



Portrait from I. Garland Penn's The Afro-American Press and its Editors (Springfield, Mass.: Willey & Co., 1891).

W. B. TOWNSEND AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST RACIST VIOLENCE IN LEAVENWORTH

by Brent M. S. Campney

Among the truest men in the State of Kansas to-day, is that young man of Leavenworth W. B. Townsend," proclaimed the *Topeka Colored Citizen* in 1878. "If he is spared to be a few years older," it predicted, "he will be known as one of the leading colored men of the nation." Upon learning of his death thirty-nine years later, the *Topeka Plaindealer*, a black weekly, recorded that Townsend had fulfilled these soaring expectations. "He was bold, brave and fearless and stood bravely for the rights of his people no matter how great the odds," it remembered. "His good deeds will ever live in the memory of Kansas and Kansans."¹ Although his black contemporaries expressed conviction that Townsend's works would long outlive him, this extraordinary Kansan has largely been forgotten. This study seeks to remedy in part that historical oversight, focusing as it does on Townsend's struggle against racist violence in Leavenworth, Kansas, around the turn of the twentieth century. Drawing primarily on newspaper accounts, it addresses Townsend's resistance against racist violence and his demand for justice on behalf of its victims, a campaign that drew upon his skills as journalist, politician, and attorney and thrust him into the role of militant. It also addresses the diverse responses of the white and black communities to Townsend's campaign, both within Leavenworth and throughout the surrounding area.

Born a slave in Alabama in 1854, William Bolden Townsend found his way to Leavenworth with his mother around 1860, after their master, Samuel Townsend—the grandfather of W. B.—emancipated them. While little is known of his childhood, it is clear that he applied himself diligently to his studies in the city's common schools. As a young man, he went south as a teacher, witnessing firsthand the horrors of Reconstruction Mississippi. "Finding the treatment of his people so inhuman," noted a contemporary, Townsend returned to Leavenworth "where he entered upon a career of usefulness which has been almost

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1. *Colored Citizen* (Topeka), September 6, 1878; *Topeka Plaindealer*, July 20, 1917. Townsend receives brief mention in works on his contemporaries, B. K. Bruce and John Lewis Waller. See Aleen J. Ratzlaff, "Ambivalent Colleagues of the Black Kansas Press: B. K. Bruce and S. W. Jones, 1890–1898," <http://list.msu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9909e&L=aejmc&P=5439>; Randall Bennett Woods, *A Black Odyssey: John Lewis Waller and the Promise of American Life, 1878–1900* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1981), 17, 48, 71–72, 102–6, 119–20. He is also mentioned in J. Clay Smith, Jr., *Emancipation: The Making of the Black Lawyer, 1844–1944* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 491.

phenomenal.”² Townsend began to emerge as a formidable black leader in Kansas by the late 1870s. Known for his dapper attire, he established himself as a force among Republicans, holding an appointive position in the Leavenworth post office throughout the 1880s and wielding significant influence over many aspects of black political life in the state. Christening him “the acknowledged Afro-American diplomat” at the turn of the century, an observer reviewed a handful of his most recent achievements. “It was but a few years since that he came within a few votes of securing the Republican nomination for auditor of the state,” he recalled, noting as well that Townsend had been “several times elected congressional and state-at-large representative to National Republican nominating conventions.”³

Like many aspiring black politicians, Townsend dabbled in journalism, working for several black papers before taking over as editor of the Leavenworth *Advocate* in 1889. Speaking on behalf of an impoverished and largely illiterate population, he found himself at the helm of an exigent enterprise. “Under the most adverse and trying circumstances, and with very limited means at our command,” he noted in an 1890 editorial, “obstacles that seemed insurmountable have been overcome by untiring industry.” That same year Townsend began sharing editorial duties with colleagues after he enrolled in the law school at the University of Kansas. A spellbinding orator, he excelled in his course of study, graduating in 1891 and delivering an address that won him the praise of a white newspaper in Lawrence. “With due respect to the other members of the class,” opined the *Daily Record*, “the oration of Mr. Townsend was by far the best on the program.” For reasons that are not altogether clear, Townsend and his partners abandoned the *Advocate* in the summer of 1891, and the newly minted barrister hung out his shingle.⁴

2. I. Garland Penn, *The Afro-American Press and its Editors* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), 312–14. Regarding Townsend’s youth, the obituary in the *Plaindealer*, July 20, 1917, noted simply that “Townsend was born in Huntsville, Ala., some sixty odd years ago and settled in Kansas when a young man and built name and fame.”

3. *Pueblo* (Colorado) *Times-Speaker*, reprinted in *Topeka Plaindealer*, March 14, 1902. On Townsend’s political activities, see, for example, *Colored Citizen*, September 6, 1878; *Leavenworth Times*, March 27, 1884; *Topeka Plaindealer*, October 12, 1900; May 10, 1901; Penn, *The Afro-American Press*, 314; Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 48, 102–3, 105–6, 119–20. On his position in the Leavenworth post office, see Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 17; Penn, *The Afro-American Press*, 314. On Townsend’s attire, see *Topeka Plaindealer*, February 1, 1901.

4. *Advocate* (Leavenworth), April 5, 1890; *Lawrence Daily Record*, reprinted in *Advocate*, July 4, 1891. *Advocate*, April 20, 1889, contains the first reference to Townsend as editor of the paper. Ratzlaff, “Ambivalent

Townsend epitomized the small black middle class that emerged in this period, composed principally of journalists, ministers, attorneys, educators, and entrepreneurs who self-consciously positioned themselves against and above their working-class counterparts, championing racial “uplift” through the adoption of the dominant middle-class values of temperance, independence, and economy. They believed that, by stressing class distinctions (and the existence of a “better class”) among blacks, they might erode white assumptions of universal black inferiority and, in so doing, provide a window through which all blacks might ultimately escape racist oppression. In vain they viewed themselves as the natural allies of the white middle class and as the social betters of what they saw as the rabble of both races. “We denounce those newspapers and people that class all Negroes with the criminal class of Negroes,” two members of the black middle class noted in a statement to the *Plaindealer* in 1901. “There is as much difference between the criminal class of Negroes and the better class of Negroes as there is between the criminal class of whites and the better class of whites.”⁵

Townsend subscribed fiercely to middle-class values, which—at least in theory—promised social mobility irrespective of race. When a Democratic newspaper attacked him during a political campaign in 1884, he defended himself with an unabashed appeal to his own piety and honor. “When I look back to my past life I am proud of it, and I feel rich, rich in character,” he declared. “I am

Colleagues of the Black Kansas Press,” discusses Townsend’s sharing of editorial duties during law school and the abandonment of the *Advocate*, noting that, when he graduated from the University of Kansas in 1891, Townsend was only one of four blacks to have earned degrees from that institution. On the difficulties of sustaining a black newspaper in the late nineteenth century and on the editorial careers of aspiring black politicians, see John Hope Franklin, *George Washington Williams: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 22–34; Ann Field Alexander, *Race Man: The Rise and Fall of the “Fighting Editor,” John Mitchell Jr.* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 28–40; Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 59–60, 65, 83. On black attorneys in the nineteenth century West, see Smith, *Emancipation*. On Townsend’s oratorical abilities, see *Topeka Plaindealer*, February 1, 1901.

