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Introduction

Early 20th century Kansas City, Missouri, nicknamed “Tom’s Town” due to political boss Tom Pendergast’s tight control over the municipal government, had a national reputation for its booming music scene, complete disregard for Prohibition, gambling rings, sex workers, and 24/7 nightclubs. In the words of Edward Morrow of the *Omaha World-Herald*, “With the exception of such renowned centers as Singapore and Port Said, Kansas City has the greatest sin industry in the world.”¹ It garnered national attention and captured the popular imagination as a lawless thoroughfare for gangsters and a thriving center for illegal leisure activities.

Kansas City’s vice district had a highly political dimension. Pendergast’s family and allies owned the clubs, saloons, and liquor wholesalers that fueled the city’s renowned sin industry, and in turn used the profits to court electoral support in underprivileged communities and to maintain control over local government. This operation had profound effects on the city’s African American community as the Pendergast organization doled out patronage and favors in exchange for black support, while exploiting notions of black criminality to reinforce segregation and maintain the support of white voters.²

Particularly prominent during the first half of the 20th century, political machines were local party organizations that generated enough votes on behalf of its slate of candidates to consolidate political power and concentrate control over local governments in the hands of either

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a boss or a small autocratic political elite. Machine bosses doled out material favors and granted jobs to secure votes, partook in illegal activity to finance their favor systems, and sought to translate their political influence into profits, jobs, and loot for their supporters and for themselves. These political organizations arose as rapid urbanization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries put excessive strain on local governments, hindering effective municipal service delivery. Early twentieth century political bosses built loyal followings among white immigrant groups and working class African Americans by providing supporters with basic goods and services in the absence of effective municipal operations. These favors could include anything from buying groceries for needy families to helping individuals find medical care. Nearly every American city was controlled by a political machine at some point between the Civil War and the Great Depression. Kansas City was no exception. Between the 1880s and 1939, the Pendergast political machine consolidated power and ultimately dominated Kansas City politics through a combination of vote buying, patronage, organized crime, and corruption. Viewed by its contemporaries as second in dominance only to New York’s storied Tammany Hall, with a leader considered a “political monarch” and “absolute dictator of the local government,” the Pendergast organization influenced every aspect of political life in early 20th century Kansas City.³

By 1926, the organization’s leadership dominated city and county governments, giving the machine control over job appointments, law enforcement, government contracts, public services, and local policy-making. When paired with profits from Kansas City’s booming sin industry and Pendergast-owned companies’ monopoly on government contracts, the Pendergast coalition had the necessary resources to garner political loyalty by providing the city’s poor with

much needed material support and employment opportunities in return for their vote come
election time. The machine effectively bridged the gap between what the municipality provided
its constituents and what working class individuals expected to receive from their political
leaders. Pendergast oversaw a complex network of precinct captains and faction leaders of all
races, religions, and ethnicities who were responsible for identifying and meeting their
neighbors’ needs with the hope of earning their vote. Both members of the organization and
recipients viewed these exchanges first and foremost as neighborly favors. However, the
machine's leadership understood that such personal assistance could be easily translated to
electoral support. After all, “coal in winter, food, clothing, and medical attention were all
provided by the organization to whoever was in need at no charge, and those benefiting from
such help would remember fondly, the system involved no paperwork, few delays, no stigma of
the dole.”

Kansas City had an atypical demographic profile with an abnormally large middle class
and a particularly small immigrant population. This meant that the Pendergast organization
could not rely entirely on working class and foreign-born voters as was the practice of political
machines elsewhere during the early 20th century. Rather the Pendergast coalition’s claim to
power rested on its ability to consolidate support from immigrants, blacks, and whites from
across the socioeconomic spectrum. Incompatible group interests complicated the machine’s
efforts to attract a diverse voter base, a phenomenon that had an adverse impact on city’s African
American working class. Thus, although many working class blacks benefited from the

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4 David McCullough, *Truman*, (Simon & Schuster, 1993), 158.
6 Ibid.
machine’s ideological and material incentives, the organization’s appeals to white supremacy to appease middle class white voters proved detrimental. It is in this context that my thesis explores the African American community’s efforts to navigate the Pendergast organization’s local political dominance at its peak between 1926 and 1939.

Scholars from numerous fields have long sought to understand the relationship between African American communities and political machines, leading to the emergence of three major schools of thought. The first perspective, heavily rooted in economics, argues that political machines were tools for the singular purpose of winning elections to extract wealth from patronage appointments, government contracts, and permissive law enforcement. In other words, political machines were “business organization[s] …interested only in making and distributing income…to those who run it and work for [them].”\(^7\) Among the poorest voters, blacks engaged in face-to-face exchange with the machine’s field agents who “sold” various selective incentives, which the poor “purchased” with their ballots.\(^8\) This model applies the Kansas City case because, like other machine bosses, Pendergast had a team of loyalists who distributed individualized assistance to needy African American families hoping for their political support. However, the economic approach proves insufficient as the favor system was only one of many factors that influenced voting decisions.

Sociologists challenge the economic argument, instead contending that a machine’s main task was not maximizing profits but rather building coalitions. Individuals voted instead to acquire representation for a larger group interest along racial, ethnic, religious, geographic, or


\(^8\) Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit*, 4.
ideological lines. Machine bosses therefore sought to build coalitions both among individuals within their organizational structures and between voting blocs.\textsuperscript{9} Working class African Americans in Kansas City voted based on a larger group interest and shifted their support increasingly from the Republican to Democratic parties between 1926 and 1939. Similarly, middle class Protestant whites formed a voting bloc based on a shared racist and segregationist ideology.

Political scientists look beyond economic incentives and voting blocs by emphasizing that political elites had a self-interest distinct from that of the machine. Individuals within a machine’s elite had an interest in acquiring power by enhancing their position within the organizational hierarchy and, by extension, the machine’s decision-making apparatus. Because individuals’ pursuit of these goals may not have been in line with organizational interests, machines did not always act rationally and could not be seen as a monolithic entity. Part of Pendergast’s genius was his ability to manage ambition within the organizational structure by cutting deals with and absorbing rival factions. Ultimately, the Pendergast machine built and maintained its economic incentive structure and diverse coalition by satisfying and managing self-interested faction leaders and the communities that they represented.

Pendergast successfully built a winning alliance because he understood the need to combine coalition-building with economic incentives while accommodating key group interests to maximize personal power and benefits. A diverse set of groups that included white immigrants, working class blacks, and socioeconomically diverse native-born whites, elected to take part in his coalition on terms that varied between groups and individuals. The coalition’s leadership faced a challenge in maintaining such a diverse voting bloc but did so successfully by

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 8.
accurately evaluating and balancing each group’s needs and wants. In addition to ideological alignment, working class individuals, white and black, wanted food, clothing, coal, healthcare, and job opportunities to help make ends meet; middle class, Protestant, whites sought to keep the sin industry out of their neighborhoods and to maintain racial segregation; and upper-middle class individuals of all races wanted machine support for their business interests and their share of the patronage pie.

Although scholars have generated large bodies of literature on African American politics, the Pendergast machine, Kansas City’s vice industry and its political history more broadly, few works directly address the relationship between the organization and African Americans. The seminal works on the Pendergast machine, William M. Redding’s Tom’s Town, and Lawrence Larsen and Nancy Hulston’s Pendergast! are no exception. They discuss the machine’s organizational, historic, criminal, and political aspects but do not directly address the African American community’s interactions with the machine or role within in their analysis. Nonetheless, these pieces clearly delineate the organization’s inner workings, strategies, and key characters. In doing so, they provide a context through which to consider its impact on the African American community and to understand how African American leaders and voters contributed to its success.

Over the past fifteen years, local historians have begun to expand the literature on Kansas City’s African American community beyond key cultural contributions such as jazz and Negro Leagues Baseball to consider the community’s greater political and social position. Charles E. Coulter’s 2006 work, Take Up the Black Man’s Burden provides a historical survey of blacks in Kansas City, describing impactful leaders and institutions. Naturally, a book of this scope veers into politics as it discusses discrimination and prominent political activists. However, like the
literature on the Pendergast machine, it fails to fully explore the relationship between the Democratic political leadership and the African American community.

More significantly however, Sherry Lee Schirmer’s *A City Divided* and *Landscape of Denial* provide geographically-grounded analyses of race-relations in Kansas City. Although her work does not revolve specifically around the Pendergast machine, its presence is felt as she investigates the relationship between race, governance, and policing. She argues that Kansas City had a “moral geography” that deemed vice inappropriate for white neighborhoods yet admissible in African American districts due to a believed gap in inherent morality and piety between the two populations. My argument builds upon Schirmer’s understanding of Kansas City race relations by arguing that the Pendergast coalition created and upheld moral geographies to cater to white voters’ desires for “wholesome” and homogenous neighborhoods.

Lastly, Larsen’s article, “The Pendergast Machine and the African-American Vote,” the only piece that directly explores the relationship between the Pendergast political organization and the city’s African American community, focuses primarily on voting patterns, only briefly touching on other aspects of the relationship such as housing segregation, the 18th and Vine vice district, vote buying, and white supremacy. My thesis builds on this existing literature by examining the nature of the relationship more broadly and its effects on both the African American community and white understandings of black criminality.

This thesis uses two African American periodical sources from Kansas City in the 1920’s and 1930’s, with minor support from the city’s dominant white publications, to reconstruct the era’s characters, happenings, and debates. *The Call* was the city’s primary African American newspaper during the early 20th century. The paper’s editor Chester Arthur Franklin railed

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10 *The Call* was also called *The Kansas City Call* and *Kansas City The Call* at various points during the 1920s and 1930s. Here it will be referred to as *The Call* for the sake of clarity and consistency.
against the Pendergast machine and published content strongly favoring the Republican Party. Another paper, *The Kansas City American* was created by Felix Payne, a prominent black club-owner and Pendergast ally, who positioned the publication as a direct challenge to C. A. Franklin’s views and influence. Together, these sources reveal the era’s racial dynamics, political context, controversies, and dominant civic conversations.

Middle class white Protestant civil society organizations often published regular newsletters or bulletins with commentary on local news and information about past and future events. The *Citizens' League Bulletin*, one such publication, provides insight into how whites discussed African Americans, vice, and black culture, outside of a strict newspaper setting. The publication contained a wealth of articles condemning the Pendergast machine and commenting on urban political reform schemes elsewhere in the country that shed light on how middle class white Protestant whites reacted to various ploys to win their support. Moreover, its discussion of race contributes heavily to my understanding of the machine's strategy in wooing Protestant, middle class, white voters.

Manuscript collections, oral histories, and organizational records supplement newspaper sources to create a multidimensional understanding of how the machine and the African American community interacted. Articles and political cartoons about the machine in various magazines and bulletins provide insight into how people viewed and engaged with the Pendergast organization. Additionally, political brochures and advertisements illustrated the ways in which both Pendergast and his enemies appealed to working class African American voters more broadly. Lastly, a small collection of letters, financial records, and legal documents provide insight into individuals’ personal lives, business practices, and private convictions.
My paper is divided into four chapters, each exploring a different aspect of African American engagement with the machine’s dominant presence in local politics. It evaluates both the ways in which working class blacks used the organization to meet their ideological, material, and personal needs, and the ways in which machine manipulated white supremacist beliefs to its own benefit at the expense of African Americans. The first chapter traces the development of Kansas City’s African American community and political context to reveal a fragile opening for Democratic appeals to working class blacks during the 1920s. Political schisms at the national, state, and local levels resulted in Republican indifference to changing conditions for working class blacks and a growing space for those same disenfranchised voters in urban Democratic coalitions.

The second chapter considers the ways in which the African American working class fulfilled their desire for basic goods, jobs, and political engagement through day-to-day interaction with the machine. It explains the symbiotic relationship between the organization and the black working class in which the machine relied on African American voters to maintain power and working class blacks benefited from the patronage, favors, and political access that the organization provided. Chapter Two also explains the results of efforts to foster and expand this relationship, contending that African American voters did in fact shift away from the GOP towards the Democratic Party.

In the third chapter, I address the ways in which the Pendergast coalition exploited existing racial tensions and white conceptions of black vice and criminality to maintain political power by appeasing white voters. The organization ensured the loyalty of middle class Protestant whites by affirming their desire for segregated, “pious,” and “wholesome” neighborhoods. The governing coalition used the geographic bounds of the black eastside as a moral and physical
dumping ground and implicitly supported efforts to restrict black residential expansion to satisfy the desires of middle class whites.

Lastly, the fourth chapter argues that anti-vice efforts in both the white and African American communities were framed through constructs of black criminality. The chapter considers the mutually constitutive nature of white and middle class black crime-related prejudices towards the African American working class. By reinforcing concepts of black criminality in the white imagination and by exacerbating schisms associated with respectability politics within the African American community, the machine’s impact proved far greater and long-lasting than simple patronage and favors would suggest. Rather, the Pendergast organization played an important role in advancing and perpetuating detrimental constructs of black male criminality.

Together, these chapters illustrate that the Pendergast organization courted working class African American votes through a carefully orchestrated favor system and ideological appeals while offering middle class Protestant whites “protection” from vice and black criminality in exchange for their support. In the short term this scheme alleviated many working class African Americans’ material desperation, providing with them with some of the goods and services that they expected to receive from their politicians. However, the approach reinforced white supremacy and strengthened constructs of black criminality, both devastating results with which the city continues to grapple today.
Chapter 1: Geographic and Political Development of Black Kansas City

The roots of Kansas City’s robust African American community are traceable to the 166 slaves and 24 free blacks living in the city during the Civil War Era.\(^1\) After the war, the city’s black population grew exponentially as the Exodus of 1879 led many blacks fleeing Southern intolerance to the area. These migrants, known as “Exodusters,” in reference to the biblical exodus from Egypt, predated the Great Migration. Exodusters set out for Kansas, a state that had accrued legendary status as the location of John Brown’s famous abolitionist exploits and where the Homestead Act gave poor former slaves the promise of their own land. However, an estimated one-third of the fifteen to twenty thousand migrants who set out for Kansas failed to complete the grueling trip, landing in Kansas City without the necessary funds to continue westward.\(^2\) Struggling to cope with the influx of migrants and eager to push the Exodusters out, the mayors of both Kansas City, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri raised funds to help stranded migrants complete their journey. Many, however, chose to make the Kansas City area home.

Additional black migrants arrived throughout the second half of the 19\(^{th}\) century from the Deep South independent of the Exoduster movement and from rural Missouri. Kansas City’s African American population grew from less than two hundred in the early 1860s to more than eight thousand in 1880, 17,567 by 1900, and a community 30,719 strong by 1920, making it a regional and national hub for African American life and culture.\(^3\)


\(^2\) Ibid.


