■ CHAPTER ONE ■

African American Fraternalism
A Missing Chapter in the Story of U.S. Civic Democracy

On FEBRUARY 15, 1964, a "Freedom Now Rally" was held at the 369th Street Armory in New York City to demand "jobs and freedom for all Americans." This event was organized by the state-level organization of a leading African American fraternal group, the "Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge" of the Free and Accepted Masons of the "State of New York and Its Jurisdiction." As Grand Master James Harold Johnstone explained, "Our FREEDOM NOW RALLY is a partial implementation of a solemn pledge taken at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., on the historic 28th of August 1963, in the Centennial Year of Emancipation"—that is, a pledge taken during the 1963 March on Washington led by Martin Luther King, Jr., and other Civil Rights activists.

> Many hundreds of New York's Prince Hall Masons took that pledge, along with thousands of other persons of all races and creeds.
>
> In that pledge, we affirmed our complete personal commitment to the struggle for Jobs and Freedom for *all* Americans.
>
> To fulfill that commitment, we pledged we would not relax until victory is won.
>
> Here and now, on the 15th of February, 1964, we Prince Hall Masons *reaffirm that pledge*.
>
> We welcome all those who join us in that reaffirmation at this rally.[1]

To orchestrate the February 1964 Freedom Now Rally, the New York Grand Lodge of the Prince Hall Masons mobilized participants and tapped resources from a broad network of fraternal and nonfraternal organizations. Rally organizers created an attractive pamphlet with a cover depicting the New York Prince Hall Masons carrying their banner in the March on Washington. Dozens of supporting advertisements appeared in the pamphlet, many of them emblazoned with

civil rights slogans.[2] Declarations of solidarity came from fifty Prince Hall Masonic lodges located in New York City, in other cities across the state of New York, and in neighboring New Jersey and Connecticut—and also from ten women's lodges of the Prince Hall–affiliated Order of the Eastern Star. Some thirty-nine businesses, most of them no doubt black-owned or situated in black neighborhoods, helped to sponsor the rally. In addition, Baptist churches, trade union bodies, politicians and political clubs, a society of black New York firemen, and the Jewish Teamsters Goodwill and Benevolent Association lent their support.

Beyond activating a network of groups and enterprises to cosponsor their 1964 rally, the New York Prince Hall Masons used the event to promote organized activism. The "Freedom Now Rally" pamphlet urged local Prince Hall lodges that had not already done so to donate the money necessary to become "life members" of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Illustrations in the pamphlet honored slain Mississippi Civil Rights leader—and fellow Prince Hall Mason—Medgar Evers, and featured New York Prince Hall leaders presenting checks in support of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the National Urban League, and the United Negro College Fund. Entire pages were devoted to chronicling and honoring the increasingly militant activities of the NAACP, the Urban League, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In effect, New York Prince Hall Masons served as interorganizational brokers, channeling loyalties, energies, and moneys from apparently nonpolitical social and economic organizations toward ongoing protest struggles in the modern Civil Rights movement.

The efforts of the New York Prince Hall Masons in the 1960s flowed from traditions in their fraternal order. "As Prince Hall Masons," explained Grand Master Johnstone, "our resolution is strengthened by our awareness that, in this great crusade for freedom, we are continuing in the historic traditions of our Institution as exemplified almost two hundred years ago by our namesake, Prince Hall of Massachusetts Colony, who was the first Negro Freemason in America."[3]

Johnstone was referring to the establishment in 1775 of the first African American Masonic lodge in Boston, Massachusetts, by Prince Hall and other men of color who fought for America in the Revolutionary War. Prince Hall Masons eventually spread to many U.S. states.[4] They were leaders in the fights to abolish slavery and extend

rights and build social capacities for African Americans during the turbulent decades that followed the Civil War.[5]

Twentieth-century Prince Hall Masons cooperated with the NAACP and got involved in civil rights politics. Back in 1925, for example, Mrs. Joe Brown, head of the Prince Hall–affiliated Supreme Grand Chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star, called on constituent state organizations to cooperate with the NAACP in establishing Junior Divisions to further race pride and prepare young people for future leadership. She likewise urged "our women everywhere . . . to make use of their right of suffrage, where they are permitted to do so and . . . when they vote not to fail to place in office men and women who will safeguard the interest of our group as well as the public in general in both State and National legislatures, and by so doing we may do away with the present status wherein our National Congress has failed for two sessions to pass the Dyer Anti-Lynching bill."[6]

