The Norfolk Hoax: Fear Social Violence and Ethnicity at the Norfolk Navy Yard During the Strike of 1877

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THE NORFOLK HOAX: FEAR, SOCIAL VIOLENCE AND ETHNICITY

AT THE NORFOLK NAVY YARD DURING THE STRIKE OF 1877

by

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B.S. August 2003, Old Dominion University

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ABSTRACT

THE NORFOLK HOAX: FEAR, SOCIAL VIOLENCE AND ETHNICITY AT THE NORFOLK NAVY YARD DURING THE STRIKE OF 1877

John Douglas Forrest
Old Dominion University, 2009
Director: Dr. Brian J. Payne

This thesis examines the contributing causes why the command of the Norfolk Navy Yard feared a labor uprising or riot in the surrounding community of Portsmouth, Virginia in July 1877. Racial, class and ethnic tensions heightened to the point that on the morning of July 25, 1877, unknown agents distributed pamphlets around the city, which appealed to workers at the Navy Yard. A culture of social violence was prevalent during Norfolk and Portsmouth’s post-Civil War existence. The ground-level view offered by this thesis is of the intense fear that spread across the country in 1877 as a result of severe economic depression, ethnic tensions, and racial conflict. A combination of racial and labor antagonism was latent in both cities and the navy yard’s location, its function as federal outpost in the South, and largest employer in the area caused its commander, J. Blakeley Creighton, to take the precautionary measure of landing the fleet’s firepower in Portsmouth. This thesis proves that the larger context of social fear, violence, and depression that marked Reconstruction, labor unrest and naval mismanagement combined to create a culture of fear and violence at the Norfolk Navy Yard in July of 1877.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

After a decade of economic depression and limited government funding, the Norfolk Navy Yard was in a depressed state. Racial, class and ethnic tensions heightened to the point that on the morning of July 25, 1877, unknown agents distributed pamphlets around the city, which appealed to workers “sympathetic with the fellow workingmen on strike.”¹ The pamphlets offered a stern warning to federal officials within the yard, who, according to the pamphlets, were guilty of lowering wages. Potential strikers were to meet at the foot of Nelson Street at 5:00 that evening. The agitated workers were to coalesce at Nelson Street so that they could raise funds for their “fellow working men and meet those of like minds.” Upon the discovery of these pamphlets, the commander of the yard, J. Blakeley Creighton, prepared the sailors stationed at the yard for the possible confrontation with the potential crowd. Sailors and Marines raced ashore and manned Gatling guns, Howitzer and rifles. However, when 5:00 came, the meeting never occurred. According to the following day’s Norfolk Public Ledger, the yard’s officials overreacted, as there was no disposition within the community to “add to the excitement” in other parts of the country. The Norfolk Virginian also reported that the strike was a hoax.²

The fellow workingmen referred to in this pamphlet were the striking railroad


² Norfolk Public Ledger, July 25-27, 1877, Norfolk Virginian, July 25-27, 1877

This paper follows the format requirements of The Chicago Manual of Style 15th Edition.
workers in Baltimore, Pittsburgh and numerous other cities. What historians have
dubbed the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 had spread to other maladjusted groups of
laborers in the weeks following the initial uprising against the Baltimore and Ohio
(B&O) Railroad in Martinsburg, West Virginia on July 16.³ Word spread quickly mainly
because Martinsburg was an important switching station for the B&O. As a result,
service was shut down for much of the B&O as well as smaller, regional rail lines. At
first, the strike only affected the railroads, but as word of the strike spread by telegram
and newspaper, workers sympathetic to the Martinsburg cause also began to strike. On
July 19, workers prevented the departure of freight cars in Pittsburgh, and thus shut down
the Pennsylvania Railroad’s yards. From Pittsburgh, the strike spread from the smallest
of railroad towns to cities as large as Philadelphia and New York. The strike reached
such proportions that the governors of West Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maryland,
New York and Illinois called on the federal government to send the army. When one
regional strike broke under threat of force, another would crop up some place else.
Previous strikes were relatively confined in size and scope, but, this strike was so large
and had so much popular support it spread across the country and across traditional trade
barriers. It could not have been confined until the army and marines marched into the
crowds of striking workers. In addition, the fear or promise inspired by the strike
reaching previously untouched portions of the country lead to strike hoaxes, telegraph-
borne threats to major infrastructure, and the massing of troops around vital nodes of
transportation and government. These properties included the governor’s mansions in
each state affected, the entire city of Washington and the navy yards in New York,

Philadelphia, and Norfolk. Towns that experienced the strike were quickly under the specter of an unprecedented event above the Mason-Dixon Line: a full-scale invasion by federal troops. ⁴

Under these circumstances, cities such as St. Louis and San Francisco quickly organized “citizens committees,” which were little more than posses granted powers by the city government. In St. Louis, police and a citizens militia took to the strikers with pistols and axe handles, killing dozens. In San Francisco violence spread to attacks on Chinese immigrants. The gang of teenagers and “hoodlums” that comprised the Committee of Public Safety burned much of Chinatown on their way to crushing the striking elements within the city. This outpouring of mass violence against the strikers and their allies in the Workingmen’s Party quickly shocked the strike out of existence and the strikers eventually dispersed. ⁵

According to leading anti-striker Allan Pinkerton’s account of the strike, the strikers represented the goals and wishes of the “internationalists” and the refugees of the Paris Commune. Pinkerton also stated that it was the intention of these agitators to propagate, “…atheism, materialism and the negation of all religion.” A more neutral contemporary account of the strike, written by J.A. Dacus argued that while the strikers had admirable goals, the “mob” and “agitators” within the strike consciously planned to toss the nation into a “vortex of ruin.” ⁶

It is the purpose of this thesis to examine the contributing causes that led the

command of the Norfolk Navy Yard to fear a labor uprising or riot in the surrounding community of Portsmouth. The answer to the question is that a culture of social violence was prevalent during Norfolk and Portsmouth’s post-Civil War existence. The ground-level view offered by this thesis is of the intense fear that spread across the country in 1877 as a result of severe economic depression, ethnic tensions, and racial conflict; all of which uniquely combined to create a culture of fear and violence at the Norfolk Navy Yard in July of 1877. A combination of racial and labor antagonism was latent in both cities and the navy yard’s location, its function as federal outpost in the south, and largest employer in the area caused its commander, J. Blakeley Creighton, to take the precautionary measure of landing the fleet’s firepower in Portsmouth. Hoaxes of uprisings were prevalent in the cities of Richmond and Lynchburg, Virginia due to their proximity to large railroad hubs. While Norfolk and Portsmouth were railheads, there was no large rail yard nor, according to the local newspapers, was there a “disposition within the community” to strike. The local newspapers argued that the over-reaction of the navy, resulted from the fear of more violence based on sectional, class, or race differences was what lead to the arming of the sailors.

The second chapter of this thesis will discuss how Reconstruction affected the navy yard. An early iteration of Reconstruction arrived in Norfolk and Portsmouth in May and June of 1862 shortly after the Confederates withdrew from Portsmouth. The navy yard, which had been partially burned by the federal army when Virginia seceded,

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8 *Norfolk Public Ledger*, July 25-27, 1877; J. Blakeley Creighton to R.W. Thompson, July 11-26, 1877, “Letters Received from Commanders of Navy Yards,” Records of Naval Districts and Shore Establishments, RG 45, National Archives, Washington, DC. Referred to hereafter as “Records of Naval Districts.”
was fully destroyed by the fleeing rebels. Upon the arrival of the Union army, General Benjamin Butler commanded the city’s occupation. Butler’s record included the creation of the “contraband” units of Freedmen as soldiers and the burning of parts of Norfolk and Portsmouth. Butler’s policy of occupation preceded the attempts of Radical Reconstruction attempted to create a more egalitarian post-war Norfolk and Portsmouth at bayonet point.9

Southerners in Norfolk interpreted Reconstruction as an act northern imperialism that resulted in a government comprised of freedmen and the northern Radical Republicans. Popular writers and journalists decried the unfortunate impact of northern reorganization of the idealized southern society. Early southern historians such as Robert Penn Warren described the Civil War and the destruction of antebellum southern culture as the “Lost Cause.” This interpretation of Reconstruction did not just forgive Confederate leaders, but also deified several, including Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis.10

W.E.B. DuBois introduced a significantly different view of Reconstruction. He interpreted Reconstruction as a continued system of African-American servitude. For Dubois, “Jim Crow” was as destructive as slavery.11 The history of Reconstruction was reexamined as a result of Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. By the mid-to late-twentieth century, Reconstruction was treated as a revolutionary era, much like its

9 Parramore, Stewart and Bogger, Norfolk: The First Four Centuries. 215-216.


contemporary, the labor movement.\textsuperscript{12}

The third chapter presents the primary characteristics of the labor movement. Although most labor historians interpret the 1877 strike as the beginning of an American labor movement, the earlier efforts of the labor movement are an integral part of the larger strike story. While few people debate the specific events of the 1877 strike, the evolving historiography of the strike, as well as the historiography of the greater labor movement, in general, has continued to debate what the strike truly represented. While some have suggested that the strike represented the beginning of a socialist movement in the United States, historian Eric Foner noted, "...at no point did the crowd have either the power or leadership to have transformed the strikes into a revolutionary seizure of the economy or the state."\textsuperscript{13} Popular accounts of the strike were written less than a year after the last elements of the strike dissipated. From 1877 to the first decade of the twentieth century, histories of the strike and of the labor movement in general represented the point of view of political and economic hierarchies. While some of these texts supported the laborers, and the need for fair regulation of industry, they often highlighted the destructive nature of the agitated workers. In addition, these texts offered an explanation perspective of why the government and corporate leadership met the strike with overwhelming force.\textsuperscript{14}

During the Progressive era in the early twentieth century, more labor-oriented histories reinterpreted the cause of the workers. Labor historians of the early twentieth

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Eric Foner, \textit{The Great Labor Uprising of 1877}, 11.
\end{flushleft}
century, such as Anthony Bimba, never claimed impartiality. Instead, these texts openly took the side of the working class against the bourgeoisie. The ascent of the Socialist portion of the labor movement, the martyring of Sacco and Vanzetti, and the previously existing histories, which sided too much with the capitalists, inspired the historians and activists of the early twentieth century. Bimba, however, seemed to reject other historians, who were less supportive of violent agitation, or key tenets of Marxism. For example, Bimba explicitly argues that his text was intended to “champion the cause of workers fighting the owners of the means of production.”

The historiography portion of the third chapter also focuses on the theories of labor history in the latter half of the twentieth century. Spearheaded by historians such as Philip Foner, Eric Foner, Robert Bruce, and Murray Nesbitt, the historiography shifted again in the 1960s and 1970s. The new era of social change that marked the 1960s inspired the wave of “New” labor historiography, and produced a somewhat less radical story than its Marxists forbearers. Many labor historians of the twentieth century, such as E.P. Thompson, had roots in the socialist movement; but they often used this ideology to help uncover the deeper cultural history of a “working class” rather than to simply chronicle the history of labor organization.

Despite the abundance of labor history writing since the 1960’s, the southern labor movement has not received much attention. Studies of post-Civil War labor in

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Virginia exist in a diversity of forms. While most focus either on ex-Confederates or of recently freed African-Americans, the issues raised in these studies offer a glimpse into the larger story of the employment experience for the average worker, black and white, in postbellum Norfolk and Portsmouth.¹⁸

A labor history of the Norfolk Navy Yard does not exist. Several contemporary documents such as the Congressional Record, diaries of shipyard workers, and newspaper articles from the Norfolk Virginian and the Norfolk Ledger regarding pay cuts and work stoppages within the yard expose portions of the story. In 1867, for example, workers from the navy yard appeared in Washington to lobby labor-friendly members of Congress regarding proposed slashing of wages or a more dire proposal, the permanent closing of the navy yard.¹⁹ The diary of George Teamoh is another invaluable resource. Teamoh was a carpenter at the yard while enslaved in the 1840s and 1850s. Upon his emancipation, he returned to the yard as a respected member of the community and as Portsmouth’s representative to the State Senate. His rise from political obscurity was derived from his attempts to build a Workingman’s Party at the navy yard. Although his success was limited to the African-Americans employed at the yard, membership was offered to the white workers as well. This attempt at a bi-racial chapter of the Colored


National Labor Union was not a long-term success, but its mere existence provides a rare example of southern unionization. In addition, political patronage created a diverse workforce within the yard. This practice was nothing new to the Norfolk yard, where charges of corruption dated to the founding of the yard in 1767. The correspondence between the commanders of the yard and the Secretaries of the Navy through the 1860s and 1870s are riddled with examples of outside workers imported and placed into positions of prominence within the yard’s workforce. Indeed, the yard’s managers relieved many Confederate sympathizers who were skilled laborers in the yard before and during the war. The 1870 census shows the vast majority of employees at the yard as locals who had been born in the immediate area. However, by 1880, the majority of those working at the yard were either born in the north or overseas.

The fourth chapter will discuss the “Dark Ages” of the U.S. Navy and its effect on the local level. The financial collapse for the US Navy in general and the Norfolk Navy Yard in particular, was a contributing factor to the local labor unrest of the 1870s. For the Norfolk Yard, this issue directly affected the ability of the yard to pay or even employ its workers. Following the yard’s destruction and recapture in 1862, very little had been repaired or rebuilt, even by 1877. During the war, the navy was a fast, well-


armed and technologically proficient force of several hundred ships. The fleet was so large that the “Anaconda Plan” had the vast shoreline of the Confederacy partially blockaded by 1862. After the war, however, expenditures dropped by such a drastic rate that by 1874, the U.S. Navy was a shell of its former self. The fleet was in such poor shape that the steam-propulsion plants of half the Atlantic Squadron’s ships were condemned at the pier. 22

The interpretation of the “Dark Ages” has evolved little since the era ended in the 1880s, when the inception of a massive naval construction program known as the “New Navy” began. Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, the scholarship of Harold and Margaret Sprout identified the post-war lack of naval funding as a result of congressional spending cuts and administrative incompetence on the part of the Navy Department. 23 Other scholars examined the inefficient and corrupt disbursement of the Navy department’s budget in the 1860s and 1870s. For example, Mark Russell Shulman, Jeffrey Dorwart, and Jean Wolf detailed corruption and boosterism related to Philadelphia’s navy yard following the Civil War. 24

In terms of the effect at the navy yard in Portsmouth, there were no advocates in the Congress or the Johnson or Grant administrations regarding the working conditions for the laborers in Portsmouth or the viability of the shipyard. Conditions within the yard


were decrepit at best. Since the occupation and slight repair of the facilities in the mid-1860s, expenditures for work within the yard were on a stop-gap basis. The yard performed basic maintenance on individual ships, even repeating repair jobs just to employ workers. The steamer *Yantic*, stationed at the yard in 1877, had its boiler removed and replaced twice over the course of three weeks with no cause given in the commandant’s log.

Following the Civil War, the yard was home to dozens of Confederate prisoners and Union sailors on board the ships based at the yard. Living conditions were so unsanitary within the yard (even by 1860s standards) that a naval surgeon concluded that a pandemic of varying illnesses was a certainty unless some basic steps were taken to improve the situation. Also, the Navy Department had studied the viability or the value of the yard and proposed closing or selling it in 1867 and again in 1869. Workers at the yard continued to do menial repair jobs, even conducting work on private vessels in order to continue employing some of the community.

These conditions had continued to deteriorate by the mid-1870s when the entire country was thrown into the potential “vortex of ruin.” The final chapter discusses the effect of the 1877 strike on the navy yard. As the strike developed, the Hayes administration panicked and quickly deployed what troops were readily available. On the morning of July 21, five days following the first work stoppage in Martinsburg, the navy

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26 J. Blakeley Creighton to R.W. Thompson, “Records of Naval Districts”, October 14, 1877.

27 N.S. Bates to George Robeson, August 20th, 1872, “Records of 5th Naval District,” Records of Naval Districts and Shore Establishments, RG 181; National Archives, Mid-Atlantic Division, Philadelphia, PA.

yard's complement of marines departed for Washington aboard the cruiser *Powhatan*. With the yard's marines several hundred miles away, notices calling for the assembly of "sympathetic workingmen" began to appear in areas surrounding the yard and the neighborhoods where the yard's workers lived on the evening of July 24. In order for historians to appreciate fully the causes, responses, and significance of the non-strike, it must be placed within the larger context of social fear, violence, and depression that marked Reconstruction, labor unrest and naval mismanagement.

**DESCRIPTION OF PRIMARY SOURCES**

This thesis compares and contrasts nationwide labor, social and economic themes of the 1860s and 1870s from a ground level view in Norfolk and Portsmouth. While secondary sources provide much of the macro-level context, the micro-level history for Portsmouth and Norfolk proves to be more elusive. Several unpublished dissertations and theses provide a glimpse of the local issues of the day; however, no complete history of the navy yard exists. In addition, the histories that do exist gloss over the Reconstruction-era within the yard.29 Primary sources provide the majority of micro-level analysis. The most important of the primary sources are within the Records of Naval Districts and Shore Establishments in Record Groups 45 and 181 at the National Archives in Washington and Philadelphia. The documents contained in each Record Group are original letters and carbon copies of the correspondence between the Navy Department and the navy yard in Portsmouth. The correspondence ranges from the

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banalities of arriving ships and receipt of letters to work completed, the employment preferences of the Navy Department regarding pilots and laborers at the yard, and the torrent of letters during the week of the strike. Unfortunately, numerous letter books and key documents produced in the 1860s and 1870s are missing from both Record Groups. According to the archivists and librarians at both the Washington and Philadelphia archives, these documents have either disintegrated or were never in the care and custody of the National Archives.

Other documents include the logbook of the captain of the watch at the yard, newspapers accounts from Norfolk and other cities in Virginia, and selected pamphlets and accounts written in the months following the strike. It is important to note that previous research has delved into the ideologies of the newspapers of Norfolk, especially the *Ledger* and *Virginian*. These two papers, which ultimately dismissed any disposition for a strike within the community, often played down the potential for mass violence in the past. While the papers did report some cases of racially-motivated violence in Norfolk in the 1860s and 1870s, they often dismissed serious acts of violence as “party factionalism.”

While these primary sources lend legitimacy to the secondary research within the thesis, these sources also represent a more traditional, less radical perspective of the events discussed.

**METHODOLOGY**

Reconstructing the exact social forces and events at work in postbellum Norfolk and Portsmouth are difficult. The secondary literature is overwhelming in its breadth and

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30 *Norfolk Virginian*, November 2, 1870; Hucles, “Postbellum Black Economic Development”, 41.
scope. Examining the pattern of violence, corruption, and economic malaise that was prevalent in both the national and local levels of each thematic construct is crucial to understanding the climate of uncertainty and fear. In terms of the Reconstruction era, Norfolk’s appearance in the secondary literature is prevalent until the end of the Civil War. Events subsequent to the end of the war are only mentioned or studied by a few texts, which rarely mention the navy yard or its issues. No labor history of the late nineteenth century mentions Norfolk as a point of labor agitation. The literature studying the navy’s Dark Ages touches on the decay of the yard, but never delves into the details. Ultimately, each chapter, and the thesis as a whole compares, and contrasts local events with national trends in each of the three themes discussed. In blending the national trends discussed in each chapter with local events found in secondary sources, contemporary newspapers, and the documents of Record Groups 45 and 181, the events of 1877 can be explained. In addition, the wealth of information derived from both the 1870 and 1880 census shows that Portsmouth’s population was diverse and nearly universally literate, which were both rare in southern cities of the 1870s.\(^{31}\) In surveying the extensive literature on Reconstruction, ethnic labor groups and the doldrums of the U.S. navy, this thesis will both compare and contrast how each factor contributed to the “Norfolk hoax” in 1877 and explain the reaction by the navy and the local press.

NORFOLK AS A SOUTHERN OUTLIER

The attempt at agitation by a few in the navy yard’s worker community bore no

fruit, with little evidence of any armed confrontation between the navy and the potentially agitated workers. However, the overwhelming response by the yard’s command indicated that there was at least an inclination for the navy to be ready for any possible riot or uprising. Other cities in the immediate region also feared a potentially violent clash with strikers, but not to the extent that was seen in Norfolk and Portsmouth. The *Lynchburg Dispatch, Richmond Whig,* and *Richmond Dispatch* all reported similar scares on or about July 25 throughout the state. However, these three newspapers also reported that the hoaxes were simple misunderstandings and warranted no federal or local government intervention. Also, the literature is devoid of any reference to a southern outcropping of the uprising or a federal response on the level of the Norfolk case. The pro-labor contemporaries of the strike had labeled it the “Second American Revolution,” and it seems that there was enough evidence for Commodore Creighton to be wary of a potential third revolution to reach the South.32 The fear of more violence based on sectional, class, or racial antagonism led to the arming of the sailors.

