In 1896, J. R. Clifford launched a public campaign against Storer College in response to its recent decision to exclude African Americans from its summer boarding accommodations. To this African American lawyer and Storer graduate, the administration’s action exhibited their indifference toward the role leisure and recreation played in black political and racial consciousness and its ties to commemorative culture. Founded in 1867 by Freewill Baptists for the education of freedmen and women, Storer College was located on Camp Hill in Harpers Ferry, a town steeped in both scenic splendor and historical significance. Since John Brown’s ill-fated assault on slavery there in 1859, Harpers Ferry had become hallowed ground in African Americans’ collective memory. In the decades following emancipation, groups large and small boarded the Baltimore & Ohio railroad and ventured to the war-ravaged town to pay respects to the man who, as Langston Hughes would later pen, “went to shoot [their] way to freedom,” while hiking mountainous trails and strolling along the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers’ shores.1

For many urban blacks, such weekend excursions became an ideal way to seek relief from unbearable summertime heat and humidity, affording them the opportunity to travel to sites of historical significance in a country that had only recently recognized their citizenship. Of the many spots prominently featured on the B&O’s westward itinerary, the student dormitories on Storer’s campus were one of the few places where African Americans of means could enjoy an extended stay, where mothers, with children by their side, could retreat during the “heated term,” to be greeted by their husbands at the train depot on weekends. A fledgling educational institution nine months each year, the campus became, during the summer, a makeshift resort for the elite and the aspiring, a place where vacationers and excursionists could bask in the area’s resplendent scenery, relax in the company of their family and friends, and revel in the end of another workweek. And though their leisurely activities might at first glance seem unremarkable, their choice of location, the meanings they invested in such pursuits, and their critique of each others, reveal a heretofore unexplored dimension of the broader contest over the memory of John Brown and the reality of Jim Crow.

Clifford’s fight to preserve summer boarding for blacks at Storer College opens a window on the politics of leisure and its role in shaping class consciousness among African Americans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The intersection of race, leisure, and memory, as witnessed at Harpers Ferry, was fundamental to the development and fragmentation of black political culture from Reconstruction through Jim Crow. As the resort, long a haven

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for the black elite and the middle class, increasingly became an excursion destination for the working poor, tensions over African Americans’ public conduct and use of “spare time” escalated, shaping groups’ and individuals’ pursuit of leisure there and its perceived political implications. Leisure and recreation, as this essay argues, became fully enmeshed in blacks’ debates over public self-representation, and at Harpers Ferry, the utilization of the past to shape the present.²

This essay examines the role of leisure in shaping debates over the role of public conduct, history and memory, and racial uplift among African Americans. The leisurely pursuits of African Americans at Harpers Ferry and the efforts of Clifford and others to protect them from the insidious effects of Jim Crow reveal the importance blacks placed in securing and defending leisure space. The ambivalence of other blacks to both Brown the historical figure and Harpers Ferry the vacation destination underscore the fractious divides commemorative activities produced among African Americans. The diverse emotions blacks invested in Harpers Ferry, and the varying ways in which they utilized this space, highlight the subtle ways through which African Americans challenged white historical narratives. It thus calls on historians to examine more closely the meanings both black participants and white observers invested in leisure activities and the places where it was pursued. African Americans’ public rebukes of official historical narratives were indeed enacted during parades, on plaques, and at other civic events and ceremonies, as the historians Kathleen Ann Clark and W. Fitzhugh Brundage have recently shown.³ But they were also performed through the otherwise simple act of claiming a space for rest, relaxation, and amusements of their own making.⁴

In the decades following emancipation, African Americans laid claim to public spaces for commemorative rituals. Through incorporating their historical consciousness into the public sphere, African American celebrants challenged dominant national narratives and, as Brundage points out, “tested the boundaries of racial etiquette that regulated public spaces.”⁵ At Harpers Ferry, we see both trends at work. African Americans challenged white Americans’ reinterpretation of the war’s origins and outcome, celebrating Brown’s raid and its radical aims in a racially contested space. Yet they also sought out Harpers Ferry because of the rare degree of autonomy and freedom of expression Storer College’s campus seemingly afforded its summer congregants. As the nation slid toward its racial “nadir,” African Americans increasingly saw both the ceremonial and the everyday weighted with political significance, and interpreted theirs’ and each others’ everyday actions in relation to its subversive potential, actions and interpretations that shaped and were shaped by their own class and gender orientations and economic interests.⁶

Both black and white visitors to and residents of Harpers Ferry disagreed over the racial, class, and gender implications of blacks’ day-long excursions and longer vacations there. For nascent civil rights leaders such as Clifford, this leisure and commemorative space held the potential to liberate a despised race from a humiliating depiction of their collective past and dim view of their future potential. For local whites, the throngs of fashionably dressed and urbane excursionists and vacationers who came to pay their respects to Brown and his co-
conspirators not only undermined the nation’s steps toward sectional reconciliation and its attendant villainization of abolitionists, but moreover constituted a flagrant rebuke of the rituals of deference that had long marked the public performance of race. Storer officials and many reform-minded blacks, meanwhile, increasingly saw such excursions and vacations as a distraction from the hard labor of racial uplift, enticing blacks to pursue lifestyles unbecoming of their status in society. To them, the acts of defiance embedded in such pursuits paradoxically confirmed whites’ most base stereotypes and offered further justification for their exclusion from the body politic.

They all, however, agreed that recreation and leisure bore more than an incidental relationship to social relations and political conditions during the uncertain transition from emancipation to Jim Crow. And none would have recognized historical renderings of this era which situate blacks on the periphery of the nation’s burgeoning tourist trade. Indeed, African Americans during this era were not simply servants to the nation’s white leisure class, or passive recipients of a “tourist gaze” projected onto exotic racial “others.” They were active combatants in a struggle between official and vernacular culture and between dominant racial conventions and everyday patterns of resistance. If tourism “played a powerful role in America’s invention of itself as a culture,” then this study, in essence, asks what role it played in the invention of counter-cultures, and how these processes of invention further delineated ideas about class, gender, respectability, and mobility among its creators and observers.

