

**A Growing Black Community:
Life and Labor in Somerville, Massachusetts, 1900-1920**

A thesis submitted by

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Abstract

A small population of Black residents in West Somerville began to form around 1900 and expanded through 1920 and beyond, though it has been absent in publications about the city to this day. Availability of new homes on inexpensive land drew Black migrants and immigrants from the American South, Nova Scotia, and the West Indies, who lived in this neighborhood alongside white European, specifically Italian, immigrants. Through the lenses of the built environment and neighborhood formation, migration journeys, and labor, this thesis compiles and analyzes information about the origins of this neighborhood and early residents who shaped the community. Using the Census, Somerville City Directories, and further archival sources, the thesis argues that this population, though small, provides a case study of Black life in the North during this time period.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
1. NEIGHBORHOOD	16
2. MIGRATION.....	32
3. LABOR.....	51
Conclusion	65
Bibliography	71

List of Figures

Figure 1. Somerville Atlas, 1900.	p. 3
Figure 2. 1900 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map.	p. 26
Figure 3. 1900 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map.	p. 28
Figure 4. Elsie Harper in Somerville High School <i>Radiator</i> Yearbook, 1932.	p. 41
Figure 5. Ida Chute on Naturalization Petition, 1936.	p. 46

Introduction

Somerville, Massachusetts, is a city in the Greater Boston metropolitan area. Previously part of Charlestown, it was established as a town in 1842 and established as a city in 1872. Somerville, in the late 1800s, was about half farmland to the west, where it bordered Medford and North Cambridge. It industrialized toward the east, bordering Boston and East Cambridge. After becoming a city, Somerville's population grew quickly, coinciding with immigration trends and transportation developments. The population rose from ~15,000 residents in 1870 to 77,236 in 1910, and reached 93,091 in 1920.¹

By 1920, a large part of Somerville's total laboring population worked in manufacturing and mechanical industries, as well as the trades. Women tended to be highly employed in domestic and personal service, working for others in their homes, and professional service, with some representation in the trades as well.¹ Men and women were almost equally employed in the clerical occupations, leading to a large percentage of women working as bookkeepers, clerks, or stenographers by 1910. However, this was not the case in the Black community, which was still largely employed in domestic service.

After 1920, the population in manufacturing and mechanical industries continued to grow, trade was steady, and the population of women employed in clerical occupations surpassed that of the men. There was still a considerable population working in domestic and personal service, but the number of servants working in the city fell by approximately 50%. As the general population of Somerville expanded and industries expanded throughout the region, employment opportunities in factories were prevalent. The immigrant population grew as well,

¹ Census Bureau, "Volume IV. Population, Occupation Statistics," Census.Gov, 1910, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1910/volume-4/volume-4-p5.pdf>.

until the 1921 and 1924 immigration quotas and restriction acts. Somerville's foreign-born population was heavily Canadian, Irish, and Italian.²

Alongside this foreign-born white population in Somerville was a small population of Black residents. Miniscule in comparison, it made up less than 1% of the 1920 population, whereas the foreign-born white population exceeded 25%.² The 1880s brought some slow migration from the Southern states when the end of Reconstruction in 1876 spurred movement to the urban industrial north. Somerville's industries were then at their height. During World War I, many Black folks moved North to answer industrial needs on the home front. This was part of an early Great Migration, understood as 1880-1920, with the second Great Migration occurring 1930-1950s.³

This historic small Black population in Somerville sparked my curiosity when, working at a local history and culture organization, I went to visit the home of Henry Parker, a Black man living on Cameron Avenue in West Somerville. Mr. Parker discussed his family's origins and their longtime residence in the home he continues to live in – over 100 years. As I will discuss in my historiography, secondary literature tends not to mention the Black history of Somerville, yet from current, generational Black residents, it is clear there exists a rich history. As such, this project uses the United States Census records to identify early residents of a Black neighborhood in West Somerville.

This community lived on Cameron Avenue, Elmwood Street, and Harrison Avenue. Bounded on one side by Holland Street in Teele Square, on land that was formerly a Civil War

² US Census Bureau, "1920 Census Monograph 7. Immigrants and Their Children, 1920," Census.Gov, accessed November 16, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1927/dec/monograph-7.html>.

³ Sarah-Jane (Saje) Mathieu, "The African American Great Migration Reconsidered," *OAH Magazine of History* 23, no. 4 (2009): 19–23.

training ground called Camp Cameron. The city of Cambridge not only borders the neighborhood, but Cameron Avenue crosses the city border, ending on present-day Massachusetts Avenue.

West Somerville's fringe identity was affected by the desirability of the land as it became

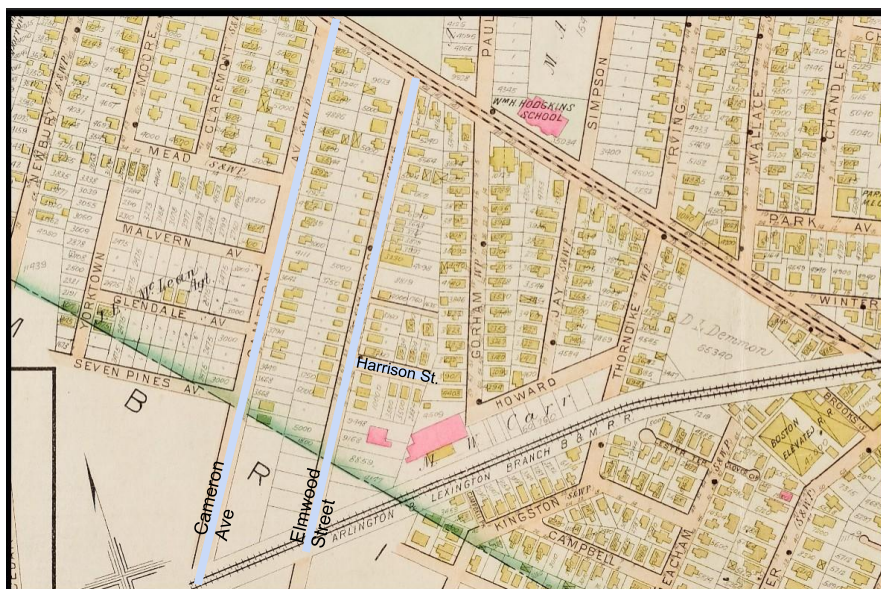


Figure 1. Somerville Atlas, 1900. Courtesy of Leventhal Map Center with outlines for clarity.

available based on its prior uses: a Civil War training camp and farmland. The access to the Lexington and Arlington streetcar branch, in addition to more connections out of North Cambridge and

investments by wealthier

individuals, led to a rapid buildup of the West Somerville area beginning in the late 1860s, though impacted by national economic depression in 1873. The Boston Elevated Railway Company, with a large streetcar barn on the original Camp Cameron lands, sold the property for development in 1892. After the electrification of streetcars, there was no longer a need to stable teams of horses. The resulting parceling of this land created a building boom in West Somerville.

The land is just one way to give context to the community that formed here. Labor and economics are another. The core of this research is about the people. As I will discuss further through the historiography and methodology, the Census reduces people to a single line to

encapsulate their status on a single day every ten years. The government then creates publications to draw conclusions about the populations contained within. My work aims to discuss community, movement, and work through stories of the Black people who lived in West Somerville. Whether they lived on the old Camp Cameron land, or performed jobs in service or in factories, they were far more than their occupation statistic or their country of origin.

Historiography

A brief note on language: the 1900-1920 census records, and early sources I referenced, describe Black people as “Black,” “Negro,” “Mulatto,” or “Colored.” I use these terms when they are in the sources. Due to the Somerville demographic including African Canadians and West Indian migrants, I chose not to use African American as it does not encompass the community.

Past study surrounding the development of Black communities in New England has largely focused on major cities, like Boston, Providence, and New Haven. Historical societies and local scholars have also examined West Medford and Cambridge. However, Somerville’s Black history has remained challenging due to the unique nature in which Somerville was formed, developed, and existed in relation to surrounding communities.

Scholarship about Somerville that I call upon is limited, but books include *Somerville Past and Present* (eds. Samuel and Kimball, 1897) to reflect on the formation and early attitudes about the city; *Somerville, Massachusetts: A Brief History* by Dee Morris and Dora St. Martin (2008), for more recent research and writing about the history of the city, and Reed Ueda’s *Avenues to Adulthood* (1987), which provides background on immigration to Somerville and youth interactions. Morris and Martin’s book contains a section about the Cousins family in

West Somerville; it was helpful to know that a little bit of research had been done about the Black community in this neighborhood. Nonetheless, it is very short, focuses on one family, and largely just on one son. There is no mention of later stories of Black residency beyond Leroy Cousins in 1909.⁴ In the archives I found this same information, and was able to delve deeper into their neighbors, friends, and community.

The City's Office of Planning and Community Development's book *Beyond the Neck: the Architecture and Development of Somerville, Massachusetts* (1982) was also an excellent resource to understand the development of each neighborhood of the city including West Somerville, Teele Square, and Davis Square. *Beyond the Neck* is well-regarded as a resource for researching home styles and the origins of neighborhoods across the city. However, it does not represent the home styles of Davis and West Somerville, save for the large estates of wealthy white men. The ownership of duplex homes was not deemed as important or significant in the city. If this survey had taken into consideration the entire history of its city and its inhabitants, the residential streets off of the Squares might be better understood, or even celebrated, in the same way the opulence of Spring Hill is shared, or the wealth and land contributions of Person Davis and the Holland Estate to real estate development are celebrated.⁵

Most writing on the formation of Black communities in the region focuses on the city of Boston, but some is useful as framing for the smaller cities and early suburbs. Additionally, community Black histories have been developed for Medford (West Medford) and Cambridge,

⁴ Dee Morris and Dora St. Martin, *Somerville: A Brief History* (The History Press, 2008).

⁵ Landscape Research (Firm) and Somerville (Mass). Office of Planning and Community Development, *Beyond the Neck: The Architecture and Development of Somerville, Massachusetts*. (Landscape Research, 1982), WorldCat. Chapter 3.

but Somerville itself is largely unexplored. There is a larger volume of scholarship focusing on the growth of various immigrant communities to Somerville or its industrial background.

