

Entry title: Cincinnati, Ohio 1877 – 1896

Author: Henry Taylor

Chapter number: 5

Word count: 2410

Mayors

Robert M. Moore 1877-1879	Republican
Charles Jacobs, Jr. 1879-1881	Independent
William F. Means 1881-1883	Democrat
Thomas J. Stephens 1883-1885	Democrat
Amor Smith, Jr. 1885-1889	Republican
John B. Mosby 1889-1894	Republican
John A. Caldwell 1894-1897	Republican

Major Events

The business elites begin to build cultural, civic institutions and trade association during this period, including an art museum, music hall, an arts academy, and the Commercial Club. The business elites used their multiple members in these organizations and institutions and associates to develop a consciousness of themselves as a group with mutual interests, despite the differences among them. This group consciousness created a notion of “business citizenship” and the public good, which guided their actions and made it possible for them to function as a team on common issues. Most important, though a process of cultural transposition, the business elites imbued the working class with a “business citizenship” notion of citizenship and the public good.

The 1884 burning of the county jail and county court house and the subsequent riots, which lasted for three nights, reflected the growing tension between business elites and the working class, as well as the elites ongoing effort to co-opt the working class movement. On the one hand, the jail and court house burning and riots reflected the frustrations of workers over political corruptions and governmental impotence, while business elites used the incident to exemplify threats to the social fabric and to demonstrate how easily “plain people” could be led by demagogues and engage in irrational action.

The Cincinnati Industrial Expositions were held between 1870 and 1888 to promote arts and manufactures as well as the economic development of the city. Sponsored by the Ohio Mechanics Institute and Cincinnati's Chamber of Commerce and Board of Trade, the expositions drew exhibitors from throughout the country who sought to demonstrate the superiority of their products, techniques and works, and win prestigious awards.

Cincinnati workers become highly organized. In a six year period, between 1878 and 1884, Cincinnati workers organized 100 new unions, with membership increasing from 1000 to 12,000.

In February 1887, a broad coalition of Cincinnati workers organizes a local branch of The United Labor Party.

In 1886, the Republican Governor Joseph B. Foraker selected George Cox to serve as his chief advisor on patronage and political affairs in Hamilton County. Cox would use this position to build a political machine that would dominate Cincinnati politics until 1911. Cox became a quintessential example of the 19th century political boss.

Cincinnati's renowned Colored Schools were closed in 1887 when segregated public schools were abolished by Ohio Law. From the 1850s to their abolishment by the state legislation in 1887, Cincinnati funded a separate system of black schools, which had their own principals and teachers. The closing of these schools symbolized both the declining social and economic status in Cincinnati and a weakening of the institutional structure that undergirded black community life and culture.

Cincinnati, Ohio 1877-1896

Situated on the banks of the Ohio River, at that borderline separating the North from the South, Cincinnati underwent dramatic change in the late 19th century. Driven by economic transformation and population growth, this remarkable change process produced a "New City," characterized by technological innovation, crisis and disorder and chaotic and unplanned patterns of growth and development. For example, the population leaped by 68.1% between 1870 and 1900, as it grew from 216,239 to 363,591 (147,352) residents and expanded its boundaries from six square miles in 1850 to 35.27 square miles by 1900. Even so, Cincinnati still lost ground in the urban rivalry, as she dropped from the sixth largest city in 1850 to the 10th largest in 1900. Thus, in spite of her impressive growth and development, Cincinnati still fell behind in the urban rivalry. After 1900, she would never again be listed in the top ten largest American cities.

Against this backdrop, the city's volatile change process was characterized by the emergence of a modern manufacturing system, and intense battles between workers and employers as they fought over declining work conditions and contending visions of the "new

city” and the role of the workers in it. As the business elites and workers collided, two additional subplots painted the changing urban landscape with even more texture and color. First, the city’s changing socioeconomic structure caused blacks to lose ground. For example, the abolishment of the Colored School System in 1887 symbolized the growing marginalization of African Americans in the new urban environment, as well as it demonstrated the inability of the “Colored Schools” to stop or even slowdown the downward trajectory of black life in the city. Between 1870 and 1900, for example, the proportion of blacks in low-paying, semi-skilled and unskilled jobs grew dramatically.

Second, the influx of thousands of newcomers combined with the building of large factories triggered the unplanned and chaotic growth of the city. This development, coupled with the growing inability of the municipal institutions to grapple successfully with the problems of water, sewage, transportation, schooling and housing, along with police and fire protections, produce an unprecedented set of urban problems. These issues reflected the need for redefining the urban problem and demonstrated the need for city planning and land-use regulation, while simultaneously highlighting the inefficiency of government. These forces of change were played out on the government and politics, industry, commerce and labor, and race and ethnicity fronts.