During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, Harpers Ferry’s historical significance conspired with its natural surroundings to create an ideal destination for urban blacks. It was situated at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, in the shadow of the Blue Ridge mountains. Hiking trails snaked through the surrounding hillsides where, throughout the spring and summer, groups and couples could traverse—picnic baskets, microscopes, and bird watching books in hand—to capture a glimpse of nature relatively un molested by the encroaching arms of industrialization or to simply sneak an afternoon of privacy with a chosen mate. Back in town, a narrow island in the middle of the Potomac housed a privately owned amusement park that featured a beach, ferris wheel, and other attractions. In 1881, the school conceived of a plan to open its doors to white and black guests. The following summer, articles began appearing in black newspapers across the mid-Atlantic region announcing the availability of rooms for vacationing families on Storer’s campus. The Baltimore & Ohio targeted this same audience for their weekend excursion trains, imploring black churches and voluntary organizations to book their next event at Harpers Ferry. In the course of extolling its ideal location and bevy of recreational options, both Storer and the B&O also emphasized the town’s pivotal role in African American history. Newspaper advertisements never failed to mention the town’s historical significance as a complement to its natural splendor:

The visitor to Harper's Ferry is doubly paid, for he not only feels the thrilling impulses which come from a contemplation of the movement of the first martyr of a true and not a spurious American freedom, but the natural beauty of the place appeals strongly to the most refined and exalted part of his being.
Though nature’s aesthetic appeal in the Gilded Age has been primarily seen as a retreat from the encroaching arms of industrialization, such descriptions of Harpers Ferry speak to African Americans’ broader effort to infuse natural surroundings with historical consciousness, and helps explain why promoters of leisure travel might have seen a potentially fertile market in surrounding black communities.

In their descriptions of the area and its past, contemporary black writers sought to recapture a past that was, in the midst of the nation’s retreat from the promises of emancipation and citizenship, in danger of receding from blacks’ collective memory. Nature was evoked to articulate historical and cultural consciousness, to give meaning to a violent past and uncertain future, and to channel order from the chaos of urban life:

The spirit of freedom has always dwelt among the mountains, and when old John Brown looked upon the mountains which rise in majesty round about the place, the spirit of liberty stirred afresh within him, here he resolved to do and dare and die, if need be, that his fellow man might come forth from the chattel house of bondage.\footnote{12}

J. Max Barber, founding member of the Niagara Movement and attendee at the Harpers Ferry conference, reflected on the area’s perfect marriage of aesthetics and racial consciousness:

The scenery and the history in and around this little mountain village possess an interest that is unusual. I have heard men speak of the peculiar sensation, the thrill which comes to one as he stands in the shadow of some mighty structure or on a spot where some great deed was wrought that perceptibly advanced the world. Men have journeyed to the other side of the world to drink a draught of air that played around a Calvary, a Trafalgar or a Runnymead, and they have felt well-paid for their trouble. I too have known what it meant to meditate at Valley Forge, Queenstown and Gettysburg. But I must confess that I had never yet felt as I felt at Harpers Ferry.\footnote{13}

Barber, like many other African American visitors, forged an emotional relationship with the town and surrounding area based in equal parts on collective memory, personal contemplation, and observance. In his 1885 commencement address to the graduates of Storer College, the black nationalist and Episcopal priest Alexander Crummell noted that the town was “full of the most thrilling memories in the history of our race.”\footnote{14} The town’s peaceful serenity and stunning scenery encapsulated, in many post-Civil War blacks’ minds, its status as an African American lieu de mémoire on the nation’s postbellum landscape.\footnote{15}

In so doing, such writers drew upon the abolitionist literary motif of evoking landscape imagery in contemplating Brown’s martyrdom. As the literary scholar Kristen Proehl notes, in the years following Brown’s raid both Frederick Douglass and Thomas Wentworth Higginson waxed at length on Brown’s “knowledge of the mountain landscape,” and his subsequent “transform[ation] of the natural world into a tool that could be used to dismantle the institution of slavery.”\footnote{16}

In the decades following emancipation, John Brown’s siege of a federal armory in pursuit of blacks’ freedom became a dominant image in nascent civil rights iconography. Brown came to represent not simply an uncompromising
demand for full equality and the courage to act on one's convictions, but moreover African Americans' hope for social relations governed irrespective of color. Indeed, for many African Americans of this era, the most famous and beloved paintings of Brown were not the ones that portrayed him as a fire-breathing, maniacal traitor, but rather as the man who, as he was led from the Charlestown, West Virginia, courthouse to his execution, stopped to kiss a black child on the cheek. As the historian Benjamin Quarles notes, Brown was more than another hero in the pantheon of black history: "his was a name to conjure with, almost a presence to be summoned." Likewise, Harpers Ferry the place became, in the writings of abolitionists and postemancipation black scholars, a spatial metaphor of man's fulfillment of God's will.

Beginning in the 1880s, Soloman Brown, an employee of the Smithsonian Institution and preservationist of African American history, annually led excursion groups to the federal armory at Harpers Ferry on the anniversary of Brown's raid. It was here, such groups were reminded, where brave black souls and white Americans of conscience cast the first stone against a dreaded institution that had, for generations, robbed them and their ancestors of their freedom and their heritage. Popularly identified with many black Americans as the site where the nation took its first steps to reclaim all that had been vanquished under bondage, the fort also came to symbolize African Americans' cultural rebirth in freedom. Pieces of its exterior became treasured keepsakes collected by black visitors, representing a bookend counterpart to the slave's shackles in the material history of slavery and emancipation. Frederick Douglass, for instance, kept a brick from the fort on the mantle of his home, Cedar Hill, in Washington, D.C. And in an undated letter to Storer College's president, Nathan Brackett, the famed civil rights orator implored the school to mark "this sacred spot" with a monument to John Brown "so that it may tell . . . coming generations of what benevolent self-sacrifice in the cause of Justice and Liberty our human nature is capable. We owe it to ourselves and to mankind," he added, "to rescue this spot on which this deed was done from doubt and oblivion."