5. *Topeka Plaindealer*, February 1, 1901. On the definitions and ideologies of the black middle class and on working-class views, see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), esp. 1–9; Martin Summers, *Manliness and its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 99–105; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 35–53. On black middle-class ideology and racist violence, see Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 97–101.

willing to challenge you, Mr. *Standard*, or any of your candidates, to show a cleaner or better record for decency, sobriety and morality than I can.”⁶ For black men, patriarchy was a crucial signifier of middle-class “manhood.” In an age when unemployment was rampant amongst black males and work outside of the home was a practical necessity for most black women, a man’s capacity to support his family became a badge of respectability.

As a professional, Townsend was quite able to support his wife, Martha H. Townsend, who, in turn, devoted herself to her home and to reform activities. Indeed, the *Plaindealer* depicted her as a quintessential middle-class woman, reporting that she “is of a domestic turn, but finds time to divide from her home affairs with charitable work.” Bolstering his position as patriarch, Townsend built “one of the most beautiful and costly homes ever erected in Leavenworth by one of ‘Aunt Hanna’s sons.’”⁷ In 1901 he underscored what he viewed as the relationship between patriarchy—what he might have called chivalry—and “uplift,” telling an audience that “I wouldd [*sic*] lay down my life in defense of any woman, be she white or black. The colored man must assert his manhood. It is time for him to attend to Negro business.”⁸

Scholars have demonstrated that middle-class blacks often displaced their anger over racism onto poor blacks, insisting that their alleged criminality provoked whites and, as a result, impeded progress for all blacks because whites viewed them as an undifferentiated mass. Townsend apparently did not embrace this characteristic middle-class resentment of working-class blacks, although he shared its preoccupation with “uplifting the race” through class assimilation. He clearly believed that black criminality (always assumed to be the province of laborers) exacerbated racial conflict and that it “was on the increase in Leavenworth among the younger members of his race.” Echoing the view of many whites, Townsend claimed that “it is the ‘New Negro’ who was born since the war and since freedom that manifests such unfortunate tendencies toward crime.” However,

6. *Leavenworth Times*, March 27, 1884.

7. *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 14, 1901; March 14, 1902.

8. *Topeka Plaindealer*, February 1, 1901. There is evidence that William and Martha Townsend had a daughter, Nola, born in about 1897. She appears as a thirteen-year-old in the 1910 federal census as a resident, with her parents, of Denver, Colorado. Nevertheless, she is mentioned nowhere else in the data identified in this study and her birthplace in the 1910 census is listed as Colorado, rather than Kansas (U.S. Census, 1910, Colorado, Denver, 8th Ward, roll T624_115, 7A). On patriarchy and the black middle class, see Summers, *Manliness and its Discontents*.

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he flatly rejected the assumption that blacks were disproportionately responsible for the city’s problems, asserting that “I do not believe the tendency of the Negro toward crime is any stronger than that of the white man.” Further, he insisted that the lawlessness of some did not justify racism against all and argued that criminality was a product of racism because those without opportunity were driven to it by “enforced idleness.” With “most of the avenues of life being closed against [him], preventing him . . . from earning a livelihood,” the black man, Townsend explained, “drifts upon the sea of idleness and vice.”⁹

Instead of blaming the black working class for racism, Townsend placed the blame squarely on whites, and particularly on working-class whites. “From the intelligent, cultured white men I have nothing [t]o fear,” he insisted, “but I want from ‘poor white trash.’” By assigning culpability primarily to working-class whites and by camouflaging the pervasive nature of white prejudice, he may have betrayed his own class bias, his aspiration for acceptance among the dominant middle class, or, at the very least, his recognition of the likely need for

9. *Topeka Plaindealer*, February 1, 1901; January 26, 1900. See also Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 217, n. 35. On middle-class displacement of anger against black workers, see Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 5–9; Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, 97–101. On white fears of the “New Negro,” see Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 244–45; Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 149–50, 197–216.

influential white support in the future. Viewing working-class blacks as victims, Townsend sought to be their champion rather than to disown them, seeing himself as a sort of Moses whose mission it was to liberate all blacks. "This is no personal fight of mine," he insisted. "It's a fight for the rights of my people."¹⁰

The fight was a difficult undertaking. In the late nineteenth century, white Kansans articulated an increasingly rigid, if *de facto*, system of Jim Crow practices that involved discrimination, exclusion, and segregation in housing, employment, schools, and public accommodations. To enforce these practices specifically and white domination generally, they employed racist violence that included lynching, police brutality, and other forms of personal and collective violence. Whites in Jefferson County, for example, sent a powerful message about the inferior position of blacks in July 1892, when a mob raided the jail in Ozawkie and seized Bob Durg, accused of operating a brothel and, more importantly, of cohabitating across racial lines. After whipping him and applying a coat of tar and feathers, the mob administered a final *coup-de-grace*, castrating its victim for having "fallen into forbidden paths" with a white woman. It then drove Durg from town under penalty of death and watched as its victim hobbled away into obscurity.¹¹

Townsend recognized this deterioration in race relations. "There was a time in the history of Kansas when the Negro was considered a man, that he was entitled to just such consideration, social and political, as his fitness demanded," he reflected in 1903. "But times have changed for the Negroes in Kansas . . . for there they burn

Negroes alive, and when they are not burning them, they are being . . . denied their rights." White Kansans, however, applauded themselves for what they deemed their liberal views on race. In the 1850s, Northern whites had struggled to ensure that Kansas would be a free rather than a slave state. Although many settlers—often virulently anti-black—had been motivated during the free-state struggle by the desire to safeguard their own liberties and the value of white labor, and to preclude black settlement, whites subsequently reshaped the memory of that struggle, remembering it as romantically anti-racist. As a result, whites saw themselves smugly as the antithesis of "Negro-Hating" Southerners. "The free-state narrative," in other words, "absolved [white] Kansans, at least in their own minds, of having any responsibility in addressing the race question."¹²

