Florida Historical Quarterly

Volume 63
Number 4 *Florida Historical Quarterly, Volume 63, Number 4*

Article 6

1984

Racial Patterns of Labor in Postbellum Florida: Gainesville, 1870-1900

David Sowell

Part of the American Studies Commons, and the United States History Commons
Find similar works at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq
University of Central Florida Libraries http://library.ucf.edu

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Sowell, David (1984) "Racial Patterns of Labor in Postbellum Florida: Gainesville, 1870-1900," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 63: No. 4, Article 6.
Available at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol63/iss4/6

RACIAL PATTERNS OF LABOR IN POSTBELLUM FLORIDA: GAINESVILLE, 1870-1900.

by DAVID SOWELL

IN July 1865, the *New Era,* a Gainesville newspaper, echoed the sentiments of many white Floridians with its comment: "We do not believe that any inducement can make black free labor a success. If it proves so here it will really prove what has not been proven anywhere else."[1] Emancipation had broken the antebellum pattern of labor relations in the South, and many people were apprehensive of the ability of the region to assimilate freedmen successfully into a new economic system. Slavery, of course, had been far more than an economic relationship. It was the visible manifestation of a socioeconomic system based upon both prescribed economic function and social status. This system had dominated the antebellum South, giving it a particular set of social characteristics; many feared that the social system of the South would crumble under the pressures released by emancipation.

The impact of the Civil War and emancipation on southern society has evoked numerous historical analyses. The primary motivation of these efforts has been to examine the ways in which the South was changed as a result of the war. The racial division of labor imposed by slavery was central to the pre-war social structure. After emancipation the social environment was the primary determinant for this societal characteristic. Given the importance of the racial division of labor in antebellum southern society, its post-war manifestations are useful for examining the question of social continuity.

This study examines racial labor patterns in Gainesville

David Sowell is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Florida. He would like to thank Cheryll Cody and Charles, Wood for their assistance with the quantitative analysis in this paper. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Florida College Teachers of History Conference at Stetson University, March 1983.

1. Gainesville *New Era,* July 8, 1865; Joe M. Richardson, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida, 1865-1877* (Tallahassee, 1965), 53.

from 1870 until 1900. As a southern frontier state, Florida could have offered both black and white immigrants the opportunity to develop labor patterns distinct from those observed elsewhere in the South. Despite the apparent opportunity, the racial division of labor in postbellum Gainesville was similar to what might have been found in a typical southern antebellum urban setting. This was in large part due to the fact that the founders of Gainesville were mostly of southern origin, and brought with them to Florida their traditional social attitudes. However, in spite of inherent limitations of a southern social structure, a black community replete with leaders and certain commercial functions developed in Gainesville during this period. Emancipation did not spell the doom of the old southern order, but it did necessitate adjustments in methods of social control. These were clearly visible in Gainesville and throughout the South by the end of the nineteenth century.

Gainesville in 1860 was a town of 269 people– 223 whites and forty-six slaves– that served as a commercial hub for the agricultural products of the surrounding region.[2] The previous year the railroad that had been under construction since 1855 from Fernandina to Cedar Key reached Gainesville, providing a transportation outlet for the Sea Island cotton that was the economic mainstay of Alachua County. The importance of the rural economy to Gainesville is shown by the fact that the fourteen slave owners who lived in town also owned at least 184 slaves in the county. Slave owners reported eighty-one per cent of the declared wealth of the community. The average net worth of a slave owner was $21,411; that of a non-slave owner, $1,817.[3] While Gainesville's racial composition was predominantly white (eighty-three per cent), its economic structure demonstrated characteristics similar to most of the rest of the South, it was tied directly to rural agriculture and slave labor.

