Alabama Black Belt Politics: Promise and Peril, 1890-1935

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Abstract: This thesis examines African Americans in Alabama’s Black Belt—the majority constituent in the region—and their centrality in Republican and Communist Party voter campaigns. The Black Belt, originally named for the geological conditions of the soil, was home to a large enslaved population in the nineteenth century. As African Americans became the largest settled community across the belt’s counties, they were seen as useful constituents, first by Alabama politicians in the early twentieth century, and then, by the Communist Party in the 1930s. Both hoped to mobilize African American voters to bolster support for their own parties. These instances reflect a consistent trend of disregarding Black Belt residents as independent political actors. This thesis shows that despite earlier failures by the Republican Party to politically incorporate African Americans, the Communist Party would later create a mutually beneficial relationship. African Americans worked within the party to advocate for their own needs. This self-advocacy by African Americans is often overlooked in regional histories of the area.

“We feel that we are shirking a responsibility if we did not make every proper, legal effort to carry on the traditions which since the days of the Tragic Era of Reconstruction have characterized the Democratic Party of Alabama… This court decision has opened the way to flood of negro registration and negro domination at the polls of Alabama especially in our Black Belt counties.”[[1]](#footnote-1) – Alabama Democratic Party, 1946

In 1946, the Alabama Democratic Party published a pamphlet summing up a half-century of political disputes in the state, all centering around one region: the Black Belt. Located throughout the middle counties of the state, the Black Belt represented a region that held great political potential, due to its significant African American population. Following the conclusion of the Civil War, Democrats prevented African Americans from voting, as Black voters almost universally did not support the White supremacist party. Some White Republicans, on the other hand, believed they could mobilize the Black vote in the 20th century. Decades later it was the Communist Party, recognizing the unique demographics of Alabama, who mobilized the African American community to support their political agenda.

African American self-advocacy is often overshadowed in discussions of the region’s history, in favor of focusing on larger political institutions that attempted to utilize the region for political gain African Americans, however, were extremely adept at working within the frameworks of these outsiders to achieve their goals. Despite this, political operatives spent decades in the region hoping to utilize the untapped Black political potential. This thesis highlights how the African American community advocated for themselves in the first decades of the twentieth century, either independently of these outside political entities or within them.

Alabama’s Black Belt is so named for its dark, fertile region of soil well suited for cultivating cotton. As the cotton industry grew exponentially, so too did the African American population, as the unfree laborers who cultivated this crop. As such, Black Belt counties were predominately African American in an otherwise White state. Figure 1 shows a map of the United States compiled from the 1860 census showing the distribution of the enslaved population in the Southern United States. Black Belt counties, Greene, Lowndes, and Wilcox all show a population composed of almost 70% enslaved people, while the surrounding non-Black Belt counties almost exclusively have enslaved populations below 50%.[[2]](#footnote-2) Figure 2 demonstrates the increase in the number of cotton bales produced in Alabama from 1820 through 1860. With each dot representing 2,000 bales, it is evident the Antebellum period saw immense growth in cotton production.[[3]](#footnote-3) Even after the conclusion of the Civil War, agriculture remained the central industry in the Black Belt, with African Americans working as tenant farmers.



Fig. 1: Distribution of Enslaved Population in Alabama in 1860. Percentages on the map is the portion of the population registered as slaves.2

 Figure 2: Cotton Production in the Southeast United States. 1820-1860. Each dot represents 2,000 bales of cotton.3

After the conclusion of the Civil War, conditions for African Americans were still disproportionately worse than that of their White neighbors. As tenant farmers Black life was characterized by poverty and inequality.[[4]](#footnote-4)

With clear disparities between races and the exclusion of African Americans from voting, individuals took note and attempted to influence the political scene in Alabama either in favor of, or simply under the guise of advocating for, African Americans. White Alabaman Joseph C. Manning wrote frequently to other members of the state’s Republican Party between 1907 and 1912 demonstrating his personal desire to protect and encourage the African American vote, in hopes that it would push forward the Republican Party. Despite this, he never publicly advocated for any relevant issues of the African American community during this time beyond the right to vote, limiting the party’s reach. A few decades later, the Communist Party also tried to mobilize the African American population to support their party. They published newspapers critiquing local politics and consistently brought attention to issues of oppression, hoping to encourage Black political mobilization. Unlike Manning, the Communist Party managed to appeal to portions of the African American community who worked within the party to achieve educational advances and social support, goals that they long struggled to achieve in the face of great resistance by the Black Belt’s White ruling class.

Defining the Black Belt:

Alabama’s Black Belt Region is defined today by its demographics, which have stayed relatively consistent. In 2020, the United States Census found that 12.4% of citizens identified as African Americans – in contrast to 64.1% who identified as White.[[5]](#footnote-5) While Alabama has a higher percentage of African Americans than the national average at 25.8%, the state is still majority White. That is – until you reach the Black Belt, a region whose formation extends beyond the human occupation of the land and directly impacts how the racial composition of the area will develop.

