

The Case of the Colored Trainmen: World War I and Racial Justice on the American Railroads

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African-American Labor during the First Great Migration

American entry into the First World War opened up additional, if largely temporary opportunities for African-American workers. Many black men took jobs on track gangs, replacing Italian-Americans and other southern and eastern Europeans who had joined the military or taken more lucrative positions in industry. Many black women became car cleaners and manual laborers. While many African Americans saw wartime employment as an opportunity, however, many skilled white workers perceived a threat to both their jobs and their sense of racial superiority. To a far greater extent than PRR managers, the members of the whites-only operating unions (the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, the Order of Railway Conductors, and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen) were determined to prevent black workers from gaining equality in either working conditions or wages. In that sense, African American workers “broke the wheel” of stable and harmonious relations between PRR executives and skilled white workers. Rather than permit the wheel to remain broken, railroad officials reluctantly yielded to the demands of the

operating brotherhoods, ensuring that another generation of black workers would be denied access to skilled positions on the railroads.

The Pennsylvania Railroad was one of many employers that contributed to the first wave of a great migration, in which more than a million African Americans left the South for jobs in northern cities. Beginning in 1916, PRR officials sent labor recruiters to several southern states. The most important was the Reverend James Henry Duckrey, an ally of Booker T. Washington and a longstanding advocate of African-American exodus from the South. Born in Summit Bridge, Delaware, in 1862, Duckrey attended high school in Philadelphia. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1890, only seven years after William Adger became the first African American to receive a degree from that institution. Duckrey then earned a degree in theology from Lincoln University and moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he became the pastor of the Mt. Olive Baptist Church. Within nine years, he had increased the size of the congregation from 25 to more than four hundred. An ardent Democrat, Duckrey lured young African-American voters away from the party of Lincoln, and many observers believed that his ability to turn out the black vote gave John H. H. McNamee a critical edge in the 1902 contest for mayor of Cambridge. McNamee rewarded Duckrey with an appointment as a trustee of the public library.¹

As Duckrey told a reporter in 1903, “In seven years there will be seven million negroes [*sic*] in the north. . . . In the South, their doom is fixed; until they are led out of bondage there can be no real development for them. . . . A negro must leave a community where signs are posted to the effect that ‘dogs and niggers’ are not allowed if he is to develop, and there is no place where he can have so good a chance as in the Northern states.” The reporter for the Cambridge Chronicle opined that “this populating of New England with southern Negroes seems

too absurd a proposition to excite antagonistic feeling,” and it would indeed be many years before large numbers of African Americans left the South.²

The labor shortages associated with World War I offered Duckrey his long-awaited opportunity to instigate the African-American migration to the North. By 1916, Duckrey was employed on the Pennsylvania Railroad, as a “colored messenger” in the Altoona offices of William Wallace Atterbury, then the PRR’s vice president in charge of operations. Atterbury was an early and enthusiastic advocate for the recruitment of African Americans from the South, and he soon identified Duckrey as the ideal recruiter. During the spring of 1916, Duckrey went to Jacksonville, Florida, and enticed hundreds of workers – enough to fill several northbound trains – to move to the North for jobs on the PRR. Over the next few years, Duckrey and other undertook additional recruiting drives in locations throughout the South.³

Southern whites, well aware that their economy depended on low-wage African-American labor, placed considerable obstacles in the path of PRR labor recruiters. The city of Savannah, Georgia, for example, required labor recruiters to pay a \$1,000 licensing fee, and Duckrey and other recruiters responded by simply basing their hiring operations just outside city limits. In July 1917, law enforcement officials in Shreveport, Louisiana, stopped and turned back two hundred recruits, destined for the PRR facilities at Pittsburgh.⁴

Despite those tactics, PRR recruiters persuaded more than 6,400 African-Americans to leave the South. Duckrey and others promised free passage north, although railroad officials later deducted the fare from each worker’s paycheck. Ernest Grey, from Cat Island, Georgia, spoke for many migrants when he recalled that in 1916 “I come on the free transportation. . . . They wouldn’t let us board at the union [depot train] sheds. So we had to board the train . . . going out from Charleston. . . . They didn’t want nobody that didn’t have any seat. But they hid

when the man came through and check, you see, you hide under the seat like that. And that's the way we got away from there.”⁵

African-American migrants joined a roughly equal number of what PRR officials termed “native stock” African-American workers who already lived in the North. Many African-American workers did not remain long, deserting the railroad for less difficult or more lucrative positions in wartime factories. During the war, one government official estimated that, of the 12,000 black workers that the PRR had hired, fewer than 2,000 stayed with the company.⁶

Following the recruitment drives, the railroad employed a Duckrey as a “Negro Consultant” to act as a “liaison between [the] Railroad and the colored population.” While his exact duties are unclear, they seem to have included the provision of housing for African-American laborers, combined with efforts to maintain discipline, prevent defections, and maintain harmonious relations between African-American employees and white workers and townspeople. After the war, as the number of African-American employees declined significantly, the PRR reassigned Duckrey, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, as a crossing guard on the Maryland Division.⁷

If PRR management demonstrated relative indifference to its black workers, the labor unions that represented PRR employees exhibited outright hostility. The four operating brotherhoods had constitutional prohibitions against the admission of African American members.⁸ Of the fourteen craft unions subsumed under the AFL's Railway Department, only two accepted African Americans. The Stationary Firemen and Oil Men actively recruited black workers, while the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees permitted African Americans to join in a subordinate capacity. They were “entitled to all the benefits and protection guaranteed by the constitution to members and [they] shall be represented in the grand

lodge by delegates of their own choosing from any white lodge on the system division where they are employed.”⁹