Government and Politics

In the late 19th century, governance emergence as a critical problem, as the city confronted unprecedented levels of crime, prostitution, labor turmoil, political corruption, and governmental inefficiency. Increasing industrialization was combining with continued foreign and domestic migration to produce a “new” type of city, which generated unprecedented governance challenges. As Cincinnati’s population grew, and the city became physically

enlarged, the population became increasingly segregated along class and racial lines, and political and social problems took on a spatial dimension. Municipal institutions and agencies established to deal with the walking city became overburdened, outmoded and dilapidated. Concurrently, the splitting up of the city into distinct residential districts, which reflected its class, ethnic and racial make-up, complicated the quest of business and professional elites to gain control over the political system. So, throughout much of the late 19th century, factionalism dominated Cincinnati politics. This fragmentation could only be overcome by triumph of a social group with the unity and power to create an alliance based on neighborhood leaders, who were willing to unite regardless of party affiliation. Three forces emerged during this period to usher in a new political leadership, which gained control over the city's political apparatus near the century's end.

The transformation of the business and professional elites into a conscious group played the critical role in shaping politics and government in the late 19th century. Throughout the period, the elites built cultural institutions, commercial clubs, and good government associations, which brought them together, regardless of where they lived or the economic sector in which they worked. Through their interactions, the elites diluted their rivalries; and by collectively grappling with issues such as smoke abatement, street cleaning, and civil service reform, they began to understand how their mutual interest was a foundation for unity. The prominent attorney, Julius Dexter, epitomized the business and professional elites of this era. He supported cultural institutions and charities, and was prominent in political reform movements. Dexter was involved in many organizations and associations: he was secretary of the Committee of One Hundred, founding shareholder of the City's art museum and Music Hall Association, treasurer of the exclusive Queen City Club, and active in the Commercial Club of Cincinnati.

Participation in these institutions, organizations and associations, gave business and civic elites, like Dexter, a generalized identity and consciousness of themselves as a group, and this “consciousness” morphed into the ideal of “business citizenship” and a business-based notion of the “public good.” These ideals of “business citizenship” and a business-based notion of the “public good” made it possible for the elites to function as a team on common issues, in spite of the differences that separated them. Moreover, through a process of cultural transposition, the business elites were able to imbue the working class with a “business citizenship” notion of citizenship and a business-based notion of the public good. Anchoring these two business ideals were two interactive values: non-partisanship, which meant the placement of the public good over individual and business interests and disdain for favoritism and political corruption. Within this context, the state (government) was viewed as a neutral arbitrator of justice that stood above the partisan fray and only a non-partisan approach could end corruption and guarantee a just city.

The working class, on the other hand, despite their radicalism and flirtation with socialist ideas, never developed *class consciousness*, and they never turned the unrest, numerous protests and organizing activity into a sustainable political movement. One reason is the workers were divided along the lines of national origin, race and ethnicity, as well as by the occupational categories to which they belong. For example, about 57% of the workforce in 1870 and 38% in 1880 were foreign-born and the entire working class was segmented into skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled cohorts. So, then, culture, life in different neighborhoods and varied work experiences created divisions within the working class, which were difficult to overcome. At the same time, by embracing the conceptual frameworks of the business and professional classes, the working class negated their own political agenda by viewing the world through the same set of lens as the elites.

The United Labor Party represented an effort of workers to translate their concerns into political power, but in Cincinnati and elsewhere this effort could not be sustained. The United Labor Party and the politicization of workers failed because it was co-opted. The most intense years of working class radicalism took place between 1886 and 1889. This coincided with the rise of George B. Cox as the driving force behind politics in Cincinnati. The turning point in local politics occurred in 1886, when Republican governor, Joseph B. Foraker, appointed Cox as his chief advisor on patronage and political affairs in Hamilton County.

Cox developed a powerful ward based political machine and then forged an alliance with the business and professional elites to ensure the sustainability of his political machine. To cement the alliance, Cox agreed to the political reforms advocated by the elites. He promoted a series of reforms, including the secret ballot, voter registration, and a series of state laws which, though retaining the mayor-council form of government with ward representation, were designed to give the city a stable and more centralized government. He also endorsed the building of a professional police force, the expansion and equipping of the fire department and other initiatives designed to make Cincinnati a stable, orderly and well-run city. In exchange, the elites helped Cox build and sustain his political machine, which remained in power until the second decade of the 20th century.

