

Haverford College

James Samuel Stemons
History of an Unknown Laborer and Intellectual 1890-1922

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of History
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts

By
Timothy Golden

Haverford, Pennsylvania
May 2007

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Traditional Patters of Black Labor.....	5
James Samuel Stemons: Interpretations of Race and Labor.....	16
James Samuel Stemons: Working Class Intellectual.....	32
James Samuel Stemons: After 1914.....	47
Reference List.....	51

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

James Samuel Stemons: History of an Unknown Laborer and Intellectual, 1890-1922

A study of James Samuel Stemons, using his letters and essays held by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, reconstructs the feelings of a black laborer and intellectual. Herbert Gutman, in his *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (1975), bemoaned the “absence of detailed knowledge of the ‘local world’ inhabited by white and Negro workers between 1890 and 1910,” because it left “only an obscure and tangled reality – filled with scattered and contradictory but suggestive bits of information.”¹ He called for the further study of the “thought and feeling of ordinary white and Negro workers in the early modern era.”²

Through the lens of Richard Davis, a black representative to the national board of the United Mine Workers, Gutman explored the impact of race on interactions between white and black miners in the early twentieth century. Stemons’ labor history contributes to the understanding of how racial discrimination affected the lives of black workers. His intellectual history reveals how class influenced both his theories on racial inequality and his interactions with other social reformers. Stemons’ unique intellectual perspective desensitized his reactions to economic racial discrimination, while his experiences as a laborer intensified his separation from the racial reform movement

James Samuel Stemons (1870-1959) was born to ex-slave parents in Tennessee and in 1876 moved with his family to northwestern Kansas. By 1889, Stemons had received some education and worked as a farmhand to pay for further schooling. In 1891, he left farm work and started a three-year search for higher wages in the industrial sector. Stemons traveled two hundred miles from Kansas to Denver, Colorado, but only found low paying, dangerous

¹ Gutman, Herbert G. *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, 195.

² Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society*, 206.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

employment as a railroad tracklayer. Industrial employers cited Stemons' color as the reason for his rejection.

Stemons failed to earn an education through wage labor and in 1894 moved to Cleveland, Ohio. For three years, Stemons traveled through Ohio, New York, and Pennsylvania speaking to church congregations about economic disadvantages facing black laborers. He survived on donations from parishioners who agreed that black laborers needed a place in the industrial sector. Stemons moved to Philadelphia around 1898 and found steady employment as a service laborer. He worked as a waiter, janitor, and porter for twelve years until he earned a regular position as a United States postal clerk in 1910. As a service laborer, Stemons felt financially insecure, trapped by color lines, and unsuccessful. Stemons voiced these feelings through letters to employers and his sister, Mary Stemons.

Stemons' life as a wage laborer is only part of his story. In 1897, Stemons published his first essay titled "*A Cry from the Oppressed.*"³ He proposed achieving economic equality for blacks by ending the discrimination that kept them out of industrial jobs. From 1906-1909 Stemons wrote for two Philadelphia newspapers, the *Courant* and *Pilot*, and published a second essay, "*The North Holds the Key to the Race Question*" (1908). Stemons believed economic reform in the North would force social reform in the South. The South would reform to prevent its black workers from migrating north, which would devastate the Southern economy. In 1910, Stemons attended the founding meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) but rejected their focus on legal rights and resented their refusal to let him influence the meeting. Later that year, Stemons created an organization in Philadelphia that

³ The full title is "*A Cry from the Oppressed: a plea for the industrial rights of the colored race in the northern states*"

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

adopted some of the NAACP's ideas. Stemons' group aimed to reform the behavior of lower class blacks and to help them find decent employment.⁴

Stemons' personal experiences as a laborer both informed and limited his perspective as an intellectual. He addressed economic problems – poverty and discrimination – that he encountered on a daily basis. Stemons' constant interaction with these economic problems prevented him from considering other obstacles encountered elsewhere by black laborers. Legalized discrimination in the South escaped Stemons' attention. Instead, he focused on problems he encountered as a black worker in the North.

Stemons also lacked the education and financial resources possessed by reformers who came from the social elite. Upper class reformers rejected Stemons' solution to racial equality, which grew out of his working class experiences, because it focused on economic change rather than education or rights. Stemons lacked the money to promote a broad campaign for racial change, so he worked within his experiences to find a solution. The personal nature of Stemons' experiences linked the goals of his solution with personal ambitions.

Stemons' pursuit of personal goals often shifted the focus of his intellectual activities away from their social goal – black economic equality. He took interest in his own success and shaped his ideas to make them profitable. As an impoverished laborer, Stemons desired his writings to earn money and to replace his wage labor. He hoped to sell his writings and free himself from the inferiority that discriminatory employers forced upon black workers. The prospect of national recognition also consumed Stemons' attention. He believed fame and financial success occurred together and sought both. Stemons searched for legitimacy, through

⁴ Stemons created two groups: the *Association for Equalizing Industrial Opportunities* and the *League of Civic and Political Reform*.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

the acceptance of his ideas, to his feelings of self-worth. He wanted to prove that he was more than an unskilled worker and belonged alongside reformers like Du Bois and Washington.

These desires prevented Stemons from creating lasting relationships with other reformers. He worked independently to maximize his two personal goals: profits and fame. Stemons feared other reformers stealing or taking credit for his ideas, so he rarely cooperated with potential supporters of his ideas. He believed other reformers were jealous of his industrial opportunities solution and that they intentionally prevented him from earning recognition. Stemons' relationship with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and National Urban League (NUL) suffered from his individuality.

However, Stemons also worked alone out of necessity. Differences in social status caused intellectuals to ignore Stemons. Educated, wealthy elites looked down upon Stemons, who entered their ranks from the outside as a laborer. He felt marginalized by these real class differences. These feelings of exclusion paralleled Stemons' feelings of inferiority created by race discrimination in his working environments. Stemons' ambivalent social position reinforced his independence and caused his hostility towards other reformers. He aggressively asserted his ideas but worried about their chances of success. Unrecognized throughout his intellectual career, Stemons envied the success of other reformers and loathed his continual failure. In 1914, Stemons abandoned public activism to focus on his regular employment as a postal clerk. Today, Stemons is still without mention in historical texts.

Stemons' obscurity is not a comment on the historical insignificance of his experiences. Stemons is one of many black workers who faced racial discrimination in the workplace. Other black laborers who shared Stemons' experiences shared his feelings of inferiority. In response to these feelings, Stemons uniquely attempted to escape his working class surroundings through

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

writing and other intellectual activities. As an intellectual, Stemons encountered recurring class differences that forced him to the margins of the reform movement. He worked independently and his abrasive personality prevented his ideas from gaining large-scale support.

(Chapter 1) **Traditional Patterns of Black Labor**

As the American economy urbanized and modernized from 1890 to 1920, northern black workers encountered racial barriers that slowed or prevented their entry into decent employment in the industrial sector. Employers, foreign immigrants, and labor unions acted in concert to reinforce traditional patterns of black labor and negative stereotypes of black workers' capabilities. Black laborers were funneled into domestic labor, unskilled positions, positions with no promotions, or into occupations rejected by white workers. This marginalization of black workers, along with the rise of legal segregation in the South and increased discrimination in the North, worked to undo the promise of Reconstruction.

Between 1890 and the end of the World War I, America's black workforce began shifting from mainly agricultural and domestic labor to mainly domestic and industrial labor.⁵ The North in 1890, found 66.3% of its 327,000 black workers in domestic and personal service.⁶ By 1900, the total number of domestic workers in the North increased from about 215,000 to about 295,000⁷. Another 9% of northern black workers in 1890 occupied industrial and manufacturing jobs, which was relatively more than in the South, but numerically less (172,000 to 30,000).⁸ By 1900, more than two thirds of the northern black population lived in urban areas. Their tendency to follow industrial occupations increased along with this urbanization. Nationwide, in 1910, the number of blacks employed in manufacturing and mechanical pursuits more than doubled from

⁵ Greene, Lorenzo J. and Carter G. Woodson. *The Negro Wage Earner*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1969 [1930 original], 36.

⁶ Greene, 39.

⁷ Greene, 78.

⁸ Greene, 42-43.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

the 1890 figure of approximately 200,000.⁹ The number of black domestic and industrial employees increased and mirrored the shift of the black population from rural to urban areas.

As the nation's economy industrialized, the black work force struggled to find its place among the new opportunities, technologies, and cities of the twentieth century. Coal mines, steel and other metal mills, factories (cars, shoes, etc...), railroads, mechanical trades (carpenters, masons, etc...) and other similar industries expanded as America produced more goods and employed more workers. Yet in the northern states, where a tradition of racial equality predated the Reconstruction Amendments, black workers encountered racially motivated barriers that denied or slowed their entrance into the growing industrial sector, whose occupations offered opportunities for promotion, scaled wages, and skill training. Black laborers were barred, in general, from the expanding industrial economy, where job opportunity and employee turnover were enormous, because of a growing sentiment that they were not capable of filling these new jobs.¹⁰

The successful training and implementation of black workers in mills, factories, and mines occurred in the early industrial American South. Blacks worked successfully on Southern railroads as firemen and trainmen, while the Brotherhood of Firemen and Enginemen and the Brotherhood of Trainmen prohibited black workers in the North.¹¹ Black exclusion in the North can be traced to racial discrimination by white employers, employees and unions. The lack of skilled or semi-skilled blacks and blacks in leadership positions points to a conscious effort to draw racial lines on employment by those who held the power to do so. The "prejudice of both white employer[s] and employees" made it very difficult for black workers to get these news

⁹ Greene, 125.

¹⁰ Nelson, Daniel. *Managers and Workers: Origins of the New Factory System in the United States: 1880-1920*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975, 86.

¹¹ Moreno, Paul. *Black Americans and Organized Labor, A New History*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State Press, 2006, 99-100.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

jobs.¹² Jacqueline Jones' *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (1998) cites six common justifications for excluding black workers. These include a tradition that excluded blacks, fear of racial difficulty with white employees, a belief that black workers were lazy and unwilling to work, and the idea that certain positions were exclusively white.¹³

Northern industry could afford to marginalize blacks and looked towards the tide of incoming white European immigrants as the main source of labor. "Whites, especially foreigners, did most of the unskilled labor which the Negroes were best fitted to perform" and helped keep black labor out of industry and manufacturing.¹⁴ In 1900, 38% of employed white immigrants worked in the industrial sector and their two million workers outnumbered approximately 300,000 black industrial workers.¹⁵ With this numerical superiority, white immigrants and native white workers joined together in at least twenty-four exclusive labor unions that effectively kept blacks out of the unions and industrial jobs.¹⁶ These unions "enforced the ironclad dictum that black people should never rise above their appointed station."¹⁷ Whether this meant keeping blacks out of industry or in jobs with no potential for advancement, white unions controlled the extent of black labor penetration.