The USRA’s relatively color-blind policies during World War I encouraged African American workers to unionize, at a time when most labor organizations remained resolutely opposed to integration. As was the case with female labor, federal policy helped shape the employment of African-American workers on the Pennsylvania Railroad, but did little to protect their long-term interests. The USRA’s General Order No. 27 specified that, “Effective June 1, 1918, colored men employed as firemen, trainmen and switchmen shall be paid the same rates of wages as are paid white men in the same capacities.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, on a railroad with some six hundred occupational classifications, it was a certainty that the wages of few black workers matched those of their white counterparts, with even highly skilled members of the former group employed as hostlers and stationary firemen, while the railroad’s managers struggled to hire enough white workers to fill such corresponding positions as engineman and fireman. An officer of the whites-only AFL, representing PRR employees in Pittsburgh surmised, probably correctly, the neither the USRA nor the railroad had even bothered to distribute copies of the order to African-American workers.¹¹

In an atmosphere of USRA support, and in the face of staunch opposition from mainstream white unions, African American workers on the PRR played important roles in developing alternate forms of union representation. Those all-black unions were rarely successful, however, thanks to low membership (often resulting from a justified fear of reprisals), scant funds, suppression by managers, and legal opposition from established white unions. Industrial unionism proved no more successful among African Americans than it had among white workers, and the one major effort to create an organization to represent all black

railway workers enjoyed but a brief existence. The Railway Men's International Benevolent Industrial Association, founded by dining car waiter Robert L. Mays in 1915, was strongest in Chicago, and lasted little more than five years.¹² Moreover, compared to the white brotherhoods, however, black labor organizations tended to be regionally fragmented. The most significant exception, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters did not become affiliated with the AFL until 1925, and was largely ineffective for another decade after that – nor did it represent PRR employees, just Pullman Company workers who traveled on PRR rails.¹³

Aside from Pullman sleeping cars, segregation in railway employment was perhaps most apparent in the PRR's dining cars, one of the few places where black employees, white supervisors, and white passengers interacted. The cooks who prepared the food and the waiters who served it were invariably African American, but the dining car conductors and stewards – who seated diners and collected the bills – were white, as were the passengers themselves. The combination of wartime inflation USRA policies, and a growing sense of labor militancy led dining-car employees to establish labor unions, separated according to race. The Brotherhood of Dining Car Conductors, established in New York in 1918, required members to “be of the Caucasian race” – a stipulation that was probably not necessary, given that railroads would not hire African Americans for such positions.¹⁴

Excluded by both race and job classification from the Brotherhood of Dining Car Conductors, African American cooks and waiters initiated an independent organization. In 1917 black PRR employees organized the aptly named Dining Car Cooks and Waiters' Association, also based in New York. The organization soon attracted members from the Baltimore & Ohio; the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad; and several other eastern carriers. In May 1920, three years after establishing the union, its leaders agreed to affiliate with the Brotherhood

of Dining Car Employees, a similar group representing African American crews on the New Haven, the Boston & Albany, the Boston & Maine, and other New England lines. The combined organization, ultimately representing the interests of more than two thousand members, took the name of the latter union. Farther to the west, Robert Mays assisted in the creation of the National Brotherhood of Dining Car Employees, essentially as a craft-based successor to his Railway Men's International Benevolent Industrial Association. Although likewise organized in New York City, it was most active on routes west of Chicago, with a fairly small presence on western extremity of the PRR.¹⁵

Colored Trainmen

In the absence of strong and effective African American unions, some black workers acted individually, in an effort to obtain higher pay and more equitable treatment. Emboldened by the service of African-American troops during the war, some black employees fought for greater opportunities on the Pennsylvania Railroad, yet without the support of white workers who were equally opposed to managerial policies. Charles Malone began working for the PRR in July 1917 as a hostler, positioning locomotives in railroad yards – what one employee later described as “the least desirable work for a fireman.”¹⁶ Hostling was, however, one of the most highly skilled occupations open to a black man. Malone soon rose to a supervisory position, overseeing a crew of African-American hostlers at Morrisville, Pennsylvania, on the New York Division. As labor shortages eased, the PRR foremen gradually replaced black hostlers with Italian immigrant labor. When Malone, along with the Italian hostlers, responded to a May 1919 Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen membership drive by attempting to join the

union, a BLF&E official representing Local No. 253 returned his \$3.00 membership fee. Later that day Edward Braus, the superintendent of the Morrisville roundhouse, informed Malone that he had been fired. Malone claimed that Braus had responded to demands from BLF&E officials to eliminate a troublesome black agitator. He recalled that “the boss told me he was sorry . . . but that the Brotherhood of Engineers ordered him to move me, and not allow me to move an engine; that the war was over and they could get plenty of men now and men of any nationality could belong to the Brotherhood excepting the colored men.”¹⁷ What is significant is that a union official, and not a PRR manager, demanded that Malone be relieved of his duties.

Such treatment must have been a fairly common experience as the industry contracted after the Armistice. What was unusual, however, was that Malone and five of his former colleagues filed grievance proceedings and demanded reinstatement. Under ordinary circumstances, they probably would have made little headway against white PRR executives, who in this instance were willing to exhibit solidarity with the members of the conservative, white, BLF&E. These were not ordinary circumstances, however, as the PRR and all of its executives and employees were answerable to the United States Railroad Administration. As such, Malone could reasonably expect that General Order No. 27 would protect his rights. Clearly imbued with the spirit of wartime activism, he asked, rhetorically, “We are good on the battlefield, and we watn [*sic*] to know why we cannot be good here.”¹⁸ Malone attained a measure of justice, eventually settling for the back-pay differential between his former wages as a hostler and his current wages as a laborer.