While this was far from the pitched battle that occurred in Pittsburgh or other major flashpoints in the strike, the events that led up to the Norfolk Navy Yard’s “hoax” of July 25, 1877 represent the confluence of three major post-Civil War themes that dominate historians’ understanding of the era. The argument and supporting evidence that follows will represent the importance of the Norfolk Navy Yard as a southern outlier. The fusion of scholarly research and primary documents that follows bolsters the argument that social forces were at work and led to a culture of fear at the navy yard in July 1877.

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CHAPTER II

NORFOLK AND PORTSMOUTH OCCUPIED AND RECONSTRUCTED

The shared harbor of Norfolk and Portsmouth had been the hub of commerce and culture in the Tidewater Region since the late 1690s. The cities, divided by only half a mile at the widest point of the Elizabeth River, continued to thrive through much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, during the 1850s and 1860s, two key events derailed the cities’ prosperity, altered population trends and affected commercial vitality. In 1855, a strain of yellow fever struck the two cities, infecting nearly 60% of each city’s population and killing 2,000 people. As the cities attempted to regain their strength in the following years, the second calamity struck; Virginia seceded from the Union in 1861.

Norfolk and Portsmouth were not bulwarks of secessionism before the attack on Fort Sumter. While Abraham Lincoln’s presidential campaign received little support in Norfolk, or Virginia in general, the area’s population was less inclined than populations in the “Deep South” to break away from the Union. A shift in public opinion occurred after the Commonwealth’s secession convention began and local volunteers armed for the “War of Southern Independence.”

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The first incident of the secession crisis in Norfolk and Portsmouth was a mass evacuation of indefensible federal facilities in the area. Locals quickly surrounded Fort Norfolk, the Portsmouth Naval Hospital, and the Norfolk Navy Yard. Under threat of the people of Portsmouth clamoring at the navy yard's gate, the remaining federal naval officers burned the yard's ships and facilities. The fires at the navy yard also heavily damaged the bordering village of Gosport. The Virginia Navy seized the facility and, handed the yard to the newly minted Confederate national government. The Confederate Navy was instantly bolstered by the relatively undamaged facilities located within the yard, including Dry-dock No.1, which was the only facility of its kind south of Philadelphia.

The Battle of Hampton Roads illustrated the limited potential of the Confederate Navy. The Virginia, which was reconstructed from a burned out hull recovered by the Confederates at the navy yard, failed in its mission to destroy the Federal blockade. As a result, the Confederate officers in Norfolk and at the navy yard realized that the cities could not hold defensible positions and were abandoned. As the Confederate Army fled the invasion force, they burned the defenses and infrastructure of both cities. Bridges, storehouses, and the Navy Yard itself were badly damaged or destroyed before the two cities fell to the Union Army in May 1862.

The residents of Portsmouth, many of whom were the shipwrights, caulkers, and carpenters who comprised the workforce of the Yard, looted the Yard between the

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Confederate departure and the Union fleet's arrival. The locals stripped the yard of all valuable materials and tools that could easily be removed. The bulkheads along the Elizabeth River were littered with rotted hulks and burned ships left behind by both the Federal and Confederate forces. In short, the yard was a shell of its former self.7

Two hundred years of Greater Norfolk's socio-economic constructs shared the navy yard's tattered state. The federal government ignored the local governments, and the cities were placed under martial law. While Norfolk and Portsmouth had a small free black community before the war, the vast majority of African-Americans in Norfolk and Portsmouth were slaves.8 Thus, the stage was set for the early stages of a federally-directed punishment of the former Confederates, the end of slavery as a state-sponsored institution, and federally-guided Reconstruction. The last federal occupation troops departed the former Confederacy in 1877, the year of the Great Strike.

In the case of Greater Norfolk, the circumstances were slightly different. While the cities were by no means an example of change from the old system to an idealized new order, they were the recipients of early forms of both Presidential and Radical Republican Reconstruction ideology. Several iterations of federal commands came and went through Norfolk, but the main agitator of the old order was personified by the administration of General Benjamin Butler. Butler's battlefield reclassification of slaves as contrabands of war created a wave of African-American soldiers.9 In addition, shortly

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8 Parramore, Stewart and Bogger, *Norfolk: The First Four Centuries*, 212. Michael Hucles, "Postbellum Urban Black Economic Development: The Case of Norfolk, VA, 1860-1890" (PHD diss., Purdue University, 1990), 31-33.

9 In short, the idealized "new order" or "missed opportunity" as described in the latter half of the twentieth century was the shifting of the Civil Rights movement to a date 100 years earlier than it occurred.
after the collapse and withdrawal of the Confederates forces in Norfolk, runaway slaves sought the protection of the federal troops in Norfolk. This flood of newly enfranchised freedmen and northerners into Norfolk and Portsmouth altered the demographic landscape of the area.¹⁰

The historiography of Reconstruction as a national concern and as an issue within Virginia is dominated by several themes that do not delve into the outlying nature of the shipyard workers. The central figure in this aspect of Reconstruction is General Benjamin Butler. Butler’s administration of Norfolk and Portsmouth began with corruption, severe animosity between local whites and the occupation, and Butler’s dictatorial tone that only softened over time. His deeds and words from his role as Military Governor of Norfolk in 1863 to his days in Congress during Radical Reconstruction dominate the whole of this study. The softening of the “Beast of New Orleans,” as Butler was vilified, was actually Butler and his administration acting as an instrument of the Lincoln administration’s plan for Reconstruction during his time in Norfolk.¹¹ As a member of Congress, however, Butler was one of the most ardent advocates of the Radical Republican ideology and the Radical plan to rebuild the South. Indeed, it was the earlier iteration of Butler’s plans in Norfolk that developed into a plan of punishing the South for its political crimes of secession and moral crimes of slavery.¹²

While not advocated with any zeal, it is key to understanding the more recent writings on Reconstruction. See C. Vann Woodward, “Seeds of Failure in Radical Race Policy,” 125-147.

¹⁰ US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Ninth Census of the United States: 1870, Norfolk County, VA, City of Portsmouth, Jefferson and Jackson Wards, Parramore, Stewart and Bogger, Norfolk: The First Four Centuries, 225.

¹¹ Parramore, Stewart and Bogger, Norfolk: The First Four Centuries, 215-218.

The evolution of Reconstruction as a national policy affected the workers of the Navy Yard. While some Butler’s controversial policies were felt in Portsmouth, a bizarre duality developed at the Navy Yard. The Navy’s administration of the Yard represented the softer policies of Lincoln’s plan for Reconstruction and national reconciliation during the war. When the war ended, however, the US Navy ejected former Confederates from their positions at the Navy Yard and replaced them with mostly northern and foreign workers and also employed former African-American slaves at the yard. The Navy Yard’s employees experienced Radical Reconstruction’s policies as much of the South did. The reopening of seemingly healed wounds by Radical Reconstruction recreated the animosity of the early occupation years for the workers and their allies around the Navy Yard.

NORFOLK AND PORTSMOUTH’S OCCUPATION

Virginia’s occupation was divided amongst the military commanders in the field and in some cases, was also governed by the provisional, Pro-Union government in Alexandria. The division of responsibilities occasionally reached Norfolk and Portsmouth, but more often then not, the cities remained under some form of martial law from May 1862 until late 1865. For the first months of occupation, the military government was effectively a constabulary force when the municipal governments in Norfolk and Portsmouth were unwilling or unable to enforce several key tenets of

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Occupation forces in other parts of Virginia, such as nearby Hampton, had a very small white population to control. Also in the case of Hampton and Elizabeth City County, the pro-Confederate white population fled to points inland when the Union Army landed at Fortress Monroe. The populations of Norfolk and Portsmouth, which were much larger, did not flee and remained hostile to the occupation. This hostility heightened after federal troops burned much of Norfolk’s storehouses and piers. Also, Union troops acting as police were frequently spit on, harassed by locals, and often fended off mobs of recently impoverished whites. Another challenge for the occupation was that the two cities were behind the Union blockade and as a result, food supplies became scarce.

Adding to an already untenable position, the occupation’s first commander, General Egbert Viele, had a much larger humanitarian concern on his hands. In the early days of the occupation, Viele proclaimed the liberation of the thousands of slaves in the immediate area. Within weeks, the Lincoln administration quickly rescinded the order, but the word was out. The army of occupation lacked the resources to support the crushing influx of escaped slaves from the surrounding area. Thousands of escaped slaves from the surrounding countryside made their way to either Fortress Monroe or to Norfolk and Portsmouth. By 1863, the federal army housed and cared for nearly 2,000 escaped and liberated slaves on nearby Craney Island, while the army escorted a large

\[\text{\underline{Parramore, Stewart and Bogger, Norfolk: The First Four Centuries. 212-226.}}\]

\[\text{\underline{Hucles, Postbellum Black Economic Development, 41.}}\]

\[\text{\underline{Kenneth H. Schwartz, “Ben Butler and the Occupation of Norfolk, 1862-1865: A Reappraisal (M.A. Thesis: Old Dominion University, 1972.) 18-19. Even after re-occupation, supplies were restricted as war materials and were distributed only to the Federal Army.}}\]
number of the slaves to deserted plantations close to the city. The army granted the
tentatively emancipated slaves parcels of land on confiscated or abandoned plantations in
the surrounding countryside. The occupation’s command and northern missionaries
who had made their way to Norfolk and Portsmouth also acted in an educational and
humanitarian role. Historian F.N. Boney credited this blend of secular and clerical
governance was credited as an early version of the Freedmen’s Bureau.

The Lincoln administration and the Department of War’s attempts to govern and
reintegrate captured territory into the Union had several iterations, with varying degrees
of success. Initially, Lincoln and his cabinet gave commanders in the field a free hand to
govern conquered territory. If the commanders were staunch abolitionists, the urge to
punish the former Confederates often led to open conflict between civilians and
occupation troops. In May 1863, a year after the capture of Norfolk and Portsmouth,
General Benjamin Butler, an ardent abolitionist, assumed command of the Military
Department of Virginia and North Carolina. Among Butler’s achievements before taking
command in Norfolk was the battlefield emancipation of African-Americans in the area
surrounding Fortress Monroe, Virginia. By declaring slaves contrabands of war, Butler
intended to cripple the southern war effort by economic means much as the “Anaconda
Plan” had intended to cripple the Southern maritime economy. As the war progressed,
Butler’s successful administration of Fortress Monroe led to his appointment as military

17 Hucles, Postbellum Black Development, 44.
18 F.N. Boney, God Made Man, Man Made the Slave: The Autobiography of George Teamoh
19 James McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 333-
334. The Anaconda Plan was Secretary of War Stanton and General Winfield Scott’s plan to blockade the
entire shoreline of the South. The blockade would choke the South, much as an anaconda would its prey.
governor of New Orleans. In New Orleans, locals constantly harassed federal troops, especially the wives and female relatives of Confederate soldiers. Butler’s interpreted the insults as evidence of rampant sedition and ordered the immediate arrest of any woman who disrespected the occupation’s troops. These tactics were criticized by Butler’s superiors, who removed him from New Orleans and place in command of the occupation of Norfolk and Portsmouth in October of 1863.  

Butler’s arrived to find the two cities in shambles, fraught with corruption, a disorderly occupation force, and local officials who refused to directly deal with the Union army. As a result, Butler decreed that only the local officials that were approved by the occupation and who had taken oaths of allegiance to the Union could hold political offices. The unelected officials and the occupation’s perceived illegitimacy added to the dissent in the community. Local whites attacked the federal garrison at Fort Norfolk and attempted to burn or steal the foodstuffs and supplies required for the occupation force. The situation in Portsmouth was also dire, with federal troops and African-Americans fighting open battles in the streets, which left several former slaves and soldiers dead. Butler responded by introducing the same tactics he employed in New Orleans. William Brooks, the mayor of Norfolk, was a ardent opponent of Butler’s, often printing pamphlets attacking the Federal occupation and Butler directly. Butler’s responded by arresting Brooks on a falsified wife-beating charge, thus eliminating his political clout.

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20 Schwartz, Ben Butler and the Occupation of Norfolk, 47-49.
22 Parramore, Stewart and Bogger, Norfolk: The First Four Centuries, 215.
and tempering any local political interference. Another episode of local obstruction of the occupation was the refusal of the elements within the local gas works to light the city for the duration of Butler’s tenure. Butler quickly seized the gas works, arrested the managers, and placed the works under Federal management.

Butler was able to act with a freehand in Norfolk and Portsmouth. He dispossessed the area’s slave owners of their remaining property and turned the old farms into free labor camps for the freed slaves and poor whites. In addition, Butler’s programs repaired the cities’ streets; rebuilt bridges burned in the Confederate withdrawal, and employed poor whites and freed slaves in other public works projects. By mid-1864, Butler’s programs employed nearly 16,000 workmen. Also, Butler’s administration published a pro-occupation newspaper, The New Regime, which often touted the achievements of the occupation’s policies. Not coincidentally, the incidents of mass violence and local animosity to the occupation began to wane in the months after Butler’s policies shifted from punishment of the locals to the stabilization of the local economy.

The one point of contention that continued to pervade all levels of the community was Butler’s policy that recruited freedmen as soldiers at any opportunity. General Order No. 46, which was the Occupation’s White Paper regarding African-American troops, created roving squads of Union troops looking to recruit freedmen. Local whites were obviously concerned that former slaves, when armed, would seek revenge for their past

23 Parramore, Stewart and Bogger, Norfolk: The First Four Centuries, 216.

24 New York Times, May 7, 1864. This case of Butler’s hardnosed administration was not unnoticed by the Lincoln administration. The board of directors of the gas works lobbied both Edwin Stanton and the president directly, resulting in a stern letter of rebuke, but no other action was taken.

25 Schwartz, Ben Butler and the Occupation of Norfolk, 117.

26 Lenoir Chambers, "Notes on Life in Occupied Norfolk: 1862-1865" Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, 73, No. 2 (April, 1965), 131-134.
bondage. Local whites besieged Butler, concerned for the safety of white families in Norfolk and Portsmouth. Butler’s usual response to these letters was to warn the whites to behave themselves.27 The African-American community in Norfolk was also wary of Butler’s “recruiters” who would often impress any African-American male under the age of 65 for military duty. One of Butler’s recruiters, George Cole, noted that black soldiers were the best for impressment as slavery had made them “submissive and obedient.”28

As the war progressed, Butler’s occupation evolved into an overland campaign into the heart of Virginia, towards Richmond. With a renewed focus on combat operations, the administration of Norfolk and Portsmouth fell to smaller forces with less emphasis on rebuilding the social fabric of the area. While racism and classism were themes that were inexorably tied to elements of the indigenous population, Butler’s attempted social, economic, and racial reform in 1863 and 1864 would not characterize the experience for the two cities or of the South in general in the immediate post-war period.29

THE NAVY YARD REOCCUPIED

As merely a physical plant for the construction and repair of ships, the Norfolk Navy Yard had no residents to police and no ideological identity. However, the thirteen months of Confederate occupation and the subsequent recapturing of the facility left an indelible mark on the yard, its employees, and the community outside its gates. From its

wartime role as the crown jewel of the Confederate war machine to its post-war disrepair, the yard bore witness to the tumult of battle and occupation.

In late April 1862, it was apparent to the Confederate officials in greater Norfolk and in Richmond that the Navy Yard and its surrounding area was becoming an untenable position to hold. The Confederate Secretaries of Navy and War, Stephen Mallory and George Randolph, both met with the yard’s commandant on April 30 and decided to abandon the yard and render all of its facilities unusable. The remaining cannons and artillery pieces were sent by rail to Charlotte, the store houses were burned and the drydock’s gates were dynamited. By May 11, the invasion fleet that transported the Federal Army to Norfolk continued south on the Elizabeth River, past downtown Norfolk and Portsmouth to the location of the Navy Yard. The Confederates had only completed their departure the previous day, and in the brief interim period, locals from the Portsmouth neighborhood of Gosport looted the yard.

On May 11, federal troops landed at the Navy Yard and found the burned storehouses, the looted machine shops and the heavily damaged, but salvageable dry-dock. The navy placed Captain John Livingston in command of the yard and charged him with the task of rebuilding the facilities and reconstituting the yard’s workforce. Livingston met his first step in this task when Portsmouth’s municipal leaders secured the return of the looted machining tools, lumber, and other materials needed for the basic operations of the yard. The manner in which Livingston dealt with the authorities and the community in Portsmouth contrasted with Butler’s rule in neighboring Norfolk.

Livingston’s long tenure as commander of the yard was marked by attempts to reconcile with the local community while maintaining the respect needed in an occupation. Livingston’s first order of business was to restore the yard to a semblance of its former self. The badly damaged drydock was intact enough to be quickly restored.33

THE CONFEDERACY RECONSTRUCTED

While Norfolk and Portsmouth fell under Federal occupation in 1862, the Civil War continued to rage throughout the rest of the crumbling Confederacy. As the death toll climbed steadily throughout from 1862 to 1864, the Union victories of Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Sherman’s March to the Sea shattered any hope of a Confederate victory.34 The rail lines and waterways leading from Norfolk to the interior of Virginia provided the Federal army a route to the Confederate capital of Richmond. Ultimately, the last remnants of the Rebellion retreated into the Piedmont and the four years of brutality that fractured the United States ended at Appomattox in April of 1865.35

The damage inflicted on the former Confederacy went beyond the initial loss of lives and economic interests. Occupation policies employed in Norfolk, Portsmouth, and other areas captured by the Federal army evolved into a distinctive plan by the Lincoln administration to eventually re-admit Confederate states. The overriding concern that gripped the country following Appomattox was how to restore the Union to an antebellum norm of social and regional stability. The development of a cogent policy of Reconstruction, first by the Lincoln administration and then with “Radical” interjections

33 Coletta and Bauer, U.S. Navy Bases, 392

34 James M. McPherson, Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction, 505-509.

35 McPherson, Ordeal by Fire, 511.
by Congress, would blend wartime experiments conducted in greater Norfolk and other areas under occupation with realities of massive social change and physical damage. The multi-faceted beast of Reconstruction following the war attempted to be all things to all people. The problem with restoring the antebellum ideal was the decimation of the old economic order and the ascent of an entirely new class of voters and free laborers embodied by recently liberated slaves.\footnote{Foner, *Reconstruction*, 127, 165-174. The demographic makeup of the “Deep South” of majority Freedmen populations was not shared by Norfolk and Portsmouth. While a sizeable population of African-Americans existed in both cities, the proportions of Blacks were much higher in port cities such as Charleston, Savannah and New Orleans. Foner details the labor aspect of freedmen and poor whites in the South. For greater detail on these factors in Norfolk and Portsmouth’s Reconstruction, please see the third chapter of this thesis.}

In addition, resistance to progress amongst the remnants of the southern aristocracy, abuses within the system of the Freedmen’s Bureau, and the ascent of racially-motivated violence doomed the program to failure. Ultimately, failed policies and administrations in Washington and the election of 1876 led to the collapse of Reconstruction as a national recovery program. In the case of Norfolk and Portsmouth, isolated incidents of racial violence, a chaotic political system, and the ascent of Jim Crow policies paralleled other Southern experiences. However, the external outlier in the area was the consistent Federal presence at the Navy Yard and a very large population non-southerners and foreigners living and working in and around the Yard.\footnote{Parramore, Stewart and Bogger, *Norfolk: The First Four Centuries*, 216-237, US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Ninth Census of the United States: 1870, Norfolk County, VA, City of Portsmouth, Jefferson and Jackson Wards* More than 50% of those engaged in shipbuilding in Portsmouth were not from Virginia or any other Confederate state. Moreover, nearly 1/3rd of non-Southerners were born overseas. Please see Appendix for a quantitative analysis of the Census.}

**PRESIDENTIAL RECONSTRUCTION**

As the war progressed and Union victories began to grow, the Lincoln
administration developed a plan to reconstitute the Union following the cessation of hostilities. While some elements within Lincoln’s cabinet and even the army continued to lobby for a negotiated peace with the Confederacy, louder elements demanded total victory and the complete dismantling of the slave-based society in the South. Lincoln’s plan was for the slow, but eventual emancipation of all slaves. Simultaneously, Lincoln attempted to rebuild the shattered country and return the fledgling states to the Union, especially as Lincoln’s term for his postbellum plan was “Restoration” not “Reconstruction.”