This was evident in the steel mills of the Pittsburgh area and more generally across the northern states. Black steelworkers constituted only one and a half percent of all steelworkers in the East in 1907 and by 1910 only 789 black ironworkers and steelworkers found employment in all of Pittsburgh's 253 factories. In comparison, black steelworkers comprised 39.1 percent of

¹² Greene, 138.

¹³ Jones, Jacqueline. *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company 1998, 314.

¹⁴ Greene, 77.

¹⁵ Wesley, Charles. *Negro Labor in the United States 1850-1925: A Study in American Economic History*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1927, 249.

¹⁶ Spero, Sterling D. and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1931, 58.

¹⁷ Jones, 302.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

the Southern steel workforce in 1907 and in 1910 more than 7,000 Slovakian workers found employment in Pittsburgh steel mills.

These numbers show that Northern employers favored white immigrants and justified the exclusion of black workers on a constructed belief in black workers' inability. While "European ethnic networks had become the channel through which nearly all lower level jobs in the mills were filled", black migrants from the south, longtime Pittsburgh residents, and even those working the steel mills failed to find employment or create a niche for future black workers. Pittsburgh, in the early years of the 1900s, represented a typical northern city in which blacks found it tough to gain access to the industrial employment sector, despite the vast number of factories, mills, and plants that constantly searched for new employees.¹⁸

Even where blacks penetrated the industrial labor sector, they "remained condemned to various forms of "lifework" that simultaneously harkened back to a preindustrial past and presaged a postindustrial future."¹⁹ As unskilled laborers, blacks and whites alike dealt with the primitive workplace regulations, dangerous and unsanitary conditions, and irregular employment that marked the early years of industrial labor.²⁰ 'Lifework' occupations offered black workers no hope of advancement up the employment ladder: there were no wage increases or promotions to better positions.

Black workers were denied the occupational mobility that many native and foreign white workers used to escape unskilled lifework. Black laborers in slaughterhouses, blast furnaces of steel mills, or manufacturing plants could not ascend to higher positions. Unskilled black workers saw little, if any, promotion to semi-skilled occupations that required more training,

¹⁸ Nelson, Bruce. *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, 163-164.

¹⁹ Jones, 304.

²⁰ Gutman, 22.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

technical skills, and experience. These semi skilled workers operated machines in textile factories, railroad shops, and the rolling mills of steel plants.

While whites used “ethnic and kinship networks”, in the form of union membership, to control particular employment sectors, black workers’ numerical inferiority prevented black networks from existing.²¹ Blacks who held skilled positions in the late nineteenth century could not transfer their skills to a younger generation. The abilities of these older skilled black workers also became less important in a modernized American workplace. Because no young black workers replaced the few previously entrenched skilled blacks, the northern black population was shut out of occupational growth by large numbers of European whites, or native whites.

In spite of examples to the contrary, white employers generally felt that black workers were not intelligent enough, could not be trusted, or were too lazy to fill more technically advanced occupations. Clark and Homestead steel mills in Pittsburgh both successfully employed skilled black puddlers, rollers, and millwrights. In 1907, thirty-nine skilled blacks worked at Clark and twenty-one skilled blacks worked at Homestead.²² However, as new and more technical positions increased in importance, skilled black workers like those at Clark and Homestead became more uncommon.

White employees were concentrated in these new positions, learned the necessary skills, and passed the positions and skills onto other white workers, often of the same ethnic background. Black laborers were not prevalent in these new areas and were denied apprenticeships and chances to learn necessary new skills. No black apprentices were allowed in Pennsylvania’s anthracite mines²³ or at Bethlehem Steel and other metal manufacturers.²⁴ These

²¹ Dickerson, Dennis C. *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania 1875-1980*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1986, 24.

²² Dickerson, 20.

²³ Moreno, 104.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

understudy positions gave many white workers, foreign and native, a way to break into skilled areas of labor that required training and experience. Instead, unskilled black laborers filled stereotypical roles of extremely hard, hot, or heavy labor that were deemed to be unfit for white workers. Across the nation in 1910, 73.5 percent of black steelworkers labored in these unskilled positions and had little hope of crossing over to skilled or even semi-skilled occupations.²⁵ Even with the increasing participation of black workers in American industry, white employers and employees marginalized black workers through racial stereotypes and racially motivated policies.

In keeping black workers out of these higher quality positions “the industrial sector duplicated the structure of southern agriculture,” where white farmers controlled the tenure of black sharecroppers.²⁶ Unskilled labor, in the case of black workers, then became a form of lifework, rather than a stepping-stone to more advanced jobs. Some leaders of the industrial sector specifically used the history of black labor in the South as justification for continued discrimination in the North. William H. Baldwin, in an address titled “the Present Problem of Negro Education” (1899), believed that blacks would “willingly fill the more menial positions and do the heavy work” in the North because they had been forced to do so in the South during slavery and immediately after the Civil War.²⁷ Baldwin justified this stratification with a pseudo scientific social Darwinism. He believed the conditions and occupations worked in by black laborers were “natural” and needed no change. The flood of migrating Southern blacks, some

²⁴ James Samuel Stemons Correspondence, 5/4/1907.

²⁵ Nelson, *Divided We Stand*, 167.

²⁶ Jones, *American Work*, 306.

²⁷ Baldwin, William H. “The Present Problem of the Negro Education” in the *Journal of Social Science*, vol. 37, December 1899, 58.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

220,000 between 1880 and 1901²⁸, to Northern cities and states ensured that blacks would fill many of the positions Baldwin recognized as menial.

The idea of black workers being “naturally” fit for certain types of employment was significant for the North’s railroad industry at the turn of the century. The stereotype of a black Pullman porter named George created a tag of servility, of inferiority, for blacks in relation to their white customers and fellow white employees.²⁹ White customers directly controlled the income of black porters, expected them to act as subordinates, and believed their servility was a unique aspect of their race. This anticipated racial difference also carried over into other realms of black railroad employment. Blacks could not operate as firemen, brakemen, engineers, or conductors in the North, despite Southern railroads employing predominantly black firemen and brakemen.³⁰ Four white unions expressly forbid black members and successfully lobbied for state legislation that restricted black porter-brakemen, who shared some of the same duties as white brakemen.³¹

White railroaders rationalized their discriminations as methods to save their own positions, wage levels, and power. White laborers feared occupational competition from the growing number of black workers migrating from the rural South.³² White brakemen felt that the exclusivity of their occupations was at stake and they took measures to ensure blacks did not join their ranks. These racially discriminatory measures relegated black workers to unskilled and service jobs in railroads and are symptomatic of northern industrial labor.

²⁸ Dickerson, 17.

²⁹ Arnesen, Eric. *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 18.

³⁰ Arnesen, 26.

³¹ Arnesen, 39.

³² Gutman, 189.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

Black workers used strikebreaking, alongside unskilled work, as a foothold into industrial employment. Employers utilized unorganized blacks, often from the South, to take the place of striking white union employees.³³ However, these footholds continued “certain patterns of black marginalization” and subordinated black laborers to the decisions and whims of white employers and mostly white unions.³⁴ The proliferation of these hierarchical positions persisted because “white people in general invented new rationales to justify certain traditional patterns of black labor.”³⁵ Strikebreaking placed black workers in an unfavorable position between employers and white unions and laborers. Black laborers who broke strikes worked temporary employment for lower than normal wages. Simultaneously, black strikebreakers fostered the racial animosity of white labor unions, whose laborers lost bargaining power, and jobs, when a strike was broken. White labor unions, like New York’s longshoremen union, made it policy to discriminate based on race and exclude black workers from their groups, making it even harder for blacks to find jobs.³⁶ In turn, black workers more easily slipped into the role of strikebreaker because they could not access industrial employment through normal routes like union participation.

White employers consciously used black strikebreakers as a tool against white unions, laborers, and strikers. In doing so, these employers sacrificed potential employees to the violence and discrimination of white union strikers. During an 1898 United Mine Workers strike in Virden and Pana, Illinois, employers at the Chicago-Virden Company attempted to use black, non-union laborers from the South as strikebreakers. The striking, white union members violently clashed with the police escorts of black workers and successfully prevented the black strikebreakers from working. The United Mine Workers, a northern union that included many

³³ Greene, 139.

³⁴ Jones, 318.

³⁵ Jones, 336.

³⁶ Nelson, *Divided we Stand*, 41.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

black members, suffered from racial tensions after the deaths of four white strikers fighting to keep black strikebreakers away.³⁷

As a result of the general exclusion from industrial labor, northern blacks looked to other labor sectors for employment. Domestic and personal service, already home to 66% of northern black workers, offered the best possibility for employment outside of industry. Blacks worked as barbers, housekeepers, janitors, laundries, servants, waiters, bootblacks, and porters in cities across the North. Domestic and service labor did not provide job security or the possibility of advancement and required little training, education or skill. Similar to unskilled industrial work, this menial labor represented a form of lifework.

The transitory and open nature of service jobs destabilized this black economic niche as the 1900s approached. White immigrants, blacks barred from better jobs, and black migrants from the South all competed for a large, though limited, number of jobs. This competition forced many blacks into unemployment and to the streets.³⁸ These varied groups of workers easily inhabited service and domestic jobs because the occupations required few skills. Uneducated black migrants, non-English speaking whites, and black youths all gravitated towards these jobs. Blacks excluded from industry by their color competed with this large group of potential service workers.

Menial labor also discouraged those who were over-educated and over-qualified but needed to work for whatever wages they could obtain. The idea of a meritocracy based on education lost its value for these black workers, who had no choice, other than unemployment, but to accept these lifework positions. Confining black workers to menial labor was “bound to make that portion of the community a burden on the public; to debauch its women, pauperize its

³⁷ Gutman, 172-186.

³⁸ Greene, 83.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

men, and ruin its homes.”³⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois believed service labor negatively affected class relations between the black workers and white employers or patrons who received the service offered. White workers expected obedient black workers and black workers internalized this power structure. This class relationship, Du Bois said, coincided with the industrialization of America and affected workers in industry and in domestic labor. The employer-employee power dynamic exported itself to social relationships between the races as well. Racial inferiority inferred by service labor became associated with historical slavery and prevented the consideration of black workers in other jobs.⁴⁰ White employers and customers stigmatized black workers, regardless of their actual traits, as incapable and unworthy of better paying tasks that coincided with higher social standing.