If race relations were ugly in Kansas, they were especially ugly in Leavenworth and in surrounding Leavenworth County. A Missouri River city of about twenty thousand people in the 1890s, 14 percent of whom were black, "poor old Leavenworth" had a well-established reputation as a "sink-hole of iniquity" and as a center of racist violence. In 1887, for example, a young white woman residing near the city accused farmhand Richard Wood of sexual assault. Within a short time, a mob stormed the county jail where Wood awaited trial and secured the prisoner. Tying a rope about his neck, mounted mob members dragged the young man for a mile through Leavenworth before leaving him dead—torn and naked—in the street. Six years later, a mob in outlying Millwood waylaid Silas Wilson, accused of sexual relations with a white woman, and beat him senseless. Unsatisfied with this punishment, it then hanged him from a tree limb.¹³

10. Townsend made these comments in a speech at a Topeka meeting of "colored citizens" on January 31, 1901. *Topeka Plaindealer*, February 1, 1901; see also *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 14, 1901.

11. *Valley Falls New Era*, July 23, 1892. On Jim Crow in Kansas, see Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 63–81; James N. Leiker, "Race Relations in the Sunflower State: A Review Essay," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 25 (Autumn 2002): 217–23; Rusty Monhollon and Kristen Tegtmeyer Oertel, "From Brown To Brown: A Century of Struggle for Equality in Kansas," *Territorial Kansas Reader*, ed. Virgil W. Dean (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 2005), 360–63. On racist violence in Kansas, see Brent MacDonald Stevenson Campney, "'And This in Free Kansas': Racist Violence, Black and White Resistance, Geographical Particularity, and the 'Free State' Narrative in Kansas, 1865–1914" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2007); James N. Leiker, "Black Soldiers at Fort Hays, Kansas, 1867–1869: A Study in Civilian and Military Violence," *Great Plains Quarterly* 17 (Winter 1997): 3–17. On racist violence generally, see, for example, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865–1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and "Legal Lynchings"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); Gilles Vandal, *Rethinking Southern Violence: Homicides in Post-Civil War Louisiana, 1866–1884* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000). For more on the Ozawkie incident, see *Independent* (Oskaloosa), July 23, 1892; *Oskaloosa Times*, July 21, 1892; *Farmer's Vindicator* (Valley Falls), July 23, 1892.

12. *Topeka Plaindealer*, September 4, 1903; Brent M. S. Campney, "'This is Not Dixie': The Imagined South, the Kansas Free State Narrative, and the Rhetoric of Racist Violence," *Southern Spaces: An Interdisciplinary Journal about the Regions, Places, and Cultures of the American South*, September 6, 2007, <http://www.southernspaces.org/contents/2007/campney/1a.htm>; Monhollon and Oertel, "From Brown to Brown," 362. On the territorial struggles and the motivations of white settlers, see Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 97–122; Bill Cecil-Fronsman, "'Advocate the Freedom of White Men, As Well As That of Negroes': The Kansas Free State and Antislavery Westerners in Territorial Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 20 (Summer 1997): 102–15; Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 1–8, 227–28, 249–53.

13. *Coffeyville Vindicator*, May 11, 1906; *Atchison Blade*, September 24, 1892. Campney, "And This in Free Kansas," 200, discusses the population of Leavenworth. On the 1887 Leavenworth dragging, see

Several factors may help to explain this high level of localized racism and violence. Unlike most of Kansas, Leavenworth was a Democratic stronghold and, while the state GOP was certainly suffused with racism, the Democrats at the national level were the avowed party of white supremacy. The city also housed a military base, thereby ensuring a substantial population of young, single men, a demographic often correlated with disorder. It also housed a federal penitentiary and abutted Lansing, site of the state prison, and consequently it became the temporary home of many discharged inmates. Finally, Leavenworth was the state's "rum soaked" symbol of defiance to the state's 1881 Prohibition amendment, where saloons ran openly and became breeding grounds for mayhem.¹⁴

W. B. Townsend emerged as the leading opponent of racist violence in Leavenworth in the late nineteenth century. If any single event can be said to have shaped him, it undoubtedly occurred in 1864, when Townsend was only ten years old. In that year Elizabeth McFarland, a white woman, charged twenty-nine-year-old Woodson Townsend, one of W. B.'s extended family members, with attempted rape. Despite grave questions about the veracity of her story, a jury sentenced Townsend to six years hard labor, a lenient "compromise" verdict. "There are good and honest men who heard the trial, who cannot think the defendant guilty," opined the defense attorney, although others, "borne along by their violent prejudices, seem ready to convict a colored man of this or any other crime." Clearly, many whites were enraged with the entire black community; in fact, because of the threat of violence, black leaders felt compelled to denounce the defendant and to plead that, "whether he is a colored man or not, he alone is guilty, and he only should suffer for his crime." As he watched what he likely viewed as a miscarriage of justice, young William must have

Leavenworth Times, January 29, 30, 1887; *Leavenworth Standard*, January 29, 31, 1887. On the 1893 Millwood hanging, see *Leavenworth Standard*, August 21, 1893; *Leavenworth Times*, August 22, 1893.

14. Robert Smith Bader, *Prohibition in Kansas: A History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 26, 32, 34, 66, 67, 128, 162, 181. On Leavenworth as Democratic stronghold, see Michael Lewis Goldberg, *An Army of Women: Gender and Politics in Gilded Age Kansas* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 52–53, 104–8. On the correlation between young single men and social disorder, see David T. Courtright, *Violent Land: Single Men and Social Disorder from the Frontier to the Inner City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). On the military base and prisons, see Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 84–85; James R. Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 42–47, 50, 56, 58–63, 75, 84–86. On tendency for discharged inmates to remain in Leavenworth, see *Leavenworth Chronicle*, January 17, 1901.