The initial stages of Restoration under the direction of the Lincoln administration began as the war was only entering its first months. The realities of an ever-shifting situation on the battlefield, in Congress, and among the President’s own constituencies framed the development of early Reconstruction. As General Butler’s policy of contrabands troops took root in Virginia early in the war, Lincoln and his cabinet attempted to maximize the efficacy of the government’s resources. The general reform movement in the northern states, spearheaded by abolitionists and proponents of temperance acted as a non-governmental arm of Reconstruction as the war progressed. Teachers and missionaries would follow in the wake of the army, educating and serving hundreds of thousands of liberated slaves by the end of the war. In addition, Radical Republicans in Congress constantly pressured the Lincoln administration on matters of Freedmen’s policy. The so-called Radicals felt as if they were living in the times similar


39 Foner, *Reconstruction*, 22-27. The genuine goodwill shown by the Reform movement was necessary for a Federal government that was in a state of “impotence.” The government had been operating within a scope that had remained relatively unchanged since the 1790s.
to the American or French Revolution, and that they had a chance to recast the United States in the image of their ideology. Instead of using the Civil War as a basis for creating a secular vision of the world as the French did, the Radicals wanted to build a new Union based on the ideals of Christian philanthropy, the death of chattel slavery, and the crushing of the Rebellion. In doing so, the United States would prove that it was worthy of its claim to the Divine Providence that had contributed to its founding.\textsuperscript{40}

In the case of Norfolk and Portsmouth, a component of Butler’s occupation strategy was the use of Quaker missionaries and educators, who arrived at Craney Island, Virginia in January 1863. The island, which bordered the northern neighborhoods of Portsmouth, was a depot for hundreds of runaway slaves.\textsuperscript{41} The Chase sisters of Connecticut, saw firsthand the massive influx of runaways drawn to Norfolk and the presence of federal troops, which would ensure their freedom. As time progressed, other northern missionaries joined the Chases and educated, clothed, and fed nearly 2,000 runaway slaves in the winter of 1862-63. Included in the Chases’ curriculum of literacy was a strong emphasis on Christian values and the virtues of temperance.\textsuperscript{42}

The more secular elements of the Radical movement were the leaders of the Republican Party in the US House and Senate and even cabinet members such as Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. Led by Thaddeus Stevens in the House and Charles Sumner in the Senate, the goals of the Radicals were to hasten the end of slavery and

\textsuperscript{40} Harold M. Hymes, \textit{The Radical Republicans and Reconstruction}, 71-75, In essence, the Republican Party that catapulted Lincoln into office was comprised of the old Whigs and a massive coalition of religious groups and abolitionists that arose during the Second Great Awakening.

\textsuperscript{41} Cassandra Newby, "The World Was All Before Them: A Study of the Black Community in Norfolk, VA, 1861-1884" (PHD diss, College of William and Mary, 1992), 90-91. Please see Appendix for a map of Norfolk and Portsmouth’s shared harbor and the location of Craney Island.

\textsuperscript{42} Newby, “The World Was All Before Them”, 95-97.
conducting a total war, even targeting non-military populations in the southern states. The Army of the Republic would be an army of ideals as much as it was an asset of military strategy.\(^{43}\)

The constant grind of the military campaigns soaked the southern tier of the country in blood throughout 1863 and 1864 began to also shift the opinion of southern whites. The harsh realities of the war that killed southern men by the hundreds of thousands and decimated the economic backbone of the region began to take its toll on the local populations. As larger occupation forces began taking root in cities such as New Orleans, Memphis, and Norfolk, the civilians of the South began to burn with enmity. The Chase sisters, who traveled to Norfolk and Portsmouth to serve the liberated slaves of the area, noted that the local whites openly stated that they would “poison a Yankee, given the chance.”\(^{44}\)

VIRGINIA AS MILITARY DISTRICT ONE

As the Army of the Potomac drove the Confederates into the Piedmont of Virginia, the long war ended at Appomattox Courthouse in 1865 and the organized rebellion ceased to exist. General Ulysses Grant’s magnanimous allowance for southern soldiers to merely lay down their arms and return home, appeared to set the tone for the eventual embracement of Lincoln’s planned national reconciliation. However, a few of General Lee’s officers, particularly General Edward Alexander, proposed dispersing the Army of Northern Virginia and continuing a guerilla war in central and eastern Virginia.


Alexander’s plan was summarily dismissed by Lee, but had some support throughout the ranks of the tattered Confederate army. Ultimately, no Confederate leaders or soldiers were ever tried for treason and the long nightmare of slavery dissipated once and for all. For a brief moment, it seemed that the Civil War had won the United States a second chance at creating a “more perfect union.”

The assassination of Lincoln quickly dashed the hopes of a peaceful era of reconciliation and the reordering of southern economic and social norms. The Radical Republicans in Congress and the cabinet inherited by Andrew Johnson were more interested in punishing the South for secession and for the grim legacy of slavery. The confluence of southern states attempting to reenter the Union on the terms of the Radical Republicans terms and the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment and the Reconstruction Acts by the Congress was problem enough. A short-lived order of bi-racial political establishments temporarily ejected the old Confederates. Adding to the chaos in Washington was President Johnson’s attempt to promote his own policies and resist the overwhelmingly Republican Congress, which lead to a total breakdown of governance and the impeachment of Johnson in early 1868. In the case of Norfolk, Portsmouth, and the Navy Yard, social and economic changes for the region included the military government of General John Schofield and an explosion in economic development. The Schofield administration of Virginia mixed with a pervasive fear regarding the potential

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45 Edward Porter Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General E.P. Alexander*, (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1998.), 533. Ultimately, Alexander dismissed his own proposal in his memoirs, but also he stated that his plan had a great deal of support amongst the troops.


political and racial violence. Several incidents in the post-war years added legitimacy to
the persistent fear of civil violence in the streets of Norfolk and Portsmouth.48

Once the executive branch dealt with the assassination of President Lincoln and
the failed plot on Secretary of State Seward, Andrew Johnson attempted to exert his
influence upon the office of the presidency. Unfortunately for Johnson, the perception of
northern radical observers was that he was a weak successor to Lincoln in ideology and
in spirit. While it was Lincoln who saved the Union and freed the slaves, Johnson was
merely a Pro-Union southerner who was only a borderline supporter of the Republican
policies and the cause of the freedmen. Johnson’s reversion to the Democratic Party in
late 1866 justified the fear of northern radicals regarding Johnson’s vacillating ideology,
yet his origins in Tennessee would also prove to be a bitter pill to swallow for
southerners.49 Johnson, who rose to national notoriety as the lone southern senator to
remain loyal to the Lincoln administration, was installed as the Military Governor of
Tennessee during the period of Federal occupation. In the eyes of southerners, Johnson
was a turncoat who could not be trusted under any circumstances. Johnson’s repeated
support of punishing of rebels and the vitriol of the Radicals in Congress seemed to lend
credence to the fears of Southerners.50

Johnson viewed Reconstruction as a task for the Executive Branch and not the
Congress. Moreover, Johnson’s stark opposition to the severe measures advocated by the

48 Wixson, Andrew Johnson: Plebian and Patriot, 299-304, Parramore, Stewart and Bogger,
Norfolk: The First Four Centuries, 224-235.

49 Hymes, The Radical Republicans and Reconstruction, 248-249.

50 Brooks Simpson, The Reconstruction Presidents, (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press,
1998), 67-69. Johnson’s statements came early in his administration. Of course, over time, Radical
members of Congress were much more prone to levy punishment against the South.
Radicals in Congress quickly led to a turf war on each end of Pennsylvania Avenue. Battles between Johnson and the Congress first erupted over the severity of southern restrictions on recently freed slaves. State legislatures of the Deep South passed the so-called "Black Codes" shortly after the capitulation of the Confederacy. The supposed need to reestablish social order was in reality a method of depriving African-Americans of the rights and privileges of citizenship that the Thirteenth Amendment and the war guaranteed. While the Freedmen’s Bureau and the blunt force of an occupying federal army repealed the political misdeeds of the Black Codes, the racial segregation portions of the codes remained in place.\(^5\) The elections of 1866 exacerbated the nebulous political status of the formerly rebellious states and their political representation. In fact, the elections quickly propelled many old Confederates into high office in the South, including Congress.

Several new members of Congress included former Confederate generals, political leaders and even former Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens.\(^5\) The understandable dismay of the Republicans in the Congress over former Confederates returning to public life and widespread disenfranchisement of African-Americans led to the passage the sweeping Reconstruction Acts. The acts required former Confederate states to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment in order to be fully readmitted into the Union and congressional approvals of all state constitutions. In order to verify the guarantee of

\(^{51}\) Patrick W. Riddleberger, *1866: The Critical Year Revisited* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 186-187. In essence, the state legislatures in the South were solidly still packed with secessionists and remained untouched by the Army or any mechanism of Reconstruction until the elections of 1867.

\(^{52}\) Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 202. Stevens was elected to the US Senate from Georgia by the state legislature, however, he was not admitted to the Senate due to Georgia’s unrepentant status in terms of secession.
African-American suffrage, the acts also divided the South into military districts until the states completed all of the requirements of the acts. Johnson opposed the Acts and vetoed them, which the Republican super majority in both houses of Congress overrode.\textsuperscript{53} The suffrage tenants of the Reconstruction Acts ejected many of the former Confederate legislators and governors out of office. The new political order in the South cast the Republican Party as a predominantly bi-racial entity, which wholly subscribed to the national Radical Republican platform. The Republican dominance of southern politics, while short lived, provided the necessary radical voting block to oppose nearly every attempt by President Johnson to water down the Reconstruction Acts.\textsuperscript{54}

The key administrative point in the Reconstruction Acts was the division of the old Confederacy into occupied military districts. While the resources of the occupation had been cut considerably between 1865 and 1867, the imposition of the Military District plan retained federal troops in the South. The plan divided the former Confederacy into numerous districts, with the states of the Deep South clustered into singular units, while Virginia comprised all of Military District Number One. Virginia's unique place in the restructuring of the South was based on its high proportion of African-Americans and its early experience of occupation.\textsuperscript{55} Occupied Virginia was unique as it also was nominally

\textsuperscript{53} Hans Trefousse, \textit{Andrew Johnson: A Biography}, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 285. The Republican super majority was comprised of mostly moderate Republicans with the Radicals, such as Thaddeus Stevens, Benjamin Butler and Charles Sumner taking positions of leadership in the House and Senate.

\textsuperscript{54} David Blight, \textit{Race and Reunion}, 102. Republican strongholds in the South were not just populated by the "carpetbaggers," northerners moving into blighted areas of the South. Blight states that the phenomenon of the "Scalawag" or southerner with northern sympathies spearheaded the attempts at creating a bi-racial bloc against the old Confederate political and economic order. The core of the Republicans in the South were freed slaves.

governed by both the occupation forces military commanders and the Unionist regime of Francis Pierpont. Political uncertainty marked 1863 through 1865, as Pierpont's Provisional Government ruled Alexandria and part of Arlington County, across the Potomac from Washington. Once the major cities of Virginia fell to Union troops, Pierpont’s government followed closely behind. The Confederate withdrawal from Richmond and the frantic march towards Appomattox allowed for Pierpont and his allies to enter the smoldering ruins of the state capitol.\textsuperscript{56} Pierpont and a hastily assembled legislature took power in Richmond as the Confederate government was still on the run in southside Virginia and throughout the South. The Provisional Government in Virginia was comprised mostly of Union sympathizers and "carpetbaggers." In October, 1865, the statewide legislative election returns in Virginia differed little from other southern states, with many ex-Confederates and old Whigs ejecting the pro-Union candidates from office. The new government intended to modernize the largely agrarian economy of Virginia and in most cases, ignored the wants and needs of newly enfranchised African-Americans. The newly seated state Senate and House of Delegates passed several laws inhibiting the basic civil rights of freedmen. The vast swaths of unemployed and homeless freedmen provided the excuse for the legislature to pass several vagrancy laws that specifically targeted the liberated slaves. In addition, the legislature voted unanimously against the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment’s guarantees of voting rights for African-Americans. These pieces of legislation, among others, prompted the Congress to include Virginia in the Reconstruction acts and the newly created southern Military Districts in

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\textsuperscript{56} Maddex, Jr., "Virginia: Persistence of Centrist Hegemony," 116-117
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113-115, The number of Federal troops in the former Confederacy declined from 150,000 in late 1865 to less than 20,000 in late 1867.
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1867.\textsuperscript{57}

General John Schofield directed Virginia’s administration under the auspices of Military District One. Most parties present in the Commonwealth lauded Schofield’s management of a highly polarized ethnic, political, and economic culture within Virginia. Prior to Schofield’s installation, racial violence was on the rise, with crowds of white “roughs” starting brawls in Richmond, Petersburg, and Norfolk. The cases of these riots were so numerous, that the preceding military governor requested thousands of more federal troops in order to prevent such clashes. Schofield’s deployment of a small constabulary force in the larger cities led to a decrease in such activity, but did not stop it entirely.\textsuperscript{58}

In the cases of Norfolk and Portsmouth, racial and political violence would continue well into the 1870s. While attempts at rebuilding Norfolk’s civilian infrastructure began to succeed, the social effects of the war lingered for some time. Throughout the early months of 1866, Norfolk saw a rash of isolated incidents of stone throwing whites and blacks and interracial fist fights. While the incidents had little in common, the heightened sense of fear among the black and white citizens of Norfolk came to a boiling point in April 1866. On April 16, the Unionists and freedmen of Norfolk celebrated the “Day of Jubilee,” a political and social event comprised of speeches and a parade. On the periphery of the parade, a gunfight between white police officers, who were Confederate veterans, and freedmen involved in the celebration broke out, killing two whites. Federal troops stationed in Norfolk quickly arrived on the scene,

\textsuperscript{57} Donald B. Connelly, \textit{John M. Schofield and the Politics of Generalship} (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2006), 166-168
\textsuperscript{58} Connelly, \textit{John M. Schofield}, 188-189
but the fear of a “black mob” quickly gripped the cities.\textsuperscript{59} Large numbers of whites swept into the African-American sections of Norfolk and Portsmouth and began attacking blacks or even whites with suspected Unionist sympathies. Some one hundred Confederate veterans, in full uniform, attacked the Federal troops sent to quell the initial stages of the riot, leading the commanding officer to place the two cities under martial law.\textsuperscript{60} The skirmishes among the black and white civilians and the army would continue throughout the following week and would eventually fade with the passing days and weeks. However, the two cities in the late 1860s and early 1870s were not the cosmopolitan port cities that existed before the war. The streets of Norfolk and Portsmouth were filled with vice, gun fights, random acts of racial violence, and the settling of old scores.\textsuperscript{61}

The imposition of a new order upon the passage of the Reconstruction acts led to closer scrutiny of the South and of the civil and racial constructions that had changed little following the war. The loyalty oath portion of the Reconstruction acts quickly ejected the civilian officials in Norfolk and Portsmouth who were unwilling to quell the outbreaks of racial violence. In addition, the new freedoms afforded to blacks under the Reconstruction acts greatly enhanced their power at the ballot box. The voter rolls alone told the story of the change in 1868, when Norfolk’s black voters outnumbered whites by

\textsuperscript{59} Parramore, Stewart and Bogger, \textit{Norfolk: The First Four Centuries}, 224-226.

\textsuperscript{60} John Hammond Moore, “The Norfolk Riot: 16 April 1866” \textit{The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography}, 90, No. 2 (April, 1982), 156-160. Major F.W. Stanhope, the officer in command, noted that the city governments were both unwilling and unable to control the population. Stanhope referred to the “Confederates” targeting him personally because he was the officer in command.

\textsuperscript{61} Parramore, Stewart and Bogger, \textit{Norfolk: The First Four Centuries}, 228.
several hundred. As the Reconstruction acts took their effect in Norfolk, the city sent several African-Americans as representatives to the General Assembly in Richmond. Portsmouth’s African-American voter rolls also greatly increased in 1867 and early 1868. Norfolk County elected George Teamoh, a freedman and ship caulker at the Navy Yard, was elected to the State Senate. The brief moment of success offered by the protection of the Reconstruction acts led to the ascent of a white and African-American Republican political coalition on the state and local level. An alliance of Radical whites and newly elected blacks comprised the specially elected constitution convention and wrote a new state constitution that continued to champion bi-racial suffrage. Many of the Radical whites that occupied office in Virginia were the Unionists from the Pierpont era, but were also northerners who settled in Virginia after the war. These individuals included Norfolk and Portsmouth’s representative in Congress, James Platt. Perhaps the largest number of these northerners were found in Portsmouth, with nearly 50% of the 1870 population of the city was non-Virginians. The population of northerners was so large in Portsmouth that a Grand Army of the Republic lodge, comprised mostly of Navy Yard workers, was listed in the city directory well into the 1880s. The combination of the GAR and the largely African-American Union League temporarily transformed Norfolk

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62 Michael Hucles, “Many Voices, Similar Concerns: Traditional Methods of African-American Political Activity in Norfolk, Virginia. 1865-1875,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 100, No. 4 (October, 1992), 546-551. The most drastic change in the demographics of Norfolk was the difference in the concentration of African-Americans living and working in Norfolk in the post-War years. In 1860, freedmen and slaves comprised 30% of the population of both cities. By 1870, that number had jumped to nearly 50%.

and Portsmouth into a bulwark of Radical Republicanism in Virginia. 64

This, however, was short-lived, as various external forces stoked the flames of discontent among “un-Reconstructed” Confederates. The overwhelming support at the ballot box for African-Americans in eastern and southern Virginia, especially in Norfolk and Portsmouth, was often blunted by the castigation of the Radical’s new policy and legislative agenda by some whites in the press and economic hierarchy. Foremost in the local crusade against black suffrage was the unrepentantly pro-Confederate Norfolk Landmark. In various articles regarding the state convention in Richmond, the Landmark often targeted the African-American delegates of Norfolk and Portsmouth, Thomas Bayne and George Teamoh, for ridicule. While often characterized by their peers as articulate and relatively well-educated civic leaders, the transcriptions of their speeches offered in the Landmark were disjointed and stereotypical in their depiction of the senators statements.65

On the state wide level, the foundations of an anti-black, anti-Radical movement were constructed by an alliance of old Confederates and Southern Democrats hoping to fracture the Radical-African American alliance and return to power. The Conservative Party, started to coalesce along racial lines in the state constitution convention of 1868. While the constitution that was eventually passed included tenets supporting bi-racial

64 Maddex, Jr., “Virginia: Persistence of Centrist Hegemony,” 124-125, J.H. Chataigne and Andrew Boyd, compilers, Norfolk, Portsmouth and Berkeley, 1891-1892., 553, F.N. Boney, God Made Man, Man Made the Slave, 205. The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) was the post-war fraternal organization of Union veterans and was overwhelmingly Republican in its political makeup. Several Political cartoons of the time referred to the GAR as “Guaranteed All Republicans.” See David Blight, Race and Reunion, 171-174.

voting rights, the convention also proved to be a pyrrhic victory for those rights.

Disaffected white Republicans, who were members of the Whig Party in the early 1850s, were initially happy with the conversion of old Confederates into upright citizens and the universal acceptance of emancipation. However, the old Whigs were fundamentally against proclaiming freedmen as racial or political equals.\(^6\)

Thus, the Whig members of the Republican alliance quickly withdrew their support and ran a separate slate of candidates. The fracture on the state level also quickly trickled down into Norfolk and Portsmouth. In 1869, the Republican coalition members in the GAR and Union League in Portsmouth began to vote along racial as opposed to party lines. In an election for the House of Delegates representing Portsmouth, the previous “shoe-in” candidacy of George Teamoh for delegate was defeated when another Republican, a white Union Army veteran, split the Republican vote and propelled a Conservative into office. The most publically visible member of the GAR was William Lyons, who had a consistent record of agitation during the war and well into the 1880s. Once the alliance between Radical whites, moderate Republicans, and African-Americans was shattered, the Conservatives quickly took office and erased many of the gains legislated in the four years following Appomattox and the seating of the new General Assembly.\(^7\)

Simultaneous to Virginia’s epic political struggle was the battle waged between President Johnson and the Radicals in the House and Senate. The climax of the battles

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\(^6\) Maddex, Jr., “Virginia: Persistence of Centrist Hegemony”, 118. Among the proposals offered by the state convention were the permanent disenfranchisement of Confederates and a requirement of all legislators to take an oath that they were not voluntarily members of the Rebellion. This, of course, was targeting the masses of old lawmakers who openly supported the Confederacy.