The effect of class, on black and white industrial and service laborers alike, provides some insight into the motivations of a race-based employment hierarchy and the reasons for discrimination against northern black workers in the early years of the twentieth century. Richard Sennett, in his *Hidden Injuries of Class* (1973), proposes that ‘dignity’ is one of the main causes of people’s actions and feelings in relation to their class and occupation.⁴¹ This search for dignity, a need to legitimize one’s thoughts and deeds, provides a useful framework for thinking about unskilled labor, racial discrimination, and service labor in relation to experiences of black workers like James Samuel Stemons.

Sennett contends that badges of ability “divert men from challenging the limits of their freedom.”⁴² Factory laborers or longshoremen worked in similarly unskilled, promotion-less environments, while railroad porters and household servants toiled in racial inferiority. White

³⁹ Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996 [original 1899]), 140.

⁴⁰ Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 136.

⁴¹ Sennett, Richard and Jonathan Cobb. *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973, 191.

⁴² Sennett, 153.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

employers and employees labeled certain jobs black to make them inferior. These badges of ability intended to continue America's racial hierarchy. The stereotyping of Pullman porters, in name, race, and expectations of servility represents one of these badges of ability. White customers believed porters were distinctly qualified for menial service and expected the black workers fulfill these abilities. These Pullman servants generally did not deviate from white expectations or challenge their lack of freedom to act as they pleased. For porters, and any servants or unskilled workers, these labels still continued to provide just enough money, or just enough opportunity to make a living in the northern states.

Imparting these badges of ability also served as a source of dignity for white laborers in unskilled positions. They deemed the occupations of black workers lower and unfit for white workers. As sufferers of employer-employee power relationships – where wages and employment were contingent on employers – white laborers searched for dignity in their own occupations. Many times, groups of white employees attempted to bar black workers from joining them in order to reinforce the specific “white-ness” of their occupations. Irish longshoremen at New York City's ports feared being replaced by black strikebreakers or being joined by non-union blacks and in turn made their jobs more exclusive.⁴³ By claiming to work jobs that blacks were not qualified for, these Irish men found dignity in their superiority.

In the same manner, railroad's white firemen and brakemen legitimized the exclusivity of their occupations using unions and state legislatures. Northern brake and firemen wanted to prevent the lower wages, poor conditions, and relatively weak bargaining stance occupied by their white counterparts who shared duties with black workers.⁴⁴ Both northern and southern white railroaders believed racial inclusion caused these problems and attempted to delineate their

⁴³ Nelson, *Divided we Stand*, 25.

⁴⁴ Arnesen, 32.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

occupation based on color, to ensure their wages, power, and freedom, their badge of ability, at the expense of black workers.

This theme ran throughout northern industrial labor in the early twentieth century and created a hostile environment in for black workers. This white dominated occupational market denied James Samuel Stemons his own industrial job and, like many other blacks, forced him to work in service. A closer examination of his Stemons' experience reveals how racial discriminations affected the thoughts and actions of a black worker.

(Chapter 2) **James Samuel Stemons: Interpretations of Race and Labor**

James Samuel Stemons recorded his working experiences, in Denver and Philadelphia, in letters to his sister, Mary, and to employers. These letters show Stemons as a black laborer who experienced economic discrimination because of his color. Race limited the work available to him and influenced the treatment accorded to him in service or unskilled jobs. Employers justified burdening Stemons with extra work because of his color and white customers manipulated their superiority over Stemons by preventing him from earning decent tip money. Stemons worked numerous menial jobs in a short period and never earned much more than ten dollars per week.

Stemons felt imprisoned by these racial restrictions and alternately used them as motivation to subvert discrimination by his bosses. Between 1900 and 1910, menial jobs served as Stemons' lifeline. Though he detested service work, Stemons relied on wages to pay for necessities and to support his mother and sister in Kansas. Stemons' dependence on weekly earnings contributed to his hopelessness. Wages failed to relieve Stemons' feelings of inferiority created by the nature of his menial jobs and the actions of white employers. He remained a disadvantaged black worker who lived in poverty and social inferiority.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

Stemons' experiences of racial discrimination are unique because he possessed the ability to circumvent, to some extent, the impact of racial discrimination. He eased feelings of inferiority and attempted to escape from his working class environment by undermining his bosses and writing letters to his sister. Stemons searched for an alternative to wage labor by participating in intellectual discourse about improving American racial relations. Stemons distanced himself from the feelings of menial employment as he insisted his 'lifework' lay in his intellectual activities. Rather than allowing menial labor to dominate his life, Stemons used his working experiences as fodder for his reform writings.

Stemons distrusted the motivations of his employers and opposed their on-job discrimination. He quit problematic jobs, but continued to work in the service sector because he needed wages. Stemons disobeyed unfair bosses, wrote to employers questioning their management, and wrote to his sister about controlling his own life. These activities relieved some of Stemons' negative feelings and brought him closer to his career as an activist for racial equality.

The majority of black laborers lacked these opportunities for escape, making Stemons' experience of racial discrimination less intense than most laborers. Few blacks challenged their bosses, risked their wages, or had the ability to outlet their feelings through essays and letters. While Stemons shared their working experiences, black menials without intellectual ambitions suffered more than Stemons from the effects of a limited job market, low wages, and prejudiced employers.

Stemons experienced the distress of economic discrimination early in his vocational life. In the early 1890s, Stemons only found access to occupations whose low pay and dangerous conditions made them reserved for black workers. In a preface to his essay, "*A Cry from the*

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

Oppressed' (1897), Stemons his expressed anger at employers who determined the quality workers by their color.

Stemons worked as an unskilled laborer laying railroad track in Colorado from 1891 to 1894. This life threatening occupation earned him only \$1.25 per day, but he needed even this small income. In 1894, Stemons asked the supervisor of a lumberyard for the chances of his being hired and the white boss responded, "Not a --- --- bit, we don't work your kind." In Denver Stemons fared no better. He found openings for black workers as menials, sewer workers, and as a hod-carriers, but none offered decent pay or exempted Stemons' from racial stereotypes.⁴⁵

"Words [were] inadequate to express [Stemons'] resentment" of a "civilization" that excluded its black workers from certain jobs because of their color.⁴⁶ He feared entrapment in dead-end jobs but could not afford to reject opportunities to earn wages. Stemons and other black workers accepted these degrading positions because they "usually had few alternatives."⁴⁷ Frustration pervaded Stemons' early working years and he tried to distance himself from the implied stereotypes of unskilled wage labor. Stemons shared these negative emotions with other black workers denied industrial positions throughout the North.

Stemons responded to this rejection in a unique way. He turned his anger at racial discrimination into a positive attempt to create better working opportunities for black laborers. In 1894, Stemons vowed to help black workers leave service labor and break down the racial barriers of industrial employment. He moved to Cleveland and began speaking for industrial opportunities at churches. Advocating change proved a method of escape, for Stemons, from his working class surroundings.

⁴⁵ Stemons, "A Cry from the Oppressed", Foreword.

⁴⁶ Stemons, "A Cry From the Oppressed", Foreword.

⁴⁷ Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 6.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

Unlike other black workers, Stemons' education allowed him to move beyond menial labor as a life goal and he maintained a forward thinking attitude. He thought critically about his employment situation and analyzed the causes of discrimination in his 1897 essay. Other black workers focused on maintaining jobs and earning wages. This intellectual separation between Stemons and laborers limited the extent to which Stemons felt trapped by racial discrimination. Stemons partially invested himself in menial wages, while most black laborers completely depended on jobs to survive. Yet shared experiences still created resentment and despair in Stemons. His writings are important because they express these emotions, which found no outlet from normal black laborers. At twenty-four, Stemons showed signs of both a working class consciousness and an intellectual consciousness that allowed him to interpret the experiences of a black laborer.

Stemons remained tied to wage labor despite dedicating himself to social activism in Cleveland and publishing his first essay. His speech tour through Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York left him with no money, no job, and no support for his ideas about racial equality and industrial opportunities. He moved to Philadelphia around 1898 and started a decade of service jobs interrupted by periods of intellectual activity. Stemons waited tables in restaurants and worked as a janitor, porter, and seasonal laborer. Long hours and low wages returned Stemons to his attitude as a laborer in Colorado. Stemons' experiences in the 1890s helped him express the negative impact of a racial employment hierarchy and he continued to use writing as an escape from discrimination.

Gimbel's Restaurant, on Ninth and Market Streets in Philadelphia, employed Stemons as a waiter from 1900-1904. Stemons depended on tips to supplement his normal wages. White customers and Stemons' white manager took advantage of this hierarchical relationship. In a

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

letter to E.A. Gimbel, the owner of the restaurant, Stemons complained about this mistreatment and voiced his emotions and the emotions of his coworkers. On July 19 1905, Stemons wrote:

I have been compelled to devote the better part of my time from 12 o'clock to 1 o'clock, 1:30 and even 2 o'clock, to those men, as a result of which my meager income from 'extras' has been at a most conservative estimate reduced no less than one-third. What injustice I have suffered may be better understood when I state, what James Coffey, who has frequently expressed his disgust at such actions...and every one of the older waiter would gladly tell you is true..."They come in and give their orders in such a way that it is impossible for me to serve any one but them, and I am therefore deprived of making anything extra while I am serving them. It is part of my religion," I continued, "not to complain, and I am protesting to you now only because I feel that I am hardly being accorded justice..."

...But I consider that the limit was more than reached, when in addition to the fact that my hours of waiting, and consequently making extra money [he usually earned \$3.50 more per week], were curtailed to two, instead of five, as in the case of other waiters, I should be compelled to give at least one of those two hours to a ten cent party...I have tried to content myself and go along the line of least resistance, because, doing literary and other special work as I am, the position suits me as no other one would, and I felt as though I could stand almost anything until my labors in other fields are crowned with success...But it may be a long time before I realize anything from this [invention] or my other work [literary]. All this makes it a great hardship for me to be thrown out of work at this time, through absolutely no fault of mine. My position, humble as it is, is as important to me as Mr. Rhodes' [his manager] is to him. I appeal to your well-known sense of justice to extend to me, and all other waiters under similar circumstances, the same just consideration as you would to your more favored employees.⁴⁸

Stemons' "humble" position and the \$3.50 in tip money constituted a serious matter.