Industry, Commerce and Labor

Manufacturing and the machine drove Cincinnati's late-19th century development and spawned significant changes in the city's life and culture. New forms of production and the growing mechanization of industry alter the realities of factory workers and owner alike. To survive and remain competitive, business owners in all economic sectors had to develop new

labor processes and introduce managerial innovations that decreased costs and increased their control over the inner workings of the factory. As production became increasingly routinized and dependent on the machine, the importance and status of skilled workers declined as unskilled laborers, including women and children, came to dominate factory work.

Concurrently, the vast amount of capital required to start or expand a factory caused owners to abandon their financially limited family firms or small partnerships in favor of organizing highly capitalized corporations. This led to the emergence of a new industrial elite and a separation between the ownership and the management factories. The reason is that most factory owners had limited or no experience in plant operations; so, they hired managers to run the factories for them. Thus, as the late-19th century progressed, industrial production grew more efficient and more impersonal. These changes notwithstanding, Cincinnati still fell from 3rd in manufacturing to seventh in overall production in 1880. However, unlike smaller, one-industry towns like Lynn, Massachusetts, Cincinnati was a multi-industrial city. So, even though she fell in overall production after 1860, the city still either led or was among the top five national producers of carriages, furniture, glycerin, coffins, plug tobacco, whisky, safes, clothing, boots and shoes, beer, printed materials, pork and pork by products, sawed lumber, harnesses and various leather goods.

These economic changes had a differential impact on the working class, with both gender and racial implications. The growing mechanization of industry led to the growth of unskilled labor and a dramatic increase in female and child labor. For example, by 1890 women constituted more than half the laborers in the city's clothing, fur, textile, regalia and society banner, box, bag, and canned food establishments. Because women and children workers were unskilled, they were also cheap labor. Manufacturers typically paid women and children workers

one-quarter to one-half the wages of a man. Consequently, their widespread use in factory work depressed the wages of all industrial workers.

The continued proletarianization and degradation of workers produced ongoing confrontations between labor and capital. The growing unrest among Cincinnati workers was part of a broad national trend, with Queen City workers participating in the national struggles locally. Workers in big and small factories organized and joined in battles to improve their plight. Initially, their efforts focused on economic issues, but during the 1880s these struggles took on an increasingly political tone. For example, in 1877 Cincinnati workers joined the Great Railroad Strike and this spawned an epoch of intense worker rebellion in the Queen City. Between 1878 and 1884, workers formed over 100 unions, as the number of trade unionists leaped from 1,000 to 12,000 men and women.

The 1884 Courthouse riot represented the first step toward the development of working class consciousness in Cincinnati. Frustrated by a decade of economic injustice, the misuses of state power, and political and judicial corruption, the workers marched upon and set fire to the county jail and courthouse--popular symbols of injustice. The triggering event was the murder trial Joseph Palmer, a mulatto, and William Berner, a German Immigrant, accused of beating his employer to death in the act of stealing \$285. To workers, the conviction of the man for manslaughter, instead of murder, was symptomatic of the injustice and political corruptions characteristic of the period. So, they took action by burning down the courthouse and jail. The ensuing three day uprising left 35 dead and 200 wounded. The workers viewed the lenient sentence as a reflection of the political and judicial corruption that undermined their struggles for socioeconomic justice.

This battle was followed by the participation of Cincinnati workers in 1866 May Day “general strike” for an eight-hour day, followed by the establishment of a local chapter of the United Labor Party in February 1887. Under the Party’s banner Cincinnati workers waged a political crusade for worker control of the city government. Ironically, in terms of their years of economic and political struggles, Cincinnati workers never viewed their radicalism as a battle between capital and labor; rather, they viewed these fights as battles between the law-abiding class and the law-breaking class. In this sense, the workers placed their struggle in a cultural war rather than labor vs. capital framework. Given the resources and cultural institutions controlled by the elites, they workers had to no chance of winning a cultural war, void of rhetoric that clearly outlined the distinctions between capital and labor. Hence, the cultural war was a fight the workers were doomed to lose from the start. This is why the business and professional elites were able to develop class consciousness, while the working class was not.

Race and Ethnicity

Race was also a defining feature of the 19th century world of work. During this period, while many white workers experienced job dislocation, and a number of white-owned business establishments disappeared, there were still many others that took advantage of the new opportunities created by industrialization. Equally important, while declining wages pushed many white workers to the economic edge, the employment of large numbers of white women and children kept them from falling off.