\(^7\) New York Times, March 9, 1886, F.N. Boney, *God Made Man, Man Made the Slave*, 191-193, 205. Lyons was, sometimes simultaneously, the leader of Portsmouth’s GAR post, President of the City Council, a candidate for the House of Delegates and the Superintendent of Machinery at the Navy Yard. For more on the exploits of William Lyons, please see Chapter III.
between Johnson and the Congress was the attempted replacement of Secretary of War Stanton, a Lincoln appointee and Radical Republican. The Congress’s passage of the Tenure of Office Act gave Congress the final say in what officials the executive could replace or remove outright. While Johnson vetoed the measure, the veto was overridden and the law went into effect. Johnson immediately tested Congress by terminating Stanton and replacing him with Military District One’s commander, John Schofield. The outcry from Congress, especially the radicals, led to the impeachment and trial of President Johnson. Leading the charge against Johnson were the two political deans of the radical movement, Thaddeus Stevens and former Union General Benjamin Butler, the latter arrived in Congress shortly after the conclusion of the war. Johnson’s trial marked the high water mark of Radical power in Washington, especially as moderate Republicans defected and voted down Johnson’s removal from office. Also, a backlash against the radicals took place in the congressional elections of 1868 and 1870. While quite a few radicals survived the elections, the efficacy of Radical Reconstruction ultimately lost traction by 1869 and 1870. The election of Ulysses Grant to the Presidency in 1868 seemed to reward the magnanimous manner in which he dealt with the former Confederates. Moreover, southern states began reentering the Union in 1870 without some of the strict conditions set forth by the Reconstruction acts. Virginia, which was rather swift in responding to and adopting the requirements of the Reconstruction acts, was the second southern state readmitted in January of 1870.

Reconstruction, however, would continue for some time in the states of the Deep South.

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68 Ferrell, Reconstruction, 34-45.

69 Foner, Reconstruction, 411-412.
South, where lynchings and terrorist activity by the Ku Klux Klan existed. While Virginia managed to only have a few instances of violence between African-Americans and whites in the 1860s and 1870s, it seemed that Norfolk and Portsmouth was much more prone to this activity. Once the Republican/African American majority collapsed and the burgeoning Conservative Party passed the early predecessors of “Jim Crow,” the hopeful potential of Reconstruction began to falter in Norfolk and Portsmouth. The troubling appearance of Confederate soldiers attacking blacks in Norfolk during the riot of 1866 was not the only episode of racial violence to mark the area. In 1870, shortly after Virginia’s readmission, Secretary of the Navy George Robeson visited Norfolk to campaign for James Platt, the Republican congressman running for re-election. In a massive public meeting on the steps of City Hall, hundreds of people and a large number of officials and workers from the Navy Yard, gathered to hear speeches from the visiting dignitary and the candidates for the seat. A number of white “toughs” on the fringe of the crowd started arguments with a few black candidates for offices. These arguments escalated to a brawl between the whites and blacks, which ended in gunfire between a few of the African-Americans and the white police officers. Secretary Robeson and Congressman Platt fled the chaos of the scene with other radical supporters, who some of the marauding whites targeted. Robeson’s witnessing of yet another racially charged brawl in Norfolk led him to telegram Washington for a battalion of marines to be sent to Norfolk and Portsmouth to prevent any further bloodshed.71

70 Parramore, Bogger and Stewart, Norfolk: The First Four Centuries, 236-237.

71 F.N. Boney, God Made Man, Man Made the Slave, 207-208. The 1870 riot provided fodder for newspapers in Norfolk to take sides or advocate further violence. The Virginian’s description of several beatings of African-Americans, including the shooting and maiming of State Delegate Willis Hodges, bordered on elation.
Several African-American men in both cities were attacked in the following weeks and months, including James Wilson, a black policeman who was murdered in Portsmouth. The harsh upsurge of racial violence in the two cities following the brief political gains would lead to burgeoning resentments in both the African American and Southern white community. In addition, the theme of violence in the former Confederacy was not monopolized by the episodic examples in Norfolk and Portsmouth. In the months following the Confederate capitulation at Appomattox, the seed planted by General Alexander’s plan for a guerilla war in rural Virginia was reaped by disgruntled Confederate veterans and poor southern whites in the formation of various secret societies in late 1865 and early 1866. The guerilla and terrorist organizations known as the Knights of the White Camellia, the Red Shirts, or the Ku Klux Klan swelled with an economically diverse group of southerners committed to the restoration of the pre-war racial hierarchy.\(^\text{72}\) The Ku Klux Klan instantly became the most powerful and notable of these organizations in the states of the Deep South, such as Alabama or Mississippi. While Virginia remained relatively Klan-free, the neighboring Upper South states of North Carolina and Tennessee were hot beds of Klan activity, often receiving national notice for their misdeeds. By 1871, the South was ablaze in violence against blacks, white Republicans, and anyone closely allied with northern political sensibilities.\(^\text{73}\) Ultimately, Massachusetts Congressman Benjamin Butler spearheaded the congressional investigation of the Klan and other nefarious and secret organizations that riddled the

\(^{72}\) F.N. Boney, *God Made Man, Man Made the Slave* 191, Foner, *Reconstruction*, 425-427. The organizations were not confined to only racially based violence. In many cases, northern whites in Southern states and white Republicans were also targeted.

former Confederacy. These hearings revealed an unofficial network of underground meetings and with an unknown number of members. The only evidence that was concrete was the obvious bloodshed and statements by various respected southerners, including Nathan Forrest, that “hundreds of thousands” of former Confederates were members and that the Ku Klux Klan was omnipresent in the South. Congress’s response to the rash of racial violence in the South was the Civil Rights Act of 1871, which Butler authored. The act called for the use of the few federal troops in the South to combat the Klan rather than employing the mostly black state militias in the fear that a potential race war could break out as a result.74

The new federal attention to burgeoning spirit of racially-based vigilantism quickly stamped out the activities of organizations such as the Klan, which ultimately foundered by 1875. However, the fifteen years following Fort Sumter’s fall proved to be colossally bloody for the southern United States. Whether it was the regional violence of the Civil War or the racial violence of the following decade, the frequently unstable forces at work in the South resulted in a mottled record for Reconstruction. The advances made in the racial order in the immediate post-war years were impressive, especially considering the preceding 250 years of slavery in much of the former Confederacy. However, the gains of 1865 through 1870 were eventually wiped away as the political and racial infighting of southern Republicans and the resurgence of the old Confederates continued throughout the 1870s. The last federal occupation troops in the South departed in April 1877 as the southern Democrats returned to power, thus ending Reconstruction. The end, too, was at hand for the advances in African-American rights in 1877. The

74 Blight, Race and Reunion, 116-118.
regression to a pre-war racial order ejected many of the African-American elected officials from office and voters from the polling place. As W.E.B. Dubois, writing in the mid-1930s, summed up the period; “the slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.”

In Norfolk and Portsmouth, the record of Reconstruction was one of political and racial contention and frequent violence. Whether it was the riots of 1866 and 1870 or the frequent acts of violence in the bawdy saloons and the open street, the cities were unstable at best. The Navy Yard was also victim and witness to the hectic events of the era. The Yard’s facilities had been destroyed twice in one year, its employees were scattered and replaced by northern and foreign workers and the locals of Portsmouth were considerably agitated by and against the external presence.

The case of Lizzie Jackson and J.S. Dungan proved to be a prime example of this hostility. In October 1868, a local Portsmouth girl named Lizzie Jackson accused Naval Surgeon J.S. Dungan of rape. Dungan, who had served as a surgeon at the Philadelphia Navy Yard and on board the sloop Portsmouth during the war had a spotless record. Commodore Augustus Kilty, the Yard’s commander at the time, corresponded with Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles regarding the progress of the case. According to Commodore Kilty, members of the local community invented the rape allegation. Kilty also reported that Portsmouth’s mayor informed him that, “an element exists in the city that generated the rape plot and was known to be hostile to the Yard’s occupants.”

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76 Commodore Augustus Kilty, Commander, U.S. Navy Yard, Norfolk to Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, October 10th, 1868, “Letters Received from Commanders of Navy Yards,” Records of Naval Districts and Shore Establishments, RG 181, National Archives, Mid-Atlantic Division, Philadelphia, PA. Kilty uses the term “rape plot” repetitively in his report to Secretary Welles.
Kilty also expressed his concern regarding other “outstanding issues” regarding problems with the local community and the continued housing of Confederate prisoners at the Yard well into 1868.77

The events and circumstances surrounding the Navy Yard in Norfolk and Portsmouth exemplified the larger sense of chaos that filled the South following the implementation of Reconstruction’s policies. As with the bulk of the South, an attempt at a new society comprised of racial parity replaced the slave-based order in Norfolk and Portsmouth. Ultimately, in both cases, much of the same ethnic and political norms that existed before the war replaced the short lived bi-racial order. The repetitive instances of violence, the unstable character of locals as evidenced by the “rape plot” and the consistently unknowns of secret organizations or Confederates who kept their uniforms were evidence enough that the officials at the Navy Yard had much to worry about regarding the surrounding community. However, the themes of regression to anti-bellum attitudes were not the only forces at work in Portsmouth, especially at the Navy Yard. The 1860s bore witness to an influx of Northern and European workers who brought two distinctly un-Southern themes to light in the 1870s; immigrant ethnicity and labor identities.78

77 David Dixon Porter, The Naval History of the Civil War (New York: Sherman, 1886), 253, Commodore Augustus Kilty, Commander, U.S. Navy Yard, Norfolk to Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, October 10h, 1868, “Letters Received from Commanders of Navy Yards,” Records of Naval Districts and Shore Establishments, RG 181, National Archives, Mid-Atlantic Division, Philadelphia, PA. Kilty uses the term “rape plot” repetitively in his report to Secretary Welles. The rest of the letters dealing with the Lizzie Williams case decomposed some time ago. For more issues regarding relations between the Yard and the community, please see Chapters III, IV and V.

78 US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Ninth Census of the United States: 1870, Norfolk County, VA, City of Portsmouth, Jefferson and Jackson Wards
CHAPTER III
LABOR AND ETHNICITY FOLLOWING THE CIVIL WAR

In Norfolk and Portsmouth, a blend of northern and southern labor took root shortly after the end of the war. The area had a great deal of skilled local white and African-American labor, but, a sizable population of northern and foreign transplants also lived and worked in the two cities. Portsmouth in particular contained several distinctly non-southern attributes to its labor population. The highly skilled labor associated with private shipyards as well as the Navy Yard contributed to an influx of labor organizations springing up in the late 1860s and early 1870s. The diverse maritime labor population living and working in Portsmouth, included a hundreds of Irish, German, and ethnically diverse northern workers.¹

The navy yard's labor force, while diverse, quickly organized in the spring of 1869 in the wake of wage reductions and threats by the Navy Department to close the Navy Yard. The largest union in Portsmouth was the local chapter of the Colored National Labor Union. The union, which was comprised of mainly navy yard workers, became known as The Workingmen's Union of Norfolk, Portsmouth and Vicinity, voted and approved of its membership to include any worker regardless of "class, color or condition."²

¹ US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Ninth Census of the United States: 1870, Norfolk County, VA, City of Portsmouth, Jefferson and Jackson Wards. Please see Appendix for an analysis of the laborers of Portsmouth. There were 136 workers from northern or border states and 104 foreign workers living within two miles of the Norfolk Navy Yard. The majority of the foreign workers were either born in Ireland or in states of the German Confederation.

The issues regarding the Navy Yard’s existence and wage disputes made their way to the U.S. House of Representative’s Committee on Naval Affairs, and the offices of two Secretaries of the Navy, which contributed to the reputation of the Navy Yard’s “labor problems.” These problems would include accounts of individuals living in Washington, but earning a pay check when they were supposedly working at Navy Yard and charges of naval agents using government-owned machines for their own personal use.³

Labor organization in the South was completely different from the victorious North. A comparative lack of heavy industry and the overwhelming reliance on agriculture characterized much of the southern landscape before and after the war. The dearth of industry resulted in a scarcity of unionized labor.⁴ Further challenging labor’s efforts in the South, waves of recently liberated slaves throughout the agricultural South benefitted somewhat under the more effective policies of Reconstruction. The federal army distributed confiscated land to the freedmen and skilled African-American workers. According to W.E.B. Du Bois, Reconstruction and the liberating effect of federal occupation led to the temporary rule of a “black proletariat.”⁵

The Civil War years altered the South’s economy and population, but also, altered the north as well. The labor movement, which gained strength before the war, expanded due to labor shortages and industrial expansion during the war. The surge in labor


⁵ As quoted in Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*, 120.
membership led to attempts at national organization, but the Panic of 1873 and the economic depression that followed ultimately confounded these attempts. Simultaneous to the ascent of organized labor, vast numbers of Irish and Germans immigrated to northern states. As these immigrants assimilated into the workforce, nativists viewed the influx of immigrants as near sub-human troublemakers. Unfortunately, events such as the Fenian uprising and the Paris Commune seemed to confirm their fears. Ultimately, it was feared that agitated workers, the unknown variable of immigrants, many of whom were considered radicals, and the vast economic destruction following the Panic of 1873 had the potential to cause a class-based uprising anywhere in the country, even Norfolk.

THE EARLY LABOR MOVEMENT

In the 1850s, as the political class of the United States edged the country closer to Civil War with each passing year, several ideological visions of labor gained momentum. These ideological perspectives varied greatly, depended upon one’s level of financial status. Abraham Lincoln, then running for the Senate in 1858, stated that there was, “no permanent class of hired laborers among us.” Spurred by an ever-growing industrial capacity in the northern tier of the country, the “free-labor” argument arose as an explanation for the industrious advances in technology that allowed for expansion. The free-labor ideology argued that a young worker, through hard work, savings and the

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7 Nell Irvin Painter, Standing At Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919, xli-xliii.

limitless potential of the capitalist system, could attain total economic independence. In addition, the proponents of a “free-labor” economy were often counted as advocated for the abolition of slavery.⁹

Simultaneous to the development of the free-labor ideology was a massive influx of immigrants from famine-riddled Ireland and the often-tumultuous German Confederation over the course of the 1840s and 1850s. The Protestant/Anglo-dominated establishment, while wary of each groups potential problems, also saw the benefit of adding four million Irish and Germans to the country’s limited labor pool. The addition of Irish and German workers would both benefit the rise of the labor movement, but also add fuel to the fire of the establishment’s case against immigration and explain the threat of “external elements” within labor-oriented violence.¹⁰ Issues regarding labor and abolitionism also made strange bedfellows of northern industrialists, Christian abolitionists, and in some cases, the predecessors of American socialists. Laissez-faire economics and religious ideology provided the basis for the hard line taken by the proponents of free labor and abolitionists against the slavery-based economy of the South. In 1857, a series of large banks began failing, causing a cascade of bank runs, which in turn ruined hundreds of businesses and threw thousands of workers into unemployment. As investors searched for new sectors of the economy to exploit, massive amounts of capital were invested in western land and railroad speculation.

⁹ Eric Foner, Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 10-11, 101. According to Foner, the inexorable link between Capitalism and Abolition was one of hypocrisy. The author argues that the Republican ideals that followed the American Revolution, dictated that the political and social equality also be tied to economic equality. In essence, free labor was the ideological equal of Adam Smith’s critique of slavery as inefficient and against the principles of “faith.”

Eventually, over-promised and under delivered returns on the investments led to a speculative crash. This secondary recession, which was known as the Panic of 1857 later caused a massive unemployment and wage reductions nationwide. The Panic also halted attempts by skilled and specialized workers to unionize. Unionization was gaining momentum in northern industrial cities and areas, but market forces and unemployment created a massive surplus in the industrial labor pool in the North. A constant flow of skilled Irish and German immigrants in turn depressed wages and halted any attempts at labor organization.

The Civil War quickly changed the dynamics of the labor pool and the potential for unionization. As more southern states seceded when Lincoln took office, the ranks of the army and navy swelled by way of enlistment and the draft. At the dawn of the Civil War, the federal army was poorly armed and equipped for an expeditionary force into the southern states. As a result, the War Department poured a tremendous amount of government funds into feeding, clothing, and arming the hundreds of thousands of troops that would restore the southern states to the Union. In terms of raw numbers, the War Department’s expenditures in 1860 and 1861 were $35 million. Between January and December of 1862, the War Department spent nearly $432 million. Railroad hubs in cities such as Pittsburgh, Chicago, and St. Louis spurred a growth in population, financial

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13 James M. McPherson, Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction, 180-182, Hermann Schluter, Lincoln, Labor and Slavery, 139.
clout, and electoral power. In addition, the pre-existing concentration of industrial activity in the North and the dearth of manufacturing in the South were further exacerbated by wartime expansion.¹⁴

The affects of federal spending spurred a quantum expansion of industry and the need for hundreds of thousands of soldiers cut the supply of available workers, thus creating the necessary conditions for the organization of labor. A burgeoning sense among the workers that they did not benefit from the huge sums of federal dollars pumped into their respective industries revived the pre-war labor movement. Unions that had been dormant for several years quickly rebuilt their member rolls and began to strike for higher wages by the midpoint of the War in 1863. As the war progressed, the result of the workers’ organization was positive, with employers agreeing to increased pay in nearly every case.¹⁵ Trade oriented newsletters quickly circulated news across the country, extolling the virtues of unionization and how factory owners engaged in more audacious attempts at wage manipulation. In some cases, stories circulated that young boys and women replaced skilled tradesmen to drive down wages universally. In December of 1863, trades such as mining, cigar makers, and locomotive engineers organized eighty unions across the northern tier of the country. By November 1865, workers organized some 300 unions with total membership of nearly 200,000.¹⁶

At the conclusion of the war, the wealth of industrialists and the strength in numbers of organized labor quickly headed into conflict. For the vast majority of labor

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organizations, the skill-based or local organization was a fully autonomous unit, unaffiliated with any other body or entity and only devoted to the highly specialized skill of their members. In August 1866, the representatives of sixty three skill-based labor unions met in Baltimore in order to organize what would become the National Labor Union (NLU). The focus of the meeting was to pool the resources of the various trade unions into an entity that could fight for a universal 8-hour work day, campaign for labor friendly members of Congress, and, most importantly, to speak on behalf of all skilled workers in the United States. The more radical members of the convention adopted the slogan “Organization against Capital” to characterize their movement17 The NLU’s initial goals were ultimately undermined by several faults within the organization and its membership. First, the NLU’s initial organization lacked an administrative framework that would serve all the workers and their interests. In essence, it was merely a collection of ideological allies and not a functional mechanism of labor organization. Other fractures appeared within the union’s organizing platform regarding its stance on strikes and race. Elements that sought to ban the union from engaging in any strikes greatly outnumbered radical, strike-prone members of the union. According to the more radical element, this greatly reduced the efficacy of the union’s collective strength and led to their departure.18

17 Anthony Bimba, The History of the American Working Class, 144-146. Philip Foner, History of the Labor Movement, 374. The 1866 meeting in Baltimore coincided with the meeting of International in Geneva. Karl Marx, writing to an American colleague viewed this synergy in dates and ideology with “great joy.”

