After the Exodus: John Lewis Waller and the Black Elite, 1878-1900

RANDALL B. WOODS

The massive influx of blacks into Kansas in the late 1870's and early 1880's has been the subject of considerable historical investigation but scholars have devoted scant attention to the society produced by the great exodus and, in particular, to the characteristics of the vigorous elite that subsequently emerged. One of the most prominent and most typical members of this black aristocracy was John Lewis Waller. During his 22-year residence in Kansas he practiced law, led the fight against discrimination and segregation, edited or coedited four race journals, held a number of important positions within the state Republican party, and served as United States consul to Madagascar.

While militant on all matters concerning the race’s civil rights, Waller, like many of his educated black contemporaries, adopted a generally conservative stance on the major economic questions of the day.1 Influenced simultaneously by the reform tradition of the national Negro elite of which he was a part and the egalitarian, frontier atmosphere of Kansas, Waller actively supported such “radical” reforms as prohibition and women’s rights. Anticipating both Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois, he preached self-help and racial solidarity as techniques of racial uplift and worked assiduously to instill a sense of identity and pride among his brethren.2 Above all, Waller, together with the rest of the “talented tenth” in Kansas, was dedicated to material advancement for himself and the black community as a whole. No less influenced by the Horatio Alger myth and social Darwinism than other Americans, he assumed that material success was both an end in itself and an indication of one’s moral and civic worth.3

Waller was born a slave on January 12, 1850, in New Madrid, Mo. He and his family remained the property of J. S. Sherwood,

---

1. See, for example, The American Citizen, Topeka, July 6 and August 10, 1888; and the Topeka Tribune, August 5, 1880.


3. In 1896 Waller headed up a Kansas City-based syndicate of well-to-do blacks who attempted to establish an Afro-American industrial institute in Cowley county.—Ibid., October 23, 1896.
an influential Missouri slaveholder,⁴ until confiscated by the 32d Iowa infantry in December, 1862.⁵ The 12-year-old freedman, his mother, father, and 11 siblings were transported to Iuka (Tama county), Iowa, by Union troops where they were turned over to a committee of sympathetic whites.⁶ With the aid of A. B. Mason, a philanthropic attorney from Sioux City, the elder Waller obtained a farm large enough to support his numerous offspring.⁷

At least one of the Waller clan believed, however, that freedom meant more than the right to eke out an existence on an Iowa farm. With additional assistance from the Mason family, young John entered public school in Toledo, Iowa, in 1863.⁸ According to one account, he planned to attend a “nearby college” but several deaths in his immediate family compelled him to return to the farm to help his father. By 1874 the economic situation had improved to the point that the young freedman was able to begin reading law in the offices of Hubbard, Clark, and Deacon in Cedar Rapids. In later years one of the partners recalled that Waller was “a young man of good character, industrious and energetic, and working hard to succeed in life.” ⁹ After toiling away at his studies for two years, the ambitious ex-slave was admitted to the bar at Marion, Iowa, on November 15, 1877.¹⁰

To a young man anxious to make his mark in the world, Cedar Rapids scarcely seemed promising. Moreover, in Waller’s case there was always the chance that he would be called back to the farm. Reports within the black community of a mass migration of Negroes to Kansas, reputedly a land of economic opportunity and civic equality, stirred his imagination. He subsequently fell under the influence of Benjamin “Pap” Singleton and became an ardent advocate of the “exodus.” Deciding that the torrent of humanity then descending on Topeka, Lawrence, Leavenworth, and Atchison would require the services of a lawyer, Waller set out for Leavenworth in the spring of 1878.¹¹ Although he was admitted to practice in the court of Judge Robert Crozier (First Judicial district) with little difficulty, the transplanted Iowan soon became discouraged at the prejudice and opposition he

⁴ “John L. Waller,” New York Age, May 9, 1891.
⁵ New York Times, March 24, 1895.
⁶ Topeka Daily Capital, September 3, 1890.
⁹ Charles A. Clark to W. Q. Gresham, April 15, 1895, RG59, “M.L., D.O.S.”
¹⁰ Topeka Daily Capital, September 3, 1890.
encountered from the white community in Leavenworth, and the apathy he met within the black.\textsuperscript{12} Soon, in what was to be the first

John Lewis Waller (1850-1907), born in slavery, became a Kansas editor and lawyer, and served as U. S. consul to Madagascar.

\textsuperscript{12} Ft. Scott Colored Citizen, May 10, 1878, and Penn, Afro-American Press, pp. 188-192.
in a series of moves among the major towns of eastern Kansas, he
migrated to Lawrence where on April 1, 1878, Waller married
Susan Boyd Bray, a native of Urbana, Ohio, and a widow. Mrs.
Bray was a woman of means, culture, and evidently some politi-
cal acumen. In September, 1890, the Topeka Capital observed of
her: “There is not a colored woman, and very few white ones in
Kansas, better posted in political . . . and race matters than
Mrs. John L. Waller.”

As an educated black with an intense consciousness of race and
a strong sense of personal destiny, Waller inevitably turned to
politics, the avocation most typical of the elite during the post-
Reconstruction era. Because the black community, even in the
West, existed at the caprice of the white, politics assumed special
significance for Kansas Negroes. As William Chafe has pointed
out, the attitude of white politicians toward their black counter-
parts served as a barometer of the white citizenry’s feelings
toward the race and an emblem of the Negroes’ status within the
community. Thus, blacks came to view recognition of individuals
through patronage and political office as tantamount to recogni-
tion of and protection for the entire race. Waller fully shared this
point of view. Like so many of his contemporaries, he was firmly
convinced that once Negroes were excluded from voting and
holding office, they would be vulnerable, both economically and
legally, to those who wanted to reintroduce slavery. In short,
Waller viewed political participation as a means for enhancing
his personal status among both blacks and whites, and as a
technique of racial uplift.