In the late 1950s, more than 300,000 Prince Hall Masons meeting in three dozen state grand lodges and more than four thousand local lodges took decisive steps in support of the modern Civil Rights movement.[7] Along with other Masonic bodies, including the African American Shriners, Prince Hall Masons undertook to raise large contributions to support NAACP legal challenges to racial discrimination and segregation.[8] State grand lodges spearheaded this and additional campaigns. As the Prince Hall Grand Master in Virginia put it in his January 1, 1958 Emancipation Day address, not only should "every colored American . . . resolve to support the N.A.A.C.P. this coming year, *and then* do it," black Masons in Virginia should also lead the way in registering to vote and helping others to exercise the franchise. The Virginia Grand Master advocated voter mobilization even in a southern state where such endeavors could be challenging, because, as he explained, the "Negro vote is the key factor in our struggle . . . freedom has never been *given*, to any race on *a silver platter*."[9]

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These civil rights undertakings by Prince Hall Masons offer a window into a vibrant African American organizational world that contributed significantly to historic and modern struggles for equal rights for all American citizens. As we will learn in this book, although Prince Hall Masonic lodges may have been the first African American fraternal bodies to emerge in the United States, they were far from the only ones. Between the early 1800s and the mid-twentieth century, dozens

of African American fraternal federations emerged and flourished—federations rooted in local lodges yet also organized within and across states. Quite a few of these federations grew to be nationally prominent, including black fraternal federations—such as the Prince Hall Masons, the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, and the Knights of Pythias of North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia—that paralleled major white fraternal organizations. Other nationally prominent fraternal federations—such as the United Brothers of Friendship and Sisters of the Mysterious Ten, and the Knights of Tabor and Daughters of the Tabernacle—were entirely distinctive to African Americans.

An extremely important part of U.S. associational life from the nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries, fraternal groups are self-selecting brotherhoods and associated female groups—and sometimes gender-integrated brotherhoods and sisterhoods. Stressing community under God and shared citizenship, fraternal lodges involve people from many occupations and walks of life, ranging from professionals and business persons to people supported by white-collar jobs, farming, and blue-collar labor. Fraternal lodges are typically linked together in federations that span local communities and may also tie states and regions together. In addition to local meetings, recurrent district, state, and national conventions are a prominent feature of fraternal life.

Fraternal federations foster mutual aid among members, and in many instances provide formal insurance benefits to cover costs due to sickness or death.[10] Yet fraternals are cultural as well as mutual-aid organizations, for they invariably enact distinctive rituals at weekly, biweekly, or monthly meetings. "Secret" in that only members are supposed to know them, fraternal rituals are morality plays in which officers and members have roles to enact. Rituals cement group identities, teach members about shared values and norms, and instruct ever-rotating sets of elected officers in the rules they must follow to carry through their official responsibilities honestly and effectively.

Although many of their activities are for members only, fraternal groups have also undertaken civic and political activities—to improve local communities and influence state and national governments. The civic presence of fraternal groups may be expressed by something as basic as organizing or participating in a parade—perhaps, as often happened with African Americans, with a banner or a float

dramatizing support for equal rights. Fraternal groups have prepared citizens for wider participation by teaching organizational and leadership skills to millions of Americans. Fraternal groups have contributed to community causes as volunteers and made donations to community projects and educational scholarships. They often maintain halls in which groups in addition to the fraternal lodges themselves can meet. And from time to time, American fraternal groups have gotten involved in legislative or policy campaigns or sponsored lawsuits—in the case of African American groups, often in order to promote civil rights or outlaw racial segregation.

This book tells the story of popularly rooted, cross-class African American fraternal organizations that spanned local communities and bridged states.[11] We pull together what is known so far about the numbers, characteristics, and activities of these remarkable organizations. By documenting how extensively and intensively African American men and women made use of fraternal forms of organization that were also popular among other American races, our book aims to retrieve the substantial place of African American fraternalism in the overall development of associational life in the United States.

By better documenting the long-term organizational achievements of African Americans, this book also aims to broaden understandings of the roots of the modern Civil Rights movement. Churches and formal protest organizations like the NAACP were not the only institutional supports for black collective assertion and modern civil rights agitation—not the only groups that fostered solidarity and built capacities for concerted agitation. From the nineteenth century to the 1960s, African American fraternal organizations also made central contributions to the struggle for equal rights.

