in George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*. Horne's other film, *Stormy Weather*, costarred Bill "Bojangles" Robinson as her love interest and also featured the tap-dancing Nicholas Brothers, Harold and Fayard, in a dance performance that Fred Astaire lauded as the single most exciting routine he had ever seen on film.

Lena Horne's association with Robeson brought her under government surveillance during the Red Scare years of the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1947 in Paris, Horne married the white MGM film conductor and arranger Lennie Hayton. She would support the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Equally conscious of the black image in film was musician Duke Ellington. His most important film in the 1930s was the musical short produced by Paramount Pictures in 1934, *Symphony in Black*. The film presents black American life set to music, a symphony depicting four social settings—African Americans at work ("Laborers"), forlorn romantic love ("Triangle"), religious expression ("A Hymn of Sorrow"), and urban life ("Harlem Rhythm"). The sequence "Triangle" features black singer Billie Holiday in her first film appearance, singing of love and betrayal. The episodes are interrupted by alternating images of Ellington, as the artist at work in the symphony's composition and as the conductor in the symphony's performance before a largely white audience in formal attire.

More than in any other artistic field, the African American influence in music was the most diverse and culturally transformative. One of the most significant and long-lasting musical developments was the emergence of gospel music, its success due largely to songwriter and composer Thomas A. Dorsey, the former blues composer turned into gospel-blues composer. His most popular song, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," was one of more than four hundred that Dorsey composed. Subsequently gospel choirs and choruses were singing in churches, night clubs, jazz festivals, and concert halls. Indeed, gospel-song records became best sellers on the record charts, thanks to Dorsey and several "queens" of gospel music, including Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Clara Ward, and Mahalia Jackson.

In what was widely called "serious" (that is, classical) music, William Grant Still was the most prominent black composer. His symphonies—*Africa*, *Afro-American Symphony*, and

Symphony in G Minor: Song of a New Race—were performed by many of the major orchestras in the United States. He was commissioned to write many works, including one for the New York World's Fair in 1939. Ulysses Kay, who studied at the University of Rochester and Yale, won numerous awards, including the Prix de Rome, for such compositions as his *Concerto for Orchestra* and *Sinfonia in E: A Short Overture*. Meanwhile, R. Nathaniel Dett continued to compose works for piano and for vocal ensembles until his death in 1943.

Paul Robeson and Roland Hayes, widely acclaimed African American concert singers in the 1920s, continued to draw large audiences and generous critical praise during the 1930s. They shared the spotlight with other black singers—Edward Matthews, Aubrey Pankey, Kenneth Spencer, and William Warfield. In 1935 Marian Anderson, acclaimed by the celebrated European conductor Arturo Toscanini as one of the greatest singers in the world, returned to the United States in a veritable blaze of glory and was regarded by many as the greatest living contralto. Dorothy Maynor and Carol Brice won the praise of Serge Koussevitsky, the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, as well as thousands of music lovers. Ann Brown and Todd Duncan added to their laurels with their interpretations of the title roles in George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*.

The 1930s and 1940s witnessed the growing mass acceptance, to some extent, even the “mainstreaming” of black cultural forms. Duke Ellington had doubtless contributed to this change in Americans' musical tastes. When asked whether he played big band jazz or big band swing, Ellington always insisted that he played “Negro music.” By the early 1940s, Ellington led what music historians consider his finest band, and in these years he was expanding the range of what he broadly defined as “Negro music.” His studio recordings from these years included musical tapestries of black life such as “Take the ‘A’ Train,” Ellington's new theme song composed by the young arranger Billy Strayhorn. Ellington's musical *Jump for Joy*, which ran for three months in Los Angeles, he described as representing “an attempt to correct the race situation in the U.S.A., through a form of musical propaganda . . . a show that would take Uncle Tom out of the theatre, [and] eliminate the stereotyped image that had been exploited by Hollywood and Broadway.”

Such racially conscious intentions on the part of Ellington were reminiscent of Du Bois's claims for art as propaganda. Ellington would convey the fullest musical explication of this perspective when he premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1943 his most ambitious and controversial work: *Black, Brown, and Beige: A Tone Parallel to the History of the American Negro*.

In the 1930s and 1940s, however, a new breed of black and white musicians was sweeping the nation. The change was especially apparent in the world of big band swing—the jazz form most popular from roughly 1935 to the end of World War II. Indeed, the New Deal Era overlapped with the years known as the **The Swing Era**. Swing was a youth-oriented musical sensation—just as rock ‘n’ roll would be in the next generation. That the mainstream culture of swing was a youth culture called attention to an unprecedented historical moment—a shifting time when youth wrested the determination of musical hegemony away from adults, thus freeing musicians, both black and white, from more rigid perceptions of respectability.