Since the Black community was not solely contained to Somerville, I turned to surrounding resources to give more context and information. Various scholars and organizations in the City of Cambridge have studied Black neighborhoods or Black folks' contributions to their community and made the knowledge accessible in various ways, through examples such as a "Special Focus on the State of Black Cambridge" including a short but effective history of Black Cambridge in the Cambridge Community Foundation's 2021 Equity and Innovation Report, or a 2022 Cambridge Landmark proposal for Maria Baldwin's home at 196 Prospect Street.⁶ Boston College's Global Boston initiative framed waves of immigration to various Cambridge neighborhoods, highlighting the movement of Black communities from the South, Nova Scotia, and the West Indies to Cambridgeport within my working time period.⁷ The Cambridge Black History project does on-the-ground work documenting "Black Trailblazers of Cambridge" and commemorating them, and the Community Development Department has a Cambridge African American History Trail including a digital story map.⁸

When writing a labor history, especially one integrating class, migration, and politics leading into the 20th century, some authors and historians are repeatedly visible and engaging.

⁶ Staff Editor, "Special Focus: The State of Black Cambridge," *Cambridge Community Foundation*, n.d., accessed November 18, 2025, <https://cambridgeccf.org/ei-report/special-focus/>, and Eric Hill and Charles Sullivan, "PRELIMINARY LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT Maria Baldwin-Alvaro Blodgett Houses," Cambridge Historical Commission, December 20, 2022, https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/historicalcommission/pdf/chcmeetingfiles/L142_prelim_report.pdf.

⁷ "Cambridge," *Global Boston*, n.d., accessed November 16, 2025, <https://globalboston.bc.edu/index.php/home/immigrant-places/cambridge/>.

⁸ Cambridge Black History Project, cambridgeblackhistoryproject.org and Cambridge, MA Community Development Department (CDD), "The Cambridge African American History Trail". <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/8bef5754e45d4d4199649f058574f6ca>

They include W. E. B. Dubois, Charles Wesley, Jacqueline Jones, and Elizabeth Pleck. They provided an important social and economic lens. Jones deals with an earlier era than the period I ended up writing about, but the background her work provided was very important.

Gerald L. Gill was a historian of Boston's Civil Rights movement who wrote an introduction to one of the articles I interfaced with most when developing drafts of my labor section. Gill wrote of the high volume of Black workers in New England who worked in domestic or personal service in roles such as domestics, nursemaids, housekeepers, servants, or cooks.³ He also highlighted the railroads as employers and framed early union issues Black men faced. His introductory section in *Making A Living* is crucial framing for the issues of labor faced in the 1900-1920 period. This is an introduction to an article by John Daniels, which heavily influenced my initial understandings of Black men's labor in this region and in this time period.

I wrote the labor section to correspond to, and push back against, some of Daniels' ideas. Writing in 1914, Daniels could not yet know about the prestige or relative financial security provided by some of the occupations he discusses. I intervened to provide examples that built on Gill's broader context. Though Gill's and Daniels' works were both most representative of Boston, as I uncovered more local movement and interplay, I determined it would be an appropriate analysis for Somerville. Daniels himself wrote that he "believe[d] that conditions in Boston are in the large representative of conditions throughout the upper North".⁹

Sam Bass Warner Jr.'s book *Streetcar Suburbs* was helpful in understanding how the West Somerville neighborhood was developed and how it became accessible to the populations

⁹ John Daniels, "Industrial Conditions Among Negro Men in Boston". P. 517. in *Making a Living : The Work Experience of African-Americans in New England : Selected Readings* (New England Foundation for the Humanities, 1995).

who moved there. Despite being a book focused on the Roxbury, West Roxbury, and Dorchester neighborhoods of Boston, I found the comparison to the entire Boston area and the urban environment useful and apt.

I also included Stephen Puleo's *The Boston Italians* in my secondary reading when I began working with the Somerville city directories and noticed that the neighborhood was strongly Italian in addition to being a Black enclave. Puleo writes about Italian movement and settlement in small communities that match their social structures in Italy, which was useful for drawing comparisons to their Black neighbors. This helps place Black migration in a larger context of global movement trends in the same period. Again, his work focuses on Boston, but the section titled "Arrival, Settlement, and Discrimination" was applicable to the neighborhood I ended up studying.

Some works and authors, stylistically, that inspired my methods include Jacqueline Jones in all her works about Black lives and labor but especially *No Right to an Honest Living* (2023), *Black Walden* (2009) by Elise Virginia Lemire, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) by Saidiya Hartman, and *Slaves in Paris* (2025) by Miranda Spieler. These included helpful discussions on archival silences and reconstituting the past when the given evidence is from the wealthy white elite. I included Wendy Warren's works including "The Cause of Her Grief" for a masterclass in reading and writing speculative histories given meager evidence.¹⁰ I also draw inspiration from digital humanists, historians using data and digital methods of imaging and parsing material, who create ways to map migration, place, and space in the Black Atlantic world and lay the foundations for a future where histories are accessible.

¹⁰ Wendy Anne Warren, "'The Cause of Her Grief': The Rape of a Slave in Early New England," *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 4 (2007): 1031–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25094595>.

Finally, there are a few community members I've been in touch with through my former role as the Education and Outreach Coordinator at the Somerville Museum. Henry Parker, Phil Reavis Jr., Matt Hoey, and students at Somerville High School have spent time developing Black neighborhood histories. They have laid foundations for this study by compiling histories of their streets, neighbors, and own families. They were fundamental to this work. I am also indebted to family genealogies and the power they hold.

Methodology

Primary Sources Become a Dataset

This project stemmed from learning to construct genealogies using the census as a primary source, then tracing individuals from there. For this work, I began by going through the 1910 and 1920 census records for the whole city and creating a spreadsheet that contains transcriptions of each census line for a person of color. I compared this to the city's calculations of these populations to ensure relative accuracy. Having an interactive document with each of these census statistics makes it possible to create filters, calculations, and visualizations of various pieces. I began using it to visualize and count demographics, then labor and jobs, then state or country of origin. What comes of this is not only a calculated overview of labor and migration, but a return to the humanity of those who may otherwise be counted only as small statistics. In 1910, Black Somerville residents were a mere 0.002% of the population. City histories, therefore, tend to discount the stories or existence of these residents. The ability to tabulate the census lines and then explore the lives of selections of these individuals introduces them to readers of this history.

The census lines between these years included some crucial vital statistics, from household, age, race, and birthplaces of both the individual and their parents, to occupation and employment status, homeownership or rental status, and school attendance. The census as a primary source contained a wealth of information and informed different lenses through which to narrow my research and create case studies. The first that stood out to me was labor. I noted homeownership as a category for analysis, then the various states and countries in the birthplace columns. These became the foundation for this thesis.

From there it was possible to get more specific and begin to form focused assessments based on the information I gathered in the spreadsheets. For example, I found 196 Black and 25 Mulatto residents of Somerville within the 1910 Census.¹¹ Using filters, I investigated the working age (above age 10) population and found 183 individuals (78 men and 105 women). Of these, 44 of the women were working (42%), ranging in age from 13 to 82; 65 of the men, ages 16 to 63, were working (83%). This is a calculation of 109 Black workers out of a total population of 221 Black residents (49%).

The Census Bureau provided more population statistics about labor in 1920 in their Population volume of Census reporting.¹² This document notes that Somerville's male working population was 9,520 individuals of native white parentage; 9,016 of foreign or mixed parentage; 10,465 of foreign-born white workers; 94 Black workers; and 28 Chinese and 3 Japanese workers. For women, this same breakdown mentions 3,729 working women of native white

¹¹ Ancestry.com. Massachusetts, Middlesex County, Somerville. *1910 United States Federal Census* [database online]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006. Original data: Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910 (NARA microfilm publication T624, 1,178 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹² Census Bureau, "Chapter III., Occupation, Table 19." in *Volume IV - Population*. Census.gov, 1920, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1920/volume-4/41084484v4ch03.pdf>.

parentage; 4,873 of foreign or mixed parentage; 2,261 foreign-born white, 49 Black women, and no Chinese or Japanese women working.¹³ My own dataset shows 144 total Black, Mulatto, and Colored workers; this is a breakdown of 46 women and 98 men over age 10 total, and one young fellow, Milton Riddick, a jobbing carpenter aged 9.¹⁴ With a total population I've calculated of 363 Black residents of Somerville in 1920, ~39% of the population is at work.

This is also where the neighborhood case study began to take shape. I noticed in city Ward 7, there appeared to be a concentration of Black Pullman Porters and a concentration of Black homeowners. The population was varied, but there were clear signs of permanency – sons living down the street from their fathers 10 years after being a teenager in the household, for example. Names stayed consistent between census years. It was evident that this was a neighborhood to focus on, so I looked back to 1900 in the census for this specific neighborhood to begin to identify the origins and the first Black families living in this area.

Furthermore, the Bureau's own focus on immigration and origins in 1920 highlighted the importance of following this line of thinking through my work. Census documents, including Chapter VII of the 1920 Federal Census Reports, show that Somerville had a high volume of immigration – in 1920, 26% of Somerville's population was foreign-born.¹⁵ Looking at Somerville's Black population in records, a handful of residents from Nova Scotia, Canada and the West Indies (Bermuda, Barbados, and Jamaica) were indicative of Somerville's status as a city of migration. I found that these immigrants were not thoroughly analyzed in the Census or in

¹³ Census Bureau, "Chapter III., Occupation, Table 19." in *Volume IV - Population*.

¹⁴ Ancestry.com. Massachusetts, Middlesex County, Somerville. *1920 United States Federal Census* [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Images reproduced by FamilySearch. Original data: Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920. (NARA microfilm publication T625, 2076 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ US Census Bureau, "1920 Census Monograph 7. Immigrants and Their Children, 1920," Census.Gov, accessed November 16, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1927/dec/monograph-7.html>.

other records about migration to Somerville, which often focus on English, Irish, and Italian immigration.

Knowing that Somerville was known for its Irish, Italian, and Greek enclaves in this same time period, I became curious how Black migration fit into this story. Between the Census and the Somerville City Directories as primary sources, the reality of a mixed Black-Italian neighborhood became apparent. This methodology allowed another granular level of tracing the buildup of this neighborhood and the movement of residents, essentially through visual text encoding, where I printed a few different editions of the directory pages that included the correct streets, marked who was Black and who was an immigrant with their country of origin based on surrounding Census years, then highlighted names and addresses based on past and future residency of Black families. A pattern became clear, which led me towards researching the built environment and what would cause these two groups to settle in this one neighborhood.

After all this began to take shape, I noted people of interest, or those who cropped up frequently in different types of records. Over the course of this writing, a few people or families began to represent a lot of things, from labor changes and homeownership to neighborhood politics and migration patterns: Robert B. Goode and his son William Goode; William H. Cousins, Carrie Cousins, and their children LeRoy and Louis Henry Cousins; James and Rosa Hawkins; Reverend Adam Smith; Arthur and Lillian Harper; and James and Ida Chute. I ended up diving deeper into the records on many of these people to discover their significance. They appear as a ‘cast of characters’ à la Saidiya Hartman to demonstrate different facets of life and labor as Black residents of Somerville.