Menial wages and extra tip money paid for Stemons' expenses and he worried about losing this income. Stemons feared the "great hardship" he faced if Gimbel's decided to end his employment. Yet, this dependence on menial labor evoked tamer feelings than the resentment caused by his unskilled occupation in Colorado.

Stemons recognized a difference between his inconvenient connection to wages and the desperation that connected his fellow service workers to their wages. Stemons' intellectual

⁴⁸ Stemons Correspondence, 7/19/1905

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

consciousness, developed in "*A Cry from the Oppressed*" (1897), protected him from the discouragement he encountered in Gimbel's. Stemons acknowledged that his writings partially prevented him from feeling the effects of racially charged manipulations by the group of white customers. He accepted the assignment without complaint because he suffered the least from low wages and the assertion of white superiority. Stemons needed tip money, but invested more importance in earning a living through his "literary and other special work".⁴⁹ His co-workers, like James Coffey, lacked second sources of income and Stemons accepted a decrease in tips to ensure his co-workers would not have to earn less tips. Because Stemons' intellectual ambitions existed outside of Gimbel's he felt fewer negative effects from racial discrimination.

Stemons further escaped his feelings of being trapped in racially determined occupations by writing to his boss and later leaving the restaurant. He protested to his employer in the name of "justice" so that he and other waiters received fair opportunities to earn tips. Stemons' complaint also demanded all workers receive equal treatment from the manager. "Favored" employees avoided assignments to the poorly tipping customers, while the manager forced black workers to endure weeks of waiting on the notorious customers. Stemons transcended the expected obedience of a black laborer by challenging his employer.

Writing to his boss signified that Stemons accepted the potential for losing his job. Stemons' desire to circumvent racial discrimination mattered more than his connection to the wages offered by his menial job. Stemons decided his dignity in the workplace came before his ability to make money. He called for an end to the group's exploitation of his service and demanded to be reassigned by the manager. Had Stemons been a menial 'lifeworker', perhaps he would have chosen to act differently and to make the best of the small tips he received. Instead, Stemons stepped out of his working class environment and called for equal treatment.

⁴⁹ Stemons Correspondence, 7/19/1905

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

Shortly after Stemons wrote to E.A Gimbel, he informed his Mary of a new job as the head janitor of the Lyric Theater. The building was a fifteen-minute walk from Stemons' home on 339 South Hicks Street. It is unknown whether Stemons quit or whether Gimbel's fired him. Perhaps Gimbel's failed to address Stemons' complaints and he resigned like the two before him. Or, perhaps Stemons' boss fired him after receiving his complaint. In either scenario, his letter facilitated his removal and he escaped the abuse he received as a server. However, these feelings of inferiority and enslavement to wage labor confronted Stemons again in his janitorial position. On September 5, 1905, Stemons wrote the following to his sister

It is now 10 minutes past 12 o'clock midnight and I have just got home from my work, and such promises to be the case almost nightly. I am no longer at Gimbel's, but have a position as janitor and food man at the Lyric Theatre, a fine new building which was opened yesterday, Sept 4th. I began work last Thursday – getting the house in shape. And perhaps I did not work! The hardest work that I have done in thirteen years, and the longest hours I ever did work. I go on duty at eight am and remain till the last person has left the theatre, which last night was 12:20 o'clock, and tonight was 11:55. Yesterday I was so busy, that I did not have time to eat one bite of supper, and I had to take my supper tonight. I have had to do all kinds of heavy lifting, sweeping, mopping, polishing brass, etc... But you would be surprised at the way I have stood it. I come home ever night very tired and sore and by morning I feel entirely recuperated. I am receiving \$10 a week, and have a chance of making a little extra in carriage checks. The manager told me to hire an assistant today, which I did, and he gets \$7.00 a week, to work from eight am to 7 pm. At least, I shall insist on him receiving \$7.00 a week, though the manager insisted that \$6.00 was enough. He is to do the heavier and dirtier work, and thus relieve me. By the way, I made 35 cts extra yesterday, and the same today.⁵⁰

Stemons' return to a traditionally black role intimates that he internalized his societal position as a worker who made ten dollars per week. Between working at Gimbel's and working at the Lyric Theater Stemons recorded nothing about a job search or his desire to leave menial labor behind. Instead, his letter conveyed the normalcy of accepting a janitorial position and subjecting himself to its historical implication of racial inferiority. Stemons expected to work

⁵⁰ Stemons Correspondence, 9/5/1905

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

hard, long days for little compensation. Racial restrictions on occupations prevented Stemons from considering looking for employment outside of service work. Stemons' resignation to menial labor is surprising because his intelligence would have facilitated his search for better jobs. Other black laborers had fewer skills to market than Stemons and were more likely to accept menial labor than Stemons.

As an employee of the Lyric Theater, Stemons performed unskilled tasks rather than customer service. He cleaned the theater house, checked carriages, and handled the sale of food. Stemons' boss utilized common stereotypes about the capabilities of black workers to assign Stemons certain tasks and ease the workload of his white employees. Stemons believed his boss intentionally exploited stereotypes about black workers and implied their racial inferiority. In response, Stemons attempted to escape the feelings he experienced in Denver and at Gimbel's. He disobeyed his boss' instructions, assisted in work 'below' his own work, intended to ask for higher wages, and wrote to his sister about leaving work on his own terms.

Stemons' experiences as a janitor expose the physical characteristics of occupations that 'naturally fitted' black workers. The Theater manager utilized the stereotype that black workers preferred manual labor. Stemons' daily routine consisted of "heavy lifting, sweeping, mopping, [and] polishing brass".⁵¹ He worked twelve to sixteen hours, received ten dollars per week, and skipped meals. Exhausted and hungry, Stemons lamented the prospect of continually returning home after a shift at the Lyric Theater. He worried about feeling trapped in a repetitive cycle of physical labor. But Stemons resigned himself to this type of labor

The proposed duties of Stemons' assistant further reveal the hierarchy of unskilled employment and its connection to race. The manager planned to assign the assistant to the "heavier and dirtier work" and pay him three or four dollars less than Stemons, despite taking

⁵¹ Stemons Correspondence, 9/5/1905

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

over the more demanding aspects of Stemons' occupation. This approach to hiring workers devalued manual labor and attached to it a stigma of inferiority. The physical work assigned to Stemons and his assistant implied that neither employee qualified to work in non-manual jobs. Because they were black, Stemons and his assistant received low pay, long hours, and tasks unworthy of white workers.

Stemons tried to relieve the racial connotations of janitorial work by asking that his assistant receive a higher wage than the manager initially offered. Stemons' experiences with the insecurity of low wages motivated him to try to spare his assistant from similar experiences. Akin to his demands at Gimbel's restaurant, Stemons wanted his assistant to have an equal opportunity to earn a decent wage. Stemons' planned appeal to his manager shows that he rejected traditional constraints of black workers.

A second letter from Stemons to his sister, written on September 17, 1905 concerned difficulties with his manager. Stemons recognized that the Theater boss assigned specific tasks to him because of his color, while easing the workload of white employees. He interpreted his boss' actions as the assertion black inferiority. Stemons felt degraded and used his letter and actions at work as ways to overcome the power of his boss. He wrote:

My work at the theatre is not now so heavy. I have an assistant who works form eight am to 6 pm. He is supposed to do the worst and dirtiest work – though I aid him in most of it – merely because I desire to not that I have to. As a rule we are through with the cleaning by 12 o'clock, noon, and in the afternoon we clean floors, windows, etc...

I seldom go to work before 9:15 or 9:30. The manager is very unreasonable. I am the head janitor, and as such it is my place to see that the work is done. It is really none of his (the manager's) business when I come to work, just so the work is properly done. I find however, that he is inclined to put all on me that he can justify because I am colored, and because he thinks I do not know what the duties of a janitor are. I have never yet complained about one thing that he asked me to do – although I knew that many things he asked me to do should be done by the white employees. But I shall certainly have some say as to what time I go to and come from work. I seemed rather meek at first, until I

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

got acquainted with the work and let him know that he could depend upon me. He told me a week ago that he was beginning to like my work and that I was keeping the theatre in splendid condition. So now I think is the time to talk with him just as I want to continue. I get to work at 9:15 or 9:30 and take about two hours off for dinner, and about two hours off for supper. He got very indignant last evening (Saturday) because I spent so much time away.

....I shall not try to be [at work throughout the day], and when he sees that I am not there and will not be there (there is no way for him to know just when I go and come) I am sure that he will accept the conditions so long as the work is well done. Otherwise I had just as soon quit...⁵²

Stemons' manager "justified" increasing his workload because he was black and, according to stereotypes, performed heavy labor well. The manager also assumed Stemons to be unintelligent and unaware of the "duties of a janitor". Stemons felt slighted by his employer's implicit assertion that he was too dumb to notice the unfair distribution of tasks to his shoulders. But Stemons had no choice except to perform the extra work until he felt comfortable to ask for a raise. He had "never yet complained" of the color line created by his the Theater manager and hope to earn the confidence of his manager. Like many black workers, Stemons felt compelled to accept these discriminations to maintain a status quo and not jeopardize his wage. Stemons' letter shows awareness of the color line in service labor. He gave voice to this awareness because of his connection to writing and racial reform. Other black menials probably internalized these types of observations, while Stemons gave them outlet in his writings

Stemons knowingly participated in the Theater's white-black power structure, but his used his letters and daily hours as sources of empowerment. Stemons subverted this racial hierarchy by determining his own hours, opposing his boss, and controlling his tenure. Rather than being forced to work continuously from 9a.m. until 11p.m., Stemons chose to leave work at certain points during the day. Stemons finished his daily tasks and decided to take lunch and dinner breaks during his workday. "It is really none of [the manager's] business," Stemons

⁵² Stemons Correspondence, 9/17/1905.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

reasoned, when he arrived at work in the morning, provided he completed his tasks well.

Stemons' assertion of control over his hours caused a confrontation with the manager in an "unusually pleasant tone". The manager's displeasure grew out of Stemons' self-determination at work. Stemons used his arrival and departure times as a source of power that balanced the indignity he felt completing his extra tasks usually performed by white workers.