Despite Brown's quick ascendency to mythic status, Harpers Ferry did not emerge as an excursion and vacation destination for African Americans simply because it was weighted with historical significance. Rather, African Americans' attraction to Harpers Ferry during the summer months stemmed from the town's commercial exploitation by a burgeoning tourism industry that traded in Americans' insatiable desire to fashion new identities (or reclaim old ones trampled underfoot by war and socioeconomic upheaval) through crafted visions of the past. By the late nineteenth century, pilgrimages to battlefields and national shrines had emerged as one of the chief destinations for the nation's growing numbers of excursionists and vacationers. Civil War battlefields such as Gettysburg capitalized on Americans' desire to commemorate the dead and reconcile sectional divisions. Families, veterans' groups, and excursion parties of all stripes boarded railroad cars and swarmed into this newly minted hallowed ground looking for the chance to collect relics from battlefields, reenact Pickett's charge, or simply drink and lounge with friends in the Pennsylvania countryside.

The success of Gettysburg in fashioning itself as a travel destination that combined pleasure with collective commemoration no doubt influenced Harpers Ferrians' marketing strategies. Yet it was the downstream commemorative des-
destination Mount Vernon with which Storer College contrasted its surroundings when appealing to black audiences. One advertisement for summer boarding at Harpers Ferry in one of Washington’s African American newspapers read:

For the money ($4 dollars a week) good board is furnished. The quick easy access to Washington City renders it twice a blessing to those whose time and purse will not allow them to go far or to anymore fashionable places. This resort ought to be crowded from the opening to the close. As Mount Vernon is the Mecca of the whites so Harper’s Ferry should be the Mecca of the colored American citizen.23

The experience of African Americans at the home of the nation’s Founding Father helps us unpack the meanings embedded in this commercial appeal.

Located a mere fourteen miles downstream from Washington, Mount Vernon was, by the late nineteenth century, a chief destination of riverboat excursion parties; it later secured a prominent stop on the city’s trolley line into Virginia. Excursionists packed boats and trains to full capacity for the opportunity “to worship at the tomb of the Father of His Country” and picnic along the property’s shore.24 After visiting Mount Vernon, excursion parties often ventured across the river to the whites-only amusement park Marshall Hall, where an afternoon of imagining the past segued into envisioning the modern, consumptive future. Indeed, the era’s new technologies and amenities mingled easily with paeans to a more innocent time along Mount Vernon’s shores. When steamboats strewn with electric lights floated past the mansion, its captain tolled the ship’s bell and passengers were expected to doff their caps.25

For black Americans, however, a day at Mount Vernon was a painful reminder of their marginal and subservient role in white historical narratives. This former slave plantation celebrated the myth of harmonious race relations under slavery. The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association hired elderly African Americans to regale guests with fabricated stories of a bygone era of amicable race relations, when dutiful, deferential slaves knew their place and served with honor under the nation’s white founders. Workers such as Edmund Parker appeared to visitors, as the historian Scott Casper notes, “as fully a relic of the place as the pebbles he asked visitors not to pocket.”26 In the midst of European immigration and growing anxieties of a pluralistic cultural landscape, Mount Vernon reinforced a traditional reading of America’s past—its unifying symbols and defined racial hierarchies—as an antidote to an uncertain future. Mount Vernon’s African American employees, and the roles they were expected to play, were intrinsic to its national narrative. When Parker died in 1898, newspapers across the country carried his obituary. Each emphasized his loyalty to the Ladies’ Association, reciprocated by the excellent care he received from his white employers, and mourned his death as emblematic of the passing of the contended, deferential black servant from American society.27

While black faces could be found in the home’s kitchen and on property’s grounds, few were seen, much less welcomed, as visitors. Though the Ladies’ Association never instituted an exclusionary policy on the grounds, they had an exclusive contract with the white-only excursion steamer the Charles Macalester and refused the docking of the River Queen, a steamer “used for negro excursions.”28 Unless traveling on their own, blacks could only visit Mount Vernon
via the segregated streetcars from Washington and could not enjoy the river's allure or partake in its amusements. Even a packed lunch proved difficult to savor. At George Washington's birthplace (located near Mount Vernon and a popular stop on excursionists' itineraries), blacks were excluded from the picnic grounds and forced to eat their lunches a mile away from the mansion. As one visitor remarked, the conditions were far from hospitable:

There were no tables or benches such as you would expect to find in a picnic ground or any other conveniences. The superintendent returned later and brought two old and dirty buckets of water for us to drink from, also an old dirty dipper, and trash can. He told us that if we left any trash he could, according to law, compel us to come back and clean it up.  

The journey to and from Mount Vernon was also, as Casper points out, "an exercise in second-class citizenship." Not only did Virginia law force them to ride in the colored section, but as part of the excursion-to-Mount Vernon experience, riders were notified of other sites of historic significance along the way, such as the slave pens in Alexandria, Virginia. The pioneering civil and women's rights activist Mary Church Terrell captured how travel to Mount Vernon inflicted a unique assault on the psyche:

As a colored woman I cannot visit the tomb of the Father of the country, which owes its very existence to the love of freedom in the human heart and which stands for equal opportunity to all, without being forced to sit in the Jim Crow section of an electric car which starts from the very heart of the city—midway between the Capitol and the White House. If I refuse to be humiliated, I am cast into jail and forced to pay a fine for violating the Virginia laws.