Genealogy

The Census includes the birthplace of the resident and the birthplaces of each of their parents. This makes it possible to trace migratory patterns of Black residents prior to their settlement in Somerville or within a specific neighborhood. Using birthplace as one of the data points enables further research of a family genealogy and gives a better framing for how and why a resident moved given their prior situation.

A complication here is the lack of 1890 census records. Though this has of course been a challenge throughout the project, for the most part I have been able to exclude this information due to the later construction of the West Somerville neighborhood from which I pull most examples of residents. Working with census records 20 years apart is a major challenge. An additional challenge, in this case, is that some of the older Black residents were younger adults or children in a state like North Carolina or Virginia in 1880. As a researcher, it would be helpful to know where they were in 1890 – if they had begun to move north, all the way to Boston or Cambridge, somewhere along the way, or if they were still in the south. As such, information about migration may be largely generalized and speculative for some decades, informed simply by as much available information as is possible to find through genealogical searches.

Chapter Outlines

In the first chapter I ask whether the scholarship on development, housing, and community largely focuses on Black urban northerners and rural fringe southerners or if it discusses the various ethnic immigrant communities of the early 1900s in Boston. What will I find as I work to inspect and draw conclusions about Somerville's Black community? I inspect the early development and arrival of the Black residents to this neighborhood. I discuss whom they live alongside, what they were involved in, social and religious elements, and

education. Through the built environment, census records, city directory lines, newspapers, and land parcels, I discuss the land itself, then focus on a few individuals and their impacts on the neighborhood.

I also outline some of the local industries and markets and how these impact the neighborhood. Based on census and other local records, I trace what sorts of jobs were accessible to the Black population of Somerville. Labor reflects the rise of the railroads as a “streetcar suburb.” We see porters, dining car waiters, and machinists, while reflecting Somerville’s past as a farm town with hostlers and helpers at wholesale dairy stores.¹⁶ There are certain industries and locations where the job someone worked was based on the neighborhood of the resident and certain local industrial institutions. Others are more difficult to connect to specific locations.

Chapter two discusses three origins of Black residents of West Somerville and how they lived alongside both native- and foreign-born White residents. I provide framing for the migration patterns of three major subsections of the Somerville Black community: those from the American South, British West Indies, and from Canada. I will describe the background, then create genealogical explorations of a few residents to demonstrate examples of their arrival in New England and the conditions they or others around them would have experienced firsthand or lived through. Though I do not describe it in detail, some residents who were in their 50s or older in 1900-1910 may have experienced the American Civil War (1861-65) and thus likely experienced enslavement as children. This section mostly commences after Reconstruction with migration and movement, but this is the background for some born in the South, and almost

¹⁶ Sam Bass Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

certainly the experience of many of their parents. I demonstrate this case through a genealogy of James Hawkins, whom I reference heavily in other chapters.

In the third chapter, I explore the population of Black workers in the city based on the Enumeration of the Thirteenth Census in Somerville, Massachusetts. Using comparative analyses based on scholarship and statistics about Black labor in Northern cities at the time, I then share some individual examples of the workers and residents in Somerville between 1910 and 1920. This section will cover a few different job categories posited by John Daniels and discuss women's and children's work and experiences as well.

In this section, I interrogate various jobs and forms of labor through a historic lens of "grades" of profession while providing nuance to this claim originally made by John Daniels in the 1920s. John Daniels categorized Boston's Black working men into three groups of professions: menial and common labor occupations, skilled manual labor and clerical occupations, then proprietors and professionals.¹⁷ He discussed public esteem, the way the general public viewed these occupations, as part of this grouping. I use his lens on men's work, attempting to complicate the ideas he posited with examples of men in the Somerville community and the impacts of WWI upon this working community. I then discuss women's work, first by providing an example of a dressmaker and her journey to settling in Somerville and second by discussing the hidden labor of wives and mothers. This aims to analyze the hard-working neighborhood and hard-working individuals in cities, shedding light on hidden labor of raising families or continued forms of servitude present in this community.

¹⁷ John Daniels, "Industrial Conditions Among Negro Men in Boston". P. 511.

1. NEIGHBORHOOD

As you walk down Cameron Avenue today and reach the developments at Mead Street and Malvern Avenue, know that Black men like James Hawkins, David P. Jones, and William J. B. Smith owned homes in the block of five plots between the side streets. In these homes, they raised families, ran businesses and worked for others, and rented parts of their homes to other families. Four homes were, at one point, identical, two simply a mirror image of the others, but the changes are now evident, with closed-in porches or extra windows. One is an odd triple decker among the two story duplexes. There are front yards; the homes do not lead directly from the sidewalk to the front door. This was an advertised benefit of the properties when they were built. The street numbering, confusing from census year to census year and the directories in between, provides no clarity to the researcher seeing them directly.

Head two blocks toward Cambridge. Walk to Elmwood Street on today's Tannery Brook Row, picturing a polluted brook running under your feet, put underground in a sewer in 1897. Stand and look toward Cambridge, toward the Somerville Community Path, toward the MBTA car house, acknowledging the bustle today along with the bustle of the past, trading buses for trolley cars, bikes for horses. Understand how close this residential neighborhood was to active train tracks and active factories. Head up Elmwood, take a peek down Harrison Street with homes again so different and yet so similar the longer you look. The Reverend Adam Smith gave church services in his home in a central location on this street, and his wife Amanda was the church's treasurer. Imagine the consistency this would bring to each week, to have a trusted friend to turn to, whether that be Reverend Smith himself or the calling of God. Outside, peer beyond the end of the road to the remaining brick factory buildings redeveloped on the edge of Davis Square, thinking of how the Black and Italian neighbors went to work there together in the

jewelry and shoe factories nearby. Feel the pull and closeness of the area, how the Chutes brought each other to the area, how young folks moved out and resided just next door.

Look up Elmwood Street back towards the rail trail. More mirror image homes, same as all the rest, built out by later residents. Note the duplexes, owned and rented to friends. The home where future Olympian Phil Reavis grew up, the home where Ruth Veletta Jones lived before her long, well-known life in Cambridge, the homes of people still important yet less studied or recognized.

Developing a Neighborhood

In *Blacks in the Suburban and Rural Fringe*, Andrew Wiese writes about the way that suburbs, industry, and transit mobility went together, and argues that, in the South, the suburb on the rural fringe contributed to the decentralization of industry with more housing options for Black folks.¹⁸ For these purposes, I view the West Somerville neighborhood as “rural fringe” in 1870, as it had recently been farmland.¹⁹ Though it was deemed “peripheral” in 1880, by 1900, Somerville was fully connected to Boston via the streetcar system, and seen as a new suburb by 1910.²⁰

The streetcars, as historian Sam Bass Warner Jr. argued in *Streetcar Suburbs*, determined the settlement of the suburbs. In 1852, Somerville’s only streetcar line ran from Union Square to Harvard Square in Cambridge, running once an hour in a low-need service. Streetcar

¹⁸ Andrew Wiese, “Blacks in the Suburban and Rural Fringe” in Henry Louis Taylor and Walter B. Hill, *Historical Roots of the Urban Crisis : African Americans in the Industrial City, 1900-1950*, in *Historical Roots of the Urban Crisis : African Americans in the Industrial City, 1900-1950*, 1st ed., Crosscurrents in African American History ; v. 7 (Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000).

¹⁹ Landscape Research (Firm) and Somerville (Mass). Office of Planning and Community Development, *Beyond the Neck : The Architecture and Development of Somerville, Massachusetts*. (Landscape Research, 1982), WorldCat.

²⁰ Sam Bass Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

development boomed after the Depression of 1873, with multiple companies consolidating in the 1880s and 1890s to expand service and thus expand suburban settlement around Boston, creating the commuter system and solidifying class stratification through land and housing.²¹ As Somerville became a city in 1872, all of the government offices were on Central Hill or in Union Square.²² West Somerville, at the time, was little-used land, with a city farm and larger estates. As streetcars expanded transportation's reach outside of Boston, the draw of new neighborhoods became powerful and affordable, and West Somerville experienced a building boom.

Camp Cameron was a 140-acre tract of West Somerville and North Cambridge used as a Civil War era Union Army training ground.²³ Former farmland, yet lacking fencing, it was used for only a short time and lay in disuse from 1863-1870.²⁴ The completion of the Lexington and Arlington railroad branch connecting from Davis Square to Somerville Junction station in the early 1870s, in addition to the parceling of Camp Cameron land and the advent and installation of metropolitan systems, expanded transportation to and from West Somerville.²⁵ This spurred the subdivision of land, eventually beginning to build as the economy recovered from the Depression of 1873. As it appears on the 1874 Atlas of the City of Somerville, the area that was formerly Camp Cameron had just begun to be subdivided. The areas of Cameron Ave and what became Elmwood Street were not entirely divided yet, so there were some existing homes, some parceled lots, and some swaths of land with one owner still. According to this atlas, the parcels

²¹ Sam Bass Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900*

²² Somerville had already become a town, separating from Charlestown when it joined Boston in 1842; a group of citizens signed a charter etc.

²³ North Cambridge Neighborhood Stabilization Committee, Cambridge Historical Commission. "Camp Cameron" [Historical Marker]. 2000. https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/historicalcommission/pdf/markers_NC_campcameron.pdf

²⁴ Dan Sullivan, <https://thecambridgeroom.wordpress.com/tag/camp-cameron/>

²⁵ now on the Fitchburg Railroad right-of-way, by present-day Vernon Street Studios and Rogers Foam.

on either side of Elmwood Street were owned and divided by Davis & Taylor, prominent estate owners and businessmen.²⁶ William A. Saunders & Woodman owned parts abutting the east side of Cameron Ave, while the West side of the street was partially divided and partially still owned by Charles Durham – these continue onto the Cambridge side of the city line. Tannery Brook, still present, was outlined; the Lexington and Arlington Rail Road crossed Holland Street with a small Elm Street station, and the Union Rail Road end point is present. This was not yet Davis Square, though it would be soon.

In the 1877 city directory, Cameron Ave had no house numbers yet, with residents being referenced by cross streets (e.g. next Holland or across Mead) and there were few homes – only two listed on Elmwood Street, for example.²⁷ However, development was slow on the old Camp Cameron lands, and they were re-surveyed and parceled in 1896. Over the 20 years, different real estate trusts took control of and transferred the land, with sales finally occurring on the new Civil War-named streets in the late 1890s. By 1900, the former Camp Cameron land had been further subdivided with the acquisition of land from the Boston Elevated Railway Company, and it housed a growing neighborhood. However, there were still some open parcels on Cameron Street on the 1900 Atlas, including a stretch of four between Mead St and Malvern Ave that became the original four homes owned by Black families in the Cameron Street section of the neighborhood. As seen in later atlases, the little-populated Elmwood Street ended up having two short, dead-end streets built off of it – Elmwood Terrace and Harrison Street – which functioned to further increase the number of lots and homes that could be built.²⁸

²⁶ Person Davis, the namesake of Davis Square.