Malone seems to have displayed little animosity toward the PRR managers who had fired him. He did, however, sue the BLF&E for \$20,000 in damages, alleging that that union representatives had engaged in a conspiracy to pressure Braus and other PRR officials to fire

him. The union responded with the legal nicety that Malone had actually been “in the employ of the United States Gov. [i.e., the USRA] instead” of the Pennsylvania Railroad.¹⁹ In order to defend themselves against this suit, the PRR officials permitted the BLF&E to examine (without a subpoena, apparently), Malone’s personnel records, to the extent that the union representative “expressed his appreciation of [PRR] management in talking to him about the Malone case, and went away highly pleased with the aid [PRR executives] had given him.”²⁰

The incident involving Charles Malone illustrates two important themes in the company’s labor-relations policy. First, it demonstrates the ongoing difficulties caused by the PRR’s hiring policies. A local foreman had hired Malone, promoted Malone to hostler, and subsequently demoted him in response to union pressure, all without senior management’s knowledge. The resulting furor caught those senior executives unawares because they had never developed a centralized labor bureau, and had never formulated any policy to deal with this sort of situation. Second, the Malone case indicates the extent to which management was willing to side with their traditional adversaries – the unions – in order to maintain relative labor peace. Executives did demote Malone at the union’s insistence, after all, and did allow the union access to personnel information that was supposedly the sole purview of management. As long as union leaders and rank-and-file members believed that African-American workers would be demoted or fired in order to preserve white jobs, they were less likely embrace union activism, less likely to strike, less likely to criticize managerial prerogatives regarding wages and working conditions.

Government intervention, in the form of state full-crew laws, provided job opportunities for African American workers, while exposing them to the discriminatory policies practiced by both managers and the members of the operating brotherhoods. The same could be said for working conditions in Pullman sleeping cars and PRR dining cars. In each of those

environments, however, whites and African Americans were divided along craft lines as well as racial lines. White Pullman conductors supervised black Pullman porters, while white dining car conductors and stewards oversaw the actions of African American cooks and waiters. Both races served the public, but they did so in different ways. What made the case of the colored trainmen unique was that black and white workers were performing precisely the same jobs, although with very different levels of pay, union representation, and job security.

Long passenger and freight trains generally required a minimum of five crewmen, in order to operate safely and efficiently. The conductor was in charge of the train, supervised its operation under the governance of train orders, and (in the case of freight trains) planned switching moves at industry sidings. The engineman ran the locomotive, the fireman managed the fire, and both assumed responsibility for keeping the locomotive in good running order and observing speed indications and lineside signals. In the early days of railroad operations, a pair of brakemen set the handbrakes on each car. Even after the widespread adoption of airbrakes at the beginning of the twentieth century, brakemen threw switches, coupled and uncoupled cars, and, in an emergency, would protect the front and rear of the train with flags, lanterns, or fuses. On passenger trains, brakemen and the conductor assumed the additional responsibilities of selling and collecting tickets, and assisting passengers in boarding or exiting the cars. Four crewmen were generally sufficient for short freight trains, and for passenger trains that served sparsely populated local markets.

In many instances, however, public policy trumped the dictates of operating efficiency. Beginning with Arkansas in 1907, state legislatures adopted full-crew laws, mandating a minimum number of operating employees on each train. Labor unions tended to be the strongest supporters of this legislation, which increased both employment opportunities and union

membership rolls. However, full-crew laws also rested on public fear, bordering on hysteria, that undermanned trains were a significant threat to public safety. Many of the states served by the PRR adopted full-crew laws during the early 20th century – Indiana in 1909, Pennsylvania in 1911, New York in 1913, New Jersey in 1914 (?), Ohio in 1902²¹, and Illinois in DATE. The Indiana law, for example, required five crewmen on freight trains of fewer than fifty cars, with an additional crew member for freights trains that exceeded that exceeded fifty cars. Passenger trains with five or more cars likewise required five crewmen, with “said brakeman or flagman shall not be required to perform the duties of baggage master, express messenger or porter.”²²

By 1913, the PRR executives claimed that full-crew laws increased wages by \$850,000 per year on Lines East alone, and they sought to minimize the cost of the legislation by hiring the least expensive workers available. On average, wage rates for African-American workers were 10 to 20 percent below comparable wages for whites, a discrepancy that management attributed to the differing rates of productivity, and not racism. PRR managers were not color blind – far from it, they shared prevailing beliefs that African-American workers were inferior to whites – but this was hardly a concern for jobs that management considered unnecessary.