A Missing Part of America's Civic Past

Americans have long been known for their special proclivity to organize and join voluntary groups. "Associations are created, extended, and worked in the United States more quickly and effectively than in any other country," observed James Bryce in *The American Commonwealth*. The "greater" associations "ramify over the country and have great importance in the development of opinion," influencing elections and public affairs.[12] Lord Bryce's comments echoed earlier observations by Alexis de Tocqueville, and foreshadowed arguments

about the centrality of voluntarism to U.S. democracy by twentieth-century scholars such as Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and Robert D. Putnam.[13] Americans are a "nation of joiners," declared Schlesinger in his celebrated presidential address delivered to the American Historical Association at the height of World War II. Voluntary organization "has provided the people with their greatest school of self government. . . . In mastering the associative way they have mastered the democratic way."[14]

Yet where do *African* Americans fit in the nation's civic history? Contemporary scholars take it for granted that African Americans have long been devoted churchgoers, and many studies, past and present, document the pervasive role of African American churches in U.S. social life, culture, and politics.[15] But received scholarly wisdom is much more at odds over the nature of African American associational achievements beyond church-building. As a once-enslaved people forced into long struggles for citizenship rights in the century after legal Emancipation, were African Americans also avid voluntary organizers and joiners, or were they civicly marginalized during much of the nation's past?

Recent scholarship highlights the deeply rooted inequalities that have discouraged full civic participation by African Americans. Some scholars stress the inherent weakness of social capital in impoverished, racially divided rural areas such as Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta.[16] Others argue that ethnic and racial divisions are inherent obstacles to social trust and high levels of associational membership.[17] Still other scholars, such as Sidney Verba and his associates, analyze the ways in which the lower incomes and limited educational attainments of many African Americans have translated into reduced individual participation in non–church-based civic activities.[18]

The best-known contemporary student of civic engagement, Robert D. Putnam, points to ethnically differentiated streams of immigration and legacies from the nation's bitter history of African slavery as key factors shaping the civic cultures of various U.S. states and regions. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam assesses 1990s levels of "social capital" in U.S. states, using a quantitative index that omits church attendance but combines fourteen other (highly intercorrelated) variables measuring community participation, volunteering, social trust, and political participation.[19] The resulting map of "Social Capital in the American States" shows that the historically whitest parts of the country are also the most civic, leaving aside church participation. Speculating about

the causes of what he sees as long-standing disparities, Putnam (2000: 294) argues that "[s]lavery was, in fact, a social system *designed* to destroy social capital among slaves and between slaves and freemen. After emancipation the dominant classes in the South continued to have a strong interest in inhibiting horizontal social networks. It is not happenstance that the lowest levels of community-based social capital are found where a century of plantation slavery was followed by a century of Jim Crow politics."[20] According to the full logic of Putnam's argument, historically black regions of the United States lagged in civic participation, and African Americans migrating to the North may have carried value legacies from slavery and Jim Crow that discouraged participation in new settings.[21]

Slavery, racial domination, and segregation obviously obstructed civic ties between blacks and whites; and in many places African Americans were barred from full participation in trade unionism and electoral politics from the late nineteenth century until the 1960s and 1970s. But the assumption that African Americans have otherwise always found it hard to organize among themselves flies in the face of much scholarship to the contrary—indeed, contradicts the standard judgment of earlier generations of scholars. "Despite the fact that they are predominantly lower class," wrote Gunnar Myrdal in his landmark 1944 treatise *An American Dilemma,* "Negroes are more inclined to join associations than are whites; in this respect . . . , Negroes are 'exaggerated' Americans."[22] Myrdal cited evidence on southern as well as northern African American communities from detailed background studies prepared by leading African American scholars such as J. G. St. Clair Drake and Harry Walker. What is more, Myrdal's claim that African Americans were avid voluntary organizers and joiners echoed earlier findings by pioneering scholars of black civic life such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Howard Odum, and Arthur Raper.[23] Myrdal's contention was later reconfirmed by a number of early representative social surveys documenting that, especially with controls for income and education, African Americans were *more* likely than whites to join voluntary associations and participate in many kinds of civic activities.[24]

The earlier scholarly view of the civic achievements of African Americans is well summed up by Robert Austin Warner, who concluded in his remarkable study, *New Haven Negroes: A Social History*, that the "life of the colored folk of New Haven is undoubtedly more sociable than that of a white New England town of comparable size."[25]

"Since 1790 other racial and cultural groups . . . have risen," Warner observed,

> but none has made as great an advance as the Negro achieved from slavery to independence and civil equality. None has started from so great a handicap of cultural disorganization and created an organized society separate from the rest of the community. . . . From being a suppressed racial element at the lowest class level in colonial society, with limited rights, and without pride and the support of a retained foreign culture, they have risen to the position of citizens with their own churches, clubs, and traditions. . . . The social and educational rise has been at least equal to, and the civil rise greater than, any other element.[26]

