



Chicago's Engine Company 21: An Interracial Vision in an Era of Reconstructions, 1872-1900

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In November 1872, the Chicago Fire Department announced that it would establish three new fire engine companies. Though predictable given the previous year's tragic conflagration, the Department's announcement aroused "unusual flurry among the firemen."¹ This sudden burst of interest had little to do with where these new companies would be stationed or what engines they would command. Instead, the firemen clamored over who would staff them. Reporting on the Department's expansion, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* noted, "Of course it is conceded on all sides that one of the companies will be composed of colored men." This black fire company was activated less than a month later and assigned to Engine 21. Yet few Chicagoans would have imagined a black fire engine company little more than a year before. In 1872, black

Chicagoans began to participate in civic life and administration at an unprecedented level. Engine Company 21 stood at the vanguard of this local reconstruction. Created in the wake of slavery's abolition, the historic fire company heralded a new era of reconstructions.

Despite the company's historical significance, the story of Engine Company 21 has been overlooked by scholars of early Chicago. Historiography on early black Chicagoans, in particular, is scant because the city's early black population has been dismissed as little more than a marginal, unremarkable presence. However, a few scholars have offered valuable insight into the lives of African Americans living in Chicago before the Great Migration. Notably, historian Allan Spear demonstrated that prior to 1900 the city was not yet plagued by anti-black hostility, and its black residents had not yet embraced

1 "The Fire Department," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 26, 1872.

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a separatist agenda.² As the city's black residents had not yet been forced into physical ghettos, early black Chicagoans were able to assimilate into mainstream civic institutions, or secure white financial support and personnel for institutions that would later become the bedrock of the city's institutional ghetto.³ Though Spear focuses primarily on the 1890s onward, his analysis provides valuable insight into the nature of race relations during Chicago's black reconstruction. Adding to Spear's work, historian Christopher Reed extensively charted the development of Chicago's black community in the 19th century.⁴ Neither of these authors, however, has critically examined Engine Company 21.

The story of this obscure company offers new ways for thinking about the history of Chicago in the late 1800s. The story of Engine Company 21 links black Chicagoans' struggle for civil rights and inclusion to the city's quest to reconstruct itself and its government after the Great Fire of 1871. These local efforts resembled and resurrected Congressional Reconstruction. As Chicago underwent its own reconstruction, freedmen throughout the nation were granted civil rights, and the state expanded dramatically. Engine Company 21's unique story, therefore, provides a new lens for exploring how Chicago's post-fire reconstruction converged with the national Reconstruction project.

The complex experience of blacks in Chicago and other Northern cities has been ignored in Reconstruction historiography. Scholarship on the era has focused almost entirely on the repercussions of emancipation in the South. Studies of Reconstruction have no doubt illuminated the particular problems facing the region as it transitioned from a slave society to a free one. But by focusing on the rural South, historians have failed to fully convey how the abolition of slavery fundamentally transformed all of American life, especially black life in Northern cities. As Leslie Schwalm argued in *Emancipation's Diaspora*, emancipation "changed the history of race throughout the nation" – even in the North.⁵ Schwalm began to unpack the repercussions of emancipation outside of the South, particularly in the Upper Midwest. However, in offering the first sweeping analysis of Reconstruction in the region, she did not address how Northern cities in particular responded to the nation's most profound experiment.

Historiography of the era has, in fact, overlooked how Reconstruction unfolded on a municipal level. Eminent historian Eric Foner, for instance, focused on the role of Northern Republican leaders in reforming state laws rather than the everyday changes blacks experienced on a local level.⁶ As the

narrative of Reconstruction has focused on the South and the state, stories such as that of Engine Company 21 have gone unnoticed. Yet Engine Company 21, a collection of men who had risen from the status of slaves to integral citizens within their community, represented the fulfillment of the highest ideals of Reconstruction. As the experience of these black firefighters attests, cities throughout the North were forced to rethink the place blacks occupied within them in the wake of emancipation. Chicago was not immune from this rethinking process, which spurred the city to begin an experiment with interracial democracy that mirrored but remained distinct from national Reconstruction.

Indeed, this essay's central claim is that, through Engine Company 21, Chicago experimented with the interracial democracy envisioned by the architects of Congressional Reconstruction. The story of Engine Company 21 reveals that the ideals of Reconstruction flourished within the city despite persistent racism. Until its decline in the 1890s, Engine Company 21 symbolized the fulfillment of an interracial vision of American democracy, in which the government and freedmen worked together to integrate blacks into civic and public life. But the image of black firemen was also manipulated in popular culture, namely in a series of Currier & Ives lithographs titled the *Darktown Comics*, to produce a counter vision. In the imaginary world of Darktown, interracial democracy was not a lofty ideal to be pursued but a problem to be resisted. Darktown's black firefighters reflected intense racial anxieties over the integration of blacks into public life. As symbols in these two opposed visions of interracial democracy, black firemen tested the limits of Reconstruction.

The term "reconstruction" could be applied to a number of processes taking place in the latter half of the 19th century. For the purposes of this essay, the term "federal Reconstruction" refers to the period between 1863 and 1877 when the federal government oversaw the readmission of Confederate states to the Union, and contemplated the social, political, and economic destiny of freedmen. Three years after federal Reconstruction began, Radical Republicans gained control of the United States Congress where they imposed martial law in the South and enacted laws to protect freedmen. This period is labeled here as "Congressional Reconstruction". Both Federal and Congressional Reconstruction ended with the Compromise of 1877 when federal troops evacuated the South and returned control to Southern Democrats. Borrowing from Eric Foner, the general term "Reconstruction" used in these pages refers to a protracted historical process in which American society adapted to the abolition of slavery.⁷ Through this lens, Reconstruction can be understood as a process that extended beyond the Compromise of 1877 and transcended the boundaries of the South.

The analysis that follows seeks to situate the story of Engine Company 21 in an era of local and national reconstruction

2 Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of A Negro Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 8.

3 Spear, *Black Chicago*, 91.

4 Christopher Reed, *Black Chicago's First Century: Vol. 1, 1833-1900* (Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press, 2005).

5 Leslie Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2009), 2.

6 Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New

York: Harper & Row, 1988), 470.

7 Foner, *Reconstruction*, xxvii.

tions. From the halls of Congress to the chambers of Chicago's City Council to the firehouse of this historic company, the country underwent a profound experiment that determined the fate of former slaves and that of the entire nation. Engine Company 21 stood at the center of this experiment. These groundbreaking black firemen cast off their tattered garments for firefighter uniforms, the chains of slavery for a fire hose. As they battled blazes throughout the city, the men of Engine Company 21 proved themselves worthy of citizenship and inclusion in a new interracial democracy. Though federal Reconstruction unraveled after less than two decades, Chicago's black reconstruction renewed the possibility for a true interracial democracy for just a moment more.