The discrimination African Americans experienced traveling to or from Mount Vernon not only laid bare the hypocrisy of the nation's professed ideals, but obviated any sense of co-partnership in the nation's past and future that such sites aimed to inculcate in its visitors. It instead reminded them of the lowness of their proscribed place. Terrell and other African Americans visited Mount Vernon in the hopes of capturing a glimpse of America's promise that contrasted with its wayward practice, to transcend the indignities they experienced daily through absorbing and passing along to their children a collective national narrative ostensibly shared by all irrespective of color. Jim Crow cars, disrespectful hosts, and uncritical celebrations of an era when their ancestors were held in bondage deflated such hopes, forcing black visitors to instead swallow a hearty dose of humiliation and reminding them of their marginal role in the nation's official narrative.

In contrast to the closed doors, incessant jeers, and racist historical narratives they confronted at Mount Vernon, Harpers Ferry seemingly offered African Americans the opportunity to commemorate an alternative vision of America's past and promise while relaxing in the company of friends in a space of their own making. Here they could fashion a history of America's past that honored not the former slaveholders who founded the nation in 1776, but rather, "the first martyr of a true and not a spurious American freedom." It also gave black families aspiring toward middle-class status the chance to rub shoulders with (or
at least claim the same vacationing spot as) some of the nation’s “aristocrats of color.” Beginning in the years immediately following the Civil War, elite black Washingtonians such as Library of Congress assistant librarian Daniel Murray purchased summer cottages there, and hosted families from black America’s “select set” throughout the summer months. Several black families owned businesses in town, none more prominent than William and Sarah Lovett, who in 1883 began operating a boarding house in town and later opened the Hilltop House, Harpers Ferry’s largest and most elegant hotel. By 1897, the Lovetts had “almost a monopoly in the hotel accommodations at Harper’s Ferry.” As an outgrowth of its sizable business and professional class, Harpers Ferry became home to a community of black homeowners unparalleled in percentage of total residents and qualities of residences in the rural upper South. In a region bereft of a substantial black population, African Americans constituted a larger percentage of Harpers Ferry’s population than any other town or city in West Virginia. By 1890, 4,116 African Americans lived in Harpers Ferry, 26.5 percent of the city’s total population. Over two-thirds of the town’s black residents owned their homes, while over three-fourths owned real estate in the area. Moreover, African Americans were not segregated within an ecologically and economically undesirable section of town. Instead of residing in the town’s “bottoms” or on the “other side of the tracks,” most black Harpers Ferrians lived at or near Camp Hill, home to Storer College’s campus, an area which offered both protection from the frequent floods that ravaged the downtown district as well as enviable views of the surrounding hillsides.

Perceiving that the town’s historical significance, combined with its growing and distinguished black community, rendered it a perfect fit for families desiring travel and leisure, Storer College began targeting its accommodations at middle-class urban blacks in nearby Washington and Baltimore. From the outset, the school sought to fashion its campus as an island of racial tranquility in a sea of violence and animosity, a place of repose for representatives of a “rising race.” The school welcomed white boarders and, although housing whites and blacks in separate dormitories, consciously sought to foster an atmosphere of interracial amity. Black vacationers took note of this seemingly unprecedented degree of racial equality. At predominantly white resorts, African Americans could only be found in a distinctly subservient capacity. Yet on Camp Hill, as the African American newspaper Washington Bee noted, “guests are both white and colored.”

To implement and maintain its summer boarding options, the school hired teachers to manage the dormitories and students to maintain the facilities and provide food and entertainment for the guests. The summer of 1882 teacher James Robinson and his wife assumed control over the school’s male dormitory, Lincoln Hall, which they leased exclusively to black families. The initiative transformed both the face of the campus and the town during the summer months. As school historian Kate Anthony noted, “Camp Hill, which had previously been like a graveyard in the summer, has become the center of life in the town having all available rooms filled to overflowing with an excellent class of summer boarders. Several hundred guests come annually, and the number increases every year. This gives business to the town, and employment to a
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considerable number of students, while the guests are sure of having intelligent, honest and faithful attendants."

Storer officials saw the boarding venture as not only an opportunity to raise money, but also to apprentice students in the service trades, showcase the fledgling school to potential white benefactors and the parents of future students, and cement the town's place on the nation's memorial landscape. By the early 1890s, the school envisioned its campus as the perfect fit for a variety of events and encouraged its students, faculty, and the surrounding black community to help promote its boarding business:

We ought to have a Chautauqua Assembly, or a Summer School of Art, or of Elocution, or of Music, or all in one at this picturesque mountain village. When its variety of scenery, its stimulating breezes, its opportunities for boating, fishing, hunting, its freedom from mosquitoes and from malaria, and its attractive houses and moderate prices, come to be known and appreciated some of these things will come here.

When he announced Harpers Ferry as the site of the first annual meeting of the Niagara Movement in the United States, W. E. B. Du Bois noted how the town offered a perfect combination of symbolic and practical appeal. "The meeting place is cool, attractive and teeming with historic interest." "Come to HARPER'S FERRY," one postcard read, "for Inspiration and vacation."

By the late 1880s, summers at Camp Hill attracted middle and upper class, mostly young African American crowd. As was common among most families who could afford extended stays away from home, the dormitories consisted of mostly women and children during the weeks, with husbands and fathers arriving on the weekends. The Washington Bee's fictitious gossip columnists "Clara" and "Louise," who spent their summers on the campus, were quick to critique the class and gender through leisurely pursuits. In such accounts, refined behavior, elaborate dress, and incessant gossip were the order of the day. Games of croquet on the campus lawn or horseback riding at the nearby stables were interspersed with stately meals, dramatic readings, and musical performances. Sometimes ladies and their children ventured down the hill to the river to fish, bathe, or pick flowers along the Potomac's shore. "The girls are very fashionable indeed," "Clara" reported in August 1884. "The young ladies take great pleasure in dressing. There are some who change at every meal. They have three meals a day here, and one would suppose the guests were at Delmonico's, fashionable resort, New York."