The boundaries of the Black Belt are fluid, but dominant conceptions of the region have remained largely consistent since the turn of the twentieth century. In 1883, an agricultural report presented to the geological survey of Alabama referred to 14 counties as “the Black Belt” creating one of the first published uses of the term. The Geological Survey of Alabama defined the region once again in 1989, composing the definition of the fourteen counties, based on the geologic nature of the area.[[6]](#footnote-6) In 1992, Scott A. Samson and Gerald R. Webster set out to define the Black Belt by comparing four separate definitions of the boundaries throughout history scholars concluded that the region, originally defined by its geologic character, was now associated with African American population more than anything.[[7]](#footnote-7)

100 million years ago, during the Cretaceous period, subduction along the western edge of the modern-day United States combined with greenhouse conditions created a foreland basin across the land resulting in a seaway covering much of the land composing of today’s United States.[[8]](#footnote-8) Put simply, as the Earth was warmer in the past compared to today, sea level was higher globally extending into regions of land at lower elevations which includes Alabama’s Black Belt (Fig. 3).[[9]](#footnote-9) As tectonic uplift took place and global sea levels dropped, this region became exposed with limestone-rich soil. This soil provided optimal growing conditions for King Cotton, contrasting the acidic soil of surrounding areas.[[10]](#footnote-10) A geologic map of Alabama published in 1849 (Fig. 4), shows early knowledge of carbonate deposit locations, corresponding to locations for major cotton production.[[11]](#footnote-11)

 Fig 3: Map of the Upper Cretaceous Western Interior Seaway, which extends to the boundaries of the Black Belt. The grey deposits represent deposits which are currently at surface level. While many deposits reach across the United States, modern environmental conditions (temperature, precipitation, etc.) are best suited for cotton growth in Alabama.11



Fig: 4, This Geological Map of Alabama published in 1849 proves knowledge of location of carbonate deposits in the region (represented by the blue). This correlates to where cotton production was shown to be most abundant in the state through the 1820s-1860s.11

While soil conditions allowed cotton to flourish, a massive, cheap labor force was needed to cultivate the crop. In 1721, the first enslaved Africans arrived in what would become Alabama, then a part of France’s Louisiana Colony. Slavery continued to expand after the Colony was transferred to the English control in 1763. With cotton becoming a main staple of the world economy, financial incentives encouraged White plantation owners to relocate to Alabama’s Black Belt and transport enslaved workers to cultivate the crop. By 1809, 48% of Alabama’s population was of African descent.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In the Postbellum era, the term “Black Belt” would be tied to new associations related to demographics. Originally, “Black” was in reference to environmental conditions, specifically the dark soil. Booker T. Washington noted the significance in 1901 when he states:

“So far as I can learn, the term was first used to designate a part of the country which was distinguished by the colour of the soil. The part of the country possessing this thick, dark, and naturally rich soil was, of course, the part of the South where the slaves were most profitable, and consequently they were taken there in the largest numbers. Later, and especially since the war, the term seems to be used wholly in a political sense — that is, to designate the counties where the black people outnumber the white.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

After the Civil War, “Black” came to primarily reference the region’s dominant racial group. For those who saw Reconstruction as a crisis, the Black Belt suddenly represented a grave threat, a newly freed population who was demographically dominant. With this new association, political parties began to reconsider a different kind of regional value, based around the racial tension rather than agricultural landscape.

 The Black Belts Advocacy from Within:

While outsiders saw a political opportunity, African Americans living in the region were already advocating for themselves. With literacy rates drastically lower for African Americans compared to their White neighbors after the Civil War, education was used to implement growth in the Black Belt.[[14]](#footnote-14) As White legislatures consistently ensured money from the state was funded primarily into White education, it was necessary for African Americans to create and fund their own avenues of education, often through private institutions.[[15]](#footnote-15) Evidence for this can be seen through formerly enslaved educator Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, founded in 1881. Washington designed the school to train African Americans with skills to become economically independent. In an advertisement published in 1900 for the traveling program, the pamphlet includes quotes from Union Civil War General, S.C. Armstrong, a close associate of Washington’s who praises the program, “with it’s eight hundred students, $280,000 worth of land and buildings, seventy-nine teachers, and an annual expense of $65,000, so far secured, is a wonderful growth…and is, I think, the noblest and grandest work of any colored man in the land.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Washington’s institute is but one example of Black self-advocacy in the region. African Americans proved to be more than capable of working to improve their lives.