Stemons escaped the discriminatory influence of his boss by owning his tenure and compensation at the Theater. He informed his sister that he would "just as soon quit" rather than receive compensation incompatible with his hard work. Stemons offered to sacrifice his weekly income of ten dollars to regain his self-respect. At Gimbel's, Stemons waited three years to ask for wage fairness, but he decided to argue for a decent wage at the Lyric Theater after only a few weeks of employment. Stemons explained to Mary that he would "demand at least two or three dollars more per week or give up the position."⁵³

Stemons' determination to break the pattern of inferior wages for 'inferior' work represents an opportunity that other black workers lacked. He opposed discrimination more forcefully than other black menials because of his potential for better employment. Stemons felt underemployed in menial labor and his intellectual activities prove that this was the case. Four months after these September 1905 letters, Stemons started work at the Philadelphia *Courant*. Stemons' temporality as a service laborer allowed him to feel the negative influences of discrimination but enabled him to shirk them as well. Stemons disliked the Theater boss taking advantage of his color but chose not to complain in order to maintain his income. Conversely, Stemons freely angered his boss, arrived to work late, and demand higher wages.

The white employees of the Lyric Theater imbued certain tasks with labels of inferiority but Stemons overlooked them when dealing with his assistant. Stemons helped complete the

⁵³ Stemons Correspondence, 9/5/1905

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

“worst and dirtiest work” at the Theatre “merely because [he] desire[d] to”. The Theater’s hiring practices labeled this work as an inferior task. The more grueling a task, the less white, and more black a certain occupation became. But had the luxury of ignoring these indicators of intelligence, race, or social position. He chose to aid his assistant and transcended the labeling of certain positions as exclusively black, unintelligent, or inferior.

The Gimbel’s and Lyric Theater letters described Stemons’ working class experiences and showed the range of responses – from belittlement to empowerment – that economic racism caused Stemons to feel. Other Stemons letters portray a working class consciousness that manifested itself outside of his places of employment. Stemons’ racially labeled jobs provided an insecure financial future for him and his family. His intellectual confidence also suffered. Stemons questioned the viability of his economic solution for black inequality. Concern over his ability to fit in with elite racial reformers prevented Stemons’ acceptance into progressive circles. Stemons’ inability to escape on-job discriminations hurt his confidence in his intellectual activities.

Stemons working class consciousness continued because his employment remained inconsistent, basic necessities became scarce, and his intellectual work failed to generate income. He worked different menial jobs to support his reform writings, but Stemons doubted his ability to succeed. He could not terminate his connections to the racial employment hierarchy. Like many black workers, Stemons feared for the well-being of his family because he hardly earned enough money for himself. A letter from James to Mary Stemons during his tenure at the Lyric Theater captures his economic troubles:

It seems impossible for me to accumulate any money. I do not mean this as a hint for you not to call on me for all you need. And especially in reference to the matter of which I last spoke to you [i.e. Mary leaving her husband, finding a place to stay for their mother]. If that was not enough let me know at once, and

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

you shall have the last cent I have. As for my being sick, I am insured, and will get \$10.00 a week while sick and \$100.00 should I die. I am insured in your name – Mary Stemons-Howard.⁵⁴

Stemons' income from the Lyric Theatre provided no surplus money and he worried about his health. A discriminatory economic structure trapped Stemons in jobs he was overqualified for, but Stemons' intellectual activities remained secondary to his wage labor. The financial burdens upon black laborers, as Stemons realized, demanded most of their weekly earnings. Bills for rent, loans, food, coal, and clothing existed whether Stemons worked or was unemployed. In *A Cry from the Oppressed*, Stemons asserted that “only the man with an iron will and a purpose high as Heaven, whose courage will not fail, and whose ambition will not take wings” could prevail as a menial. Stemons' inability to save money even caused him to worry about death. He informed Mary that, in the case of his passing, she would receive the payment of his one hundred dollar insurance policy. Pessimism surrounded Stemons and he questioned his chances of surviving his working class life. Hopelessness continued after Stemons' initial tenure at the Lyric Theater and his failure as a writer for the *Courant*.

In the summer of 1906, Stemons worked as a porter at the hotel Lorraine. His work there was only temporary and he considered an offer to work for the summer at Willow Grove Park, an amusement park north of Philadelphia in Upper Moreland Township. On May 11, 1906, Stemons wrote to Mary. :

Two nights ago the man who I worked for out at Willow Grove came into the Lorraine and said that he would like to have me this summer, from about the middle of June. He gives \$5.00 a week, and lodging during June, and \$6.00 during the remainder of the season. I had hoped to get something better than this by going away. But it is a relief to know that I can get even this.

I made \$8.36 the second week and \$9.14 the third week. Thurs. of this week, I made only 75 cents, the smallest amount I have made any one day. But yesterday, Friday, I made \$3.14, the most I have made any one day. So this is the way it goes; there is nothing certain about this kind of work, aside from the small

⁵⁴ Stemons Correspondence, 12/8/1905

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

wages. I am sending you \$10.00 because I was shocked to know that you do not get enough to eat.⁵⁵

Stemons recognized the uncertainty of his job location and the variance in pay from week to week. Though his 'lifework' existed apart from wage labor, Stemons planned where he would earn his next paycheck. Racial divisions of labor caused insecurity that dominated Stemons' working class attitude and affected how he approached his intellectual activities. The range of occupations held by Stemons familiarized him with different areas of black labor. Stemons worked one summer at Willow Grove and with his tenure at the Lorraine ending, planned to work outside of the city. Stemons mentioned possibly taking a job sixty miles away in Wildwood, New Jersey but settled on returning to Willow Grove.⁵⁶ In the fall of 1906, Stemons returned to the Lyric Theater. He worked as there until October 1907 when he began work as a postal clerk. In the span of three years, Stemons experienced a range of occupations, wages, bosses, and working locations. From waiter, to janitor, to porter, to seasonal laborer Stemons familiarized himself with the roots of black economic disadvantage.

As late as 1909, Stemons struggled to make ends meet economically. His clerkship at the post office was intermittent until August 1909 when he was appointed a regular clerk. He edited two black newspapers between 1906 and 1909, but the revenue generated through advertisements and subscriptions was not enough to offset the cost of publishing the papers and Stemons often found himself in need of money. He could occasionally barely afford to pay rent for his office building, in which he accepted lodgers. "Just now," Stemons wrote, "I am in rather embarrassing straits for money

⁵⁵ Stemons Correspondence, 5/11/1906

⁵⁶ Stemons Correspondence, 5/23/1906

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

because most of our good lodgers have left, and the \$40.00 a month rent continues to go on just the same.”⁵⁷

These letters illuminate Stemons’ experiences of the racially oriented problems faced by black labor throughout the industrializing North around 1900. Stemons voiced the negative impact of race-based menial labor through his letters. Like other black laborers, Stemons relied on temporary jobs, faced discrimination from white people in positions of power and struggled financially. His feelings – anger, hopelessness, and motivation – are an example of the feelings other black workers might have experienced. However, Stemons’ ambitions outside of menial labor lessened the intensity of these reactions. Unlike other black laborers, Stemons used his personal experiences to engender an intellectual career that searched for racial equality. His understanding of racial discrimination, through years of experience, compelled Stemons to explore solutions that improved the lives of northern black workers. Stemons’ writings, speeches, essays, articles, and books, influenced by his experiences as a black toiler, are the focus of the next chapter.

(Chapter 3) **James Samuel Stemons: Working Class Intellectual**

From 1894 to 1914, Stemons campaigned to help the economically disadvantaged northern black population. His major efforts were two publications, “*A Cry from the Oppressed*” (1897) and “*The North Holds the Key to the Race Question*” (1908), and two organizations – the AEIO and LCPR.⁵⁸ His history as a reformer shows many ideological parallels to the well-documented history of the reformers like by Booker T. Washington, W.E.B Du Bois, the NAACP and the NUL. Stemons’ first step in adjusting racial relations was to convince industrial employers that black laborers deserved opportunities because they worked as well or better than

⁵⁷ Stemons Correspondence, 12/21/1907

⁵⁸ The organizations’ full names are the Association for Equalizing Industrial Opportunities and the League of Civic and Political Reform.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

whites worked. Stemons' working experiences trapped in racially segmented labor directed his economically focused solution. These experiences also prevented him from considering other reform solutions – rights or education based theories – as viable ideas. Stemons remained rooted in his working class identity despite working for the same cause as upper class intellectuals.

Stemons' awkward position between intellectual calling and menial wage labor caused him to clash with the racial reform movement. Elite progressives who led this movement were well-educated, wealthy whites and blacks. Insecurities caused by Stemons' working class deficiencies in these things made him aggressive when interacting with other reformers. He defended economic opportunity as the only possible solution to racial inequality and attacked ideas proposed by others.

Criticism flustered Stemons and he refused to cooperate with activists who outclassed him. He interpreted their words as jealous attempts to oppress his ideas. Stemons' independence and bad relationship skills also derived from his personal goals. He hoped his ideas earned money and fame to end his working class struggles. These traits prevented Stemons from becoming more popular in his time and prevented him from taking on any historical significance.

Stemons' "*A Cry from the Oppressed*" (1897) understood black disadvantage on the same economic bases as George Haynes of the NUL and Booker T. Washington of the Tuskegee Institute. Stemons asserted that unequal economic opportunity impoverished northern blacks and divided the nation along racial lines. "*A Cry from the Oppressed*" (1897) cited statistics from the 1890 census, which showed 69.3% of black laborers in New York worked as domestic or personal servants. In opposition to this menial majority, Stemons presented ratios of white industrial workers to black industrial workers. Sixteen white masons, nineteen white

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

blacksmiths, and twenty seven white carpenters labored for every one black mason, colored blacksmith, and black carpenter.⁵⁹ Stemons felt that this:

“unremitting opposition to colored labor in the North [*demoralized*] and [*degraded*] colored people to an appalling extent. Colored children, by going to school, and associating with white children, are led in every way to consider themselves the equals of white people. They are constantly and eloquently reminded from pulpit and from press, that in free America men are regarded not by their race or color, but by their merit and manhood. But when the colored youth enters upon the stern duties of life and brings this proud assertion to a practical test, he finds it is an empty display of rhetorical mockery. He applies for a position as stenographer, bookkeeper, clerk or salesman and public sentiment says: ‘Black man, thus far, but not farther.’ He goes to a shop, factory, steam or street railway and asks for work, and the doors are ruthlessly closed in his face.”

Stemons’ rejection from industrial labor in Colorado and his years as a service worker in Philadelphia legitimized these assertions. Letters to his sister and employers reflected his personal demoralization. “*A Cry from the Oppressed*” (1897) elaborated on the Stemons’ feelings of being pinned down by discrimination and extrapolated these feelings to other black laborers. Stemons’ Colorado experiences made him cynical about his chances of finding decent employment in a nation built on “rhetorical mockery”.

Stemons presented these feelings to strengthen his idea that economic change was the key to earning equality for northern blacks. These deeply held feelings also prevented Stemons from agreeing with the non-economic focus of other reform initiatives.