Table 1: Population of Kansas City Missouri, 1870-1920

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Census Count</th>
<th>% Total</th>
<th>% Change</th>
<th>Census Count</th>
<th>% Total</th>
<th>% Change</th>
<th>Census Count</th>
<th>% Total</th>
<th>%Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>32,260</td>
<td>28,484</td>
<td>88</td>
<td></td>
<td>7,679</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td>3,764</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>55,785</td>
<td>46,484</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>+63</td>
<td>9,301</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>+21</td>
<td>8,143</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>+116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>132,716</td>
<td>119,061</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>+156</td>
<td>20,858</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>+124</td>
<td>13,700</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>163,752</td>
<td>146,090</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>+23</td>
<td>18,410</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>-12</td>
<td>17,567</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>+28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>248,381</td>
<td>224,677</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>+54</td>
<td>23,327</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>+27</td>
<td>23,566</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>324,410</td>
<td>293,517</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>+31</td>
<td>27,320</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+17</td>
<td>30,719</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Those who migrated to Kansas City wanted what anyone would: security, safety, a livelihood, and the right to political participation, all aspects of life that they were denied in the Deep South. Their political choices reflected those desires. From Reconstruction to the beginning of the Pendergast era, black voters were almost ubiquitous with the Republican Party. Historians dispute the rationale behind this strong party loyalty. As historian Nell Irvin Painter asserts, most African Americans voted Republican during the postbellum period because the GOP best represented their interests as both working class individuals and as people of color. In contrast, the Democratic Party during the Reconstruction period represented the interests of the planter class and attracted working class white support by appealing to negrophobic beliefs and sentiments. This argument contrasts with Steven Hahn’s claims that many African Americans voted Republican out of a staunch refusal to “acquiesce with a party who refuse[d] to recognize their right to participate in public affairs.” Many black Republicans regarded “colored conservatives” as racial traitors, leading to frequent and violent reprisals against African American Democrats. Although in conflict with one another, Painter and Hahn together

6 Ibid.
articulate the ways in which postbellum African American politics and black loyalty to the Republican Party reflected efforts by blacks of all socioeconomic strata to meet their needs through politics. Collectively the two scholars indicate that the Republican Party offered African Americans political participation and policies favorable to the working class. Black migrants to Kansas City therefore brought with them a penchant for Republican politics inspired not by blind Civil War-era loyalties, but rather by the party’s preferable stances on the issues that mattered most to African American voters during the postbellum period.

Initially, blacks were dispersed throughout the city’s neighborhoods, constituting at least ten percent of the population in each ward. During the 1880s however, high concentrations of black residents emerged in neighborhoods with affordable housing. Historian Clifford Naismith’s study of the city’s urban history found that, like other American cities, racially-defined neighborhoods did not emerge in Kansas City until the early 20th century because, in the absence of mass transit and zoning laws, blacks determined where to live based primarily on socioeconomic and income-level indicators.8 Because working class families, regardless of race, lived close to their places of employment, neighborhoods with high concentrations of African American residents were not the black ghettos that emerged in the 20th century and continue today, but racially and ethnically diverse slums whose residents shared socioeconomic challenges more so than racial, ethnic, or religious identities.9

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9 Schirmer, A City Divided, 32.
The four most prominent of these neighborhoods, which together constituted the “black eastside” were Hell’s Half Acre, Church Hill, Belvidere Hollow, and Lincoln-Coles (frequently referred to as the Vine Street Corridor). One of the first black enclaves to emerge, Hell’s Half Acre, a subsection of the West Bottoms and of the First Ward, exemplified the period’s diverse slums. A slum deserving of its name, Hell’s Half Acre emerged in 1860 to house black workers tasked with building the Hannibal Bridge. The area expanded as Exodusters settled there after leaving the city’s migrant refugee camps, and it diversified as white immigrants and some poor native-born whites moved into the area. Characterized by its proximity to the city’s growing industrial district, high transiency rate, and reputation as a hotbed for crime, the area featured shack-style housing and lacked basic sanitation.\(^{10}\) Naismith concluded that the area likely served as an entry and transitory point for black migrants looking to settle in Kansas City.\(^{11}\) Although initially established by black workers, the area took on a distinctly heterogeneous profile with residents sharing comparable income-levels and employment as unskilled laborers more so than any racial, religious, or ethnic unifier. In 1900, blacks comprised one third of the neighborhood’s population and a diverse mix of German immigrants, Irish immigrants, and native-born whites made up the

\(^{10}\) Schirmer, A City Divided, 34-35.

other two-thirds.\textsuperscript{12} Although the area never transformed into the African American community’s cultural or commercial center, it served a key purpose in the development of race relations in Kansas City by creating a precedent for interaction between the Irish, German, and African American communities.

By the late 1910s, new racially discriminatory real estate practices limited the areas to which blacks could move, resulting in increasingly racially-homogenous neighborhoods. Established in 1908, the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB), the first national real estate union, codified the industry’s professional standards, training ideology, licensing procedures, etc. The organization disseminated the belief that the presence of black neighborhood residents lowered property values and investment security. Racially discriminatory real estate practices were not only accepted but were incorporated into NAREB’s code of ethics by 1924. The policy read that “a Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood…members of any race or nationality… whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood.”\textsuperscript{13} This policy likely also sought to address “blockbusting,” a practice in which “brokers intentionally stoked fears of racial integration and declining property values in order to push white homeowners to sell at a loss. Real-estate agents were profiting coming and going: They were cheating whites, who were selling their homes at below-market rates, and they were cheating blacks, who were buying these homes at above-market rates.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 68.

\textsuperscript{13} Gotham, \textit{Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development}, 35.

Real estate agents acted on these anti-blockbusting standards and ensured that other agents did the same by encouraging the creation of restrictive covenants, contractually binding agreements between property owners and neighborhood associations that prohibited home and property sales to black families regardless of social class.\textsuperscript{15} Although peer cities had employed racial zoning policies as a means of enforcing housing segregation, Kansas City did not introduce its first zoning laws until 1923, five years after racial zoning was struck down by the Supreme Court in \textit{Buchanan vs. Warley}.\textsuperscript{16} These housing covenants served the same purpose as zoning however, not only limiting the ability of blacks to move into existing neighborhoods, but also governing new developer-built housing.

Although African American housing demand grew due to migration and population growth during the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the real estate industry actively limited black access to both existing housing and new developments, resulting in overcrowding, increasingly racially homogenous neighborhoods, and exploitative rent pricing in the few areas where blacks could live. The African American share of the residential population remained relatively constant in Hell’s Half Acre and numerous other slum areas. However, the Lincoln-Coles neighborhood along the Vine Street Corridor emerged as the commercial, cultural, and residential center of the black community because the black population growth was heavily concentrated in that area.\textsuperscript{17} Whereas the neighborhood was 25\% black with ethnic and religious diversity among its white majority in 1900, its population was 75\% black by 1920.\textsuperscript{18} As working class blacks moved into

\textsuperscript{15} Gotham, \textit{Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development}, 38-48.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
the neighborhood in greater numbers, most of the white residents, unrestrained by racially-biased housing policies, moved elsewhere.

African Americans first moved to the Vine Street Corridor in the 1890s. Housing production had outpaced the city’s population growth during the previous decade, leaving developers with a surplus of vacant housing units. They eagerly sold the units at reasonable prices to anyone willing to buy them, regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity.\textsuperscript{19} The black middle class took advantage of the availability of high quality housing in the newly developed Lincoln-Coles neighborhood to move out of the existing enclaves into residences more reflective of their socioeconomic status.\textsuperscript{20}

By the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the Lincoln-Coles district developed as the first neighborhood with a black majority. A combination of industrial expansion, neighborhood-level housing discrimination, rising racial tensions, and new communal institutions in the Vine Street corridor led to the Lincoln-Coles district’s emergence as the center for African American residential and communal life. The physical expansion of industrial operations in the West Bottoms and Hell’s Half Acre displaced many of the area’s black residents.\textsuperscript{21} Unfortunately, however, the expulsion of African American families from the West Bottoms coincided with the rise of codified discriminatory real estate practices which in effect limited those families to heavily black neighborhoods in their relocation efforts. Restricted to areas with existing black residents, many settled alongside the African American middle class in Lincoln-Coles.

Where real estate restrictions failed to dissuade African Americans from buying homes on previously all-white blocks, neighborhood residents reinforced the separationist order through

\textsuperscript{19} Schirmer, \textit{A City Divided}, 39.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 40.
violence. Frequent and credible bomb threats against black families who moved onto all-white streets deterred most but not all African Americans from doing so. William Raspberry, a black packinghouse worker, recalled the danger of living on the periphery of a black neighborhood, explaining that “When we first moved up there, we heard a noise outside, I had a shotgun and he had a pistol. We’d get up and be ready for whatever happened. They set a small fire outside one of the houses, but that was the only thing to happen.” 22 Such violent threats and frequent bombings paired with the obstacles to obtaining a home outside of the black eastside proved a sufficient deterrent to force blacks to move into the Vine Street Corridor, despite evident overcrowding, poor municipal services, and unhealthy living conditions.

African American newspapers were quick to condemn and contest both NAREB’s policies and violent threats from neighborhood residents. In an attempt to disprove the myth that blacks lowered land values, The Call investigated six pieces of property purchased by blacks from whites and discovered, unsurprisingly, that the property values increased over an eight-year period. 23 In a searing editorial on the subject, C. A. Franklin articulated the racism at the root of NAREB’s policy, writing “Negroes do not depreciate property values. Not even the dollar, the great American god, can give absolution to the consciences of those who deny us houses fit for human habitation.” 24 Franklin took the lead in articulating both black opposition to discriminatory housing policies and the relationship between ghettoization and health problems. Overcrowded African American neighborhoods were rife with tuberculosis, with a death rate

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24 Ibid.
five times that of whites.\textsuperscript{25} He articulated the effects of this phenomenon by lamenting the “never ending funeral ceremonies” as the “the price we pay for living in congested and unknown surroundings,” drawing a direct association between black deaths and overcrowding while condemning the “heartless, un-Christian… determination to keep the sacred area of the elect, free of Negroes.”\textsuperscript{26}

Intolerance and segregation took many forms in Kansas City. While residential discrimination limited black access to housing and fostered poor living conditions, employment discrimination kept working class blacks economically subservient to their white counterparts and erected barriers to socioeconomic advancement. Unions frequently denied blacks membership even though African Americans typically held the most perilous, poorly compensated, and exploited positions in the city’s mills, packinghouses, plants, and stockyards. A 1930 study on the industrial status of black workers by the Urban League found that discriminatory unionization practices constituted one of the largest barriers to African American employment and professional mobility and that one-third of African Americans were unemployed as a result.\textsuperscript{27}

Those companies that did employ blacks, permitted African Americans to fill only the firm’s least desirable positions. Thus, apart from self-made businessmen, black employment was limited to unskilled labor and domestic work.\textsuperscript{28} An estimated one in eight African American males in the labor force worked in the city’s packinghouses and stockyards. Although one-third

\begin{footnotes}
\item[26] C. A. Franklin, “Asleep? Or Just Lazy?,” \textit{The Call}, June 11, 1926
\item[27] Charles E. Coulter, \textit{Take up the Black Man’s Burden: Kansas City’s African American Communities, 1865-1939} (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 56.
\end{footnotes}
of meatpackers were black, opportunities for black employment in packinghouses was limited to the most strenuous, gory, dangerous and degrading part of the process, the killing floor. Although the era’s gendered division of labor discouraged female participation in industrial labor, meatpacking plants frequently employed African American women in all aspects of operations except for butchering and inspection. Those tedious and bloody jobs that did not require great speed or physical strength and that would have been unthinkable for native-born white women, such as bone cleaning or separating the animal’s organs, often fell to black women. 29

Table 2: Top Five Occupations of African American Women Workers in Kansas City, 1920

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Servants</td>
<td>2,855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundresses</td>
<td>1,569</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laundry Operatives</td>
<td>509</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boardinghouse keepers</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housekeepers</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Coulter, Take Up the Black Man’s Burden, 81.

In addition to the packinghouses, many black men found employment as railroad porters, as janitors, in the stockyards, or in the city’s steel mills while eighty-eight percent of black women worked in the service industry, primarily as domestic workers or by taking in laundry. 30 Black families frequently sent their children to work in the same, often perilous, conditions in their early teens to make ends meet. 31 The prevalence of child labor served as both an illustration

29 Coulter, Take Up the Black Man’s Burden, 67.
30 Ibid., 79.
31 Ibid.
of widespread poverty and as a contributing factor to the lack of formal education and resulting poverty that plagued the African American working class.\textsuperscript{32}

While Kansas City’s working class African Americans struggled to find stability and upward mobility in the face of severe housing and employment discrimination, the Republican Party largely turned a blind eye to their plight. A schism emerged within the Republican Party that threatened black loyalty to the GOP. The Lilywhite movement emerged during Reconstruction as white and black factions within the Republican Party fought for control over the party’s direction and positions of power. Many white GOP leaders viewed growing black influence and control within the party during Reconstruction as a hindrance to the Republican Party’s expansion and long-term viability in the South. As such, they successfully campaigned for the removal of black party leaders from their positions.\textsuperscript{33} They believed that, as Lilywhite advocate Colonel R. B. Creager insisted, "If the Republican Party is to amount to anything in the South, it must be led by white men."\textsuperscript{34} Although the Republican Party continued to pay lip service to African American causes, the movement ultimately left black Republicans feeling isolated from the GOP and culminated in a widespread defection to Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal Coalition in 1933. The Lilywhite movement’s prominence stood in direct contrast to the party’s historic commitment to abolition, opposition to Jim Crow legislation, and advocacy for the extension of rights to people of color. In some northern cities, including Kansas City, Lilywhitism provided the primary outlet and political organ for racism, leading local Republican

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 83.

\textsuperscript{33} “Negro being Pushed out of GOP says Kelly Miller," \textit{The Call}, June 29, 1928.

\textsuperscript{34} Colonel R.B. Creager Speech delivered in February 1928 in New Orleans, quoted in "Lily-Whitism now Official Republicanism," \textit{The Call}, June 15, 1928.
parties to align with the Klu Klux Klan.\textsuperscript{35} Nationally, this intolerance penetrated the GOP as black leaders proved unable to secure a plank for enforcement of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments in the party's 1928 platform and were instead forced to settle for a small and weakly worded official opposition to lynching.\textsuperscript{36} The Lilywhite issue was most prominent during the election of Herbert Hoover in 1928, the first presidential election after the Pendergast coalition consolidated its control over local politics and began courting black votes in earnest.

Historians have long described the Democratic Party of the 1920s as one of cultural collision between the party’s rural, urban, and Southern wings. This ethnocultural explanation of the party’s actions understands the Democratic Party as an uneasy alliance of “immigrants and Klansmen, Catholics and Protestant fundamentalists, rednecks and shanty Irish, bosses and antibosses, wets and dries.”\textsuperscript{37} Nationally, the Democratic Party of the 1920s is best understood as a coalition between white Southerners who opposed the GOP due to its relative racial tolerance and advocacy for Reconstruction, and urban Irish-run machines. Previously, the Democratic Party had defined itself largely in opposition to Reconstruction and racial progress. However, the rise of urban Democratic machines and the incorporation of Irish immigrants into the party produced a coalition defined by contrasting identities rather than a cogent platform, reducing anti-blackness’s centrality in many circles.

Although no Democratic faction could claim a progressive attitude towards civil rights and racial advancement, urban and Southern Democrats differed considerably in their attitudes


\textsuperscript{36} “Negro being Pushed out of GOP says Kelly Miller,” \textit{The Call}, June 29, 1928.

towards African Americans. For the most part Southern Democrats continued to cling to the party’s anti-black history. Democratic Party scholar, Douglas B. Craig suggests that it was Southern Democrats’ extreme commitment to white supremacy that held the party together during this period. He highlights the election of 1928 where most anti-Catholic Southern Democrats put those identities aside by voting for Al Smith, the first Catholic Presidential nominee from a major party, over Herbert Hoover because, in the words of Mississippi governor Theodore Bilbo, no one “can vote for Hoover after his action in making white women work with negroes, using the same basins, towels and temporary housing” in reference to the desegregation of Washington DC office workers. Some Southern Klansmen went so far as to endorse Hoover over Smith in notable break with tradition, citing Smith’s Catholicism, his association with alcohol, and his support for Tammany Hall’s African American division as Smith’s disqualifying characteristics.

