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Source: *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 13, No. 4, The Gilded Age (Summer, 1999), pp. 52-55

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Organization of American Historians

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25163311>

Accessed: 05-11-2018 19:35 UTC

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# African-American Women Workers' Protest in the New South

Images of African-American domestic workers in history and popular culture often conjure up acquiescent and docile employees content with their occupational status. Domestic workers usually worked in solitude in private households, unlike their peers who worked in factories, shops, or offices. Scholars have often assumed that this isolation inhibited the growth of their working-class consciousness and solidarity.

The story of Atlanta's washerwomen, however, defies this assumption. The women organized one of the most significant strikes in the urban South during the late nineteenth century. It is no coincidence that the laundresses washed, dried, and ironed the clothing of their patrons in their own neighborhoods, which enabled autonomy rather than direct employer supervision, and allowed them to work together. They took advantage of the networks they built and nourished in their communal work to mobilize a strike. The "Washing Amazons," as they were called by the *Atlanta Constitution*, gained the support of the larger black community and seriously inconvenienced the majority of white households in a city dependent on their labor.

## Time Frame

This lesson requires three sixty-minute sessions.

## Student Objectives

1. To enhance critical thinking skills.
2. To learn to interpret primary documents and situate them in the context of their times.
3. To learn about the lives of ordinary women and their aspirations for social and economic justice.
4. To learn about the experiences of African Americans in the South following Reconstruction.

## Background and Preparation

In July 1881, African-American washerwomen in Atlanta formal-

ized the Washing Society and launched a strike to protect their autonomy and increase their pay. The initial organizers expanded their ranks from twenty to three thousand and generated broad support among blacks by canvassing door to door in their neighborhoods. Churches provided sanctuaries for meetings and a means for disseminating information. White employers and city authorities responded with several reprisals: they arrested strikers for "disorderly conduct," threatened to levy an exorbitant tax on each member of the Washing Society, and proposed to build a competing steam laundry to minimize the women's virtual monopoly. Undaunted, the women wrote a defiant open letter to the mayor outlining their grievances and demanding respect for their labor. The letter is the only extant source in the women's own voice. The other surviving evidence is a series of reports from the city's daily newspaper, the *Atlanta Constitution*.

There is no conclusive evidence about the strike's resolution, as stories in the newspaper petered out after a month of passionate reporting. But even the *Constitution*, which was sympathetic to the opponents of the strikers, admitted that the women were effectively organized. Moreover, the strike was symbolically meaningful. The laundry workers' protest sharply contrasted with the image of complacent Southern workers depicted by the city's business and political elites as they tried to attract northern capital to the region. The women demonstrated an astute political consciousness by making private household labor a public issue in a city where whites routinely relied on black women's labor not only as laundresses, but also as cooks, maids, and child-nurses. Their action was a poignant reminder to the city that African-American labor was vital to the political economy of the New South.

This lesson would fit into United States history courses at the point where African Americans often drop out of general textbooks—in the period following Reconstruction, before legalized segregation and disfranchisement became pervasive in the South. It could be used to talk about the history and conditions of working people during the period of industrialization. As factory work became

increasingly common, some workers continued to labor in older occupations, such as domestic service. The lesson can also invite discussion on the cross-cultural experiences of women, both as workers and employers.

In preparation for the lesson, teachers should read chapters three and four in Tera W. Hunter's *To 'Joy My Freedom*. The first two chapters from Howard Rabinowitz's *Race Relations in the Urban South* will also be useful in providing a broader view of black life in this period.

Teachers should decide whether or not to make this a writing assignment. For maximum results students should write papers on the strike, individually or in groups. Writing exposes the challenges of historical interpretation that do not necessarily appear when working through the exercise orally. Writing also unmask some of the preconceptions that each student brings to the process of interpretation.

### Procedure

#### I. Day One: Understanding the Historical Context.

A. Start by having the students read relevant secondary literature, before class. (Alternatively, you can provide lectures to cover the same material.) It is important for students to have a good, basic grounding in the history of Atlanta and African-American life in the city during the 1870s and 1880s. Likewise, it is important for them to be familiar with the organization and character of domestic labor, especially laundry work. Suggestions for secondary reading appear in the Bibliography.

B. Discuss the history of Atlanta as a southern city and the lives of African Americans in the late nineteenth century.

C. Discuss the importance of secondary literature, primary documents, and the relationship between the two. To prepare students for using both kinds of sources, encourage them to think of historical interpretation as piecing a puzzle together. The primary sources will provide the most important pieces of the puzzle, though not all. They will not provide answers to all relevant questions necessary to fully understand the strike. This is true in part because some details may only appear pertinent in hindsight. Also, the sources may reflect the point of view of some parties involved but may not tell the full story from the point of view of all. The secondary sources will help to fill in the gaps by providing additional useful information, explanation, and context.