Not surprisingly, Waller pledged his allegiance to the Repub-
lican party as the political faction most likely to allow the Negro a
voice in its affairs and to reward loyalty through patronage and
public office. In 1888 he warned the Shawnee county colored
convention that a “free ballot and a fair count” depended upon
solid black support of the party of Lincoln at every level. That
protection and recognition of the race were uppermost in his
mind was evidenced by his frantic efforts for 25 years to see that
only those who were proven friends of the Negro reached the top
in the party. He denounced Chester A. Arthur in 1882 for his

13. Statement of Mrs. John L. Waller, July 9, 1895, “Case of John L. Waller”, Papers Relating to the
Foreign Relations of the United States, 1895, pt. 1, pp. 385-386.
16. See, for example, “Shawnee County Clippings,” 1888, v. 11, p. 83, Kansas State Historical Society, and
The Western Recorder, Lawrence, April 11, 1884
treatment of black officeholders and his lily-white policies in the South, and he endorsed John A. Logan of Illinois for President and John Mercer Langston, a prominent black educator, lawyer, and politician born in Virginia, for Vice-President because of their advanced stand on civil rights. Moreover, Waller labored diligently throughout his political career to preserve the party’s traditional commitment to democracy and equal rights. When James G. Blaine advised southern blacks in the late 1880’s to abjure all topics except the tariff, Waller wrote Pres. Benjamin Harrison that he “was all for a productive tariff for the highest wages,” but that he “was not willing to close my mouth and eyes to the frauds committed against the suffrage of nearly a million colored voters in this country.”

Although Waller had been a resident of Kansas for only two years, when the state convention of colored men met in Topeka on August 4, 1880, he was named chairman of its central committee. All in attendance agreed that black Republicans should descend en masse upon the Republican state gathering scheduled for September 1, and compel the white majority to select a Negro for a major state office. The delegates resolved that “the race must secure this recognition under all circumstances for its own safety and advancement.” Charles H. Langston, brother of John M. Langston and an intimate of Waller, was selected as the black community’s choice for a place on the Republican state ticket. It was Waller rather than Langston, however, whom the Republicans chose to be the token of their affection for the black community.

Kansas Republicans could scarcely afford to ignore their black constituents; in fact they proved willing, with several notable exceptions, to accord them a role in party affairs throughout the last quarter of the 19th century. By 1880 there were 43,000 Negroes in the state, the vast majority of whom voted for the Republican party. Though blacks constituted only about five percent of the population, their political clout was enhanced by the facts that they were concentrated in the state’s populous

18. *The Western Recorder*, February 1, and April 11, 1884; and *The American Citizen*, February 23 and March 1, 1888.
edward counties,24 and that the two parties in Kansas were fairly evenly matched. Despite this, the Republicans in 1880 were willing to recognize Negroes only by awarding them jobs within the party structure. Waller’s resounding speech in behalf of Langston for lieutenant governor did nothing to prevent his defeat by a white.25 Blacks were somewhat placated, however, when Waller was unanimously selected to the state central committee, the first Negro in Kansas history to be so honored.26

No sooner had the dust settled from the 1880 campaign than Waller and his contemporaries began to lay plans for 1882. After Langston’s abortive candidacy, prominent Negroes turned to E. P. McCabe, a black lawyer and realtor from Nicodemus, as their representative Republican and urged his selection as state auditor.27 Throughout 1881 and 1882 Waller toured the state urging blacks to mobilize in support of McCabe’s candidacy, and whites to accord their Negro fellow-citizens the recognition they so

27. For biographical data on McCabe, see manuscript by Kenneth Wiggins Porter in possession of K.S.H.S. Library. Also, Jere W. Roberson, “Edward P. McCabe and the Langston Experiment,” Chronicles of Oklahoma, Oklahoma City, v. 51, no. 3 (Fall, 1973), pp. 343-355.
richly deserved. Alarmed by signs of a Democratic resurgence within the state and weakened by internal divisions, the Republicans decided to heed the warnings of Waller and others and reward the black-and-tan faction of the party by nominating McCabe. Though Gov. John P. St. John, campaigning for an unprecedented third term, was defeated by the Democratic nominee, McCabe won.²⁸ The campaign marked the beginning of a close friendship between McCabe and Waller, who had delivered more than 40 speeches in behalf of the Republican nominee for auditor.²⁹ Given the fact that McCabe’s election (he was reelected in 1884) catapulted him into national prominence within the black community and attracted the attention of the national Republican leadership, the relationship proved of some importance to Waller’s later career.³⁰

After a brief residence in Leavenworth following his marriage, Waller moved back to Lawrence in February, 1882, and established law offices above Charles Anderson’s grocery store. During the next two years he practiced in courts throughout the state, sold real estate, collected bad debts, and performed a variety of other duties in search of his livelihood.³¹ Given his temperament and strong views on current issues in general and race matters in particular, it was impossible for him to abstain from public affairs for long. In March, 1883, he established The Western Recorder which served as a forum for his ideas and vehicle for his political ambition for the next three years.³²