While urban blacks flocked to Camp Hill to hone their refined cultural and intellectual tastes, a crew of Storer students labored to maintain the summer facilities and tend to guests' every needs. In contrast to the backgrounds of summer boarders, most Storer students hailed not from the "select sets" pocketed along the east coast, but instead from the rural upper South. Many enrolled at Storer College in search of the teaching skills necessary to escape desperately poor conditions. Most struggled to cobble together the funds to pay their tuition, and the wages summer student workers earned were usually handed back to the school at the start of the fall semester. Many who did not work on Camp Hill instead flocked to white resorts along the coast in search of employment; indeed, sum-
mer work at resorts became, around the turn of the century, a common form of employment for aspiring young African Americans.45

Storer students' struggles to make ends meet provided a striking contrast to the relative financial comfort enjoyed by summer boarders. The school preached to its student body that continued enrollment at Storer and ultimate success in life necessitated avoidance of the very activities popular among the summer vacationing crowd. Though many enrolled at Storer with only enough money for one term, "[t]hey learned," the Record commented, "to avoid excursions, festivals, picnics, and many other places of amusement" and thus save enough money to stay in school.46

For those who could not afford an extended stay, weekend excursion trains offered working class blacks an opportunity to bask in the town's resplendent beauty and fashion their own forms of commemoration. As railroad lines extended across the region, and tickets became increasingly affordable to the working poor of Washington, Baltimore, and surrounding areas, African American crowds became more numerous and conspicuous and often as interested in simply having a good time at Island Park or along the shore as in paying homage to Brown. The school and the black community's ambivalence toward the steady stream of such excursion parties during the summer best captures the class tensions that bedeviled efforts to claim (and contain) the town's historical interpretation. To Storer teachers and administrators, the seemingly careless amusements enjoyed by excursion parties at Harpers Ferry embodied the antithesis of the values of hard work, frugality, and conservative display. More importantly, it seemingly threatened to wrest control over the meaning of Brown's actions and its lessons from the "best men" and "best women" of the race and instead lend credence to whites' most base prejudices. Calling excursions a "growing evil," in particular among "those in straightened circumstances," Storer student William H. Gordon fumed that it was "an expenditure of money in a way from which [its participants] receive neither pleasure nor knowledge of their country in return." Not only did such groups of black pleasure seekers needlessly drain their pocketbooks on train tickets, drink, and ostentatious dress, Gordon charged, their behavior in such settings dealt a blow to the race as a whole. Gordon was likely alluding to several highly publicized, violent encounters between members of black excursion parties and local law enforcement. So averse to the disrespectful behavior and pretentious affectations reputedly rampant on such trips, school officials included "pleasure excursions" on its list of banned activities.47

Prohibitions against pleasure excursions were merely one part of Storer's focus on cultivating proper time and resource expenditure habits. In stark contrast to the conspicuous displays of status characteristic of elite black vacationers, Storer students were told to "leave their jewelry and gaudy clothing at home."448

In its instructions to parents on necessary and unnecessary items for incoming students, school officials "warn[ed] parents against sending and students against bringing jewelry and expensive clothing." Instead, students were told to bring only "the number of [clothing] changes necessary for cleanliness, of inexpensive material."449 Wasteful expenditures were, school officials warned, part and parcel of a destructive mentality that prized idleness and appearances over productivity and frugality and led to ruin both for the individual and the race as a whole. In the summer of 1904, the Record's editorial page implored its readers to "save
their pennies, avoid excursions and fancy clothing, and be anxious to work all the time and be unwilling to be found idle.\textsuperscript{50}

Though African American residents envisioned Harpers Ferry as a black counterpart to Mount Vernon, they never lost sight of the reality of racial hostility that engulfed the region. Fierce resistance from local whites had greeted white missionaries’ initial efforts at establishing Storer. Throughout the early 1870s, local whites sought to pressure state and federal officials into annulling the school’s charter through concocting outrageous stories of riots and unruliness. African Americans’ sizable and growing presence in Harpers Ferry as residents, students, and tourists only further inflamed local whites’ anxieties. Newspaper coverage of blacks at Harpers Ferry and Island Park ranged from vivid accounts of black fugitives and their capture, to “reckless shooting[sl],” to “drunken rows at colored picnics,” to “indecent assaults” on white women.\textsuperscript{51}

That the maturation of Harpers Ferry as a black vacation destination elicited white hostilities and reprisals should be no surprise. African Americans’ efforts at social autonomy and mobility in the post-emancipation era were invariably interpreted as a threat to the racial status quo.\textsuperscript{52} The presence of black tourists paying homage to a pivotal figure in African American history or simply congregating among themselves in places of their own choosing posed, in white Southerners’ minds, a grave threat to the region’s uncertain and contested racial hierarchy. At Harpers Ferry, poor rural whites came in contact with an upwardly mobile class of African Americans freed from the chains of servitude and refashioning established rituals of commemoration to fit their own perspectives on past events. Indeed, as evidenced throughout the Jim Crow South, whites’ cries of black barbarism and primitivism were often loudest when the threat of black mobility seemed most acute.