Earlier observers attended closely to the African American fraternal associations that flourished *between* the time of slavery and the late twentieth century. "The lodge, more than any other merely social organization, is a permanent and ever-increasing force" among blacks, wrote African American social settlement activist Fannie Barrier Williams in 1905. "Next to the Negro church in importance, as affecting the social life of the people, are the secret orders" she wrote. "These affect every phase of their social life and represent the best achievements of the race in the matter of organization. . . . In no other form of organization do the terms of brotherhood and mutual obligations mean so much."[27] As noted above, U.S. fraternal groups often provided their members with insurance against sickness and death; and Progressive Era reformer and student of social benefits Isaac Max Rubinow noted that "outside of the immigrant groups, the negroes represent the only class of population where the habit of mutual insurance through voluntary association has developed to the highest degree in the United States."[28] Through much of U.S. history, African American fraternal associations bridged classes and locations and offered many opportunities not only for group self-help but also for public assertion and leadership on social and civil rights concerns. As historian Charles Wesley put it, "no other organization, except the church, could boast of reaching into the masses of the Negro population and at the same time into the middle class and the intelligentsia with its appeal and its leadership."[29]

In recent scholarship, only a few researchers have focused on African American fraternalism.[30] To be sure, many community studies briefly describe African American lodges in particular places and

times.[31] But little comprehensive research on translocal fraternal associations has been done since Edward Nelson Palmer's pioneering 1944 overview of "Negro Secret Societies" and two early studies of black efforts in social insurance that also included discussions of fraternal associations.[32] In part, systematic research on African American fraternal groups has lagged because data on group histories and memberships are very hard to find. National and local directories giving rich details about white voluntary associations between the 1870s and the 1920s often omitted most African American associations other than churches. Equally pertinent, since the 1960s the study of the history of U.S. fraternal groups has been out fashion, as scholarly attention has focused either on working-class politics or on contemporary social movements. Viewed as odd relics of the past, fraternal groups of all kinds, including African American fraternals, have been ignored by all but a few contemporary scholars, thus ensuring much less attention than there should be to a massive aspect of America's civic past.

Black Fraternalism and the Struggle for Civic Equality

Neglect of African American fraternalism has also constricted our understanding of long-standing civil rights struggles and the institutional roots of modern black protests. The modern Civil Rights movement, which reached a crescendo in the mass protests of the 1950s and 1960s, expressed remarkable solidarity among African Americans across lines of class, gender, and residential location, enabling blacks to fashion broad appeals to fellow Americans while taking on the repressive segregationist order, pressing until the overt legal supports of that regime gave way. Yet the mass movements of the 1950s and 1960s did not come out of an institutional void. Contemporary scholars have come to appreciate the contributions to the modern Civil Rights movement of long-established organizational networks and collective traditions of black churches and the NAACP—and it is high time to add African American fraternal traditions and organizational capacities to this picture.

Autonomous churches took shape among free African Americans from colonial and early national times, yet black churches in the South as well as the North became steadily more organizationally independent in the decades following the Civil War. Black churches

served as centers of overt political and electoral activism in the immediate postwar decades.[33] During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when repression and Jim Crow limited possibilities for overt black political action, churches remained centers of community identity and collective self-assertion, with women as well as men taking leadership roles.[34] As sociologists Aldon Morris and Doug McAdam have brilliantly documented, the capacities of black southern churches to support autonomous, challenging political action grew with the expansion of urban life in the South, especially from the 1930s to the 1950s, when urban congregations and ministers grew and gained resources and freedom of maneuver.[35] Working in conjunction with vanguard direct-action organizations, such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (founded in 1957), southern urban black churches and ministers orchestrated mass participation in the militant boycotts and protests of the 1950s and 1960s.[36]

Southern black churches also had a long tradition of cooperation with another key organization in the long-term fight for civil rights—the NAACP. Black ministers were often members, and black churches contributed funds and offered places for NAACP branches to meet.[37] Launched from New York City in 1910, the NAACP originally grew most rapidly in the North. Yet the NAACP established branches in all southern states by 1918, and from the 1930s to the 1950s, southern NAACP units steadily proliferated more rapidly than northern units.[38] To be sure, the NAACP was always a relatively small, elite organization, which joined together smatterings of white elites opposed to American racism with many African American ministers, lawyers, teachers, doctors, and business people. Throughout the twentieth century, the NAACP used lawsuits, public advocacy, and lobbying to fight racial segregation and further equal civil rights for African Americans. After 1954, the NAACP especially pushed for implementation of the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* calling for desegregation of the public schools. When the mass protest phase of the modern Civil Rights movement arrived, some NAACP branches participated, especially youth branches, and NAACP lawyers continued to press forward on legal challenges to desegregation.