18 Anthony Bimba, The History of the American Working Class, 147. The skill-specific union chapters included examples of vastly different occupations, including the National Union of Cigar Makers, the Iron Molders Union and the Bricklayers and Masons’ Union. According to Bimba, a secondary goal of the NLU’s main thrust was the adjustment of the country’s monetary supply. The distraction caused by the monetary policy goal also contributed to the collapse of the NLU.
In terms of the NLU’s inclusion of African-Americans, the platform of the convention argued that the principles of organization should be carried into the Freedmen’s community and offered invitation to Freedmen’s working organization. However, the ideology of organization, a colorless and stateless working class, would not extend to the population of a country recovering from a sectional Civil War that was fought over, among other reasons, the manumission of African-Americans. The NLU’s attempt at reaching out to African-American labor organizations failed due to a fear amongst the white workers that unskilled Blacks would take their jobs. In addition, many chapters of the NLU refused to admit any Black laborers into their local meetings. In the end, the national movement was marked more by its workers differences rather than their similar goals of working class solidarity. These key differences marked the end of the NLU in 1872 following three years of chapters and skill-specific unions withdrawing their membership.19

THE PARIS COMMUNE

In spite of the failure of the NLU, the smaller, separate organizations continued to prosper throughout the late 1860s and early 1870s. However, events in France following the Franco-Prussian War would taint the words “labor” or “organization” for the members of the industrial or capital hierarchy. In July 1870, Prussia and France had been involved in years of bellicose disagreement over various issues including a vacancy on the Spanish throne and general issues of state. Ultimately, Napoleon III declared war on

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Prussia, which drove the loosely bound states and principalities of the German Confederation to ally with the Prussians.\textsuperscript{20}

The German alliance dealt a serious blow to the French on the battlefield, which led to the collapse of the French government and the siege of Paris. After the brutality of the siege, the new Republic and the Germans signed an armistice in January 1871. The last pieces of the French army was the National Guard, comprised of thousands of Parisian volunteers and workers who were willing to fight the Germans to the last man and felt betrayed by the Republic. Within a few days, the leaders of the Guard, who were known as the “Communards,” quickly gained total control of Paris and installed the Central Committee as the ruling body of the city. Also, the Communards operated a separate government from the rest of France, which was under the direction of the Third Republic based in Versailles. The Central Committee, comprised mostly of skilled workers, adopted a platform of confiscating church property and adopted the red flag of Socialism, first used in the 1848 revolution.\textsuperscript{21}

The American press present in Paris feverishly sent dispatches home to their newspapers due to the “special” relationship between France and the United States. Some in the press gleefully rejoiced in the return of the revolutionary spirit in France, and compared the Communards to Washington, Madison, and Adams. However, the vast majority of correspondents and American citizens in the city were dismayed by the brutality visited upon a bright point of western civilization. Dispatches describing the


pitched battles fought in the city, the decimation of Paris’s social order, and the confiscation of church property made headlines in nearly every major newspaper in the United States.  

American civic and social leaders openly opposed the “secessionist” government operating the Commune and denounced the bloodshed following the collapse of the Republic’s rule in Paris. Comparisons were quickly made between the leaders of the Commune and the leaders of the Confederacy and that the fate of the Commune would be the same. Ultimately, the Republic crushed the Commune’s attempt at breaking out of Paris and bringing the revolt to the rest of France and the Commune collapsed. Resultant lessons and warnings derived from the Commune’s demise planted the seeds of fear into the psyche of American political and economic establishment and the seeds of hope for the labor movement. European socialists, especially Karl Marx, saw hope in the brief moment when the workingmen of Paris committed to a rebellion against the bourgeoisie and the political leaders that continued to empower an unjust economic system. Marx’s history of the Commune, The Civil War in France, promised that the martyrs amongst the piles of bodies in Paris were the “harbingers of a new society.” Marx’s statement regarding a ‘new society’ mirrored a letter he drafted on behalf of the International to Abraham Lincoln regarding the status of labor in the United States following the Civil War.

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22 Philip Katz, From Appomattox to Montmartre, 92-102. Katz cites newspapers with an ideological range from the conservative New York Times to the more progressive newspapers of the day. The near universal response from the American writers in Paris and their counterparts in the U.S. was one of horror of the Commune’s brutality. Their fear was bolstered by reports of “tens of thousands” being killed by the Communards or the Republic’s army in the struggle for the Capitol.
War. According to Marx, the examples of the Civil War and the Commune offered the only path to the idealized society, which was armed insurrection.23

THE PANIC

The potential for an American version of the Commune was concerned the political and economic leadership, but the post-Civil War economic boom and brief era of financial stability based on railroad construction, heavy industrial expansion, and western land speculation fueled the growing wealth of the northern tier of the country. Federal and state policies liberally allotted massive tracts of land in western states and territories for the construction of railroads in order to fully exploit the rich natural resources of the sparsely populated western half of the country.24 The massive tracts of land granted to railroads created an unregulated land speculation boom that mirrored the events that created the Panic of 1857. The first fracture in the railroad boom started as an effort by financier Jay Gould to manipulate the price of gold by cornering the market and artificially inflating the commodity’s price. Gould’s scheme, which also involved “Boss” William Tweed of Tammany Hall, ultimately led to the collapse of the gold market and the financial ruin of thousands of investors.25

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23 Karl Marx, “The Civil War in France” in The Paris Commune, 118, Hermann Schluter, Lincoln, Labor and Slavery, 191, Eric Foner, The Great Labor Uprising of 1877, 230. Marx’s use of the grim and foreboding word “harbinger” indicated that the days of the bourgeoisie were numbered.


25 Julius Grodinsky, Jay Gould: 1867-1892 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), 77-79. Gould profited from the attempt to corner the market, but his reputation suffered as a result of the Panic and investigations by the press. For example, Gould and Tweed would often appear together in Thomas Nast’s Harper’s Weekly caricatures. For the public, this highlighted the connection of corrupt political machines and corrupt industrialists.
The Gold Panic, however, was just the beginning. In 1873, the railroad boom shuddered upon the insolvency of Jay Cooke and Company of Philadelphia. Cooke and Company was the major financier of another transcontinental railway, the Northern Pacific. The Northern Pacific’s envisioned route paralleled the previous transcontinental line, but laid 500 miles north of the old route. This, according to Cooke and Company, would open the entire wilderness of the Dakotas and Montana, specifically the mineral rich Black Hills. Unfortunately, aggressive price competition left Cooke’s millions of dollars in Northern Pacific’s unsold. Cooke & Company ultimately fell into bankruptcy and crippled the American economy. The cascade set off by the failure of Cooke and Company forced the failure of dozens of banks nationwide. Unemployment was rampant and the once vibrant railroad industry suffered a catastrophic slowdown in expansion. Nearly 35,000 miles of track were laid between 1865 and 1873, however, only 6,000 miles of track were built following the failure of Cooke and the aftershocks of the Panic. In a period of eight short years, the people of the United States had witnessed the Civil War and the rampant corruption of the Gold Panic crisis; many of them who had not been affected yet, would lose their jobs. The outlook had become so dire that, in 1874 an article in the New York Times feared that the Panic was laying the foundations for an American version of “the class warfare and jealousy of Europe.” It seemed, at least to the press, that the conditions that created the Communards were coming to pass in America.


Initially, the fear amongst the economic leadership of a potential Commune or a class war would be propagated by certain noisy elements, demonstrating their support for the Commune after the bloodbath in Paris perpetrated by the French Republic’s army. The demonstrators were often a diverse crowd, comprised of European political refugees, suffragettes, and German and Irish immigrants. They marched on anniversaries associated with the Commune and draped themselves with red flags and held banners proclaiming the virtues of various causes. While at first observers saw the protesters as merely a few thousand rabble rousers; deteriorating economic conditions of the 1870s, the presence of millions German and Irish workers in key areas of industry, and several violent strikes heightened the fear of a second, class-based civil war.  

IMMIGRANTS OR TROUBLE MAKERS? 

The revolutions of 1848 prompted an influx of German immigration to the United States, with the majority settling in the heavy industrial and railroad dominated cities of northeast and midwest. Driven by a labor and political uprising within the individual states of the German Confederation, vast crowds of laborers took to the streets and called for a general strike against the various states and principalities within the Confederation. A group of socialists in the Rhineland, specifically, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, called for the first of the strikes. While the German immigrants were not participants, or even remotely sympathetic to the strikers or the socialists, the events of 1848 would cast

28 Katz, *Appomattox to Montmartre*, 164-168. The size of the protests, which occurred mainly in lower Manhattan, was estimated at either 600 persons or nearly 10,000. “A few thousand,” according to Katz, was much more likely than artificially inflated or deflated numbers.
aspersions on the true economic loyalties of all Germans in the United States. German laborers organized into ethnic social clubs that also acted as nascent labor organizations. Groups such as the Allegmeine Arbeiterbund and Arbeiter All-Gewerke claimed to speak as the voice of the German-American labor class. These two groups were an outcropping of three German-centric labor organizations, the National Labor Union, the Proletarian League and Turnerbund, the Socialist Athletic Society. While even the most ardent of capitalists understood that these groups only represented a minority of the German-American community, their revolutionary backgrounds and socialist tendencies raised a few suspicions. Even after the individual contributions of countless Germans in the Civil War, opinion makers of the day linked German labor organizations with the 1848 revolts and the German origins of Karl Marx and the International.

The Irish had been a presence in the United States since the days of Jamestown, and much like the Germans, held high offices and were respected members of the economic and social aristocracy. These highly respected early Irish immigrants were the Scots-Irish, who were also known as the Ulster Presbyterians and assimilated into the Protestant-dominated Yankee culture of the North and, for the most part, created the Cavalier culture of the South. The onslaught of an almost universally Catholic wave of Irish immigration in the 1840s and 1850s was not greeted with enthusiasm, to say the

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least. In addition, the Protestants questioned all Catholics’ ability to function independently from the church’s hierarchy. The Papal connection led many in the Know Nothing and abolitionist advocates to group the Irish with a church that openly supported slavery throughout Central and South America.

As Irish immigration continued to swell throughout the 1860s, the flood of new workers streaming into the United States were often left with few choices in labor prospects. The discovery of anthracite coal and the development of massive mining operations in northeastern Pennsylvania drew both Irish and Welsh immigrants who arrived in the relatively close ports of New York and Philadelphia. The labor movement in the industrialized cities of 1850s was also present in the coal region of Pennsylvania. As in other locations, the overwhelming Irish majorities in the mining communities that grew during the Civil War coupled labor organization to the Ancient Order of Hibernians and other Church-based community groups. However, organization was difficult as a nearly inexhaustible supply of new labor poured into the various mining communities. As a result, low wages and often hazardous conditions for those lucky enough to find work were the norm. In addition to the inherently hazardous nature of the mining, wage increases and decreases were tied to the price of coal, which varied greatly due to external market forces and the supply provided by the miners efforts. The miners’ union, the Workingmen’s Benevolent Association (WBA), shared most of its northeastern

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32 Reginald Byron, *Irish America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999), 197-199. An anecdote from the 1850s regarding some of the Ulster Presbyterians, who identified themselves as Scots-Irish unless they were located in or near a city with a large number of Irish Catholics.

33 Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 44-46. William Lloyd Garrison, the most well-known American abolitionist, openly linked “all Irishmen with the accursed South.” The Know Nothings, which was a single issue, anti-immigration movement, had a high tide before the Civil War, but was dissolved after its two main components, northern abolitionists and southern slave owners, went their separate ways.
Pennsylvania membership with the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Simultaneously, a number of mine managers, landlords and railroad officials were murdered in the coal region. The famed Pinkerton detective agency tracked down the culprits, which yielded reports of a shadowy band of radical Irish Catholic conspirators known within the community as the Molly Maguires. Allan Pinkerton’s own recollection was that the violence perpetrated by the Irish of Pennsylvania was akin to the murders, lynchings, and misdeeds “performed by the Ku Klux Klan and other similar political combinations in the Southern states.” In addition, the violence only degenerated as the Panic of 1873 produced even deeper wage cuts as the railroad business was one of the hardest hit industries in the country. By mid-1875, the nation’s newspapers were filled with accounts of open warfare in the hills of Pennsylvania involving the seemingly old problem of violent Irish Catholics and secret societies within an already suspect community. Ultimately, the alleged leaders of the Molly Maguires were captured, tried and hung in June of 1877, less than a month before the Great Strike broke out in West Virginia. The German and Irish waves of immigration broke on the American shoreline at roughly the same point of the 1840s, but each group was fleeing markedly different circumstances in their homeland. However, the economic and political leadership in the United States coupled with the ascent of nativism, shaded the new immigrants as starving wretches or worse, revolutionaries. In addition, this selective pattern of observation

34 Kenny, Making Sense of the Molly Maguires, 133-135. The price of coal effectively doubled overnight. The Coal Board of Trade and the Union agreed to a variety of price and wage formulas, but the formulas changed when the Redding Railroad started to buy most of the mines in the coal region.

35 Allan Pinkerton, The Molly Maguires and the Detectives (New York: G.W. Dillingham and Sons, 1887), 16. It should be noted that Pinkerton was often the detective of choice for railroads and industries dealing with labor problems.

linked all immigrants to the Socialists of the Rhineland or the soldiers of the Roman church. In any event, the press and the elements of the nativist movement concluded that both groups were untrustworthy, impulsive, and fundamentally violent.

PORTSMOUTH'S LABOR

Organized industrial labor in the southern states before the Civil War was rare. Southern specialization in agriculture compounded the cycle of dependency on a slavery-based economy. While mills, railroads, and shipbuilding exploded in the northern tier of the country, “King Cotton” continued to reign in the Deep South. The rare examples of heavy industry in the Upper South were the iron works of Richmond and the maritime industries of Norfolk and Portsmouth. The Civil War, however, greatly altered the social and economic framework of Portsmouth. The post-Civil War composite of labor in Portsmouth contained elements of the southern liberated slaves and a highly diverse foreign-born population of Irish, German, and other European laborers working at the Norfolk Navy Yard or in closely associated industries. While other southern port cities such as Charleston and Pensacola had a few of these demographic elements, the exceptional outlier of Navy Yard tied these groups together. As a result of the unique circumstances at work in Portsmouth’s labor population, attempts at organizing unions quickly developed following the Civil War and continued to be a force for agitation up

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37 Tyler Anbinder, Nativism and Slavery, 110-112.

38 L. Diane Barnes, Artisan Workers in the Upper South: Petersburg, VA, 1820-1865. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 12, William M. Still, The Confederate Navy: The Ships, Men and Organization, 1861-1865 (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1997), 70. Pensacola’s Warrington Navy Yard did not possess the anti-bellum or post-war capacity of the Norfolk Yard and employed comparatively few laborers. For example, Pensacola had no machine shop, timber shed or capacity for handling more than two ships at one time. In addition, Charleston’s Yard did not exist until 1901.
through the strike year of 1877. Battles within the diverse labor groups of the community also developed in the years following the Civil War, with white northerners in conflict with local African-Americans and whites for employment at the yard.39

Antebellum labor at the navy yards in Boston and Philadelphia had been in a constant state of agitation regarding the length of the workday and wage disputes. In fact, several federal employment precedents were set as a result of navy yard workers lobbying the Van Buren administration to lower the workday from fifteen hours to ten.40 However, this was not the case in Portsmouth, since slaves supplied the bulk of the labor force at the yard. Also, Norfolk's port witnessed the arrival of thousands of German and Irish immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s. The combination of slaves and immigrants working for little or no wages often supplanted the indigenous southern workers in various private yards and at the Navy Yard. The excess supply of labor meant any attempts at organization failed before they began.41 The influx of German and Irish laborers on the Elizabeth River's waterfront added fuel to the fire of Norfolk and Portsmouth's burgeoning nativist tendencies and open violence against immigrants. The American Party, a southern nativist party, swept Norfolk and Portsmouth's municipal elections in 1854 and 1855. Most of the office holders remained in place until the arrival of Federal troops in 1862. In addition, the two cities witnessed a rash of attacks on Irish


Catholics and churches well into the 1850s. Arsonists burned St. Patrick’s Catholic Church in Norfolk and severely beat several members of the clergy.\textsuperscript{42}

At the close of the Civil War, the Navy Yard’s labor population shifted in its loyalties and origins greatly over the course of the preceding four years. Locals and navy officers who defected to the Confederate cause was dominated the yard, but once the Union naval squadron reoccupied the yard in May 1862, they barred suspected Confederates from employment for the remainder of the war. Indeed, an 1867 survey of the yard’s laborers concluded that of the 620 employees of the yard, none had any ties to the former Confederacy. Also, the Navy Department’s liberal use of transferred workers from northern yards and explicit directions to the Norfolk yard’s officials to hire “approved” workers greatly decreased southern employment after the war.\textsuperscript{43} Although the post-war labor population of Portsmouth was comprised of a sizeable number of outsiders, the city’s working population was still overwhelmingly pro-Confederate. The lack of positions at the Navy Yard did not mean Portsmouth thousands of shipwrights, caulkers, and carpenters remained unemployed. Several private shipyards, such as the Atlantic Iron Works, the Elizabeth Iron Works and Godwin & Company, operated on the waterfronts of Norfolk and Portsmouth. In the post-war industrial boom that rebuilt


\textsuperscript{43} Marshall Butt, \textit{Portsmouth Under Four Flags}, 42, Letter from Commodore A. H. Kilty, Commander, U.S. Navy Yard, Norfolk to Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, October 10\textsuperscript{th}, 1868,“Letters Received from Commanders of Navy Yards,” Records of Naval Districts and Shore Establishments, RG 181, National Archives, Mid-Atlantic Region, Philadelphia, PA. Referred to here after as “Records of Naval Districts.” The letter from Kilty to Welles confirms that the Yard received orders for the termination of an unnamed local tugboat pilot and the reception of Silas Reynolds, a pilot from arriving from Washington.
Norfolk and its waterfront economy, the private yards prospered and had no regional preferences in their hiring practices.44

While the hiring practices of the yard echoed the social and economic damage cause by the Civil War, the dilapidated state of the yard’s facilities were evidence of the war’s physical damage. The navy perennially lobbied Congress for an increase in funding to repair and expand the facility, however, the little funding available allowed for only the restoration of half the Yard’s facilities. In 1866, the navy argued for nearly $1.2 million to return the yard to its pre-war strength, however, Congress only provided $335,000 in appropriations. The damage of the war and the continued need for funding prompted several attempts before the Senate’s Committee on Naval Affairs to close the yard and sell its resources. A series of public meetings sent a delegation of citizens and Navy Yard workers to Washington in order to lobby for the yard’s existence.45

The delegation’s fears went unrealized when the yard remained open, but the initial stages of organization that apparently developed well in late 1866 and early 1867 continued through the next two years with little progress. Unfortunately, the agitation of government workers in the northern states also affected the workers of the yard, who were already under the burden of an employer on the brink of closure and the heel of federal occupation. Beginning in 1865, several organizations of federal employees marched the streets of New York, Philadelphia, and Washington calling for a legally


mandated eight-hour work day. The protests and torchlight parades continued until Congress passed a law in 1868 that mandated an eight-hour work day for all federal employees. However, the cut of two hours from the workday did not ensure the maintenance of wages at the old rate and led to Secretary of War Schofield and Secretary of the Navy Welles to immediately cut wages by twenty percent.

Following the wage and workday legislation, the workers of the Navy Yard protested to Congress again. A largely African-American group of workers comprised of members of the Union League regularly met at the Zion Church in Portsmouth throughout 1868 and 1869. As a means of protesting the wage decision, the yard’s workers elected representatives to meet with labor-friendly congressmen in Washington. The meetings at Zion Church continued to attract more African-American workers of the yard until May 1869, when those present at the meetings offered a resolution to the charter of the Workingman’s Union of Norfolk and Portsmouth. The several hundred white and African-American workers in attendance voted to approve the charter. In addition, the corresponding secretary of union proposed that in order for the union to truly represent the workforce of the Yard, it should include the black and white skilled laborers of the yard. The meeting passed the motion with a near unanimous decision. As time progressed, the workers movement in navy yard cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, and Portsmouth succeeded in lobbying President Grant, who in May 1869

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48 *Norfolk Virginian*, April 29, 1869, pg. 2
unilaterally overturned the wage reduction tenets of the eight-hour law.\(^{49}\)

However, the bi-racial spirit of the Workingman’s Party of Norfolk and Portsmouth foundered as a result of smoldering racial tension and the northern laborers at the navy yard. The bulk of these northerners were Union army veterans and members of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) post in Portsmouth. The Portsmouth GAR evolved into the white Republican meeting place in Portsmouth while the Union League evolved into Portsmouth’s Black Republican stronghold. As members of both organizations contributed to the creation of the Workingman’s Party, the racial divide of the local Republicans also fractured the Workingman’s Party.