Storer College’s administrators were not immune from the nation’s slide toward segregation, rejection of interracial democracy, and consequent betrayal of its black citizens. By the mid 1890s, Storer’s principal Nathan Brackett had cooled to notion of fostering interracial fellowship on Camp Hill during the summer months. In 1896, he brought before the Board of Trustees a proposal to discontinue the use of Lincoln Hall for black boarders during the summer months, citing its inability to generate a profit. The trustees voted to cease direct operation of dormitories exclusively for African Americans, dismissing the program as a mere “benevolence” that was “no part of the work of Storer College” and that they were therefore under no obligation to continue.\textsuperscript{53} Despite admitting that white dorms also failed to generate a profit, the trustees continued to offer boarding for whites, perhaps in the hope that, without black guests dining alongside them in Myrtle Hall’s cafeteria or playing on the campus green, they would be more inclined to reserve a room for an extended stay.\textsuperscript{54}

Though in the early 1880s, Brackett and fellow missionaries might have seen interracial summer boarding as an opportunity to practice their ideals, by the mid-1890s such affronts to dominant racial conventions placed the school, ever beholden to the state and white benefactors for their financial security and under constant threat of assault from the surrounding white community, in acute danger. In contrast to the decades following the war, by the 1890s public recognition of abolitionism as a central thread in the nation’s historical narrative was
incongruous with the push toward sectional reconciliation and embrace of Jim Crow. Storer officials realized that their role in making the town a haven for the black vacationers and excursionists further inflamed the anxieties of an increasingly emboldened segregationist movement and threatened to scuttle their educational mission altogether. The decision to end summer boarding, though seemingly based solely on financial considerations, marked their retreat from an anti-racist agenda and capitulation to dominant racial attitudes. Indeed, considering the tenets of scientific racism ascendant during this decade and its concern with blacks' supposedly hereditary aversion to work, suppression of their leisurely pursuits was likely seen as fully compatible with the school's duties to "uplift the race."

Many within the African American community argued that, to the contrary, the continued availability of dorms for black boarders was not only essential to the town's black business and cultural vibrancy, but moreover the fulfillment of the school's stated principles. From the outset, Clifford led the efforts to preserve summer boarding for black guests. His voice, as many of his adversaries over the years discovered, was not easily dismissed nor ignored. After his graduation from Storer, Clifford taught and later became principal of Sumner School in nearby Martinsburg. In the mid 1880s, Clifford studied law under the guidance of a white lawyer in Martinsburg, in 1887 became the first African American admitted to the bar in West Virginia, and in 1898, successfully argued the case Williams v. Board of Education of Tucker County, the first ruling in U.S. history that defined racial discrimination in public education as illegal. In the midst of these triumphs and achievements, Clifford published, beginning in 1882, the Pioneer Press, which he used as an organ to advocate for black rights both locally and nationally and where he led his campaign against the Brackett administration.

By 1896, Brackett had served Storer in multiple administrative capacities from its founding over thirty years ago. As the school's principal, Brackett was responsible for balancing the account ledgers, hiring and firing teachers and employees, and maintaining amicable relations with alumni and students. His tenure paralleled the broken promises and scuttled citizenship inflicted on black Americans during the post-Reconstruction era, when social and economic aspirations fell victim to a rising tide of white terrorism and public and private segregation. Such bitter realities led, by the 1890s, to the formation of embryonic civil rights organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women and later the Niagara Movement. In West Virginia, Clifford's editorials in the Pioneer Press charted a new course for black activism, castigating enemies of black progress, rejecting the accommodationist approach advanced by Booker T. Washington, and exposing the hypocrisies and condescending paternalism of black America's so-called white friends. By the end of his tenure at Storer, Brackett had, in Clifford's estimation, fallen into that final category. Though the school employed African Americans as teachers, the administration and board of trustees remained all white. In its curriculum and its employment opportunities, the school increasingly became, by the 1890s, more focused on training young black bodies for the service and industrial trades in the Hampton and Tuskegee models rather than, as outlined in its mission statement, molding young minds both morally and intellectually, more interested in ensuring
to white Southerners a loyal, laboring class in perpetuity than in creating an environment where young blacks could rise above their proscribed station in life.  

To Clifford and others, such trends constituted nothing short of an abandonment of its principles. And the school’s decision to cease its summer boarding offerings for blacks seemed to confirm Clifford’s worst fears. In a meeting that summer, Storer’s “Alumni and friends” condemned the decision as a blatant example of the school’s insensitivity to its alumni and surrounding African American communities. Members proposed various resolutions against Brackett’s administration, one of which called for his resignation. Though none of these resolutions passed, it was a clear sign of how the denial of blacks’ right to enjoy a vacation on Camp Hill was seen as symptomatic of broader patterns of discrimination. Moreover, it underscored the extent to which local blacks saw their future in Harpers Ferry as dependent on its status as a “Mecca for the colored American citizen” and recreational haven for the aspiring and the elite.  

Clifford was not alone in perceiving that blacks’ exclusion from vacation accommodations at Harpers Ferry portended more pernicious developments. That same summer, the National Association of Colored Women, at their second annual convention, resolved “that the action of the management of Storer College . . . merit[ed] [their] severest censure and disapproval,” since it “sacrifice[ed] manhood rights to mercenary motives” and constituted a “deplorable example of treachery and prejudice from a hitherto trusted quarter.” Not coincidentally, these young civil rights leaders capped their three-day convention in Washington, D.C., with a trip to Harpers Ferry where, among other activities, they hiked to the relocated federal armory building where Brown made his last stand. Their fight to preserve summer boarding for blacks at Storer and, by extension, commemorate Brown’s legacy at Harpers Ferry, hints at the fundamental role leisure and recreation played in the practice of historical memory, and the ways in which the marketing of Harpers Ferry as a vacation and excursion destination shaped and was shaped by African Americans’ struggle, in the face of shifting political winds and deteriorating race relations, to rescue John Brown from infamy and claim him as a hero. Moreover, as the rise of travel and tourism and its increased affordability blurred the lines between commemoration and recreation, pilgrimages and excursions, blacks’ claims to Harpers Ferry became not only an act of resistance, but also a form of conspicuous consumption. In many respects, the former was fully enmeshed in the latter. The town’s continued appeal to the black pleasure seeker, as Clifford and his adversaries knew all too well, constituted a formative element in the articulation of counternarratives of war and emancipation, and contests over blacks’ leisure and recreational pursuits there a crucial arena in both whites’ and blacks’ efforts to position Brown’s actions within contemporary outlooks and orientations.  