During his residence in Lawrence, Waller became increasingly involved in the issue of “quality education” for blacks. He believed that Negroes could never improve their individual and collective lot without an education. Literacy meant protection; knowledge was the prerequisite for wealth and respect. In a speech delivered to a group of black Baptists in August, 1880, he urged his audience to teach their sons and daughters “how to read, write and cipher. . . . Do this and the time is not far distant when . . . there will be positions for your children which will call them to the highest stations of life.” ³³ On the assumption that racial mixing was the only real guarantee of equality, Waller joined W. B. Townsend, a prominent black

²⁹. The Leavenworth Advocate, September 21, 1889, and The Western Recorder, July 18, 1884.
³⁰. The Leavenworth Advocate, July 5, 1890.
³¹. The Western Recorder, March 22, 1883.
³². Penn. Afro-American Press, pp. 188-192. Political ambition was not the only factor responsible for Waller’s decision to go into journalism. According to Penn, The Western Recorder was established in direct response to a lynching.
³³. The Topeka Tribune, August 26, 1880.
politician and editor of the Leavenworth Advocate, and other members of the elite, in a crusade for integrated schools. In the absence of mixed institutions, however, he felt the least the white community could do would be to provide equal facilities and he repeatedly demanded in The Western Recorder that it do so. His views on education won for Waller the respect of whites and blacks alike. In 1882 he was elected to the Lawrence school board by an overwhelming majority, defeating in the process Joseph Riggs, a prominent white Democrat.

Waller hoped ultimately to succeed to McCabe’s position as chief black officeholder in Kansas, and consequently, with an eye to the future, he labored throughout the period from 1884-1888 to extend his contacts among black and white Republicans in Kansas, and to establish a reputation among Negro leaders at the national level. In July, 1883, he attended the colored press convention in St. Louis where for the first time he met such black luminaries as John M. Langston, ex-Sen. Blanche Bruce, and Frederick Douglass. In August he persuaded the state convention of colored men that met in Lawrence to name him one of the four Kansas delegates to the national convention scheduled to be held in Louisville the next month.

In June, 1884, Waller moved The Western Recorder to Atchison. He had failed in a campaign to win a place in the Kansas delegation to the Republican national convention. Despite Waller’s best efforts, the party had chosen an all-white contingent. His feelings were somewhat assuaged, however, when B. K. Bruce, then recorder of deeds, named him Kansas’ black commissioner to the New Orleans world’s fair which was slated to run from December, 1884, through May, 1885. Waller’s selection by Bruce, who as recorder was chief dispenser of black patronage for the Arthur administration, underscored his position as a recognized member of the national elite. In November, 1884, he sold The Western Recorder to H. H. Johnson of Kansas City in order to prepare the Kansas exhibit at the New Orleans exposition.

34. The Leavenworth Advocate, November 19, 1889, January 4, April 26, 1890.
35. The Western Recorder, March 7, 1884.
40. Ibid., May 2, 1884.
41. The Western Recorder, August 29, 1884.
42. Ibid., September 5 and November 6, 1884.
Participation in racial affairs at the national level acquainted Waller with the grievances of blacks of all regions; it heightened his sensitivity to prejudice and increased his determination to resist discrimination at all levels.\textsuperscript{43} His post-1884 speeches and writings reflect a growing conviction that “separate” could never be “equal.” Separate facilities and institutions were the products of racial prejudice and thus were bound to be inferior. Like generations of blacks before him, Waller viewed the right to bear arms as a universally recognized badge of citizenship.\textsuperscript{44} Throughout 1883 and 1884 he denounced the Kansas constitutional prohibition against the induction of blacks into regular militia units and demanded “in the name . . . [of] equality, equity, and fair play” that the distinction be eliminated.\textsuperscript{45} Unwilling to admit that individual citizens operating their own businesses had the right to refuse service on the basis of color, Waller, in 1888, represented a Topeka black who had been denied service at a lunch counter and who was seeking redress through the Kansas Civil Rights bill.\textsuperscript{46}

Integration would, as Waller recognized, have to be a two-way street. In return for civil equality and nondiscrimination, the black community must accept and reflect white middle-class values. Indeed, as his civil rights activism increased so did his obsession with “respectability.”\textsuperscript{47} Negroes should acquire property, pay their taxes, obey the law, vote Republican, and, in particular, be above reproach in their moral conduct. Parents should keep their children “out of town” and teach them to be thrifty, clean, self-reliant, and sober. “We have no money to leave our children,” Waller remarked to a black audience in 1880, “let us leave them a good example, a good character, independence of nature and an untrammeled conscience.”\textsuperscript{48} Waller’s position on the most compelling social issue of the day in Kansas—prohibition—was eminently correct.\textsuperscript{49}

The period from 1888 through 1891 was one of rising expectations and disappointed hopes for the black elite in general and John Waller in particular. The challenge to Republican supremacy mounted by Democrats and Populists led many Negro leaders

\textsuperscript{43} See, for example, \textit{The American Citizen}, July 6 and August 3, 1888.
\textsuperscript{44} In 1898 Waller was one of the principal organizers of the 23d Kansas volunteers.—\textit{The American Citizen}, June 24, 1898.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{The Western Recorder}, May 31, 1883.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{The American Citizen}, August 17, 1888.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid.}, June 15, 1888.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{The Topeka Tribune}, August 26, 1880.
\textsuperscript{49} “No Third Ticket in Kansas,” \textit{The Western Recorder}, July 18, 1884.
to believe that the party of Lincoln would offer special inducements to blacks in order to retain their allegiance. The reality was quite different. While white Republicans were willing to accord minimal recognition to their black proteges in order to keep the Negro vote, they generally refused to respond to threats of ticket splitting. The Democrats and Populists, both separately and in coalition, displayed a momentary inclination to appeal to the black electorate, but by 1894 exclusionist elements had gained the upper hand in both parties.\textsuperscript{50} It was against this backdrop that Waller made an unsuccessful bid for state office. Failure, and the disillusionment that it bred caused him to look beyond Kansas to America’s burgeoning overseas empire for the means to advance his interests and those of the race.