An Era of Reconstructions

Blacks had maintained a small but consistent presence in Chicago since the late 1700s when Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable, a man of African and French descent, became the first permanent settler in the area. Though Du Sable has long been hailed as the founder of Chicago, subsequent generations of black settlers found themselves excluded from civic life and administration. However, black Chicago reached a turning point when the Chicago Fire Department created Engine Company 21 in 1872. Engine Company 21 marked the beginning of the city's black reconstruction. What had black life in Chicago been like prior to this reconstruction, and how did it change afterwards? What catalyzed this profound reshaping of municipal life? And how did Chicago's reconstruction compare to Congressional Reconstruction taking place at the same time? Just as Congressional Reconstruction waned, Engine Company 21 signaled a renewed reconstruction that accorded blacks a formal place within municipal life and administration for the first time. In this era of reconstructions, Chicago's growing black population enjoyed a legal status equal to whites, ascended to elected office, and earned municipal appointments.

Prior to the formation of Engine Company 21, black Chicagoans were disenfranchised under state law. Under Illinois's slave codes, black indentured servants and slaves were subject to unmitigated violence, exploitation, and highly restricted mobility, as well as "the entitlement of all whites to act punitively against blacks in the enforcement of these regulations."⁸ Even after the 1848 Illinois State Constitution outlawed slavery, the state's black codes continued to disenfranchise black people. An 1819 statute required black residents to prove their freedom to circuit courts and carry papers indicating their status.⁹ In 1853, the Illinois General Assembly altogether banned free blacks from immigrating to the state, made it a criminal offense to bring a slave into Illinois, and awarded money to anyone who apprehended a black or mulatto per-

son – whether slave or free.¹⁰ In antebellum Chicago, state laws denied free blacks the right to vote, testify in court against whites, or marry outside of their race. Legal statutes likewise maintained racial segregation in public schools, accommodations and transportation.¹¹ Through these many laws, black Chicagoans were marked as inferior and unworthy of citizenship, thus allowing whites to "exploit, coerce, and dehumanize" them with impunity.¹²

Despite the legal statutes circumscribing their rights, the law did not always dictate the reality of black life. For instance, the Illinois General Assembly barred blacks from immigrating to Illinois in 1853, but the city's black population steadily grew afterwards. The number of free black Chicagoans nearly tripled from 323 in 1850 to 955 in 1860.¹³ Most of these new residents immigrated to Illinois from other states, primarily the slave states of Virginia, Kentucky and Missouri.¹⁴ Thus, even though blacks were legally barred, a significant number of free blacks and runaway slaves found refuge in Illinois in reality.

The dissonance between law and reality manifested again shortly after Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The act compelled federal marshals to arrest any black person accused of being a runaway slave and denied the accused a right to a jury trial. The controversial act likewise provided marshals with a bonus for capturing alleged slaves and stipulated that anyone who abetted a runaway could be fined and jailed. Chicago's City Council condemned the law, calling it "revolting to our moral sense, and an outrage upon our feelings of justice and humanity."¹⁵ Accordingly, the council declared that officers in the city would not enforce the law. Despite the support of the City Council and local abolitionists, black Chicagoans were still targeted by slave catchers hoping to profit from the ambiguity of blacks' status. Such was the case when a group of slave traders seized a runaway slave named Eliza and attempted to send her back to captivity.¹⁶ Though Eliza was spirited away by local abolitionists, her ordeal highlights how precarious and complex many black Chicagoans' lives were prior to the city's reconstruction.

In spite of their precarious legal status and inferior social position, black Chicagoans successfully assimilated into

10 *Laws of Illinois*, 18 G.A., Act of Feb. 12, 1853, 57-60.

11 Spear, *Black Chicago*, 6.

12 Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 27.

13 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing, 1850*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1850), 705; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing, 1860*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1860), 613.

14 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing, 1860*, 613.

15 Chicago City Council, Resolution Regarding the Fugitive Slave Act, Nov. 29, 1850, File 6603A, in Chicago City Council Proceeding Files, Illinois Regional Archives Depository.

16 St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 33.

8 Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 16-17.

9 Elmer Gertz, "The Black Laws of Illinois," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 56.3 (Autumn, 1963), 454-473.

the city's communities. In 1850, the majority of the city's 323 black citizens were spread out relatively evenly in the first four of the city's nine wards, where blacks made up around two percent of the residents in each area.¹⁷ Out of the five remaining wards, only the Fifth and Seventh Wards held no black residents. The remaining wards, South Chicago, and East and West Chicago each held at least one black resident – with as many as thirty-five in the latter. Thus, few of the city's wards were exclusively white, and none of the city's neighborhoods were isolated black ghettos. Five years after the end of the Civil War, Chicago's black population exploded to 3,091, as thousands of former slaves fled the South in search of a new start. Even with this dramatic influx of freedmen, the city's neighborhoods remained racially mixed. Forty percent of this growing population was spread out over eighteen wards. Even in the Second and Third Wards, where the remaining sixty percent of black Chicagoans lived, they did not exceed ten percent of the total population.¹⁸ Living alongside each other, whites and blacks enjoyed frequent contact in the antebellum and immediate postwar period.

Before the city's reconstruction, Chicago's community institutions had also been integrated. Businesses were just one of the many integrated community institutions. Black entrepreneurs such as John Jones, a wealthy merchant-tailor, ranked among the city's business elite. Businessmen like Jones catered to a racially mixed clientele, and maintained professional ties with the white community. Furthermore, early leaders argued against founding other separate community and civic institutions. According to historian Allan Spear, black leaders were steadfastly committed to "the ideal of an integrated community" where hospitals, social agencies, and other public institutions were open to whites as well as blacks.¹⁹ Though black Chicagoans founded separate churches and fraternal organizations, other community institutions remained mixed.