William Lyons, the leader of the GAR post in Portsmouth was quite possibly the most powerful and opportunistic man in the city and at the Navy Yard. In addition, his exploits offered a model of the patronage that structured employment in Portsmouth. Lyons first appeared on the local political scene shortly after Virginia’s secession, when he was ejected from his job as a labor foreman at the Atlantic Iron Works for not supporting the Confederate cause. In the June 29, 1861 *Norfolk Daybook*, Lyons protested his mistreatment and proclaimed his loyalty to the south:

\[\text{I, William Lyons, having been charged with disloyalty to the Southern Confederacy, proclaim myself as good a southerner as any man in the south and am doing as much to destroy the invaders as any man in the field.}\(^{50}\)

Despite this expression of Southern loyalty, once the federal fleet arrived at Portsmouth in 1862, Lyons immediately found employment at the Navy Yard as the new Supervisor of Machinery, replacing his Confederate predecessor. In addition, as the navy replaced

\[\text{\(\text{\ldots}^{49}\text{Norfolk Virginian, May 17, 1868, pg. 2, May 25, 1868, pg. 2}\)}\]

\[\text{\(\text{\ldots}^{50}\text{Norfolk Daybook, June 29th, 1861. Lyons’ questionable allegiance to the Confederacy seemed to be confirmed by his instillation as Supervisor of Machinery upon the federal reoccupation of the navy yard.}\)}\]
the majority of the yard’s workforce with unionists and freedmen during and shortly after
the war’s conclusion, Lyons had a free hand to employ hand-picked individuals. In
1866, Lyons won the campaign for President of Portsmouth City Council as a
Republican, with the largely northern and freedman vote behind his candidacy.
However, the collapse of the Union League/GAR coalition prevented his candidacy for
the House of Delegates in 1869. The split between the Union League and the GAR in
political and labor terms led the *Norfolk Virginian* to blame Lyons and his use of the navy
yard as “personal patronage machine.” The GAR membership of Portsmouth was
obviously northern, but also contained a large number of the navy yard’s Irish and
German employees that fought for the Union during the war. From the perspective of the
Union League’s African-American members, it seemed that Lyons meddling in politics
and employment issues at the navy yard was meant to deprive freedmen of jobs and
promote the GAR’s members and Lyons’ personal agenda.

Shortly after its victory over wages in 1869, the Workingman’s Party in
Portsmouth collapsed due to infighting, corruption, and biases within the Union League
and the Grand Army of the Republic’s local affiliates. However, the local labor
movement collapsed at the worst possible moment in the region and the country’s
economic cycle. In 1869 and 1870, the United States was still in the heyday of the post-

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Biography* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1913), 240. Lyons, at one time or another,
also occupied the office of City Treasurer for two four-year terms. Another labor scandal involving him,
referred to in the same *New York Times* article, occurred well into the 1880s and led to his removal from
the Navy Yard and his positions in city politics.

52 *Norfolk Virginian*, October 21, 1872, pg. 2

53 F.N. Boney, *God Made Man, Man Made the Slave*, 205. George Teamoh, a black Republican
state senator and de facto leader of the freedman community in Portsmouth, explicitly blamed the GAR
members, especially Lyons, who was more interested in advancing the place of white northern veterans
than the freedmen who they were allied with in labor and political interests. Teamoh also seemed
concerned with the plight and anger of the southern whites who lost their jobs in the process.
Civil War economic boom fueled by railroad and land speculation in the West. The same was true for Norfolk and Portsmouth, which was in the midst of rebuilding the rail, port, and market infrastructure components destroyed during the war. However, the swift downturn caused by the Panic of 1873 had an erratic effect on the area’s economy. Although, the port facilities that drove Norfolk’s economy remained at full capacity through the 1870s, the lack of expansion, funding, and the occasional mass-furloughing of the workers the navy yard decimated Portsmouth’s economic prospects. The relatively-narrow Elizabeth River proved to be an economic chasm between the gilding of Norfolk and the decay of Portsmouth. Another large employer in two cities was the Atlantic, Mississippi, and Ohio Railroad, which faltered on its bond as a result of the Panic of 1873 and laid off hundreds of employees in Norfolk and Portsmouth. Again, Norfolk sustained the shock of the Panic because of the diversity of its economy, but Portsmouth suffered because of its dependency on the navy yard. The yard periodically furloughed its entire workforce for weeks, or even months, following the panic.

Ultimately, the clash between the Workingman’s Party and the GAR both sabotaged the attempt to organize the laborers of Portsmouth. As a result, the un-channeled desperation of unemployed or poorly paid workers had the potential for any number of outcomes. In the cases of the Parisian Commune or the Molly Maguires, the outcomes were clearly the overthrow of the Second Empire and mass violence amongst the coalfields of Pennsylvania. The economic instability of the Panic years provided the

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54 Parramore, Stewart, and Bogger, *Norfolk: The First Four Centuries*, 231-233.

55 Parramore, Stewart, and Bogger, *Norfolk: The First Four Centuries*, 233.

potential for nearly any possible outcome, even in a sleepy southern port town. However, the Civil War and Reconstruction showed the violent potential of Norfolk and Portsmouth’s highly diverse population. Northerners and immigrants made up a great deal of the labor population, which many leaders assumed were inherently violent. These elements added a great unknown to the equation. The labor disputes of the 1860s and 1870s at the yard came at the nadir of national interest in naval technology, spending, and development. The “dark ages” of the U.S. Navy further hindered the efforts of the Norfolk Navy Yard.

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57 Ninth Census of the United States: 1870, City of Portsmouth, Jefferson and Jackson Wards, Painter, Standing at Armageddon, 28-32.
CHAPTER IV
THE "DARK AGES" OF THE NAVY YARD

The Civil War committed the United States to total war for nearly four and a half years. The measure of American military might included the massive expansion of its navy. The U.S. fleet, numbering less than 50 ships in 1861, had nearly 680 ships at its disposal at the time of Lee’s surrender at Appomattox.\footnote{James M. McPherson, \textit{Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction} (New York: Random House, 2000), 202. The U.S. Armed Forces, the Army, Navy and Marine Corps, had nearly 2.1 million men in uniform by the War’s end.} The scientific advances in shipbuilding during the Civil War temporarily affixed the eyes of the world on the Norfolk Navy Yard when the revolutionary CSS \textit{Virginia} decimated the wooden blockading fleet of the federal navy and battled the \textit{Monitor} at Hampton Roads. The battle’s results and further technological advances in northern shipbuilding throughout the war revolutionized the construction methods of much of the world’s shipbuilding by 1865.\footnote{McPherson, \textit{Ordeal by Fire}, 194.} The wartime torrent of naval spending greatly benefitted private shipbuilders throughout the north and federal shipyards in Boston, Philadelphia, and Brooklyn. At the peak of spending during the war, congressional naval appropriations were nearly $120 million annually. However, the end of the war brought about a new era of fiscal restraint on the part of Congress, especially in military spending. In 1866, the navy’s budget was cut by more than 80% to roughly $20 million.\footnote{39th-51st Congress, “Report of the Treasury Secretary.” \textit{House Executive Document 1}, 1865-1890.; Robert L. O’Connell, \textit{Sacred Vessels: The Cult of the Battleship and the Rise of the U.S. Navy} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 56} Historians have dubbed the trend of an
ever-shrinking post-war navy the “Dark Ages.”⁴ The utter collapse of the navy was
evidence that a large fleet had become an expensive liability for the Congress.

The collapse of the post-Civil War navy was a result of a wave of fiscal
conservatism in Congress.⁵ However, these issues alone were not enough to hollow out
the massive U.S. fleet in less than ten years. While many of the 680 ships of the Civil
War fleet were unseaworthy monitors and riverine vessels, the larger ocean-going ships
of the fleet were allowed to fester and become unlivable for their crews and the shipyard
workers who encountered them. The mismanagement, institutional traditions, and rank
corruption that marked the Grant administration 1870s extended to the Navy Department.
The steering of lucrative contracts and a bias towards private shipbuilders and federal
facilities in the Delaware Valley ultimately shunted attention and badly needed capital
away from the Norfolk Yard.⁶

While other Navy Yards prospered, the Norfolk Yard’s post-war existence was
one of deprivation and decay. While some of the massive naval spending of the war
years trickled down the Chesapeake from Washington, the yard remained a shell of its
former self. The twice-burned storehouses, the heavily damaged dry-dock and the theft
of valuable tools and machinery had been overcome in the initial stages of the federal

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⁴ Harold H. Sprout and Margaret Spout, *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776-1918*
(Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 197


⁶ N.S. Bates, Naval Surgeon, U.S. Navy Yard, Norfolk to George Robeson, Secretary of the
Navy, Washington, DC, Reports on Conditions of *U.S.S. St. Lawrence*, August 20, 1872, Norfolk
Navy Yard; Records of 5th Naval District; Records of Naval Districts and Shore Establishments, Record Group
181; National Archives and Records Administration—Mid-Atlantic Region (Philadelphia, PA), Leonard A.
Swann, Jr., *John Roach, Maritime Entrepreneur* (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute Press,
1965.), 136.
reoccupation of the Navy Yard in 1862. However, the end of the war also brought a halt to the reconstruction of the yard’s heavily deteriorated infrastructure and work in general at the yard. While at one time valuable, the yard had become an expensive liability for the Navy Department.  

POST-WAR FISCAL AND FOREIGN POLICY

The expenditures of the federal treasury during the four years of the Civil War nearly bankrupted the country. In order to pay for the war, Congress and the Lincoln administration levied taxes and tariffs on tobacco, liquor, and various items across the spectrum of the market place in order to service the debt incurred during the war. As the war’s cost in blood and treasure reached its peak in early 1865, the peaceful surrender of the Confederates and a lack of foreign enemies led to the mass demobilization of nearly 600,000 soldiers and sailors almost overnight. As a result of the crushing budget deficits and a decreasing return on foreign and domestic investment in treasury bonds, Congress and the Lincoln and Johnson administrations substantially cut the overall budget for 1866. Indeed, the new budget surpluses allowed for the United States to service its debt and begin paying off the large sums of government bonds by 1872. The cuts were not limited to the navy, but the sudden and sharp decrease in available funding shattered its potential fighting efficacy. In an ironic twist, the iron plating that forged the legend of American naval prowess during the Civil War literally decayed and oxidized after the massive cuts of 1865-1866. The backbone of the wartime American fleet had been

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8 Hormats, The Price of Liberty, 84.
small, coastal patrol ships in the vein of the famous Monitor. Most of these smaller ships were entirely unseaworthy. Also, Congress ordered Secretary of the Navy Welles to sell much of the fleet to foreign governments or for scrap. The effect of these new policies reduced the size of the fleet from a high of 680 ships in 1865 to 72 seaworthy ships in 1870.9

Declining federal revenues following the Panic of 1873 further limited naval funding. While the treasury department’s service of war-oriented debt was well under way by 1872, the drastic shortfalls that marked 1874 and 1875 led to an imposition of higher tariffs and, for the first time, income taxes to offset the difference. While the higher tariffs and taxes yielded results in the latter half of the decade, the immediate shortfall in federal revenues from 1870 to 1875 was nearly 25% or $135 million.10 The mass-exodus of construction dollars from private contractors was enough that in 1866, Congress approved a measure allowing American firms to build warships for foreign powers. For example, the Webb Shipyard of New York completed several warships for European powers in the late 1860s. The drastic cuts of the naval budget also extended to individuals, such as John Ericsson, a force in American naval construction for twenty years, who departed for Europe due to the richer prospects overseas.11

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9 All but 4 of the 36 ironclads operated by the U.S. Navy in 1865 were monitors derived from the basics of John Ericsson’s prototype. For more information on the variety and limitations of the monitors, please see Stanley Sander, “A Navy in Decay: Some Strategic Technological Results of Disarmament, 1865-1869 in the U.S. Navy,” Military Affairs 35, 4 (Dec. 1971), 139.


The *Virginius* incident of 1873 underscored the inability of the American fleet to defend its interests against even the long declining Spanish Empire.\(^\text{12}\) The knowledge of the navy’s poor condition was also apparent to the officers and enlisted men serving on board the aging ships of the fleet. Shortly after the incident with Spain, the Navy completed a series of exercises and war games in the Gulf of Mexico in 1874. The exercise was hampered by the more sluggish vessels in the fleet and only averaged 4.7 knots at a time when comparable fleets of the British and French were capable of averaging 10 knots. In addition, the commanding officer of the fleet stated that only 12 ships of the fleet 142 ships were in condition for battle.\(^\text{13}\) Indeed, the naval juggernaut of the era, the United Kingdom, was especially harsh in their critique of the U.S. Navy, both officially and in the literature of the time. According to a British military journal published in 1875, there was never “a more tattered, broken-down, forlorn and hapless apology of a Navy as that possessed by the United States.” The decline of the navy’s reputation continued well into the 1880s, as observed by Oscar Wilde’s “Canterville Ghost.” An American girl laments the lack of ruins in the United States, to which Wilde’s ghost replies: “No ruins! …you have your Navy and your manners!”\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^{12}\) The *Virginius*, an American-flagged merchant ship, supplied Cuban rebels in their uprising against the Spanish in 1873. The American members of the crew were tried and summarily executed by the Spanish force which intercepted the *Virginius* off Havana.

\(^{13}\) Thiesen, *Industrializing American Shipbuilding*, 153.

The lack of an effective fleet also reflected the post-war priorities of the Congress, as it was pre-occupied with Reconstruction and the internal priorities of a country emerging from four long years of bloodshed and destruction. The rapid antebellum expansion of the United States seemed to be at an end, especially as much of the new territory was divided into slave or free states. The end of the war settled the matter and there was no internal pressure in Congress or in public opinion to continue adding territorial possessions either in North America or overseas. William H. Seward, was a long time proponent of American expansion throughout the 1840s and 1850s. Once the Confederacy was dispensed with, Seward’s longtime mission of expanding the territorial holdings of the United States was allowed to continue. Seward’s vision was to create a massive, intercontinental American state by way of annexing or buying every European territory in the Western Hemisphere. In 1866, Seward’s attempts to buy the vestigial French territory of St. Pierre and Miquelon and Greenland ultimately failed. However, the largest expenditure of Seward’s purchasing spree was the Russian territory of Alaska. In the spirit of commercial expansion and Manifest Destiny, the steady progress of American territorial purchases and annexations resulted in American ports in San Francisco, the Pacific Northwest and nearly unlimited access to the plentiful marketplace of the Pacific.

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15 V.J. Farrar, *The Annexation of Russian America to the United States* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1966), 40-41. Seward’s dreams of empire included a 100 year plan, dating from 1860, to place North and South America under one government by 1960. The new intercontinental capitol would have been the geographically central St. Paul, Minnesota.

Ultimately, the Radical Republican Congress’ control of Federal purse strings doomed Seward’s aspiration of empire. The Congress’ notoriously miserly behavior was compounded by the overwhelming accumulation of wartime debt. Also, the taint of corruption associated with a bribery scandal regarding the purchase of Alaska soured the opinion of the press and public regarding further expansion. The end of Seward’s tenure coincided with election of Ulysses Grant in 1868, but Grant too fought a losing battle with the Congress regarding the purchase of several islands and potential coaling stations in the Pacific and Caribbean. Also, much of Grant’s administration suffered from the same corruption that characterized the purchase of Alaska.\footnote{Holbo, Tarnished Expansion: The Alaska Scandal, the Press and Congress, 91. Several members of Congress key to the passage of the Alaska bill were alleged to have received payoffs in the form of “lobbying fees” from Russian agents in Washington.}

ADMINISTRATION OF THE NAVY

The coupling of a dearth of financial resources and the lack of a mission also doomed the navy. Unlike the British or French, the United States had no overseas territories to manage or associated proxy wars of empire to justify the great expense of developing and maintaining a massive fleet. However, the internal political struggles of the navy exacerbated the already weak administration of the Department and the fleet itself. In addition, the few financial resources allotted to the navy were squandered by the gross incompetence or corruption that was rampant in the post-Civil War Navy Department. By the 1870s, the navy was transformed from a wartime asset to a peacetime patronage and kickback machine.\footnote{Albion, Makers of Naval Policy, 62, Kurt Hackemer, The US Navy and the Origins of the Military-Industrial Complex: 1847-1883 (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 121-125.}
The close of the war and massive cutbacks in spending also affected private shipbuilders and the shipyards owned by the navy. The strong leadership of wartime Navy Secretary Gideon Welles and a proper allocation of resources under his direction blunted the effect of the post-War funding malaise. Wells management skills were put to the test when congressional cuts first took effect in 1866. Wells prioritized the needs of the fleet, quickly retiring obsolete ships and severely restricting expenses with private contractors. However, further cuts in 1867 and 1868 delivered too much of a blow to the navy’s budget and even Welles’s administration skills were no match for the Congress’s mission of cutting costs.¹⁹

Upon the election of Ulysses Grant in 1868, Welles’s long tenure at the Navy Department ended. Adolph Borie, Grant’s first selection as Navy Secretary, had no experience in political office, the navy, or the administration of a large organization.²⁰ Borie’s limited knowledge of naval affairs led Grant to appoint Vice Admiral David Dixon Porter as a special assistant to Borie. Porter quickly took the role as de facto Secretary of the Navy. Porter’s naval pedigree was impressive, as he was the third generation of his family to earn a command of an American warship and Porter’s heroics during the Civil War were equally impressive.²¹ However, Porter’s background cast him as a traditional sailor. Porter steadfastly opposed the navy’s modernization and


²⁰ John Niven, Gideon Welles: Lincoln’s Secretary of the Navy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 565. According to Niven, Grant appointed Borie only to shore up Republican support among Philadelphia’s elite.

believed that that the navy and its sailors suffered from a lack of traditional skills due to
the advent of steam propulsion. Porter’s era of administration marked the further decline
of the modern navy because he prioritized the maintenance of sailing vessels and sailing
seamanship.22

Porter’s emphasis on traditionalism was indicative of the larger thematic construct
of a naval aristocracy that had taken root throughout the officer corps. In the decade and
a half prior to the Civil War, the first classes at the Naval Academy’s instilled cadets with
the accrued knowledge of hundreds of years of seamanship, as well as, the professional
naval social and class constructs developed by the British Royal Navy. These constructs
were adapted to the American culture of dutiful public and government service.
Moreover, the naval officers that survived the professional challenges of the service were
often the sons of government officials or senior naval officers.23 Another “Yankee”
social construct that took root throughout the navy was the frequent intermarriage of
senior officer’s daughters to up and coming junior officers. Porter was a noted example
of these relationships, as he was married to Georgie Ann Paterson, the daughter of
Commodore Daniel Patterson the brother-in-law of Admiral Thomas Paterson. The

Naval Power, 1776-1918 (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 197 In addition, Porter labored to
settle old scores in the Navy, especially proponents of steam, such as Bureau of Steam Engineering chief
Benjamin Franklin Isherwood. Porter removed Isherwood from his post and placed him in command of the
distant Mare Island Navy Yard in San Francisco.

23 Mark C. Hunter, “The United States Naval Academy and Its Summer Cruises: Professionalism
in the U.S. Navy 1845-1861”, Journal of Military History 70, 4 (October 2006), 963-965, Peter Karsten,
“Ritual and Rank: Religious Affiliation, Father’s ‘Calling,’ and Successful Advancement in the U.S.
Officer Corps of the Twentieth Century” in The Training and Socializing of Military Personnel, ed. Peter
Karsten (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 81. The key to the development of the Naval Academy’s
early curriculum in seamanship also indoctrinated the young students in their “gentlemanly” duties above
and beyond their naval duties. The reason for this was that the developers of the curriculum were often
comprised of the key New York, Boston and Philadelphia social register members. For more on the
composition of the Northeastern urban establishment, please see Fredrick Cople Jaher, “Nineteenth Century
relations of the Paterson-Porter marriage extended further into the navy, which included a close relation to David Farragut and various other senior officers of the time. Porter's background and relations was a product of the institutional nobility that gave him a free hand in exerting his influence over the civilian administration of the navy. Porter removed numerous Civil War veterans from the navy's payroll for the simple reason that they were volunteers and not properly acclimated to the professional and social norms of the navy and its associated culture. Upon the completion of Porter's officer purge, Solicitor General John Augustus Bolles, noted that the officer corps was quickly taking on the trappings of a "virtual aristocracy." 25

In terms of the technological reorganization of the navy, Porter's usurpation of Secretary Borie and his sail-only ideology doomed the ironclad fleets rusting in the sewage-filled rivers of New York, Philadelphia, and Norfolk. Borie resigned in July 1869 with little explanation. His replacement was another Philadelphia-area politician with no naval experience, George Robeson. While Borie's appointment was an overture to Philadelphia's society and Republican elders, Robeson unsavory relationship with several private shipbuilders on the Delaware River proved costly for the navy in its decade of need. Private shipbuilding on the Delaware greatly benefitted from their technical proficiency with iron and lucrative construction contracts during the Civil War.