Sometime between 1885 and 1887 Waller moved to Leavenworth and established a law office in partnership with Turner W. Bell.\textsuperscript{51} However, to the aspiring black politician, Topeka seemed to be the perfect base of operations. Aside from the fact that it was the state capital and thus would enable him to keep in touch with the white power structure, 8,000 of Kansas’ 75,000 blacks lived there.\textsuperscript{52} Without a mouthpiece since the sale of \textit{The Western Recorder} in 1885, Waller entered a partnership with his cousin, Anthony Morton, to establish \textit{The American Citizen} in Topeka on February 23, 1888.\textsuperscript{53}

Soon after launching his new paper Waller began mobilizing the black community for the forthcoming Republican state convention. In March, 1888, he called for the colored men of Kansas to meet and map strategy for maximizing black representation within the party. “We want the ‘Alternate’ business for colored men to cease,” he proclaimed to his readers, “and such representation as we are entitled to, on the county and state delegations, conceded to us.”\textsuperscript{54}

The Republicans who gathered in Wichita on May 10, 1888, were not so much worried about the Democrats, who were badly split by the prohibition issue, as about the Union Labor Party which had gained considerable support among the depression-ridden farmers of southern Kansas.\textsuperscript{55} Although the G. O. P. proved unwilling to place a black on the state ticket it did select

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{The American Citizen}, March 23, 1888.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Ibid.}, July 13, 1888.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}, February 23, 1888.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, March 1, 1888.
\textsuperscript{55} Zornow, \textit{Kansas}, p. 197.
Waller as a presidential elector and a delegate to the Republican National Convention in Chicago. Despite the fact that a white had again been chosen to fill McCabe’s old post, the editor of the *American Citizen* believed that black Republicans had fared well, especially in contrast to Negro Democrats.  

Having one of their number chosen as presidential elector and delegate to the Republican convention in Chicago brought Kansas blacks a degree of national attention, but it did little to improve their image or power within the state. Waller’s positions were largely honorary and certainly temporary; what was needed was a permanent power base within the state hierarchy. Thus, no sooner had the campaign of 1888 ended—the Republican slate, both state and national, carried Kansas by large margins  

that the black Republican leadership set its sights on 1890 and the party’s nomination for state auditor. Their determination to secure such recognition was heightened by a challenge to their political hegemony within the Negro community by a clique of Democrats and Populists.

As early as 1884 Kansas Democrats had attempted to attract the Negro vote. Two years before, they had been able to take advantage of a split within the Republican party to capture the statehouse and in their drive to retain power, party leaders proved willing to court the swelling black electorate. Accordingly, in 1884, the Democratic state convention selected C. H. J. Taylor, an aspiring black lawyer-politician, as a delegate to the party’s national meeting. As Democratic leaders had hoped, Taylor’s election as well as his subsequent appointment by the Cleveland administration as minister to Liberia, immediately attracted state- and nation-wide attention among blacks. In late May, 1888, black Democrats and “independents” convened to organize and discuss race problems in Kansas. Taylor was elected chairman and such prominent Republicans as Turner W. Bell and Charles Langston not only attended but Langston agreed to serve as a member of a state central committee.

---

58. Ibid., p. 193.
59. Taylor was admitted to practice before the Kansas supreme court on April 20, 1885.—*Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of the State of Kansas*, v. 140 (July 7, 1934, to December 31, 1934), p. xxxiii.
60. *Nebraska Morning World-Herald*, Omaha, August 14, 1891; *Topeka Daily Capital*, April 27, 1888; and *Afro-American Advocate*, Coffeyville, February 16, 1893.
from which Waller withdrew in August, subsequently became the Democracy’s advocate within the black community.\(^{62}\)

No less alarming to black Republican leaders than the Democratic resurgence among blacks was the challenge from the Populists. When in 1889 Kansas farmers founded the People’s Party, they decided to make common cause with the Negro populace.\(^{63}\) As their emissary to the black community, the Populists chose Benjamin Foster, a Topeka minister, a militant, and a former Republican.\(^{64}\) By 1890 he had succeeded in establishing a Negro Populist League,\(^{65}\) as a reward for his efforts and as part of its bid for the black vote, the party selected Foster in August as its candidate for state auditor.\(^{66}\)

Because of the uncertain political situation the convention of colored men that met in Salina on August 11, 1890, attracted state-wide attention among whites as well as blacks. The mood of black Republican leaders had changed during the summer of 1890 from one of deep pessimism to guarded optimism. From feeling threatened by the activities of the Negro Democrats and Populists, the Republican faithful had gradually moved to the position that the political revolt could be used to advantage against the white supremacists within the party. Waller had said as much in the document he issued convening the Salina convention. He admitted that because the Republican party was “fortified behind a tremendous majority in this state, [it] has been in a position to deny to the colored voters the representation . . . commensurate with our numerical strength.” Nonetheless, Waller advised prospective delegates, the means of redemption were at hand: “By reason of the altered conditions and threatened revolts, the colored voters are now in a position, by a united effort, to obtain some representation from the party whom they have always loyally supported. . . .”\(^{67}\) After passing resolutions denouncing forced colonization of blacks and calling for continued agitation and protest, the convention set about choosing a candidate for the Republican nomination for auditor. Although there were a number of aspirants, Waller was

\(^{62}\)  The American Citizen, August 24, 1888. For a brief history of this influential paper, see ibid., April 2, 1897.