As the largest and most extensive sector of popularly rooted social organization next to churches, African American fraternal lodges and federations likewise nurtured African American solidarity and supported many instances of civil rights advocacy from the nineteenth century, through the post–Civil War and Jim Crow periods, and down

to eruption of modern Civil Rights militancy. Like church denominations and the NAACP, fraternal groups created wide-ranging organizational networks that spanned localities and regions of the country and allowed African Americans to mobilize resources on behalf of struggles for equal rights.

African American fraternal self-assertion started before the Civil War, when the Prince Hall Masons and the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows spread lodges among free blacks, especially along the eastern seaboard. Because both emerged after white Masons and Odd Fellows refused to extend their apparently universal principles of brotherhood to free blacks in the United States, the very existence of these African American federations, chartered by white British Masons and Odd Fellows, represented a demand for self-respect and equal treatment—and a challenge to the hypocrisy of white Americans. In his argument for establishing an order of Odd Fellows separate from the white U.S. Independent Order of Odd Fellows that had rejected African American applicants, Peter Ogden, the founder of the black Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, argued in 1842 and 1843 that it was "folly, a waste of time, if not self-respect, to stand, hat in hand, at the foot-stool of a class of [white American] men who, professing benevolence and fraternity, were most narrow and contracted, a class of men who judged another, not by principle and character, but by the shape of the nose, the curl of the hair, and the hue of the skin."[39] White Odd Fellows were betraying their own principles of Friendship, Love, and Truth, and African Americans should thus organize to carry forward these principles on their own.

The decades immediately following the Union triumph in the Civil War and the Emancipation of the slaves were an era of extraordinary institution-building and optimistic political self-assertion among African Americans newly empowered by amendments to the U.S. Constitution. As we will see in greater detail in subsequent chapters, fraternal federations grew rapidly in this era, as Prince Hall Masons and black Odd Fellows spread lodges into former slave states, and as dozens of new black fraternal federations emerged and spread, especially from the border states. Mutual aid and ritualism were key activities of all black fraternal groups, as they were for white groups also proliferating in this era; and these core activities did much to support black communities and reinforce shared values and identities. But in the immediate postwar era, black fraternal groups were also part of a range of interlinked black organizations—along with churches,

militia companies, Republican Party clubs—that asserted African American claims to full citizenship. In rural areas as well as in cities, African American politicians made election appeals through fraternal groups as well as other community institutions.[40] And colorful contingents of male and female African American fraternalists marching in full regalia often participated in processions to honor milestones such as Emancipation Day (commemorating the anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation) or civil rights amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

One resplendent example is the massive parade held on May 19, 1870 to celebrate the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment giving freed slaves the right to vote. The march was held in Baltimore, Maryland—sometimes considered the capital of black America in the nineteenth century.[41] Featuring colorful floats—including a wagon with a printing press on which copies of the Fifteenth Amendment were struck to hand out to the crowds of onlookers—the parade lasted about five hours and covered six and a half miles. According to the detailed report that appeared in the *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser* on Friday, May 20, "not less than ten thousand colored people were in the march and ten thousand more lined the sidewalks."[42] Notables at the head of the march rode in carriages behind a banner proclaiming "Ring out the old. Ring in the new. Ring out the false. Ring in the true." They were followed by disciplined contingents from many black organizations—providing a virtual panorama of African American civil society at this moment of hopeful celebration of citizenship. Units of black Union Army veterans marched, as did police and militia units, Republican Party clubs, ward clubs, freemen's associations, social clubs and benevolent societies, school groups, the Young Men's Christian Association, workingmen's organizations, and church contingents. Likewise, a backbone of every division of the march were black fraternalists carrying banners emblazoned with the mottoes of their orders. These included many lodge contingents from the Independent Order of Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria; from the Grand United Order of Galilean Fishermen; from the Grand United Order of Nazarites; and, above all, from the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows—who "were a very important feature of the procession and made an imposing appearance." Baltimore was certainly not the only place where such politically explicit celebrations occurred—and fraternalists were prominent parts of the rich organizational order everywhere.

By the late nineteenth century, African Americans found themselves in a new, repressive era, and it is notable that, along with black churches, black fraternal orders were mainstays of self-organization for blacks during the difficult times of segregation, disenfranchisement, and threatening violence that prevailed from the 1880s to the mid-twentieth century.[43] As political parties and unions became hard for blacks to sustain, especially in the South, fraternal orders were one of the few secular institutions that survived and grew. Indeed, in some ways, African American fraternal orders became most numerous and densely present in local communities around the turn of the century.