24 Ritter, "David Dixon Porter", 323-328. The use of "Yankee" as a social definition attributes had dual uses in the case of Porter or the Navy in general. The obvious negative connotation that was used by Southerners during and after the Civil War had its basis in the words use in the 1830s and 1840s in New England as a self-descriptor. For more, please see Mitford Matthews, A Dictionary of Americanism on Historic Principles (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 189.

25 As quoted in Donald Chisholm, Waiting for Dead Man's Shoes: Origins and Development of the U.S. Navy's Officer Personnel System (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 329-334. A lobbying group, likely founded by Porter and likeminded officers, pushed for the passage of the bill that, among other things, greatly limited the number of officers allowed to remain in the Navy following the War's expansion of ship and personnel numbers.
The expansion of shipyards in Philadelphia and Chester, Pennsylvania, Camden, New Jersey and Wilmington, Delaware transformed the Delaware River into what has been referred to as an “American Clyde.”

Robeson’s political career before taking the reins of the navy was riddled with accusations of prosecutorial misconduct and corruption when he was attorney general of New Jersey and a member of Congress representing Philadelphia’s companion city of Camden. Senator Alexander Cattell’s influential Republican Union League, which included the membership of various political and business elites in Philadelphia, including Adolph Borie and John Roach, backed Robeson’s appointment.

Upon taking office, Robeson’s administration dampened the effects of Porter’s antiquated view of technology, but did not entirely root it out. Moreover, Robeson’s first two years as Secretary were not spent in Washington, but in Camden and Philadelphia.

If Robeson’s absence from Washington were not enough, the Delaware River’s new prominence in the navy was compounded by an ambitious program to build a new naval shipyard in Philadelphia. The planned closing of the Southwark neighborhood’s portion of the yard and the new yard to be constructed at League Island led to an economic boom for the city and its large population of maritime laborers. At one point in the mid-1870s, the navy employed nearly 1,600 workers in Philadelphia. Also, Robeson ordered the

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26 Thiesen, Industrializing American Shipbuilding, 21, Hackemer, U.S. Navy and the Origins of the Military-Industrial Complex, 122. Scotland’s River Clyde was the key manufacturing hub for the British Empire’s naval and merchant fleets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

construction of fresh-water basins for the preservation of the Philadelphia Yard’s ironclads. 28

In addition to the benefits of the new Navy Yard at League Island and the unneeded renovations for the doomed Southwark Yard, the Delaware’s private shipbuilders received several lucrative navy contracts in the early 1870s. The most prominent beneficiary of these contracts was shipbuilder John Roach. Roach owned two of the Delaware’s largest shipyards and was a member of the “Catell’s cabal.” During the *Virginius* incident and the mobilization that followed, Robeson contracted Roach’s yards to refit nine of the fleet’s aged ironclads for wartime duty. In addition, Robeson distributed much of the navy’s small budget to other Union League contacts in mostly Delaware River yards and continued building up the Southwark section of the Navy Yard despite its planned closure. 29 Stories of Robeson securing payoffs, fraudulent engine contracts for the Roach shipyards, and the dozens of patronage jobs for the Southwark and League Island Yards took their toll on the navy’s budget and the department’s reputation. 30

Ultimately, Robeson’s legendary funding misappropriation and Philadelphia-oriented cronyism was brought to light in a series of congressional hearings late in his term and after he left office in 1877. However, the damage was already done and the

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28 Dorwart and Wolf, *The Philadelphia Navy Yard*, 94. The iron ships of the Wartime fleet had decayed greatly in the toxic stew of the Delaware, thus justifying the massive appropriations for repairs and the construction of the fresh water basins.

29 Dorwart and Wolf, *The Philadelphia Navy Yard*, 97. The navy purchased a great deal of acreage surrounding the Southwark Yard and also hired hundreds of laborers shortly before the mid-term election of 1870 and the presidential election of 1872 to secure their votes for the shaky Republican congressional majority in 1870 and the embattled Grant-Wilson ticket two years later.

30 Swann, *John Roach*, 134. The *Sun* repeatedly referred to the overall theme of the navy’s contracting issues as: “Roach, Robeson, Robber.”
navy’s utter collapse under his management left the fleet to decay. However, several of
Robeson’s engineering-related decisions contributed to the long term efficacy of the fleet.
Robeson circumvented elements of David Porter’s influence regarding steam engineering
regulations and helped to mold the long term successes of the navy in the decades to
come, but the negatives far outweighed the positives. Robeson’s culture of corruption
pervaded the administration of the navy and damaged the integrity of its industrial
needs.31

THE NORFOLK NAVY YARD DURING THE “DARK AGES”

The spirit of corruption that was omnipresent during the Borie-Robeson years of
the Navy Department harmed more than the aging ships of the fleet. By the late 1870s,
the Norfolk Navy Yard had borne the brunt of the post-Civil War era’s budget cuts and
the navy’s mismanagement of remaining resources. In September 1878, the Norfolk
Navy Yard’s property value exceeded $1.4 million, however, the value of the internal
assets of the yard, including the various structures, the drydock and the contents of the
storehouses was assessed at less than $1.2 million. According to the same inventory, the
Yard was in desperate need of nearly $4.5 million in recapitalization in order to bring it
up to the standards of other yards owned by the navy, including the recently completed
League Island Yard in Philadelphia.32 The circumstances that created the decrepit

31 Thiesen, Industrializing American Shipbuilding, 146, Dorwart and Wolf, The Philadelphia Navy
Yard, 97

32 Inventory of U.S. Navy Yard, Norfolk, Commodore J. Blakeley Creighton, Commander, U.S.
Navy Yard, Norfolk to R.W. Thompson, Secretary of the Navy, Washington, DC, October 1, 1878; Norfolk
Navy Yard; Letters Received from the Commanders of Navy Yards; Records of Naval Districts and Shore
Establishments, Record Group 45; National Archives Building, Washington, DC; Dorwart and Wolf,
Philadelphia Navy Yard, 98.
conditions in Norfolk and Portsmouth were the culmination of war’s partial destruction of the yard and its facilities and the post-war neglect of the navy’s financial and infrastructure needs. The byproduct of the yard’s decline was a perception on the part of the local community that Norfolk’s lowly place in the navy’s hierarchy of needs was a result of corruption and retribution for the sectional strife of the Civil War years.  

Before the Confederates captured the Navy Yard in 1861, the Norfolk Yard had been the key naval station and repair facility in the southern tier of the country. The cornerstone of the yard’s importance was its drydock. Completed in 1833, the dock was the first of its kind in the Western Hemisphere. The pumping of water out of the dock allowed for the yard’s workers to repair the badly corroded copper sheathed bottoms of the navy’s ships, thus ensuring their basic maintenance needs were met. The dock’s purpose was to not only repair the often decaying wooden ships of the fleet, but also to show off the technical proficiency of a navy and a nation on the rise. The yard and the dock were so advanced and impressive that it was a showplace as a technical marvel to the various dignitaries visiting Norfolk, including the Marquis de Lafayette and Chief Blackhawk. However, the Civil War’s series of frantic evacuations heavily damaged or destroyed much of the yard. By May 1862, both the Federal and Confederate evacuations dynamited the yard’s building ways and drydock, and the local population pilfered the abandoned yard’s vast inventories of ship stores and hand tools. Slowly, Captain John Livingston restored the yard’s basic facilities, and by 1864, there were signs

33 Calhoun, “Dark Ages of the Norfolk Navy Yard”, 6-14
34 Bruce Linder, Tidewater’s Navy: An Illustrated History (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 25.
of some improvement in capabilities of the yard. The damage was partially repaired and little stood in the way to the yard’s return to international prominence and a fully operational condition. However, the decaying hulks of abandoned ships burned in both the evacuations of 1861 and 1862 blocked the channel of the Elizabeth River and the yard’s bulkheads. The practice of decommissioning and storing ships before their disposal had left dozens of aged and historic ships laid up at the yard. The rebels captured the original frigate United States, renamed her Confederate States and sunk her to block the advance of the Federal invasion fleet. The famous and revolutionary CSS Virginia shared the United States’ fate, as did dozens of other ships. While the shipyards along the Delaware Valley expanded with the infusion of federal wartime capital, the sad remnants of the Norfolk yard remained dormant.36

Secretary of the Navy Welles championed the restoration of the yard’s potential in his messages to Congress in 1864 and 1866. Welles argued that the importance of Norfolk outweighed any potential misgivings regarding the past transgressions of the South:

Norfolk [...] is as essential to the Navy and the country as either of the yards to the north [...] the rebellion has passed away, the State [...] is part


of the Union, and the establishment is national in its character, and of
general interests to all.\textsuperscript{37}

However, it was highly unlikely a southern shipyard would receive any federal
funding from the rabidly anti-southern Radical Republican majority in both houses of
Congress. Once the federal purse strings tightened in 1867 and 1868, further cuts in the
small stream of funding provided for the navy’s yards were insufficient to maintain the
already dilapidated facilities at Norfolk. The clearing of Hampton Roads and the
Elizabeth River of wrecks sunk during the Federal and Confederate withdrawals
exhausted the trickle of money supplied to the yard.\textsuperscript{38} In addition, other properties
governed by the yard absorbed funding granted to Norfolk following the war. In 1866,
the Navy Department requested nearly $900,000 in appropriations for the restoration of
the yard’s facilities. Of that sum, a little less than $21,000 went for the Norfolk Naval
Hospital’s walkways and general maintenance for its façade.\textsuperscript{39}

The tenures of Adolph Borie and George Robeson saw a deeper decline for the
Norfolk Yard as Philadelphia and San Francisco’s Yards received the bulk of the Navy
Department’s attention and funding. Both the Southwark and League Island Yards in
Philadelphia received millions of dollars in appropriations over the course of both Borie
and Robeson’s terms. San Francisco’s Mare Island Yard also greatly benefitted during
the Navy’s “Dark Ages,” procuring nearly $3 million from 1869 to 1872. However, the

\textsuperscript{37} Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1866), 19. Secretary Welles’ request for more funding included a plea for the Pensacola yard’s expansion.


\textsuperscript{39} Inventory of U.S. Navy Yard Norfolk, August 1, 1878, RG 45, National Archives, Washington; Richmond C. Holcomb, A Century with Norfolk Naval Hospital: 1830-1930 (Portsmouth, VA: Printcraft Publishing Co.), 302. The Naval Hospital was a few miles north of the Navy Yard in Portsmouth.
Norfolk Yard received less than $250,000 for the construction of new timber sheds and a gas lighting system.\(^{40}\) The lack of funding for even the most basic maintenance also extended to the ships and barracks within the yard’s boundaries. The sloop St. Lawrence had been in the service of the navy since the Mexican War and fought in several engagements during the Civil War. By 1869, it had traversed the Atlantic several times, defended her country and was disease-addled and rotting. Once her fighting days were over, the Navy stationed her at the Norfolk Yard and used her to store the yard’s munitions and serve as the yard’s marine barracks. The previous structures for those uses were still in disrepair.\(^{41}\) By 1872, conditions aboard the St. Lawrence and within the yard had deteriorated so badly that the Naval Surgeon for the yard, N.S. Bates, was in fear of a cholera outbreak that could spread unchecked into the surrounding community. As a matter of public health, the ship was a festering mess, especially for the scores of marines living on board. According to Bates:

> The vessel is old, contains large masses of damp and decaying timber, and has had no general repairs in several years. The spar deck leaks very badly and in rainy weather, the marines are obliged to shift their bedding about to find a place to sleep. Wet bedding and dampness are frequent causes of disease and I am often compelled to send men to the hospital.\(^{42}\)

The yard had a brief moment of normal activity during the Virginius incident in the waters off Cuba, but the yard’s facilities were in such poor shape that the bulk of the ships stationed in Norfolk had to travel to Philadelphia to be readied for a possible war


\(^{41}\) “St. Lawrence”, DANFS, 231.

\(^{42}\) N.S. Bates, to George Robeson, August 20th, 1872. Bates’ letter stresses that the St. Lawrence should have been broken up immediately, but the ship remained as the yard’s marine barracks for another three years.
with Spain. In addition, the *Virginius* matter allowed for a champion of the Yard’s poor state to take center stage in the local press. James Barron Hope had been a fixture of the social scene in the Yard and in Greater Norfolk since his birth. Hope’s grandfather was Commodore James Barron, the former commander of the yard in the 1820s, an early hero of the Barbary Wars and the dueling opponent of the famous Stephen Decatur, whom Barron killed in 1820. James Barron Hope was born at the Commander’s house at the navy yard and inherited his grandfather’s fighting skill, killing several men, including twin brothers who were cadets at the Naval Academy, in duels by the age of 19. Hope was a proud veteran of the Confederate Navy and remained in Norfolk during the federal occupation as a writer for the unapologetically pro-Confederate *Norfolk Virginian*. In 1873, James Hope founded the *Norfolk Landmark* and used its printing presses as a pulpit to argue against Reconstruction, successful African-Americans, and the administration of the Navy Yard.\(^\text{43}\) Hope attacked the administration of the Navy and of the Yard, noting that the success of Philadelphia’s twin navy yards was directly tied to the collapse of the Norfolk Yard. Hope argued that the only reason for the funding disparity was because Norfolk, its population, and the navy yard had been active participants in the “struggle for Southern independence.” In addition, Hope’s poetry frequently appeared in the *Landmark*, which extolled the virtues of the yard’s employees, but also curried favor with employees who had frequently out of work. Hope’s poems explicitly blamed the

\(^{43}\) Michael Hucles, *Postbellum Urban Black Economic Development: The Case of Norfolk, VA, 1860-1890* (PHD diss., Purdue University, 1990), 327-329, Ritchie Devon Watson, Jr., *Normans and Saxons: Southern Race Mythology and the Intellectual History of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 232-234. Hope was also partially responsible for creating the pro-Confederate “Lost Cause” mythology after the Civil War. He also wrote a great deal of poetry deifying Robert E. Lee as the “last cavalier.” Hope’s *Landmark* promoted White racial “superiority” and openly warned the African-Americans and Northerners of Norfolk and Portsmouth of potential violence during political campaigns of the 1870s.
Northern-oriented management of the Yard for effectively stealing their “hard—earned” wages.

When Panic of 1873 appeared to threaten the local economy, Hope’s *Landmark* amplified its usual anti-northern and anti-African-American tone. Two separate articles in the October 3 edition blamed local economic troubles on, “His Corrupt Excellency, General Grant” and “negro brutes, who often beat their wives.” On November 7, several days after local elections were held, the *Landmark* reported that:

Rumors are circulating of mass-discharging of workers at the Navy Yard. While the management of the Yard is known and respected by the publisher, the hiring of these workers was a ploy to gain support among certain elements of dependent white men and ignorant negroes. Hope’s intended audience was locally born and reared whites who were affected by the yard’s troubles. In addition, the intended audience of Navy Yard workers was overwhelmingly literate, which made the *Landmark* accessible to most. The descriptions of “dependent whites” and “ignorant negroes” employed merely for electoral purposes was likely a reference to the Republican voting bloc in Portsmouth, northern whites, and African-American Republicans.

The issue of frequent work stoppages and layoffs at the Navy Yard had some resonance in Norfolk and Portsmouth. At times, the entire labor pool was unemployed, with several furloughs in the mid-1870s. The ebb and flow of work created an anti-navy

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44 *Norfolk Landmark*, October 4, 1873, p.4, November 7, 1873, p.2.

backlash in some parts of Norfolk and Portsmouth. The intangible tensions had simmered to the point that in the mid-1870s, the yard’s commander ordered the navy’s officers from, “living outside the gates of the yard in Gosport and Portsmouth.” By the end of George Robeson term as Secretary of the Navy, not much had changed in terms of the yard’s physical capabilities in the fifteen years since the heyday of the Monitor and the Virginia. Indeed, Robeson’s successor, R.W. Thompson, admitted as much in his 1877 message to Congress. The year of the great strike marked no new appropriations for the Norfolk Yard and an almost verbatim duplicate of Gideon Welles’s 1866 request of appropriations for fresh water basins and new timber sheds at the yard. In addition, Norfolk’s vast array of laid up or decommissioned vessels had grown even after the channel clearing efforts of the late 1860s.47

J. Blakeley Creighton, the yard’s commander in 1877, reflected the U.S. Navy of the 1860s and 1870s. He was an officer of the line and the model of what Admiral David Porter accepted as worthy of being navy material. Creighton’s background as an aristocratic New York land owner and a longtime veteran of the peacetime and Civil War navy also allowed him to pursue a lengthy career in Porter’s redefined fleet. His wife’s pedigree was also in line with other senior officers of the time, as she was the daughter of Admiral S.H. Stringham, Creighton’s former commanding officer in the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron. In addition, Creighton’s forbearers in the navy included his father, John Orde Creighton, who commanded the Constitution and was an aide de camp to

46 Letter from Admiral Charles H. Davis, Commander, U.S. Navy Yard, Norfolk, to George Robeson, Secretary of the Navy, Washington, DC, October 11, 1872; Washington Daily Critic, March 17th, 1874

Captain Johnston Blakeley during the War of 1812. Creighton, the elder, was a somewhat notorious naval officer for his reputedly frequent beatings of enlisted men and ill treatment of what he deemed “poor seamen.” Creighton was put on trial for one such beating, but the charges were quickly dismissed by Creighton’s benefactor, Commodore John Rodgers.

J. Blakeley Creighton’s Navy Yard also represented the U.S. Navy of the 1860s and 1870s. The decay of the fleet that once represented the height of naval technology and progression and boasted nearly 700 ships was a shell of its former self. The corruption represented by George Robeson’s administration of the navy, the institution of a naval aristocracy by David Porter and the expansion of Philadelphia’s marine industrial capacity only exacerbated an already weakened naval pocketbook. In addition, while the Delaware Valley benefitted from the direction of lucrative naval contracts and expansions of its shipyards, Norfolk’s Yard withered on the vine. These events and circumstances were obvious to the unemployed and agitated population of Norfolk and Portsmouth who read the words of James Barron Hope. For people of the two cities, it appeared that the dank and disease prone Navy Yard’s condition was the personification of a radical northern conspiracy directed against the south and the workers of the yard. Ultimately,

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48 New York Times, February 24, 1924; Stephen W.H. Duffy, Captain Blakeley and the Wasp (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 35. Mrs. J. Blakeley Creighton’s assets at the time of her death included a vast swath of land in the Bronx, which was inherited from her husband.

49 Christopher McKee, A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794-1815 (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 229-232. Rodgers was also responsible for ostracizing Captain James Barron, James Barron Hope’s grandfather, for his role in the death of Stephen Decatur.
the fear and loathing of the Navy by the community and vice-versa would culminate in the events of July 1877.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{50} J. Blakeley Creighton to R.W. Thompson, July 25, 1877. Norfolk Navy Yard; Letters Received from the Commanders of Navy Yards; Records of Naval Districts and Shore Establishments, Record Group 45; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.
CHAPTER V

"THE END TIMES ARE UPON US" THE STRIKE OF 1877 AND THE REACTION AT THE NAVY YARD

Historian Eric Foner noted 1876 as both the 100th anniversary celebration of American Independence, and the fourth year of a depression that began with the Panic of 1873. Twenty-five percent of urban workers were unemployed, wages had been cut numerous times by nearly all employers and workers' organizations nationwide described that conditions were ripe, according to the *Chicago Workingman's Advocate*, for "another revolution, as essential today as that inaugurated in 1776."¹ Although Foner argued that the conditions in the summer of 1877 were not enough to produce a socialist revolt in the United States, contemporary writers believed that the railroad strikes was an American version of the Paris Commune.² The opening stages of the strike reminded many of the bloodshed of the Civil War, with the difference that the 1877 violence was a nationwide, class-based conflict. As the strike progressed, the great industrial cities of the North were crowded with mechanics brawling with police and private detectives. The vicious nature of the riots compelled the army to bivouac on the steps of the U.S. Capitol and the lawn of the president's mansion.³ As newspaper reports of eruptions of strikes and violence in Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Chicago hit the telegraph wires, the fear of an uprising amongst the disaffected and abused workers in city after city spread throughout the


country. Among the earliest telegraphs sent regarding the outbreak of the strike was to the commander of the Norfolk Navy Yard, Commodore J. Blakeley Creighton. The Navy Department normally sent a telegraph once or twice a week to the navy yard, but in the week of the strike, Commodore Creighton responded to at least four telegraphs each day requesting information regarding the readiness of the ships and marines at his yard.\(^4\)

While the cities of the north merely had agitated workers striking over wages, the workers surrounding the navy yard in the neighborhoods of Norfolk and Portsmouth had several other points of contention with the navy yard and the environment in which they lived and worked. As chief administrator of the navy yard, Commodore Blakeley was well aware of the composition of the surrounding community. The large population of Irish workers reminded the officers of the yard of the Molly Maguires of Pennsylvania, who had captured national headlines earlier in 1876 and 1877, while Germans who worked at the Yard bore resemblance to the *Arbeitsbunds* of Chicago and Pittsburgh, who were among the first to strike. In addition, the area surrounding the Yard was heavily populated with northern and African-American workers who had been in conflict with each other and the Yard regarding unionization and labor disputes for nearly a decade. Also, the dominant population in the two cities was southern whites, who had often resorted to open violence against all others, including uniformed federal troops and African-Americans on several occasions in the preceding decade. The cacophony of telegrams requesting troop support for Washington emptied the Navy Yard of its marines.