#### II. Day Two: Constructing and Interpreting the Narrative of Events.

A. Discuss what information from the secondary literature (or lectures) is most useful for understanding the primary documents. Try to solicit as much of this information from the students as possible:

1. Character and organization of domestic work;
2. Significance of community institutions among African Americans;
3. Geography of black and white neighborhoods.

B. It is helpful for students to try to work with the primary documents on their own or in groups before you discuss them as a

class. Encourage students to read the evidence more than once. Discuss the basic facts of the strike (Who? What? When? Where? How? Why?). While this may seem too straightforward, figuring out the facts on the basis of the newspaper accounts is not easy. Students must learn to pose critical questions to understand the documents.

1. What were the most important issues of the strike?
2. How was the strike organized?
3. What kind of opposition and support did the strikers face?

C. Have the class as a whole or students in small groups write an outline providing the basic narrative (or chain of events) of the strike. If students are writing papers, have them share their results with the class.

#### III. Day Three: Explaining the Meaning and Significance of the Strike.

A. Discuss the meaning and significance of the strike and what it reveals about southern history and African-American women workers. Ask students to write a thesis statement in a few sentences to defend their interpretation of the strike's meaning.

1. How was the strike resolved?
2. Do you think the strike was significant or insignificant? Explain why.
3. What evidence supports your thesis?

B. Have students compare their theses with each other. Debate and question the effectiveness of each in light of the sources.

C. Have students assess what they have learned about history and the use of primary sources. □

### Bibliography

- Hunter, Tera W. *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. Students should read chapter three: "Working-Class Culture and Everyday Life."
- Jones, Jacqueline. *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.
- Katzman, David. *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- McLeod, Jonathan W. *Workers and Workplace Dynamics in Reconstruction Era Atlanta*. Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies; UCLA, 1989.
- Rabinowitz, Howard. *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. Students should read chapter two: "Black Migrants and White Cities."

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Tera W. Hunter is an associate professor of history at Carnegie Mellon University and the author of *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (1997), which has won several prizes.

## Documents

Select Articles from the *Atlanta Constitution*, July-August 1881

21 July 1881

### **"The Washerwoman's Strike"**

The laundry ladies' efforts to control the prices for washing are still prevalent and no small amount of talk is occasioned thereby. The women have a thoroughly organized association and additions to the membership are being made each day. In the association there is a committee denominated the visiting committee, and the duties of the few is implied in the name. The visiting committee assemble at a designated place early in the morning, and after a consultation divide and spread themselves over the city. During the day the house of every colored woman who is not a member of the association is visited and a regular siege begun, and in nearly every instance an addition to the membership is the result. In this way the meetings, which are had every night, are largely attended and generally very demonstrative. The body has a regular corps of officers and the conventions are up to style. Speeches advocating their rights and exhorting the members to remain firm are numerous and frequent. To several families whose washing left home Monday morning the clothing has been returned [w]ringing wet, the woman having become a member of the association after taking the washing away. It is rumored that house help is also on the eve of a strike.

24 July 1881

### **"The New Steam Laundry"**

The washerwomen of Atlanta having 'struck' for very unreasonably high prices, a number of our most substantial citizens have quietly gone to work to make up a large cash capital, and will at an early day (as the strike is nearly all subscribed already) start an extensive Steam Laundry. The capacity of a new laundry will be equal to the wants of the whole city, and everything will be done on the latest and most approved methods. Clothes sent to the laundry in the morning will be returned to the owners in the evening of the same day. From fifty to one hundred smart Yankee girls experienced in the business, will be employed in running it and the calculation of those having the enterprise in hand, is that at the very moderate charge, say an average of twenty, to thirty cents per dozen the profits will be sufficient to give all the stock holders fair dividends and their washing besides. We are glad to chronicle this movement. It will be a great boom to housekeepers in more ways than one.

26 July 1881

### **"The Doughty Washwomen: Holding Out for an Advance in Wages"**

The Washerwomen's strike is assuming vast proportions and despite the apparent independence of the white people, is causing quite an inconvenience among our citizens.

In one instance the demand for one dollar per dozen was acceded to. Those who decline to give this price are still wanting washers. Several families who have declined to pay the price demanded, have determined to send their clothing to Marietta where they have secured laundry service. The strikers hold daily meetings and are exhorted by the leaders, who are confident that the demands will be granted. The committees still visit the women and induce them to join the strike and when a refusal is met threats of personal violence are freely indulged in to such an extent as to cause a compromise with their demands. There are some families in Atlanta who have been unable to have any washing done for more than two weeks.

Not only the washerwomen, but the cooks, house servants and nurses are asking increases. The combinations are being managed by the laundry ladies.

26 July 1881

### **"A Move in the Right Direction"**

We learn that at the next meeting of the city council, an ordinance will be offered requiring all washerwomen belonging to any 'association' or 'society' to pay a business tax or license....

29 July 1881

### **"The Wet Clothes"**

Police court was well attended yesterday morning and Recorder Glenn added \$186 to the city treasury by fines imposed.