In addition to education, the African American community in Alabama took other steps to advocate for themselves, including political organization. Following the Civil War, the United States required Alabama, along with all Confederate states, to redraft their constitutions. In 1867, Alabama became the first state to begin Congressional Reconstruction, with around 100 delegates, of which 18 were African American.[[17]](#footnote-17) Thus began the first and only time African Americans were heavily involved in drafting a constitution in Alabama. This moment of direct political involvement was short-lived, however, as the Democrats quickly regained political control in 1874 and worked to overturn any political gains made by African Americans during Reconstruction. The process known as Redeemer Reconstruction resulted in southerners in the Democratic Party restoring White reign by disenfranchising African Americans through a bloody Southern campaign. Tennessee and Georgia first “redeemed” their states, laying a blueprint for the rest of the South. White violence marked elections across the Southern U.S. during the entire Reconstruction period.[[18]](#footnote-18) Eufaula, Alabama, situated in Black Belt County Barbour, experienced this violence directly in 1874 when White employers openly fired any Black man who attempted to vote for the White incumbent City Court Judge Elias Keils, who strongly favored Reconstruction.[[19]](#footnote-19) Despite being aware of the threat White voters posed at the polls, African Americans still turned out to vote, but only to be massacred at the polls. While 1,200 Black ballots were cast in Eufaula in 1874, only 10 were cast in 1876.[[20]](#footnote-20) In 1995, Historian Dan T. Carter wrote, ‘Violence, already endemic in southern society, became institutionalized, and community leaders transformed the willful corruption and manipulation of elections into a patriotic virtue."[[21]](#footnote-21) Between 1871-1873 before the Democrats regained control, only one lynching took place in Alabama, and it was for a White man accused of murder. By the 1890s, the state would experience at least 10 lynchings a year.[[22]](#footnote-22) When Reconstruction officially ended in 1877, open warfare on the Black community carried on without fear of federal intervention. White southerners directed violence toward the Black residents to silence any political efforts and instill fear in the community for challenging the status quo.

While it is certain Democrats pushed African Americans out of politics, African Americans still desired to participate. Sustained political organizing in the Black Belt was difficult for African Americans, yet they were not complacent or willingly accepting of their diminished status in society. Individuals with outside education or connections could leverage this influence and protection more than Black Belt citizens. With a White supremacist, Democrat-controlled state, African American voting was effectively outlawed, and Black Belt residents remained largely excluded from political power or influence.[[23]](#footnote-23) The Republican party remained small, supported mainly by poor white farmers and union members. After years of struggling to regain a political foothold, the Republican Party needed to diversify its strategy to gaining members and successfully run for office. Aware of this, in 1907 Joseph C. Manning would attempt to revolutionize the Republican party.

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Joseph C. Manning:

Boldly printed in the *Atlanta Constitution[[24]](#footnote-24)*, an eye-catching headline reads, “OLD Republican machine is dead. New Moses arrives to lead party in Alabama.”[[25]](#footnote-25) This “New Moses” was Joseph C. Manning – a man long involved in Alabama politics. After returning to his home state following a brief political stint in Atlanta, Manning, a White man, founded the People’s Party of Alabama in 1892. His return marked an “evangelical” mission to recruit for the People’s Party. As the son of a merchant, Manning witnessed many neighbors lose their land and transition to sharecropping after cotton prices fell following the Civil War. Manning founded the Southern Ballots Rights League in 1895 to bring attention to fraudulent elections in the South.[[26]](#footnote-26) When the Populist party of Alabama collapsed, Manning joined the Republican Party becoming Alexander City’s postmaster in 1900.[[27]](#footnote-27) Thus began his rise in regional politics. In the years to follow, Manning would print posters campaigning for change within the party, as well as contact many members to sway them towards his agenda.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The lack of African American voters in Alabama was no secret. Democrats and Republican alike were familiar with the consistent disenfranchisement of African Americans. In 1901, the same year Booker T. Washington wrote about the significant African American population in the Black Belt, the state constructed a new constitution aimed to enforce White supremacy and disenfranchise African Americans.[[29]](#footnote-29) The Democratic Executive Committee of Alabama would even call back to this constitution in 1946, writing in an address to voters, “In 1901 when our present constitution was adopted it well served the purpose of preserving White Supremacy in the State.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Known to be undeniably and openly racist upon its creation, the state constitution enforced exactly what Manning was fighting to change. Manning wished to propel the Republican Party of Alabama into more power, and he believed the way to do so was by allowing African Americans to vote. Manning relied on his assumption that given the right to vote, African Americans would completely align with the Republican Party and vote in favor of them each election. While Manning’s beliefs were not unfounded – during Reconstruction African Americans did predominantly vote Republican, it was both optimistic and ignorant of him to assume such associations.

As he was a young and fresh voice amongst Republicans, Manning shook up the party with his bold opinions about the untapped political potential of the Black Belt, quickly dividing individuals on next steps. In an address to the “Republican Voters of Alabama,” Manning wrote,

“It is known that the elimination of the negro from the ballot has possibly annihilated three-fourths of the county, senatorial and congressional district republican committees. I propose hereafter to spend my time and my energies in well directed and broad-gauged efforts to increase the party vote and to have a Republican party in Alabama and for Alabama”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Manning discussed the issue of African American voting rights acknowledging the disconnect

between how White Republicans voted and how counties in the Black Belt voted. He knew there were White Republicans who would not support African American advances, yet he argued that the Black community’s sheer numbers could bolster the Republican Party’s ranks by over double. In his efforts to create a better party, his only specific reference on how to do this was by increasing the party size and thus voting power. While Manning may have had other plans, nowhere did he specify what would happen after the Republican Party gained new voters, as Black issues were of no importance to the ultimate goal of regaining political power. His focus centered on the vote and the Republican Party’s relevance, not on the authentic political objectives of African American voters.