Many other African American students and local residents rushed to the defense of Storer’s administration and board of trustees, calling the decision a necessary measure to save the school from financial ruin. The student-run newspaper defended their principal, pointing out that several local black residents continued to take in boarders throughout the year. Some noted that summer vacations distracted one from the real work of racial uplift, and offered a poor model of emulation for lower-class blacks stuck in a cycle of poverty. Others
questioned the motives of Brackett’s critics, implying that Clifford and others were merely attempting to fan the flames of racial tensions between the black students, teachers, and residents and the white administrators and trustees to their own advantage. “This whole crusade is only an exhibition of the malice of disappointed men,” James Robinson, Lincoln Hall’s first summer manager, claimed. “Make me a trustee, hold me as a teacher, confer a degree upon me, advertise in my paper, lend me a few hundred dollars or I will destroy your reputation through the press is the spirit of the whole crusade.” Such rebukes of Clifford and the NACW underscore the ways in which views on vacations and amusements encapsulated a wide range of ideas about social autonomy and the path to political and economic equality.

Clifford’s prediction of further financial ruin befalling the school in the wake of the decision proved correct. As the story gained traction in regional black newspapers, enrollment fell to record lows and, despite his vocal defenders, support for Brackett among students and teachers plummeted. In 1898, Brackett bowed to pressure and resigned as the school’s principal. Stung by Clifford’s allegations, in May 1899 Brackett requested that the board of trustees investigate the whole affair. When the trustees not surprisingly “vindicated” Brackett of any wrongdoing, the school decided that the issue was officially settled, in their favor. For Clifford and others, however, the issue marked a watershed moment in the alumni’s increasingly vocal disapproval of the school’s leadership, an issue which despite not achieving its stated goal did produce a change in the administration. Similar to conflicts at Fisk, Tuskegee, and Spelman during this same period, the controversy over summer boarding demonstrated a growing willingness on the part of black students and alumni to challenge autocratic school presidents and expose the incongruence of administrative decisions with the sentiments of the communities they served. It is no coincidence that such figures were fighting to defend their commemorative dominion over a symbol of militant resistance to inequality. Even more telling was other black Harpers’ defense of Brackett, which suggests that the contours of the community’s interests and, more broadly, the meaning of Brown to black Americans, was far from settled, and that what many saw as a pattern of discrimination and a silencing of their past, others saw as a sound business decision, and still others saw as a means of stemming the growing popularity of leisure travel and vacations among a people desperately in need of sound work ethics and frugal spending habits.

Summers at Camp Hill thereafter began to acquire a more familiar racial arrangement: whites relaxed while blacks catered to their every need. African American teachers continued to manage the dormitories, and students worked as servants and laborers. Black church choirs performed for captive audiences, and orators gave dramatic readings. Yet it was strictly for a white audience. Only white families lounged on the campus green, played games of croquet, or dined in the cafeteria, served by attentive young African Americans schooled in the art of respectability and deference.

Despite the school’s decision, African American organizations continued to periodically reserve the campus for meetings, conferences, and training schools during the summer months. Here, too, the economics of race determined the availability of space. After Storer hosted the Niagara Movement conference in 1906 (an organization who counted among its founding members Clifford, by
now the state's most well-known and reviled civil rights activist), West Virginia's legislature decreased its annual allotment of funds; donations from white benefactors likewise plummeted. When the movement's founder W. E. B. Du Bois wrote to the new school president Henry T. McDonald in March 1907 to inquire about the campus's availability for the upcoming summer, McDonald refrained from welcoming the civil rights leader back with open arms. In his reply, McDonald claimed that, although he did "not think that the Niagara Movement in any way has injured this institution, there are some who will not agree with me and in view of the unexpected lessening of our annual appropriation, there might seem to be a foundation for their argument." McDonald asked Du Bois to "sympathize with me when I say that I do not feel justified in saying that we can entertain that annual meeting until the trustees have had an opportunity to express themselves." Though no record of the May 28, 1907, trustee meeting is extant, Du Bois never received a follow-up letter from McDonald, and the Niagara Movement instead held its 1907 meeting in Boston.64

The administration's apparent dis-invitation of the Niagarites was part of their steady disassociation from civil rights leaders and capitulation to white segregationists' interpretations of the past. In 1931, McDonald endorsed the United Daughters of the Confederacy's placement of a plaque honoring Heyward Shepherd in downtown Harpers Ferry. Shepherd was the black railroad worker who, on that fateful night, initially refused to aid Brown in his mission and was summarily shot and killed. He came to symbolize in Lost Cause mythology the celebrated loyal and deferential black of a bygone era, struck down by fanatics seeking to unjustly elevate him against his will. At the ceremony, presided over by Storer's president, McDonald, speakers denounced Brown as a lunatic, celebrated the mythical "Black Mammy," and welcomed Shepherd, "this faithful, joyous servant ... in[to] the sanctuary of the blessed."65 The dedication of the monument to Shepherd marked the culmination of a half-century-plus-long struggle over African Americans' commemorative claims to Harpers Ferry. The monument to Shepherd worked to further disentangle the town from its radical past and erode its contemporary appeal to blacks, to in effect become somewhat of a memorial equivalent to the crude road signs that greeted black travelers as they approached sundown towns. Black voices from Harpers Ferry refused, however, to be intimidated into silence. Before leading the Storer College Glee Club in song, Storer's musical director Pearl Tatten, who had sat in shock while her race and its past were humiliated, bravely addressed the predominantly white crowd: "I am the daughter of a Connecticut volunteer, who wore the blue, who fought for the freedom of my people, for which John Brown struck the first blow. Today we are looking forward to the future, forgetting those things of the past. We are pushing forward to a larger freedom, not in the spirit of the black mammy, but in the spirit of new freedom and rising youth." Her impromptu speech, as J. Max Barber noted, "startled the 'daughters' almost as much as John Brown's raid startled the old slave holders."66