Stemons linked behavioral tendencies to these feelings of oppression that resulted from economic discrimination. Black Americans inclined towards crime, unemployment, and poverty because racial limitations left them few choices. Stemons understood that:

“after waging a fruitless war against the sentiment that vetoes their progress, colored youth enter the chambers of despair, with ambition crushed and hope blighted. It is easy at such a stage to pursue (sic) a downward course. All of the evil tendencies of nature, and very few of the good ones, present themselves to

⁵⁹ Stemons, “*A Cry from the Oppressed*”, 14-16.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

the discouraged soul. Discouragement is parent to the most wretched lives that are lived, and to the most heinous crimes that are committed....⁶⁰

White America believed blacks naturally tended towards these “evil” social qualities – laziness, poverty, illiteracy. Stemons contended these “heinous crimes” derived from the cycle of economic discrimination against black workers. Negative social characteristics were circumstantial and not racial. Returning hope to black workers by increasing industrial opportunities would curb these behaviors and help end racial discord. Stemons believed decent wages, steady employment, and technical training would make black workers accepted in American society.

George Haynes founded the NUL on similar precepts as those set forth by Stemons in “*A Cry from the Oppressed*” (1897). More than ten years after Stemons, the NUL called for blacks to receive “the full responsibilities and opportunities of first-class citizenship.”⁶¹ Stemons and Haynes agreed that Reconstruction’s promise of equality existed in theory and not in practice. The NUL echoed Stemons call to allow black citizens to prove their merit and compete for jobs with white workers. Haynes deplored this “discouraging cycle” where “opportunities remained closed because Negroes so rarely had ‘the *chance* to acquire the skill and experience’ they needed to move up.”⁶² Haynes believed that the concentration of black workers in domestic/personal service perpetuated their second-class citizenship and negatively affected their motivation and behavior.

Socially, Haynes recognized that “sanitation and health, morality and family discipline were early victims of an economic system unable (or unwilling) to offer Negro men decent jobs

⁶⁰ Stemons, “*A Cry from the Oppressed*”, 17

⁶¹ Weiss, Nancy J. *The National Urban League 1910-1940*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, 65.

⁶² Weiss, *The National Urban League 1910-1940*, 32.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

at a living wage.”⁶³ The decline in sanitation, morality, and discipline elaborated on the “downward course” proposed by Stemons. Black workers were kept out of better paying jobs and necessarily lacked the resources to meet the standards of white society. In turn, they were even less likely to receive industrial jobs. The underlying cause of black economic and social inferiority, Stemons and Haynes agreed, resulted from discriminatory hiring practices that limited opportunity instead of genetics.

Despite these ideological similarities, Stemons and the NUL’s Philadelphia branch (known as the Armstrong Association) never cooperated. Their bitter relationship grew out of class differences and Stemons’ desire for fame. In January 1912, John T. Emlen asked that Stemons merge his organizations (the AEIO and LCPR) with the Armstrong Association. Stemons felt insulted by the “rich white man” who previously “would have nothing to do” with his movement.⁶⁴ Stemons felt removed from the Armstrong Association because of Emlen’s wealth and established position as a reformer. Stemons also felt insulted that the Armstrong Association ignored him up to that point. Emlen wanted Stemons to join his group only after Stemons’ organizations gained support.

Stemons’ aspirations for national recognition also steered him away from working with Emlen. Cooperation with a recognized group like Philadelphia’s NUL branch made it less likely that Stemons would earn personal prominence. Stemons defended the individuality of his movement because its momentum offered him a chance to earn money and support. Similar to the Armstrong Association, the colored YMCA of Philadelphia was “fighting” to have Stemons’ “turn [his] work over to them”.⁶⁵ Stemons refused this request on the basis that he wanted to lead his own movement, rather than work under the name of some other group. Stemons’ refusal

⁶³ Weiss, *The National Urban League 1910-1940*, 32

⁶⁴ Stemons Correspondence, 1/17/1912.

⁶⁵ Stemons Correspondence, 1/17/1912.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

to work with these ideologically similar organizations repeated itself throughout his intellectual history.

Stemons and Booker T. Washington both advocated black economic empowerment through industrial employment as a solution to “racial animosities and suspicions”.⁶⁶ However, their proposed methods for realizing industrial opportunity differed according to their personal histories. Washington graduated from Hampton Institute, in Richmond, Virginia, in 1875. Hampton impressed upon Washington the benefits of an education centered on industrial labor. He learned that manual labor was not a disgrace. He loved manual labor “not alone for its financial value, but for labour’s own sake and for the independence and self-reliance which the ability to do something which the world wants done brings.”⁶⁷ Washington advocated industrial education so a black worker could “help himself” – an ability that contributed to strong character.⁶⁸

In 1881, Washington established the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial school in Tuskegee, Alabama and endeavored to instill and personal value of manual labor into its students. Tuskegee’s ambitions, and Washington’s reform career, reflected the lessons he learned at Hampton. He wanted Tuskegee’s black students “to lift labour up from mere drudgery and toil” and “learn to love work for its own sake.”⁶⁹ Washington’s success at Hampton also proved to him the value of self-reliance. A black worker’s independence became a tool to increase cooperation between the races. Washington found that Tuskegee workers “who produce[d] something that [made] the white man partly dependent upon the Negro instead of all the

⁶⁶ Brundage, Fitzhugh W. *Up From Slavery by Booker T. Washington: With Related Documents*. Boston: Bedford / St. Martin’s, 2003, 145.

⁶⁷ Brundage, Fitzhugh W., 74.

⁶⁸ Brundage, Fitzhugh W., 80.

⁶⁹ Brundage, Fitzhugh W., 108-109.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

dependence being on the other side” garnered white cooperation and acceptance.⁷⁰

Washington promoted this industrial education of black youth, by schools like Tuskegee and Hampton, throughout his reform career.

Stemons’ opposition to Washington’s is rooted in his own educational and occupational history. Stemons’ experiences in traditionally black occupations left him with a negative opinion of labor and created his hopelessness. Labor only fulfilled Stemons’ need for wages, while Washington learned to love his work. These experiences also narrowed his perspective so that Stemons only believed in industrial opportunity to solve racial inequality. Stemons’ intelligence provided no help in earning industrial positions and he believed Washington’s industrial education would do no better. Working class insecurities based on wage dependence plagued Stemons’ relationship with Washington. Stemons believed Washington stole his ideas, prevented him from earning recognition, and blocked potential income. He feared that his industrial opportunities solution would find success in Washington’s hands. Jealousy of Washington’s rise to fame and his escape from working class concerns also distanced Stemons from the Tuskegee leader.

To defend the potential success of his ideas, Stemons tried to discredit Washington’s industrial education. He believed modern occupations demanded skills beyond the scope of Tuskegee’s teaching ability. Stemons contended that zero of four industrial schools, including Tuskegee, Hampton, Berean, and Downingtown (the later two near Philadelphia) had “ever graduated a single Negro who would be permitted to serve in the humble capacity of a motorman, conductor or lineman for the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company.”⁷¹ Stemons felt these schools provided false hope for black workers because out of date skills differed little than

⁷⁰ Washington, Booker T. *The Future of the American Negro*. New York: Negro Universities Press, reprinted in 1969 (1899 original), 87

⁷¹ Stemons, 12/26/1910, from a speech titled “Industrial Repression”.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

no skills at all. Stemons felt Washington's solution stopped "short by almost completely ignoring the patent fact that an untrammelled opportunity to ply a trade is of vastly more fundamental importance than is any mere opportunity to learn a trade."⁷² Stemons concerned himself with opportunity and opposed Washington because decent employment eluded Stemons throughout his youth.

Stemons used editorship of *The Pilot*, created in 1907 at 1341 Lombard Street, to oppose Booker T. Washington's industrial education. His personal differences with Washington often displaced the *Pilot's* goal of acting as "an instrument for bridging the ever-widening gulf between the colored and white races."⁷³ In June 1908, Washington wrote to Stemons about keeping their relationship professional and working towards black equality. "On many matters you and I do not agree," Washington said to Stemons, "but I always read your paper, because when you do not agree with a person, you argue and do not abuse."⁷⁴

Stemons reacted to their disagreement differently. He interpreted Washington's actions and words as an affront to his reputation. Stemons complained to Mary that some of Washington's speeches were "a direct attack" upon his personal character because they advocated positions different from Stemons'.⁷⁵ Stemons also said Washington's inclusion of 'industrial opportunity' in recent speeches was an attempt to "steal [his] thunder."⁷⁶ He interpreted Washington's use of his idea as piracy rather than compliment. Stemons bickered over personal differences while Washington focused on finding the best method for blacks to earn equality.

⁷² Stemons Correspondence, 1/31/1906

⁷³ Stemons Correspondence, 1/31/1906

⁷⁴ Stemons Correspondence, 6/6/1908

⁷⁵ Stemons Correspondence, 11/11/1908

⁷⁶ Stemons Correspondence, 11/11/1908

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

Jealousy affected Stemons' perception of Washington, who achieved the personal goals Stemons set for himself. Stemons working class hopelessness continued as he failed to attract financial support for *The Pilot*, sell his second essay "*The North Holds the Key*" (1908), and gather general support around his ideas. In comparison, Washington escaped his history of slavery, successfully attracted money to Tuskegee, and had a large biracial following for his ideas. Stemons disliked Washington's "star of false leadership" and shunned comparisons to the "boot licker".⁷⁷ Stemons' adverse personal feelings towards Washington contributed to his lack of contemporary recognition. Stemons' emphasis on individual gains precluded supporters from contributing to his efforts. Washington requested a friendlier relationship with Stemons, but Stemons continued to attack Washington's character in letters to his sister and in *Pilot* editorials.

In Philadelphia, Stemons treated the editor of the *Courant* in a similar manner. In the spring of 1906, Stemons' conflict with A.P Caldwell caused him to quit the newspaper. Stemons' entertained a conceited self-image and believed Caldwell feared being eclipsed in the public eye by Stemons.⁷⁸ This aggressive attitude prevented Stemons from gaining support in Philadelphia and on a national level. But Stemons needed this forcefulness to have a chance at national recognition. A successful rise from obscurity to prominence required over-confidence on Stemons' part. Personal confidence also allowed Stemons to separate himself from the negative feelings associated with his working class environment.