At first, full-crew laws thus provided African Americans with access to high-paying positions in the railroad industry. This effect was only temporary, as unions soon exploited full-crew laws to exclude African-Americans from PRR train crews, in favor of white workers. In some instances, whites-only unions fought for equal pay for all workers, yet that seeming desire for parity was no more a manifestation of racial tolerance than was management’s decision to hire African-American workers in the first place. Union officials emphasized that wage equality would make African-American workers as expensive as white ones, and thus remove all incentive for the railroad to hire them. The labor shortages of World War I, and the force

reductions that followed the end of USRA control, brought about a showdown between the two races.²³

Branch-line passenger trains carried few passengers, generated little revenue, and required little effort on the part of the legions of brakemen mandated by state law. As such, the PRR managers believed that they could economize on labor costs by reclassifying the “colored porters” employed on certain passenger routes as “colored trainmen,” in order to comply with the requirements of full-crew laws in Indiana and Ohio. These “colored trainmen” received sixty percent of the pay earned by white brakemen, even though PRR officials acknowledged “that colored trainmen are to perform practically the same duties as head brakemen, and in addition, look after the coaches and passengers a little more carefully than would be done by a [white] head brakeman.”²⁴ In practical terms, this meant that African-American crewmen cleaned cars en-route, transferred baggage, and rented pillows to drowsy passengers.²⁵ As one official stated, they handled “the many unpleasantnesses that may arise from the transportation of passengers.”²⁶ Managers on the St. Louis Division were even more brazen in its efforts to circumvent full-drew laws, employing “Colored Milk Porters” who presumably had little if any contact with passengers, and certainly no authority over train operations.²⁷

As was the case with the hostlers at Morrisville, opposition to the use of colored trainmen came from the white brotherhoods, although disguised under a veneer of solidarity. In 1914 representatives from the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen insisted that colored trainmen should receive brakeman’s (i.e., equal) pay, with the resulting positions reclassified from trainmen to brakemen. That demand had nothing to do with racial tolerance or working-class solidarity, however. White brakemen knew that if African-American trainmen’s positions were reclassified as brakemen, most would have so little seniority that white brakemen could bump them from

passenger service, taking those highly desirable jobs for themselves. White brakemen were also jealous that colored porters were able to rent pillows to passengers – a subservient job, perhaps, but one that could bring in between eighty and a hundred dollars per year in extra income on the best runs. Furthermore, absent the economic advantage gained from employing black workers at reduced rates, PRR supervisors might simply fire their black train service employees and replace them with white men.²⁸

PRR officials agreed to elevate colored trainmen's wages to the level of white brakemen, but refused to commingle the black and white seniority rosters, as the BRT had demanded. Benjamin McKeen, the general manager of Lines West, thought that it was "unfair to be obliged to dismiss these men in order to make places for white brakemen," particularly as "the 'colored trainmen' now in passenger service could not go into freight service as this would cause friction."²⁹ In the end, executives agreed with the BRT that, of the twenty-four colored trainmen, only "about seven" would be kept in service as porters after August 15, 1915, while the remainder "would be taken off and white men used instead."³⁰ Four of those who had been dismissed ultimately filed suit against the railroad, demanding the back-pay differential between their wages and those of brakemen. The PRR's pre-1920 policy of decentralized employment decisions harmed the company in that instance, inasmuch as the plaintiffs alleged that a local train master had verbally promised the higher wage rate, causing the general solicitor of Lines West to wonder "who had the authority to fix the colored trainmen's wages."³¹ In June 1917, the court sided with the PRR in denying the back wages. The Conductor's and Trainmen's Award of 1913 between the railroad and the BRT had fixed the pay of white brakemen, but that contractual obligation did not apply to African-American crew members, who were excluded from membership in the union.

By the time that the colored trainmen had lost the first round in their legal battle against the PRR, the United States had declared war on the Central Powers, with the railroad industry coming under USRA control. After the USRA had assumed control of the PRR's operations, in December 1917, the administration's employment policies soon began to affect African-American train-service employees. Some of these changes were cosmetic, as when the USRA required the Railroad to issue "Brakeman" hat badges to African-American passenger crewmen in place of the "Trainman" badges that they had formerly worn (they did not receive brakemen's uniforms, however).³² More substantively, Supplement No. 12 to General Order No. 27 required that all employees (regardless of race) who performed any of the duties of a brakeman be given the same pay and seniority rights as a brakeman. The USRA thus unintentionally echoed the BRT position a few years earlier, initially ensuring that colored trainmen, if placed in same seniority pool as white brakemen, would be outbid for passenger runs. Moreover, the subsequent USRA Supplement No. 20 stipulated that railroads were not required to remove established (i.e., African-American) employees from passenger train service, even if other, white employees had accumulated more seniority, while on freight service.³³

While General Order No. 27 indicated the federal government's willingness to pay lip service to the concept of racial equality, that attitude ultimately yielded to their desire – reflecting that of the Wilson administration – to maintain the support of organized labor. Under those circumstances, the leadership of the all-white operating brotherhoods had little difficulty in persuading the USRA to ignore both the letter and the spirit of General Order No. 27, and to systematically exclude African Americans from train service. USRA officials issued instructions that African-American train service employees would not be permitted to "take the places of white men."³⁴ In 1919, after Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen threatened a strike on

southeastern railroads (where African American trainmen were far more common than on the PRR), USRA officials stipulated that “Negroes are not to be used as conductors, flagmen, baggagemen, or yard conductors.”³⁵

White workers, represented by the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, soon expressed their outrage over the Railroad’s acceptance of the USRA’s decision to reclassify colored trainmen as brakemen. The issue was not one of pay, since the former group had been receiving brakemen’s pay rates since 1915. Nor was the issue one of numbers, inasmuch as the Railroad employed only seven such employees in the far southwestern reaches of the system, most of whom worked between Indianapolis and St. Louis (these were the same seven men, out of the original group of 24, who had survived the Railroad’s 1915 compromise with the BRT, and had led to the Colored Porter Cases that were even then working their way through the courts), along with two colored passenger brakemen on the Fort Wayne. The issue was, instead, that African-American employees could out-bid white workers, even those with lower seniority, for coveted passenger jobs.³⁶