In contrast, numerous urban machine bosses actively sought to include working class African Americans in their electoral coalitions. For many people of color, the Democratic Party’s uneasy coalition and inconsistent attitudes towards racial progress and political participation did not meet their basic desire for the right to take part in politics. For others, however, the incorporation of African Americans in urban Democratic politics constituted a recognition of their “right to participate in public affairs,” and thus allowed them to evaluate the party’s ability to meet their needs somewhat independently of racial questions.

No place were these ideological and political contradictions more prominent than in Missouri, a state with urban areas plagued by Irish machine politics, yet a former slave state with

38 Craig, After Wilson, 169.
40 Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 226.
rural areas sympathetic to a racist Southern understanding of the Democratic Party. Missouri historian Franklin D. Mitchell, asserts that politically, Missouri during the 1920s can be considered a microcosm of America as a whole writing that “The cotton farmers of the Southeast shared the economic and social outlook of the Deep South, the grain and livestock farmers of the north possessed the attitudes of the Midwest’s corn-hog farm belt; the urban areas of St. Louis and Kansas City were similar to the nation’s eastern industrial complexes.”

Missouri shared political and historical characteristics with both the North and the South and thus had ideological schisms within both parties that mirrored those at the national level. Both Kansas City and St. Louis had both strong Irish political machines that reflected those in northern urban areas and more traditional black Republicans. However, the rural areas were rife with Lilywhite Republicans and Southern Democrats. In Kansas City, Irish political bosses largely characterized and dictated the Democratic establishment's direction, frequently pitting the city’s elected officials against rural Democrats at the state level. Outside of the African American community, the city’s Republicans represented the party’s Lilywhite faction, putting the city’s black Republicans at odds with the local party establishment.

Republican negligence towards the needs of working class blacks paired with emerging schisms within both major parties complicated working class African Americans’ political loyalties and paved the way for shifting voting coalitions both locally and nationally. Although the black middle and upper classes in Kansas City largely continued to vote for the Republican Party, the working class, those most hurt by Republican insensitivity to their needs and to racial discrimination, sought political alternatives during the 1920s and 1930s. Working class African

42 “Neither Boss Nor Anti-Boss,” *The Call*, January 21, 1922.
American support for the Republican Party had been largely predicated on the GOP’s racially and economically favorable policies. The Republican Party’s failure to meet working class blacks’ basic political expectations therefore brought the Republican stronghold over Kansas City’s African American vote into question.

Growing Lilywhite elements within the Republican Party combined with Irish control over the city’s primary Democratic factions created an environment in which a black working class voting shift from staunch Republicanism to the Democratic Party was ideologically feasible and desirable. Although the Pendergast machine was, above all, a mechanism for acquiring votes, and by extension power and money, it maintained clear views on numerous issues, albeit those directly associated with the organization’s success. Its organization's to both the Klu Klux Klan and to Prohibition were amongst the most important of these stances.43

The black working class and the Democratic Irish political establishment had a shared interest in opposing the Klu Klux Klan and in limiting its influence at both the state and local levels. In addition to its signature racism, the Klan held deeply anti-Catholic and xenophobic beliefs, creating a division between Southern Democrats and the party’s new heavily Irish and immigrant oriented wing. Thus, the xenophobic and anti-Catholic rhetoric espoused by the KKK directly hurt the interests of both the Pendergast coalition’s leaders and of the African American working class. Occasional Klan support for and alliances with local Republican leaders compounded black unease with the group's role in Kansas City politics while drawing strong criticism from African American leadership of all socioeconomic strata. The issue therefore proved central to both the GOP's alienation of working class blacks and to the Pendergast machine's ideological attraction.

Moreover, both the machine and many working class African Americans opposed Prohibition. Given the lack of available opportunities for working class blacks, many depended on vice industries for employment. African Americans frequently filled the entertainment and service positions in night clubs and gambling joints, businesses that met employment needs in contrast to widespread discrimination in other sectors. The black working class therefore opposed Prohibition due primarily to alcohol’s centrality to the job market rather than its impact on leisure activities. Unlike unease over the KKK's role in politics, the Prohibition issue divided the African American community along class lines, with working class individuals, those most in need of the employment that the vice industry provided, opposed Prohibition, and with the middle class overwhelmingly in favor of temperance.

Kansas City’s warring African American publications, pro-Pendergast The Kansas City American and the Republican-leaning The Call brought these intra-party conflicts into the homes and collective conscience of the African American community with the intention of swaying and mobilizing black voters and discrediting the opposing party’s claims. The Kansas City American, the pro-Pendergast publication, went to great lengths to distinguish Irish machine Democrats from rural Southern Democrats at both the local and national levels. It actively promoted Al Smith’s candidacy over eventual president Herbert Hoover arguing that as a representative of New York City’s Tammany Hall machine, Smith had advocated for African Americans through egalitarian housing legislation, patronage for people of color, government services for his black constituents, and a willingness to press for a racially unbiased criminal justice system.

45 Ibid., 76.
46 “Smith or Hoover?” Kansas City American, September 27, 1928.
*Kansas City American* painted Tom Pendergast and the Democratic Party as a whole as racially progressive using headlines such as “Klan Fights Smith Lack of Prejudice.” This effort also sought to present Pendergast as a Tammany Hall-style Democrat rather than a racist Southern Democrat.

Moreover, *The Kansas City American* used the growth of the Lilywhite movement to lure black Republicans to the Democratic cause with statements such as “With [Hoover’s] bid for the Lilywhite vote of the South, there seems to be nothing else for the colored brother to do but to pack his clothes and go.” Meanwhile, this machine organ went to great lengths to highlight black Democrats and the party’s supposed attempts to close the gap with Republicans on civil rights issues. Rather than shying away from the widely accepted belief that “the democrats were the slaveholders and the republicans the abolitionists” and that African Americans should vote Republican because “all democrats are ‘nigger haters’” they regularly confronted it head on, accusing Republicans of taking black loyalty for granted and ignoring black interests in “party deliberations.” The newspaper branded black Democrats as “[awakened] to the state of affairs” while calling support for Republican candidates “a demoralization of Negro principles and self-respect.” This argument came at the perfect historical moment as Republicans themselves began to condemn the GOP establishment’s growing capitulation to the racists in their ranks, reinforcing Democratic critiques. By asserting a narrative in which the GOP exploited black loyalties while offering little to nothing in return, *The Kansas City American* confirmed many working-class blacks' unease with the Republican Party and in doing so, wooed them into the Democratic column.

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Similarly, Republican-leaning, *The Call*, repeatedly criticized the Lilywhite elements within the Republican Party, arguing that such individuals did not represent the party’s true platform or ideology and condemning the movement’s penetration into the Republican establishment at the national and local levels. C. A. Franklin, *The Call*’s editor wrote a series of editorials that condemned the Missouri Republican Party’s failure to fight for civil rights, challenged the Republican governor “to point out [how his administration] is any better to the Negro than was that of Majors, a democrat,” and condemned the state’s Republican establishment for joining “with democrats in deploring the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the United States Constitution.”

Historian Thomas D. Wilson characterizes Franklin’s growing antipathy towards the Republican leadership, as a sentiment so strong that Franklin “appeared ready to embrace the Democratic party and pursue a more aggressive approach to civil rights… [but] never quite made the leap.” As a staunch lifelong Republican, his strong and frequent condemnations demonstrated his mounting frustration with the Republican Party’s failure to advocate for racial progress both locally and nationally. However, these honest criticisms strengthened his Republican endorsements by addressing working class political concerns and projecting authentic rather than propagandistic views.

Both news outlets sought to discredit the other’s reporting by diverging from key news and political commentary in favor of personal attacks on the other paper’s leadership. For example, when it was revealed that *The Call* editor C. A. Franklin’s grandmother resided in the Jackson County home for the Aged and Indigent, Payne jumped at the chance to smear

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49 The 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the United States Constitution, frequently referred to as the “Reconstruction Amendments” abolished slavery, provided citizenship with equal protection under the law to anyone born or naturalized in the United States, and prohibited states from determining one’s right to vote on the basis of race.

Franklin’s character, arguing that to leave his grandmother in an old age home while living in a palatial mansion illustrated flawed values.\textsuperscript{51} When a woman sued Franklin for purportedly shoving her during a heated conversation, \textit{The Kansas City American}, reported the story with the headline “Franklin Attacks Woman,” seemingly eager to spread information of the rival editor’s alleged wrong-doing.\textsuperscript{52} Similarly, Franklin regularly attacked Payne’s business DEALINGS, night clubs, and gambling.\textsuperscript{53}

These personal attacks between the newspapers’ editors added to the publications’ lively political debates with the aim of attracting readership through sensationalist headlines while discrediting the rival paper. Each side recognized that newspaper readership played a central role in determining the community’s voting patterns and they stooped to personal antics to attract readers to whom they could deliver their political message and agenda. The bitter rivalry between the two papers and the low tactics that they embraced to elevate their respective messages illustrated the fierce political debate within the community and demonstrated a pervasive view of working class black voters as valuable and engaged. The sharp contrasts between the positions of these papers gave voters access to multiple political perspectives, equipping them to make ideologically-informed political decisions.

A rising tide of discrimination and segregation during the first two decades of the 20th century accentuated and highlighted African American struggles for equality and healthy living conditions in Kansas City during the 1920s. Blacks of all socioeconomic backgrounds felt betrayed and abandoned by the Republican Party's shift towards Lilywhitism while local Irish political machines emerged as a feasible ideological alternative to the GOP, particularly among

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{51} “The Kansas City American Sued,” \textit{Kansas City American}, January 31, 1929.
\item \textsuperscript{52} “Franklin Attacks Woman,” \textit{Kansas City American}, July 19, 1928.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Robert Trussell, “Journalism wars of KC’s Jazz Age,” \textit{The Kansas City Star}, February 20, 1990.
\end{itemize}
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the black working class where Prohibition remained unpopular. The ideological division within both major parties and the availability of news media representing divergent political views established an environment in which working class African Americans could reasonably reconsider their previously unwavering loyalty to the Republican Party. It was in this broader context of shifting conceptions of Democratic and Republican values and uncertain working class black political alignment that Tom Pendergast's coalition made its appeal to black voters and attempted to woo them through jobs, basic goods, and services.
Chapter 2: Addressing African American Needs

The growing ideological schisms within both the Democratic and Republican parties created a context in which working class African Americans began to question their political alignments. This process of political exploration left a critical mass of African American voters disposed to seriously consider Democratic campaign proposals for the first time. The Pendergast organization attempted to take advantage of and compound upon growing ideological uncertainty through a traditional favor system that included patronage appointments, social clubs, and material benefits. Its leadership believed that these techniques could capitalize on shifting party ideologies and woo working class black voters to the Democratic Party. In the eyes of many working class blacks however, siding with the machine provided a means of ensuring that their own desires for political participation, ideological affiliation, and the wherewithal to make ends meet were met. The Pendergast organization’s efforts engaged working class African Americans in Democratic politics while providing a channel through which to make their political frustrations heard. Efforts to cultivate working class black support proved fruitful as the Democratic Party captured the majority of the African American vote by 1939.

During the first decades of the 20th century, political bosses emerged in slum areas across the country when well-to-do community leaders, frequently from immigrant ethnic groups, began doing neighborly favors with the hope that recipients would support a given candidate come election-time. Kansas City proved no different as the Pendergast political machine grew into one of the most dominant political apparatuses in the country. Jim Pendergast, the son of Irish immigrants and brother of future political boss Tom Pendergast, founded the organization in the 1880s as a Democratic faction in the city’s First Ward. A saloonkeeper by profession, Jim earned a loyal following among his diverse working class patrons and a reputation for both his
generosity and Democratic political activism. He increased his political involvement gradually, as a First Ward Democratic committeeman in 1887 and later as alderman in 1892. As a Democratic committeeman, Jim oversaw “mob primaries” in which a candidate was chosen by a voice vote. In response, candidates sought to limit knowledge of the meeting to their supporters and the meetings themselves frequently devolved into a chaotic street party.\(^1\) It was in this rowdy and corrupt context that Jim took advantage of political fragmentation within the First Ward to build a small machine within the local party.\(^2\) He built his reputation in large part on his generosity.

A contemporary remembered:

No deserving man, woman or child that appealed to Jim Pendergast went away empty-handed…There was never a winter…that he did not circulate among the poor of the West Bottoms, ascertaining their needs and after his visits there were no empty larders. Grocers, butchers, bakers, and coal men had unlimited orders to see that there was no suffering among the poor of the West Bottoms, and to send the bills to Jim Pendergast.\(^3\)

The First Ward did not develop into quite the utopia expressed above. Rather, the quote reflects the narrative of the Pendergast brothers’ boundless benevolence upon which their legend thrived. This generosity was not limited to fellow Irishmen, but rather encompassed the First

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\(^2\) Ibid.

Ward’s heterogeneity and included African Americans. 4 Respect for Jim Pendergast was so great that the machine’s opposition continued to speak highly of him fifteen years after his death in 1911. Despite distrust of the Pendergast organization and the Democratic Party more broadly, W. G. Mosley, an author for the Republican-leaning African American newspaper, The Call, remembered Alderman Jim fondly, writing that “He always kept an open door and could be approached by his humblest constituents of whatever color, nationality or creed.” 5

Jim’s commitment to aiding those in need regardless of race, albeit to largely political ends, set precedence for future aid distribution. The West Bottoms was an enclave for both working class blacks and recent Irish immigrants. The neighborhood’s heterogeneity meant that Irish political leaders had to actively court black votes to win elections at the ward level. 6 This period of cohabitation played a formative role in establishing a rapport between Irish political leaders and their native-born black neighbors that would continue well into the 1920s and 1930s after racially isolated neighborhoods emerged. When Tom Pendergast took over his elder brother's organization upon Jim's death in 1911, he continued to distribute aid and court voters across racial lines.

A shift away from heterogeneous slums to mostly black neighborhoods between 1900 and 1920 temporarily weakened the relationship between the Pendergast organization and the African American community. 7 The Lincoln-Coles neighborhood, the area that developed into the center of the African American community, laid outside of the Pendergast-controlled First

4 Ibid.
and Second Wards and therefore did not play a role in the machine’s strategy until its leadership sought city-wide expansion later during Tom Pendergast’s tenure. Nonetheless, the interaction between the organization and working class blacks during the machine's earliest days set a precedent for color blind aid distribution, constituent services, and personal relationships that would provide the basis for later appeals for black support.

Scholars frequently use the term “colorblind” to describe the Pendergast brothers’ aid distribution. It is important to note however, that this term does not refer to equal distribution of goods but rather equal levels of machine engagement in African American neighborhoods and equal access to Boss Pendergast himself. Black wards received less aid, services, and support than Pendergast’s white supporters. However, many African Americans considered the machine’s attention as progress in the direction of acquiring essential goods and services. As one such individual remembered, “The machine did small favors mainly, but small favors were better than no favors at all.”

