INTRODUCTION

In 1857 Frederick Douglass told the nation: "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." Half a century later, Francis J. Grimké exhorted from his Washington pulpit:

> If we are ever to be free from invidious distinction in this country based upon race, color, previous condition, we have got to be alive, wide-awake to our own interest. . . . We are not going to secure our rights in this country without a struggle. We have got to contend, and contend earnestly, for what belongs to us. Victory isn't coming in any other way. . . . We have got . . . to keep up the agitation until right triumphs and wrong is put down.

As the nation mobilized for World War II, A. Philip Randolph declared that "if Negroes [are to] secure their goals . . . they must win them and to win them they must fight, sacrifice, suffer, go to jail and, if need be, die for them. These rights will not be given. They must be taken."[1] These three leaders lived at different times and adopted different political orientations, but they shared a common understanding. The America in which they lived conceded nothing without a demand. If Afro-Americans expected a share of the nation's bounty, then Afro-Americans would have to act in their own interests.

Just before the mantle of Negro leadership passed from Frederick Douglass to Booker T. Washington, Thomas Hill left North Carolina and headed for Norfolk, Virginia. At first glance, his actions seem far removed from the powerful words of Douglass, Grimké, and Randolph. But Thomas Hill, like many Afro-Americans, proved how much, and in what ways, blacks were prepared to act in their own interests. Arriving in Norfolk in 1892, Hill resided there for the next forty-seven years. By

1939, when he was sixty-nine, Hill had much to tell Edith Skinner, an in-
terviewer for the Virginia Writers' Project.

Hill's early years in Norfolk were difficult financially; he survived by
working as a day laborer. Then, in 1904, he went to work at the Norfolk
Navy Yard (in Portsmouth) as a woodcutter's helper, a job he retained
for more than twenty-five years. He retired at age sixty-two with a pen-
sion. Steady employment had enabled him to marry in 1904; his wife
bore two children before her death in 1908. By the time he remarried
four years later, his youngest child had also died. Working-class by
all measures, Hill nonetheless managed to purchase a seven-room,
two-story, brown-shingled house for his daughter and new wife. Lit by
electricity and warmed by a heatrola, the house with its fine amenities
became a testament to his hard work, although it set him apart from
most others of similar background.[2]

In relating his life's story, Hill adumbrated the history of black Nor-
folk. Pushed by deteriorating economic and social conditions and pulled
by the lure of the city, many Afro-Americans emigrated from farms and
small towns in Virginia and North Carolina during the late nineteenth
and early twentieth centuries. In Norfolk, they struggled to find jobs
that promised a better future. The Norfolk of those years was neither an
industrial wasteland nor an industrial oasis. Because the city was blessed
with a naturally deep harbor and strategically located within the Atlantic
coast transportation system, its commercial fortunes improved and its
economic base grew as its port expanded. For most blacks, this economic
expansion translated into additional jobs in the transportation and ser-
vice fields. Like Hill, a few managed to obtain industrial employment.
Fewer still became teachers, preachers, lawyers, and entrepreneurs—
the Afro-American elite. Only the coming of World War II altered the
general contours; then, more than ever before, black residents landed
industrial jobs.

As a middle-sized southern city, Norfolk is an ideal setting in which
to study how Afro-Americans balanced the competing inclinations of
conscious inaction and purposeful agitation. Norfolk remained wedded
to the traditions, customs, and mores of the region, but, as an Upper
South port city, it also experienced the profound changes of World War
I, the Depression, and World War II; the radicalizing influence of the
Communist party and the CIO; and the general shifts in tastes, ideas,
and philosophies that occurred throughout the nation. Norfolk was also
a military town and thus an important southern industrial site. It was a
terminus in the North-South transportation complex and played an im-
portant role in the ferrying of southern blacks north and south and be-
tween the countryside and the city. It had a reasonably well developed
civic and business infrastructure, including what was at the time the na-

tion's largest black-owned and -operated bank. The *Norfolk Journal and Guide,* headed by editor P. B. Young, was the South's leading black newspaper—a paper that, notwithstanding its openly middle-class bias, provides us with a unique entree into the world blacks created. And, finally, Norfolk contained a broad spectrum of Afro-Americans—active Garvey followers, Daddy Grace supporters, Communist enthusiasts, conservative race leaders, and teachers who successfully challenged the legality of a race-based wage structure. Though their viewpoints were often strikingly different, they frequently agreed on matters of race. Their disagreements underscored the complexity of the race-class dynamic and the importance of studying southern Afro-American urbanites.

Equally important, during the years between the Civil War and the civil rights movement, as Norfolk Afro-Americans struggled to improve their material conditions, they also fought for equal treatment, sometimes quietly and sometimes visibly. They never abided racism, "polite" or otherwise, well;[3] instead, they boycotted, rioted, petitioned, cajoled, demonstrated, and sought legal redress. During moments of introspection, some even vocalized the irony they found in accepting a policy of separate-but-equal that led to an unwanted reality of inequality.