Black Chicagoans, though, desired to be given a prominent place within municipal life and administration. Drawing upon the rhetoric of freedom and equality abounding during Congressional Reconstruction, early black Chicagoans demanded to be recognized as equal citizens and accorded their rights as such. For instance, in May of 1866, a committee of prominent black Chicagoans sent an address to the congressmen who had supported the passage of the Civil Rights Act. The contentious act granted citizenship and extended certain legal rights to freedmen. In praising the act's passage, however, the committee also reminded the congressmen that there was still much work to do:

But giving to her [the United States] the whole heart,

we ask from her the whole hand! The suffrage of the citizen is the strength of the republic! Constituting a part of the American nation, we possess with it a common destiny. Our record in the past, we think, warrants the belief that with it we will be found willing to do, to dare, to suffer, and, if need be, to die in defense of American constitutional liberty for the entire American people.²⁰

Bringing this emancipation-inspired activism to the local level, early black Chicagoans also successfully lobbied the Illinois General Assembly to repeal the black codes in 1865.²¹ Through their political agitation, Chicago's early black residents attempted to remove the legal barriers denying them citizenship and inclusion. However, these incremental legal victories did not substantially improve their status within society.

In fact, African Americans throughout the country found their legal status imperiled as Congressional Reconstruction came to an end. Led by Radical Republicans, Congress passed the Reconstruction Acts and Amendments, Enforcement Acts and two civil rights acts between 1866 and 1875. Together they laid the foundation for to a truly interracial democracy. However, the federal government failed to enforce and protect many of the legislative victories achieved during Congressional Reconstruction. Most notably, Radical Republican struggled to draft the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted the franchise to black men, and have it ratified by highly resistant state governments. Rather than protect the spirit of this landmark amendment, the federal government allowed states to completely exclude blacks from voting as long as they did so on grounds other than race. Thus, by 1890, every Southern state – and many Border States – had devised laws that trampled over the Fifteenth Amendment without violating it.²²

By the time Democrats regained control of the House of Representatives in 1874, Congressional Reconstruction had lost support among the people and within the federal government. In honor of their late leader Charles Sumner, Radical Republicans passed what would be Congressional Reconstruction's final achievement, the Civil Rights Act of 1875. The federal act specified that blacks were entitled to equal treatment in public accommodations, further stipulating that blacks could not be excluded from jury service.²³ The monumental act met the same fate as many of the key legislative victories made during Congressional Reconstruction: The executive branch did not enforce the laws, and federal courts quickly rolled back

17 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing, 1850*, 705.

18 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing, 1870*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1870), 1: 110; Spear, *Black Chicago*, 7.

19 Spear, *Black Chicago*, 7.

20 "Civil Rights – 'Address of the Colored Citizens of Chicago to the Congress of the United States'" U.S. House of Representatives. 30th Congress, 1st Session. May 10, 1866, 3–4.

21 Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 50.

22 Eric Foner and Joshua Brown, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2005), 206; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 422.

23 Foner, *Reconstruction*, 553–4.

many of the remaining vestiges of Congressional Reconstruction.²⁴ The Compromise of 1877 served as a resounding reminder that federal Reconstruction was officially over.

Like millions of freedmen throughout the nation, black Chicagoans found that the short-lived national Reconstruction project had failed to deliver the interracial democracy they hoped for. As the federal government abandoned Reconstruction, early black Chicagoans were as excluded from civic life and administration as they had ever been. By 1872, racial discrimination and segregation remained legal, no blacks had been elected to public office in the city, and no blacks had been appointed as municipal employees.

With the creation of Engine Company 21, Chicago's reconstruction began. Blacks were incorporated into municipal life and administration for the first time – even as Congressional Reconstruction unraveled. But how could Chicago's reconstruction succeed when blacks had theretofore been roundly barred from participating in civic life? Earlier efforts had proved that a growing population and political agitation alone would not realize black Chicagoans' vision of an inclusive civic sphere. Carving out a place for the city's growing black community, then, would require more. It would require a fire.

In the twilight of Congressional Reconstruction, the Great Fire of 1871 catalyzed the reconstruction of Chicago on a number of levels. First, the conflagration required the literal reconstruction of homes, businesses and factories in the burnt district. Second, the fire allowed the city to construct a new public image as a resilient, world-class metropolis filled with opportunity. Third, the fire was attended by a reconstruction of class and labor relations in the city. According to historian Karen Sawislak, local elites and working class people competed to "reconstruct a [class-based] sense of 'order'" after the tragedy upended social hierarchies within the city.²⁵ Finally, the 1871 fire brought about a reconstruction of municipal administration. Following the fire, the city's government took greater control over economic and social affairs.²⁶ The City Council began regulating the sale of bread and taxi fares, created new departments, wrested control of the police and fire departments, and began to modernize city services. These four reconstructions profoundly reshaped municipal life, redefining social relations as well as the relationship between the city's government and its citizens.

At the helm of these municipal reconstructions was Joseph Medill. Following the fire, Medill capitalized on his popularity as an owner and editor of the *Chicago Tribune* to run for mayor on the aptly named Union Fire Proof ticket. In his inaugural address just two months after the fire, Mayor Medill proclaimed that his first priority was to restore integrity

and financial stability to the city's government.²⁷ Medill announced and undertook a number of initiatives to modernize the city, including outlining new fire-resistant building codes, establishing the public library system, and modernizing fire-fighting by establishing a reservoir system. Medill sought to propel Chicago to "a prosperity greater than ever dreamt." He hoped that Chicago would serve as "a good and pure example" to other cities, believing that "the perpetuity of the nation itself depends upon the character of the municipalities." The Great Fire catapulted Mayor Medill and the city to the forefront of a movement to modernize and expand government administration. Indeed, Chicago's reconstruction was a localized expression of an identical process of expansion, bureaucratization, and increasing power taking place on the state and federal levels.²⁸

Besides overseeing the modernization of municipal government, Mayor Medill spearheaded Chicago's black reconstruction, no doubt inspired by his Radical Republican roots. Before moving to Chicago, he helped to found the Republican Party on the principles of free soil and anti-slavery. From the outset of the Civil War, Medill personally urged President Lincoln to take a radical course: emancipate the slaves, allow black men to serve in the army, extend the franchise to freedmen, and punish states that had seceded.²⁹ Following Lincoln's assassination, Medill joined other Radical Republicans in condemning President Andrew Johnson for readily welcoming the former Confederate states back into the Union and not supporting the civil rights of freedmen.³⁰ He feared that "the curse and horror of slavery" would return if the military did not continue to occupy the South and the government did not extend suffrage to freedmen.³¹

Medill continued to push his Radical Republican agenda on the local level, using his authority to carve out a place and secure rights for freedmen. Medill advocated for freedmen's right to vote as Cook County's delegate at the 1869 Illinois Constitutional Convention. On the topic of black enfranchisement, many of his fellow delegates favored a "white man's vote for a white man's government."³² But Medill defiantly declared, "The colored man... has the same right to suffrage as the white man."³³ At the Convention, Medill also lobbied for a cumulative voting system that would increase mi-

24 Foner, *Reconstruction*, 587.

25 Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Chicago Fire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

26 Dominic A. Pacyga, *Chicago: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 82.

27 Chicago Common Council, "Inaugural Address of Mayor Joseph Medill, December 4, 1871," *Journal of Proceedings*.

28 Foner, *Reconstruction*, 469.

29 Tracy Strevey, "Joseph Medill and the *Chicago Tribune* during the Civil War Period," (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1930), 194.