Fraternal groups did many things for African Americans in these difficult decades. The mutual aid and social insurance orchestrated by fraternals were mainstays of economic security in an era when black insurance companies were not yet strong and white insurance companies refused to sell policies to blacks. And fraternal federations also offered economic opportunities beyond the provision of social insurance payments at the death or illness of a worker-member. In times and places where blacks had few chances to create well-capitalized business enterprises, African American fraternal orders expressed and fostered entrepreneurial talents, paid wages to black employees, and allowed blacks to use dues payments to amass considerable institutional capital. As of the early 1920s, more than sixty nationally visible "secret and fraternal organizations" had about 2.2 million members and owned $20 million worth of property, including grand headquarters buildings, banks, and hospitals and social-welfare institutions in places ranging from Philadelphia, Indianapolis, and Chicago, to Atlanta, New Orleans, and Hot Springs, Arkansas.[44] What is more, historian Carter G. Woodson celebrated black fraternal orders as one of the wellsprings of black-owned insurance companies, which he argued eventually became "more prosperous than any other large enterprises among Negroes."[45]

African American fraternals also served vital civic and political purposes. In places where blacks retained the right to vote, fraternal federations continued to allow black politicians to make appeals and work contacts in the African American community. Like many other black fraternals, over many years prior to the late 1920s, the black Elks participated actively in Republican Party politics.[46] From the late 1920s, especially in northern cities, blacks developed ties to Democrats. Thus, for example, the Official Program of the 1926 national meeting of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows held in Baltimore

included an advertisement placed by a lodge brother running for office, probably in Maryland, which read: "Vote for John L. Myers, Your Friend Democratic Candidate State Senate from the Sixth District"; it went on to indicate that Myers was a member of the Prince Hall Masons and the Eastern Star as well as the black Odd Fellows.[47]

Everywhere, participation in fraternal groups allowed a measure of sheer public assertion for African Americans, no matter how constricted their overall options for collective action. In the North, fraternalists continued to parade at fraternal conventions and in celebration of Emancipation Day and other holidays of special significance to blacks. And in the South, fraternalists marched in funeral parades, even in places where other public assemblages of African Americans were prohibited.[48] Finally, black lodges by the thousands gave many ordinary African American men and women virtually the only chances they might have to get elected to offices, to run organizations, and to learn and exercise organizational skills.

Because fraternal orders sometimes grew into massive organizational networks run by blacks themselves—through paid and volunteer leadership positions—they could further struggles for equal rights even in the most difficult periods and places. In 1891, to give one example, African Americans in Arkansas faced a campaign in the state legislature to enact a statute mandating separate black and white waiting rooms and carriages on the railroads—part of the general rollback of hard-won equal rights that was occurring across the South at the time. Many blacks were too fearful of intimidation to speak out, but in "Little Rock . . . such threats were ignored. Here the urban black community had achieved a measure of freedom and economic security and proved both active and articulate furnishing the principal opposition to the 'Jim Crow' cars."[49] Mass meetings were held, and an organization to lead the opposition was formed, led by a committee that—tellingly—included John E. Bush, one of the co-founders of a major black fraternal organization headquartered in Little Rock, the Mosaic Templars of America. Along with a handful of others, all property owners and professionals, Bush had the institutional and personal independence necessary to lead a struggle (unsuccessful, unfortunately) against the imposition of Jim Crow.[50]

Between the 1890s and the 1930s, as we will learn in detail later in this book, major black fraternal orders paralleling white orders had to wage protracted legal battles to defend their right to use similar rituals and names—the "Knights of Pythias" and "the Elks" in particular.

White fraternalists were vexed and worried by the growth of black orders, so in many states they engineered the passage of legislation that attempted to outlaw their black counterparts. This amounted to a fundamental attack against black civil rights—threatening the very right to organize in the name of values that African American fraternalists believed were universal. Faced with such a mortal threat, certain of the major African American orders were able to draw support from their vast federated networks of local lodges and carry the legal battle all the way to the Supreme Court, which ultimately ruled that black orders had the right to exist. Some of the black lawyers who first learned the ropes of civil rights litigation in these fraternal cases later went on to work on other civil rights litigation with the NAACP.

Mississippi in the 1940s and after affords another southern example of fraternal support for black assertion.[51] The Knights of Tabor and Daughters of the Tabernacle were flourishing—with over fifty thousand members meeting in one thousand lodges by 1945—in large part because they opened a black-run hospital in the all–African American town of Mound Bayou in 1942. Perry M. Smith, the leader of the Knights of Tabor in Mississippi, was also a member of, and major contributor to, the Mound Bayou branch of the NAACP. The example of Tabor's growth, along with leadership competition, inspired the creation of another, breakaway, Mississippi fraternal order, the United Order of Friendship of America. The leader of this order, Dr. Theodore Roosevelt Mason Howard, not only founded a hospital for his order, but also "became a Mississippi legend in civil rights" by helping to found the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL). This was a "clearinghouse of black fraternal, business, and educational leaders" that "promoted voting registration campaigns, equal treatment by law enforcement, self-help, and entrepreneurship." And RCNL heads "included two future heads of the state NAACP" in Mississippi.