Under the terms of the USRA’s 1919 directive, some colored trainmen retained their jobs on the Pennsylvania Railroad, with union officials attempting to have their fellow workers demoted or fired, at odds with the PRR managers who were endeavoring to protect the jobs of these same employees. Ignoring, or at least selectively interpreting, Supplement No. 20, BRT officials insisted that PRR managers bar African-American employees from passenger train service, noting that the railroad’s use of colored porters as brakemen “is entirely foreign to our seniority practice.”³⁷ Superintendent R. C. Barnard indicated that “some of our [white] conductors seem to have very little confidence in the ability of the colored trainmen who perform the work of brakemen, with the result that a very great portion of the work that should be done

by the colored trainmen . . . is being done by other members of the train crew, including the baggagemen,” this last practice itself a violation of the Ohio and Indiana full-crew laws.³⁸ The BRT further encouraged the PRR to follow the policy of the superintendent of the Logansport Division who, according to the union, “would simply displace them with white trainmen without any ceremony.”³⁹

The fate of the PRR’s colored trainmen was part of a larger national battle between white and African American labor organizations. Barred from the BRT, black workers in 1912 established a separate union, first organized in 1912 as the Colored Trainmen of America, and incorporated six years later (during the period of USRA oversight) as the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen. In 1919, ACRT officials asked the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the largest and most active civil rights organization in the United States at that time, to investigate wage inequality between white and African American trainmen. The problem was especially severe in Tennessee and Mississippi, states where racism was far more overt and vicious than was the case in areas served by the PRR. In early 1920, shortly before the USRA’s termination, the NAACP filed a grievance with the administration’s Board of Wages and Working Conditions, winning back pay in excess of \$125,000, as well as an ongoing wage increase amounting to \$12,525 per month. White BRT members in the two states were incensed, and in early 1921 distributed flyers threatening their African American counterparts with lynching. There were widespread reports that bounties of \$300 had been placed on the heads of any colored trainmen on the Illinois Central who accepted equal pay with whites. Several black trainmen were subsequently killed, and others severely beaten. Protests against colored trainmen, while far less violent, erupted on several other railroads, including the Norfolk & Western and several lines in Texas.⁴⁰

Although BRT members on the PRR were far less violent and confrontational in their racism, events in the South presented a cautionary example to PRR managers. While those managers generally tolerated (and in some cases openly supported) the employment rights of colored trainmen, they became increasingly reluctant to jeopardize harmonious relations with unionized white workers. The company's decentralized employment practices further complicated the situation, ensuring that there was neither a systematic or uniform managerial response to the crisis. The general superintendent of the Indiana Division pointed out that "These [African-American] men are regularly and consistently performing the duties that were assigned to them, and in fact are keeping our trains much cleaner than would be done by regular white Brakemen, and also are more attentive to passengers, particularly the women and children." He went on to insist that "if the colored Trainmen should be taken out of these positions, we should, under all circumstances, find a position for them."⁴¹ Some, after all, had been in PRR service since the late 1890s.⁴² General Superintendent R. K. Rochester acknowledged "the injustice of the peremptory action" of removing African-Americans from service, yet thought that this should be done "for the good of the service as a whole" and to "allay the complaint of the white trainmen."⁴³

After the USRA returned the railroads to private control, in the spring of 1920, PRR executives quickly yielded to union demands that colored trainmen be removed from duty, often on the flimsiest of pretexts. All of those colored trainmen serving on the Logansport Division were terminated in 1920, "due to catching some of the men 'bootlegging.'"⁴⁴ The one colored brakeman on the Columbus Division resigned the same year rather than accept a reassignment to the Columbus Union Station baggage room.⁴⁵ On June 7, 1921, following the repeal of the Indiana full-crew law, PRR officials slashed the wages of the remaining colored trainmen and

reclassified them as “porters.”⁴⁶ Two more were subsequently fired, one in December of that year “in connection with [a] complaint made by a passenger,” another in February 1922 “on account of [a] letter written by him, which he signed with another man’s name, in which he gave an account of a mythical trip he had taken on the train, and criticising [*sic*] the dining car service.”⁴⁷

Whether the Railroad had just cause for dismissing these employees, or whether it simply seized on excuses to placate white workers and rid the Company of a troublesome inconsistency in its employment practices, the results were still the same. By the early 1920s, the handful of African-American train service employees had been eliminated, with remaining black employees being restricted dining car crews and to such unskilled jobs as freight handlers, laborers, and cleaners. Even in those positions, African-American employees were extremely vulnerable – in 1920, for example, five PRR dining car crewmen became involved in an altercation with two racist white southerners, and were arrested on charges of disorderly conduct.⁴⁸

The saga of the colored train porters continued even after the porters themselves had lost their jobs. Nathaniel Marable had been a porter since 1908, typically assigned to trains between Logansport, Indiana and Louisville, Kentucky, a comparative backwater on the vast PRR system. Along with several co-workers, he sued the PRR in 1916, demanding \$2,663.90 as compensation for the differential between his wages and those of white brakemen. The Circuit Court of Clark County, Indiana decided in his favor, but the PRR appealed the case to the Appellate Court of Indiana, where judges could not reach a verdict. The case was then transferred to the Indiana Supreme Court, which, on October 7, 1919, reversed lower court’s decision and ordered a new trial. Within months, USRA control ended, and PRR officials now had a much freer hand to suppress the rights of African American employees, in order to maintain harmony with the white

operating unions. Company managers were also awakened to the possibility that a defeat in the courts might lead to higher wages for African-American workers in other occupations throughout the system. They fought back with a two-pronged strategy, demonstrating their good faith by increasing porter's monthly wages from \$95 to \$120, and then to \$140. The railroad's managers also made effective use of its legal talent and ultimately, on December 5, 1924, Clark County Circuit Court dismissed the suit and held Marable and his fellow plaintiffs responsible for court costs.⁴⁹