The town grew rapidly during the 1860s, primarily due to its function as an organizational center for the war effort. Many families also refugeed there. It also underwent a radical trans-

2. Manuscript census returns, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Alachua County, Florida, Population Schedule, National Archives Microfilm Series M-653, roll 106 (hereinafter 1860 Population Schedule); ibid., Slave Schedule, National Archives, Microfilm Series M-653, roll 110.
3. 1860 Population Schedule. These and other statistics employed in this paper were generated by the author.

formation in its racial composition. In 1870 more than half (fifty-three per cent) of Gainesville's 1,444 residents were black, an increase from the seventeen per cent level of 1860.[4] This large influx of blacks was part of the geographic mobility of ex-slaves after the war ended. Throughout the South blacks moved to urban centers and to areas where land was available. Many blacks from South Carolina were drawn to the Alachua area by the promise of land. Thousands of others from elsewhere in the South hoped to escape the social and political turmoil of the post-war era in the relatively unsettled state of Florida.[5] After the initial influx of blacks, the racial composition of Gainesville remained fairly stable until the end of the century. In 1880 the population was equally divided between blacks and whites; in 1900 whites held a slim majority of the 3,633 residents of the town.[6]

In the 1870s and 1880s, the Sea Island cotton that had dominated agriculture, in the pre-war period was supplemented by citrus and truck crops in the rural area around Gainesville. Citrus did well in Alachua County until the freezes of the 1890s forced that crop southward to more protected areas. Phosphate mining was begun in the area in the 1890s, and it remained a relatively dynamic industry until World War I. Although Gainesville's economic well-being remained linked to rural industries, an urban economy was also developing during this period. Several concerns, such as the H. F. Dutton cotton works and the Doig Foundry, along with other smaller businesses, supported the town's economy and provided urban work opportunities.[7]

While Gainesville's population increased ten-fold between 1860 and 1900, its basic division of labor remained stable, with only a few exceptions that reflected a change in its economic

4. Manuscript census returns, Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Alachua County, Florida, Population Schedule, National Archives Microfilm Series M-593, roll 128.
5. Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Land Ownership* (Baton Rouge, 1978), 137-57. Hundreds of blacks moved to Florida during the winter of 1866-1867 due to crop failure and social discontent in South Carolina. Francis Butler Simkins and Robert Hilliard Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, 1932), 233.
6. United States Bureau of the Census, *Abstract of the Twelfth Census of the United States* (Washington, 1914), 137.
7. For a discussion of the town's growth during this period, see Charles H. Hildreth and Merlin G. Cox, *History of Gainesville, Florida, 1854-1979* (Gainesville, 1981), 53-100.

orientation. During this period Gainesville was making the transition from a rural to an urban community as it was shifting slowly away from agriculturally-related employment. (Table 1)[8] In 1870, one-third of the town's labor force was directly linked to the agricultural sector; ten per cent of the work force was still engaged in such efforts in 1880; and only four per cent in 1900. The urbanization of the town is demonstrated by the increase in the numbers of people classified as professional, managerial, and clerical workers. These three sectors made up thirty per cent of the workers in 1900, as opposed to twenty per cent in 1870. Concurrent with the decline in the numbers of people working in agriculture was the increase in the numbers classified as unskilled laborers. Unskilled labor replaced farm labor as the largest single source of employment between 1870 and 1900. Since

TABLE 1

5 OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE OF GAINESVILLE'S WORK FORCE, 1870, 1880, 1900

	1870		1880		1900	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Professional	34	6	68	10	154	12
Managerial	39	7	74	10	161	12
Clerical	40	7	40	6	107	8
Skilled	66	11	95	13	155	12
Semiskilled	11	2	19	3	41	3
Unskilled	54	9	194	27	402	30
Domestic and Personal Service	153	26	148	21	249	19
Farmer	3 0	5	34	5	419	3
Farm Labor	166	28	37	5	15	1
Total N	593		709*		1,325**	

Source: 1870, 1880, and 1906 United States manuscript census returns.
* Four workers were unclassifiable. ** Four workers were unclassifiable.

8. Analysis of occupational data derived from census sources is complex. The occupation recorded by the enumerator does not always reflect a person's primary occupation. For this study, however, all occupations were recorded as listed. For comparison of Gainesville with other southern urban settings, a system of occupational categorization developed by Howard Rabinowitz in his *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York, 1978), has been employed: professionals; proprietors, managers, and officials; clerical workers; skilled workers; semiskilled workers; unskilled workers; and domestic and personal service workers. Farmers and farm laborers are included as distinct categories as well.

other categories of labor were relatively unchanged during this period, it suggests that workers were shifting from positions of manual labor in a rural economic structure to similar positions in an urban environment.