It would be incorrect to conclude, however, that blacks in Norfolk merely reacted to white racism. Long before emancipation, Afro-Americans had ceased simply reacting to whites. The Norfolk that Thomas Hill knew had its own sights, sounds, and tastes, its own urban flavor, accounted for in large part by Hill and his neighbors. They filled the porches and windowsills, attended the churches, lodges, and parades, set the rhythm, and regulated the pace. As much as possible, they transformed the city to meet their needs. Always cognizant of racism, they were never all-consumed by its presence; throughout, they remained actors in a fluid social drama.

This book is about Thomas Hill and other Norfolk blacks—members of the working class and the elite, marginally educated and learned, folksy and refined, lesser knowns and power brokers—who came to live in the city between 1862 and 1945. It seeks to recreate the texture of Afro-American urban life. Thus it is concerned with the lives of the migrants after they moved to the city—the jobs they obtained, the assistance they secured, the houses they lived in, the families they built, the battles they waged, the victories they realized, the defeats they suffered, the institutions they developed, and the culture they shared.

It is also a book about a southern place, during the period of Jim Crow's codification, during the lean, troublesome 1930s, and during the conversely bountiful but equally troublesome 1940s. It is concerned with the internal, external, and structural factors that affected the city and its Afro-American residents.[4] Unavoidably, it considers the little-explored

nexus between race, space, and class—that is, race relations, spatial for-
mation, and elements of what Joe William Trotter, Jr., labels proletarian-
ization. Norfolk's southern character dictates, however, that we cannot
blindly adopt previous approaches, especially because most earlier anal-
yses have concerned case studies of northern urban centers.

   If few urbanists have studied southern city dwellers, even fewer have
studied the larger issue of Afro-Americans at work and at home (which
in black parlance signifies both the household and the community).
Most studies have instead detailed black-white contact or ghetto for-
mation. Although these are important considerations, Afro-American
history is much more complicated than the history of race relations or
ghettoization. Such studies have made significant historiographical con-
tributions, but they render little assistance to those interested in the in-
tersection of industrialization, urbanization, and Afro-American history.[5]

   Profoundly interested in this intersection, Trotter argues that histori-
ans should focus on the making of an urban-industrial Afro-American
proletariat and should abandon their seemingly unreflective attachment
to the approaches that concentrate on race relations or ghetto forma-
tion. Offering the phenomenon of proletarianization as an alternative
approach, Trotter defines it as the movement of blacks "into the indus-
trial labor force as wage earners whose lives were shaped by racism as
well as by the competitive interplay between labor and capital under
capitalism."[6]

   Although proletarianization offers a fresh perspective and avoids the
theme of tragic sameness that pervades much of the existing literature,
it is not without its limits. First, any study of the Afro-American urban
experience must consider the culture that blacks constantly recreated, a
culture that bound blacks to one another, even while it distinguished the
working class from the elite. Second, any such study must include, where
possible, a serious consideration of the Afro-American family and its
role. Finally, the current application of the proletarianization approach
fails to examine fully how the "complex convergence of class and race
consciousness" informed changing patterns of interracial labor solidar-
ity and fragmentation.[7]

   If the Norfolk story proves typical, previous scholars may thus have
erred in choosing only the most rapidly industrializing northern urban
settings for study. Through the 1960s, Afro-Americans in such cities
were a clear-cut minority, dominating few occupations and controlling
few labor associations. Emphasis on industrial jobs also contradicts the
general employment history of blacks. In Norfolk, where blacks com-
posed at least a third of the population, dominated several occupational
categories, and had important independent, all-black, nonindustrial
unions, the story of labor solidarity and fragmentation is not one story

but three—the first beginning in 1910 and ending in 1930; the second dating from the Depression until the start of World War II, and the last spanning the war years, 1941–1945. Furthermore, each story highlights the complex interplay between conditions at work and at home.

To explore those complexities adequately, we need a new conceptual framework. This perspective must build on the strengths of earlier approaches while avoiding their weaknesses. An analysis of the ways in which blacks acted in their own interests, the strategies they devised to empower themselves, accomplishes this. More specifically, we should examine the interaction between shifts in social relations and changes at work and at home. Several scholars have observed that the melding of urban and industrial development had by 1900 produced individuals who identified themselves as workers at work and ethnics at home. This was true for all groups *except* Afro-Americans, who remained "racial ethnics" at work and at home.[8] This peculiar half-status in the urban setting shaped their search for empowerment.

Through this perspective, we discover a story distinctly American in form and Afro-American in substance. In its American form, it is a story about the relationship between power and culture in the industrial phase of American history.[9] In substance, it is a story about how Afro-Americans acted in their own interests and how their peculiar place in the political economy shaped those actions. This story also considers the culture that Afro-Americans both transferred and transformed, often in such a way as to sidestep the contentious debate over relative degrees of autonomy.[10] For Norfolk's black residents, the issue was more than autonomy—their success in carving out some social and psychic space exemplified their determination to achieve power in whatever way possible (see Chapter 4).