\(^{63}\)  According to historian Jack Abramowitz, “The potentialities awaiting the Populist movement, should it seek to win the Negro vote and integrate the Negro into the party itself, were first discernable in Kansas where there was less tradition of anti-Negro sentiment to hinder this development.”—Jack Abramowitz, The Negro in the Populist Movement,” in Sheldon Hackney, ed., Populism, the Critical Issues (Boston, 1971), pp. 40-41.

\(^{64}\)  Ibid.


\(^{66}\)  In 1891 the Populist-controlled house of representatives appointed seven blacks to staff positions compared to only two by the Republican senate.—The Leavenworth Advocate, February 21, 1891.

\(^{67}\)  Ibid., July 26, 1890.
easily the first choice of the convention. His long service to the party, his close contacts with the white power structure, and growing stature within the national black elite made him appear the best possible selection. Indeed, the convention reacted as if his election was tantamount to nomination by the G. O. P. “For four of five minutes (after Waller’s nomination),” Townsend later wrote, “there was the greatest rejoicing, hats were waved, ladies shook their handkerchiefs, men shouted themselves hoarse.” 68 The jubilation at Salina proved premature.

The Republican convention that met at the Copeland Hotel in Topeka on September 2, 1890, was concerned over the challenge posed by the Populists and Democrats, but their anxiety did not, as Waller and his associates had hoped, make them more solicitous of the black community. Although Bion S. Hutchings, secretary of the central committee, and other prominent figures supported Waller for auditor, the convention chose a white instead. 69 According to one account, the extreme anti-Negro faction within the party delayed the vote for hours while it convinced the majority that nomination of a “nigger” would drive white Republicans into the Democratic fold. 70

Waller was deeply disappointed and frustrated at his rejection by the Republican party. Although some of his contemporaries believed that the Democrats and Populists would continue to offer protection and participation to blacks in order to oust the Republicans from the niches of power, Waller was sure that there was no long-range alternative to the G. O. P. He was convinced the Negrophobia was too deeply ingrained in each party’s membership for them to offer a permanent political home for blacks. 71 Adding to Waller’s discontent was his belief that the tendency of the G. O. P. to ignore the Negro was merely a manifestation of the extreme racism that was emerging in Kansas and throughout the nation. Indeed, as early as 1889 his speeches and writings reflected a sense of deep foreboding. During the course of an address delivered at the dedication services of the A. M. E. church in Leavenworth, he warned that “a conspiracy [is] forming against the Negro in this country which has reached a larger and more gigantic proportions [sic] than many of us imagine.

68. Ibid., August 16, 1890.
70. The American Citizen, September 12, 1890. The Washington Bee blamed “the criminally injudicious acts of Waller’s friends” for the G.O.P.’s rejection of him. Attempts to coerce the Republicans with threats of vote splitting had merely alienated supporters of the Negro and resulted in the party choosing a white.—The Washington Bee, September 13, 1890.
71. The American Citizen, August 3, 1888.
Race prejudice is on the increase. A cloud is gathering and increasing in size, and unless averted by the Negro, will burst.”

This sense of disillusionment and foreboding did not lead Waller to reject the American creed of material betterment through self-reliance and enterprise, but rather prompted him to look to America’s expanding economic empire overseas as an area where the Negro would be allowed to “prove himself.” Stung by personal misfortune and depressed by the deteriorating racial climate in America, he had decided by 1889-1890 that if colonization and commercial empire could enhance the power and prestige of white Americans, there was no reason why they could not do the same for the black populace. Specifically, he began to lay plans for the establishment in some underdeveloped area of the world of a plantation that would be owned and operated by a syndicate of Afro-Americans headed, of course, by himself.

The opportunity to implement his schemes was made possible by a bizarre combination of white Republican anxiety over Negro voting trends in 1890 and aid rendered by a prominent black Democrat. Foster’s nomination by the Populists and Waller’s rejection by the Republicans had a significant impact on the fall elections. The Republican majority of 82,000 in the presidential contest of 1888 was reduced to 15,000 in 1890, a trend in which black disaffection with the G. O. P. played no small part. Some prominent white Republicans had anticipated this disaster, and as a result had begun pressing the Harrison administration immediately after the close of the state convention to bestow a compensatory diplomatic appointment on Waller.

Adding his voice to those of concerned Republicans was C. H. J. Taylor, who had taken over the revolving editorship of the American Citizen in early November, 1890. Events had done nothing to alter the politics of the ex-minister to Liberia, who together with W. H. Eagleson had campaigned actively for Democrat Charles Robinson in the November governor’s race.