An examination of the racial division of labor reveals that blacks, rather than whites, experienced marked change in their patterns of employment as the economic structure was transformed. (Tables 2 and 3) Throughout the 1870-1900 period the white division of labor underwent only gradual changes. The decline in the number of white farm laborers (eight per cent) was offset by an identical increase in the numbers of white unskilled laborers. The number of white farmers remained constant although their relative percentage declined. The most significant change in the distribution of white labor was the growth in the managerial sector. None of these changes reflect a major redistribution of the white labor force.

The black division of labor, on the other hand, underwent several significant changes. In 1870 a large majority (eighty-eight per cent) of the black laborers were employed in either manual or menial positions such as domestic service, farm labor, or unskilled labor. This was still the case in 1880, but the relative percentage of farm laborers and unskilled workers had been reversed.

TABLE 2

OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE OF GAINESVILLE'S WHITE WORK FORCE, 1870, 1880, 1900

	1870		1880		1900	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Professional	34	15	58	18	94	16
Managerial	39	17	71	22	143	25
Clerical	39	17	38	12	102	18
Skilled	36	16	62	19	89	16
Semiskilled	5	2	12	4	24	4
Unskilled	5	2	26	8	56	10
Domestic and Personal Service	16	7	14	4	32	6
Farmer	27	12	28	9	28	5
Farm Labor	23	9	15	5	4	1
Total N	224		324*		572**	

Source: 1870, 1880, and 1900 United States manuscript census returns.
* Three workers were unclassifiable. ** Four workers were unclassifiable.

TABLE 3

OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE OF GAINESVILLE'S BLACK WORK FORCE, 1870, 1880, 1900

	1870		1880		1900	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Professional	-	-	10	3	60	8
Managerial	-	-	3	1*	18	2
Clerical	1	1*	2	1*	5	1*
Skilled	30	8	33	9	66	9
Semiskilled	6	2	7	2	17	2
Unskilled	49	13	168	44	346	46
Domestic and Personal Service	137	37	134	35	221	29
Farmer	3	1*	6	2	13	2
Farm Labor	143	38	226	6	11	1
Total N	369		385**		757	

Source: 1870, 1880, and 1900 United States manuscript census returns.
* Less than one per cent. ** One worker was unclassifiable.

In 1880 blacks were present in every occupational category, but less than one in twenty were professional, managerial, or clerical workers, as compared to over half (fifty-two per cent) of their white counterparts. In 1900, when blacks were most repre-

TABLE 4

THE STABILITY OF RACIAL COMPOSITION OF SELECTED OCCUPATIONS* GAINESVILLE, 1880 AND 1900

Eighty-five per cent or more black	Day laborer, laundress, drayman, cook, laborer, nurse, barber, porter, chambermaid, waiter, waitress, hunter, fisherman, ostler.
Sixty to eighty-five per cent black	Farm laborer, carpenter, railroad laborer.
Forty to sixty per cent mixed	Seamstress, bricklayer, teacher.
Sixty to eighty-five per cent white	Butcher, farmer, printer.
Eighty-five per cent or more white	Merchant, lawyer, bookkeeper, stenographer, clerk, civil engineer, manager, telegraph operator, watchmaker, doctor, contractor, agent, baker, sheriff, hotel keeper, travelling salesman, orange grower.

Source: 1880 and 1900 United States manuscript census returns.
*Only occupations which had at least three persons in both 1880 and 1900 were included. Positions which contained a higher percentage of blacks in 1900 than in 1880 include: blacksmith, plasterer, cobbler, sawyer, preacher, house painter, gardner, railroad worker, farm laborer, and liveryman. Positions which contained a higher percentage of whites in 1900 than in 1880 include: tinner, servant, and saloonkeeper.

sented in these areas of the labor profile, less than one out of every ten workers held jobs in these three categories. The inability of blacks to penetrate the upper echelon of the labor structure was accentuated by the fact that most black professionals were either preachers or teachers, positions of high social prestige within the black community, but which required little formal education or economic capital.