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cultivated an abiding distrust of white justice and a profound sense of the vulnerability of his people.¹⁵

Townsend was also indisputably the product of the tradition of civil rights activism in the community in which he was raised. One of Townsend's precursors, for example, a civil rights agitator named William Smith, "gained himself many enemies" by, in the words of an unsympathetic observer, pushing "himself obtrusively into the society of white persons" and by organizing voters in the 1870 election in which blacks first cast ballots. Smith became a martyr for his cause two months after the election when he was shot and killed by a white saloonkeeper. Undoubtedly Smith also became a courageous example to the sixteen-year-old Townsend.¹⁶

During his tenure as editor almost two decades later, Townsend used the *Advocate* as a platform for publicizing racist violence and for promoting resistance. In 1889

15. *Leavenworth Daily Times*, February 25, 1864; *Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, January 20, 1864. For more on the Woodson Townsend incident, see *Leavenworth Daily Times*, January 20, 1864; *Leavenworth Daily Times*, February 17, 1864. To verify the familial relationship between W. B. and Woodson Townsend the author corresponded with Merrily Harris, Project Archivist, May 30, June 6, September 9, 2008, W. S. Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, who processed the papers (1820–1937) of Septimus D. Cabaniss, executor of Samuel Townsend's estate. For corroborating evidence, see Penn, *The Afro-American Press and its Editors*, 312; *Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, January 20, 1864.

16. *Leavenworth Times and Conservative*, June 19, 1870; *Leavenworth Daily Commercial*, June 19, 1870. See also *Leavenworth Bulletin*, June 19, 1870, reporting on the Smith killing.

he reported that white toughs had assaulted a city resident, leaving him critically injured, and that the leader of the attack, one “Punk” Maloney, had quipped that “it won’t be the first time an Irishman has killed a nigger.” Outraged, Townsend warned that blacks would not meekly submit to such violence. “While it may not be the first time an Irishman has killed a ‘nigger’ it had [better] be the last,” he advised. “Notice is served upon those low-bred white men that we are men and citizens, entitled to the enjoyment of life at least, for which we will contend man against man if it is necessary.”¹⁷ The editor advocated more radical measures that same year when a policeman in neighboring Wyandotte casually shot and killed a youth and, subsequently, faced no consequences. “The colored populace of that city should have served him just as the whites would have served a colored officer who would wilfully [*sic*] shoot down a white boy,” he counseled. “They should have adorned the first lamp post they came to with his carcass [*sic*] and then riddled it with bullets.”¹⁸

Townsend was often instrumental in channeling communal anger over racist violence into organized protest. In 1894 city police gunned down several blacks on the flimsiest of pretexts. In one incident, an officer shot Charles Reed after spotting him racing up the street with several white men hot in pursuit. “As it turned out, Reed had been waylaid by a gang of white toughs and was simply running for his life.” Following this shooting, Townsend and a coterie of middle-class blacks led a demonstration, delivering blistering speeches to a crowd of three hundred. The attorney also framed a series of resolutions condemning “the bigoted, overbearing, intolerant, abusive spirit which prevails among the police, with but few exceptions, toward the colored people.” Townsend and his allies took more practical steps as well, patching together a Colored Citizens’ Protective League whose purpose was to “employ legal talent to defend colored people when unjustly arrested and resist in every way the encroachments of their new oppressors.” While they were certainly well intentioned in this effort, they undoubtedly faced the same resource constraints that prompted one contemporary to note that, “it has been said, and truthfully so, that

negroes were given to calling big meetings, drawing up resolutions,” and then simply “going home.”¹⁹ Townsend, however, was rarely guilty of “going home.”

In his capacity as attorney, Townsend defended blacks accused of trumped-up charges or denied adequate representation. In 1894 he took the case of George Smith, a prisoner accused of “insulting” a white woman and threatened with mob violence. Although he lost that case—a predictable verdict under the circumstances—and Smith had to pay a substantial fine, the *Leavenworth Herald*, a black weekly, reasoned that, despite the outcome, the defense had at least succeeded in exposing the malicious fiction of the prosecution’s case. “Townsend showed clearly to the satisfaction of all except the girl’s parents and the court that Smith had committed no crime,” it reported. Declaring the black community “well pleased with his able efforts,” the *Herald* concluded that “the persecutors of the colored people in this city have in Townsend a formidable antagonist.”²⁰

Although likely disaffected by the late 1890s with the indifference of the Republican Party toward blacks, Townsend viewed the GOP as infinitely superior to the Democratic alternative. He pointed out repeatedly that the latter had been dismantling black rights across the South in a process that, he insisted, both enabled racist violence and was enabled by it. “I want to warn all colored men that their fate is now trembling in the national balance,” he wrote in 1900. “The manifest desire to rob the black man of the elective franchise is demonstrated by democratic leaders in the halls of congress who openly and defiantly proclaim to the world that they shoot ‘niggers.’”²¹

At the state level, Townsend saw his fears realized in the run-up to the 1900 election when Democrats reinterpreted state law and declared black men ineligible to vote. “Reliable information has been received at Republican state headquarters that the fusionists will endeavor to disenfranchise the Negro,” reported the *Plaindealer* on October 19. “Reports to that effect are coming in from several sections of Kansas, so that the movement seems to be general.” White Republicans flatly mocked the “scheme” and would undoubtedly have moved with

19. Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 68; *Herald* (Leavenworth), May 19, 1894; *Topeka Daily Capital*, May 19, 1894; *American Citizen* (Kansas City), February 22, 1901.

20. *Herald*, April 28, 1894.

21. *Topeka Plaindealer*, October 12, 1900. On black disillusionment with Republicans—and Republican indifference to blacks—in Kansas, see Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 83–109; William H. Chafe, “The Negro and Populism: A Kansas Case Study,” *Journal of Southern History* 3 (August 1968): 402–19.

17. *Leavenworth Times*, July 10, 1889; *Advocate*, July 13, 1889.

18. *Advocate*, May 18, 1889. See also *Advocate*, February 28, 1891. On the role of the black press in opposing racism and racist violence, see Julius E. Thompson, *The Black Press in Mississippi, 1865–1985* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1993); Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 162–66.

singular aggression against any serious effort to neutralize their most reliable voting bloc. In these disquieting reports, however, blacks recognized a dangerous new mood in the state and in the nation. Amidst these developments, Townsend embarked upon an extensive tour of the state to mobilize black voters for the GOP. "They know that Tillmanism and Bryanism are synonyms for disfranchisement," explained Townsend, "and they do not propose to cast their ballots for their own ruin."²²

Townsend was clearly committed to intellectual engagement, reflecting his maxim that "abuse is not argument."²³ However, he apparently had an explosive temper when riled, an attribute that may have fueled his dogged dedication to seeing through a confrontation and his willingness on occasion to abandon his maxim and to resort to some rather colorful language and undignified fisticuffs. In 1876, for example, he was arrested at a political meeting when a disagreement deteriorated into a torrent of blasphemy. He uttered "oaths too profane to go in type and words too indecent to be repeated," chided the *Times*, demonstrating to all present "his proficiency in the use of 'God damns' and other terms of a like nature." In another incident in 1900, which he undoubtedly viewed as an act of gallantry, the *Times* reported "that Townsend knocked down a white man some months ago in this city, who was seen following a white woman along the dark streets late in the evening."²⁴