Among other cases disposed of were those against Matilda Crawford, Sallie Bell, Carrie Jones, Dora Jones, Orphelia Turner and Sarah A. Collier. The sextette of ebony hued damsels was charged with disorderly conduct and quarreling, and in each case, except the last, a fine of five dollars was imposed, and subsequently paid. In the case of Sarah A. Collier, twenty dollars was assessed, and the money not being paid, the defendant's name was transcribed to the chain-gang book, where it will remain for forty days.

Each of these cases resulted from the washerwomen's strike. As members of the organization they have visited women who are taking no part in the strike and have threatened personal violence unless their demands were acceded to and their example followed. During their rounds they met with persons who opposed the strike and who declined to submit to their proposition to become members. This opposition caused an excessive use of abusive and threatening language and the charge of disorderly conduct and quarreling was the result.

Soon after court, a *Constitution* representative heard Captain Starnes remark, 'Well, Glenn's a good one; he put the fine on the

## Documents (cont'd)

strikers and tomorrow we will have additional subjects for his considerations.' This remark caused the reporter to ask Starnes if he knew what he was talking about. 'Of course I do,' was the reply. 'Bagby and I have been working on this matter ever since the strike began, and if anybody in town knows anything about it, I guess we do.'

'You say they organized a year ago?'

'Yes, but that organization went to pieces.' The society that now exists is about two weeks old. Next Saturday night three weeks ago twenty negro women and a few men met in the Summer Hill church and discussed the matter. The next night the negro preachers in all the churches announced a mass meeting of the washer-women for the following night at Summer Hill church. The meeting was a big one and the result was an organization. Officers were elected, committees appointed and time and places for meeting read out. Since then there has been meetings every night or two, and now there is a club or society in every ward in the city and the strikers have increased from twenty to about 3,000 in less than three weeks.'

'What do they do at these meetings?'

'Make speeches and pray. They swear they never will wash another piece for less than one dollar a dozen, but they will never get it and will soon give in. In fact, they would have caved before this but for the white man who is backing the strike.'

'Do you know that there is a white man behind these strikers, or is it a rumor?'

'I know it, and I'll tell you who it is if you want to know.'

'No, never mind his name. Tell me how you know.'

'I have heard it from several responsible persons. There is Dora Watts, who lives at Mr. Wolfe's, 144 Jones St, who swears that a white man addressed a meeting last week. She also says that he will speak to them next Monday night. This man tells them that he will see them through all right. They have fund of \$300 and feel confident of getting what they ask.'

'They are trying to prevent those who are not members from washing, are they not?'

'Yes. The committee goes to those who have no connection with the organization and try to persuade them to join. Failing in this they notify them that they must not take any more washing at less than one dollar a dozen, and then threaten them with cowhides, fire and death if they disobey. Out on Walker Street there lives a white lady, Mrs. Richardson, who has had but one washerwoman for eight years. Her name is Sarah Gardener. Her husband joined the strikers and would not let his wife take the washing. Mrs. Richardson then induced a girl she had in the house to undertake the washing but yesterday evening while she was at

work on Mrs. Richardson's place, a committee composed of Dora Shorter, Annie King and Sam Gardener came up and threatened to kill her if she didn't stop, and when the lady Mrs. Richardson, came out and ordered them away, they refused to go, and began to abuse her. I heard of it and now all three are in here, and Spyers has the key. He is fond of locking, but hates to unlock the door. I guess Recorder Glenn will catch 'em for \$20 each.'

'So they are on their muscle!'

'Well, I should say so. The men are as bad as the women. When a woman refuses to join the society, their men threaten to whip 'em, and the result is that the ranks are daily swelling. Why, last night there was a big meeting at New Hope Church, on Green's Ferry Street, and fifty additions were made to the list. They passed resolutions informing all women not members of the society to quit work or stand the consequences. I tell you, this strike is a big thing, but if Glenn will only stand to Bagby and myself we will break it up. I am going to arrest every one who threatens any woman, and I am going to try to get the chain gang full, then they will stop. Why, let me tell you, out here on Spring street is an old white woman who lives over her wash tub. The infernal scoundrels went to her house yesterday and threatened to burn the place down and kill her if she took another rag. Emma Palmer, Jane Webb and Sarah Collier, with two white women, are doing the work, but I think Sayers will get a chance.'

3 August 1881

"Letter to Mr. James English"

Mr. Jim English, Mayor of Atlanta

Atlanta Georgia, August 1 [1881]

Dear Sir:

We the members of our society, are determined to stand to our pledge and make extra charges for washing, and we have agreed, and are willing to pay \$25 or \$50 for licenses as a protection, so we can control the washing for the city. We can afford to pay these licenses, and will do it before we will be defeated, and then we will have full control of the city's washing at our own prices, as the city has control of our husbands' work at their prices. Don't forget this. We hope to hear from your council Tuesday morning. We mean business this week or no washing. Yours respectfully,

From 5 Societies, 486 Members

16 August 1881

Upon the resolution imposing a license of \$25 upon washerwomen an adverse report was made by the ordinance committee and adopted by the council.