Although the Pendergast coalition proved the most powerful in the long-term, numerous political bosses commanded their own political blocs and competed with the emerging Pendergast coalition for power and influence. The city's two most powerful factions were the Pendergast brothers’ Goats and Joe Shannon’s Rabbits. The political difference between the two sides was one of style rather than substance. Both Pendergast and Shannon loyalists engaged in vote-buying and frequently resorted to violence, ballot stuffing, and ballot box theft to ensure their hold on power. However, the Pendergast organization was known for high voter turnout whereas contemporaries credited Shannon’s clever schemes for his success. Every Democrat in Jackson County identified as either a Goat or a Rabbit and the division between the two camps

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was so institutionalized that primary ballots frequently featured a rabbit and a goat symbol at the top to help illiterate voters as well of those without a clear knowledge of the candidates to aid them in voting a straight ticket.\textsuperscript{9}

The sides frequently either allied with Republican bosses or cancelled out one another’s votes facilitating periods of Republican rule. Recognizing their shared interests and their destructive rivalry, Jim Pendergast and Joe Shannon reached what became known as the “Fifty-Fifty Accord” in 1900.\textsuperscript{10} The agreement ensured unity as both sides agreed that no matter which faction won, its leaders would share the patronage with the losing group. Although distrust continued, the accord created a basis of cooperation upon which the factions’ future relationship was to be based.

In addition to Shannon and the Pendergast brothers, several local sub-bosses commanded significant voting blocs and their own small-scale political organizations. Goats and Rabbits competed for these sub-bosses’ endorsements to secure their votes for their candidates. The working class black vote did not fall directly under either Pendergast or Shannon, but rather a powerful sub-boss named Casimir Welch. Welch’s political organization was known as “Little Tammany” due to his strong emphasis on constituent services and precise organization and his influence was concentrated geographically in the “Bloody Sixth” Ward, known for its widespread political violence, and the Eighth Ward, an area that encompassed the Lincoln-Coles neighborhood, the emerging residential, cultural, and commercial center of the African American community. His followers took their voting cues directly from him rather than from Goat or Rabbit leaders. Therefore whether most working class African American Democrats identified as

\textsuperscript{9} Larsen and Hulston, \textit{Pendergast!}, 32.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
Rabbits or Goats depended largely on which faction Welch advocated for at a given moment. Although initially a Shannon lieutenant, Welch swore loyalty to Tom Pendergast in 1924 when Shannon allied with Republicans, and by extension the Klu Klux Klan, to defeat Pendergast’s rising star Harry Truman’s bid for the eastern seat on the Jackson County Court.\footnote{Larry Grothaus, “Kansas City Blacks, Harry Truman and the Pendergast Machine,” \textit{Missouri Historical Review} 69, no. 1 (October 1974): 54.}

To fully discern the relationship between the Pendergast organization and the African American community, one must first understand why Welch had such loyal constituents. His supposed “control” over the working class black vote proved far less one-sided than that term suggests because the African American community’s loyalty to Welch was largely contractual. He provided patronage and material goods such as food and coal in exchange for political loyalty. Welch was their connection to the party apparatus and with no significant ideological differences between Tom Pendergast and Joe Shannon, working class blacks cared little about which side he chose.

Welch’s political following stemmed from his reputation as “a champion of the unfortunates in his district” and for his commitment to providing equal consideration to all, regardless of race, religion, or socioeconomic status. He enjoyed a particularly loyal

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Many contemporaries criticized Cas Welch’s corruption and connection with the machine, claiming that it made it prevented him from administering justice appropriately. Source: \textit{Left Handed Justice}, Cartoon, n.d., Papers of Rufus B. Burrus, Harry S. Truman Library.}
\end{figure}
following from the city’s black working class within his district and beyond. The Call, a publication tirelessly critical of the Pendergast machine, unexpectedly praised him in 1926 as “somebody with sympathy of a big brother... trusted by the negroes of Kansas City.” The widely-held view, best expressed by The Call, held that “Since the days of Jim Pendergast, it is safe to say that no politician or office-holder, democratic or republican, has made or held the warm friendship of the colored people as Welch.” Formally, he was elected time and time again as justice of the peace, running his courtroom based on his own sense of justice rather than the law itself. Lacking a high school, let alone legal, education and skeptical of both formal legal proceedings and precedent, Welch’s courtroom had just five rules posted on the wall:

1. My idea of a justice mill is a place to get justice without a lawyer declaring himself in on it. I’m not going to run this court for the lawyers.
2. I don’t believe the forty-fourth New York has got anything to do with the cases that will come up before me. I don’t know what’s in the books, but I can read a man’s face as good as the chief justice of the supreme court.
3. There can’t any corporation deprive a poor man out of any money in this court. No bluffs will go here.
4. People won’t have to have a lawyer to get justice here. I’ll be their lawyer. All they’ve got to do is to come in here and tell me about it.
5. There are too many delays and continuances in the law. They are a part of the lawyer’s game. The docket in this court is going to be kept clear. Justice quick and cheap is my motto.

Those accustomed to conventional legal proceedings found Welch’s complete contempt for legal practice and knowledge disturbing. However, his largely working class constituents appreciated what they considered a sensible approach to the law and the absence of lawyers, who were otherwise a necessity that most could ill-afford. For working class blacks, Welch’s

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12 “Friends Speak Out for Judge Welch,” The Call, October 29, 1926.
13 “Concerning Cas Welch,” The Call, October 22, 1926.
14 “Friends Speak out for Judge Welch,” The Call, October 29, 1926.
15 “‘Cas’ Welch Dies,” The Kansas City Star, April 17, 1936.
courtroom represented an uncommon space where their cases would be tried on merit rather than racial prejudice. Moreover, he protected the vice industries that provided considerable employment for black workers, generated the wealth that paid for the favor system, and lined his pockets and those of other Pendergast cronies.

 Welche’s territory did not encompass the African American community in its entirety, though that fact was not widely recognized by his contemporaries who equated his methods and personage with the African American vote. The 1925 ward realignment divided the city’s predominantly black neighborhoods into the new Fourth Ward and the new Second Ward, the successors to Welch’s ‘Bloody Sixth’ and the old Eighth Ward. African Americans constituted forty-one percent of the new Second Ward, which was Welch’s jurisdiction and over half of the

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16 Ibid.
new Fourth Ward, an area controlled by other machine officials. In the ensuing elections, Welch’s Second Ward supported Pendergast-backed slates by much higher margins than did the new Fourth Ward, a majority black area that did not fall within his geographic realm. Ultimately, he gained recognition and notoriety for his success in both genuinely directing the African American vote and in fraudulently running up electoral tallies in the Pendergast coalition’s favor.

Political bosses such as Cas Welch depended on the high incidences of poverty, sickness and material deprivation among their constituents. In their eyes, those individuals with the greatest need were also those most easily influenced by their relationships with machine personnel. Historian, David McCullough, articulated the model, explaining that:

The Precinct captain was the first person who called on newcomers to the neighborhood, who saw that their water was connected, gas and electricity turned on. Coal in winter, food, clothing, and medical attention were all provided by the organization to whoever was in need at no charge, and those benefiting from such help would remember fondly, the system involved no paperwork, few delays, no stigma of the dole.

As Larry Grothaus explained, Pendergast recognized that in a city as heterogeneous as Kansas City, “he could not send out city slickers to organize the rural sections of the county, or silkstockings into the wards of the poor. Likewise, he could hardly send an Italian who spoke broken English into a status-conscious, predominantly Protestant, residential precinct, and expect him to have much success in delivering the vote.” Through Welch and others, the Pendergast coalition recruited and organized individuals from every neighborhood to assess their neighbors’

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18 Larsen and Hulston, Pendergast!, 118.
19 McCullough, Truman, 156.
needs, and distribute goods and services. Although in the eyes of upper class machine organizers the precinct captain system was a means of buying votes, it took on a more personal dimension for those actively partaking and benefiting from it. For working class blacks, these visits and emerging friendships were neighborly favors with political encouragement rather than strict and unwavering transactions. In their eyes, neighbors did not sell and purchase votes, rather they exchanged favors and “all that was expected in return was gratitude expressed at the polls on election day. And to most… people this seemed little enough to ask and perfectly proper.”

Despite his deep personal associations with crime and vice, many within the African American community viewed Tom Pendergast fondly. Ironically, frequent distrust and disillusionment with the city’s political corruption did not color people’s perceptions of his individual character. The working class recognized him as someone disposed to perform favors and to help those in need with the expectation of only political, rather than monetary or material compensation. They also recognized the immense value of voting for the winning candidate and the often-catastrophic downside of failing to do so.

James Anderson, the son of a saloon-keeper, had little formal education, dropping out of school after 8th grade to help support his family. Eventually, he opened Anderson’s Chicken Shack in Edwardsville, Kansas but attested that he was forced to close the business for “not votin’ for the right people” and went on to explain that he had difficulty knowing which the right group to vote for was “the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, mixed up there and you gotta

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21 McCullough, Truman, 156.
22 Anderson characterized Pendergast as part of an oral history project that sought to preserve the memories and experiences of both everyday people and leaders from the African American community. James Anderson, Oral History Collection: Interview #2, interview by Horace M. Peterson III, October 5, 1976, Black Archives of Mid-America.
know just which party’s gonna win to stay in.” Anderson remembered Pendergast fondly despite his own personal suspicion of politics and his indirect condemnation of the machine system. When asked about Boss Tom he explained that “he tried to care of the poor and everybody else” in the same way as did beloved local religious leader and anti-Pendergast activist, D. A. Holmes. Holmes, the founding reverend at the Paseo Baptist Church, was deeply revered and respected within the entire African American community as a civil rights advocate, vocal critic of police brutality, and proponent of strong public schools for African American children.  

Anderson’s comparison of Pendergast to Holmes illustrated the respect and appreciation that the machine boss commanded among those who benefited from his politically motivated generosity. When prompted about Pendergast’s political and criminal activities, Anderson went on to explain that he had been unperturbed by the machine’s corruption and crime because Pendergast “may have defended his own nest but he built city hall and everything else.” Such a willingness to turn a blind eye to crime and vice on account of the machine government’s public works projects and the organization’s favor system was typical of Pendergast’s working class black supporters. The machine structure served as a local channel through which working class blacks could register their grievances and receive the coal, food, or clothing that they needed to make ends meet, all goods and services that previous politicians had failed to provide or that they could not afford for themselves, fostering positive attitudes towards the organization.

In 1926, the machine seized control over local government and, in doing so, gained power over numerous appointed patronage positions. Under the traditional model of machine government, when the Democratic gubernatorial nominee died suddenly in 1932, the committee tasked with choosing the new nominee was dominated by the Pendergast faction. They selected Guy Park, giving Missouri a governor who was indebted to Pendergast for his political position. When the Roosevelt Administration named long-time member of the
politics, political power provided access to appointed positions that were used to reward loyalists and buy votes. The Pendergast organization frequently distributed jobs to supporters and used positions to expand the machine’s influence into new geographies and demographics. Like the machine’s other outreach efforts, the organization distributed jobs to both African Americans and white men, making patronage a notable force in the machine’s attempts to secure black votes.

Pendergast regularly employed blacks in the execution and staffing of public projects. Every weekday, jobseekers formed a line stretching for blocks outside of Tom Pendergast’s Main Street office. Black and white, men entered one by one to talk to the boss. Pendergast listened to each individual respectfully, recognizing, that as Truman biographer David McCullough put it, “tolerance is good politics.” After a short discussion, Pendergast handed each jobseeker a piece of paper sending them to a county organization, city official, or power broker. The color of the pencil that Boss Tom used told the potential employer his true sentiments, with red pencil indicating urgency, blue pencil for those whom the employer could keep in mind for future vacancies, and plain lead pencil to indicate complete indifference or even opposition to hiring a given jobseeker. Surely, African Americans fell heavily into the blue and lead categories when seeking positions; however, for many the mere action of meeting with the boss represented unprecedented access to the seat of political power while the lucky few with red pencil who acquired jobs through Boss Pendergast remained loyal and grateful.

the Pendergast organization, Matthew Murray, as the state head of the Works Progress Administration, the Pendergast coalition gained unprecedented influence over federal work relief jobs throughout the state and resulting in disproportionate funding for projects in Pendergast-controlled Kansas City.

McCullough, *Truman*, 152.

Ibid., 236.

Ibid., 235.
Pendergast-backed politicians supported numerous projects to curry favor with black voters that produced patronage positions specifically for African Americans. These schemes both provided much needed public services and were staffed by black workers at the discretion of leaders within the Pendergast coalition. The most prominent of these projects was the construction of General Hospital No. 2, a medical facility to serve the African American community. Although everyone acknowledged the urgent need for an upgraded hospital and lauded the construction of a high-quality facility, the project drew criticism from the machine’s opponents for the political nature of appointments to hospital jobs. An editorial in the *Kansas City Times*, went so far as to suggest that the “Hospital ‘Belongs’ to Welch,” referencing the large number of positions that the project created for distribution at Welch’s discretion. The article asserted that the selection of the Hospital Superintendent, Dr. William J. Thompkins, an African-American physician and activist represented “the chance to reward a political worker and make a bid for certain blocks of votes in the future” rather than a justifiable selection. Additional projects included an orphanage, an old age home, and a juvenile correctional facility specifically for blacks.

Under the Pendergast coalition, public projects often favored the opportunity to line loyalists’ pockets and those of the Pendergast family through public works contracts and providing patronage positions for supporters over the needs of the county and city at large. A series of reports from September 1924 chronicled this misuse of municipal and county funds, reporting “new roads wholly unnecessary, while maintenance of the present system of roads virtually has ceased, leaving many stretches of important highways almost impassable” and the preponderance of “contracts that exceed revenue” in favor of “Goat controlled business.

Pendergast’s own ready-mix concrete company frequently supplied the concrete for public projects resulting in storied fund mismanagement that favored concrete-intensive projects. In many cases, it is difficult to differentiate the legendary from the factual. However, the project to pave mile-upon-mile of Bush Creek, a 10.5-mile stream that runs through Kansas City, with Pendergast’s ready-mixed concrete and the decision to make the airport’s runways twelve inches deep rather than the required ten inches to use more materials are among the best-known examples of waste.31

Although heavily criticized at the time and since, historians suggest that Pendergast’s desire to produce patronage positions served as a stimulus for Kansas City’s economy during the Great Depression, and that the city was well off relative to the rest of the country. Pendergast’s Ten-Year Plan, a bipartisan public works and infrastructure project, took on a legendary stature. The project spanned the decade of the Great Depression and resulted in the construction of a new city hall, a new county courthouse, a municipal auditorium, the zoo, an airport, and a public hospital. Historian Charles Coulter estimates the number of men employed weekly on public projects at as many as six thousand, sufficient to keep the local economy afloat despite the national economic trends.32 Aside from government-sponsored jobs, the local economy laid dormant making it clear that the city’s leadership therefore deserves full credit for Kansas City’s economic wellbeing.33 City Manager Henry McElroy once went so far as to suggest that Kansas

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33 Ibid.
City’s own make-work program inspired the Franklin Roosevelt administration’s Works Progress Administration, a key component of the New Deal.  

Kansas City did not escape the Great Depression completely unscathed, however. The city’s relative prosperity minimized but did not fully shield working class blacks from the downturn. African American workers remained the first fired and the last hired. The relative stability provided by Pendergast’s job-creation schemes, however, left Kansas City blacks (at least those who pledged support to the Democratic machine) better off than African American communities elsewhere in the country. Whereas more than eighty percent of black males had a job in 1920, that number dipped only slightly to seventy-three percent in 1930 while the percentage of working black women increased from forty-two percent to forty-six percent over the same period. This downturn was miniscule relative to other regions where as few as half of African American males found employment. Nationally, black urban unemployment exceeded fifty-percent, more than twice the rate for white workers. Racially discriminatory employment practices and propaganda became pervasive particularly in the South as slogans such as “Niggers, back to the cotton fields—city jobs are for white folks” circulated in many Southern cities. In many regions, anti-black violence rose and the KKK surged, selling unemployed whites on the idea that killing blacks created job vacancies.