In Manning’s written reflection on the state, “The Politics of Alabama,” he brings attention to how the White community that aligned with African American beliefs would fall short on their political aspirations due to the work done by the Democrats. He wrote:

“It is not the supremacy of the negro that curses, or may curse the white productive classes, but it is the supremacy of “machine bosses” who, through the fraudulent manipulation of the ballot-box in counties with a predominance of colored population, roll up fictitious and enormous majorities in order to defeat the will of the white people of other counties.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

Manning’s intentions and personal beliefs regarding the African American community are blurry at best. Here, he asserts that Whites are being silenced as a consequence of African American silencing. It is not an issue of Black disenfranchisement – rather an issue of subsequent White disenfranchisement. While the extant materials do not provide examples of Manning outright castigating racism, he regularly drew attention to racism within the party as a reason why Republicans did not hold more power in the state. Manning maintained through his efforts that Black voters were allies to the White working class.[[33]](#footnote-33) Additional research on Manning would provide greater insight into Republican organization within the Black Belt. Very few publications have discussed Manning, making it difficult to completely understand his intentions and Republican involvement in the Black Belt. Thus, this article focuses primarily on his own letters and publications.

Joseph Manning’s one-man campaign in the Solid South showed the limits to his approach and the minimal success he netted. By focusing his efforts through letter-writing and speeches to sway the White Republicans who ran the Party in Alabama, he left African Americans in the Black Belt voiceless. The archival record does not indicate if Black political actors ever interacted with Manning, nor what they thought of his interventions during his work with the Republican Party in Alabama. He was unable to harness their considerable numbers or agency, as they were never part of the conversation. It would not be until two decades later when the political landscape and economy of the South drastically changed, allowing the Communist Party to emerge and work alongside Black Belt citizens. In the process, the political power of each group grew.

Agricultural and Political Landscape of Alabama preceding the 1930s:

The Great Depression brought unique challenges to Alabama’s Black Belt. With an agriculturally based economy, Alabama suffered the impacts of nationwide drought multiple years before the stock market crashed in 1929. Cotton reached its lowest prices since the 1880s, strongly impacting the Black Belt, and the Black sharecroppers were at the forefront of the declining economy.[[34]](#footnote-34) Many African Americans left the farming region in the aftermath of the Civil War to locate family members sold during slavery, or in hopes of better opportunities in urban areas. Afraid of a loss of labor, White former plantation owners created deals with the Freedmen’s Bureau to offer cash incentives for freedmen to return to work on the farms. Under the promise of work and income, African Americans returned only to be met with a system directly reflective of slavery.[[35]](#footnote-35) By 1910, over half of Alabama farmers were engulfed in tenancy.[[36]](#footnote-36) In addition to these economic struggles, racially charged violence continued throughout this time, with lynching being one of the most brutal forms of oppression. By 1931, the *Southern Worker* newspaper claimed over 3,329 non-White individuals had been lynched in the opening decades of the twentieth century across the nation.[[37]](#footnote-37) Alabama saw this violence with 361 African American lynching victims between 1877-1950.[[38]](#footnote-38) Despite the tremendous hardship it caused, the difficult racial and economic climate opened an opportunity for African American political organizing.

The Communist Party of the United States in Alabama, 1930s:

With evident issues arising, it would not be long before outside political groups would attempt to gain a foothold in the economically struggling region. In 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration would describe Birmingham as, “the worst hit town in the country.”[[39]](#footnote-39) While Birmingham resided outside the Black Belt counties, its growth as an urban center provided a hub for political organizing. An incredibly complex political landscape arose within the Democrat dominated state that would see both the rise of the Communist Party’s organizing and attempts to suppress this activism. The Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) raised the issue of “the Negro Question” in 1928, attempting to address Southern inequality specifically – although they were actively involved in addressing inequality nationwide.[[40]](#footnote-40) Originally, “the Negro Question” in the South referenced the discussion among Whites in the South over how to handle the newly freed African American populations.[[41]](#footnote-41) The CPUSA grasped onto this theme decades later and shifted their perspective of the question into centering around how they could support African Americans in the South, many of which had just returned from WWI and were no longer willing to accept second class citizenship in the nation.[[42]](#footnote-42) While the American South was thought of as an impenetrable region due to the strong presence of racism and the Democratic Party, the CPUSA decided to set up in the region to address these issues.

With the influx of European immigrants to Alabama, the ongoing power of the Democratic Party was made evident. Typically, poor and discriminated against in other states, Italian, and to a lesser extent, Jewish immigrants found economic success in Alabama. Nationwide, Italian immigrants worked labor intensive often deadly jobs, marking their lives as less important than native-born Whites. Jewish immigrants also faced rampant anti-Semitism across the country.[[43]](#footnote-43) Through aligning themselves with the Democratic politics of Alabama, both groups were able to achieve some economic success in Alabama, unlike other states.[[44]](#footnote-44) Due to their Geographic and racial isolation, African Americans in the Black Belt had little opportunity to build coalitions with other oppressed groups, finding only limited support from White industrial workers.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The CPUSA believed that the solution to voter disenfranchisement was self-determination: the concept that African Americans should be given the opportunity to determine the trajectory of their own lives. While self-determination was not a new idea, it enjoyed newfound support globally during WWI. The CPUSA grasped onto this and pushed forward the idea during the early 1930s and endorsed the Presidential campaign of William Z. Foster, a White man, who unsuccessfully ran as the American Communist Party’s candidate.[[46]](#footnote-46) Black Alabaman James W. Ford ran for vice-president. Campaign posters for the pair showed a map of the United States with an outline of the Black Belt region stating, “Equal rights for Negroes everywhere! Self-determination for the Black Belt.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Ford was notably outspoken about his wishes for a self-ruling African American community and was one of the earliest proponents of self-determination. Ford published “The Communist’s Way Out for the Negro” in 1936 expressing his distinct beliefs communism was the best path forward to achieve equality:

“The Negro people want an equal national status in the country. These things can only be obtained through hard struggle for immediate daily needs leading on to big economic and political struggles. This way out is not an easy one, but no basic change in society is easy. A radical change in present day society must be made before the needs of the Negro people can be satisfied.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

While not a successful campaign nationwide, Foster and Ford received 275 votes in the 1932 Presidential Election in Elmore County, Alabama, where president elect Hoover only received 160 votes.[[49]](#footnote-49) It is unclear where these votes came from, and while there is speculation the votes may have reflected White farmers frustration with the two-party system, the votes nonetheless demonstrate the CPUSA had gained support and a following willing to stand behind the party and spread its beliefs.[[50]](#footnote-50) The CPUSA benefitted from involving themselves in the fight against Southern racial injustice as they were outvoting the two dominant parties here. If the Elmore County votes are any indication, there was clear support in Alabama for the Communist Party’s concept of self-determination over the typical fare that the Republicans offered.

While self-determination was supported throughout the party, Birmingham communists struggled to connect the ideological with the practical in rural areas of the Black Belt. White organizers initially thought this call was too extreme to appeal to rural communities and ignored the Black Belt, instead organizing the White tenant farmers who already supported the party.[[51]](#footnote-51) An uprising in Arkansas of hundreds of sharecroppers in 1931 shifted the party’s perspective and encouraged them to build on the newfound interest of Black sharecroppers in the Black Belt. Following the uprising, poor Black farmers sent letters to the *Southern Worker*, suggesting they were close to a breaking point and had even begun organizing in their own local communities.[[52]](#footnote-52) The culmination of these efforts resulted in the creation of the Alabama Sharecroppers Union (ASU).

With support from the Communist Party, the ASU fought to improve the material conditions for Black farmers as defined by themselves. A 1934 issue of *The Southern Worker* quoted a sharecropper, showing the dire situation many found themselves in:

“Farmers are in a bad condition in Chambers county. Making one and one-half to two bales of cotton to the plow. Work hard all year on Jim Tucker’s big plantation. We poor Negroes are in starvation. Paid 50c a day for work, 35c and 40c for cotton picking and can’t get money but have to take it up at the store.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

Leaders of local units were responsible for distributing party literature based around self- determinism, biracial farming alliances, and Marxist political education.[[54]](#footnote-54) The ASU concentrated their efforts on gaining rights for sharecroppers to sell their own crops and work with banks directly.[[55]](#footnote-55) Here the mutually beneficial relationship between Black sharecroppers and the Communist Party is evident. Party membership grew and sharecroppers gained a support system, allowing them to advocate for change as a collective. Unfortunately, this gaining momentum positioned communists as targets for violence as well. This is largely attributed to the fact that 95% of the members were Black, and the party boasted more members than the Birmingham branch of the NAACP.[[56]](#footnote-56) While self-determination represented a grand concept not everyone believed attainable, Black people would still get to make decisions that would directly impact their daily lives through getting involved in the Communist Party.

The party worked alongside citizens of the Black Belt to advance their community. With White leaders treating African Americans as equals in the party, their dignity was finally affirmed.[[57]](#footnote-57) Fearful that another Civil War was imminent, and a resurgent White Supremacy in the South would take their new found dignity way, the Communist Party provided reassurance and relief through sheer numbers to African Americans.[[58]](#footnote-58) While some White Southerners suggested Joseph Stalin sent Soviet agents to Alabama to promote Northern radicalism, the radical potential of this political movement and its commitment to equality drew people to the party.[[59]](#footnote-59)

A tangible example of this commitment to equality came through the Communist Party’s efforts to educate Black Belt residents as members of the Party. While efforts had been made to improve education, African American education still lagged the White community. In 1930, 26.2% of Alabama’s Black population was illiterate, and within the Black Belt that number rose to 42.2%.[[60]](#footnote-60) Al Murphy driven by the need to financially provide for his family, left school early and did not receive an education until he became an organizer with the Community Party. There he was able to attend Marxist education classes expanding his knowledge on the Party and world matters.[[61]](#footnote-61) Some Black Belt citizens worked out agreements with the Party to allow communists from Alabama to travel to the Workers’ School in New York. In New York, ten-week training schools were offered focusing on education revolving around capitalism.[[62]](#footnote-62) Members also formed informal study groups where people could convene to read and discuss literature distributed by CPUSA. One prominent source was *The Southern Worker,* a Party newspaper produced in Chattanooga, Tennessee and Birmingham, Alabama from 1930-1937. The first issue advertised the newspaper as “The only paper published in the South that stands with the workers against the bosses. The paper of and for the Negro and white workers and farmers.”[[63]](#footnote-63) With literature designed for the African American community, they were clearly committed to increasing literacy rates and providing education – an advantage for the African Americans in the Black Belt who had been unable to achieve this previously.