Black workers, however, experienced a different reality. All black workers occupied a deteriorating position in the labor force. From 1870 to 1890 the more prestigious black occupations, such as barber and teacher, declined as laborer and domestic servant came to

dominate the black job ladder. For example, in Cincinnati in 1890 there were virtually no black workers, male or female, in clerical and sales, painters, carpenters, boot and shoemakers, iron and steel workers, cabinet makers, and the like. Instead, black male workers were concentrated in the laborer and servant work categories, while black women worked mostly as servants and laundresses.

Occupationally, blacks and the Irish dominated common labor and personal and domestic service, although blacks rarely obtained semiskilled jobs as did the Irish. Germans and southern and eastern Europeans obtained white collar jobs and gravitated to the small business and professional fields. The exclusion of blacks from the growing number of white-collar jobs in the clerical and sales area was particularly damaging, since these jobs generally offered upward mobility in the nineteenth century. These jobs required literate workers, and although thousands of black children attended the public schools from the 1850s on, there were only 58 black bookkeepers and clerks, seven black sales workers, and three black stenographers in Cincinnati in 1890—altogether, a mere one percent of the black labor force. Thus, occupationally, during this transitional period and in subsequent eras, the big story for blacks was that the floor of the white worker opportunity structure was their ceiling.

Blacks and European immigrants formed a significant proportion of the population during the era when Cincinnati transitioned from a commercial to industrial city. Yet, between 1870 and 1900, while the proportion of blacks in the population increased, the proportion of immigrants in the city declined in relative and absolute terms. In this time span, the number of blacks increased from 5,904 to 14,498, an increase of 146 percent. Concurrently, the number of immigrants in the city fell from 79,612 to 57,961, a decrease of 27 percent. Even so, in 1900, blacks and immigrants still formed about 22 percent of the city's total population.

Blacks and immigrants, for the most part, along with low-income whites, shared residential space in the Basin, an area situated along the city's waterfront. Within this shared space, blacks built their institutions and lived in residential clusters, which were scattered throughout a setting dominated by native-born and foreign-born whites. Even though blacks shared space with immigrant and native-born whites, their location at the bottom of the economic ladder placed them at a greater disadvantage than other groups in the quest for good housing and neighborhood conditions.

In the Basin, blacks lived in the most undesirable sections of the community and were disproportionately represented in the worst housing units. Irregular and low incomes made life difficult for all workers trapped in the Basin, but racism and economics combined to worsen the situation for blacks and to make them the last group to leave this congested and declining residential area. These were transitional years for African Americans. The old institutional structure anchored by the Colored Schools and churches were giving way and blacks would have to construct a new institutional framework to guide them in the coming century.

See also *Cincinnati, 1828-1854; Cincinnati, 1854-1877*
Henry Louis Taylor, Jr.

Bibliography

Bertaux, N. (1993). Structural Economic Change and Occupational Decline among Black Workers in Nineteenth-Century Cincinnati. In Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. (Ed.), *Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970* (pp. 126-155). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Bertaux, N., Michael Washington (2005 Winter). The "Colored Schools" of Cincinnati and African American Community in Nineteenth-Century Cincinnati, 1849-1890. *Journal of Negro Education* 74 (1): 43-52.

Duggan, E.P. (1977). Markets and Labor: The Carriage and Wagon Industry in Late-Nineteenth-Century Cincinnati. *The Business History Review*, 51(3):308-325

Haydu, J., & Lee, C. (2004). Model Employers and Good Government in the Late 19th and Late 20th Centuries. *Sociological Forum*, 19(2), 177-202.

Haydu, J. (2002). Business Citizenship at Work: Cultural Transposition and Class Formation in Cincinnati, 1870-1910. *The American Journal of Sociology*. 107(6):1424-1467.

Miller, Z. L. (1968). *Boss Cox's Cincinnati*. New York: Oxford University Press

Peirce, D. C. (1979). Mitchell and Rammelsberg: Cincinnati Furniture Manufacturers 1847-1881. *Winterthur Portfolio*, 13, 209-229.

Ross, S. J. (1985). *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788-1890*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Taylor, H. L., Jr. (2000). Creating the Metropolis in Black and White: Black Suburbanization and the Planning Movement in Cincinnati, 1900-1950. In Henry Louis Taylor, Jr., Walter Hill (Ed.), *Historical Roots of the Urban Crisis: African Americans in the Industrial City, 1900-1950* (pp. 51-71). New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc.

Taylor, H. L., Jr. (1984). The Use of Maps in the Study of the Black Ghetto- Formation Process: Cincinnati, 1802-1910," *Historical Methods*, 17(1), 44-58.

Taylor, H. L., Jr., V. Dula (1993). The Black Residential Experience and Community Formation in Antebellum Cincinnati. In Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. (Ed.), *Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970* (pp. 96-125). Urbana: University of Illinois.