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34 McCullough, *Truman*, 235.


36 Ibid.

The Pendergast Ten-Year Plan’s effect on African American workers was largely indirect. The Urban League lobbied the local government to include more workers in public work projects but their efforts proved largely futile, as only 120 of the six thousand workers employed for government projects were black. Nonetheless, the plan had positive externalities that benefited the African American community. Relatively low white unemployment kept white workers from taking jobs that they previously believed to be beneath them as they did in other cities. Thus, racial tension and black unemployment in Kansas City did not rise during the 1930s to the same extent as elsewhere.

The extensive government contracts put forward by the Ten-Year Plan served Pendergast’s personal interests by paying workers the wages necessary to continue to frequent vice establishments owned by members of his coalition and supplied with Pendergast’s own wholesale. Whereas entertainment districts across the country plunged into crisis between 1929 and 1933, making a moderate comeback after Prohibition was repealed, Kansas City’s red light district boomed throughout the era due to the stable economy, lining the machine’s pockets and providing reliable employment for

Machine leaders benefitted financially from the Ten-Year plan because the jobs provided the working class with money to spend on alcohol or at the city’s vice establishments.


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African American service workers and entertainers. In an era where few cities had the disposable income to spend on entertainment, Kansas City stood out nationally, attracting many of the country’s best African American musicians and establishing its contemporary and historic legacy as a center for jazz.

In addition to making ideological appeals and providing supporters in need with jobs and fulfilling requests for food, coal, and clothing, the machine’s organization had a distinctly social element. Democratic clubs, led by Goat-loyalists, cropped up in every ward, providing social opportunities for those who did not qualify for membership to the city’s exclusive country clubs on racial, religious, ethnic, or socioeconomic grounds. Although any Goat voter could participate in club activities, they were particularly attractive to middle class individuals of all races and ethnicities who did not qualify for membership in other clubs and who did not need the favors or jobs that the machine offered. In the African American community, however, they served the working class as the middle class had access to other exclusive African American civic and social organizations. Politically-sponsored social clubs held teas and bridge gatherings for neighborhood women, sports leagues for men, and picnics, dances, and dinners for all members. The Pendergast organization made all such activities available at no monetary cost and used the clubs as an opportunity for the organization’s workers to build the personal relationships with their constituents that their model demanded. From the organization’s perspective, clubs served three main purposes: providing individuals with perceived access to the

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seats of power, rewarding loyalists, and increasing interaction between the machine structure and its supporters.\textsuperscript{42}

Although the African American community had several socioeconomically inclusive community institutions, including churches and the Paseo YMCA, most fell under the purview of religious groups. Most secular social clubs had exclusive membership, largely limited to the middle and upper classes.\textsuperscript{43} The local Democratic clubs provided an alternative, holding regular events for the community, often including free meals. For example, the annual “Rabbit Feast” served over seven thousand working class blacks in 1929, providing each attendee with a feast of rabbit, pickles, olives, celery, cupcakes, and coffee in addition to entertainment and dancing.\textsuperscript{44} This generosity drew many into the machine’s activities and provided personnel with the opportunity to forge personal relationships with their constituents.

The city’s Republican black leadership sought to counter the effects of the Democratic clubs by sponsoring similar events. For example, C. A. Franklin, hosted a free annual Christmas party for his readers and raised funds for needy African American families.\textsuperscript{45} Although such efforts paled in comparison to the machine’s large-scale favor operation, their similarities to the Pendergast coalition’s tactics represent a conscientious effort to deny Democrats a monopoly on such activities.

It should be recognized that although many elected officials sought to benefit from vote-buying practices, others condemned them. In an editorial on the subject, C. A. Franklin equated it

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\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Coulter, \textit{Take Up the Black Man’s Burden}, 240.
\textsuperscript{44} “Democratic Club Holds Annual Feast,” \textit{The Kansas City American}, February 7, 1929.
\textsuperscript{45} “Come to The Call’s Free Christmas Party!” \textit{The Call}, December 17, 1926; “Needy Families All Cared For,” \textit{The Call}, December 24, 1926.
\end{flushleft}
with political slavery and urged his fellow African Americans to reject the favor system, correctly asserting that “White men will not give us a fair deal when they think of us in terms of purchasable votes.”\textsuperscript{46} As a disciple of Booker T. Washington, Franklin believed that the onus for change fell on the African American community itself and condemned those who sold their votes as opposed to the broader institutions and white leaders who directed and facilitated such activities. The fact that the community’s leading Republican African American voice advocated a “pull yourself up from your bootstraps” brand of community advancement surely contributed, at least in part, to the shift towards the Pendergast organization, particularly for those who needed the jobs and support that the machine provided. When Franklin and his middle-class contemporaries scolded their working-class peers, explaining that “[politics] is not a fairy godmother with jobs for a few, but a means of determining public policies for all the people,” they failed to recognize what many blacks sought to get out of politics by neglecting the Democratic Party’s ideological appeal and the critical goods and services that the machine provided. When Franklin wrote that “We need no favors, we only want opportunity,” claiming to speak for the entire African American community, he really only spoke for the community’s middle and upper class Republican elites, failing to fully grasp the lure of the Democratic opposition and that in Pendergast-controlled Kansas City, favors and opportunity were one and the same.\textsuperscript{47} On one hand, the Franklin brand of Republicanism advocated party loyalty and put the onus on the individual to improve without considerable support, while Pendergast and Welch offered improved community services and individual aid in return for a vote and tolerance for the Pendergast organization’s illegal activities. It is therefore unsurprising that many working-class

\textsuperscript{46} C. A. Franklin, “Shall We Remain Political Slaves?,” \textit{The Call}, January 21, 1922.

blacks ignored Franklin’s warnings, instead electing to maximize the personal benefit derived from their political capital by voting Democrat.

Some middle and upper class African American business leaders also left the Republican Party and capitalized on opportunities to serve as liaisons between the black community and the Pendergast organization. They were compensated through business incentives, patronage positions, and/or a share of the machine’s loot. Largely tied to the Democratic Party by their business interests, these liaisons stood at odds with most of their middle class black peers who staunchly supported the Republican Party. Tom Pendergast included two prominent African American leaders, Felix Payne and William Thompkins, in his inner circle, depending heavily on them to advocate for the organization’s interests within the black community. These two men did not relay working class black interests to decision-makers within the coalition, but rather disseminated the machine’s message to the African American masses. They were primarily interested in using the machine system for personal gain and leveraged their influence within the African American community to strengthen the Pendergast organization, and by extension, their own positions.

Born in Marshall, Missouri in 1884, Felix Payne first moved to Kansas City in his 20s. Although he initially worked as a barber in the African American community, he soon branched out into both legal and illegal business in the sports, gambling, and entertainment industries. He owned several clubs and gambling joints in the city’s red light district, including the storied Sunset Club, making him one of the districts most notable figures and successful businessmen.48 A Democrat, a skilled orator, and a businessman dependent on revenue from illegal activity,

Payne used his influential position within the African American community to secure votes for the Pendergast organization. This personal, political, and financial alliance served him well as he benefitted financially from police protection and government contracts. Additionally, Payne used his credibility as an African American leader to support Pendergast through his weekly Democratic newspaper, *The Kansas City American.*

William Thompkins, another close Pendergast ally, was a doctor by training but took a keen interest in local Democratic politics, aiding Payne with *The Kansas City American*’s operation. Thompkins benefited from his political involvement as he was appointed superintendent to General Hospital No. 2, drawing criticism from machine opponents for the political nature of his appointment and others. He organized black voters as the head of the Central Negro Democratic Organization until his appointment as Recorder of Deeds for Washington D.C. in 1934.

Although Payne and Thompkins were not Pendergast’s only middle and upper class allies in the African American community, they were the most prominent and represented two different sides to Pendergast’s relationships with African American leaders. with Payne symbolized Pendergast’s business interests and illicit activity in primarily African American neighborhoods and Thompkins represented the organization’s political organizing wing and patronage system.

**Democratic Success**

Voting records indicate that Kansas City’s African American vote had shifted from the Republican to Democratic parties and had become a key constituency within the Pendergast-led

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50 “A Hospital ‘Belongs’ to Welch,” *The Kansas City Times*, August 30, 1930.
coalition by 1930 (predating that same reversal nationally). The extent to which the Pendergast coalition enjoyed considerable support from the African American community is the topic of widespread debate among local urban historians. Scholars unanimously agree that raw vote tallies illustrate a shift in the African American vote toward the Democratic Party and that election fraud was a widespread machine practice. However, they differ in their assessment of the extent to which corrupt practices invalidate the surface-level shift in political loyalties. In the 1970s, Larry Grothaus suggested that the machine’s vote buying system combined with Republican indifference to produce a shift in African American voting in Pendergast’s favor. More recently however, Lawrence Larsen and Nancy Hulston have argued that the shift was the result of extensive voter fraud rather than a real change in opinion or in voting behavior. The truth likely lies between the two positions. There is no question that illegal voting contributed greatly to the electoral shift; however, it is unlikely that voter fraud accounted for the entire swing. Rather, many blacks first voted for Democrats during the Pendergast era and the 1930 election represented the turning point in African American support for the Pendergast coalition. Welch’s heavily African American Second Ward favored the Pendergast-supported mayoral candidate by more than a 3:1 margin while the majority black Fourth Ward registered primarily Democrat for the first time. After 1932, Pendergast effectively subcontracted the African American vote, both real and manufactured to Welch, making it difficult to differentiate real African American political support for the Pendergast coalition from ghost votes and to account for black Republican voters deterred by the threat of violence at the polls. In 1932, the Goat organization unveiled a

52 Ibid.
logistically complex “Ghost voting” effort that made it difficult to assess the extent to which the African American turn toward the Pendergast coalition continued in 1932 and beyond. “Ghost voting” was a form of ballot box stuffing in which the organization’s cronies voted multiple times under the names of deceased or fictional individuals. In 1930, 8,128 of the Second Ward’s 18,478 eligible voters turned out to vote. However, in 1932, Pendergast and Welch sought to produce a large number of votes for Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first presidential bid, resulting in 13,905 votes cast in the Second Ward and 14,108 cast for Pendergast’s hand-picked gubernatorial candidate despite no significant change in population.

The 1934 mayoral election saw 18,159 total votes cast in the Second Ward, including over 13,000 for the Pendergast-backed candidate. It is completely inconceivable that the election truly saw 98% voter turnout in Welch’s “Little Tammany.” Historian Lawrence Larson deemed the 1934 mayoral election “the most corrupt election in the city’s history” in recognition of widespread ghost voting and the murder of four individuals at the hands of Pendergast enforcers. William Finley, a black Democratic Precinct Captain was killed in an election day shooting in the Fourth Ward, although the newspapers reported that the target was James Lindley, a black Republican judge who was working at the voting precinct but fled when the Pendergast enforcers arrived.

53 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 “Negro Democratic Precinct Captain Slain; Women and Men Beaten By Gangsters,” *The Call*, March 30, 1934.
Ghost voting in heavily black districts did not end with Welch’s death in 1936, rather the 1936 presidential election saw vote totals in the Second Ward that exceeded the area’s total voting-age population, handing FDR an impossible 22:3 margin in the area. After the 1936 election, federal officials cracked down on ghost voting, resulting in the conviction of 259 Pendergast officials for voter fraud, including many from Welch’s “Little Tammany.”\textsuperscript{58} The 1938 election, the last of Pendergast’s tenure, provides a second opportunity to assess African American support for Pendergast. With the federal government’s efforts to dismantle the Pendergast coalition’s ghost voting operation, the 1938 municipal elections saw only 11,715 total votes cast in the Second Ward in stark contrast with 21,242 in 1936.\textsuperscript{59} The absence of a presidential race on the ballot surely accounted for some of the drop-off, however, data from previous elections, including those before 1932, indicates that such an effect was minimal compared to the decrease in ghost votes. The Pendergast-backed mayoral candidate garnered eighty percent of the vote in Second Ward even without the enormous ghost voting operation.\textsuperscript{60}

Although achieved, at least in part, through illegal and unsavory means, the shift from a 3:1 margin in 1930 to a 4:1 margin in 1938 represented an increase in African American support for the Pendergast coalition during the 1930s. Pendergast and his allies employed a combination of vote buying, patronage, and ideological congruence in addition to electoral fraud to elect their candidates. Even after the machine’s collapse and dissolution, the Democratic Party continued to maintain a slight edge in heavily African American districts in the early 1940s, indicating that the shift in working class African American voting patterns was real, ideologically substantive, and representative of a larger phenomenon than simply vote-buying or voter fraud. Still, this


\textsuperscript{59} Johnson, \textit{Kansas City Votes, 1853-1979}.

slight edge represented a radical departure from the 4:1 Democratic margin in 1938, indicating that non-ideological tactics such as the favor system, social clubs, and patronage played a notable role in supplementing ideological decision-making.
Chapter 3: Kansas City’s Racial Geography

Kansas City differed demographically from other comparably sized Midwestern cities in the early 20th century. In 1920, Kansas City was the nineteenth largest city in the United States with approximately 325,000 inhabitants.¹ Unlike similarly sized Midwestern cities during this period such as Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Indianapolis, Kansas City had only a small manufacturing sector contrasted with the large industrial core that developed in other cities in the region.² White collar workers made up forty percent of the city’s population, serving primarily in financial services, insurance, and clerical jobs while the manufacturing sector accounted for just twenty seven percent of those employed.³ As a result, the city had an abnormally large middle class and attracted few immigrants due to the relative lack of manual labor.⁴ This atypical demographic profile meant that the city had an unusually diverse ruling coalition as political leaders could not rely entirely on working class and immigrant populations as was the practice of political machines elsewhere during the early 20th century.⁵ Each group sought to maximize a different personal or collective benefit in return for their votes and thus, had a claim to power within the coalition.

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² 27% of wage earners worked in manufacturing in contrast with 50% in Milwaukee in 1920.
⁴ In 1920, Kansas City’s population was 8.8% foreign born, in contrast with 24.1% in Milwaukee, 13.4% in St. Luis, and 23.2% in Minneapolis. The city’s small immigrant population was comprised primarily of Italians and Irishmen. U.S. Census Bureau, “Nativity of the Population for Urban Places Ever Among the Largest Urban Places Since 1870.”
⁵ Schirmer, A City Divided, 22.
The governing coalition’s ability to rule rested on a fragile balancing act that accounted for each racial or ethnic group’s claim to power, but that when successful, maintained an alliance that incorporated support from immigrants, blacks, working class whites, and middle class whites. This proved difficult given the era’s preponderance of xenophobia, racism, and anti-Catholic sentiments. Tom Pendergast’s allies quarantined vice into specific urban centers and reinforced segregation to balance competing interests and maintain the coalition’s electoral support base. The machine’s approach was multifaceted as its leadership exploited environmental racism, the threat of violence, and control over law enforcement to sway middle class Protestant whites whose votes could not be swayed by material vote-buying strategies.