²⁷ *The Somerville Directory of the Inhabitants, Institutions, [Etc.]*, (Boston, MA). No. 6 (1877)
<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100493160>

²⁸ Sanborn-Perris Map Co., *Insurance Maps of Somerville, Massachusetts, 1900*, Fire Insurance Map, Sanborn-Perris Map Co., 1900, 50 ft to an inch, <https://digitalsanbornmaps-proquest->

Cambridge newspapers described the original plans for the Camp Cameron land development: “The property will be improved and developed in every possible way by the owners, and restrictions in certain directions will be imposed upon purchasers of the lots. No house can be built upon the tract worth less than \$2,500 and every modern improvement as to sewers, light, etc., will be arranged for.”²⁹ This is consistent with how Warner describes development and affordability for the middle classes in the “streetcar suburbs” of Boston as they grew. In 1897, after some development and official parceling began to take place by a real estate trust, an advertisement for a mortgagee in the *Cambridge Tribune* writes that parties interested in buying a parcel on the old Camp Cameron land would be required to pay \$300 cash at the time of sale.³⁰

By 1900, development was well underway. Though mostly a native-born white or immigrant neighborhood, a few families I trace throughout this thesis are already present in the neighborhood: the Chutes, the Cousins, the Goodes, and the Holmes. In 1900, although they were not all living at their final address, they had already moved to West Somerville, with three families starting on Elmwood Street and one family, the Chutes, around the corner on Howard Street. By tracing some land transfers through the Registry of Deeds’ index document, I have been able to find approximate years that the Black families who owned homes took out their mortgages or acquired their more permanent residences, beginning in 1896.

Land Desirability

com.somproxy.minlib.net/browse_maps/20/3601/17267/18041/240537?accountid=46322, and Landscape Research (Firm) and Somerville (Mass). Office of Planning and Community Development, *Beyond the Neck: The Architecture and Development of Somerville, Massachusetts*. (Landscape Research, 1982), WorldCat. P. 42

²⁹ The Cambridge Chronicle, May 2, 1896. <https://cambridge.dlconsulting.com/?a=d&d=Chronicle18960502-01>

³⁰ The Cambridge Tribune, Volume XX, Number 42, 25 December 1897.

<https://cambridge.dlconsulting.com/?a=d&d=Tribune18971225-01.2.58.4> and Middlesex Deeds Book 2567, p. 551

There are a few indicators that this section of West Somerville might not have been a very desirable section of the city to live in for at least the first few decades of the neighborhood. I consider who was able to buy or rent the homes when they became available based on economic opportunity and goals of the residents.

As we see through historical accounts like *Beyond the Neck* and publications such as the *Somerville Journal* and city council records, there were a few “undesirable” features lurking in this neighborhood. One was Tannery Brook. The Cambridge Historical Commission writes that having a tannery as a neighbor was to have a “foul and unsanitary” neighbor.³¹ The city almshouse was, for a time, the Muller Tannery’s only neighbor. However, after the electrification of streetcars in 1889, this open area, just over the city line from Cambridge into Somerville, began to be built up. Somerville residents read of the pollution from tanneries in the area in an 1885 *Somerville Journal* recounting of the water supply report and of tanneries emptying into the Mystic, and Cambridge residents read of the “nuisance.”³² In 1893, the *Cambridge Chronicle* published a short complaint that a member of the Cambridge Health Department found approximately fifty Somerville homes emptying sewage directly into Tannery Brook, reporting “that there is a terrible stench arising from the little brook which flows through the Camp Cameron property, from Davis square even into Alewife brook.” They go on to say, playing an inter-city blame game, that “these houses are nearly if not quite all in Somerville, and

³¹ North Cambridge Neighborhood Stabilization Committee, Cambridge Historical Commission. “Tannery Brook” [Historical Marker]. 2000.

https://www.cambridgema.gov/~media/Files/historicalcommission/pdf/markers_NC_tannerybrook.pdf

³² *Somerville Journal*, September 5, 1885. Vol. XVI, No. 43. Somerville, MA.

https://somervillema.historyarchives.online/viewer?k=tannery&i=f&by=1885&bdd=1880&d=01011885-12311885&m=between&ord=k1&fn=somerville_journal_usa_massachusetts_somerville_18850905_english_4&df=1&dt=5&cid=3308

the Cambridge people take the brunt of the bad odor.”³³ This concern surrounding tannery-related pollution was likely a deterrent to prospective buyers upon the 1895 division and ensuing sales of land in this neighborhood. As such, construction of the underground Tannery Brook sewer, a joint measure by Cambridge and Somerville, began in 1896, consistent with major development and sales of new homes in this neighborhood. The sewer system was connected to North Cambridge’s sewer system by 1897, clearing the area of sewage and stormwater flooding.

Deeds and Mortgages

Robert B. Goode, a Black man from Virginia, bought his Elmwood Street home from Charles W. Cook in 1896, with a mortgage of \$1,500.³⁴ The Goode family – Robert, his wife Emily, and their son William – acquired this home, on the corner of Elmwood Street and the private way that became Elmwood Terrace, before the construction of the Tannery Brook sewer. By 1910, almost every property on Harrison Street was owned or inhabited by a Black family. Elmwood Terrace, with only two listed houses on the 1910 census, was entirely Black-owned, with the stretch of Elmwood between the two private ways being fully Black-owned as well. With Rev. Adam Smith’s home and congregation on Harrison Street, we can envision this as a community center of the Black neighborhood. Though the Terrace became an Italian street by 1920 – as everyone living on Elmwood Terrace was a renter, the landlord likely chose to change tenants – the seeming center of this neighborhood remains strong.

Through these examples, I found that the Black families were in some cases buying from Irish men who had already been stateside for some decades. The deeds in this area before the

³³ The Cambridge Chronicle, Volume XLVIII, Number 43, 28 October 1893
<https://cambridge.dlconsulting.com/?a=d&d=Chronicle18931028-01.2.47>

³⁴ Land Deed from Charles W. Cook to Robert Goode, 4 February 1896, Middlesex County Recorded Land Book 2435, page 475, Middlesex South Registry of Deeds, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Black families purchased them changed hands frequently, or sometimes the taxes were unpaid and the city appears to have auctioned them. There were some direct sales as well. For example, James Hawkins liaised with the white real estate agent, Olmore Francis of Cambridge, to finance his Cameron Ave parcels of land.

Tracing through grantors and grantees with the registry of deeds, I found it possible to learn about the home values and some available funds. A few banks appeared to be lenders to Black mortgagees, including the Somerville Cooperative Bank, Abington Savings Bank, and Somerville Institute of Savings, with further mortgages through North Cambridge Cooperative Bank and East Cambridge Savings Bank. Many of these were mutual savings banks, which relied on each customer's deposits to ensure availability of funds to other customers. In this early lending market, "mutual savings banks grew rapidly in size and importance within urban areas in New England."³⁵ As such, when James Hawkins had a home mortgage through the North Cambridge Co-Op Bank, if multiple Black families were using the same mutual savings bank, it suggests mutual aid in one sense, and self-sufficiency in another.

James Hawkins owned multiple properties on Cameron Avenue. I found that he owned Cameron Avenue + Malvern Avenue Lots 1 and 4, and Malvern Ave Lot 3. He purchased the first property in 1904, Cameron + Malvern Lot 1, from Olmore Francis, the North Cambridge real estate agent. This is the same property found in his will in 1949, suggesting this was the first and primary residence for James and his wife Rosa in Somerville through their lives, at 39-41 Cameron Avenue. Hawkins appears to have purchased "the equity of redemption of the estate" and assumed the remainder of a \$3000 mortgage on the home, or \$136/month with 7% monthly

³⁵ Kenneth Snowden, "Mortgage Banking in the United States, 1870-1940," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, ahead of print, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2349189>. P. 58.

interest.³⁶ Hawkins mortgaged the home repeatedly through different banks over time. He later acquired neighboring plots of land, perhaps using them for equity, or perhaps his 1910 Census “boarding house proprietor” endeavor. Cameron Avenue Lot 2 appeared on his records, first taking a mortgage from Nellie Chandler in 1911, then paying it off in 1913 only to immediately re-mortgage it for a \$2400 loan through the North Cambridge Co-Op Bank.³⁷ Another Black family ended up living in this home – the head of household was Walter J. Fubler, a porter. Hawkins then acquired Malvern Ave lot 3, a smaller property behind the first two lots on Cameron Ave, with a loan of \$600 from North Cambridge Co-Op bank in 1915.³⁸ This series of mortgaging through local cooperative banks continued, again showing that there existed mutual aid and loans for Hawkins to pursue these endeavors while he enacted self-sufficiency through property ownership.

Some women owned homes as well, demonstrating their economic roles in family life. For example, I found records of both William H Cousins and Carrie Cousins for their Elmwood Street home. In some locations, like the Grantor Index, William Cousins is listed; in the Grantee Index, his wife, Carrie Cousins, is marked as the grantor even for the same transactions and deeds with the Somerville Cooperative Bank. I did not find the same for other wives, suggesting that Carrie had some economic power; Carrie also appears as an active participant in the neighborhood’s political life.

Neighborhood Makeup

³⁶ Land Deed from Olmore C. Francis to James Hawkins, 20 October 1904, Middlesex County Recorded Land Book 3125, page 599, Middlesex South Registry of Deeds, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

³⁷ Mortgage Deed from James Hawkins to North Cambridge Co-Op Bank, 22 October 1913, Middlesex County Recorded Land Book 3832, page 192, Middlesex South Registry of Deeds, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

³⁸ Mortgage Deed from James Hawkins to North Cambridge Co-Op Bank, 26 April 1915, Middlesex County Recorded Land Book 3963, page 285, Middlesex South Registry of Deeds, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

To count the immigrant populations and assess change over time on Cameron Ave, Elmwood Street, Elmwood Terrace, and Harrison Street, I compared the 1909, 1915, and 1919 city directories to the 1910 and 1920 censuses and marked down the countries of origin of first- and second-generation immigrants. I also highlighted the Black residents and the homes that they inhabited in the surrounding years. The major groups of immigrants in this neighborhood across 1909-10 and 1919-20 were Canadian and Italian. The Canadian group included English, French, and Black (English) migrants. The number of French Canadians and second-generation Canadians increased by 1920. The number of Irish in this area decreased, and Italian households doubled. Between active change in the neighborhood and the methods, the 1909 directory shows 26 Black households where the 1910 census counts 31. The 1919 directory contains 39 to a census count of 40, however, so quick growth is a more likely explanation.³⁹

With a total of 120 addresses posted to the 1909 directory in this neighborhood, ~48 (40%) identifiable immigrant households (likely higher), and ~26 (22%) Black households, the remaining 56 (46%) are either American-born White or unidentified immigrant. In this earlier period as the neighborhood continued to build up and grow, it was largely entirely working-class or extant earlier estates and surrounding businesses. By 1920, there were approximately 137 households, with ~73 (53%) identifiable, mostly immigrant households and ~40 (29%) Black households. This leaves 27 (19%) unidentified households, with a lower proportion overall of American-born White or unidentified households. By this time, the houses that Black families tended to live in were notable and traceable across multiple directories and censuses, showing a definite neighborhood boundary.