72. The Leavenworth Advocate, November 9, 1889.
73. Whether Waller was swayed by visions of overseas empire when he applied for the Haytian post in 1899 is unclear. The fact that he listed several alternative positions would seem to indicate that political considerations were uppermost in his mind.—John Waller to James G. Blaine, June 22, 1889, RG59, “Waller Appointment File, Department of State,” National Archives.
74. In 1895 the Cleveland Gazette, a widely read black newspaper edited by H. C. Smith, hailed Waller as a leading spokesman for those who believed that “Afro-Americans will find employment for their increasing wealth in foreign enterprises.”—Cleveland Gazette, May 4, 1895.
76. See, for example, P. B. Plumb to James G. Blaine, June 18, 1890; B. W. Perkins to Benjamin Harrison, October 18, 1890; J. H. Robertson to Benjamin Harrison, October 17, 1890; and John J. Ingalls to James G. Blaine, September 25, 1890, RG59, “Waller Appointment File, D.O.S.”
77. The Leavenworth Advocate, October 25, 1890.
Rather, he saw in Waller’s disappointment and desire for a position overseas an opportunity to enhance the prestige of the Democrats and Populists—Taylor was by 1890 an ardent fusionist\textsuperscript{78}—among Kansas Negroes. At this point Waller was more than willing to serve Taylor’s purpose. Despite the fact that but two years earlier he had referred to Taylor as “a low, scheming, unscrupulous ward politician,”\textsuperscript{79} Waller late in 1890 joined the staff of the \textit{American Citizen}. Taylor immediately began boosting his new associate for a consular position abroad. In return Waller wrote a series of editorials critical of the Harrison administration for its refusal to appoint a significant number of blacks to patronage jobs. On February 5, 1891, Waller was named United States consul to Madagascar.\textsuperscript{80} Whether Taylor played a direct role through his contacts with the state department and the black leadership in Washington, or an indirect part by hiring Waller and thus alarming Republicans in Topeka and Washington, he clearly figured in the appointment. Indeed both the Leavenworth \textit{Advocate} and Leavenworth \textit{Times} gave Taylor sole credit for the selection.\textsuperscript{81}

When Waller sailed for England on August 1 en route to his new post, he was already laying plans for the establishment of a plantation and black colony in Madagascar.\textsuperscript{82} Unfortunately for Kansas’ answer to Cecil Rhodes, the huge east African island, a vast, underdeveloped land whose untapped resources were among the richest in the world, was then the site of a bitter colonial rivalry between Britain and France.\textsuperscript{83} In spite of the fact that British missionaries and merchants far outnumbered those of France, the British foreign office decided in 1890 to relinquish all formal claim to Madagascar in order to persuade France to recognize British dominance in Egypt. Accordingly, in August Lord Salisbury and William Waddington, the French ambassador in London, signed a joint declaration on Africa in which France acknowledged the British protectorate over Zanzibar (and tacitly

\textsuperscript{78} Taylor ran for state representative on the Democrat-Populist ticket in 1892.—\textit{The Afro-American Advocate}, Coffeyville, September 29, 1892.


\textsuperscript{80} Waller’s deposition, August 27, 1895, No. 362, RG59, “Dispatches of United States Minister to France, Department of State,” National Archives.

\textsuperscript{81} The Leavenworth \textit{Advocate}, February 21, 1891, and the Leavenworth \textit{Times}, February 28, 1891.

\textsuperscript{82} J. L. Waller to John Mercer Langston, July, 1894, “Papers of John Mercer Langston,” microfilm in Amistad Research Center, Dillard University, New Orleans (originals at Fisk University, Nashville).

over Egypt), and in return Britain acquiesced in French control over Madagascar and the Sudan.\footnote{84}{"Declarations Exchanges Entre la Gouvernement de la Republique Francaise et la Gouvernement de sa Majeste Britannique au Sujet des Territories d’Afrique, August 5, 1890", No. 4, Documents Diplomatique: Affaires de Madagascar, 1885-1895 (Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1895).}

In spite of the Salisbury-Waddington Pact, opposition to a French takeover continued unabated both from the British colony in Madagascar and the Hova monarchy.\footnote{85}{John Campbell to William H. Wharton, September 24, 1890, No. 89, RG59, “Dispatches of the United States Consul at Tamatave, Department of State,” National Archives.}

Although they joined forces in the face of the common enemy, the crown and local Englishmen were well aware that even their combined power posed no serious obstacle to French imperialism.\footnote{86}{Herbert I. Priestly, France Overseas: A Study of Modern Imperialism (New York, 1938), p. 311.}

Soon after Waller’s arrival in Tamatave (Madagascar’s principal port and the seat of the U. S. consulate) the Anglo-Hova coalition sought to make him a party to their anti-French schemes, hoping that he would interpose himself and his country between the Quai d’Orsay and Madagascar. Although Waller’s interests differed from those of his host, Malagasy independence was of less importance to his objectives than to theirs. Thus, the black diplomat readily agreed to resist the establishment of a French protectorate.\footnote{87}{Queen of Madagascar to Grover Cleveland, June 6, 1893, No. 65, RG59, “D.U.S.C.T., D.O.S.,” and Madagascar News, August 21, 1893.}