The paper included a section entitled “Lynch Law at Work,” which highlighted acts of violence against the African American community. A 1931 article recounts an incident of violence in Birmingham: “Clifton Payne, Negro watchman of the Greenberg Auto Parts Corporation, was attacked by two White men, and thrown into a shed and burned to death when the men set fire to the shack.”[[64]](#footnote-64) CPUSA recognized that the devaluation of Black life only increased after slavery:

“Instead of the old plantation whip – which was used with care, for an able-bodied slave cost money – there is the whole lynch law system used for by the boss class to ‘keep the negro in his place’ at starvation, or low wages, or farm peonage. In the chattel slave days a dead Negro slave was so much money lost to the owners. Today a dead Negro worker is no one’s loss but his family’s.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

It was a harsh calling out of the issues and position of the African American community at the time, which ultimately garnered more supporters for the Party. The accounting of such violent acts in part memorialized the victim, while also forcing readers to confront, creating a sense of urgency to solve it. While this urgency was not neglect in the African American community, the paper demonstrated the Party aligned with African Americans who felt this pressure.

The CPUSA did not limit themselves to perpetrators of anti-Black violence; they also called out the Republican Party for its simplistic approach to race relations. In January of 1931, the newspaper published an article critiquing party.

“To this day, the Republican Party still uses the Emancipation Proclamation as a means of gaining Negro support, and those making most use of this are the Negro Republican politicians. The idea that the Civil War was fought purely and simply by the golden-hearted Northern capitalists to free the slaves of the South, is still accepted in many quarters by the Negro workers. Still more harmful to the working class is the idea that the amendments to the Constitution were passed in all good faith by a Northern Republican only to be nullified by the wicked Southern democrats, who to this day no not give the right to vote, and other rights supposed to be guaranteed. Put the Republicans in power in the South, say these demagogues to the Negro a masses, and everything will be hotsy- totsy.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

By vilifying the Republican Party, both North and South of the Mason-Dixon line, the CPUSA clearly distanced themselves from all political parties, especially the Republican Party which African Americans traditionally aligned with. While they consistently brought attention to violent acts of racism, they also articulated the limits to both parties holding them accountable for these acts of violence. By focusing on the Republican Party’s shortcomings and lack of engagement on civil rights, they were able to paint themselves as *the* political party for African Americans. The CPUSA attack on the Republican Party, equating them to Southern Democrats, attempted to unite the Black Belt region in Alabama by capitalizing on the hatred toward the Democratic Party and distrust of the Republican.

Black people were also drawn to the Communist Party due to the organization’s activism around the Scottsboro Boys. In 1931, eight Black teenagers and one young adult, were accused of raping two White women in Scottsboro, Alabama on a freight train. Today, it is widely accepted that the women were not raped, but rather forced into accusing the defendants after a fight broke out. The Scottsboro boys were pardoned by the Alabama House of Representatives in 2013.[[67]](#footnote-67) Less than a month after the accusation in 1931, eight of the accused were convicted and sentenced to death. Hollace Ransdall, a reporter on the case, recalled a favorable response in the courtroom when a guilty verdict with a death sentence was announced, “the room resounded with loud applause, and the mass of people outside, when the news spread to them, cheered wildly.”[[68]](#footnote-68) This case gained widespread attention, and the CPUSA national office recognized the potential to publicize the plight of African Americans in the Deep South.[[69]](#footnote-69) The Party began considering taking an active role of defending the accused.

The NAACP, initially fearful of tarnishing their reputation, strayed from public support of the Scottsboro Nine. With the boys’ innocence in question, the organization did not want to be seen as associating with “a gang of mass rapists.”[[70]](#footnote-70) The NAACP was not involved until the International Labor Defense (ILD) contacted them asking for legal assistance when the case was on appeal. The NAACP did not trust the Communist Party and believed they were only involved for publicity. Still the NAACP felt they had to act in the case, as they had been approached and could not be seen as not advocating for African Americans.[[71]](#footnote-71) The NAACP’s problems compounded as the nearest chapter collapsed in 1930, leaving them with few representatives on the ground. The organizations best information came from press reports.