Census data and information from city directories suggests that a fledgling black commercial community had developed in Gainesville by the end of the century.[9] The scale of these operations, however, was smaller than those of their white counterparts. The absence of black contractors, hotel keepers, or manufacturers underscores the fact that blacks were unable to undertake capital-intensive business efforts. The majority of black workers continued to be engaged in manual or menial labor, a pattern unchanged since the days of slavery.

TABLE 5

MALE PERSISTENCE, 1870-1880*

Occupational Category in 1870	Black		White	
	%	(P/N)	%	(P/N)
Professional	-	-	27	7/26
Managerial	-	-	26	10/39
Clerical	0	0/1	15	6/39
Skilled	34	10/29	14	5/36
Semiskilled	-	-	-	-
Unskilled	16	8/49	0	0/5
Domestic and Personal Service	12	4/34	0	0/6
Farmer	66	2/3	50	3/6
Farm Labor	8	9/110	0	0/10
All male workers	15%	33/226	19%	31/167

Source: 1870 and 1880 United States manuscript census returns. % is the rate of persistence, 1870-1880. P is the number in the category still present in 1880. N is the total number in the category in 1870. *Laborers must be listed in the 1870 census to be included. Workers are listed by their 1870 occupational category.

9. J. M. Hawks, ed., *The Florida Gazetteer* (New Orleans, 1871); *Florida State Gazetteer and Business. Directory, Vol. 1, 1886-87* (New York, 1886); *Florida Railroad Gazetteer and State Business Directory, 1896* (Atlanta, 1896); Manuscript census returns, Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Alachua County, Florida, Population Schedule, National Archives Microfilm Series T-623, roll 165.

Occupational segregation seems to have developed toward the end of the century which paralleled the social segregation that was taking place throughout the South. By classifying specific occupations as white-dominant, black-dominant, or not racially specific, the extent of occupational segregation can be measured. Occupations were grouped when they were filled by eighty-five per cent or more of the same race in both 1880 and 1900; by sixty to eighty-five per cent of the same race; and those in which neither race filled over sixty per cent of the recorded positions. Changes in racial occupational patterns are also noted.

This approach reaffirms that jobs which involved considerable manual or menial labor were "black jobs." (Table 4) Managerial, professional, or clerical jobs were "white jobs." The only professional posts in which large numbers of blacks participated were preaching and teaching, activities which dealt primarily with the black community.[10]

In 1900 more occupations were filled by a single race than had been the case in 1880. Several positions which had been racially mixed in 1880, generally those involving manual labor, were dominated by blacks in 1900. Fewer blacks were employed as servants or personal nurses in 1900 than had been in 1880. This tendency toward segregation of those occupations which had traditionally brought the races into more personal day-to-day contact has been reported in other southern cities.[11]

Although the racial division of labor did not change in any significant manner between 1870 and 1900 except to reflect Gainesville's urbanization, and occupations were becoming even more segregated, rates of geographic and social mobility are a reminder that this was a period of free labor. Analyses of rates of persistence show that less than one male in five listed as a worker in 1870 was recorded in the census of 1880.[12] (Table 5)

10. Social distances between the races forced blacks to build their own institutional structure, leading to the emergence of separate black communities. These efforts were limited by the dominant white society. See John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* (Chicago, 1961), 224; Reynolds Farley, "The Urbanization of Negroes in the United States," *Journal of Social History,* I (Spring 1968), 250.
11. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South,* 68.
12. These rates of persistence are comparable to, although lower than, those of Atlanta, San Antonio, or Birmingham during the same time-span. Richard J. Hopkins, "Occupational and Geographic Mobility in Atlanta, 1870-1896," *Journal of Southern History,* XXXIV (May 1968), 207; Alwyn Barr, "Occupational and Geographic Mobility in San

Apparently, the "higher" the job level in which one worked, the greater the likelihood that one would remain in Gainesville. Conversely, the "lower" the job level, the greater the likelihood that one would move away. Black males had a lower rate of persistence than did white males, suggesting that while the society denied certain positions to blacks, black geographic mobility was not restricted.