The crucial role of youth as the cultural arbiters of the American soundscape (a role that is yet to be relinquished) redounded to the benefit of musicians black and white. It opened the cultural front door to the unconventionality and creative difference that defined big band musicians' ethos and lifestyles. The public images and performance styles of three popular black band leaders of the Swing Era—Cab Calloway, Count Basie, and Jimmie Lunceford,

along with black women singers Billie Holliday and Ella Fitzgerald—are instructive for envisioning the Swing Era in a variety of available forums: recordings, radio broadcasts, film, and live performances. All speak, as well, to pioneering efforts at racial integration—to the creation of the interracial kingdom of swing.

Count Basie, born William James Basie in 1904 in Red Bank, New Jersey, created a public image that he maintained throughout his long career—one of urbane and unhurried “cool.” He was clearly a sophisticated musician attentive to image. Few big band leaders were as willing to let the music swing in a relaxed, personally unmediated manner as was Basie, and this casual aesthetic undergirded the band’s recording, film, and concert performances. By 1940 the name “Count Basie” had become synonymous, according to Basie, with the band itself. Indeed Basie may well have had the first black band to affect the contemporary popular usage of “cool.” Also featured with the band were solo vocalists—jazz singer Billie Holiday in 1937 and blues singer Jimmy Rushing in the late 1930s. Count Basie toured the nation, played at prestigious venues and in Hollywood films, and is described by some scholars as more successful than Ellington at integrating his band into the white-dominated entertainment industry of the time.

Cab Calloway, born Cabell Calloway III in Rochester, New York, flaunted a decidedly “hot” but also clearly calculated image as a hipster. The exuberant, zoot-suit-wearing Calloway brought the language of “jive” to the American people, publishing his own dictionary of slang terms. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Calloway as the first published usage of the word *jitterbug* (the title of one of his songs as well as a popular dance). His song “Minnie the Moocher” was introduced to most Americans in the Hollywood film *The Big Broadcast* (1932). The movie showed Calloway in a scat performance, crying “Hi-de-hi-de hi-de hi” with his chorus bellowing the same words back to him. Especially after his radio broadcasts with the white singer Bing Crosby, Calloway became one of the most popular and wealthy musicians of the Depression years.

Fisk University graduate Jimmie Lunceford, born in 1902 in Fulton, Mississippi, brought versatility, showmanship, and musical genius to the Swing Era in a very different way. The hallmark of the Lunceford Orchestra was its two-beat rhythm, as opposed to the more common four-beat swing rhythm. Each of the musicians in his largely college-educated band was selected by Lunceford not only for image and personal character but also for versatility of musical talent. They comprised an ensemble that played instruments, sang, danced, and performed tricks. Sy Oliver (trumpet), Willie Smith (alto saxophone), Eddie Tompkins (trumpet), Trummy Young (trombone), and Joe Thomas (tenor saxophone) were also the band’s singers and dancers. In addition to playing his own drums, Jimmie Crawford commanded a complete percussion section while also performing “tricks with his sticks.” The members of the trumpet section not only played as one but also threw their instruments in the air, catching them simultaneously in order to begin to play together again with precision timing. White bands such as the Tommy Dorsey Band and the Glen Miller Band were influenced by the Lunceford showmanship.

Near the end of the 1930s several black musicians had begun to integrate large white bands. Lunceford trumpeter Sy Oliver (identified as the originator of the two-beat rhythm) left to play with Tommy Dorsey. Big band leader Fletcher Henderson, prominent in the 1920s, played his most influential musical role in the Swing Era as the arranging architect of white band leader Benny Goodman’s sound. Although Goodman was labeled by white Americans “The King of Swing,” Goodman himself credited the crucial influence of Fletcher Henderson. The Goodman-Henderson partnership was just one of the interracial musical

alliances that Goodman forged during the Swing Era. In addition to his orchestra, in 1935 he formed the integrated Goodman Trio, which included black pianist Teddy Wilson and white drummer Gene Krupa. In 1936 the trio expanded to a quartet by adding the black vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, giving its first public performance in Chicago. The Goodman quartet won tremendous applause on records and in live performance—so much so that the group was featured in the 1937 Warner Brothers film *Hooray for Hollywood*, along with the Goodman orchestra. In the later 1930s, Goodman hired black arrangers Edgar Sampson, Jimmy Mundy, and Mary Lou Williams. He also added other black members to his orchestra: electric guitar pioneer Charlie Christian in 1939 and Duke Ellington's trumpet star Cootie Williams in 1940.