30 Strevey, "Joseph Medill," 192.

31 Strevey, "Joseph Medill," 193.

32 Illinois Constitutional Convention, *Debates and Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Illinois, Vol. 2* (Chicago: E.L. Merritt, 1870), 1291.

33 Illinois Constitutional Convention, *Debates and Proceedings*, 1290.

nority representation.³⁴ Under Medill's new system, black politicians were finally elected to state posts, as black Chicagoans translated their relatively small number into political power.³⁵ Medill continued his Republican agenda as mayor of Chicago, carving out a place for freedmen in the city's expanding government. Notably, he appointed the city's first black firemen and policemen. For his radical efforts, Medill earned a reputation as a champion of the "rights of the Negro people."³⁶ While no extant records indicate why Medill formed Engine Company 21, he likely used his position as mayor to enact a radical Republican agenda suited for the municipal level.

That Mayor Medill oversaw the reconstruction of municipal government and black life in Chicago attests to how intimately connected the processes of modernizing government and integrating blacks into civic life were during Reconstruction. Though perceived by some as a threat to white privilege, the new model for government administration was necessary for creating the interracial democracy envisioned by Radical Republicans.³⁷ Indeed, the hallmarks of federal Reconstruction, such as the federal occupation of the South and the Freedmen's Bureau, would have been impossible without a robust federal government. On a local level, the modernization of municipal administration and expansion of public services likewise afforded black Chicagoans previously unavailable opportunities to participate in civic life. The expanding municipal state incorporated the thousands of freedmen who flocked to the city following the Civil War, renewing the possibility for equality and inclusion dashed by the end of Congressional Reconstruction. The figure most responsible for Chicago's reconstructions was Mayor Medill. As he embarked on a radical mission to reconstruct Chicago, he began to create a modern city responsive to the needs of its lowest citizens. As a single figure, Medill best embodies how dependent the project of creating an interracial democracy was on the success of a modern, expansive government. Unfortunately, his agenda was ultimately left unfulfilled. Medill fell ill and resigned before completing his first term.

Without Mayor Medill as its architect, Chicago's black reconstruction persevered. During this period, Chicago's black population was booming. Just a year before the fire, the city's black population totaled 3,091. Ten years later, that number had more than doubled to 6,480.³⁸ By 1890, Chicago's black population had exploded to 14,852.³⁹ When the city's recon-

struction drew to a close in 1900, more than thirty thousand blacks had settled in Chicago.⁴⁰ In this thirty-year period, though, blacks never exceeded more than two percent of the population. That such a miniscule segment of the population spurred a profound reordering of municipal life is a testament to the centrality and pervasiveness of the broader ideals of Reconstruction during this period.

Unlike in the antebellum and immediate postwar eras, thousands of black Chicagoans now enjoyed a legal status equal to their white counterparts. Only a year before the fire, the state's new constitution granted black men in Illinois the right to vote. Three years after the fire, the Illinois Supreme Court ordered that the city's public schools be desegregated.⁴¹ The Illinois General Assembly passed a civil rights act in 1885, which deemed blacks "entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the accommodation, advantages, facilities and privileges" in public accommodations, including restaurants, barbershops and theaters.⁴² While these laws and rulings did not necessarily shield them from discrimination, black Chicagoans were accorded a badge of citizenship that would have been unattainable prior to the 1871 fire.

Just as state laws began to recognize them as equals, black Chicagoans were elected to public office for the first time. Local businessman John Jones was elected nearly unanimously to the Cook County Board of Commissioners just a few months after the fire, becoming the first black person elected to public office in Illinois.⁴³ The Illinois House of Representatives welcomed its first black member, John W.E. Thomas, in 1877.⁴⁴ That Black Chicagoans were able to achieve such electoral success was not unprecedented given the number of black men elected to Congress after the Civil War. However, as blacks throughout the nation were increasingly disenfranchised and otherwise excluded from the democratic process, the ability of black Chicagoans to consistently assume political office proved remarkable.

More than the legal and electoral victories, municipal appointees were the most visible signs of Chicago's black reconstruction. The first black police officer was appointed in 1872. The city also appointed Franklin Denison assistant prosecuting attorney in 1891, making him the first black person in the city's legal department.⁴⁵ When city officials did not move quickly enough in appointing them to municipal positions, black Chicagoans banded together to demand that they do so. In 1878, the city's black citizens called upon Sheriff John Hoff-

34 "Hon. Joseph Medill," *The Graphic*, Dec. 1, 1891.

35 Harold Gosnell, *Negro Politicians: The Rise of Negro Politics in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), 65-66.

36 "Helped Negro Race," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept. 10, 1918.

37 Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 90.

38 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Compendium of the Census of Population and Housing, 1880*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1880), 152.

39 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing, 1890*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1890), 4: 161.

40 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing, 1900*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1900), Bulletin 8: 269.

41 Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *Negro in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 234.

42 Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *Negro in Chicago*, 233.

43 Gosnell, *Negro Politicians*, 82.

44 Gosnell, *Negro Politicians*, 65-6.

45 Gosnell, *Negro Politicians*, 198.

man to fulfill his promise to appoint a black bailiff.⁴⁶ Only a year before, a group of more than one hundred black Chicagoans vowed that they would only support politicians committed to “securing for us a portion of the public patronage which are to be distributed broadcast to every nationality.”⁴⁷ In seeking political office and municipal appointments, black Chicagoans demanded to not only be recognized by the city’s administration but to have a voice within it. The city responded to these demands, realizing for a brief moment the interracial democracy envisioned during federal Reconstruction.

Given that the 1871 fire has traditionally been identified as a turning point in the history of Chicago, it is fitting that the nation’s first black professional fire company spearheaded this local reconstruction. The city’s black firefighters were among the thousands of freedmen who migrated to the city following the Civil War. Like Chicago’s other black citizens, the men of Engine Company 21 arrived hopeful that they too could stake their place in the Midwestern metropolis. Burdened by color prejudice and the stigma of slavery, they nonetheless held on to the promises that the city offered and demanded even more. The men of Engine Company 21 found their place through service in the fire department, simultaneously carving out a place for others within the larger civic sphere.