Townsend's refusal to run from trouble led to several acts of spectacularly militant resistance in the 1890s. His role in an incident in nearby Tonganoxie in 1892 undoubtedly cemented his status as a civil rights champion among blacks and as a troublemaker among whites. In late July authorities arrested Noah Ashby, a twenty-four-year-old farmer, on a charge of rape. Although a white doctor who examined the alleged victim insisted that there was no evidence of an attack, whites declared that "it must be true and the 'nigger' must hang!" In order to prevent violence, local officials spirited Ashby to Leavenworth to await examination. Perhaps recalling the dragging of Richard Wood by a mob five years earlier, a

22. *Topeka Plaindealer*, October 19, 1900; *Leavenworth Times*, November 4, 1900. See also *Leavenworth Times*, October 27, 1900. Members of the Populist Party who "fused" with the Democrats behind their presidential candidate, William Jennings Bryan, in the 1900 election were labeled "fusionists." "Tillmanism" refers to the political philosophy of Democratic South Carolina Senator Benjamin Ryan Tillman, who was a leading advocate of lynching and a symbol of Southern white supremacy.

23. *Leavenworth Times*, March 27, 1884.

24. *Leavenworth Daily Times*, November 1, 1876; *Leavenworth Times*, January 22, 1901. For report of another physical confrontation, see *Leavenworth Evening Standard*, June 23, 1890.

Townsend was often instrumental in channeling communal anger over racist violence into organized protest. . . . [though] he apparently had an explosive temper when riled.



party of armed blacks collected outside the jail as a deterrent. With a "race war" brewing, whites in Tonganoxie learned that Townsend had agreed to represent Ashby and, accordingly, intimated that the attorney might share his client's fate—indeed, the same limb—upon his arrival in town.²⁵

They were silenced by what happened instead. "Townsend who had been threatened if he should go down to defend Ashby, paid no attention," a correspondent reported to the *Atchison Blade*. "You all know that they have to do more than threaten Townsend." Instead, the attorney enlisted the services of "25 of the bravest black boys in Kansas," all of them armed to the teeth, to escort him to Tonganoxie. Ashby's father had sent recruiters into the countryside to assemble an *ad hoc* army to defend the prisoner and, as a result, when Townsend and his guards stepped off the train, another 125 blacks and two wagons loaded with firearms were there to greet them. Following the examination, more blacks poured into town. "The men camped around the jail; the mayor issued his proclamation to the effect that they should break camp and leave the city, but the colored men sent word back . . . that they were there to stay, and they did stay until the next morning when Ashby was sent to Leavenworth for safe keeping." Humiliated whites insisted that there had never been the "slightest indication"

25. *Atchison Blade*, August 20, 1892; *Tonganoxie Mirror*, August 18, 1892. See also *Tonganoxie Mirror*, July 28, August 11, 1892; *Leavenworth Times*, August 13, 1892.

of violence and that blacks had overreacted. The *Blade* correspondent had a different interpretation: "Had there been an attempt to do violence to any colored man there would not have been enough of Tonganoxie and many of her citizens left to tell what had happened."²⁶

Incidents such as the one in Tonganoxie were not as unusual as commonly assumed, though the fact that scholars have focused more on racist violence than on armed black resistance may have supported this supposition in the past. In some cases, in fact, blacks went beyond mere deterrence, engaging in mob violence itself. They did so in Leavenworth in 1888, for example, when a white man, James King, shot and killed a black politician and wounded two others. Although King claimed self-defense, blacks saw it differently, and within moments a quickly expanding mob set out in pursuit, firing shots at him as he raced along a ravine, eventually trapping him in a utility building. "Mayor Neely appeared on the scene, and attempted to order the turbulent crowd back," reported the *Topeka Daily Capital*. "A dozen revolvers were pointed at him, and Chief of Police Roberts met with no better success." Finding the white man crouched under a stairway, officers dared not move him without taking drastic measures. "King was kept secreted in the building until a late hour . . . when a company of cavalry arrived from Fort Leavenworth and he was taken to the Fort to prevent lynching."²⁷

In 1898 Townsend led blacks in another such episode. In January, Samuel Sully, a white saloonkeeper, refused to serve two blacks who requested drinks. When a third black man, farmer Jesse Cambridge, walked through the door moments later, Sully shot him dead. Working on a *pro bono* basis as assistant prosecutor during Sully's trial, Townsend became angry during the preliminary examination when defense counsel Harry Michael secured a procedural delay, charging him with using nefarious means to obtain an acquittal. During a recess, Townsend addressed a large crowd of blacks assembled in front of the courthouse, some of whom had expressed an eagerness to hang Sully, and whipped them into a furor with thinly veiled threats of violence. "Townsend reiterated his previous statements that the delay was for the

purpose of getting the witnesses to the crime, alleged to have been committed by Sully, out of the jurisdiction of the court so that Sully might escape the consequences," reported the *Times*. "He addressed the crowd saying among other things that the ends of justice would be served. If witnesses were bought off there were other means of avenging the death of Cambridge."²⁸

As Townsend stoked the passions of the crowd, Michael, a constable, and the prisoner emerged from the courthouse. Perhaps to illustrate the "other means" to which he had referred, Townsend caught his professional adversary by the collar and struck him. Simultaneously, a mob converged upon the white attorney, showering him with kicks and punches until he broke loose and ran. A judge dragged Townsend from the scene. Although reckless in his attack on Michael, Townsend may have actually prevented more serious violence against Sully himself, who was "badly frightened" during the fracas, believing that "he was the object of the wrath." Trembling with fear, reported the *Times*, the prisoner "crept hastily through the crowd followed closely by the officer and was soon clear of the crowd which might have made it extremely interesting for him had not the division created by the controversy between the lawyers diverted their attention."²⁹ The prosecution ultimately secured a conviction of third-degree manslaughter, sending Sully to prison for a short term and compelling him to pay a thousand dollar judgment to Cambridge's wife. Not surprisingly, an observer singled out the assistant prosecutor as the driving force behind the state's case. "The work of W. B. Townsend in the prosecution of the case was very creditable," reported the *Times*. "It was largely due to his efforts that the verdict was secured."³⁰

Townsend's uncompromising approach to combating racist violence won him the love and admiration of blacks across the state. Nevertheless, it also won him powerful enemies. The varying responses to his activism came into stark relief in the aftermath of a terrible act of racist violence that occurred just blocks from his Leavenworth home in January 1901. In November 1900, a child discovered in

26. *Atchison Blade*, August 20, 1892; *Tonganoxie Mirror*, August 18, 1892. See also *Leavenworth Times*, August 13, 1892.