While the number of colored trainmen was never large in absolute terms, their story reveals a great deal about the attitudes of management, railway unions, and employee relations. Members of the BRT feared and openly discriminated against fellow crewmen who happened to be black – an uncharitable response, perhaps, but one that was certainly in keeping with the prevailing attitudes of most labor unions at the time. PRR managers were far more racially tolerant than workers or union officials and often sought at least a modicum of justice their African-American employees. The company's executives may have promoted black porters to the position of colored trainmen in order to subvert the intent of state full-crew laws, and ultimately to save money. Nevertheless, managers seemed genuinely uncomfortable at the thought of dismissing these men from the service for no better reason than the opposition of white workers. During the late 1910s and early 1920s, those managers miscalculated badly, when they responded to the dictates of the state, whether in the form of full-crew laws or of USRA policies. Unionized white employees bristled at the thought that they had been unable to outbid African-Americans for coveted passenger-service jobs, and they bristled even more at the thought that African-American employees might even take away the jobs that whites already occupied. The employment of even a handful of colored trainmen, whether to conform to full-crew laws, to

accommodate USRA policy, to save money, or simply to protect the livelihoods of long-time African-American PRR employees, illustrated the law of unintended consequences. Railroad officials had caused serious damage to its employee relations precisely because their decision to hire and protect black employees (no matter how halfheartedly or inconsistently) threatened to shatter management's implicit guarantee of lifetime and multigenerational employment to its white male workers. Those workers could scarcely imagine that women might supplant the future railroad careers of their sons, much less their own. They could, however, readily imagine that African-American workers would replace them – or, more likely, their children – on the railroad.⁵⁰

¹ *Cambridge Chronicle*, September 5, 1903; Kurt Bell, *Milepost Journal of the Friends of the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania*, September 1998, also in Kurt Bell, Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania, "Tears, Trains and Triumphs: The Historical Legacy of African-Americans and Pennsylvania's Railroads," <http://www.rrmuseumpa.org/about/rrpeopleandsociety/legacy.shtml>; Pennsylvania State University, University Archives and Records Center, "Penn Biographies: William Adger (1856-1885)," http://www.archives.upenn.edu/people/1800s/adger_wm.html, accessed on March 15, 2014.

² *Cambridge Chronicle*, September 5, 1903 (quotes).

³ Kurt Bell, *Milepost Journal of the Friends of the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania*, September 1998, also in Kurt Bell, Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania, "Tears, Trains and Triumphs: The Historical Legacy of African-Americans and Pennsylvania's Railroads," <http://www.rrmuseumpa.org/about/rrpeopleandsociety/legacy.shtml>.

⁴ Joe William Trotter, *River Jordan: African American Urban Life in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 97; Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 52.

⁵ Quotation in Kurt Bell, *Milepost Journal of the Friends of the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania*, September 1998, also in Kurt Bell, Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania, "Tears, Trains and Triumphs: The Historical Legacy of African-Americans and Pennsylvania's Railroads," <http://www.rrmuseumpa.org/about/rrpeopleandsociety/legacy.shtml>.

⁶ Dewey H. Palmer, "Moving North: Migration of Negroes during World War I," *Phylon* 28 (1967): 52-62, 58-59; Joe William Trotter, *River Jordan: African American Urban Life in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 97; Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 52.

⁷ H. A. Enochs to John F. Deasy, July 21, 1942 (quote), HML, Box 309, folder 13.

⁸ The 1913 constitution of the BLF&E was typical: "Any worker within the jurisdiction [i.e., in the United States and Canada] who has served for at least 30 days, white, of good moral character, sober and industrious, not less than 18 years of age, and able to read and write the English language, is eligible for membership. Mexicans, American Indians, or those of Spanish-Mexican extraction, are ineligible. (International president authorized to grant special dispensation in individual cases with regard to Indian applicants.)" Reprinted in Stewart, *Handbook of American Trade-Unions*, 262.

⁹ Quote is from Stewart, *Handbook of American Trade-Unions*, 265; Unsigned memo to Martin Clement and J. P. Newell, November 29, 1942, PHMC, Box 23 (9-1619), folder 011; Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922) 409.

¹⁰ United States Railroad Administration, *General Order No. 27: Wages of Railroad Employees* (Washington: U.S. GPO, May 25, 1918).

¹¹ Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 53.

¹² Mays was willing to affiliate with the AFL, but only so long as that organization was willing to end its discriminatory practices. “We agree with the policies and principles of the American Federation of Labor so long as they are American and in the interests of the workingmen,” he noted in 1918, “but if their practices are against Negroes, then we are against the American Federation of Labor unflinchingly.” *The Negro in Chicago*, 410.

¹³ An earlier union, the Pullman Car Porters’ Brotherhood, established in 1900, quickly faded, as did similar unionization efforts in 1909, 1910, and 1915. During World War I, USRA policies encouraged the formation of the Pullman Porters and Maids Protective Association – but that organization was soon supplanted by the Pullman Porters Benefit Association of America, a pliant company union controlled by Pullman Company executives. The Pullman Employees League (established in 1918) and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Protective Union (1919) fared somewhat better, and served as antecedents to the later Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, headed by journalist A. Philip Randolph. Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 59-65; Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 51.