Yet Engine Company 21 more than laid the foundation for Chicago’s reconstruction. The company emblemized this historic moment, serving as a testament to the lasting influence and legacy of Reconstruction in post-fire Chicago. The ideals of Reconstruction did not just survive in the city but thrived, inspiring the city’s government to create a thoroughly modern and interracial democracy. While highly inspired by Congressional Reconstruction, Chicago’s reconstruction was marked by a stronger and more prolonged commitment by the government to give blacks a prominent place within civic and public life. By creating Engine Company 21, the city gave the black firemen – and black Chicagoans in general – not only equal citizenship but also an opportunity to prove themselves equal as laborers, members of society and men. But the administration’s commitment to an interracial democracy did not receive popular support among white Chicagoans. Indeed, Engine Company 21 – in fact, the very image of black firemen – faced tremendous racial prejudice that tested the limits of interracial democracy and threatened the fate of Reconstruction.

“The Pipemen Evidently Do Not Mind Heat”: Overcoming Prejudiced Perceptions of Engine Company 21

Though Engine Company 21 was the nation’s first professional black fire company, the image of black firemen circulated throughout the nation. The most popular images of black firemen were a series of chromolithographs known as

the *Darktown Comics* printed by Currier and Ives, a company that held a reputation as “weather vanes of popular opinion [and] reflectors of American attitudes.”⁴⁸ The product of unadulterated white racism, the imaginary Darktown Fire Brigade reflected intense racial anxieties over the prospect of an interracial democracy, especially the increasing prominence of blacks in civic and public life. The anxieties coded into the image of Darktown’s black firemen would resurface in newspaper coverage of Engine Company 21.

In the interracial vision of Darktown, black firefighters raised anxiety over the prospect of blacks being treated as equals in the labor and social spheres or as men. These anxieties are particularly evident in the lithograph “Under Full Steam” (Figure 1). As in many of the other prints, the black firemen of Darktown are depicted as inept – a fireman shoots water at a woman descending the stairs rather than at the fire raging inside. This image of black laborers as incompetent helped to justify the exclusion of freedmen from the free and compensated labor market. More than expressing anxiety over blacks’ capacities as skilled laborers, the image of this particular fireman also suggested anxieties over the prospect of an integrated social sphere. Sitting atop the brigade’s rig, the fireman holds the hose close to his lap while shooting water at the woman’s posterior. In this image, the fire hose and rig powerfully symbolize sex and intimacy. Outside of the all-black Darktown, this symbolism would have definitely aroused fears of interracial intimacy and miscegenation, which stemmed from underlying fears of social equality among the races. Finally, in depicting blacks as simian-like creatures, the producers and consumers of the *Darktown Comics* stripped the brigade’s men of their masculinity and humanity. All of these racial anxieties rendered the vision of an interracial democracy problematic and helped to bring an end to Reconstruction throughout the nation.

For many white Chicagoans, Engine Company 21 and the city’s interracial democracy were no less problematic. Despite the persistence of white racism, the ideals of Reconstruction were more successful in the city than they had been in the imaginary world of Darktown. The anxieties coded into the Darktown lithographs were expressed explicitly in newspaper articles about the company. These articles revealed that some whites in the city harbored racial anxieties related to labor, social interactions and manhood that shaped how they perceived the company. Because of these anxieties, the city’s black firemen were attacked as incompetent, socially inferior, and unmanly. In many ways, Engine Company 21 confronted the same stereotypes presented in the *Darktown Comics* that had rendered Reconstruction and the ideal of an interracial democracy untenable throughout the nation.

Compared to the imaginary world of Darktown, however, the reality of Chicago’s interracial democracy was much more complex and ambivalent. This ambivalence arose be-

46 “City Brevities,” *Chicago Inter Ocean*, Dec. 9, 1878.

47 “Chicago Politics,” *Chicago Inter Ocean*, March 14, 1877.

48 Harry Peters, *Currier and Ives: Printmakers to the American People* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1942), 7.

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cause, unlike the static Darktown brigade, the men of Engine Company 21 could speak for themselves through their actions and words. The city's black firemen pushed back against racist perceptions by outperforming their white counterparts, integrating into social institutions and asserting their masculinity. Engine Company 21 proved that they deserved to be included in a reconstructed Chicago. The contest between the perception and reality of Engine Company 21 demonstrated that Reconstruction had not removed whites' racial prejudices. But the company overcame these prejudices and offered hope for Chicago's future as an interracial democracy.

Labor

Some white Chicagoans perceived the black firemen in Engine Company 21 as incapable of performing their duties. The collection of black firefighters – like thousands of freedmen seeking skilled, nonagricultural positions in the urban North – struggled to combat stereotypes that blacks were incompetent and lacked the faculties to compete with whites in the skilled labor market. The stereotype that Engine Company 21 most often found itself combating was Sambo, a popular minstrel character who was goodhearted and docile but irresponsible and childlike. Despite these racist perceptions, in reality, the collection of black firefighters was not only competent but also exemplary – worthy contributors to a reconstructed Chicago.

Some whites openly feared that blacks were incompetent and incapable of serving as firefighters. Whites outside of Chicago expressed anxiety over integrating their fire departments. For instance, Detroit's fire commissioner rejected petitions from black Detroiters to appoint black men to the department, citing the alleged inefficiency of Engine Company 21. Remarking on a recent fire, the unnamed official claimed that Chicago's "colored company" was "slow and... did not do all in their power to save the [homeowner's] property."⁴⁹ Despite his intense animosity towards Engine Company 21, Detroit's fire commissioner had not personally observed the company in action. His attack on the company indicates that racial anxieties – and not observed facts – determined white perceptions of black firemen.

The most vicious attacks, of course, came from Chicagoans. A former volunteer firefighter, F.A. Bragg, dismissed Engine Company 21 as "inferior."⁵⁰ He further alleged that the company had only been created to "subserve political interests" and had kept "good and experienced" white volunteer firemen from joining the reorganized department. The colored company, Bragg continued, endangered the lives and property of fellow firemen and the public with their "unaccountable ignorance." Certain that the city's black firemen were dangerously inept, Bragg felt that blacks were only qualified to work as drivers and horsemen, jobs that required little skill

or technical knowledge. A later article published by the *Tribune* was less hostile towards the company but nonetheless attacked their mental capabilities. The reporter praised the men for their superior service but refused to attribute their success to their skillfulness or quick thinking.⁵¹ Rather, he pointed to their "magnificent lungs and splendid muscles" and ability to "climb like squirrels." The article suggested that black firemen were strong but otherwise incompetent without a watchful and commanding white captain. Such demeaning characterizations validated some white Chicagoans' belief that blacks were mentally incapable of performing skilled labor.