It was into this void that the International Labor Defense stepped in, hiring a new attorney and covering legal fees in the case. The ILD was the legal arm of the Communist Party. They selected highly controversial cases with the hopes of gaining nationwide and international recognition for their work, including the Sacco and Vanzetti Trail. Robert Minor, a CPUSA point man, decided the case would be the perfect issue to promote engagement with the Communist Party in Europe – which was becoming more aware of racial discrimination - after the war. [[72]](#footnote-72) Communists in the region were not yet overly involved until receiving a notice from members in the headquarters in New York who became aware of the case and wished to be involved immediately.[[73]](#footnote-73) The ILD also personally visited the jailed Scottsboro boys, securing their consent to handle the case. The ILD’s quick action caught the NAACP off guard as their limited numbers in Alabama prevented them from contacting the defendants. The two groups vied for control, but the ILD and Communist Party move forward with the case as the parents credited the ILD with personally contacting them and asking for their support in achieving equality – something the NAACP failed to do.[[74]](#footnote-74) With the ILD’s success in winning new trials that resulted in life sentences for the boys, the Communist Party’s reputation only grew in the African American community.[[75]](#footnote-75) Historian Robin D.G. Kelley credits the Communist Party a century later writing “It is very probable that had it not been for the Communist Party, the Scottsboro boys would have been executed or lynched.”[[76]](#footnote-76) The lives of these boys were saved because of the party’s work. At the same time, the Party received international attention and support for the work they were doing in Alabama. This proved useful as Party membership in the region grew almost overnight among Black communities.[[77]](#footnote-77)

Beyond involvement in public trials, the CPUSA grew membership by integrating elements of Christianity, the dominant religion in the Black Belt, into the framework of Communism. Most African Americans were churchgoers, and the Party would begin meetings with prayer. Christianity also became a useful rhetorical framework for local Blacks. In *The Southern Worker,* Alabama district organizer, Nat Ross claimed Communism, “can and will destroy this hell and build a heaven for the Southern working people right here in Dixie.”[[78]](#footnote-78) The Biblical framework certainly appealed to individuals in the Black Belt, among them Angelo Herndon.[[79]](#footnote-79)

Born in 1913, Herndon’s parents lived in Birmingham for much of their life, overlapping in time and place with Manning’s failed organizing attempts. Herndon best captured the political landscape that faced African Americans from the Civil War through the Nadir when Manning was organizing to the time of writing in 1937:

“My parents and grand-parents were hard-boiled Republicans, and told me very often that Lincoln had freed the slaves, and that we'd have to look to the Republican Party for everything good. I began to wonder about that. Here I was, being Jim-Crowed and cheated. Every couple of weeks I read about a lynching somewhere in the South. Yet there sat a Republican government up in Washington, and they weren't doing a thing about it.”[[80]](#footnote-80)

This frustration encouraged Herndon to join the Communist Party in 1930 upon his introduction to it. From there, he moved to Atlanta in 1931 and devoted his efforts to advancing the party’s agenda. In Georgia, he was arrested for leading a march of out-of-work laborers to the Fulton County courthouse to demand relief payments. Threatened by the unification of Black and White workers showed, the state, arrested Herndon. Charged with attempting to overthrow the government, the next four years of Herndon’s life would be spent appealing the case, with support from the ILD, and eventually, in 1937, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in his favor citing that the law Herndon was convicted under was too vague.[[81]](#footnote-81)

As a member of the Communist Party, Herndon published widely on his experiences with Southern racism, especially in Alabama. Upon his release in 1937, Herndon wrote *You Cannot Kill the Working Class* which highlighted injustices in the Southern legal system. He recalled his time living in Alabama in 1930 when the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) handed out leaflets stating, “Communism Must Be Wiped Out. Alabama Is a Good Place for Good Negroes, but a Bad Place for Negroes Who Want Social Equality."[[82]](#footnote-82) Naturally, during a time that featured many acts of violence against the African American community, the KKK successfully instilled fear for African Americans considering association with the Party. The KKK also made claims about the region that, “destroyers of the American civilization” had turned Birmingham into, “the hub of alien radicalism in the Southeastern United States.”[[83]](#footnote-83) Herndon’s family in Alabama felt this fear and informed Herndon that should he continue his role in the Party he would not be welcomed back to Birmingham.[[84]](#footnote-84)

Referencing back to one of the original inspirations for the CPUSA setting up in the Black Belt, Herndon publicly proclaimed his belief in self-determination. Not only is this evidence for the continuation of the belief beyond 1930, but it demonstrates that CPUSA’s employment of “self- determination” was successful in motivating African Americans to join them. When he found himself on trial in Atlanta, Herndon recounted:

“Did I believe in the demand for the self-determination of the Black Belt—that the Negro people should be allowed to rule the Black Belt territory, kicking out the white landlords and government officials? Did I feel that the working-class could run the mills and mines and government? That it wasn't necessary to have bosses at all? I told them I believed all of that—and more.”[[85]](#footnote-85)

There was never an independent region in the South operated by African Americans for African Americans, but the idea proved effective in drawing young members to the CPUSA in Alabama.

With gains for both the African American community and Communist Party, many White Democrats became more aware of their potential threats to their political power, and a wave of hatred washed over Alabama. Publications by the KKK circulated in the mid-1930s and read, “NEGROES BEWARE. DO NOT ATTEND COMMUNIST MEETINGS." Signed by the Birmingham Klan, "The Ku Klux Klan is Watching You. TAKE HEED. Tell the communist leaders to leave.”[[86]](#footnote-86) In 1935, White Supremacists group, the White Legion, kidnapped communist Blaine Owen for his involvement with *The Southern Worker*. While Owens did not disclose the location of the paper’s press, it was a powerful antiradical attack intended to instill fear among Black Belt residents.[[87]](#footnote-87) Violence against the community continued, and as Democrats maintained power throughout the following decades, no massive successful movement to change Alabama’s political scene came to fruition until the Civil Rights era.