Essentially, this book argues that as shifts in social relations intersected with conditions at work and at home, blacks modified their strategies. As we discover in Chapter 1, the basic strategic outline appeared soon after emancipation, inspired by the search for both well-being and equality, that is, material gain as well as equal treatment and privileges before the law. Fully aware of their tenuous position in the local setting, Norfolk's Afro-American residents attempted to fulfill these goals by combining advancement in the workplace with improvements in the home sphere.

In a setting where *home* meant both the household and the community, the term *home sphere* enables us to understand more clearly how blacks framed their own world. The word *sphere* can be defined as the environment in which one lives. That environment exists on several different levels—the household, the neighborhood, the black community, the city, the state, and so forth. Few blacks lived a completely balkanized

existence, and their environment was informed by the interaction be-
tween the different levels, which in turn was shaped by shifts in values,
ideologies, and norms over time. But at the level of local mobilization,
our concern is the intersection between the household and the commu-
nity, or the home sphere, where Norfolk blacks struggled to align their
needs, expectations, desires, and cultural traditions to improve their
place in the city.

By 1900 the formation of a racially stratified labor market, coupled
with changes in social and political structures, called the initial strategic
equation into question. At work, blacks found themselves relegated to
the worst jobs, increasingly at odds with their white counterparts, and
unable to take advantage of their numerical superiority in certain
trades. At home, they lost the franchise, were forced to endure the
spread of Jim Crow restrictions, and lost out to working-class whites in
the battle for city services. As a result, Afro-Americans modified their
strategy. Workplace advancement remained an important concern, but
it became less of a priority than progress in the home sphere. Most be-
lieved that the greatest losses had occurred in that area and that more
individuals would benefit from an approach that produced better roads,
more city services, and a larger say in the political process. Once framed,
it was this perspective that Afro-American residents took into the first
decades of the twentieth century.

Except for a brief moment during World War I, blacks in Norfolk fol-
lowed this strategy into the early days of the Depression (see Chapters
2–4). This is not to imply that the strategy was not challenged at various
points, for it was. At times, for example, the needs and actions of
working-class blacks diverged from the stated interests of the larger
community. Black workers frequently purchased goods from white eth-
nic merchants who offered lower prices rather than from their black
friends or neighbors. One's allegiance to home was as often determined
by one's class and racial positions as it was by race alone. Thus the inter-
ests of a particular household might contradict professed community in-
terests. And in this complex and contradictory world, neither the black
community nor the white community was a monolith. Internal differ-
ences highlight the intricate nature of race and class concerns. But the
enveloping political economy did compress the range of choices open to
those seeking power. As a result, in the final analysis, blacks agreed more
than they disagreed over which strategy to pursue.

A pivotal modification came during the Depression years, as discussed
in Chapters 5 and 6. A sharp decline in collective material well-being
and the introduction of a new protest rhetoric led some to equate true
development in the home sphere with sustained advancement in the
workplace. The convergence this formulation suggests never completely

materialized. For example, as part of this shift, black workers were ad-
vised to form alliances with white workers. A few managed to do so, but
most wondered whether they had surrendered too much in the process,
for such coalitions existed only at work. Beyond the workplace, the same
groups remained locked in an ongoing battle for city services. Many be-
lieved that alliances that failed to contribute to development in the
home sphere produced more harm than good. Nonetheless, the seed for
change was planted.

The most dramatic realignment in perspective came during World
War II. For the first time in more than half a century, large segments of
the community agreed that an equation for full empowerment must link
employment advances with progress in the home sphere. This time,
however, as Chapter 7 describes, black workers received wider encour-
agement to form prudent alliances with whites. In turn, white laborers
made a more serious effort to move the language of competition beyond
black versus white to haves versus have-nots. This shift paralleled a
larger discussion among blacks about the true meaning of democracy.
The acceptance of a strategy based on advances at work and at home
heralded the birth of a new chapter in the history of Afro-Americans in
the industrial age.

During the heady days of the civil rights movement, blacks across the
region began to alter their strategy once again, with mixed results. In
the name of progress in the home sphere, they valiantly invaded the cita-
dels of racism and white supremacy, eventually crippling Jim Crow
through the combined weight of moral force and social pressure.
Through their efforts, they gained access to political office, removed the
most egregious symbols of segregation, produced a new black middle
class, and in the process acquired a new sense of self. But they could not
check a decline in the nation's industrial fortunes, and thus, in spite of
the numerous improvements, power remained elusive. For a time, lulled
by their own success, even blacks in Norfolk forgot that improvements in
the home sphere without advancement in the workplace produces hol-
low gains. Sadly, a generation after the 1963 March on Washington, it is
now conventional wisdom—and the conclusion of this book—that in
black America everything has changed and nothing has changed.

Hence this is not only a book about Afro-Americans in Norfolk and
the social world they created or about a southern city and its black resi-
dents. It is also a book suggesting the history of a region and its people,
a book about the complex interplay between race and class and how that
interplay changed over time. Through that perspective, it explains how
shifts in social relations intersected with altered conditions at work and
at home to frame Afro-Americans' interpretation of their own interests.