Ofentimes, whites cloaked their anxiety about black firemen's incompetence in minstrel stereotypes. Such was the case when the Republican-leaning *Tribune* published a lengthy exposé on the controversial company. Asked by the reporter how the company occupied itself when not fighting fires, Engine Company 21's white captain, Joseph Kenyon, responded, "A number of the boys are good singers, and we usually have a banjo around."⁵² Sketches accompanying the article reinforced this stereotype of the company as a collection of happy-go-lucky, singing and banjo-playing Sambos. Like the *Tribune*, the *Inter Ocean* indulged in minstrel stereotypes. While the paper was generally empathetic towards the city's black community, the *Inter Ocean* abandoned any claims to reality in a story published about Engine Company 21. The paper comically reported:

Yesterday forenoon as Mr. Eaton, the undertaker, was passing the station, one of the boys with an eye in a sling and his lower jaw tied up, grinned, as well as he could and remarked: "Mornin', Mr. Eaton, comin' to take my measure?" "No, Jim," said the party addressed, "I don't want to do that." "Golly, though," was the answer, "I thought I was gone suah tho' last night. I did."⁵³

Deploying ducky dialect and creating a fictional member of the company (Jim), the article provided its upper-class readers a minstrel show in writing. In doing so, the paper reduced the company to little more than a collection of dimwitted and comical Sambos.

Though many whites labeled Engine Company 21 as inferior, their perceptions did not match reality. In a rare moment when the voice of the city's black firemen emerges from the historical record, a member of Engine 21 directly responded to perceptions of the company as inferior. In a letter published in the *Sunday Times*, former engineer Isaiah Washington took the aforementioned F.A. Bragg to task for his demeaning comments about the company, asking, "Is it possible that in the ... giant metropolis of the west, there is one man so full of preju-

51 "The Boys of Engine 21," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 11, 1888.

52 The Boys of Engine 21."

53 "City Brevities," *Chicago Daily Inter Ocean*, Nov. 16, 1877.

49 "Glances Here and There," *Plaindealer*, Dec. 6, 1889.

50 "The Fire," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 22, 1874.

dice, so selfish?”⁵⁴ Washington continued his defense, boasting that Engine 21 had “always proved faithful and reliable.” Annual reports published by the Chicago Fire Department more than support Washington’s claims. According to the reports, the colored company repeatedly outperformed their all-white counterparts. In 1893, for instance, they traveled more miles than other companies, responded to 474 alarms (compared to an average of 360), worked 184 hours (compared to 110) and performed duties at 148 alarms (compared to 75).⁵⁵ Engine Company 21 met and exceeded the expectations many white Chicagoans placed on them.

They demonstrated their proficiency to the public in an 1885 three-alarm fire – one of the worst the city had faced since the 1871 conflagration. Beginning in the Chicago Lumber Company’s yards, the blaze jumped across the Chicago River, and threatened to destroy the city’s lumber stockpiles, much of the South Side and the neighboring Town of Lake. By the time Engine Company 21 was called to the scene, the fire had been raging for hours and seventeen companies had attempted – but failed – to contain the blaze. When the men arrived, they were immediately met with ridicule. “There was a great crowd of spectators present, and many of them made fun of the colored firemen when they dragged their hose in,” the paper reported, “But the levity was soon succeeded by admiration. Their steamer is a powerful one, and the pipemen evidently do not mind heat.”⁵⁶ The article continued to document the company’s heroic and awe-inspiring efforts, “They went up to within ten feet of the burning lumber pile so full of danger to the city and Lake, and soon made an impression on the flames. The pipe got away from three of them once, but the fourth held on, though he was thrown down and knocked around on the ground.” In helping to contain the blaze and risking their own lives, the company proved their skills and worth as members of the department.

This and similar acts of valor helped the company gain wider esteem. For blacks in the city and elsewhere, Chicago’s black firemen were a source of pride, a symbol of what blacks could be now that the wretched institution of slavery had been abolished.⁵⁷ The historic company was held in high regard by some whites as well. Fire Chief D.J. Sweeney and others proudly proclaimed that Engine Company 21 invented the sliding pole, an iconic fixture in early American firehouses.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the company was regularly called to demonstrate new fire engines and frequently received praise for their performance from the press and CFD officials.⁵⁹ The Department’s

initial announcement that it was not “definitely known whether [Engine Company 21 would] be commanded by a Caucasian” provides perhaps the best indication that some whites had faith in the capacities of freedmen.⁶⁰ While the captains of the company were in fact white for its first three decades, the announcement indicates that at least some whites believed blacks capable of not only fulfilling the duties of a fireman but also leading an entire company.

Society

Besides questioning whether the firemen were suited for skilled labor, some white Chicagoans also expressed anxiety over Engine Company 21 invading social and intimate spaces. The idea of black firemen sharing social spaces with whites aroused anxiety because some whites perceived blacks as unclean and unworthy of socializing with them. Newspapers surprisingly reported on the company entering white people’s homes, churches, and businesses with little hint of trepidation. Instead, anxieties over interracial social relations pervaded newspaper coverage of the company’s firehouse and led the CFD’s auxiliary club to ban black firefighters. In both cases, Engine Company 21 successfully overcame these perceptions and achieved a degree of acceptance in the social sphere.

White Chicagoans feared interracial social interactions in a place most would never enter: the company’s firehouse. Indeed, a number of news articles expressed concern over black firemen sharing communal and sleeping quarters with their white superiors.⁶¹ While men sharing living spaces did not carry the threat of miscegenation, whites nonetheless perceived black firemen as unclean and a threat to the purity of their white counterparts. Playing on these fears, the *Tribune* titillated readers with the promise of “a glimpse [into] everyday life” in the quarters of the city’s colored fire company.⁶² Perhaps to assuage white readers’ fears that the Negro firemen were tainting or corrupting their white counterparts, the journalist thoroughly noted the cleanliness of the men and the firehouse. Indeed, he remarked on everything from the Brussels carpet in the sitting room “swept to the last degree of cleanliness” to the “neatly ranged” collection of “brushes, combs, [and] handkerchiefs.” This language of cleanliness attempted to dispel notions that the black firemen would somehow taint the white men who lived in close proximity. Despite the *Tribune*’s complicated coverage of Engine Company 21, the article attempted to sooth anxiety over blacks and whites sharing intimate and social spaces.