Her inspired words spoke to not just fellow blacks' broader efforts to project a dignified vision of their past on the public stage, but also to protect the few such commemorative spaces at their disposal. That the UDC chose Harpers Ferry as the site to perpetuate the myth of the loyal slave and amicable race relations under slavery underscores the extent to which blacks' construction of a spatial
counternarrative to places such as Mount Vernon challenged the foundations of white supremacy. Indeed, the rise of Harpers Ferry as a fashionable destination for African Americans in the late nineteenth century and its untimely demise helps us better contextualize the protracted struggle over Brown's memory in the postwar decades and its relationship to the politics of leisure behind, across, and along an ever-hardening color line. Moreover, the history of leisure and commemoration at Harpers Ferry during this period reminds us that, among African Americans, ideas about how to best honor the past (and who should be honored) were far from settled. Rather than tangential to African Americans' political divisions, leisurely pursuits constituted a formative element in constructions of class and visions of racial uplift.

African Americans' efforts to claim Harpers Ferry as a black commemorative space along the Potomac's shore—and the setbacks and challenges encountered along the way—exemplify the role of travel and tourism in the shifting dynamics of segregation culture. African American promoters of Harpers Ferry packaged and marketed an image of the small town that appealed to an audience hungry for leisurely destinations free from the hostility, humiliation, and exclusion that marked their experiences at white public spaces and commemorative sites. Their repeated invocation of Brown and his significance to black Americans alerts us to the role of leisure and its performance in the broader contest over public memory. The inextricability of pleasure and place, as captured in advertisements and in the words of black vacationers and excursionists, asks us to consider the ways in which recreational pursuits challenged and reinforced ideas about self and society. As the controversy over black summer boarding at Storer College reminds us, Clifford and others' defense of an emancipationist vision of the American past was predicated on the creation and preservation of such communities of fellow travelers and conspicuous consumers. That by 1896 such ideals proved untenable reveals much about the barriers under construction during this era, and the social arenas in which blacks and whites contested Brown's memory and, by extension, African Americans' future.

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ENDNOTES
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2. In his essay on W. E. B. Du Bois's challenge to the "master narrative" of American history, David Blight defines historical memory as "the study of cultural struggle, of contested truths, of moments, events, or even texts in history that thrust out rival versions of the past which are in turn put to the service of the present." See David Blight, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory." In History and Memory in African-American Culture, ed. Geneviève Fabre and Robert G. O'Meally (New York, 1994), 45–71, esp. 46.


7. For a representative example of a recent study of leisure and tourism that examines African Americans primarily through the eyes of white spectators, see Marguerite S. Shaffer, See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880–1940 (Washington, 2001).

8. John Bodnar argues that we must differentiate between official culture, which seeks to cloak images and symbols in unifying terms so as to mitigate against competing interests and contrary interpretations, and vernacular culture, which, as a product of local traditions that speak to national concerns, "represents an array of specialized interests that are grounded in parts of the whole." See John Bodnar, Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century (Princeton, 1992), 14.


12. Ibid.


18. Proehl, “Transforming the ‘Madman into a Saint,’” 111.


28. Harrison Howell Dodge to Justine Van Rensselaer Townsend, Superintendent’s Letterbooks, Mount Vernon Archives, Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association (Mount Vernon, Va.).


31. *Ibid*.

33. Washington Bee, June 16, 1888, p. 1


37. Storer Record, Winter 1892, p. 2.


40. Anthony, Storer College, Harper’s Ferry, W. Va., 18–19


42. Letter, Office of the General Secretary of the Niagara Movement, Atlanta, Ga., June 13, 1906, Reel 0864, Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois


46. Storer Record, Fall 1894, p. 4.

47. Ibid., 17 (Sept. 1903), p. 4.

48. Storer Record (Fall 1894), p. 4.

49. Storer Record, 17 (Sept. 1903), p. 4.

50. Storer Record, 18 (July 1904), p. 2.

51. White newspapers were quick to exacerbate racial tensions. See Washington Post, May 8, 1896; ibid., July 30, 1895; ibid., Aug. 6, 1895; Spirit of Jefferson, May 29, 1877; Washington Post, July 11, 1904.
52. Tera Hunter identified similar modes of white resistance in post-war Atlanta. She points out that "despite effective community mobilizations on many fronts—indeed, because of their effect—blacks were increasingly met with systematic encroachments on their civil and human rights." See Tera W. Hunter, To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 98.

53. James Robinson, undated article, HFMN file number 1870, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.

55. Paul Schackel notes that "For several decades after the Civil War, the abolitionist movement became part of the official history of the United States, and John Brown was often recognized as a hero and martyr in much of the northern published literature." By the 1890s, however, "the public memory of the Civil War was being transformed from that of a conflict about abolitionist ideals to that of a war of bravery and loyalty to a cause." Brown’s assault on slavery was subsequently cast not as a heroic stand against an unjust institution, but the actions of a misguided fanatic. See Paul A. Schackel, Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-bellum Landscape (Walnut Creek, Calif., 2003), 56, 59. On the emergence of the Lost Cause and sectional reconciliation, see Charles Reagan Wilson, Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause: 1865–1920 (Athens, Ga., 1980); Gaines M. Foster, Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1863 to 1913 (New York, 1987); Nina Silber, The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900 (Chapel Hill, 1993); and David W. Blight, Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).

56. Pioneer Press, July 1, 1887.


60. James Robinson, undated article, HFMN file number 1870, Harpers Ferry National Historic Park. See also Gozdzik, “A Historic Resource Study for Storer College, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia,” 67
61. Ibid., 68
63. Burke, “Storer College,” p. 246
64. Henry T. McDonald to W. E. B. Du Bois, March 18, 1907, Du Bois Papers

65. undated newspaper clipping, Papers of Henry T. McDonald, HFNHP