Goodman and his black musicians inspired other interracial collaborations. Jimmie Lunceford's arranger Sy Oliver joined Tommy Dorsey, and classical composer William Grant Still arranged for the white jazz musician Artie Shaw. However, despite the camaraderie black musicians enjoyed with fellow white band members, racial integration brought them painful and harrowing experiences. For example black trumpeter Roy Eldridge joined the big band of white drummer Gene Krupa in 1940 and later joined the Artie Shaw orchestra. On stage and on records, Eldridge enjoyed star treatment, but offstage, when he traveled on tour, he was personally humiliated by Jim Crow policies. Similarly, jazz singer Billie Holiday joined Artie Shaw's band in 1938—an early instance of a black musician in an all-male, white orchestra. She praised him for his courage in hiring her, but Shaw could not shield Holiday from racial insult. Jim Crow reminders followed her even when the band played in New York. Performing with Shaw's band at the city's Lincoln Hotel, Holliday was told to use the service elevator. Shaw would later cite this incident to explain “why her stint with us was a bit, let's say, limited.” She left Shaw's band.

Billie Holiday (born Eleanora Fagan in 1915) helped change the image of the black female singer from rough to refined, from entertainer to artist. While acknowledging a debt to Bessie Smith and the “classic blues” singers of the 1920s, her style appeared restrained and subtle in comparison to their growling and gruff lyrical expression. A decade after the heyday of her predecessors, who wore the colorful bejeweled-and-feathered, attention-grabbing costumes of vaudeville queens, Holiday dressed in understated and elegant gowns, with a white gardenia in her hair. In the 1930s, she recorded or performed live with a number of great jazz groups—Benny Goodman, the Fletcher Henderson orchestra, Count Basie, and Artie Shaw.

Women Vocalists

While Holiday was commended for her depth and for the emotional resources that enriched her performances, especially her poignant protest of lynching in her song “Strange Fruit,” another young black woman vocalist was celebrated for the sheer joy and sparkle that she brought to song.

Not yet the interpreter of the “great American songbooks” of Cole Porter, George and Ira Gershwin, and Irving Berlin, the young Ella Fitzgerald (born in 1917 in Newport News, Virginia) as a teenager won a talent contest at Harlem's Apollo Theater in 1934. Her career catapulted after she joined the newly formed orchestra of black drummer and bandleader Chick Webb. Together Fitzgerald and Webb shared the spotlight until Webb's death in 1939. Fitzgerald brought youthful exuberance and perfect pitch to such self-penned songs as “A Tisket, A Tasket,” one of the major national song hits of 1938. She was no doubt at Harlem's Savoy in December 1938 when a battle of the bands between Benny Goodman and Chick Webb resulted in an unequivocal win for drummer Webb and his orchestra.



Opera singer Marian Anderson stands in front of a photo of her performance at the Lincoln Memorial

After the DAR barred Marian Anderson from singing in their hall in 1939 because of her race, she gave a free concert in front of the Lincoln Memorial to over 75,000 people. She is pictured here, years later, in front of a photo of that famous event.

rudely confronted with the “whites only” policy of the DAR in the nation’s capital. Eleanor Roosevelt resigned her membership in this elite organization, and New Deal leaders Harold Ickes and Oscar Chapman set in motion steps necessary to facilitate the open-air concert. Among the more than 75,000 persons in attendance were politicians, teachers, laborers, artists, civil rights activists—a massive audience of vast and diverse constituencies and coalitions forged in the New Deal Era. Few could have missed the historic importance of that spring day in 1939 or its suggestive setting before the solemn image of the “Great Emancipator.”

Black artistic expression in the 1930s and into the war years had helped to predispose Americans black and white to the civil rights movement. New Dealer Mary McLeod Bethune expressed such a sentiment on the very next day after Anderson sang. “Through the Marian Anderson protest concert,” Bethune exulted, “we made our triumphant entry into the democratic spirit of American life.” For African Americans on the eve of World War II, there would be no confusion as to the dual nature of their fight ahead.

As Goodman drummer Gene Krupa admitted of Webb’s performance, “I was never cut by a better man.” The Chick Webb Orchestra provided the accompaniment to the dance innovations of the black teenagers and young adults who frequented the Savoy. Their athletic embellishments of the basic “jitterbug” became models for the popular dances of American youth: the “Lindy Hop,” the “Susie-Q,” the “Shag,” and the “Big Apple.” These popular dances were only a few of the many black contributions to the interracial Swing Era youth culture of the 1930s and early 1940s.

In the realm of culture, as in labor and in government, the public face of race relations had begun to change. The musical event that most dramatically bore witness to the changing racial climate, however, was

Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial

not a performance of swing music, but the performance of black sacred, European classical, and American patriotic songs. So sang Marian Anderson on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday (April 9), 1939, in her most poignant rendition: “My country ’tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty, To thee we sing.” Historian Scot A. Sandage calls attention to Anderson’s revised wording of “America”: “The change [from “Of thee, I sing” to “To thee we sing”] made the national hymn subtly political, painting ‘land of liberty’ as more aspiration than description and catching both the communalism and conflict of that famous day.”

The event had occurred because of the refusal by the politically and socially conservative Daughters of the American Revolution to permit Anderson to sing in its Constitution Hall. She had given concerts in Carnegie Hall in New York in 1930, throughout Europe between 1930 and 1935, and in much of America before being