³⁹ My methodology likely under-counted each population using the city directories as it was imperfect, referencing only a few years and only recognizable names or those easily corroborated by the surrounding census.

By 1920, there appears to be a *de facto* boundary line on Cameron and Elmwood Streets. On Cameron Ave, only the odd-numbered west side of the street from numbers 31-55 were inhabited by Black families. Most were workers, employed as railroad porters, waiters and waitresses, or in factories, much like the Italian and other white families around them. The

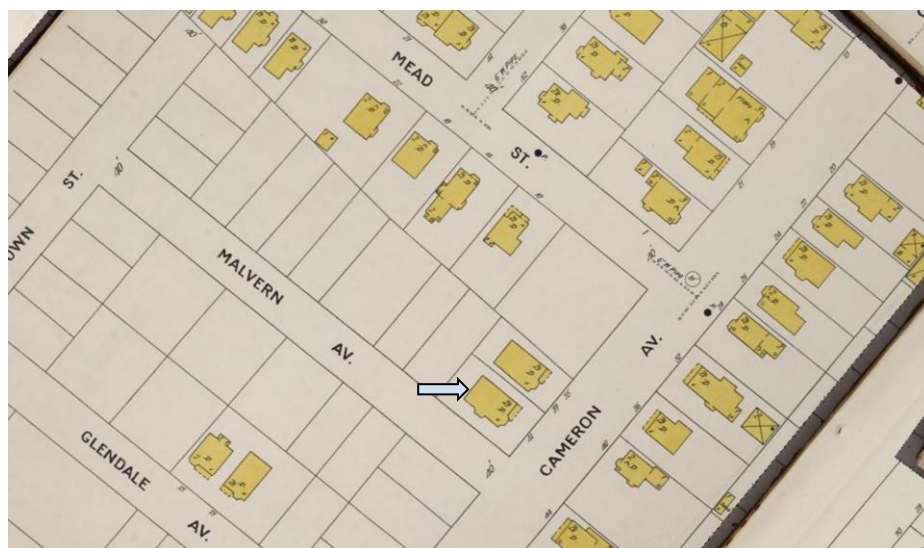


Figure 2. 1900 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map. House marked was James Hawkins'.

homes and lots they resided in were not present in the 1900 census or atlases, suggesting that they were developed by 1909 with the 29-41 lots and then by 1915 for the last

few up to 55. These

bordered or were part of the Camp Cameron developments, and a few seem to be part of James Hawkins' holdings, lining up with the time he wrote on the 1910 census that he was a boarding-house proprietor.

In 1910, seven of eight Black porters in the entire city lived in the Elmwood/Cameron neighborhood. While one man shared a home address with another resident and two younger men lived with their families, the remaining four railroad car porters in the neighborhood owned homes with a mortgage. Several of them are present in both 1910 and 1920 at the same addresses on Harrison Street, Elmwood Street, or Cameron Avenue, including Thomas P. Ewell, Charles Murray, William Jones and David Jones. In 1920, two additional porters lived in the same neighborhood, while an additional three lived near major railroad lines elsewhere in the city. By

the 1920 census, most of the residents on Harrison Street, an offshoot of Elmwood Street that abutted the railroad tracks, were railroad porters, and many of them were already living on Harrison Street in earlier city directories.⁴⁰ Through this snapshot of an industry, today we can piece together how a neighborhood could form around common identities and common work.

Elmwood Street was a more obvious mix of Black and Italian, less divided by sides of the street and more by the end of the street toward the railroad tracks, where developers and wealthier individuals identified less desirable land. A handful of the homes were also still under development in 1900, but most were the homes that bordered and were across from Elmwood Terrace and Harrison Streets. There are stretches toward the Cambridge line where the Black neighborhood has distinct overlap, either through the side of the streets or through alternating houses, with Italian immigrant families. Italians and Black families had shared goals of economic mobility through homeownership, and this neighborhood is an interesting embodiment of that goal. Stephen Puleo, writing of Italian migratory communities to Boston, quotes an historian who wrote that for Italians, ““nothing embodied the essence of community more than a home... No home, no community; no property, no dignity.””⁴¹ This rings true for Black ownership as well. In studies of Southern Black residents after Emancipation, one scholar writes that “hard work led to economic self-sufficiency and freedom from debt,” which is a shared goal and reality for their Italian neighbors.⁴²

In *Streetcar Suburbs*, Sam Bass Warner Jr. writes how, with the extension of street railway companies, neighborhoods developed along class lines rather than by race. This model

⁴⁰ *The Somerville Directory of the Inhabitants, Institutions, [Etc.]*, (Boston, Mass.), nos. 40 (1917) and 42 (1919), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100493160>.

⁴¹ Stephen Puleo, *The Boston Italians : A Story of Pride, Perseverance, and Paesani, from the Years of the Great Immigration to the Present Day* (Beacon Press, 2007). p. 96.

⁴² Waymon R. Hinson, “Land Gains, Land Losses: The Odyssey of African Americans Since Reconstruction.” 910.

seems to be consistent with the development of the neighborhood described in this thesis. For example, a grouping of residents in the same neighborhood on Elmwood and Harrison Streets are

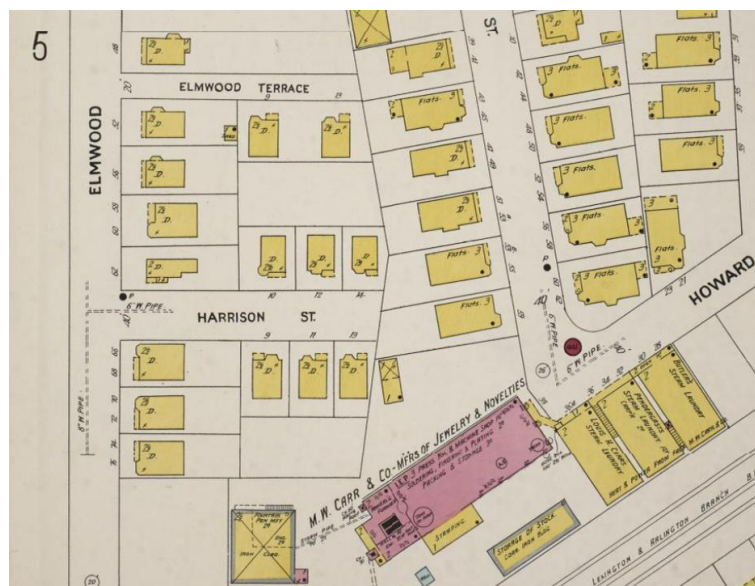


Figure 3. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Somerville, Middlesex County, Massachusetts. Sanborn Map Company, 1900. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3764sm.g038491900>

listed on the 1920 census as being employed at a “Jewelry Factory” as foremen, bench workers, time keepers, and polishers.⁴³ This factory, given the neighborhood and known industry in Somerville, is likely the M. W. Carr & Co Manufacturers of Jewelry and Novelties, based on the 1900 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Somerville.⁴⁴ Black and Italian laborers also

worked together as machinists and metalworkers at railyards and the meat packing plants, as salesmen, general laborers, butlers and servants. In *The Boston Italians*, Puleo writes about the Italian side of this experience, acknowledging that Southern Italian immigrants often worked alongside Black laborers in less-skilled positions.⁴⁵

In the West Somerville neighborhood, it was already clear that the Italians and Black residents were neighbors and coworkers. They shared goals of owning a home and the security of

⁴³ Ancestry.com. Year: 1920; Census Place: Somerville Ward 7, Middlesex, Massachusetts; Roll: T625_718; Page: 3A; Enumeration District: 456. *1920 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

⁴⁴ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Somerville, Middlesex County, Massachusetts*. Sanborn Map Company, 1900. Map. https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn03849_001/.

⁴⁵ Puleo, *The Boston Italians*, 91.

having property to hold, shelter them, and pass down to their families. Their children went to school together. In one sense, it was an illustration of shared experiences, though they were not always equivalent. There is evidence both communities were involved in political life and cared about the safety of their neighborhood and property, sometimes supporting each other, sometimes against.

In April 1919, first-generation Italian immigrants Caterina and Raffaele Montuori applied to the city for a license to open a garage for 50 automobiles on their property at 39 Elmwood Street. In May, there was a hearing, and it seems to have passed, for in June, the city received two petitions that their license be revoked. Both June petitions appear to have been from fellow Italian residents including “A. Casassa et als” and “Tortelli Ottario et als,” residents whose properties at 25 and 51 Elmwood Streets, respectively, may have been greatly affected by the construction of a garage for 50 automobiles; likely, their petitions also included other residents, and were filed by those with the most know-how. The city deemed “no action necessary” on these two petitions, and a month later, the Montuoris filed a petition to build “for the storage of gasoline” at lot 29 on Elmwood Street.⁴⁶

In September 1919, the city council held a hearing over this petition, where 14 people rose in opposition. Three Black residents and two other Italian residents are named as appearing in objection, likely speaking at the meeting: Louis Henry Cousins, Mrs. Jennie Englise, Carrie Cousins, Mrs. Gertrude Bacci, and Robert B. Goode. This group of abutters had an attorney representing them as well. All lived nearby, some, like Mrs. Englise, with children, and would have been deeply affected by the construction of such a storage facility. In the same notes, R. and

⁴⁶ City of Somerville Board of Aldermen. Thursday, June 12, 1919, in City Council Minutes 1919. Provided by Somerville City Archives. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema-live/s3fs-public/city-council-minutes-1919.pdf>

C. Montuori filed another petition to open a garage, this time spanning two lots on Elmwood Street; immediately, there was a petition against them from Felice Passero et als, a direct neighbor of Mr. Montuori. Two weeks later was another hearing, with two attorneys present. Louis Henry Cousins spoke again, as well as Augustus Casassa; twenty-five residents stood in opposition, but eleven were in favor. The city moved into legal counsel.⁴⁷

Rafaelle Montuori was ultimately granted permission to build the garage with a gasoline tank not exceeding 500 gallons of gasoline stored underground. Residents and the attorneys appeared in protest. It disappeared from the city record after September 25, 1919, after the petitions and protests began in April. In a small residential neighborhood such as this, it is hard to visualize a facility storing gasoline and a 50-car garage, but by January 1920 Elmwood Street Garage was advertised in the paper and slated to open on January 15. There are such interesting neighborhood connotations to this political and legal action, with race and class dynamics at play.