27. *Topeka Daily Capital*, April 3, 1888. See also *Leavenworth Evening Standard*, April 2, 3, 1888; *Leavenworth Times*, April 3, 1888. For more on scholarly neglect of armed black resistance, see, for example, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "The Roar on the Other Side of Silence: Black Resistance and White Violence in the American South, 1880-1940," in *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 271-91.

28. *Leavenworth Times*, January 14, 1898. See also *Leavenworth Times*, January 9, 1898; *Leavenworth Evening Standard*, January 13, 1898; *Lawrence Daily Journal*, January 15, 1898; *Herald*, January 22, 1898. On Townsend's *pro bono* efforts, see *Leavenworth Times*, May 20, 1899.

29. *Leavenworth Times*, January 14, 1898. See also *Lawrence Daily Journal*, January 15, 1898; *Leavenworth Evening Standard*, January 13, 1898.

30. *Leavenworth Times*, May 20, 1899. See also *Topeka Plaindealer*, May 31, 1901. For more on the Sully trial, see *Leavenworth Times*, April 22, 24, 26, 29, May 1, 19, September 23, 1898.

a ravine the battered body of Pearl Forbes, a nineteen-year-old white woman who was the victim of an unknown assailant. Coming at the height of a rash of alleged assaults by black men on white women, whites immediately concluded—without substantiation—that the perpetrator was black. With white anger at a fevered pitch, police arrested a succession of suspects, none of whom were charged with the crime. Nevertheless, for the next two months, the threat of mob violence hung over the city like a fog.³¹

In mid-January 1901, when race relations were already stretched to the breaking point, Officer Mike McDonald, renowned for his hatred of blacks, arrested laborer Fred Alexander and gave him a “sound licking” after a woman reported that he had been following her. As white crowds collected near the city jail, authorities spirited the prisoner to the state penitentiary in Lansing. “Never in years have the people of the city been worked to such a pitch of excitement,” reported the *Times*. “There is no wild talk; simply the determination on every hand that summary justice must be dealt out to Fred Alexander.” After days of threats by mobs and efforts by officials to keep the prisoner out of their clutches, the sheriff capitulated to popular sentiment, returning Alexander to the city and, in essence, handing him over to a mob.³²

Mob leaders transported the prisoner to the spot where Forbes’s body had been discovered and tied him to a stake as five thousand whites looked on. In addition to substantial numbers of women and children, the crowd included citizens of all classes, soundly repudiating Townsend’s optimistic assertion that the “better class” held few terrors. “The crowds began congregating on the hills about the ravine immediately after the news spread that Alexander had been taken from the county jail,” reported the *Leavenworth Chronicle*, “and by the time he arrived there every hill side was black with people.” After attempting to force Alexander to consume amputated portions of his own flesh, mob members doused him in coal oil and set him ablaze. When the fire died, whites harvested the body, cutting off ears, fingers, and other mementos. Because the burning took place within two hundred yards of Alexander’s home, the crowd

[Townsend] bitterly arraigned the white people for “advocating mob law. . . . White people profess to be Christians, but they get out and burn negroes just the same.”



soon witnessed what was, perhaps, the most chilling aspect of the killing. “A piercing scream went up from the crowd,” noted the *Chronicle*. “Some one [sic] said ‘his mother is here’ and investigation revealed the fact that the mother, two sisters and a third colored woman had arrived on the scene.” Amidst jeers from the mob, the three women dragged Alexander’s mother back toward her home as she wailed, “Oh, Jesus will come down in vengeance on Leavenworth!”³³

Whites used the climate of terror to settle the score with their nemesis, W. B. Townsend. Within a day, they circulated rumors that he had “made an ill-advised statement” in the lead-up to the killing. “Whether he really made the statement, or not, made no difference after the report gained circulation,” noted the *Atchison Daily Globe*, “and, upon the advice of friends, he took a Missouri Pacific train for Atchison at Ft. Leavenworth.” Townsend disputed this interpretation, claiming that he had left on business and that, while away, “my wife and many friends wrote me that many threats were being made.” Whatever the sequence of events, all agreed that Leavenworth was “just now not desirable to [Townsend] as a place of residence.”³⁴

Townsend went into exile in Topeka where he and other black leaders set about establishing a Kansas

31. *Leavenworth Times*, November 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16, 1900. For an excellent account of these events, see Shawn Leigh Alexander, “Vengeance without Justice, Injustice without Retribution: The Afro-American Council’s Struggle against Racial Violence,” in *Great Plains Quarterly* 27 (Spring 2007): 117–33.

32. *Leavenworth Times*, January 13, 15, 1901. See also *Leavenworth Times*, January 16, 17, 1901; *Leavenworth Chronicle*, January 17, 1901; Alexander, “Vengeance without Justice,” 122–25.

33. *Leavenworth Chronicle*, January 17, 1901. On the efforts to compel Alexander to consume his own flesh, see *American Citizen*, February 22, 1901.

34. *Atchison Daily Globe*, January 21, 1901; *Leavenworth Times*, January 24, 1901; *Topeka Plaindealer*, February 1, 1901.

chapter of “the country’s only national civil rights organization of the period, the Afro-American Council.” There, he learned, whites were no more sympathetic to blacks than their counterparts in Leavenworth. During a temperance meeting attended by whites and blacks, the attorney was booed off stage after quarreling with Carrie Nation. The saloon-smashing temperance activist announced that she had been raised among slaves and that “I know them as well as I know anyone.” Blacks were incarcerated in large numbers, she lectured, because they had traded the bondage of slavery for that of whisky. Taking exception, Townsend steered the conversation toward racism. “He bitterly arraigned the white people for ‘advocating mob law,’” reported the *Topeka Daily Capital*. “White people profess to be Christians,” Townsend spat, “but they get out and burn negroes just the same.” When Nation implored him to sit down, Townsend retorted, “You have had your say, and now I want to have mine,” prompting a “storm of hisses” from whites in the audience and, perhaps, from blacks anxious to avoid an escalation of the situation. “The sympathy of the crowd was evidently with Mrs. Nation,” concluded the *Capital*, and “Townsend took the hint, and quit.”³⁵

Whites in Leavenworth maintained a campaign of intimidation against blacks throughout the spring. In May, a white saloon proprietor shot and killed Robert Simpson, a black laborer, dividing the city anew. A week later, an all-white jury acquitted a white prisoner who had killed Philip Boyd, a black man and fellow inmate. The Republican *Leavenworth Times*, edited by racial moderate D. R. Anthony, bemoaned the verdict, freely acknowledging its racist intent. “There is no question but that a deliberate murder was committed by Frank Clark, when he plunged a knife into his fellow convict,” it opined, averring that the only explanation for the acquittal “is that Boyd was a ‘nigger.’” Finally, when the Afro-American Council attempted to oust the sheriff as a result of his complicity in the burning of Fred Alexander, the Democratic *Leavenworth Chronicle* warned darkly that “the people of Leavenworth settled the Alexander matter to their own satisfaction and any Negroes not satisfied can have another lesson if they wish.” Indeed, Townsend specifically condemned the *Chronicle* (the “dung disseminator”) for its role in the continued unrest.

