

# Introduction

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*So many things we were doing no one ever gives [us] credit.  
No one wants to place our deeds in the right light. But we were  
there and did it.*

Margaret Starks, 1988

Richmond, a sleepy backwater on the San Francisco Bay in Northern California, was transformed into the quintessential war boomtown when Henry J. Kaiser and other defense contractors located four shipyards and numerous war industries there in 1940. Although the war is an important part of the story of that transformation, the history of African Americans in Richmond begins long before World War II brought hundreds of thousands of black people west.<sup>1</sup> Decades before the war the small black community, operating under visible and invisible constraints and stigmatized by other Bay Area blacks as unsophisticated and “primitive,” was busy raising families, establishing institutions, and building economic structures. The influx of hopeful, determined black newcomers from the South in the 1940s only rejuvenated processes that had already been set in motion. Black wartime newcomers, determined not to be “Jim Crowed” in California, helped shatter racial barriers that had marginalized African Americans for decades. The war was only one phase of this transformation, however. This book examines the history of the African American community in Richmond during the critical transitional years of the first half of the twentieth century. It places the activities of black working-class men and women, regarded by some as

unlettered peasants who were spatially and intellectually isolated from larger social currents, at the center of the nation's most profound, transformative events.

In the past two decades a number of works have begun to explore African American history from a new perspective. These works have liberated blacks from their role as passive victims in history. They have examined black agency using a model that recognizes the impact of internal as well as external forces on the lives of African Americans. However, most of these works have limited their analyses to African American communities east of the Mississippi River.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, a number of works have begun to examine the history of African Americans in the West, and several have explored the impact of World War II on blacks in the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>3</sup> This book, however, moves beyond the eastern focus to look at the experiences of African Americans in what is now the country's largest and most influential state. This work is the first to examine the historical development—including migration, the rise of a black urban industrial workforce, and the dynamics of community development—of one black working-class community in California over a fifty-year period. This work affords the opportunity for studying a western black community in which middle-class and professional blacks were among the last to arrive.

The study of black Richmondites allows us to examine the role of culture in the process of black entry into the industrial proletariat. Moreover, it offers an opportunity to analyze the function of culture among working-class blacks who also interacted in a culturally diverse general population. Black working-class cultural expressions prevailed in Richmond despite their lower-class connotations. Even though thousands of black newcomers brought with them a panoply of sustaining cultural traditions that took root in new soil, black community building in Richmond involved more than the simple transplantation of southern black folk culture to the Golden State. The experience of black Richmondites suggests that men and women were equally responsible for bearing and preserving culture. This important duty was not relegated to the realm of women, but was part of the community-building process that occupied black Richmondites of both sexes.<sup>4</sup>

The experiences of black Richmondites suggest that, in California at least, the cultural traditions of black migrants were not isolated or immutable. Their "traditions from home," while critical to the emergence of their political, economic, and social voice, were distinct, malleable, and inextricably linked to forces within and external to the black

population. Black Richmondites' cultural traditions were introduced into the diverse threads that comprised California's (and the Bay Area's) cultural fabric even before the second Great Migration brought in thousands of blacks from Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, and other southern states. Black Richmondites lived, worked, and interacted on a daily (and sometimes intimate) basis with whites and other ethnic groups including the Mexicans, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, and Italians who made up a large part of Richmond's population. The possibility of life in a diverse, tolerant environment represented what some black Richmondites called the "California lifestyle." This possibility was, in part, the California equivalent of the "promised land" that led millions of African Americans to eastern industrial cities during the first Great Migration. Their hope is what historian Quintard Taylor has identified as black expectations of Seattle's "free air" in that Pacific Coast city.<sup>5</sup>

The California lifestyle held out the promise of social freedom as well as economic advancement and stood in marked contrast to the Jim Crow existence that many had known in the South. This promise motivated and sustained black Richmondites before, during, and after the war. Black newcomers to Richmond wanted the opportunity to "mix and mingle and get along" in California.<sup>6</sup> The history of black Richmondites suggests that unlike the larger eastern and midwestern urban black communities that were defined almost from the outset by rigid boundaries, small black communities in California, and perhaps in other western states, were formed and functioned within broader spatial and cultural parameters.

In addition to exploring the role of culture, this book examines the impact of racial solidarity and intraracial conflict. For black Richmondites voluntary racial congregation was not merely a reaction against exclusion and denial; it was at the heart of community formation. Racial congregation, like culture, was another manifestation of black agency and positive self-perception. Even before the civil rights and black power movements called upon African Americans to unify against segregation and discrimination, black Richmondites expressed racial solidarity in the founding of their churches, in their educational endeavors, and in their clubs, mutual aid societies, and other institutions. This process of unification was accelerated during the war and in the postwar period as black Richmondites struggled to retain their wartime gains.