¹⁴ Quoted in Stewart, *Handbook of American Trade-Unions*, 252. The Brotherhood of Dining Car Porters had only about a thousand members nationwide, and was represented on the PRR only in New York and Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ Stewart, *Handbook of American Trade-Unions*, 256-8; Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 59.

¹⁶ Paul C. Dietz, *Firing on the Pennsy: A Fireman on the Pennsylvania Railroad Describes the Last Hurrah of the Steam Engine, 1943-1947* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 2001), 3.

¹⁷ Charles Malone to Railroad Administrator, June 17, 1919.

¹⁸ Charles Malone to Railroad Administrator, June 17, 1919 (quotes); C. H. Markham to Elisha Lee, February 26, 1919; Charles B. Kennedy to Walker Hines, February 15, 1919; all in HML, Box 932, folder 11.

¹⁹ Timothy Shea to Elisha Lee, November 14, 1919 (quote); HML, Box 932, folder 11.

²⁰ Charles Malone vs. Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, Local No. 253, et al., Supreme Court of New Jersey, Mercer County, November 19, 1919; H.A.E. to R.V.M., October 29, 1920 (quote), all in HML, Box 932, folder 11; “Charles Malone, Plaintiff, v. Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, et al., Defendants,” *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court and, at Law, in the Court of Errors and Appeals of the State of New Jersey, Volume IX*, February Term 1920 (Newark, N.J.: Soney & Sage, 1921), 347-51; *The Atlantic Reporter* 110 (1920) 696-8; *Law and Labor* 2:12 (December 1920), 274-5; Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 324-5.

²¹ Date is from Trotter, *River Jordan*, 68 – seems too early.

²² By 1914 at least two further cases were before the Indiana courts, and another in Indiana, to determine whether these colored trainmen satisfied the requirements of the full crew law. The Railroad successfully argued that, even though “these colored ‘trainmen’ perform porter service they are examined on the book of rules and are otherwise qualified to perform the duties of ‘brakemen,’ thus complying with the requirements of the ‘Full Crew’ law.” Indiana Full-Crew Act of 1909, p.1. 68, HML, Box 1261, folder 9. B. McKeen to J. G. Walber, October 29, 1914 (quote), HML, Box 1261, folder 9; Mark Aldrich, *Safety First: Technology, Labor, and Business in the Building of American Work Safety, 1870-1939* (Baltimore Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 173-74; James W. Ely, Jr., *Railroads and American Law* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 261-62; SEE: Bureau of Railway Economics, “The Arguments for and against Train Crew Legislation,” *Bulletin* 77 (Washington DC, 1915).

²³ David E. Bernstein, “Racism, Railroad Unions, and Labor Regulations,” *The Independent Review* 5 (Fall 2000): 237-47.

²⁴ Colored porters earned \$4.00 for a trip between Indianapolis and St. Louis, compared to \$7.50 for a white brakeman. One colored porter, Nathaniel Marable, earned \$518.15 per year, while brakeman’s wages would have been \$805.75 as a brakeman. In Ohio, black porters were paid brakemen’s wages because they were legally entitled to carry switch keys, and could receive train orders. I. W. Geer to H. K. Brady, June 28, 1919 (quote); HML, Box 1314, folder 4; E. B. Dithridge to I. W. Geer, 29 December 1924, HML, Box 760, folder 6; H. E. Newcomet to R. E. McCarty, 21 October 1915 (Recapitulation figures), HML, Box 1261, folder 9.

²⁵ Benjamin McKeen, the general manager of Lines West, bluntly stated that “it was not the intention of the Company to provide colored trainmen except on trains where this cleaning, etc., of cars enroute was desired.” “Memorandum of Meeting . . . Pay of Colored Trainmen,” October 26, 1914. The vice-president of the (white) Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen went further, insisting “that the character of work required of them will not be performed by white brakemen; therefore, white brakemen are not available for the employment.” “Pennsylvania Lines West of Pittsburgh, Case of Colored ‘Trainmen,’ Conductors and Brakemen – Conference Committee, May 24, 1915;” B. McKeen to J. G. Walber, October 29, 1914; all in HML, Box 1261, folder 9.