Indeed, just as black churches often sheltered, materially supported, and lent leaders to the NAACP, so did African American fraternal orders—especially through the middle decades of the twentieth century. In addition to the instances just mentioned (and others we will discuss later in the book), we saw an example of this at the opening of this chapter, which narrated ways in which Prince Hall Masons lent active support to the NAACP. Yet the most important example of coordination of efforts with the NAACP and other organizations fighting for equality has not been introduced yet. Along with the Prince Hall

Masons, the black Elks—the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World (IBPOE of W) and their women's partner organization, the Daughters of the IBPOE of W—provided highly visible leadership in civil rights struggles throughout much of the twentieth century.

The IBPOE of W was arguably the most dynamic black fraternal order of the twentieth century, for it had a secular outlook—bridging self-help and civil rights militancy—that was very attractive to many urban working-class and professional adherents, who joined in large numbers as African Americans migrated from rural areas into southern and northern cities.[52] The black Elks were an urban-centered fraternal federation.

Starting in 1927, the black Elks set up a formally organized Civil Rights Commission (later Department) that undertook to coordinate campaigns against segregation and for equal political and civil rights. The commission was initially led by a prominent civil rights attorney, Robert J. Nelson, who quickly engaged it in "vigorous civil rights programs at the state, local, and national levels," including efforts to fight segregation in the federal civil service, opposition to school segregation, vindication of the rights of individuals, and engagement with lawsuits.[53] Commenting on early activities, historian Charles Dickerson reports that the "Elks Civil Liberties Department usually acted in conjunction with the National Equal Rights League, the NAACP and the YMCA in fighting for Negro rights. However, the Civil Liberties Department often acted alone as it did in forcing Gary, Indiana to rescind a metropolitan bill to build a segregated Black high school."[54]

A very similar picture remains in focus decades later. At the 1954 national Elks convention, the then head of the Civil Liberties Department, Hobson R. Reynolds, reported that he "had traveled with the Grand Exalted Ruler into every state in order to make the people civil rights conscious. He outlined the main objectives of the department as the formulation of plans for the desegregation of the public school system, to urge participation in voting, to fight segregation in all its forms, to organize civil liberties leagues, to cooperate with other [Elks] departments and with labor organizations in opposing discrimination on account of race and color."[55] In sum, the remarkable institutionalization of civil liberties work in the Elks federation meant that consistent staff and organizational resources were devoted to the struggle for equal rights over many decades.

We might imagine that the impact of the Elks was centered in the

North, yet over the decades prior to the eruption of mass civil rights protests, the IBPOE of W developed important institutional resources in the black South, too. Like the NAACP, the black Elks emerged in the North and only later spread south. By 1920, only 26 percent of 213 U.S. Elks lodges were in the South, and those were concentrated mainly in Virginia and North Carolina.[56] But once the black Elks won legal battles and the white Elks stopped challenging their right to organize, expansion was swift, including in the South. By 1927, the IBPOE of W had a substantial presence across all eleven states of the old Confederacy, and more than 39 percent of its 678 U.S. lodges were in the South.[57] As of 1954, the proportion of southern presence remained the same, with 39 percent of 728 U.S. lodges in large and small cities across the South.[58] Counting not just male Elks lodges, in fact, but also associated female "Daughter Elks" temples, the IBPOE of W had a network of some 558 southern organizations in 1954, with many in every state.[59] With a national membership of around three-quarters of a million in the mid-1950s, Elks and Daughter Elks were more numerous than NAACP members; and the Elks federation also bridged cities across regions.[60] Although the proportional weight of the Elks in the South was not as great as that of the NAACP, the Elks tied hundreds of southern lodges and temples into a nationally federated and centrally managed organization powerfully identified with the struggle for equality.[61]

In February 1950, the black Elks supported an active voter registration drive in southern and border states. Calling for special attention to "Florida, North Carolina, Texas, Alabama, Virginia, South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Louisiana, Arkansas, Maryland, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Kentucky," every lodge was urged to "make all-out registration drives its first order of business. Every Elk should join hands with all other community leaders, especially our good churchmen, to create a solid, non-partisan community front to register another million voters this spring."[62] In 1953, moreover, the Elks proposed grand alliance consisting of their organization, two national Baptist conventions, the NAACP, African American newspapers, labor organizations, and civic groups—a total of "95 Negro organizations and groups"—to push forward voter registration drives, especially in the South.[63] The year 1953 was also the first time the Elks convened their national convention in the Deep South, when they gathered in Atlanta, Georgia.[64] This magnified their southern impact at the very moment when Elks' civil rights efforts were intensifying, and just as southern civil rights

struggles were taking a militant turn. Not surprisingly, the black Elks got directly involved in those struggles, not only by lending steady encouragement to efforts to register voters, but also by defending the NAACP when it came under attack in the South, and joining campaigns to integrate the schools and desegregate buses and public facilities.[65]