Stemons' relationship with W.E.B Du Bois and the NAACP followed a similar pattern to his relationship with Washington. He refused their leadership, disagreed with their methods, and personally disliked reformers involved with their efforts. Du Bois' racial reform demanded immediate equal civil and political rights for black Americans. His *Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

⁷⁷ Stemons Correspondence, 11/11/1908, Stemons Correspondence 9/25/1912.

⁷⁸ Stemons Correspondence, 4/12/1906

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

foreshadowed the legal protests used by the NAACP to fight for racial justice. Stemons concentrated on industrial opportunity, rather than suffrage and social rights, because it avoided racial antagonisms and strived for definite goal.

Stemons' attendance at the Lincoln Conference, the founding meeting of the NAACP, revealed to him the limitations of his working class solution and the possible benefits of a rights approach to racial equality. The Conference also forced Stemons' awareness of his personal dissimilarity to other reformers. He loathed the success that other reformers had, while he toiled in menial jobs for the majority of his life. Stemons also perceived that the Conference's organizers were jealous of his ideas and purposely prevented him from influencing the proceedings. His working class background affected his ability to mesh with the socially elite reformers of the NAACP.

In May 1908, Stemons published his second major essay on industrial opportunities. In "*The North Holds the Key to the Race Question*" (1908) Stemons proposed a solution that he expanded on in his newspaper, *The Pilot*. He argued for equal industrial opportunities in the North as a key to ending the racial subordination of blacks in the South. This lead-by-example method, Stemons held, would replace unsuccessful verbal criticism used by northern racial reformers. "In proportion as industrial opportunities are extended to Negroes in the North," Stemons wrote, "in that proportion alone will civil and political differences be adjusted in the South."⁷⁹ He believed economic opportunity in the North would draw a wave of Southern immigrants out of the South. In response to this emigration, Stemons envisioned the South adjusting civil liberties and the right to vote to encourage black workers to stay in the South. Stemons believed the South would offer social equality to black workers to prevent the loss of their labor.

⁷⁹ Stemons, "*The North Holds the Key to the Race Question*"

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

Stemons second major essay recognized the limited perspective of his earlier reform work. The scope of his racial reform grew in response to the increasing support for Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk*. His 1908 publication offered a solution to discriminations against southern blacks as well as northern blacks. Stemons' earlier writing excluded civic, political, and southern concerns. His 1897 work, Stemons' perspective was contained to his solutions based on his working class experiences. After Du Bois championed "the privilege and duty of voting" and criticized "the emasculating effects of caste distinctions" Stemons reconsidered his narrow focus on industrial rights.⁸⁰ Stemons partially incorporated Du Bois' ideas into his scheme of economic improvement so that industrial opportunity acted as the watershed for social rights. This change broadened the effect of Stemons' solution and brought him ideologically closer to the reform movement that focused on mainly Southern problems.

Despite some concessions by Stemons, he remained opposed to Du Bois' central idea that rights needed to form the basis of racial equality. Besides this goal of racial equality and their time in Philadelphia, these two reformers led very different lives. Stemons harbored personal goals that he wanted to achieve quickly, while Du Bois prepared for a long battle for black rights. Du Bois also searched to collaborate with other reformers, while Stemons preferred to work alone and even rejected Du Bois' NAACP. Most notably, Stemons' experienced the racial discrimination, poverty, and second-class status that he wrote about, while Du Bois' privileged position allowed him to develop an intellectual conscious mostly free from the barriers faced by Stemons.

It is unclear whether Stemons, who arrived around 1898, and Du Bois, who left around the 1897, lived in Philadelphia simultaneously. Regardless, the city contributed to the

⁸⁰ Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999, 45.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

development of both intellectuals and influenced their different approaches to racial equality. Du Bois attended Fisk University, Harvard College and the University of Berlin and earned a doctorate from Harvard in 1895. He moved to Philadelphia in 1896 and conducted a factual survey of the black population in the city's seventh ward. In his *Philadelphia Negro (1899)*, Du Bois analyzed how the "different mental attitude, moral standard, and economic judgment" ascribed to the city's blacks affected their relationship with white society.⁸¹ After collaborating with the University of Pennsylvania and publishing his study of Philadelphia, Du Bois moved to Atlanta in 1897.⁸²

In 1894, while Du Bois studied in Berlin, Stemons gave up hope of financing his higher education. Industrial employment eluded Stemons and he could not afford further schooling. Stemons moved to the Philadelphia's seventh ward after Du Bois' left for Atlanta and prior to the publication of *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1899. Stemons survived in Philadelphia as a menial laborer and would have interested Du Bois had they crossed paths in 1896.⁸³ Stemons' experienced Philadelphia's racial discrimination as decade-long service laborer while Du Bois' experienced Philadelphia's racism through a year and half-long observation. As a result, Stemons gravitated towards an economic solution to racial equality while Du Bois' educated perspective believed black rights would solve racial discrimination.

In *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) Du Bois asked, "Is not life more than meat, and the body more than raiment?"⁸⁴ Du Bois wanted "culture and character" for America's black citizens rather than materialism and "bread winning." Educated at Harvard and cultured in Berlin, Du Bois rejected wages and industrial occupations as the end to racial reform. He believed black

⁸¹ Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Philadelphia Negro*, 8.

⁸² Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Philadelphia Negro*, x-xix.

⁸³ Stemons Correspondence, 5/2/1906

⁸⁴ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 65. From Matthew 6.25.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

Americans needed to look beyond industrial education or opportunities and aim to be the equal of white citizens in every aspect of life. Du Bois specifically opposed industrial education as an end because its teachers required a liberal education.

Stemons answered Du Bois' question with a resounding "No". He based his solution on the idea that material equality preceded cultural equality. As a poor Philadelphian, Stemons concerned himself most with earning consistent wages and devoted himself to activism only after he found decent employment as a postal clerk. Stemons devoted twenty years of his life to earning money for education and necessities. It was easy for Du Bois to disregard wages as a life goal because he never worried about having no food or money for rent. For black workers like Stemons, wages formed a major part of his life. Liberal education and high culture never entered Stemons' program for change and Du Bois and Stemons never completely shared the same ideas for racial reform.

Stemons' disagreements with Du Bois' legal-cultural approach culminated at the Lincoln Conference on May 31, 1909. The conference magnified tensions between Stemons' working class identity and his identity as a racial reformer. Stemons felt socially insecure and frustrated with the NAACP's focus on non-economic solutions to racial inequality. The meeting also exposed Stemons' uncooperative tendencies and his egoistic confidence that his ideas alone would succeed. Stemons mixed feelings of jealousy, disbelief, and anger at his own failures caused him to leave the Conference doubting the quality of his ideas. Shortly after his setback at the Conference, Stemons adopted some of the NAACP's ideas and regained confidence in his industrial opportunities solution.

Prior to the Conference Stemons corresponded with William Walling, a co-founder of the NAACP, about potential topics of discussion. Stemons disagreed with the focus of the

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

conference – equal suffrage and civil rights – and asked Walling to include a discussion of economic equality. Stemons wrote to Mary that if Walling and others fought “for civil and political rights (even though they are what we are all indirectly striving for)” the resulting “storm of opposition in all directions” would make reform difficult.⁸⁵ He warned Walling that the Conference was doomed for failure unless the economics of race relations shared an equal space with social rights.

Stemons voiced his disagreement with the Conference’s program to make the organizers aware of his own ideas. After years of failure, Stemons became desperate to have an intelligent audience hear his theories about racial inequality. He hoped presenting his ideas at the Conference would increase the sales of his essay and allow him to work solely on racial reform. Stemons’ efforts at the *Pilot* and in his 1908 essay failed to grab the attention of other reformers. He worked part time as a postal clerk and continued his dependence on wages. To insert a discussion of economic rights into the program, Stemons aggressively questioned the planned topics of discussion.

Stemons was a non-factor at the May 1910 Conference as Du Bois and other leaders formed the NAACP around political and civil rights goals. Stemons spoke for ten minutes in an open discussion but the group of reformers showed no interest in his ideas.⁸⁶ Stemons left New York having “never seen the race in a worse light than at this Conference.” He perceived “arrogance and opposition to all who do not subscribe” to the program of the NAACP – political and civil rights.⁸⁷ Stemons attributed the rejection of his economic-industrial solution to jealousy. Before the conference began, Stemons believed his voice was stifled. He sensed an

⁸⁵ Stemons Correspondence, 3/13/1909

⁸⁶ Stemons Correspondence, 6/1/1909

⁸⁷ Stemons Correspondence, 6/1/1909

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

attempt “to keep [his] name from appearing in connection with the entire Conference.”⁸⁸

Reminiscent of his interactions with Booker T. Washington, Stemons believed the NAACP leaders feared the success of his ideas and were jealous of his insight. Stemons also worried more about his personal failures than the hope to ease discrimination offered by the formation of the NAACP.

Stemons perceived an “arrogance and opposition” to his ideas that developed from the separate class backgrounds of the Conference attendees. The leading racial reformers were social elites: college educations, national reputations, and well paying jobs were the norm for the white and black leaders who attended the Lincoln Conference. The intellectuals who offered their support to the early NAACP included Jane Addams, Mary White Ovington, Ida Wells Barnett, William Lloyd Garrison, W.E.B Du Bois, Francis Grimke, and Susan Wharton. The white members of the early NAACP came from the “upper-middle-class” and “urban elite”.⁸⁹ Addams grew up wealthy and attended Rockford Female Seminary. Mary White Ovington conducted a sociological study of New York’s black population, similar to Du Bois’ *Philadelphia Negro* in the years prior to her involvement in the NAACP. Nearly all of the NAACP’s black members attended college and the majority of them attended graduate school. Black intellectuals were “doctors, lawyers, ministers, educators, businessmen, and publicists.”⁹⁰

Stemons anticipated these real class differences in a letter to Mary written before the Conference. Stemons feared that his inability to present himself respectably, along with the working class undertones in his ideas, might cause a negative reception from other reformers. On March 18 1909, Stemons wrote:

⁸⁸ Stemons Correspondence, 5/21/1909

⁸⁹ Weiss, *National*, 48.