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\(^4\) Commodore J. Blakeley Creighton, Commander, U.S. Navy Yard, Norfolk to R.W. Thompson, Secretary of the Navy, Washington, DC July 23-25, 1877; p. 214, Letter Book 270, Norfolk Navy Yard; Letters Received from the Commanders of Navy Yards; Records of Naval Districts and Shore Establishments, Record Group 45; National Archives Building, Washington, DC
and its munitions. Once notices calling for workers of “like mind” to address their grievances with the command at the Navy Yard, it appeared that the post-Civil War developments in Norfolk and Portsmouth created the potential for a violent uprising.  

THE NATIONAL STRIKE BEGINS

A year of political and economic developments preceded the initial stages of the strike. In the election of 1876, Republican Rutherford Hayes and Democrat Samuel Tilden’s dueling candidacies for president led to a battle in Congress for the ultimate victory. The controversy was over the electors of three southern states and while Republican-led bi-cameral committee declared Hayes the victor, the compromise reached over the electors of South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana removed the last Federal troops from the former Confederacy.  

The complete withdrawal from the South officially ended the national policy of Reconstruction, but the political effect of the compromise also led some Democratic supporters of Tilden to propose a march on Washington to demand a retraction of the electoral decision. The outgoing President, Ulysses Grant, substantially strengthened the numbers and firepower of Washington’s small garrison for such a contingency, but the marchers never arrived.

The potential for blood in the streets of Washington was enough of a threat following the extraordinarily caustic rhetoric of the campaign and the weak economic

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conditions in much of the northern tier of the country. Perhaps the most unstable region was the anthracite coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania. A rash of labor-oriented murders and bombings struck the region following steep wage cuts during the years after the panic of 1873. The Workingman’s Benevolent Association, the predominantly Irish Catholic labor movement comprised of railroad and mine workers, engaged in several strikes that only heightened the tension in Pennsylvania. The response to these strikes was a campaign by the mainstream press and corporate leaders in the area to place blame on the shadowy Molly Maguires and a series of arrests and high-profile trials captured the country’s attention in the early months of 1877. In essence, it was the railroads and mine owners that captured the alleged Mollies and put them on trial. Historian Harold Aurand concluded, “the state provided only the courtroom and the hangman.” Tensions in the hills of northeastern Pennsylvania were also high due to a wage-related strike on the Redding Railroad that had lasted several months.\(^8\)

The trials and executions ended in May 1877 and were part of a chain reaction within the heavily agitated, and now victimized workers organizations throughout the industrial belt in the northeast and mid-west. Simultaneously, several railroad executives met in Chicago and planned an industry-wide cut in tonnage rates and wages of at least 10% to take effect before July 1. The cuts in railroad wages following the Panic of 1873 amounted to nearly 40% on several lines, however, the steepest cuts were on the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad, which cut workers’ wages by nearly 50% of their pre-Panic income.\(^9\) On July 15, the Baltimore and Ohio’s board of directors voted to cut


its workers wages by another 10%. Working conditions had also become untenable on the B&O, where dismemberment or death was commonplace amongst the conductors, break men, and fire men of the rail line. As word of another wage cut filtered through the relay station in Baltimore's outskirts on July 16, the workers peacefully left their tasks and refused to work. At the B&O’s Martinsburg, West Virginia relay station, however, the workers seized control of all property owned by the railroad and refused to allow any trains to pass through one of the more important hubs of the B&O’s network. The B&O quickly persuaded West Virginia’s governor to call up the state militia to free the relay station or to guard incoming trains operated by strike-breaker workers.10

The situation in Baltimore had also become grave as nearly 40,000 workers of various other trades walked off their jobs to support the B&O strikers. Maryland’s governor responded by ordering the state militia to protect railroad property in Baltimore. Thus, a confrontation between the angry workers, the strike-breakers and an unsympathetic militia came to a head in Baltimore. Random pistol shots from the crowd and rifle fire from the militia sent panic through the thousands of striking workers. As the sun went down on July 20, Baltimore’s streets bore resemblance to a war zone. Nine people were dead and dozens of strikers and militia members were injured from gunshots and bayonetings.

Word of the strike in Baltimore and Martinsburg spread quickly, leading to the riot of July 20. Workers in Pittsburgh, the industrial portions of Ohio and Philadelphia all had similar wage disputes with their employers and also walked off their jobs. In addition, outbreaks of violence or rumors of the same in Martinsburg, Jersey City, and a

dozen other cities appeared in the columns of every newspaper in the country.\textsuperscript{11} On July 21, Pittsburgh became another scene of the strike's burgeoning reputation for violence, when state militia and strikers clashed, leading to the deaths of dozens of workers, their wives and their children. On the following day, July 22, the Irish Catholic mineworkers’ in Northeastern Pennsylvania joined with the striking railroad workers by blocking trains rumored to contain soldiers heading to Pittsburgh. Pennsylvania’s National Guard arrived at Redding’s blocked rail station and, according to the next day’s \textit{Redding Daily Eagle}, “the streets were literally baptized in blood.”\textsuperscript{12} On July 22, Cincinnati’s Workingmen’s Party took to the streets and protested the violent response to the strikes in Pittsburgh and Baltimore. The crowd of workers was led through the streets by numerous German members of the Workingmen’s Party and carried the “blood-red flag of the commune.” The noticeably foreign accented protesters were not exclusive to Cincinnati however, as newspapers in Chicago, St. Louis, and New York mentioned similar protests on or about July 22.\textsuperscript{13}

The rapidly destabilized condition of the strike was worsened by a pervasive fear that an agitated force of workers could overthrow the government and the entire American economic system. J.A. Dacus of the \textit{St. Louis Times-Dispatch} declared that the bloodshed of Baltimore and Pittsburgh was confirmation that the “end times were upon us.” In addition, the appearance of the lower classes rebelling against the economic system led some newspapers to compare the strikers to the Parisian Communards.


\textsuperscript{12} As quoted in Eric Foner, \textit{The Great Labor Uprising of 1877}, 70-73.

As reports of mass casualties filtered through the country, word of the deadly episodes in Baltimore and throughout Pennsylvania traveled quickly to Washington by telegraph. The Hayes administration was originally concerned with the impact the work stoppage would have on interstate commerce. However, the rapid advance of work stoppages to points as far west as Chicago and St. Louis and outbursts of violence associated with the strike led Hayes to recall John Schofield, the superintendent of the Military Academy at West Point, to take charge of Washington’s garrison. The Navy Department ordered the navy yards of Boston, Brooklyn, and Philadelphia to send what ships were seaworthy and their entire marine detachments to Washington to protect the capitol.\textsuperscript{14} The President’s advisors deemed prudent the protection of Washington as the strike became increasingly confusing due to the rapid increase of cities and known ethnic “troublemakers” involved. Newspapers readily admitted that the situation was in a constant state of flux and a calm city one day could be riddled with strikers the next. Cities with little or no union activity in the past quickly reported potential strikes due to their proximity to strike cities or the railroad. The reports of strike rumors appeared to be spreading in all directions from Maryland, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. The nation’s rail network was at a standstill and the general consensus was that the strike would continue to spread further west and south unabated.\textsuperscript{15}

THE NAVY YARD IN JULY 1877

\textsuperscript{14} Donald B. Connelly, \textit{John M. Schofield and the Politics of Generalship} (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 279-281

\textsuperscript{15} New York Times, July 24, 1877. Robert Bruce, \textit{1877: Year of Violence}, 215-228. The Times excitedly reported that the strike had spread to the New York Central, the Erie and the Northern Pacific Railroads.
The economic circumstances for the workers at the Navy Yard in June and July of 1877 were quite similar to those of workers in Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and throughout the industrialized north. Following years of decay, work furloughs, and a slow trickle of funding from the Navy Department, the yard’s workforce was in a constant state of agitation regarding their wages. June of 1877 was no exception as the Navy Yard was idled for several weeks due to a complete lack of funding for any work. However, rumors frequently asserted that an emergency appropriation by Secretary of the Navy R.W. Thompson was forthcoming. The attitude of the workforce was less than optimistic, leading the *Norfolk Ledger* to declare that the workers of the yard were “growing concerned” regarding the Yard’s future and their employment. Throughout early July, some small appropriations were made to repair the aged *Galena*, but the Navy Yard’s financial starvation continued.

July 11 marked a noticeable surge of communication between Commodore Creighton and the Navy Department regarding the safety of the Yard. Creighton wrote Secretary Thompson requesting an emergency appropriation of Navy and Marine Corps resources to protect the yard. Creighton’s preference was the construction of a series of new walls around the commandant’s house and the officer’s quarters to protect the yard against sailors leaving and from locals trying to breach the yard’s perimeter. Creighton’s letter to Washington included a series of diagrams of the proposed fortification and a request for more marines to supplement the wall’s protective features. According to Creighton’s letter, “the exposed sections between Quarters ‘A’ and ‘B’ are easily

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16 *Norfolk Ledger*, June 25, 1877
passable [...] considering the walls can be readily scaled, I would prefer more protection.”

Creighton’s request for funds to construct a wall around his quarters at the yard was followed later that same day by an evaluation of the wages of workers in the yard. The evaluation stemmed from a request by the Navy Department to cut the pay of the yard’s machinists in an attempt to efficiently utilize the yard’s meager resources. Commodore Creighton responded with a detailed ledger compiled by George Boush, the Yard’s naval constructor and William Lyons, the Yard’s superintendent of machinery and the boss of Portsmouth’s political machine.\(^\text{18}\) An addendum from Naval Constructor Boush included a survey of wage ranges at local privately-owned shipbuilders such as the Atlantic Iron Works and Godwin & Company. Both Atlantic and Godwin paid their senior, first-class machinists $2.50 a day, while the Navy Yard paid $3.00 a day for the same level of machinist. Boush argued that, “I am of the opinion that $2.50/100 per day is liberal compensation for a first class machinist.” Ultimately, Boush proposed a reduction of 50 cents for the Yard’s machinists, which amounted to approximately 17\(^\%\).\(^\text{19}\)

The letters of July 11 indicated that both the long standing wage issues in the Navy Yard mirrored the consistent reductions of other workers in northern states and ultimately led to the precautionary measures taken by Commodore Creighton to protect the Yard’s infrastructure and naval population. Yet matters worsened in subsequent

\(^{17}\) Commodore J. Blakeley Creighton to R.W. Thompson, July 11\(^{\text{th}}\), 1877; p. 196, Letter Book 270, Norfolk Navy Yard; Letters Received from the Commanders of Navy Yards; Records of Naval Districts and Shore Establishments, Record Group 45; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

\(^{18}\) J. Blakeley Creighton, George Boush and William Lyons to R.W. Thompson, July 11\(^{\text{th}}\), 1877, p. 197-201, Letter Book 270, Record Group 45, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

\(^{19}\) George Boush to R.W. Thompson, July 11\(^{\text{th}}\), 1877, p.202, Letter Book 270, Record Group 45, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.
weeks. As the Hayes administration ordered the Navy Yards to ready their ships and marines for travelling to Washington, the infrequently used telegraph at the Navy Yard sprung to life. On July 23, the Navy Department ordered Commodore Creighton and North Atlantic Squadron commander Admiral Stephen Trenchard to ready the available and seaworthy ships at the Yard for an emergency cruise to protect Washington from any potential troubles caused by the strike. In another telegram, Creighton was ordered to, “send the ordnance outfit of the yard, including ammunition, to Washington.”20 The next day, the Yard’s detachment of marines boarded a commandeered private steamer, the Lady of the Lake and departed for Washington accompanied by Admiral Trenchard and his flagship, the venerable Hartford. In addition, sailors and marines emptied the yard’s entire supply of munitions from the bowels of the rotting St. Lawrence and sent them to Washington as well. The once-sleepy and decaying Navy Yard hummed with a level of activity not seen since the Civil War or the Virginius affair.21

The sun rose over the Navy Yard on the morning of July 24 as the local newspapers reported on the continued horrors of the strike throughout the northern tier of the country. The Norfolk Ledger reported on the “the mobs of Redding” and the “bloodshed of Baltimore and Pittsburg[h].”22 Rumors circulated that violence had erupted in Lynchburg and Richmond, two railroad oriented cities in Virginia’s interior. Richmond was the site a major relay for the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) railroad and fears of a potential strike there led Richmond’s mayor, Judge Meredith, to rapidly

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20 J. Blakeley Creighton to R.W. Thompson, July 23 and 24, 1877, RG 45, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.


22 Norfolk Ledger, July 24th, 1877, p.1.
mobilize the local militia comprised of Confederate veterans and police. The militia arrived at the C&O’s yard to find that nothing was out of the ordinary. According to the *Richmond Dispatch*, Mayor Meredith received “hand-written affidavits from the workers in the C&O shop that they had heard nothing regarding a potential strike.” However, fear and rumors alone drove the mayor of Richmond to call out his jury-rigged army. There was no pattern of labor unrest or even unionization in Richmond following the Civil War. In fact, there was a labor shortage in Richmond well into the 1870s that artificially elevated wages, which benefitted any burgeoning working class.  

Meanwhile, the July 24 afternoon edition of the *Norfolk Virginian* reported that frenzied activity at the navy yard had subsided and was effectively unprotected:

> There are not a half-dozen of the marine battalion left to guard the government property at the yard. The watchmen are doing marine duty [...] there is a good deal of excitement at the yard, as every available vessel and man has been called into requisition on account of the national riot.  

The heat and humidity of July in Virginia gave way to a cool evening and the appearance of handwritten notices in prominent places throughout Portsmouth and on trees surrounding the main gate of the Navy Yard. The notices stated:

> ATTENTION!-Workmen, strike while the iron is hot. All parties sympathizing with the fellow workmen that are now on a strike throughout the country will meet at the foot of Nelson street for the purpose of raising funds in aid of this movement, and also to devise some means whereby we can, by fair means or foul, get clear of certain officials in the Navy-yard

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23 *Richmond Dispatch*, July 24, 1877


25 *Norfolk Virginian*, July 24, 1877, p. 2.
that has always favored a reduction of wages ever since they have held their positions. A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, will meet tonight.26

According to Commodore Creighton’s letter informing the Navy Department of the day’s events, the notices were produced by a troubled person and the rest of the surrounding community was as peaceful as usual. However, Creighton’s actions in response to the notices on the streets of Portsmouth were not as calm and collected. He ordered the crews of the Powhatan, the Ossipee, and the Essex to land the cannons and Gatling guns on board each ship in the Yard and tow them to the front gate. In addition, he armed whatever sailors were still available in the Yard with what rifles that were not taken to Washington. These sailors stood ready with their bayoneted rifles at the yard’s gate. And so, the sailors and watchmen waited at the intersection of the Navy Yard’s gate and Nelson Street in Portsmouth, ready to fend off whatever the fiendish rabble of Portsmouth had in store for the Yard and its occupants. However, 5pm came and the meeting never took place. The sailors returned to their ships, the cannons were restored to their proper places onboard and peace was at hand.

Creighton’s letter to Secretary of the Navy Thompson contained no explanation for why he armed the sailors and prepared for another incident akin to the strike-related violence of Baltimore or Redding or Pittsburgh. Because no explanation was needed in light of nationwide trouble, Creighton only explained that the troops were landed to deter any “disorderly nature” within a community he usually extolled as peaceful and quiet. The fear associated with the ever-spreading strike coupled with the area’s tumultuous post-Civil War experience seemed to have driven Creighton to ready the

26 Norfolk Landmark, July 25, 1877. The Landmark and the Captain of the Watchmen at the Navy Yard, a Mr. J. Swarthout, transcribed the handwritten notice. Commodore Creighton also added a copy of the Landmark’s transcription in his letter to Secretary of the Navy Thompson.
Navy Yard for the “Second American Revolution” that the newspapers warned was going on in the rest of the country.27

For the Navy Yard, however, it could have been a third or fourth revolution, following the “War of Southern Independence” and the reordering of the local social fabric. The composition of Norfolk and Portsmouth’s population was unique in the former Confederacy. The large population of African-Americans and Confederate veterans was not unique, nor were the violent racially-oriented outbursts that marked the post-war history of the two cities. However, the political alliance between African-Americans and the large number of northern veterans in Portsmouth was unique in the South. The population of northerners in the South plummeted between 1860 and 1870. However, in Portsmouth, the population of northerners and Union Army veterans skyrocketed during the same period.28 The frequent episodes of racial and political antagonism in the two cities often resorted to violence, such as in 1866, 1870, and in other isolated incidents. Also, the combination of a high number of Irish and German workers in the two cities and their respective reputations amongst the Anglo-Saxon elite of the 1870s jibed with the negative attention given to the Molly Maguires and the German Socialists of Cincinnati and Chicago during the strike. When the pre-existing social, ethnic, and labor conditions mixed with the lack of funding at the Navy Yard, Commodore Creighton’s actions of July 25 seem well-reasoned. His fear of the


inherently unstable locals, northern agitators, and the immigrant presence in the two cities drove him to land the sailors and prepare for the worst.

Ultimately, the strike of 1877 ended without a socialist United States, but the tumult of the year did mark the end of Reconstruction, the first of many violent labor uprisings, and the nadir of the Norfolk Navy Yard’s existence. By 1880, the majority of foreign-born workers in Portsmouth were living within the newly constructed walls of the Navy Yard and mass-appropriations were made in order to renovate the Yard for the expansion of the Navy. Rational actors such as President Hayes, the mainstream newspapers, and Commodore Creighton were responding to a moment of great fear during the height of the strike’s violence that is only understandable within the larger context of Reconstruction, ethnic violence, and the results of an economic depression.

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APPENDIX A: GRAPHS
CENSUS DATA

POPULATION OF PORTSMOUTH BY NATIONAL/STATE ORIGIN

1870

![Bar Graph]

Source: US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Ninth Census of the United States: 1870, Norfolk County, VA, City of Portsmouth, Jefferson and Jackson Wards*

\(n=\) Number of Male Workers at Norfolk Navy Yard or ambiguously employed maritime laborer

(*e.g. ship’s caulker, sail maker, boat builder, some are explicitly employed at the Navy Yard in the Census, but total number listed as working in the yard is under twenty five.*)
CENSUS DATA
POPULATION OF PORTSMOUTH BY NATIONAL/STATE ORIGIN
1880
DISTRICTS 78-80


n=Number of Male Workers at Norfolk Navy Yard or ambiguously employed maritime laborer

(e.g. ship's caulker, sail maker, boat builder, some are explicitly employed at the Navy Yard in the Census, but total number listed as working in the yard is under thirty.)
CENSUS DATA

POPULATION OF PORTSMOUTH BY NATIONAL/STATE ORIGIN

1880

NAVY YARD DISTRICT


\[ n=\text{Number of Male Workers at Norfolk Navy Yard or ambiguously employed maritime laborer} \]

(e.g. ship’s caulker, sail maker, boat builder are all explicitly employed at the Navy Yard. The record divided the civilian and military personnel living within the gates of the Yard.)
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I am originally from The Bronx, New York. I attended Old Dominion University and graduated in 2003 with a BS in Political Science and a minor in History. Upon graduation, I was employed by a congressional campaign in Virginia’s 2nd District during the election cycle of 2004 as a tutor for the candidate. Simultaneously, I was employed by LeadAmerica, an education and leadership non-profit organization in Boca Raton, Florida and Washington, DC from June 2004 to August 2006. I began the Master’s Program at Old Dominion University in the fall of 2006. I spent my two years at ODU as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTAI) under Dr. Douglas Greene. Since completing my assistanceship, I worked on a congressional campaign in Maryland’s 1st District during the election cycle of 2008. My goal to enter a history doctoral program with an emphasis in nineteenth-century American labor and political history.