Persistence during the last twenty years of the nineteenth century followed a somewhat different pattern. (Table 6) The length of the period of analysis yields lower rates, as both mortality and mobility are more apparent. Despite the twenty-year period, however, overall rates of persistence for both races were the same as they had been for the decade between 1870 and 1880. Skilled black workers, the most persistent during the previous decade, now left Gainesville at rates comparable to manual laborers, along with white professionals. For these blacks, this may reflect their inability to escape manual labor jobs, or the

TABLE 6

MALE PERSISTENCE, 1880-1900*

Occupational Category in 1880	Black		White	
	%	(P/N)	%	(P/N)
Professional	14	1/7	19	10/54
Managerial	67	2/3	26	18/70
Clerical	50	1/2	42	16/38
Skilled	15	5/32	10	6/59
Semiskilled	-	-	-	-
Unskilled	14	23/164	8	2/26
Domestic and Personal Service	18	5/28	-	0/9
Farmer	0	0/6	11	3/28
Farm Labor	5	1/19	13	2/15
All male workers	15%	38/261	19%	57/299

Source: 1880 and 1900 United States manuscript census returns. % is the rate of persistence, 1880-1900. P is the number in the category in 1900. N is the total number in the category in 1880. *Laborers must be listed in the 1880 census to be listed. Workers are listed by their 1880 occupational category.

Antonio, 1870-1900," *Social Science Quarterly,* LI (September 1970), 401; Paul B. Worthman, "Working Class Mobility in Birmingham, Alabama, 1880-1914," in Tamara K. Hareven, ed., *Anonymous Americans: Explorations Nineteenth-Century Social History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), 182-83.

narrowing range of job opportunities after the end of Reconstruction. For white professionals, the opportunities for improvement in other areas of Florida may have attracted them. Perhaps the most significant rate of persistence was noted among white clerical workers, usually younger men who were establishing homes and careers and were thus less likely to leave.

The black and white males who continued to live in Gainesville in the period from 1870 until 1880 generally remained in the same job, or improved their occupational level. (Table 7) Not surprisingly, black males experienced less occupational mobility than did their white counterparts. Moreover, the stability of white males must be read with the recognition that if one were classified as a professional in 1870, the only direction of mobility would have been down. Clearly black mobility was limited during the Reconstruction era despite the town's position as a Republican stronghold.

The stability of the 1870-1880 period stands in contrast to the more fluid 1880-1900 period. (Table 8) This offers some insights into the rise of institutionalized segregation. While black occupational mobility was limited during the Reconstruction period, it had improved considerably in the last twenty years of

TABLE 7

MALE OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY, 1870-1880

	Unchanged	Higher	Lower
Black	84%*	16%	3%
White	69%	25%	7%

Source: 1870 and 1880 United States manuscript census returns. *Six of the twenty-six men in this group changed from farm labor to unskilled labor, reflecting structural change, not an "improvement" in their work level.

TABLE 8

MALE OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY, 1880-1900

	Unchanged	Higher	Lower
Black	58%	32%	11%
White	58%	29%	15%

Source: 1880 and 1900 United States manuscript census returns.

the century. A certain pressure was being placed upon the traditional social structure by upwardly-mobile blacks. This pressure helps explain why many whites felt the need of imposing legal restrictions upon blacks and supported Jim Crow legislation.[13]

Despite the apparent improvement in black occupational opportunity, most of their mobility was limited to advancements from unskilled to skilled laborers. The black occupational profile was quite similar in both 1870 and 1880. Little significant change was visible by 1900, despite the development of community leaders, drawn from the ranks of ministers and teachers. The social structure of the town confined the range of opportunities available to resident blacks. Internal community leaders were present, but few blacks could operate in both the black and white communities.

Free labor did not prove to be the disaster that many white Floridians had feared. The majority of Gainesville's blacks were employed in the same kind. of manual or menial jobs as slaves and free blacks had been in the antebellum urban South. By contrast, whites were able to participate in, the full range of available economic opportunities. Gainesville's racial division of labor seems to have been shaped by its southern socio-economic environment, and it supports the continuity of the southern social fabric throughout the nineteenth century. However, the post-war society was more fluid than its predecessor. This is indicated by rates of black mobility and by the emergence of black social leaders. Despite its, continuity, emancipation irreversibly altered the social structure of Gainesville, and the South.

---

13. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South.*