To a lesser extent, the white perception of blacks as inferior affected social organizations as well. For firefighters in Chicago, the Benevolent Association of the Paid Fire Depart-

54 “The Colored Company,” *Sunday Times*, July 26, 1874.

55 Chicago Fire Department, *Report of the Fire Marshal*, (Chicago: Hazlitt & Reed, 1893), 132.

56 “Battling with Fire,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 9, 1885.

57 For instance, “Flotsam and Jetsam,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, Sept. 29, 1888; “Dedication of Bethel,” *Cleveland Gazette*, July 15, 1899.

58 “Among the Firemen,” *Boston Daily Globe*, April 3, 1898.

59 For instance, “Fire Fighters Win Record,” *Chicago Daily Tri-*

bune, April 9, 1900.

60 “The Fire Department.”

61 For instance, “Colored Fire Fighters,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 20, 1903.

62 “The Boys of Engine 21.”

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ment was their primary social and mutual-aid club. The association provided “means for the relief of distressed, sick, injured and disabled workers” and supported the families of firemen killed in action.⁶³ Though the association’s bylaws stipulated that each company elect a member to the Board of Directors, black firemen from Engine Company 21 were explicitly barred from the organization.⁶⁴ In banning the men, the city’s white firefighters rejected any implications of brotherhood with the black firefighters, their perceived social inferiors. Even though their firehouse had been integrated, black firemen were still treated as unworthy of socializing with whites in the department’s social extensions.

However, Engine Company 21 overcame perceptions that had led the Benevolent Association to ban black firemen. In 1884, the association admitted an original member of Engine Company 21, Wilson C. Hawkins.⁶⁵ The club’s admission of Hawkins demonstrated that blacks were not only capable of socializing with whites but doing so as equals. In reversing its stance on black members, the association suggested that racial boundaries in the department’s social sphere were permeable to a certain degree. The integration of black firemen into the Benevolent Association likewise hinted at the possibilities for an integrated social life in post-fire Chicago.

Manhood

Engine Company 21 also struggled to overcome the white perception that they lacked masculinity. The most common way that white Chicagoans denied the firefighters’ manhood was by calling them “boys”. For instance, the *Tribune* included only one comment on Engine Company 21 in its report on the CFD’s annual inspection: “The colored boys did nobly.”⁶⁶ Engine Company 20, on the other hand, was derided as having “the worst house and worst body of men visited.” The article continued, “The house looked dilapidated, and the men, from their shaky appearance, did not relieve the melancholy spectacle.” Though clearly inferior, the firefighters of Engine Company 20 were bestowed a badge of manhood consistently denied to the colored company.

A later news article went one step further by comparing the black firemen to adolescent girls. “The next room is the bedroom, and this, it may be wagered, will be a surprise to any one,” the reporter teased, “It looks more like the dormitory of a girls’ boarding-house than the sleeping-room of eight colored firemen.”⁶⁷ The journalist essentially castrated the firemen in order to make them palatable to the public. In an era when

women were prohibited from voting, denying the black firemen’s manhood was tantamount to denying them full citizenship and a place in the nation’s civic life.

But the black firefighters of Engine Company 21 constantly asserted their manhood, primarily through their clothing. The firefighter uniform commanded respect, deference, and recognition of manhood because it was associated with one of the nation’s most venerable professions. The uniform worn by the men of Engine Company 21 carried a symbolic value similar to that worn by soldiers. In the years following the Civil War, the military uniform took on added significance for black veterans who drew power and respect from its connotations of masculinity and public service. Whether tied to service to the Union or the city, the uniform profoundly transformed popular perceptions of blacks. Historian Kirk Savage powerfully stated the transformative potential of the uniform in his analysis of 19th century sculptural monuments: “In one simple change of outfit, he stepped out of one entrenched tradition of popular representation – the ragged, feeble, pathetic ‘darky’ familiar from minstrelsy and caricature – and into a brave new world of civic display.”⁶⁸

The symbolic association between Engine Company 21, the military and manhood was on full display in an 1878 parade for President Rutherford Hayes. In a procession before the man whose presidency had brought about the end of federal Reconstruction, the men of Engine Company 21 marched alongside more than a thousand Illinois soldiers, including a company of black troops.⁶⁹ In an era of reconstructions, the soldier’s uniform remained a salient symbol of freedom, citizenship, and manhood for the black men who wore it. The men of Engine Company 21 drew upon this symbolism every time they donned a firefighter uniform, subconsciously challenging white perceptions of them as unmanly.

Despite the negative reaction they received from white Chicagoans, the black firemen of Engine Company 21 challenged the stereotypical perceptions that dogged them. Overcoming racial anxieties over labor, society, and manhood, the firemen proved themselves capable as workers, comrades and men. Engine Company 21 embodied the radical possibility of an interracial democracy in Chicago. But neither Engine Company 21 nor the city’s interracial democracy would last. If persistent racism among local white citizens had not brought about an end to Chicago’s reconstruction, what would? While the city’s government had been relatively uninvolved in counteracting prejudiced perceptions of Engine Company 21, it played a central role in determining the destiny of the historic company and its experiment with interracial democracy.

63 Benevolent Association of the Paid Fire Department of the City of Chicago, *Charter, Constitution and By-Laws* (Chicago: Hazlitt & Reed, 1877), 4.

64 “Local Brevities,” *Pomeroy’s Democrat*, Dec. 1, 1877.

65 “Chicago Doings,” *New York Globe*, April 26, 1884.

66 “The Fire Department: Official Inspection by the City Authorities,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 12, 1874.

67 “The Boys of Engine 21.”

68 Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldier, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1997), 97.

69 “The Great Event,” *Daily Inter Ocean*, Sept. 4, 1878; “The Tournament,” *Pomeroy’s Democrat*, Sept. 7, 1878.

The Breakdown of Reconstruction in Chicago

Engine Company 21 served as a powerful symbol of Chicago's reconstruction – a testament to the power of municipal government in shaping civic and public life to include black citizens. The reconstruction of municipal government and black life in the city were intimately connected as the city sought to realize an interracial vision. But as the century drew to a close, municipal government became less concerned with using its increasing power to create an interracial democracy. Again, the story of Engine Company 21 harbingered and symbolized the demise of this interracial vision. Whereas the city initially took an active role in integrating Engine Company 21 into civic life, municipal government reversed course in the last decade of the 19th century. In ordering the segregation and subjugation of black firefighters, municipal government signaled that Chicago's experiment with an interracial democracy had come to an end.