Looking Ahead

The chapters to come offer a detailed picture of the emergence, spread, and activities of African American fraternal federations. In chapter 2, we will describe how dozens of African American fraternal groups spanning localities and states emerged in the same eras that native-born whites and ethnic whites also organized fraternal federations. We also present the highlights of the growth of fourteen of the most prominent African American fraternal federations, including groups that paralleled white fraternals and groups that were entirely distinctive to African Americans.

Chapter 3 examines the incidence of locally present lodges in greater detail, comparing intensity of organization among white and black fraternalists, and men and women. In many places, blacks built even more lodges per capita than whites, and African American women were especially strong participants in the fraternal world. A high density of fraternal lodges among African American men and women meant that many people who rarely had authority at work or in formal politics gained unique opportunities to learn organizational skills and serve as group leaders, laying the basis for many other organizational endeavors. Fraternal federations also enhanced the capacities of African Americans for collective action by spanning classes, religious denominations, and regions of the United States—and by linking people of color across national boundaries.

Chapter 4, written by Bayliss Camp and Orit Kent, explores the rituals that were so central to American fraternal orders. This chapter makes creative use of printed fraternal initiation rituals, comparing the themes stressed in white and black orders, and in men's and women's lodges. Fraternal rituals developed identities and values stressing individual proprietorship, women's roles as helpmates, and community participation in a shared journey. Interestingly, black women fraternalists and members of gender-integrated fraternal

groups distinctive to African Americans were especially likely to enact rituals that stressed themes of community solidarity and responsibility.

In chapter 5, we tell the stirring story of the legal fights certain African American fraternal orders waged to defend their right to exist—fights that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where African Americans ultimately prevailed. Involving some of the lawyers who later went on to work with the NAACP, this struggle won some of the major victories in the quest for equal civil rights in America.

In chapter 6, we look more closely at broader civil rights struggles of the mid-twentieth century, noting instances in which African American fraternal groups mobilized people and money in support of the NAACP, voting rights campaigns, and struggles for desegregation. As befits the central role this particular fraternal group played, this chapter focuses especially on activities of the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World and the Daughter Elks.

Throughout the book, our scholarship relies on a unique combination of sources of evidence and research methods, borrowing from both history and the social sciences. We have used old official histories as well as scholarly studies to learn about particular African American fraternal federations. We have pulled evidence from a very broad range of rich ethnographic and community studies. We have used old U.S. city directories that happen to include local counts of African American as well as white fraternal lodges. And we have mined the fascinating associational listings of the *Negro Year Book* compiled by sociologist Monroe N. Work of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute and published periodically between the 1910s and the early 1950s.

To develop statistics on memberships and numbers of lodges in major fraternal federations, we have located national and state-level organizational proceedings in various libraries and archives—and purchased more of them by bidding in eBay auctions on the Internet. Evidence about fraternal rituals comes from fraternal ritual handbooks found in libraries or purchased in antique stores or on the Internet. Legal compendia and official organizational histories provide data on the role of African American fraternal groups in courtroom struggles and in the national civil rights movement. And we have mined runs of fraternal newspapers—especially the official black Elks organ, the *Washington Eagle*, for further insights on legal, civic, and political activities. Specific references to the sources we have used

appear in notes throughout the volume, often with comments that will show interested scholars how we made inferences or put facts together.

The data sources for this book are thus highly eclectic. We have certainly not exhausted all of the possibilities. Indeed, more remains to be done by scholars who can piece together evidence from local black newspapers, and by scholars who gain access to whatever fraternal archives have survived the vagaries of organizational histories.

Nevertheless, substantial progress has been made here. By combining and triangulating among many different kinds of primary and secondary sources, and pulling together knowledge that was scattered and fragmentary, we have assembled the best picture to date of the rich history of African American fraternal federations, retrieving an often-overlooked chapter in the history of U.S. civil society. And we have offered a valuable window into the critical role these organizations played, along with churches and advocacy organizations, in the lengthy struggle waged by African Americans to vindicate their basic rights as equal citizens in U.S. democracy. In effect, this was a struggle that black faternalists waged on behalf of the ideals of all Americans.