Kansas City Democrats rose to power after voters passed the City Manager Plan in 1925. Designed to decrease the power of machines over local politics, the plan had the opposite effect, instead allowing the machine’s Democratic leaders to consolidate power. The idea for municipal reform came about in 1900 as Progressives advocated for local governments run by nonpartisan administrators rather than politicians. The 1925 charter proposed an elected nine-member nonpartisan council with the power to select top municipal officials, including the city manager. Proponents hoped that the plan would remove politics from city governance; however, Pendergast recognized that his supporters would only have to win five of the seats on the council for him to dictate the city manager and by extension, control the entire municipal government. The Democrats selected Henry McElroy as Kansas City’s first city manager. Maurice Milligan, the district attorney who prosecuted Tom Pendergast in 1939 and author of one of the machine’s earliest histories, commented, “McElroy was a Pendergast tool, and most the members of the City Council were under obligation to the boss and could be depended on to vote the way he
wanted them to vote. Instead of freedom the people of Kansas City had unwittingly voted themselves into a strait-jacket.”

C. A. Franklin, editor of The Call, initially viewed the plan’s passage optimistically, believing that it would decrease political considerations in municipal decision-making but was quickly proven otherwise. Even after the Democrats selected Henry F. McElroy, a man with strong personal loyalties to Tom Pendergast, as the first city manager, Franklin continued to believe that the fact that he was selected by a majority Democratic council did “not take from him the chance to serve his city as no man has.” Despite racist undertones amongst the plan’s proponents, the African-American community believed that the new system provided an opportunity for a more egalitarian delivery of municipal goods and services. This viewpoint proved naïve as McElroy regularly acted more on Pendergast’s orders than for the greater municipal good. Everyone was aware of the Pendergast-McElroy dynamic and groups frequently circumvented the city manager by addressing concerns to Pendergast directly.

Historians who study the Pendergast machine uniformly consider the City Manager Plan as a boon for Pendergast’s Goat faction but in doing so, ignore the centrality of racism and ethnic chauvinism to the pro-reform campaign. Donald Oster’s study of the plan’s passage reveals that from the first reform proposal in 1900 onward, proponents of eliminating machine rule were overwhelmingly white and Protestant with a distrust of blacks and Catholics that was characteristic of the period. In contrast, those who believed reform to be unnecessary

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8 “Ask Hospital be Placed on Hospital Hill,” The Call, September 23, 1927.
disproportionately benefited from the machine structure or identified with a minority group. Although typical of the era, the divide between white middle class Protestants and minority groups significantly hampered the Pendergast organization, as its political leaders were forced to overcome prejudice in creating a voting coalition that encompassed numerous ethnic, religious, and racial groups.

Urban reformers brought anti-Catholic prejudices to the surface in the creation of an anti-machine movement led by the Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice and the Citizens’ League amongst others in Kansas City’s white civil society. Anti-machine publications such as the *Citizen’s League Bulletin* emphasized corruption, alcohol, and crime as evidence for the city’s urgent need for the political reform that they believed only Protestants could provide. Anti-boss organizations that condemned the city’s approach to these issues often took on a strong Protestant undertone, touting the Protestant work ethic and actively supporting Prohibition, even after it officially ended.

Reformist publications occasionally showed regard for black wellbeing, however such concerns were usually tinged with white supremacy and inspired by convenience rather than genuine sympathy. For example, the *Citizens’ League Bulletin* regularly derided vice in black neighborhoods but showed only minimal empathy when they described the bombing of African-American homes in 1926 as “despicable outlawry.” The publication showed concern for black living conditions only to the extent that they imperiled the city’s white inhabitants. For example,

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10 Ibid., 310.
11 Ibid.
a 1927 article detailing the health problems that plagued the black community concluded that “many persons overlook the fact that contamination in one part of our city affects all parts of the city” and that for that reason, “Kansas City should make a heavier investment in protection from disease.” Similarly, another article from the same year describing the charities serving the African-American community ended with “For information concerning Negroes, or for colored help call the Urban League phone.” This faux concern for the African American community illustrated that many of those middle class Protestant whites who took interest in the plight of Kansas City’s black community did so only to the extent that they perceived their own self-interest as dependent on addressing the challenges that blacks faced. They were untroubled by vice so long as it was physically quarantined outside of their communities because their concern for black wellbeing was not genuine but rather of expedience and personal benefit.

Middle class Protestant whites condemned vice not as a practice, but rather for its impact on them and their youth. For example, an article published in the Citizens’ League Bulletin lamented “the pollution” of Kansas City’s “moral life…from sensual and degrading shows,” notes that “thousands of our young people have attended these contaminating exhibitions.” The fact that such shows were portrayed as a revelation to white Kansas Citians in 1927 is laughable given that risqué performances became the norm in many of the red light district’s establishments more than a decade earlier. They never showed concern for vice’s detriment to the city’s African American or Catholic youth; rather, they were only troubled by such trends

when they began to concern “our young people,” or in other words, middle class white Protestant youth.\textsuperscript{15}

White reformers’ frequent condemnations of “sensual and degrading shows” often carried a strong racist undertone. Racially charged characterizations of jazz and leisure spaces in African American neighborhoods further proved that white Protestant interest in black wellbeing was insincere and tinged with racism rather than compassion. For example, the same publication that warned against “play houses” also characterized jazz as music that:

worships force, is contemptuous of law, obedient to the passions, repeals the Decalogue, enacts chaos, denies the Christ, and stones the prophets of peace…. A contagion of lawlessness and unbelief, infecting all civilization, and manifesting itself in every variety of folly. Only the naked savage, quarantined in his jungle, is immune…. he is beyond the reach of this mental leprosy and keeps the peace.\textsuperscript{16}

White Protestant civic organizations viewed elements of African American culture such as jazz as a danger to society and sought to minimize exposure and broader cultural influence. This view of African American culture as a dangerous and polluting force created an opportunity for the machine to trade “protection” from blacks and from vice in exchange for white middle class Protestant votes. These whites did not need the blue collar jobs and basic provisions that the machine doled out among poorer communities, leaving Pendergast unable to woo their votes through more traditional tactics. Rather, he understood that white votes could be purchased more intangibly, by soothing racist fears and keeping vice out of middle class white neighborhoods.

Although middle-class Protestant whites were vice’s largest opponents, they also made up the red light district’s main customers. The plethora of vice-related institutions on the black eastside ranged from cabarets to brothels but almost always had black performers and segregated

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

clientele. Some jazz clubs served the neighborhood’s African American community; however, in most cases local clubs only allowed white patrons. In a city with few legitimate employment prospects for blacks, African Americans often depended on the vice industry for wages. Few could afford to frequent the local vice establishments and the majority would have denied them entry had they tried.

White reformers employed what Sherry Lamb Schirmer refers to as a “moral geography” which “declared vice to be unthinkable in their own territory but acceptable in districts where respectable whites seldom ventured.” In other words, staunchly anti-vice whites turned a blind eye to vice so long as it only harmed the day-to-day lives of blacks. Although quarantined to the black eastside, the vice district served primarily as a leisure space for white men, highlighting a key contradiction for white Protestant civic organizations. They tolerated its practice and white male participation so long as it remained outside of their neighborhoods so that white women and youth were not exposed to vice’s evils. The Pendergast coalition therefore offered a solution to white hypocrisy and concerns: “protection” from sin and criminality for women and children without eliminating access for white men. If relenting to white nimbyism was all it would take to guarantee their support, Pendergast would certainly comply by constraining the development of a vice district to the physical heart of the black eastside.

Given that the Pendergast organization was comprised of and supported by primarily Irish and Italian Catholics, and given its deep involvement in corruption, alcohol, and crime, the division between reformers and the machine had racist and anti-Catholic undertones that made it difficult for Pendergast to persuade enough Protestant whites to join his coalition. However, the machine was uniquely situated to quarantine crime and ensure racial segregation, strong enough

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17 Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 126.
inducements to garner enough middle class white Protestant votes for Pendergast to maintain power over local government. From 1926 until the end of Prohibition in 1933, Tom Pendergast and his associates controlled local government and by extension, law enforcement within Kansas City. Saloon owners could continue to do business with the machine’s approval and Tom Pendergast’s wholesale liquor business dominated the market. After Prohibition, Boss Tom maintained control over the vice district by appointing his brother, Mike Pendergast, as the only liquor license inspector in Jackson County. Vice businesses paid ten thousand dollars a month for legal protection. However, simply paying the required tribute did not guarantee owners the right to stay open. Rather, they had to do as the boss demanded. This high degree of control over whether a given business could even operate made it possible for Pendergast to direct where businesses could locate and limit vice to the black eastside.

In 1926, Tom Pendergast formed an alliance with Johnny Lazia, leader of one of the city’s political machines and an Italian mob boss frequently compared to Al Capone. The two men agreed that Lazia would control law enforcement and the machine’s criminal operations while Tom Pendergast would get Lazia’s voting bloc in Little Italy and a “personal skim from every night’s gambling receipts.” Additionally, Lazia agreed to “keep the rackets “controlled” by restricting them to certain parts of the city.” The 1926 agreement therefore represents the moment in which the machine institutionalized quarantining crime and vice to the black eastside.

18 David McCullough, Truman (Simon & Schuster, 1993), 154.
20 An unknown rival assassinated Lazia in 1934.
22 Ibid., 85.
as official policy. Between Lazia’s control over the police, Pendergast’s ownership of the city’s leading wholesale liquor company, and strong support from prominent businessmen, club owners, and gamblers, Pendergast was uniquely situated to quarantine crime to Vine Street Corridor. In return, some middleclass whites tacitly accepted the vice industry and joined the Pendergast-led coalition.

The city’s moral geography not only influenced the politics of quarantining vice but also led to strict, although not always codified, housing segregation. Conflicts over the physical borders of African American neighborhoods frequently forced the Pendergast organization to choose between defending the basic needs of blacks and capitulating to the demands of middle-class whites. Time and time again, the machine did the latter, leading to conflict between the African-American community and the surrounding white neighborhoods.

The Linwood Neighborhood Improvement Association proved to be particularly troublesome for Pendergast as it continually quarreled with the neighboring African American community to protect its borders from what its residents viewed as black encroachment. Linwood boasted an entirely white and predominantly lower middle class population.23 Primarily residential with a small and centralized commercial district, Linwood residents sought to protect the neighborhood’s all-white character.24 In 1926, John Bowman, a Linwood resident and realtor established the Linwood Improvement Association with the intention of mobilizing his neighbors to enter restrictive housing covenants to prevent home sales to black families.

During the early 20th century, property developers regularly placed parks or golf courses between black and white neighborhoods to create a clear boundary demarcating the areas and a

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23 Schirmer, A City Divided, 112.
24 Ibid.
physical buffer against interracial interaction or encroachment. Troost and Spring Valley Parks separated the black eastside from Linwood, with a small and sparsely populated grouping of well off African American residences in between. Linwood residents organized on multiple occasions to protest the black presence in this area, leading to racial tension and forcing the coalition’s political leaders to balance white demands for physical separation from the black eastside and its red light district with black property rights.

In 1926, the sixty-two African American homes occupying the area between the Troost and Spring Valley parks became a point of contention as the Linwood Improvement Association (LIA) advocated for their demolition to create a larger uninterrupted buffer between the two communities. Initially, the Board of Park Commissioners rejected LIA’s proposal on the grounds that the city could ill-afford to build a park simply to serve as a buffer between Linwood and the black eastside. However, when LIA returned with a petition signed by thirteen hundred property owners and a plan to build the park at their own expense, greater debate ensued. Ultimately, the proposal was voted down as property owners in the southern portion of Linwood were hesitant to pay for a park that would only benefit those living in the northern part of the community.

\[25\] Ibid.
\[26\] “Would Ask City Council to Segregate,” The Call, May 28, 1926.
\[27\] “Cost is Too Great, Park Board Says,” The Call, June 11, 1926.
When the plan failed, a mob of Linwood residents took matters into their own hands, threatening to bomb the area’s black homes.\(^{28}\) Although normally a reaction to the introduction of a black family onto a previously all-white block, bombings were commonplace along the border between the black eastside and Linwood where the perpetrators were rarely caught or charged for their crimes.\(^{29}\) Linwood’s terror campaign ultimately proved futile because African American families refused to leave their homes and the city never built the desired park. However, the physical violence that defined the border between Linwood and the black eastside demonstrated not only LIA’s strong desire for segregation but their complete disregard for African American wellbeing or life as well.

Although the Linwood Improvement Association’s proposal failed, it illustrated the ways in which white communities obscured racial prejudice and a desire for segregation behind pretenses that political elites could reasonably support such as public parks. In contrast with African American publications, the white press never acknowledged the conflict’s racial nature, actively choosing not to report on anti-black violence and white attempts to maintain segregation on the eastside. This racially silent coverage in the white press gave Tom Pendergast the freedom to continue avoiding conversations about race altogether while the machine pursued its policy of

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\(^{28}\) “Association Aided by 25 ‘Brave Men’,” *The Call*, June 18, 1926.

appeasing white voters and leveraging black poverty and ideological disenfranchisement to use more traditional vote-buying tactics to gain black votes.

The buffer between the black eastside and Linwood came under fire once again just a year later when the city of Kansas City proposed the tract of land between 26th and 27th on Michigan Ave. as the site for the new black hospital. In the early 1920’s, the citizens of Kansas City approved the construction of a new hospital for blacks in a special bond election, setting up the most consequential and telling faceoff between the City of Kansas City, the Linwood Improvement Association, and the city’s African American leadership. The plot was located immediately north of the buffer parks, with 27th St. serving as the widely accepted southern boundary of the black eastside. However, many white Linwood residents worried that “the location of the hospital right on the line [would] tend to send Negroes south of 27th street across the line” and increase the presence of African Americans in the parks themselves.30

The city’s African American leaders condemned LIA’s efforts, emphasizing Linwood’s racist motives and the urgency of the new hospital to the African American community’s wellbeing. A fire at the Old City Hospital in July 1927 pushed the issue to the forefront of the African American community’s civic dialogue and hastened the condemnation of the Linwood Improvement Association and municipal government alike. African American newspapers filled with pleas from community leaders who emphasized that the community had waited long enough and that blacks could no longer wait patiently “when the death angel keeps taking a dear one who might be saved if the hospital was here to serve.”31

30 “Location in Negro District Angers Whites,” The Call, January 14, 1927.
31 “And Still No Hospital,” The Call, July 22, 1927.
Ultimately, the city capitulated to the Linwood Improvement Association’s demands, proposing a location for the new hospital further from the black eastside’s borders. However, the politics and business surrounding the new site’s acquisition and selection illustrated the machine’s signature corruption and eagerness to reward loyal African American elites. The city acquired the new site at the intersection of Paseo and Tracy when Pendergast ally and wealthy African American businessman Felix Payne purchased the plot from the Centennial M. E. Church for $15,500. Payne immediately sold the land to the city for $27,500, pocketing a $12,000 profit, yet another example of the ways in which political leaders were rewarded for loyalty to the Pendergast-led coalition.32

Payne, Thompkins, and other Pendergast-allied black businessmen were among the most outspoken supporters of the Paseo and Tracy site. At the personal level, these black businessmen could exchange their support of Pendergast’s proposal for police protection and preferential government contracts. At the same time, they could maintain the Pendergast machine’s charade that it represented its black constituents while still appeasing white interests represented by the Linwood Improvement Association. These successful black businessmen facilitated the maintenance of the governing coalition by actively supporting the organization’s efforts within the African American community. In return, African American businessmen received compensation in the form of access to business opportunities and patronage positions. Additionally, given that Tom Pendergast and his allies controlled the city’s liquor supply and the police, those black businessmen involved in the sin industry grew increasingly beholden to the

32 “City Is Offered Paseo-Tracy Site for Hospital After Secret Deal by Centennial Church Trustees,” The Call, September 30, 1927.
machine after Pendergast’s 1926 alliance with Johnny Lazia consolidated machine-influence on law enforcement.