Voluntary racial congregation did not, however, preclude intraracial conflict. The study of African Americans in Richmond provides an opportunity to analyze the internal divisions and variations in a black popu-

lation that was generally regarded as ideologically monolithic, unsophisticated, and intellectually inferior. Political orientation, length of residency, and gender generated internal divisions in the community even though the small size of Richmond's black population, the comparatively late influx of black migrants, and its truncated class structure tended to compress and blur these distinctions. While newcomer/old-timer animosities flared during the war and conflict over political radicalism became pronounced in the postwar chill of the McCarthy era, gender was the most enduring of the intraracial divisions.

The experience of black Richmondites suggests that although black men and women shared an economic, social, and cultural interdependence, black women, clinging to the bottom rung of the economic ladder with their male counterparts, nevertheless experienced discrimination on two fronts. Although the black community's economic survival was greatly dependent on female labor, black women in Richmond were constrained by male notions of a woman's place until World War II opened up new options. During the war some women, utilizing traditionally sanctioned female work skills, moved beyond the kitchen and shipyards to carve out convention-shattering avenues of economic autonomy in the blues clubs and after hours clubs that proliferated in North Richmond.

Despite their struggles and achievements, African Americans who lived and worked in Richmond never saw the full fruition of the city's economic and social promise. The city's prewar dynamics had been permanently altered, and the black wartime shift upward could not be sustained. The study of black Richmondites provides an opportunity to explore what historian Earl Lewis has called the "culture of expectation."<sup>7</sup> Black migration to California, entry into the industrial workforce, and wartime prosperity heightened blacks' anticipation of advancement in the workplace and on the home front. The formation of the Richmond branch of the NAACP (the most active branch on the West Coast) in 1944 underscored black expectations of life in the Golden State. The NAACP's bold campaigns against workplace and residential discrimination in the 1940s and 1950s were manifestations of community aspirations that lasted long after the shipyards pulled out of the city, substantially eroding the economic underpinnings of their culture of expectation.

These events suggest another variation in the eastern and midwestern pattern of black industrialization and economic development. The meatpacking, tanning, steel, automobile, and mining industries of eastern urban centers provided relatively steady albeit low-paying employ-

ment for millions of African Americans before World War II and endured past the end of the war boom. In Richmond, black prewar industrial employment was precarious, despite the town's aspirations to becoming the "Pittsburgh of the West." With the demise of the Kaiser shipyards after the war, black Richmondites lost their tenuous foothold on the employment ladder.

The history of black Richmondites should prompt more inquiries into the activities of other black working-class communities in California and the West. This study suggests that small black western populations have existed in the shadows of larger, more urbane black communities, whose experiences have been regarded as representative. The story of black Richmondites implies that black political leadership, social activism, cultural instruction, gender equity, and personal achievement, far from being the exclusive domain of a black middle-class and professional elite, also emanated from the ranks of working-class men and women, who frequently stood in the vanguard of change.

In preparing this work I consulted several manuscript collections that were tremendously helpful. The Regional Oral History Office at the University of California, Berkeley, has compiled a number of excellent oral histories of African Americans who resided, worked, or had some dealings in Richmond and the Bay Area. These transcripts provided insight into the lives of a broad cross section of African Americans. In addition, the Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, West Coast Region; the Kaiser Papers; and the papers of C. L. Dellums in the Bancroft Library proved to be invaluable manuscript sources. The National Archives' Records of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice were essential sources of information about the wartime and postwar experiences of black Richmondites. I found working with the actual papers, letters, notes, and ephemera, rather than the microfilmed collection, to be a productive, satisfying, and moving experience. The Richmond Public Library's Richmond Collection was also extremely useful in my research, as were the holdings of the Richmond Museum.

These excellent collections notwithstanding, most histories of Richmond have virtually ignored the presence of black people. Traditional historical sources yield scant information on prewar black Richmondites and generally focus on wartime migration. Therefore, I conducted more than one hundred hours of oral interviews, both in person and by telephone, that have been equally (if not more) important than traditional sources for this study. I was fortunate to meet many of my inter-

viewees through my personal network of friends and acquaintances. This network continued to expand as my contacts introduced me to their friends, relatives, and acquaintances whom they believed might be helpful.

Some of my contacts appeared bemused at my request for an interview, insisting that their experiences in Richmond were “not important,” or that there was “nothing special to tell.” However, everyone welcomed me warmly and provided detailed and often surprisingly candid responses to my questions. Most of the interviews were conducted informally, within the natural flow of people’s lives: I interviewed people as they were preparing meals, seeing children off to school or preparing them for bed, tending their gardens, or planning family outings. Other interviews were conducted in business establishments or workplaces, where the interviewees took ringing telephones and constant interruptions in stride. Sometimes, in the middle of an interview, an informant would insist on calling a friend or relative to clarify a dimly remembered event. Some took me on guided tours of old neighborhoods and shared half-forgotten secrets about what transpired in those neighborhoods.

I am grateful for the generosity of these women and men, who are living repositories of African American history. This book is an attempt to place their deeds on the historical record and illuminate the intricate texture of the African American experience.