The Montuori family arrived to the United States in 1907 and purchased their West Somerville property by the 1910 census enumeration, but did not live there immediately. Rafaelle worked at the jewelry factory with other Italian and Black folks in the neighborhood. The Montuori family, especially the younger generation, would have grown up alongside Leroy and Louis Henry Cousins, who later protested against them opening this garage. It is difficult to know now outside of this city record how this affected the neighborhood, but taking legal action against a neighbor who is changing the fabric of the neighborhood by opening a large garage and gasoline storage is not a neutral decision. These residents demonstrated political power and sway

⁴⁷ City of Somerville Board of Aldermen. Thursday, September 11, 1919. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema-live/s3fs-public/city-council-minutes-1919.pdf>

through attendance of public meetings and by hiring an attorney – for Black residents, this was an exercise of their status in the North in the face of disenfranchisement of the Jim Crow South; for both Black and Italian residents, it was an act of solidarity across racial lines and in their shared position as immigrants. This was a measure of empowerment, the ability to affect their neighborhood afforded to them with the growth of these community ties.

The development of the West Somerville neighborhood allowed Black community members to actualize the goals of freedom and empowerment. Homeownership was a status symbol of equality and self-sufficiency, thus it was sought after and achieved through means such as cooperative lending and long-term mortgages, like in James Hawkins' experience. Property ownership was achievable for Black migrants and other immigrant groups in West Somerville because the land was not desirable to wealthier individuals. Their symbols of sufficiency were also marked by environmental hazards from industrial factories and neighbor's gasoline storage. Despite this, the Black community's presence in its first 20 years in West Somerville only solidified, forged by connections of people and families with common pasts and common goals.

2. MIGRATION

Migration Patterns

Looking at West Somerville, there were two main migration patterns that influenced the neighborhood's development. The first was chain migration. Chain migration occurs when one family member, or a group of heads-of-household or family, moves and then contributes to bringing other family members or neighbors to live nearby in their new neighborhood or environment. This is how cities, including Boston, ended up with "Little Italy" or known neighborhoods of certain demographics, like a North End that was almost entirely Southern Italian in the early 1900s. For example, Ida Chute's brother James Langford came to Somerville after she arrived from Nova Scotia and settled with her family. Henry Dallas migrated from Barbados and his brother and then brother-in-law and sister joined a few years later once he found work.

Another term found in studying patterns of movement is step migration. This is where an individual or family moves through different cities before settling in a destination, like a migrant from the American South staying temporarily in Philadelphia before settling in Boston, or a migrant from the West Indies arriving through a port like New York or Halifax before traveling again. In the context of the Black residents in Somerville, sometimes I noted step and chain migration working together as I was able to construct select genealogies, but other times one or the other predominated.

American South

After the Civil War and Emancipation, newly freed Black people in the South were faced with a mix of opportunity and progress, amid violent racism and continuing social, political, and economic oppression under the Jim Crow south. These circumstances led to movement north,

with the promises of increased wages and less legislated segregation, although *de facto* segregation still occurred in various ways.

The Great Migration in United States history is often defined as a wave of mass migration of Black Americans out of the southern, formerly slaveholding states, beginning around 1910, ramping up through the First World War, and continuing through the 1970s. Often, the migrants would end up residing in northern industrial cities, having come in pursuit of factory work. However, this dominant narrative does not fully encompass the migratory history. There was an earlier wave of migration in the Reconstruction era.⁴⁸ As I analyzed writing about neighborhood construction and will expand on later, the railroad lines were major employers that created pathways of mobility for newly freed slaves to gain employment on rail lines and in companies such as the Pullman Car Company. These labor trains formed their own wave of migration, where men working on the lines effectively gained passage to Northern cities including Boston.

This type of migration was ongoing from the end of the Civil War through the 1970s. Over 100 years, Black Americans, moving away from southern sharecropping, farming, and other systems to the North, Midwest, and West, reshaped a society recovering from disunion and war. They did not move only to these regions; there was also high migration from the rural South to southern cities. Some moved back and forth; some resettled and stayed in their new communities. There were various factors and circumstances that influenced movement and people's destinations. Economics and opportunity were important components of these

⁴⁸ George E. Haynes, PhD., "Migration of Negroes Into Northern Cities 1917," Social Welfare History Project, February 14, 2012, <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/eras/civil-war-reconstruction/migration-of-negroes-into-northern-cities-1917/>.

experiences. Boston was a final destination of migration as one of the Northernmost major cities on the East Coast. Often, Black migrants arrived through railroads and shipyards to pursue work.

In Somerville, my dataset shows a small variety of states of origin for individuals and families in this earlier wave of migration. By 1890, the Census Bureau interpreted that the Boston area held a high distribution of the Black population. Essentially, for a small city, a high proportion of “colored” residents to white residents were in the city.⁴⁹ The first Black residents living in the West Somerville neighborhood migrated from North Carolina and Virginia. After 1900, there was a slightly higher variety of states of origin, but the majority of Black residents were still from North Carolina or Virginia. A decade later, a large quantity of Somerville’s Black residents were born in Massachusetts, followed by Virginia, then North Carolina. Also present were people originating in South Carolina, Alabama, Missouri, Washington D.C., Florida, Georgia, Texas, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New York, and West Virginia. This regional range makes sense for the migratory patterns, coming from states with high rates of enslavement and major plantations. If the individual were not from Virginia or North Carolina, they were more likely to be traveling alone, documented on the Census as a lodger boarding in an established family’s home. Many of the Massachusetts-born were younger and had one or both parents listed as born in North Carolina or Virginia. In 1910, the higher age range of those born in Massachusetts while one or both parents were from the south tended to be in the mid-30s, meaning that migration of those parents would have occurred by the mid-1880s. This further points to an earlier wave of a great migration.

⁴⁹ United States Census Office. 11th Census, 1890, and Henry Gannett. “Distribution of the Colored Population, Table 29,” in *Statistical atlas of the United States, based upon the results of the eleventh census*. Washington, Govt. print. off, 1898. Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/07019233/>.

One such Black resident of Somerville in my dataset, who I previously described becoming a property owner, is James Hawkins. James Hawkins was born between 1871 and 1873 in Sandy Creek Township, Warren County, North Carolina where he still lived in 1880. His parents are recorded as Lydia Taylor and Cambridge Hawkins on James' marriage record. Born in approximately 1849, James' father, Cambridge Hawkins, experienced enslavement for the first part of his life and was likely farming under a sharecropper system. Cambridge sued John G. Thomas through the Freedman's Bureau in 1868, asking to be paid for the labor he did, but I was unable to find how this case was resolved.⁵⁰ As a stonemason, Cambridge would have been considered a skilled worker. Though likely a sharecropper after Emancipation, he may have worked in masonry on the side, already trained during his enslavement. By 1880, he considered it his full-time profession.⁵¹ Providing for a wife and multiple children, it is possible that he was able to accumulate wealth through this profession. Some of his children may have farmed as well. However, at least two children left for the North.

In Sandy Creek Township, multiple "Hawkins" owners are listed on the 1850 Slave Schedules of the US Census; the enumerator is also a "Hawkins." While it is difficult to pinpoint which of them may have enslaved Cambridge and other members of James' family, several candidates appear. Mary F. Hawkins had one 1-year-old boy listed (p. 12); Micajah E. Hawkins was a major enslaver with a couple of boys in the right range (p. 10), and Peter B. Hawkins had

⁵⁰ The National Archives in Washington, DC; Washington, DC, USA; Records of the Field Offices For the State of North Carolina, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872. NARA Roll: *Roll 024, Register of Complaints, Jan-Dec 1868*. Ancestry.com. *U.S., Freedmen's Bureau Records, 1865-1878* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2021.

⁵¹ Tenth Census of the United States, 1880. (NARA microfilm publication T9, 1,454 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Year: 1880; Census Place: Sandy Creek, Warren, North Carolina; Roll: 985; Page: 105b; Enumeration District: 285. Ancestry.com and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *1880 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010.

multiple enslaved boys of this age as well (p. 8).⁵² In 1850, Mary’s “property” was valued at \$1200, but her spouse Alex’s property was valued at \$6000 – he just happened to be the Assistant Marshall who was enumerating the census – and they appear to have hired a farm manager. In 1860, Mary F. Hawkins had an 11-year-old boy listed on her slave schedule (p. 12) and had 10 “slave houses.” Micajah’s property was valued at \$17,885.⁵³

So, Cambridge was born into enslavement, likely on one of these three properties. After Emancipation, he continued farming for at least 20 years, according to census records, before beginning employment as a stonemason by 1880. He married Lydia Taylor in 1869 in Manson, North Carolina, by a Justice of the Peace. He may have been able to acquire land after 1870. Cambridge and Lydia are together on the 1870 and 1880 censuses, and have at least 6 children by 1880. With a missing 1890 census, what we know is that his son James Hawkins was 7 years old in North Carolina in 1880, in Cambridge by 1897, then married to Rosa Lee Purdis on November 15, 1899 before moving to Somerville. James’ brother, Conrad, was also in Cambridge in 1899-1900, but I have been unable to locate records that contain him after this time.⁵⁴ On this 1900 Cambridge, MA census record, both James and Conrad were listed as being employed as “Porters on Cars.” In this context, most likely, gaining employment, and thus passage, on a train car is how they came north to Massachusetts.⁵⁵

⁵² Ancestry.com. *1850 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. Seventh Census of the United States, 1850. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1850. M432, 1,009 rolls.

⁵³ Ancestry.com. *1850 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009. Images reproduced by FamilySearch. Original data: Seventh Census of the United States, 1850; (National Archives Microfilm Publication M432, 1009 rolls); Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁴ *The Cambridge Directory*, XLVIII, with Cambridge Public Library (W.A. Greenough, 1899), <http://archive.org/details/cambridgedirecto1899unse>. P. 255.

⁵⁵ Ancestry.com. Year: 1900; Census Place: Cambridge Ward 2, Middlesex, Massachusetts; Roll: 656; Page: 13; Enumeration District: 0682. *1900 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004.