⁹⁰ Weiss, *National*, 59

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

... It will be absolutely necessary for me to have some nice clothes to wear, and I also ought to have ten to \$15 in my pocket. I am scarcely making enough in the post office now to pay rent, and have sufficient to buy enough to eat. I never have money to buy personal necessities for myself. For example, I have not bought a hat in three years, if I rightly remember, nor an overcoat in five years, my present coat being so shabby that I am ashamed to wear it to work. I have a passable suit of clothes, which I procured in pay for advertisement.⁹¹

Stemons felt self-conscious about his working class lifestyle and his inability to afford new clothes. The gathering of leaders on the race question intimidated him and he feared being embarrassed by his appearance. Vestiges of Stemons' menial labor lessened his confidence in his intellectual ideas and triggered his aggressive behavior leading up to the Conference. Stemons' ten-minute speech at the Conference, presumably about industrial opportunity, depicted his limited working class perspective. His insecurities proved valid as the Conference ignored his call for an economic focus. The group of reformers shunned Stemons' individual call for a different approach. Stemons' uncomfortable intellectual space between laborer and elite caused another disappointment in his intellectual career. Nevertheless, Stemons' stubborn desires to harmonize race relations, profit from his ideas, and become famous caused him to return to intellectual work in Philadelphia.

Stemons admitted the limitations in his methods for racial change when he founded the Association for Equalizing Industrial Opportunities (AEIO) and the League of Civic and Political Reform (LCPR) in November 1910. He incorporated the principles of the Lincoln Conference – civil and political reform – into his new plan for black equality. Stemons' earlier efforts – essays and newspapers – “proved absolutely futile.”⁹² His two major essays and work at the *Pilot* failed to bring his solution national acclaim and burdened him financially. Stemons' troubles at the Lincoln Conference eroded his once strong convictions and he opened his perspective to include

⁹¹ Stemons Correspondence, 3/18/1909

⁹² Stemons Correspondence, 10/5/1909

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

solutions from other different points of view. Stemons wrote to the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* that his new organizations had:

“the dual purpose of constraining the refractory elements among Negroes to conform to the laws of decency and order, and of broadening the opportunities of that race to work for an honest living. This organization is founded on the proposition that the only possible means of righteously adjusting relations between the races lay in upright Negroes combining, especially through their churches, to curb such disturbing elements as are mentioned above, and in upright white people agreeing, especially through their churches, to apply such rules of social and economic justice in their dealings with Negroes as measurably accord with the accepted ideas of Christian civilization.”

Stemons believed his reform League could change the behavior of the deviant class of black citizens. This League embraced the NAACP’s focus on the social status of blacks. But Stemons’ social reform departed from the NAACP’s vision of equal rights via protests. Stemons wanted blacks to heed the “demands of civic duty and public deportment” to prove deserved basic rights. He proposed advisory committees to investigate conditions “detrimental to the civic life, morals, or good name” of the black community. These committees, composed of black and white members, then suggested solutions to the problems they found.

The AEIO also employed committees to explore methods to make industrial opportunities available to black workers. Stemons envisioned the AEIO pressuring, but not antagonizing, white industrial employers and providing them with reasons for expanding their employment to black workers. In a letter that requested support from Chicago philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, Stemons detailed the AEIO’s proposed method:

Our initial efforts would be to find openings for Negroes in small shops, factories, manufactories, and the like. Every such opening would be placed before the public, that would have the tendency of awakening general interest, and to prepare the way for still broader recognition. We would then judiciously approach employers and employees in the larger establishments (at the same time keeping within the realm of manual labor) including locomotive and boiler works, street railways, and ultimately steam railways.⁹³

⁹³ Stemons Correspondence, 11/21/1913.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

Stemons asked Rosenwald for a donation of five thousand dollars to support the AEIO and LCPR. In 1914, Rosenwald refused to offer his support and insufficient funds forced Stemons to give up the last of his reform efforts. Stemons also suffered from rheumatism and wanted to devote his limited energy to earning wages at the post office and supporting his sister and mother. After 1914 Stemons' career as a public reformer ended.

Stemons' working class identity contributed to the demise of his public reform career. In his twentieth year of fighting for racial change, Stemons searched for financial support from wealthy Americans. He wrote to Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Rosenwald and asked them to support the AEIO and LCPR. He also advertised his organizations' need for five thousand dollars in the *Public Ledger* but found no supporters. Stemons' early reform initiatives died out due to lack of funds as well. Debt forced the 1908 closure of *The Pilot* and Stemons published his two major essays on a small scale. Stemons remained trapped by economic limitations in his last days as an intellectual.

(Conclusion) James Samuel Stemons After 1914

After his public career ended in 1914, Stemons worked as a Philadelphia postal clerk. He continued his quest for racial equality within the post office and lobbied for black workers to receive the same benefits as their white co-workers. Stemons worked full time at the post office to support his mother and sister after they moved to Philadelphia, from Kansas, sometime around 1915. The majority of Stemons' 1918-1922 letters are to and from the Postmaster in Philadelphia, Colonel George Kemp. In 1922, Stemons spoke at a gathering of postal workers about the discriminatory treatment he received as a fourteen-year employee of the post office.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

In 1916, a collection of Stemons' writings was published in a book titled *The Key: A Tangible Solution of the Negro Problem*. This book gives an overview of Stemons' proposed solutions to racial inequality and does not present any new material. Stemons' reaction to this publication would have created an interesting comparison to his many failures, but the Historical Society of Pennsylvania contains none of Stemons' letters between 1914 and 1917.

Stemons' efforts to publish written material continued into 1918 when he wrote a third major essay "*The Negro Exodus from the South*". The Historical Society's collection does not include a copy of this essay. This essay would have been useful in analyzing the development of Stemons' industrial opportunities solution. Black workers broke into industrial employment during the World War I and economic opportunities lured migrating blacks from the South. How did Stemons incorporate the influx of unskilled workers into economic theories? How did Stemons react to continuation of the second-class status of blacks after their inclusion into industrial employment? The only information about Stemons' third essay comes from publishers' letters informing him of their decision to reject his paper. The rejection of this essay continued Stemons' string of failures and ensured that he remained unrecognized for his intellectual activities. Stemons' life after 1922 is not recorded in the Historical Society's collection even though he lived in Philadelphia until 1959.

Gutman's call to study the lives of black and white workers remains a valid starting point for a historical analysis of racial interactions at the beginning of the twentieth century. Stemons' papers confirm that racial inequalities affected his interactions with employers, co-workers, intellectual reformers. His letters and essays

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

also reveal that the racial attitudes affected Stemons' psyche as much as they affected his relationships with others. The volume of personal materials located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania made Stemons' reflections on racial discrimination easily accessible. Stemons' historical obscurity, despite his historical value, demands the further study of similarly situated workers and intellectuals.

Stemons' unique situation presents an obstacle to Gutman's proposed method of interpretation. To what extent can historians interpret the experiences of ordinary blacks if there is no historical record of their thoughts? Stemons had no historical presence despite his twenty-year public reform career, his published material, and his attendance at the founding Conference of the NAACP. Ordinary workers usually lacked the means or ability to record their feelings, while Stemons used his essays and letters as a venue for his thoughts. Stemons' recorded feelings offer a valid representation of the feelings of lifelong menials, despite his concurrent existence as an intellectual and menial. Can the historical interpretation of workers' feelings exist on a deeper level than Stemons' valid, but tamer, experience of black workers' feelings?

Stemons' non-existence in histories about efforts to obtain equal rights for black Americans raises similar questions. Stemons' idea about improving economic equality to create general racial equality proved only to be a partial solution. The rights based legal approach of Du Bois and the NAACP proved to be a more complete solution to equality that fostered the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. The history of leaders like Du Bois and Washington, and their large movements, dominates the literature of the equal rights movements. Should there be a history of unrecognized reformers like

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

Stemons? The effects of class, interpersonal relationships, and ideology on Stemons' reform ideas suggest that there is more to rights history than stories of success.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

Primary Sources

Stemons, James Samuel. Correspondence and Manuscript, 1894-1922. Includes correspondence (1894-1922), writings, and speeches. Balch Institute Collection located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Stemons, James Samuel. "A cry from the oppressed: a plea for the industrial rights of the colored race in the northern states." (1897) Balch Institute Collection located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Stemons, James Samuel. "The North Holds the key to the race question." (1908) Balch Institute Collection located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Stemons, James Samuel. *Key: A Tangible Solution of the Negro Problem*. New York: Neal Publishing, 1916. Balch Institute Collection located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Works Cited

Arnesen, Eric. *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Baldwin, William H. "The Present Problem of the Negro Education" in the *Journal of Social Science*, vol. 37, December 1899.

Brundage, Fitzhugh W. *Up From Slavery by Booker T. Washington: With Related Documents*. Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2003.

Dickerson, Dennis C. *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania 1875-1980*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1986.

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996 (original 1899).

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.

Gutman, Herbert G. *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.

Greene, Lorenzo J. and Carter G. Woodson. *The Negro Wage Earner*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1969 (1930 original).

Jones, Jacqueline. *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

Moreno, Paul. *Black Americans and Organized Labor, A New History*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State Press, 2006.

Nelson, Bruce. *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Nelson, Daniel. *Managers and Workers: Origins of the New Factory System in the United States: 1880-1920*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975.

Sennett, Richard and Jonathan Cobb. *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973.

Spero, Sterling D. and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1931,

Washington, Booker T. *The Future of the American Negro*. New York: Negro Universities Press, reprinted in 1969 (1899 original).

Weiss, Nancy J. *The National Urban League 1910-1940*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Wesley, Charles. *Negro Labor in the United States 1850-1925: A Study in American Economic History*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1927.

Wright, Richard R. Jr. *The Negro in Pennsylvania: A Study in Economic History*. Philadelphia: A.M.E Book Concerns Printers, 1970.

Consulted Sources

Adams, Francis D and Barry Sanders. *Alienable Rights: the exclusion of African Americans in a white man's land, 1619-2000*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003.

Foner, Philip S. (ed.) and Ronald L. Lewis (ed.). *The Black Worker From 1900 to 1910*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980.

Fox, Stephen R. *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter*. New York: Kingsport Press, 1970.

Henri, Florette. *Black Migration: Movement North 1900-1920*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1975.

Higgs, Robert. *Competition and Coercion: Blacks in the American Economy 1865-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Tim Golden, Haverford College, May 2007

Marlowe, Gertrude Woodruff. *A Right Worthy Grand Mission: Maggie Lena Walker and the Quest for Black Economic Empowerment*. Washington D.C: Howard University Press, 2003.

Meier, August. *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963.

Rapp, Barbara Anne. *A Marginalized Voice for Racial Justice, Charlotta Bass and Oppositional Politics 1914-1960*. Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 2005.

Taylor, Henry Louis Jr. (ed.) and Walter Hill (ed.). *Historical Roots of the Urban Crisis: African Americans in the Industrial City, 1900-1950*. New York: Garland Publishing, 2000.

Trotter, Joe William Jr. (ed.) and Eric Ledell Smith (ed.). *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Shifting Historical Perspectives*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1925*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918.