City leaders used the African American neighborhoods as a moral and literal dumping ground in their efforts to appease middle class white voters. When in 1921 the Citizen’s League, a white middle class political organization that rallied against corrupt and inefficient governance, complained about the city’s ineffective garbage collection system, city officials began considering solutions to the problem, ultimately deciding to build a garbage-reduction plant. Finding a widely accepted location for the malodorous project proved difficult as whites continuously rejected sites near their homes and businesses. Finally, in 1926, the city settled on Twenty-First and Vine, an intersection at the heart of the black eastside, as the location for the new plant. An uproar from black leaders, led by C. A. Franklin, persuaded the city to choose an alternate site. However, rather than placing the so called “garbage factory” on the outskirts, the city chose another location just a few blocks away but still within the black eastside.\(^{33}\) This early example of environmental racism negatively influenced black quality of life. Garbage trucks barreled through the community’s commercial and social center daily, spewing an intolerable odor and dripping liquids. The smell was said to be so bad that students at nearby schools and local families became physically sick from the stench and miasma that the site produced.\(^{34}\)

The fact that the “solution” to the garbage problem came about after Pendergast had consolidated his power is significant because it embodies the larger pattern which would come to define the relationship between the machine and African American community. The machine would maintain its fragile coalition by appeasing white voters and responding to their demands,

\(^{33}\) Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 123.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.
almost always at the expense of the city’s black population. Machine leaders relied heavily on their ideological and material appeals to working class voters to maintain their electoral support despite the black eastside’s use as a moral and physical dumping ground.

Pendergast never discussed race, however his approach to coalition-building reflected a deep understanding and willingness to take advantage of white middle class racial bigotry. White power claims within the machine proved stronger than those of the poorer African American community as Pendergast was willing to trade black wellbeing for white votes. Although he never enjoyed widespread support among middle class Protestant whites, Pendergast secured the little support he needed when a fraction of that demographic chose to partake in the governing coalition. Although the tradeoff between black wellbeing, racist white apprehensions, and electoral power was never outlined in writing, it is evident through the practices of complying with white nimbyism by reinforcing segregation, and quarantining crime at the African-American community’s expense.
Chapter 4: Constructing Black Criminality

Both the Pendergast organization’s efforts to quarantine vice to the Vine Street Corridor and the anti-vice efforts within the African American community were couched in constructs of black criminality. Black and white ideas about black crime, although different in both origins and nature, were mutually constitutive. White constructs of black criminality served to provide white men with desired vice activities while also giving them a means of controlling white women. In contrast, the emphasis on crime and vice within the African American community stemmed from both concern for communal wellbeing and from the kinds of respectability politics that prevailed in black Kansas City. Both however, contributed to and drew from a broader discourse linking blackness, vice, and crime whose long-term political, social, and economic effects became the larger legacy of machine rule for Kansas City’s African American community.

The belief in the immorality and criminal deviance of working class black men, although established independently from real working class black behaviors, created an ideological reality that the African American working class had to navigate. In other words, the white and black middle classes held disproportionate agency because they had the power and influence to impose their ungrounded biases on the lives and realities of the African American working class. White and black debasement of working class blacks evolved into the disparagement of all blacks as many whites viewed African Americans as a racial and socioeconomic monolith. Thus, middle class black appeals to respectability politics and by extension, condemnations of working class African Americans did not help middle class blacks to themselves escape the construct of black criminality.

Local historian Larry Grothaus contends that Kansas City’s African American community “learned to function within a system of machine politics to [their] benefit.” He
credits the system’s “benevolence” for attracting black voters to the Democratic Party, citing the refusal by Jim Pendergast’s loyalists to support discriminatory bills in the state legislature as well as the machine’s extensive favor system. However, Grothaus overlooks the long-term consequences of the organization’s relationship with Kansas City blacks by considering only the short-term benefits of machine rule. Although working class blacks benefited materially from vote-buying and patronage, and select middle class blacks benefited from the machine's corrupt business dealings, the organization’s decision to use the community’s physical bounds as a dumping ground for undesirable activity, both moral and physical, had negative long-term effects that outweighed any short-term material, social, or patronage benefits. More importantly, the Pendergast organization’s efforts to limit vice to African American neighborhoods created a heightened sense of insecurity among local residents that spatially reinforced the perceived association between blackness and crime, contributing to the continued stigmatization of the African American working class as criminal and morally abhorrent.

Under Pendergast, the 18th and Vine District represented what Amber Clifford refers to as a “zone of deviance.” By quarantining the most outrageous, criminal, and sinful establishments

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2 Jazz musician and scholar, Charley Gerard, defines the relationship between white slumming and African American involvement in the entertainment and vice industries as one analogous to caste, in what he refers to as “the American version of the Brahmin-Untouchable relationship.” In his view the “black mystique” stems from the belief that “the African American is … the incarnation of the free soul, the pre-social being untethered by the constraints of civilization, possessing both innocence and power emotions that whites because of the pressures of modern civilization no longer possess.” Thus, whites sought out this elite-pariah interaction, as a means of having an “exotic” experience and escaping from white America’s “emotionally unsatisfying daily grind.”

Stewart Paul suggests that prestige does not only come from adopting the values and culture of the ruling class, but can also come from adopting those rejected by society. The values, cultures, and practices held by those at the bottom of the country’s racial and socioeconomic hierarchy represent an inversion of and rebellion against established social norms. Thus, middle class youth gained standing among their peers, not by adopting the values and practices associated with striving for higher standing, but by seeking out those associated with the African American community as a means of rejecting middle class values and culture. Like Gerard, Paul’s theory imposes the white supremacist conceptions of high and low culture as an indicator of which activities, values, and cultural phenomena attracted young white men out of a sense of rebellion and a desire to seek out the exotic.
to this particular area, the Pendergast alliance marked the zone as one inherently associated with
sexual arousal, vice, and eroticism. Therefore the district acquired a double-association in the middle
class white Protestant imagination as the center of both the African American community and as
the heart of the city’s sin industry. This association, paired with high rates of black employment
in the vice industry, contributed to the “representation of blacks as purveyors of deviance.”

The city’s governing and policing choices in and around the 18th and Vine District facilitated vice but
also generated crime by creating physical boundaries that lacked policing. Such decisions helped
to ensure that blacks came to represent not only illegal alcohol, gambling, and sex, but also the
spread of other immoral and criminal activity.

It is important to note that Kansas City’s vice enterprises were organized for and by men,
not by policy but in accordance with the era’s forceful gender norms. That is not to say that no
white women ever worked or partook in the sin industry, but rather that their presence was
deply stigmatized as a violation of racial and gendered standards. Society deemed vice-based
leisure inappropriate for white women for numerous reasons. First and foremost, white women
were responsible for creating a wholesome home environment. However, this gender segregation
also stemmed from a deep-seated belief that black men posed a threat to white women. Popular
culture frequently portrayed black men as menacing and primitive, unable to control their sexual
impulses.

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3 Amber Clifford, “Queering the Inferno: Space, Identity, and Kansas City’s Jazz Scene” (Dissertation, University of
Kansas, 2007), 131.
4 Ibid., 128.
5 Primitivist and uncivilized representations of blackness, both locally and nationally, often veered into criminal
portrayals, depicting black men as rapists. Amongst the most famous and influential of these portrayals is the 1915
silent film, The Birth of a Nation, in which a primitively portrayed black man, played by a white man in blackface,
rapes a white woman who is saved by Klansmen. Wildly popular and deeply influential, the film reinforced and
solidified existing stereotypes while providing a prime example of how the media and popular culture propagated
the myth of the black rapist. Historian Dianne Sommerville summarized this cultural phenomenon, explaining that in
the eyes of whites “black men were innately barbaric and libidinous. Unable to restrain their animalistic passions,
The narrative of black men as a threat to white women and the large number of black men working in the vice industry and in the surrounding neighborhood made the Vine Street Corridor an area of unusually high perceived danger for white women. Although the myth of the black rapist is most commonly associated with lynching in the Deep South, it extended nationally and colored Kansas City race relations. *The New York Times* regularly argued that blacks were particularly prone to rape, confirming that the myth extended across the country, regardless of lynching’s general absence outside of the South.⁶ C. A. Franklin recognized the myth’s detriment to black men in Kansas City. He lamented that “the prevailing American sentiment brands every man of us with being a potential rapist” and that “the very approach of a Negro to a white woman is interpreted by her as being attempt at rape.”⁷

Although lynching was no longer commonplace in Kansas City by the 1920s, a longstanding literature on the topic provides the best explanation of the ways in which the myth of the black rapist served as an instrument for white male dominance. In her groundbreaking research, Ida B. Wells found that two-thirds of lynching victims were never even accused of rape. Oftentimes angry white men brought rape allegations against black men *after* the exposure of a consensual interracial relationship between a white woman and a black man.⁸ Thus she argued, white men employed rape allegations to control white women’s social and sexual behavior at the extreme expense of black men. By accusing black men of rape, even in cases where the relationship was consensual or even non-existent, white men claimed to protect the

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⁸ Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely*. 
supposed sexual purity of white women but, in actuality, sought to exert dominance by controlling and manipulating white women’s behavior.

In the context of Kansas City’s vice district, the myth of white womanhood and related belief that black men posed an inherent danger to white female purity and safety echoed the logic and language used to justify lynching. Although quarantining crime as a means of preserving both white womanhood and male access to vice is unquestionably less reprehensible than lynching, it presents parallel logic in which black men were presented as primitive and dangerous to ensure that white women stayed on the straight and narrow, avoiding both any relations with black men, sexual or social, and unwomanly activities. Additionally, it served to warn black men away from white women.

The desire for white male dominance over both black men and white women, as expressed through the myth that black men posed a threat to the sanctity of women, created a rationale for segregation, inspired racial violence, and resulted in efforts to contain vice. White women represented piety and vice districts typified sin. Given that the construct of black masculinity was associated with rape and crime, and that black women allegedly lacked the supposed purity of white women in the white imagination, the physical heart of the black eastside appeared to whites as an acceptable location for the quarantine of vice.

Although numerous Kansas City saloons served a primarily black clientele, the racially segregated red light district and the racial pay differential ensured that the space where African Americans lived and worked primarily served the white male desire for vice and power.\(^9\) Alcohol, drugs, prostitution and sex shows shared venues with considerably more tame jazz

performers making many of city’s most notorious clubs one-stop-shops for sinful activity where employed blacks provided those services for their primarily white clientele. The red light district was one of the primary locales for interracial interaction as people of color provided liquor, gambling, sex and controversial music for their white patrons.

In contrast to white attitudes, African American condemnation of black criminal and “sinful” behavior stemmed from concern for the community’s wellbeing, the strength of religious life, and Booker T. Washington’s pull yourself up by your bootstraps ideology of self-betterment that permeated the community’s middle and upper class leadership. However, it also revealed middle class blacks’ use of respectability politics that subtly paralleled white supremacist constructs of black primitivism and criminality. Intersecting racial and class identities created a context in which middle class blacks condemned racial discrimination and the living conditions on the black eastside, while representing working class African American youth as naturally teetering on the edge of sin and crime. Their fixation on the evils of intracommunal crime, jazz, blues, and alcohol consumption allowed them to simultaneously condemn white perceptions of black males as a danger to society and project their own doubts about the wholesomeness and respectability of working class black youth.

Kansas City’s African American newspapers regularly reported on crime, highlighting it as a systematic issue facing their community. For example, in 1928 The Call included a running tally of intracommunal murders on its front page as well as a count of how many days passed between murders. The ways in which the black media leaped to the conclusion that intracommunal crime was endemic and systematic speaks to what Khalil Gibran Muhammad

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10 Clifford, “Queering the Inferno: Space, Identity, and Kansas City’s Jazz Scene,” 142.
refers to as “writing crime into race.” News sources portrayed white crime as numerous isolated events while African American and white news sources alike reported black crime as a larger systemic problem. By adopting this narrative in direct contrast with isolated approaches for crimes committed by whites, the African American press reinforced broader constructs of black criminality and painted the black working class as particularly crime-prone.

Narrative aside, it is clear that middle class African American leaders expressed concern about crime and law enforcement in their neighborhoods. However, their insistence that the onus fell upon the African American community to fight a criminal epidemic stood in direct contrast to the reality that policing practices, rather than an inherent fault with the African American community, likely accounted in large part for the high perceived incidence of intracommunal crime. As a “zone of deviance,” city officials actively elected to police the Vine Street Corridor differently than other residential areas. In fact, the continuity of gambling, alcohol, prostitution, and drugs for white male consumption depended on lax policing practices. Calls for just and effective policing revealed a practice on the part of law enforcement officers not to police certain districts. For example, in September 1928, The Kansas City American countered municipal calls for more police, arguing that “much can be done if the present members of the department will police their districts, in the name of law and order, instead of spending time soliciting votes for their chief.” These political dimensions, and the absence of law enforcement in the 18th and Vine District suggest that blacks did not commit crimes at a higher rates than whites, but were very likely apprehended less frequently due to the absence of policing in their neighborhoods and

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12 Ibid.
that this problem, no doubt led to the perception of intracommunal lawlessness within the African American community.

Both The Kansas City American and The Call recognized that a lack of law enforcement contributed to what they perceived as high incidences of intracommunal crime. However, they put the onus on the African American community as a whole to change rather than acknowledging and seeking to address policing’s role in perpetuating the problem. Franklin took a bold and regular stance on the issue of absent law enforcement. In one editorial, he asserted that “The loose enforcement of the law against murder has bred contempt for it to the point where every Negro in Kansas City, who goes armed, thinks he can kill and not ‘do a day for it’.”\(^{13}\) However, rather than lobbying for more consistent policing as did The Kansas City American, The Call advocated capital punishment, contending that “Punishment that is prompt, adequate, and unescapable will stop Negros from killing each other in this city just as it has stopped them from killing whites.”\(^{14}\) This proposed solution echoed the sentiment amongst middle and upper class African Americans that intracommunal crime reflected a fault within the African American community itself rather than inconsistent policing practices.

Interestingly however, The Call reported on endemic intracommunal crime with far greater frequency that its pro-Pendergast rival, The Kansas City American. There are two possible explanations for this discrepancy. First, The American sought to glorify the Pendergast organization and Democratic politics. Given that the Pendergast organization played a notable role in making vice readily available in African American neighborhoods and in perpetuating the city’s underworld gang violence, crime reporting did not suit its purpose. Second, The Call

\(^{13}\) C. A. Franklin, “Hanging Will Stop Murder,” The Call, January 24, 1930.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
represented the views of the black Republican middle class, a group that was preoccupied with respectability and by extension black criminality, and consequently played its role in reinforcing the negative stereotypes.

Even though white ideas about black criminality were largely constructed in the media, the African American middle class continued to worry about how actual black crime would worsen anti-black stereotypes and prejudice. For example, in response to an uptick of killings by black murderers in 1928, C. A. Franklin wrote that “A killing every five days for over a month calls for action. Life and the community’s reputation are too valuable to be destroyed.”15 By likening the value of human life with that of the community’s reputation, Franklin implied that a lack of communal respectability had dangerous consequences and cemented the idea that a failure by the African American working class to embrace middle class respectability politics threatened the entire race by reinforcing white negrophobic stereotypes, and consequently perpetuating anti-black violence and discrimination.