The peak of the Party and its influence was in the early the 1930s.[[88]](#footnote-88) With the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany and the subsequent Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, the Communist Party lost its popularity with African Americans nationwide, including Alabama’s Black Belt.[[89]](#footnote-89) War in Europe also opened new gateways for advancement for African Americans within the existing two-party system. The Double Victory campaign promoted democracy abroad while advocating for equality at home. This campaign drew in African Americans and represented a new method of advocacy that attracted African Americans in the 1940s during the War.[[90]](#footnote-90) During the War, red baiting also influenced the role of the CPUSA. Red-baiting was the process of attempting to de-legitimize political or social efforts based on community affiliation. For example, integration was often deemed a community ideal by those who favored segregation. While red-baiting was unsuccessful in uncovering communists in the South, it successfully spread anti-communist rhetoric and discouraged participation with the Party.[[91]](#footnote-91) Black participation in wartime efforts led to many left-leaning groups in the South to suffer as their leaders joined the U.S. army leaving them unable to run these groups.[[92]](#footnote-92) Notable examples of Black involvement in the war include the Tuskegee Airmen, consisting Tuskegee Institute educated pilots who amassed an impressive war record leading the discussion on integration in the military.[[93]](#footnote-93) The U.S. was changing, and the Communist Party’s importance was diminishing in Alabama. Separations between the national office in New York and local organizers became strained, as one anonymous Black communist stated in 1945, “Ain't no foreign country in the world foreign as Alabama to a New Yorker. They know all about England, maybe, France, never met one who knew 'Bama.’”[[94]](#footnote-94) With the party losing its significance, and the growing influence of anti-communist Joseph McCarthy, it is not surprising that by 1951 the Alabama Communist Control Law banned the Party in the state. Pushed forward by the KKK, the bill represented the conclusion of one of the most progressive and successful movements for equality in Alabama in the early inter-war era.[[95]](#footnote-95)

Alabama Today

Issues of oppression and voter disenfranchisement in Alabama politics continue to echo today. After the Communist Party was pushed out, segregation continued, and it was not until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that the many forms of disenfranchisement – such as literacy laws – ended. Consequently, African American voters grew exponentially.[[96]](#footnote-96) This encouraged Governor George Wallace, an arch segregationist, to mobilize more White voter registration, eventually culminating in two presidential campaigns. Regardless, by 1968, twenty-four African Americans were elected to local political offices, and these numbers have continued to grow.[[97]](#footnote-97)

With this growing influence, White supremacists feared losing power in the state and renewed their efforts to disenfranchise African American voters. In Shelby County, Alabama V. Holder (2013) the Supreme Court ruled that pre-clearance provisions established by the Voting Rights Act were unconstitutional. After this ruling, Alabama quickly enacted voter ID laws, closed polling places as well as license booths, and purged voter rolls.[[98]](#footnote-98) Between 2012 and 2016, sixty-six of Alabama’s polling places closed.[[99]](#footnote-99) States across the nation followed suit. In Alabama, this disenfranchisement has been met with opposition by African Americans in the Black Belt who are actively working to maintain the right to vote. The 2022 election results reflect the Black Belt counties’ demographics as they disproportionately voted Democratic compared to the rest of the state – in a sense, the Black Belt created a Blue Belt across the state.[[100]](#footnote-100) Currently, the outcome of Merrill V. Milligan, a case of Black voters challenging Alabama’s congressional map drawn in 2021 for violating the Voting Rights Act, hangs in the balance awaiting a hearing at the U.S. Supreme Court.[[101]](#footnote-101) While organizing is occurring against voter disenfranchising, all combined, these actions disproportionately impact the African American community.

Today, while Alabama continues to deal with issues of voter disenfranchisement and inequality, the Black vote continues to be a powerful political tool to wield. Once African Americans had their right to vote protected, those in power feared that their political grip was loosening and worked to suppress their political agency. Perhaps Manning and the Communist Party correctly predicted the potential of Alabama’s Black Belt to grasp power from the ruling White supremacists. The region reflects a nonlinear path of history, where the same events manifest differently throughout time. The Black Belt’s political power, whether in 1903, 1933, or 2023, has the potential to be an asset for some or a political liability for others, who fear their influence will be undermined.

Understanding the Black Belt remains crucial to understanding the history, politics, and future of Alabama. The region represents a small fraction of the land in the state but holds the potential to alter the lives of those both in and outside of the area. Realizing the influence this region has had on nationwide movements in the past, as well as understanding the achievements African Americans successfully made despite being in one of the most discriminatory states suggests a disregard today for the region would be ill-judged. The Communist Party provided one answer to the “Negro Question” of the South in the 1930s. With diligent advocacy, a group of marginalized people could save lives already sentenced to death, expand education, and bring nationwide attention to their issues that were unsolved in local communities. The effort and inclusion of those in the Black Belt, the region can alter and improve the lives of its citizens. A comprehensive regional history must engage the Black Belt, and the work both residents and non-residents, have done to alter the political and social position of Black Alabamans.

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