35. Alexander, “Vengeance without Justice,” 117; *Topeka Daily Capital*, February 2, 1901. See also *Topeka Plaindealer*, February 1, 1901; *Topeka State Journal*, February 2, 1901.

“I hope no colored family will allow that nasty sheet . . . to come to their homes,” he advised. “If you do, stop it, for its [sic] your bitterest enemy.”³⁶

The evidence supports his claim. Although racism pervaded all white coverage of the Alexander burning, the *Chronicle* freely endorsed the killing, and did so with language incendiary even by turn-of-the-century standards. In one of several editorials after the killing, it argued that the white woman

who has been the victim of the lust of a creature like Alexander is forever a thing accursed, innocent though she be. In all her years to come, so long as she may live, she can’t walk the streets without one and another pointing and saying, “There goes the woman who was raped by a negro.” . . . The position of the CHRONICLE is that the virtue of a good woman is higher and holier than all the half-cooked laws . . . and when a woman is robbed of this priceless jewel, justice, swift and sharp, should be meted out and meted out too with a severity that will cause the lesson it teaches not to be forgotten.³⁷

Upon Townsend’s return to Leavenworth in February, whites directed considerable violence against him. In one case late that month, arsonists set his house ablaze, causing substantial damage. In May, Officer McDonald—the same policeman who had apprehended Alexander—assaulted Townsend as the attorney chatted with two colleagues. “Robinson and Richardson got between McDonald and myself . . . saying ‘Don’t say anything Townsend, he’s got a big gun drawn there to kill you,’” explained Townsend. Clearly, Townsend believed that McDonald was targeting his continued activism. “I can’t account for his malicious attack unless it be that I attended a mass meeting of the colored citizens two nights ago, which framed a complaint against him to the mayor for his brutal treatment of a colored woman.”³⁸ City leaders, however, plainly endorsed McDonald’s actions.

36. *Leavenworth Times*, June 6, 1901; *Leavenworth Chronicle*, reprinted in *Topeka Plaindealer*, July 19, 1901; *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 14, 1901.

37. *Leavenworth Chronicle*, January 24, 1901. See also Alexander, “Vengeance without Justice,” 129; *Leavenworth Chronicle*, January 17, 1901. For more on the trial of Frank Clark, see *Leavenworth Times*, June 5, 1901.

38. *Leavenworth Times*, May 31, 1901. On the burning of Townsend’s house, see *American Citizen*, March 1, 1901; *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 14, 1901. For more on McDonald’s assault, see *Leavenworth Times*, June 1, 1901. Townsend’s house survived despite substantial damage. In the spring of 2005, the author visited it. The current owner graciously provided a tour and noted that, in making repairs and additions, he had identified charring, presumably from the 1901 attack.

“McDonald has been petted and jollied for his brutality to colored people in this town until he believes he has a right to commit assault or murder without provocation whenever he feels inclined to do so,” Townsend reflected. “This is the second time he has assaulted me.” A week after the assault, officials placed their overt stamp of approval on McDonald’s tactics when they awarded him a promotion. Facing violence from mobs and from law enforcement, Townsend was a marked man. “It is only a question of time,” concluded the *American Citizen*, until “the light of Hon. W. B. Townsend will be put out if he remains in Leavenworth.”³⁹

Despite the campaign of violence, many black residents voiced open support for Townsend’s “efforts to obtain justice for our people who are being mistreated by the hoodlums.” The Reverend W. E. Stewart praised him during his exile in Topeka. “They say that Mr. W. B. Townsend has been driven from home and is afraid to return,” he told the *Plaindealer*. “He has committed no crime unless it be the crime in the eyes of the white man to defend his race. Townsend can return home any time he desires and the colored people . . . of Leavenworth will defend him.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Townsend, it seems, also earned himself the enmity of some influential members of the black middle class who feared correctly that his confrontational style might provoke additional reprisals. They may also have believed that participation in such a struggle—particularly at a moment of such extreme tension—might jeopardize their own interests and elevated status. Consequently, many of them maintained a conciliatory posture throughout the spring, insisting “that it won’t do to say anything,” that “we will lose our ‘jobs,’” and that “we had better keep still.”⁴¹

In response, others took the naysayers to task for what they viewed as a pusillanimous response. “This city has too many of that kind of ‘white folks niggers’ who pretend to help the colored people,” an unnamed observer—likely middle class himself—opined in May. “They only help when there is a scheme on, out of which they individually can get a little cheap white folks glory and a few dollars all at the expense of the race.” From the safety of Topeka, the *Plaindealer* took a similar position, denouncing what it deemed a betrayal of the state’s premier civil rights agitator. “Are the Negroes of

Facing violence from mobs and from law enforcement, Townsend was a marked man. “It is only a question of time,” concluded the *American Citizen*.



Leavenworth so cowardly, that they won’t call a meeting denouncing the mob and take proper steps to protect their fellow townsman, W. B. Townsend?” it asked. “Let those Negroes in Leavenworth who are afraid of their jobs, keep their mouths shut and be a lick spittle for those demons; for there are some brave men in that city who will do their duty.”⁴²

In the summer of 1901, W. B. and Martha evidently concluded that it was time to leave Leavenworth. Before departing for a fresh start in Colorado, however, Townsend had biting words for white Kansans. Referencing the recent acquittal of the inmate Clark, he mocked their pretensions to a legacy of racial liberalism, shrewdly comparing them to those whom they had long viewed as beneath contempt—and finding them wanting. “A white man could not do a cowardly murder like that in Missouri to a colored man without some punishment, but this is free Kansas, g-lorious Kansas, and the soul of John Brown is marching on!”⁴³ Yet, Townsend was emphatic that it was not whites who had driven him to leave, but his erstwhile allies whose abandonment left him disillusioned. “Now, when there has been an effort to have the colored to stand together and demand fair treatment from the police and from the independent

39. *Leavenworth Times*, May 31, 1901; *American Citizen*, March 1, 1901. On McDonald’s promotion, see *Leavenworth Times*, June 11, 1901.