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- ²⁶ R. K. Rochester to I. W. Geer, September 14, 1920, HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ²⁷ I. W. Geer to S. M. Rankin, 2 October 1922, HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ²⁸ “Pennsylvania Lines West of Pittsburgh, Case of Colored ‘Trainmen,’ Conductors and Brakemen – Conference Committee, May 24, 1915;” E. B. Dithridge, “Memorandum: Colored Trainmen,” May 20, 1914; “Memorandum of Meeting . . . Pay of Colored Trainmen,” October 26, 1914; all in HML, Box 1261; W. E. Davis to Taber Hamilton, 10 November 1924, HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ²⁹ Benjamin McKeen to J. G. Walber, October 29, 1914, HML, Box 1261, folder 9.
- ³⁰ McKeen to Walber, October 29, 1914; E. T. Whiter to B. McKeen, August 31, 1915; both in HML, Box 1261, folder 9 (quote). Another source puts the date of the force reduction as January 1, 1916. W. C. Downing to I. W. Geer, September 9, 1921; HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ³¹ E. T. Whiter to E. H. Seneff, September 16, 1915; Seneff to Whiter, February 12, 1917 (quote); Seneff to Whiter, June 25, 1917, all in HML, Box 1261, folder 9.
- ³² S. L. Mider to W. Lafferty, September 26, 1919, reprinted in Pennsylvania Railroad, Southwestern Region, Joint Submission of Superintendent and Trainmen (Cincinnati Division), March 4, 1921; HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ³³ H. K. Brady to I. W. Geer, April 27, 1919; Brady to Geer, September 23, 1919; T. B. Hamilton to Brady, October 3, 1919; all in HML, Box 1314, folder 4; Geer to Hamilton, June 28, 1920, HML, Box 760, folder 6; USRA, “Supplement No. 12 to General Order No. 27,” December 2, 1918, HML, Box 1024, folder 4.
- ³⁴ Following protests from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League, the USRA withdrew the instructions. Bernstein, “Racism, Railroad Unions, and Labor Regulation,” 240; originally quoted in John D. Finney, Jr., “A Study of Negro Labor during and after World War I,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 1967, 185.
- ³⁵ Bernstein, “Racism, Railroad Unions, and Labor Regulation,” 240; originally quoted in Sterling Spero and Abram Harris, *The Black Worker* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 292.
- ³⁶ Train service employees “bid” on available jobs according to seniority, with those in service the longest having the first pick of what they considered to be premium runs – based on mileage, rate of pay, the amount of work involved, time on the road, and time spent away from the home terminal. H. K. Brady to R. E. McCarty, January 13, 1919; T. B. Hamilton to Brady, May 5, 1919; S. L. Mider to R. C. Barnard, October 10, 1919; Brady to McCarty, November 12, 1919; all in HML, Box 1024, folder 4.
- ³⁷ J. A. Zanger to S. P. Johnson, September 30, 1919 (quote); HML, Box 1024, folder 4; Local Grievance Committee, Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, Pennsylvania Railroad – Western Lines to S. L. Mider, October 12, 1919; H. K. Brady to I. W. Geer, December 12, 1919, R. A. Knoff to R. C. Barnard, June 3, 1920; all in HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ³⁸ R. C. Barnard to I. W. Geer, April 15, 1919, HML, Box 1314, folder 4.
- ³⁹ R. A. Knoff to R. C. Barnard, June 3, 1920 (quote); R. K. Rochester to I. W. Geer, June 18, 1920; both in HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ⁴⁰ The Association of Colored Railway Trainmen was renamed the Association of Colored Railway trainmen and Locomotive Firemen in 1936. The union maintained a chapter in Chicago, but only a few of its 3,000 or so members were PRR employees. *Twelfth Annual Report of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for the Year 1921* (New York: NAACP, 1922), 59-60; Stewart, *Handbook of American Trade-Unions*, 272; *Railway Age* 70:1 (January 7, 1921), 126, 70:2 (January 14, 1921), 202.
- ⁴¹ W. G. (CHECK INITIALS) Downing to I. W. Geer, August 5, 1920, HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ⁴² Pennsylvania Railroad, Southwestern Region, Joint Submission of Superintendent and Trainmen (Cincinnati Division), March 4, 1921; HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ⁴³ R. K. Rochester to I. W. Geer, August 17, 1920 (first quote); September 14, 1920 (second quote); both in HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ⁴⁴ R. K. Rochester to I. W. Geer, June 18, 1920; HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ⁴⁵ R. K. Rochester to I. W. Geer, July 6, 1920, HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ⁴⁶ Downing to I. W. Geer, September 9, 1921, HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ⁴⁷ R. K. Rochester to I. W. Geer, March 3, 1922, HML, Box 760, folder 6.
- ⁴⁸ Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 23.
- ⁴⁹ H. E. Newcomet to R. E. McCarty, 21 October 1915 (Recapitulation figures), HML, Box 1261, folder 9; D. P. Williams to I. W. Geer, 10 May 1920; W. C. Downing to Messrs. Pickens, Moores, Davidson & Pickens, Solicitors, 12 August 1921; Geer to W. C. Downing, 3 April 1922; Taber Hamilton to Geer, 17 October 1924; J. H. Kelly to Hamilton, 19 July 1924; C. E. Brinser to Geer, 10 December 1924; W. C. Downing to I. W. Geer, 6 July 1923; State of Indiana Appellate Court, Division Number Two, Hon. William P. McMahan, Ethan A. Dausman, Alonzo L. Nichols, # 11493, in the Case of the Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Chicago & St. Louis Railway Company vs. Nathaniel

Marable, 26 June 1923; John Rynerson (PRR Legal Department) to C. E. Brinser, 9 December 1924; all in HML, Box 760, folder 6; State of Indiana in the Appellate Court, No. 11493, *The Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Chicago & St. Louis Railway Company v. Nathaniel Marable*, September 6, 1922; *Logansport Pharos-Tribune*, March 29, 1916; *Jeffersonville Star*, September 26, 1916.

⁵⁰ White union opposition to the employment of African Americans in train service continued for decades on railroads across the United States. In March 1946, for example, an agreement between the BRT and the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway barred colored porters from train operations, making it inevitable that the railroad's managers would terminate their employment. The Frisco contract was unusual in that one of the African American trainmen, Simon Howard, sued the BRT. More than twenty years later, the International Association of Railroad Employees, an African American union established in 1934, sued the BRT and the Order of Railway Conductors and Brakemen (the 1942 successor to the Order of Railway Conductors) over their continued opposition to the employment of African Americans in train service. Later that year, the BRT and the ORCB, along with the other operating brotherhoods to form the United Transportation Union – and, a year after that, they set aside their hostility toward the IARE and merged that union into the larger organization. *Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, et al., v. Howard, et al.*, 343 US 768 (1952); *Chicago Tribune*, November 16, 1995.