James, born after the Civil War, may have grown up on a sharecropper farm, a product of this system during Reconstruction. Sometime between 1880 and 1897, he headed north, perhaps as a sleeping car porter with the Pullman company. Pullman Porters drew many Black men to employment and migration along major railroad lines. Once in New England, he would have found somewhere to board while he worked and earned money. From 1897, it appears this would have been at 55 Harvard Street in Cambridgeport, already a Black neighborhood. In 1903, this address appears to have been directly against the Boston and Arlington Railroad tracks.⁵⁶ He lived at 31 Union Street in 1899 on his marriage record; his wife, Rosa, lived nearby on Windsor Street.⁵⁷ No matter how he got there, his work as a railroad porter likely influenced where and how he was able to find housing. Labor, leisure, and connections within these spaces created these communities for James Hawkins and other Black migrant groups. His journey North to Somerville through the more established Black community in Cambridge via the railroad lines is representative of the migration of other Black Somerville residents from the American South.

“Making Good Abroad”: Migration from the British West Indies

West Indian migrants to North America, and more specifically to the Boston area, had a few different reasons for, and ways to accomplish, migration. Step migration was a common experience for West Indians because of the role of steamships and ports in their journeys. Gaining passage through work or stowing away on a steamship was a method of arrival in the North. For some arriving in Boston, this was their intended final destination. For others aiming

⁵⁶ G.W. Bromley & Co. Atlas of the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts :from actual surveys and official plans. Philadelphia : G.W. Bromley and Co., 1903.[Plates 6-10]. Harvard Map Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. [https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:6153086\\$11i](https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:6153086$11i)
This address appears to now be under a science center.

⁵⁷ The Cambridge Historical Commission has a stop across the street on the African-American Heritage Trail at 28 Union Street: <https://cambridgeusa.org/a-guide-to-cambridges-african-american-heritage-trail/>

for New York, Boston served as their temporary settlement location. It depended what the destination of their steamship was, especially if they could not pay.⁵⁸ Other Bostonian West Indians arrived after spending some time in New York, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, New Bedford, or other port cities. Boston, though, had a good economy for receiving immigrants, especially because of its mixed factory and service economy around 1900-1910. The West Indian population of Somerville illustrates some of this transience and roles of employment as originally outlined in Violet Showers Johnson's 2006 book *The Other Black Bostonians*.

Johnson argues that the main reasons for immigration of West Indian residents to Boston were the ideals of education, more and higher paying jobs, and the opportunity to move back to their home island as a higher-class individual. Poverty in the Caribbean was a driver to migrate, and despite a comparatively low rung on the American social and economic ladder upon arrival, the idea of "going foreign" or "making good abroad" to rise in class status spread. Among West Indians, the ability to earn more, sustain family members back home, and rent or own a home enabled them to reach a middle class status that was near impossible to rise to back in stratified Barbados or Jamaica.⁵⁹ The higher, stable pay in Massachusetts was a goal of "livelihood migrants" to reach this status.

In Somerville in 1910, there were eight Black or Mulatto individuals who were born in the British West Indies. Most were from Barbados, but one was from Jamaica, and one was listed with Spanish as a native language. Most were servants, maids, or domestic workers. One man,

⁵⁸ Violet Showers Johnson. *The Other Black Bostonians: West Indians in Boston, 1900-1950*. Blacks in the Diaspora. Indiana University Press, 2006.

⁵⁹ Violet Showers Johnson. *The Other Black Bostonians: West Indians in Boston, 1900-1950*. Blacks in the Diaspora. Indiana University Press, 2006.

Hugh Plunkett, was an electrician; he was listed as mulatto from Jamaica. Another, Naaman Breedy, was a blacksmith from Barbados.

This population more than doubled by 1920, with twenty British West Indian residents.⁶⁰ Most still were from Barbados and Jamaica, with a group from Bermuda – one individual and a family unit of four people – present as well. None who were residing in Somerville in 1910 were still present on the 1920 census, so movement continued, with some ending up in Cambridge instead. Fewer were working in service, but mostly those individuals who were given a race marker of Black on the census (as opposed to mulatto), potentially demonstrating the colorism, or discrimination based on skin tone, that affected Black British West Indians both on their home islands and on the mainland arriving in Boston. At the same time, some mulatto residents were still working in service, so it was not a hard and fast color line. Skill and opportunity still mattered in a racist economy filled with all types of immigrant laborers. West Indian women lived with the expectation they would raise children and have jobs; the women were often employed in domestic service, even if they had skilled training in dressmaking, because the potential client base was small.

Born Lillian Rosalie Shuffler in Barbados, a colony of the British West Indies, Lillian, a seamstress, married Arthur, a blacksmith, on June 14, 1900. They lived on the south side of the island, in Sargeant's Village, Christ Church. Arthur Oscar Harper, born 1869 in Barbados to an agricultural laborer, emigrated to the United States, arriving at Ellis Island on April 14, 1903. Arthur reported on his record of passage that he was "going in search of employment. He also has friends in Boston." Written after this line is a name and the address "9 Harrison," and

⁶⁰ It is actually higher; the census taker did not note down some very young children who had immigrated with their parents and then appear on a later census record in Cambridge.

another address, assumedly where he found lodging, at “494 Broadway, Somerville, Mass.”⁶¹

We know Harper immigrated to join someone specific, showing chain migration, and it seems unusually specific, as many West Indian Black migrants were coming to settle in the South End of Boston or around Central Square, Cambridge, in the early decades of the 1900s.

Lillian arrived in Boston on the *USS Thespis* on September 8, 1903, joining her husband who arrived earlier in the year. Lillian was listed as a laundress on her immigration record, going to join Arthur at “494 Broadway Somerville Boston Mass” with \$35 to her name.⁶² Arthur is on his own in early Somerville Directories (1904-1909), but in the 1909 edition, Lillian is listed separately as a dressmaker both in the street directory section and in the business directory section. At this point, the family settles down in West Somerville at 63A Elmwood Street, where she works out of her home.⁶³ As it was already her profession in Barbados, it is likely that, regardless of the lack of public record and documentation, Lillian continued with her profession the whole time. Yet, in 1920 she has no profession listed on the census.

Another important factor of West Indian migration was educational achievement.⁶⁴ Lillian and Arthur Harper settled in West Somerville. Although the Harpers lived in a few different homes on Cameron or Elmwood, they always stayed in this neighborhood after moving there. Lillian and Arthur’s daughter, Elsie (b. 1914), went on to graduate with honors from

⁶¹ “New York City, New York, United States records,” images, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-816L-9TG4?view=explore> : Jan 9, 2026), image 228 of 335; United States. National Archives and Records Administration. Image Group Number: 005262385

⁶² “New York, Passenger Arrival Lists (Ellis Island), 1892-1925,” *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JFTV-YZ7> : Tue Nov 18 23:14:21 UTC 2025), Entry for Lilian Rosalia Harper and Arthur Oscar Harper, 8 September 1903.

⁶³ *The Somerville Directory of the Inhabitants, Institutions, [Etc.]*, no. 32 (1909). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hnez2a&seq=403&q1=harper>

⁶⁴ Johnson, *Other Black Bostonians*.

Somerville High School in 1932.⁶⁵ While not the first Black graduate, in her class she was the only one. She was clearly involved in the school community, and must have been bright and driven, graduating as a National Honor Society inductee, in the Glee Club, and on the Tennis Team. Elsie grew up a child of Barbadian immigrants during a time of high nativism, part of the West Somerville Black community, with working parents. In 1930 and 1940, like her mother, Elsie worked in the garment industry, but in wholesale, not as an at-home dressmaker.⁶⁶ This family alone demonstrates the intersections of race, migration, class, labor, and gender in West Somerville from their arrival through the next generation.



Figure 4. Elsie Harper in the 1932 Somerville High School *Radiator* Yearbook.

The Harpers were not the only West Indian migrants who settled in this area of Somerville. Another set of family members' stories demonstrate the ideas of both step and chain migration. In 1920, Harris W. DeShield lived on Cameron Ave with his wife, Sarah, and two brothers-in-law, Alonzo and Henry Dallas.⁶⁷ DeShield arrived in Montreal from Bermuda in 1910 and emigrated to Boston through Vermont in 1919. Henry Dallas arrived first to the United States in 1910. Alonzo followed in 1913, and the DeShields' December 1919 border crossing document shows they are going to visit Alonzo at 50 Mass Ave, Cambridge.⁶⁸ An earlier

⁶⁵ Somerville High School (Somerville, *The Radiator : Somerville High School*, with Somerville Public Library (Somerville High School, 1932), <http://archive.org/details/radiatorsomervil1932some>.

⁶⁶ Ancestry.com. Year: 1940; Census Place: Somerville, Middlesex, Massachusetts; Roll: m-t0627-01705; Page: 9B; Enumeration District: 21-105. *1940 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

⁶⁷ Ancestry.com. Year: 1920; Census Place: Somerville Ward 7, Middlesex, Massachusetts; Roll: T625_718; Page: 3A; Enumeration District: 456. *1920 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

⁶⁸ Roll Number: 386, Source Information Ancestry.com. *U.S., Border Crossings from Canada to U.S., 1895-1960* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

document, from May 1919, shows a declaration of intention for citizenship after Harris' April 1919 arrival to the United States through Vermont; he may have traveled to find a job before bringing his family.⁶⁹ All of them migrated through different locales before arriving in Boston, some through New York or Connecticut, and some through Canada. This demonstrates step migration, moving through different cities temporarily before settling in Boston, and chain migration because family members were bringing other family members to settle in a new location.

Harris DeShield, a machinist, was listed as working at an auto repair shop in 1920. His work as a machinist is consistent with general trends of skilled West Indian workers coming to find employment in Greater Boston's manufacturing economy. Compared to many Johnson writes about in *The Other Black Bostonians*, it is possible DeShield was luckier and was able to hold a more coveted skilled job, as opposed to his brother-in-law Henry, who worked in service. Alonzo was a carpenter, also holding a skilled job. DeShield's wife Sarah, a domestic servant in Canada, was likely still a domestic worker in Somerville. It is distinctly possible, given that in Somerville in 1920 they are all marked as mulatto, that colorism was at play, and any distinction he had being light-skinned benefitted him.

Some residents of Somerville in 1910 were there only temporarily, suggesting that social status and economics continued to change. Instead of settling, they followed jobs to other ports and cities. Naaman Breedy's brother-in-law, Milton Evans, lived in Cambridge for a little while, then applied for naturalization in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, where he worked as a butler for a

⁶⁹ Description: *Declaration of Intention, V- 190, No- 94501, 8 Apr- 1919, Julius Kanaber-V- 194, No- 97000, 19 June 1919, Vincent Cannizzaro* National Archives at Boston; Waltham, Massachusetts; ARC Title: Petitions and Records of Naturalization , 8/1845 - 12/1911; NAI Number: 3000057; Record Group Title: Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685-2009; Record Group Number: RG 21

family.⁷⁰ Breedy himself appeared to return to Barbados, showed up again on a 1924 ships inventory list to go back to Cambridge, then applied for naturalization under a different name in Brooklyn in 1931.⁷¹ These both illustrate the idea that the Boston area was, for some, just part of their migration experience, while having a different city in mind or as their final destination. Evans may have also moved for personal reasons, or better opportunity, along with the changing statuses of Barbadian immigrants.