40. *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 14, February 22, 1901.

41. *Topeka Plaindealer*, May 31, 1901. See also *Leavenworth Times*, January 18, 1901.

42. *Topeka Plaindealer*, May 31, February 1, 1901.

43. *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 14, 1901.

order of hoodlums, I find that there are a few would-be leaders who are jealous and taking sides with the white men in their oppression of our people," he noted frankly. "They are telling colored men to have nothing to do with the matter, to attend no meetings and to let Townsend fight it out alone." These men ("nothings," he called them) were so craven, he insisted, that they "tell the white men everything that is said and done by colored men to protect themselves." In addition to fear, he concluded, these "leaders" were driven by envy and that envy would invite further oppression.

My God, when will they say anything about the wrongs imposed upon the race? I answer never, so long as they have no interest in the race but a selfish one. . . . I could win but for the double dealing of the jealous colored men who would be pleased to see any misfortune befall me in my efforts to help my people, thinking I will then be out of the way of them to get some glory. I tell you I have spent thirty years collecting glory and have a trunk full and some to spare. I don't want any more glory—they can have it for me. Time will show who the friends of the race are in this city. Mark my words, for the white's [*sic*] have just begun proscription and denial to our people of their rights. Let those who will submit, but for me I never will.⁴⁴

If Townsend's detractors among the middle class in Leavenworth celebrated his departure, blacks elsewhere viewed this development as a calamity for the cause of civil rights in Kansas. "The day he left the state," the *Plaindealer* later recalled, "the colored people in every city, town and hamlet of Kansas expressed deep regret." More immediately, the newspaper worried that his departure would allow dishonorable sycophants to assume the mantle of leadership, men who would surrender black rights without a whimper. "Since his departure the ermine of leadership has fallen into the hands of a lot of cowards—men who are but school boys when it comes to demanding the rights of the people whom they assume to lead," it lamented in 1903. "Townsend was the most valuable man the race ever had in this state, which the Negroes of Kansas will thoroughly understand after they have been represented a few more times by the present crop of cowards who are assuming the places of men." While this characterization was not entirely fair, given the climate under which these men were laboring,

44. *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 14, 1901.

it is certainly illustrative of the high esteem accorded to the "old war horse."⁴⁵

It is unclear precisely why Townsend chose to relocate to Colorado, a state where radical racism was also ascendant. In fact, a mob in Limon had incinerated a young black Kansan in a widely publicized incident only months before the burning in Leavenworth. Settling in Pueblo, Townsend soon reestablished a legal practice and founded "one of the brightest and most interesting Afro-American weeklies in the state." Within a year and a half, he had achieved the position of clerk of the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives, a loftier position than any he had been able to secure during three decades of service in Kansas, as the *Plaindealer* duly noted. "The chances are that he would not have lived long enough to have held a similar position in this state," it opined. "The Republicans of Kansas never extend the Negro a higher place than a janitorship." Relocating to Denver, Townsend continued to practice law and to represent the Knights of Pythias, a black fraternal organization. He died after a brief illness in that city in July 1917.⁴⁶

W. B. Townsend embodied black middle-class men of his period, striving to exemplify dominant middle-class values and to define class distinctions among blacks that he hoped would break down racism and ensure upward mobility irrespective of race. Yet, he also recognized that "uplift" could not be achieved until blacks banded together as a group and until the black middle class recognized that whites, and not working-class blacks, were the source of their oppression. At the same time, he apparently clung to his conviction that racism emanated primarily from the white working class, notwithstanding his own experiences to the contrary. Despite his commitment to lawful forms of resistance, including journalism, politics, and law, Townsend recognized that effective resistance demanded pragmatism

45. *Topeka Plaindealer*, July 20, 1917; March 14, 1902.

46. *Pueblo Times-Speaker*, reprinted in *Topeka Plaindealer*, March 14, 1902; *Topeka Plaindealer*, January 23, 1903. On racist violence in Colorado at the turn of the century, see Stephen J. Leonard, *Lynching in Colorado: 1859–1919* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002), 123–54. On the Lawrence, Kansas, origins of Preston Porter, the youth burned in Limon, see *Lawrence Daily Journal*, November 17, 1900. For other information on Townsend's life in Colorado, see *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 5, September 4, November 27, 1903; April 7, 1905. On Townsend's years in Denver and his death, see Smith, *Emancipation*, 491; *Topeka Plaindealer*, July 20, 1917.

and that, since whites did not allow legal technicalities to deter them, blacks could not do so either. In the end, Townsend was not driven away by whites, despite the avalanche of violence that they directed at him, but by his sense of betrayal at the hands of those who, in his estimation, put their own interests above those of their community.

One incident perhaps best captures the essence of Townsend, underscoring not only his refusal to defer to whites but his unbridled and often dangerous determination to provoke them and to shatter their blithe assumptions of superiority. In October 1892, U.S. Representative “Sockless” Jerry Simpson of the People’s Party delivered an address in Leavenworth and boldly challenged any willing Republican to a public debate. A member of the audience immediately took up the challenge. “Mr. Townsend was not profoundly impressed with Jerry’s arguments,” reported the *Times*, “and in the presence of a number of prominent Democrats of the city, challenged Jerry.” As a measure of his confidence—and in a gesture that the white politician and his supporters must have found especially galling—the attorney upped the ante, offering “to wager any of the Democrats present \$1,200, the matter to be left to competent judges, that he could best Jerry in an argument.” Simpson apparently declined.⁴⁷

Clearly, Townsend was a man of indomitable will, a man whose refusal to compromise drove his myriad

“Since his departure the ermine of leadership has fallen into the hands of a lot of cowards. . . . Townsend was the most valuable man the race ever had in this state.”



accomplishments; however, because of this attribute, he may also have contributed to the rift between himself and his middle-class counterparts. Despite the personal and professional costs of his efforts, Townsend remained, nonetheless, unbowed even as he enumerated these costs to an interviewer shortly before leaving Leavenworth. “I may be fighting a losing fight, but I have this consolation,” he declared defiantly. “I am right.”⁴⁸ [KH]

47. *Leavenworth Times*, October 19, 1892. See also *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 20, 1892.

48. *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 14, 1901.