The opportunity to challenge France’s position was not long in coming; in the course of assuming his new duties, Waller clashed with the French authorities over the granting of \textit{exequatur} (official authorization given to consular agents by the country in which they are stationed). At that time the French resident-general was demanding that all consuls apply through him rather than directly to the queen. To the delight of the Hovas and the British, and the outrage of the French, Waller submitted his credentials directly to the monarchy and in due time received \textit{exequatur} from the native authorities.\footnote{88}{John Waller to William Wharton, August 10, 1891, No. 1, RG59, “D.U.S.C.T., D.O.S.”} Though Waller’s position was sanctioned by the state department, France and particularly Frenchmen in Madagascar chose to believe that America’s refusal to acquiesce was due primarily to the black consul. When Waller later set in motion plans for the founding of his plantation and Negro colony, the French became convinced that he was a threat to their interests.\footnote{89}{John Waller to William Wharton, October 26, 1891, No. 11, \textit{ibid.}}

In June, 1893, Waller learned that under the new Democratic administration of Grover Cleveland he was to be replaced by a
white Georgian. His dismissal left him free to initiate discussions with the Hovas in connection with the long-dreamed-of land concession. Negotiations between the ex-consul and the Hova government culminated in March, 1894, some two months after Waller had stepped down as consul, with the announcement that he had been awarded a 30-year lease on a 150,000-acre tract in the rubber-rich Southeast. Letters that Waller subsequently wrote to various black and white newspapers in America together with advertisements that appeared in the local papers, indicate that he intended first to form a financial syndicate to exploit the rubber, timber, and mineral resources in the concession and eventually to sublet tracts to various enterprising black Americans. The French had other plans, however. They considered the land grant, only the second ever to be awarded to an individual by the Hova queen, as a direct challenge to their hegemony. As a result, relations between the French authorities on the island and both the Hovas and Waller deteriorated rapidly.

On October 8, 1894, the French resident-general delivered an ultimatum to the Hova government demanding unqualified recognition of French hegemony in the island. When the crown refused, a 15,000-man army landed at Tamatave in December, and launched a year-long assault on the capital, Tamarive.

Since Waller assumed that his American citizenship would protect him and hoped that the Hovas would somehow prevail, he remained in Tamatave with a view toward developing his concession. By the spring of 1895 the French were having to contend with yellow fever as well as the Hovas, and they were in no mood to tolerate the activities of a man who had become the symbol of resistance to their authority in the island. On March 5, 1895, the military commandant at Tamatave ordered the ex-consul arrested as a Hova spy. A week later a tribunal of five French officers sentenced Waller to 20 years at hard labor. Chained to the deck

90. Alvee Adee to Josiah Quincy, June 10, 1893, interdepartmental memo, ibid.
91. Agreement between John L. Waller and the Malagasy government, March 15, 1894, No. 34, ibid.
94. Gabriel Hanotaux to Le Myer de Vilers, November 27, 1894, No. 57, Documents Diplomatique, and Heggoy, Hanotaux, p. 83.
of a mail steamer, the thwarted empire-builder subsequently departed for France to serve out his term.97

Just as the Kansas Republican leadership and C. H. J. Taylor had helped Waller acquire his position in the diplomatic corps, they were to be instrumental in rescuing him from the clutches of the French. Helped by the panic of 1893, the G. O. P. had captured the governor’s seat and control of the house in the 1894 elections. Despite these successes, the Republicans feared that the Democrats and Populists might join hands in 1896 as they had in 1892 when the “Popocrats” had captured both the governorship and the house of representatives.98 Thus, when Waller’s arrest and imprisonment became a cause celebre among Kansans both black and white, the Republican congressional delegation descended upon the state department and demanded immediate, vigorous action to secure the ex-consul’s release.

The black community did not hesitate to make its views on the “Waller affair” abundantly clear. Indeed, not since the exodus had blacks been as aroused as they were over France’s treatment of the ex-consul. The American Citizen compared Waller’s exploits to the “triumphs of Cecil Rhodes” and warned that “standing armies of the effete European dynasties will be wise to think twice henceforward before attempting to run any bluffs on Kansas diplomats or captains of industry whether white or black.”99 A large number applauded Waller as a defender of the weak and oppressed. “The French have no more right in Madagascar than a burgler has in a man’s parlor. . . . He [Waller] is paying heavily for his sympathy with an outraged people,” according to a Topeka Capital editorial quoted by the Parsons Weekly Blade.100 Still others saw in the Waller matter an opportunity to aid the race in its march toward full citizenship. They believed that if the imprisoned entrepreneur could be made into a symbol of the national sovereignty, the white power structure might somehow be induced to view all Negroes as full-fledged citizens deserving of equal protection under the law.101 Whether they portrayed the ex-consul as the herald of black business enterprise abroad, as a leader in the global fight against oppression, or as a vehicle for achieving full citizenship, Negro spokes-

97. Crummond Kennedy to Algee Adee, September 6, 1895, RG59, “M.L., D.O.S.”
99. The American Citizen, March 15, 1895.
100. The Parsons Weekly Blade, May 11, 1895.
101. See, for example, the Kansas City (Mo.) Journal, August 10, 1895.
men in Kansas demanded immediate action to secure his release.\textsuperscript{102}

Although not as aroused as blacks, a number of white Kansans believed Waller’s treatment at the hands of the French was an outrage and a slur upon the national honor, and they joined the Negro community in demanding prompt action. W. C. Tetrick, writing in behalf of the 2,200 citizens of Kingman, was quite outspoken in support of Waller. “Nothwithstanding the fact that we are white and the Hon. Mr. Waller is a Negro,” he wrote Secretary of State Olney on July 19, 1895, “yet we are both citizens of this state and this Republic and insist on our rights to ask your Department to accord Mr. Waller the same protection as if he were White.” He demanded that Washington secure the ex-consul’s rights “if it takes every Gun-boat, Gatling gun, Torpedo, and sword in this county to do it.”\textsuperscript{103}