Like many whites who viewed jazz as a vulgar and sexual symbol of African American culture, leaders within the African American community blamed music for high incidences of intracommunal crime and criticized the blues for its violent imagery and “suggestive” lyrics.16 Like many African American art forms, jazz and blues drew inspiration from the black church but faced criticism from opponents of this secularization of religious music who deemed it “the devil’s music.”17 The idea of playing variations of religiously inspired music in brothels and other decidedly unchristian settings defied the dignity that such music deserved. Black middle

class critics sneered at blues and jazz musicians who incorporated “shouting, twisting, shaking, and snapping of fingers,” as indications of secularism and poor artistry.\textsuperscript{18}

Some of jazz’s opponents within the African American community contended that rejection of jazz by many white communities reflected the music’s immoral and dirty character. In an editorial condemning the sale of “race records,” C. A. Franklin argued that characterizations of African American music as vulgar in mainstream white culture indicated that jazz and blues musicians should embrace more wholesome performance styles and lyrics. He condemned songs that “could not be called by name in a decent society” and urged patrons to “demand that only clean songs be offered on stage.”\textsuperscript{19} In taking this stance, Franklin once again embraced respectability politics by encouraging other blacks to conform to mainstream middle class values. In referring to the music played in the 18\textsuperscript{th} and Vine district establishments as “flagrant immorality” and “sewage” Franklin articulated a middle class attitude that transcended racial boundaries, and in doing so, he vied for communal respectability.\textsuperscript{20}

Others hypothesized that families and communities banned jazz music not only on religious grounds, but because they wanted to distance themselves from the Southern migrants whose mannerisms, cultures, and experiences differed greatly from those of Northern blacks.\textsuperscript{21} This intracommunal divide marked Southern black migrants as uncivilized and particularly prone to vice. At the same time, this perception of migrants echoed classism and ethnic prejudice among whites who held similar stereotypes about white immigrant groups. This dynamic in Kansas City manifested itself primarily through class divides as migrants were less likely to be

\textsuperscript{18} C. A. Franklin, “A Substitute for the Blues,” \textit{The Call}, August 19, 1927.
\textsuperscript{19} C. A. Franklin, “Admits its Own Filth,” \textit{The Call}, February 11, 1927.
\textsuperscript{21} Ogren, \textit{The Jazz Revolution}, 114.
part of the local middle class than were members of the existing community. The black middle class’s hesitation to associate with jazz in Kansas City therefore reflected this regional tension and class divides.

Much like jazz, Prohibition emerged as a hot-button issue within African American communities across the country. Northern civil rights advocates argued that white Southern Prohibitionists sought to keep liquor away from blacks out of fear that African Americans posed an unusually large threat to property and public safety while under the influence of alcohol. While racism undoubtedly played a role in white support for Prohibition and white supremacist undertones forced many African American leaders to distance themselves from the temperance movement, Prohibition was also popular among middle class African Americans. The whitewashed narrative of Prohibition ignores the fact that many blacks in the South and elsewhere, most notably Booker T. Washington, posited that Prohibition benefited all races. In Kansas City, attitudes towards alcohol were divided along class lines with middle class black Republicans actively opposing alcohol consumption and the working class opposing Prohibition. Of course, Prohibition had both supporters and detractors in every socioeconomic class within the African American community, however, these opinions were drawn largely along class and ideological lines.

Middle class black Republican women were among Prohibition’s most insistent proponents, expressing concern that repealing the 18th amendment would set a dangerous precedent that could justify attempts to repeal the unpopular civil rights amendments passed.


during Reconstruction. These amendments, the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution, include abolition, equal protection, suffrage and other protections which formed the basis of civil rights legislation and judicial decisions for decades to come. Their argument held that strict enforcement of the Prohibition amendment would translate into strict enforcement of all constitutional amendments. Thus, temperance became more than a religious and moral issue for middle class black women who instead transformed it into a civil rights ultimatum.

The black temperance movement directly addressed the working class shift from the Republican to Democratic parties. By the early 1920s middle class Republican women wrongly concluded that, because the Democratic Party opposed Prohibition, any working class African American who switched to the Democratic Party did so because they wanted to drink. They further claimed that by voting Democrat, poor blacks prioritized access to sinful leisure over the Reconstruction amendments. Thus, in the eyes of middle class African Americans, poor black Democrats had improper values and required the guidance of middle class black women.

Historian Lisa G. Materson contends that middle class black approaches to Prohibition reflected both the limitations of theories that emphasized ethic and racial voting blocs, and of the era’s class-based conceptions of community leadership. By associating black Democrats with sinful behavior, middle class Republicans unwittingly revealed both their failure to understand poor blacks’ decision to abandon the Republican Party and the emerging sentiment that the

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 66.
African American community’s supposed middle class leadership was growing increasingly out of touch with black voters’ lives and values.

Uplift organizations such as churches, civil rights advocacy groups, and community centers represented the front lines of the fight against alcohol and other forms of recreational vice in the African American community. Ministers emerged as the loudest African American voices of opposition to the Pendergast organization. Reverend Daniel Arthur Holmes, of the Paseo Baptist Church, stood out as a particularly staunch opponent, openly condemning the Pendergast machine’s favor schemes and mismanagement of public funds from the pulpit despite the physical danger that such opposition posed.\(^{29}\) Moreover, social benefit organizations that sought to keep African American youth away from vice and crime were closely tied to local churches where ministers frequently sided with the black middle class on vice issues and used their pulpits as a platform to preach temperance, oppose vice-based leisure, and promote participation in uplift organizations.

Despite strong investment in uplift organizations, the black middle class believed that the institutions often went underused and underappreciated. The Paseo YMCA for example was left “to go after men and boys to use its facilities,” outraging anti-vice advocates and middle class blacks alike who believed that the center should serve as a primary source of recreation. The Call condemned this apparent apathy towards the YMCA, writing that “Murder stalks the streets, vice gathers in its victims, the children drift off into gangs to become penitentiary fodder while unthinking thousands wait to be begged to uphold the arms of the social Moses which guarantees wholesomeness for men and boys.”\(^{30}\) This dismay reveals the binary with which anti-vice

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advocates thought about black criminality and recreation. Youth and men were either good god-fearing participants in social betterment organizations and religious life, or destined to a life of crime and vice with no middle ground.

Middle class black efforts to change the behaviors and maintain the “morality” of their working-class counterparts were not limited to black men. Rather, middle class black women formed clubs and organizations that aimed to teach working class women more “respectable” behavior. One organization, The National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was founded in 1896 by a group of nationally prominent African American women, to improve education, ensure suffrage for black women, and actively oppose lynching. However, the NACW’s primary objectives also included promoting moral purity, church participation, and temperance. They believed that encouraging poor mothers to lead morally upright lives, as defined by middle class black respectability standards, was the only way to combat the believed working class tendency towards sin and the racist representation of blacks as immoral and primitive. In other words, middle-class black Republican women misguidedly contended that white representations of all blacks as dangerous and uncivilized stemmed from the behavior of working class blacks and their failure to embrace “respectable” middle class behaviors and tastes. From their perspective, the only way to fight prejudice against the entire race was to encourage working class blacks to adopt the trappings of middle class culture.

Although Kansas City had an active NACW chapter, little documentation survives describing the organization’s activities. Two local leaders, Myrtle Foster Cook and Josephine


Yates served the organization at the national level during the early 20th century, suggesting the Kansas City chapter operated consistently with the national organization’s stances and goals.\textsuperscript{33} Both Yates and Cook were also active in the local chapters of the YWCA and the NAACP, aligning the group’s outlook with those of other betterment organizations seeking to fight to spread of vice within the African American community.\textsuperscript{34}

The machine's role in promoting the white supremacist and patriarchal myth of the black rapist had a significant and long-lasting effect on Kansas City’s African American community. Although the construct of black criminality was mutually constitutive, incorporating both the racist attitudes of whites and classist attitudes of middle and upper class blacks, the Pendergast organization played a role in reinforcing both narratives. The decision to make the Vine Street Corridor a moral dumping ground for the city's red light district unquestionably reinforced white associations of blackness with crime and danger. However, the black middle class's strong opposition to the machine and advocacy for Prohibition exacerbated a class-based schism within the African American community. Middle class blacks immediately discredited those working class blacks who chose to associate with the machine, to accept its material benefits, or to vote for Democratic candidates as immoral and sinful contributors to intracommunal crime. Moreover, the absence of effective policing in Kansas City’s “zone of deviance” led to crime reporting in both white and African American news sources that unfairly reported white crime as a series of isolated incidents, and black crime as deeply systemic and endemic. The short-term impact of material benefits that working class African Americans derived from the Pendergast

\textsuperscript{33} Charles E. Coulter, \textit{Take up the Black Man’s Burden: Kansas City’s African American Communities, 1865-1939} (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 40.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
machine did not compensate for the organization’s full effect on the community. Rather by reinforcing segregation and concepts of black criminality in the white imagination, the machine’s impact was far greater and long-lasting than simple patronage and favors would suggest.
Conclusion

In September 2006, Kansas City memorialized the 12th and Vine area as the “Goin’ to Kansas City Plaza.” At the dedication, Juanita Moore, the Executive Director of the city’s American Jazz Museum called the new plaza “a physical symbol to help us all remember, and relive, the wonderfully vibrant early days of Kansas City jazz” and urged all of those listening to go to see the plaza and “reminisce.”¹ Just one example of the many ways that the city has sought to commemorate and celebrate the jazz era, the plaza represents a choice to privilege the celebration of the city’s strong African American cultural heritage and national prominence under Pendergast over the far more complex racial, cultural, and political reality. The city’s undeniable nostalgia for the roaring vice district of the Pendergast era fails to recognize the price that African Americans, specifically the working class, paid for that image and heritage.

A contradiction emerges as commemorative efforts not only fail to acknowledge the Pendergast organization’s detrimental contribution to constructs of black criminality and the vice quarantine’s destructive effects but go further by stripping African Americans of ownership over and credit for their own cultural accomplishments. The prevailing narrative ignores the era’s complicated racial history in favor of a problematic and sanitized memory designed to promote civic pride and bolster tourism. In an ironic twist, the Pendergast era’s glorified memory and supposed responsibility for Kansas City jazz becomes, itself, a commodity for commercialization. Tour companies offer a glimpse into the glamorous and dangerous world of 1920s gangsters while museums give tourists and locals alike an important glimpse into African

American culture during the period at the American Jazz Museum and the Negro League Baseball Museum, both only skimming the surface of the era’s oppressive racial legacy.

In 1939, Tom Pendergast was convicted of Income Tax Evasion and sentenced to fifteen years in Federal Penitentiary. With no clear heir and a mounting tide of anti-machine reformist sentiment, his organization declined into irrelevance. Pendergast’s fall in 1939 left the city’s African American working class in a political bind. Having shifted their allegiances to the Democratic Party, the rise of Lilywhite Republican reformers left them without the machine’s material benefits and disenfranchised by the new majority. The white reformers who gained control over local government associated black voters with Pendergast rule and declined to incorporate working class blacks into their coalition.²

Stricter law enforcement, particularly of vice industries such as prostitution, gambling, and illegal substances accompanied the rise of Republican reformers who actively sought to eradicate Pendergast’s prized red light district and renew rule of law. In the 1940s, Republican-dominated city governments began legislating clubs’ closing hours, requiring all establishments to close no later than 1 A.M., and in doing so, limited revenue for former Pendergast allies in the vice industry.³ Stricter enforcement of drug, prostitution, and gambling laws effectively ended the “zone of deviance” that sustained the vice industry during the 1920s and 1930s. This cocktail of anti-vice legislation and enforcement almost completely shut down the vice district by the middle of the following decade.


The material benefits, favors, and jobs associated with the Pendergast organization faded away with Boss Tom’s arrest in 1939 and with them went the benefits that many working-class blacks depended on often for their basic survival. The Pendergast organization’s influence on the African American community however did not end with the machine’s demise and that of the city’s storied vice district. In important ways, our present politics still confront ideas about black criminality that were shaped by machine politics during the Pendergast era in Kansas City and beyond.

Red light districts’ placements at the center of the African American and minority communities, in Kansas City and elsewhere, had long term effects on constructs of black criminality, particularly in the white imagination. They merely reinforced popular media portrayal of black men as fundamentally savage and sinful by building an association between where black people lived and where one went to partake in deviant activity. This social construct proved relevant in the long-term as ideas about black criminality bolstered during the early 20th century remain relevant to today’s political and social discourse.

Contemporary political and social movements echo the theme of black criminality, a likely long-term consequence of machine rule for urban blacks and one which historians have failed to appropriately identify. As of 2010, in Missouri, blacks made up thirty-nine percent of the state’s prison population but only twelve percent of all Missourians. This is notably representative of the national picture in which, as of 2010, blacks made up forty percent of the country’s incarcerated individuals but only thirteen percent of all Americans.\(^4\) If current incarceration trends hold, one-in-three African American men will serve time in prison at some

point during their lives and “in some cities more than half of all young adult black men are currently under correctional control— in prison or jail, on probation or parole.” These individuals are overwhelmingly sentenced for non-violent drug-related crimes, charges reminiscent of the types of vice activities that dominated Kansas City’s red light district during the Pendergast era and that, as such, marked black men as “purveyors of deviance.” In the same vein, the employment discrimination, housing discrimination, and denial of government services, that convicted felons face harken back to the Pendergast era in what Michelle Alexander influentially refers to as “the new Jim Crow.” This use of black criminal stereotypes in the justice system to perpetuate white supremacy links to political machines’ roles in bolstering white dominance through similar constructs of African American moral and legal deviance.

The undeniable parallels and connections between early 20th century condemnations of supposed systematic and inherent black criminality and the current debates on police brutality and mass incarceration make historic examinations of these themes as relevant as ever. Although political machines have fallen into irrelevance, new political mechanisms and racially biased institutions have arisen that continue to privilege the political power of some over the wellbeing of others and that continue to devalue minorities as “buyable” votes. Analyzing dominant political institutions’ roles in both generating and perpetuating white supremacy, as this thesis has sought to do, albeit on a small scale, is relevant to both understanding white supremacy’s modern manifestations and the ways in which politics may generate and transform racism moving forward. Identifying and evaluating the relationship between the Pendergast machine and

6 Ibid., 2.
Kansas City’s African American community forms only a small part of the necessary analysis, yet it constitutes a key step toward this goal.

Today, Tom Pendergast remains a legendary and larger than life character in Kansas City’s lore, credited for instilling the city with a sense of identity and encouraging the rise of its staple jazz scene. Many harken back to Pendergast’s rule as the golden era, a period where the city attracted national attention as an example of the cultural richness and economic prosperity for which every city should strive. At the same time, the city recognizes and seeks to celebrate the rich black culture and national relevance of its African American institutions during the same period. Unfortunately, civic groups frequently seek to reconcile these heritages by painting Pendergast as a paternalistic figure responsible for facilitating African American arts, including jazz. Despite admirable attempts to bring the city’s early 20th century African American culture to life, its juxtaposition with the popular glorification of the Democratic machine as the source of the city’s relevance and with Tom Pendergast’s promotion to patron of the city’s jazz scene undermines efforts to accurately commemorate African American culture and history.
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