While it had once been the protector of Engine Company 21, the city's administration came under attack for discriminating against the company. In late 1889, black Chicagoans called for a mass meeting to "have the wrongs heaped upon our colored men righted, and see that they get better treatment."⁷⁰ A month later, John G. Jones reiterated and expounded these charges of discrimination. Speaking before a crowd of black masons, Jones censured the CFD, especially Fire Marshal Sweeney, for exploiting the company: "They [are] stationed in one of the heaviest districts of the city and compelled to do with ten men what the other companies did with fifteen."⁷¹ Before condemning the city's treatment of Engine Company 21, Jones had warned the audience that it was "useless for the colored people to look to Congress for aid." As Jones's speech indicates, the demise of Chicago's reconstruction mirrored the breakdown of the national Reconstruction project.

Moreover, while Engine Company 21 had consistently demonstrated its efficiency, the city rejected cries from black Chicagoans to appoint a black fire captain. In 1889, local blacks presented petition to Mayor Hempstead Washburne demanding that he appoint a black captain, calling the city's "appointment of a white officer [a negative] reflection on the ability of the colored firemen."⁷² A few months later, the black firemen of Engine Company 21 presented a similar petition to Fire Marshal Sweeney asking that a special board be formed to review their applications for promotion to the captaincy.⁷³ Both petitions were denied. While the Department did not go so far as to call the firemen inept, the city nonetheless began to discriminate against black firefighters and refused to treat them

as the equals of their white counterparts.

Chicago's government further signaled that it had abandoned Engine Company 21 as an experiment in interracial democracy in 1901. The city's newly created Civil Service Commission declared that it would not send the recruit at the top of the eligibility register to Engine Company 21 because he was white.⁷⁴ In doing so, the municipality treated black and white recruits as inherently different and unequal. This differential treatment would later lead the commission to formally establish separate lists for black and white recruits. The commission's actions further signified that promoting an interracial democracy was no longer a priority as the reconstruction of municipal administration continued.

The Chicago Fire Department, an extension of city government, further condoned discrimination against the city's black firemen. Indeed, in 1907, the *Tribune* reported a troubling incident at a white fire station:

Firemen of truck company No. 17 in South Chicago burned a negro in effigy last night... on learning that [a black recruit] had been assigned to work with them. Feeling against the presence of the colored man as a member of the company is so strong that the firemen said they would not sleep in the same dormitory with him.⁷⁵

While the fate of this black recruit is unknown, he likely received the same treatment as John Jackson. Jackson, a black firefighter, was originally assigned to Truck Company 2, but was forced to transfer to Engine Company 21 after the firemen of the white truck company went on strike.⁷⁶ In giving in to demands of these insubordinate white companies, the CFD signaled that black firefighters would not be accorded equal status within the department.

Twenty years later, the department took its discrimination against black firefighters to the ultimate level. Members of Engine Company 21 were directed to switch engines and firehouses with Engine Company 19, moving from their downtown station at 1213 S. Plymouth Court to 3440 S. Rhodes.⁷⁷ Located firmly within the Black Belt, the city's black firemen – now members of Engine Company 19 – were kept out of the sight of white Chicagoans and increasingly neglected by the department. Thus, the city's government drew a color line in the fire department that was more defined and entrenched than it had ever been. After more than fifty years, Engine Company 21 was no more, and the city's experiment with an interracial democracy had come to an end.

⁷⁰ "The Color Line a Failure," *Indianapolis Freeman*, Dec. 4, 1889.

⁷¹ "Mr. Jones Wrath," *Daily Inter Ocean*, Nov. 11, 1889.

⁷² "Needs Non-Partisan Management," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 11, 1891.

⁷³ "Why Mr. Lane Should Be Chosen," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept. 17, 1891.

⁷⁴ "To Unite City Bureaus," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 16, 1901.

⁷⁵ "Firemen Draw Color Line," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 12, 1907.

⁷⁶ "Firemen Draw Color Line."

⁷⁷ Kenneth Little and Joe McNalis, *History of Chicago Firehouses of the 19th Century*, (n.p: Chicago, 1997), 193.

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The demise of the historic company coincided with the breakdown of Reconstruction throughout the city. At the precise moment that they began to charge the city with discriminating against Engine Company 21, black Chicagoans became the targets of intense white racism. According to Allan Spear, as Chicago's black population became more conspicuous, racial hostility heightened.⁷⁸ Again, anxieties over social interactions and labor helped to fuel this emergent anti-black prejudice: "Whites grew anxious as a growing Negro population sought more and better housing; they feared job competition in an era of industrial strife when employers frequently used Negroes as strikebreakers."⁷⁹ At the same time that anti-black racism spread, black Chicagoans also turned inward, abandoning their desire to integrate into civic life for a self-help ideology.⁸⁰ As the century drew to a close, Chicago's civic and public life became segregated, and the gains the blacks had made under the city's reconstruction slowly evaporated.

Conclusion

Engine Company 21 remains a salient symbol of the profound experiment that was Reconstruction. Through a group of former slaves, Chicago reawakened the possibility of an interracial democracy just as this radical vision began to fade in the rest of the nation. Engine Company 21 proved that Reconstruction radically transformed not only the rural South but also Northern cities like Chicago. As these cities began to modernize, blacks seized opportunities to integrate into civic and public life in ways that even the architects of Radical Reconstruction might not have imagined. Through their exemplary actions and occasionally through their words, the black firefighters of Engine Company 21 forcefully pushed back against whites who anxiously tried to deny them a place within a reconstructed America. Yet, just released from the chains of slavery, Chicago's black firefighters could not realize the vision of an interracial democracy alone.

A municipal government that had once been committed to the ideals of Reconstruction betrayed Engine Company 21. The company's demise at the hands of Chicago's government was perhaps the most tragic ending possible – but not the most surprising. Indeed, the story of Engine Company 21 is the story of Reconstruction. Just as blacks began to carve out a place in civic and public life, the governments that once vowed to protect them abandoned them instead. Nonetheless, Engine Company 21 extended for a brief moment the possibility of an interracial democracy. In doing so, the company left a legacy that Chicago and the nation should strive to live up to.

78 Spear, *Black Chicago*, 7.

79 Spear, *Black Chicago*, 8.

80 Spear, *Black Chicago*, 54; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 50.

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