Confronted by this coalition of outraged blacks and chauvinistic whites, the Republican leadership in Kansas alternately pleaded for and demanded action from the federal government during the summer and fall of 1895. On July 20 a mass meeting at Topeka appointed a committee consisting of ex-Gov. Thomas Osborne, Lt. Gov. A. J. Troutman, and A. M. Thomas, a well-known black attorney, to go to Washington and press Waller’s case.\textsuperscript{104} That same week Gov. E. N. Morrill again wrote Cleveland: “The people of our state feel that a great outrage has been perpetrated upon one of its citizens. It is not a question of race or color; it is a question of American citizenship.”\textsuperscript{105} Despite these efforts Waller continued to languish in the same French dungeon once occupied by “the Count of Monte Cristo” throughout the late summer and fall.\textsuperscript{106} Finally, in December, 1895, Cong. Orin Miller and Sen Lucien Baker, both of Kansas, secured passage of a joint resolution demanding that the administration surrender all correspondence relevant to the Waller affair and, subsequently, to authorize a full-scale investigation into the matter.\textsuperscript{107}

While white Kansas Republicans were lambasting the administration for its failure to secure Waller’s release, the would-be empire-builder was receiving aid of a more inconspicuous sort from C. H. J. Taylor. In 1893 Cleveland had rewarded the Negro

\textsuperscript{102} The Parsons Weekly Blade, March 30, 1895.
\textsuperscript{103} W. C. Tetrick to Richard Olney, July 9, 1895, RG59, “M.L., D.O.S.”
\textsuperscript{104} “In Behalf of Ex-Consul Waller,” New York Daily Tribune, July 20, 1895.
\textsuperscript{106} The Leavenworth Herald, July 13, 1895.
Democrat for his years of service to the party by naming him
recorder of deeds. From his post in the nation’s capital, Taylor,
who was apparently motivated both by feelings of personal
friendship and political considerations, pressed the President
through his private secretary not to abandon Waller to French
imperialism.

In the face of this biracial brauhaha the state department
redoubled its efforts in behalf of the imprisoned ex-consul during
the opening weeks of 1896, but all to no avail. Finally, however,
in early February the French foreign office put forth a proposal
whereby France would release Waller in return for an explicit
promise by the United States not to press for the evidence against
him, and an understood pledge not to challenge French hege-
mony in East Africa. Secretary of State Olney readily agreed
and on February 21, 1895, Waller was released from the Maison
Clarveaux to begin the long journey back to Kansas.

The ex-consul spent the remaining years of his life just as he
had the pre-Madagascar phase: alternately embracing politics,
journalism, and foreign adventure in a continuing quest for the
key that would unlock the door to power and prestige for himself
and other black Americans. Upon his return to the United States
Waller engaged in an extended speaking tour during which he
regaled his audiences with tales about his overseas adventure.
In 1896 he once again joined the staff of the American Citizen
and from this vantage point campaigned for recorder of deeds. Al-
though he stumped the Midwest for the G. O. P. during the
election of 1896, and the Citizen and other black papers listed his
qualifications for recorder weekly, Waller failed in his bid to fill
Taylor’s old position. In 1898 during the Spanish-American
War, Gov. John Leedy appointed him a captain in the 23d Kansas
volunteers, an all-black regiment which served as part of the
occupation army in Cuba. In Cuba Waller once again attempted
to found a plantation and black American colony, but he was
neither able to generate sufficient interest among blacks in the
United States nor to secure the land needed for his projected

108. C. H. J. Taylor to Grover Cleveland, August 9, 1894, “Papers of Grover Cleveland,” Library of
Congress.
Blakely gives a brief description of Waller’s arrest and imprisonment in “The John L. Waller Affair,
112. See, for example, The American Citizen, June 26, 1896, and The Afro-American Sentinel, May 2,
1896.
113. The American Citizen, June 26, 1896, and Iowa State Bystander, Des Moines, November 27, 1896.
enterprise. After returning to the mainland in 1900, he settled with his family in New York. Aside from the fact that he edited the Progressive American in Yonkers for a time and that he finally managed to extract $10,000 from the French in compensation for his imprisonment, little is known about the closing years of his life. He died in 1907.

In his political activism, civil rights militancy, and personal lifestyle, John Lewis Waller typified the black aristocracy that emerged in Kansas between 1878 and 1900. Believing that political participation offered a unique opportunity for him to serve simultaneously his own interests and those of his race, he plunged into politics with a passion. The Republicans, however, proved unwilling to accord him in particular and the black community in general the recognition Waller believed they both deserved. Although disillusioned with the party of Lincoln and alarmed by the sharp increase in racial tensions so evident throughout the nation, Waller did not join those of his contemporaries who in the early 1890's embraced the Democrats and Populists, but instead looked to America's rising empire overseas as an answer both to his personal problems and those of the race. His attempt to carve out a plantation and Negro colony in Madagascar, however, foundered on the rocks of French imperialism. Following the failure of a similar scheme in Cuba, he returned to the United States to spend his days in a continuing but fruitless search for equality and opportunity.

115. The Topeka Plaindealer, March 17, 1899.