The experiences of West Indian migrants in West Somerville, specifically, are interesting to compare to other immigrant groups they lived alongside in addition to the native-born Black residents. They shared the same goals – economic stability, home ownership, educational gains – though a different balance for each. For example, West Indian children generally had higher educational attainment; though they were expected to work and contribute to the family finances, a high value was placed on their education. This was a national goal at least for Barbados, where scholars write that “to be a proud Barbadian was to be an educated Barbadian,” acting as a form of nationalism and investment in not only the child, but the future of the nation, even for those who left.⁷² This was not always the same for children of other groups.⁷³ Elsie Harper graduated from Somerville High in 1932, while in the two years before, two Black boys with native-born

⁷⁰ Ancestry.com, National Archives at Boston; Waltham, MA; Record Group Title: *Records of District Courts of the United States*; Record Group Number: Rg 21; NAI Number: 594499; NAI Title: Petitions and Records of Naturalization, 1790 - 11/1945. Vol 14-19, Declaration No 5250 (Elie Roma)-No 7421 (Erkki Kylloneu), 21 Oct 1920-21 Nov 1924. P. 1074. *Maine, U.S., Federal Naturalization Records, 1787-1991* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

⁷¹ The National Archives in Washington, DC; Washington, DC, USA; Passenger and Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1897-1957; Microfilm Serial or NAID: T715; RG Title: Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787-2004; RG: 85. Ship or Roll Number: *Parima*. Ancestry.com. *New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820-1957* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. P. 52.

⁷² Christopher Stuart Taylor. “Education Is the Key to Prosperity: The Barbadian Education System and 20th-Century Black Barbadian Migrants in Canada.” *Journal of Black Studies* 45, no. 5 (2014): 453–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24573093>.

⁷³ Violet Showers Johnson, *Other Black Bostonians*.

Black parents were present in the junior class list but not in their senior class. As this was during the Great Depression, the boys likely had to leave school to work earlier because of economic hardship. Elsie may have experienced many things differently, between class, gender, or ideals of Barbadian attainment pushing her to graduation.

Canada

While migration north from the American South and from the West Indies increased in this time, especially after 1910, Canada's immigration restrictions increased, barring Black people from completing a journey further north, with legislation in place by 1911. West Indian immigrants, despite also being British subjects, faced restrictions based on "race" or economic status. Black Americans were effectively banned on "race" alone.⁷⁴

Though some West Indian migrants migrated to Boston, then Somerville, through Canadian ports, some of Somerville's Black population were originally from Canada. Black migration back to the United States after the Civil War era occurred largely because of the appearance of different opportunities or reuniting with other family members. However, reasons for Black residency and migration to and from Canada for this population are a little less clear than for Southern or West Indian migrants.

In West Somerville, Black Canadians tended to arrive in the United States a little earlier than West Indians, in the 1880s and 1890s. Some, generally living elsewhere in the city, were in the 1905-1913 arrival period, even achieving naturalization by 1915. In 1910, more Canadian-born Black residents were servants, maids, or laborers than in 1920, at which point they were

⁷⁴ Schwinghamer, Steve. "The Colour Bar at the Canadian Border: Black American Farmers." Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, July 20, 2021. <https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/black-american-farmers>.

largely professionals. The vast majority were from Nova Scotia, so this is the focus of my Canadian migration section. The main Black Canadian-American family that was present in Somerville in all censuses and documents from 1900-1920 were the Chutes and Langfords, who lived in West Somerville, settling at 9 Harrison Street. James Chute and Ida Chute (née Langford) arrived from the port of Weymouth, Nova Scotia with their children in 1895.

James' wife, Ida Langford, grew up in Weymouth Falls, Digby. In Weymouth in the 1871 census, it appears that the "African" origin residents are largely farmers, lumbermen, and millworkers. There were the same few surnames, including high concentrations of Robart, Jarvis, and Langford. The Langford name is tied back to James Langford, one of the Black Loyalists brought to Nova Scotia after the American Revolution.⁷⁵ Formerly enslaved in Maryland, he escaped to British lines at the end of the American Revolution, then was granted land and settled in the rural Weymouth area of Digsby.⁷⁶ James Langford's 1783 passage is recorded bound to St. John's River (Bay of Fundy), so it can be assumed that these Loyalist and Black settlements developed in Digsby, Annapolis Valley, Halifax, and other small communities.⁷⁷ James Langford and his wife, Margaret Erwin, had ten children, many of whom had children of their own. By Ida and John's childhoods, there were many, many Langford cousins in this area.⁷⁸

A handful of Langford descendants returned to the United States through Boston in the 1890s and early 1900s. Ida, by then Ida Chute, arrived in 1895 and her brother John Edward

⁷⁵ Nova Scotia Archives, "Nova Scotia Archives - African Nova Scotians in the Age of Slavery and Abolition," Nova Scotia Archives, April 20, 2020, <https://archives.novascotia.ca/>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Nova Scotia Archives, "Book of Negroes". From Guy Carleton, 1st Baron Dorchester: Papers, The National Archives, Kew (PRO 30/55/100) 10427 pages 66-67. <https://archives.novascotia.ca/africanns/book-of-negroes/page/?ID=43&Name=James%20Langford>

⁷⁸ James Langford Family Tree. https://www.chebucto.ns.ca/~ah900/tree/james_langford_sr.html and <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Langford-4154>

Langford arrived in 1901 after visiting in 1899.⁷⁹ John Edward lived with Ida and James Chute for a time before marrying Victoria Bowman, a Virginia-born woman, and settling down the street in her family's home. Eventually the couple separated and John returned to living with his sister. Some of Ida and John's other siblings joined them in Somerville in 1908, like Gertrude Francis. Gertrude married John A. Francis in Nova Scotia in 1894, then arrived in Massachusetts and lived on Harrison Street next to the Chutes. Another younger brother, James Langford, was a boarder of Rev. Adam Smith's at 11 Harrison Street in 1910.⁸⁰ Outside of this immediate family,

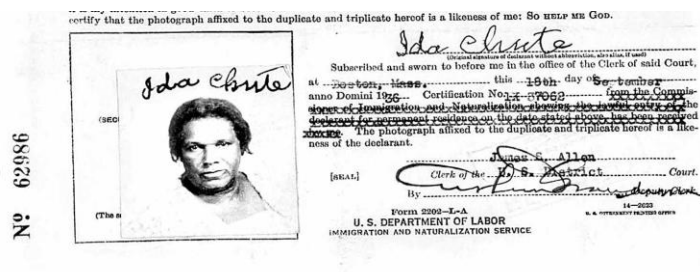


Figure 5. Ida Chute photo and signature on her 1936 Naturalization Paper. Ancestry.com.

Ida's aunt, Tamar, moved to Cambridge where she passed away in 1919. Sam Langford, the heavyweight boxing champion, also lived in Boston and Cambridge. He ran away from home and made his boxing debut in Boston at

age 16, living in Boston and Cambridge until his passing in 1956. Though the family was larger and more separated by this time, I did not find a direct link to one another, but Sam and Ida bear a strong family resemblance in their photos.

Ida, John, Gertrude, and James lived out the experience of chain migration. Of course, many Nova Scotians were interested in moving and found it possible through the Boston and Yarmouth Steamship Co., where documents show their arrival. Canadian emigration occurred among African Nova Scotians after the Civil War as they looked to the United States in the same

⁷⁹ "Boston, Suffolk, Massachusetts, United States records," images, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9YWQ-86V?view=explore> : Apr 13, 2026), image 736 of 814; United States. National Archives and Records Administration. Image Group Number: 005103116

⁸⁰ Ancestry.com. Massachusetts, Middlesex County, Somerville. 1910 United States Federal Census [database online]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006. Enumeration District 1019, p. 13.

terms as other immigrant groups: the possibility for a different life and different opportunities. Weymouth Falls and the surrounding Digby County was a rural port town; most of the Black residents on the 1881 and 1891 censuses were farmers or seamen. Looking to Boston where they could continue to work on the docks or take up industrial employment may have held promise.

Social Life

Being a smaller but growing community in Somerville, Black folks likely would have worked together, met up at local institutions to do shopping, attended church together, went to neighborhood schools together, and supported each other.

Early residents of the neighborhood may have celebrated their first local marriage with the union of John Edward Langford and Victoria Bowman. Victoria, born in Virginia, lived in Cambridge in 1900, just across from the Cameron Avenue intersection. Both age 22, they married in 1903, as some of the first of marriage-age in this new neighborhood. The Langfords were married by Rev. J. Henry Duckrey, at Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Cambridgeport. This church (later and today Mass Ave Baptist Church) was founded to serve as a center of spiritual community for Black migrants from the South and from the West Indies. It clearly served those from Canada as well.⁸¹ Additionally, Cambridge in 1904 when the Langfords were first married had two African Methodist Episcopal Churches, both near Central Square.⁸²

By 1909, they lived on Elmwood Terrace, in a home the Chutes moved into by 1915.⁸³ John Langford, still formally a Canadian citizen, served in World War I in the British

⁸¹ "About," The Avenue, accessed April 13, 2026, <https://www.avecbridge.org/about>.

⁸² *The Cambridge Directory*, LIII, with Cambridge Public Library (W.A. Greenough, 1904), <http://archive.org/details/cambridgedirecto1904unse>.

⁸³ *The Somerville Directory of the Inhabitants, Institutions, [Etc.]*, no. 32 (1909). <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hnez2a>

Expeditionary Forces. In 1919, Victoria is listed on her own in the city directory as Mrs. Victoria Langford, at 56 Elmwood Street, where her family had lived before.⁸⁴ By 1920, they appeared to have separated and did not have children. They always had their families nearby.

James Hawkins and Rosa Purdis married in Cambridge in 1899, before moving to Somerville. They were married by Rev. Jesse Harrell, Minister of the Gospel at Union Baptist, also in Central Square, Cambridge.⁸⁵ The same minister married Robert B. Goode's son, William N. Goode and Florence V. Morgan in 1904, suggesting that there was already contact of members of the later Elmwood/Cameron neighborhood through their church communities, especially as Hawkins and Goode were early residents of the area. Though the Union Baptist Church's website no longer displays this location's history, in 2020, community member George Parks wrote that "in the late 1800s this congregation had its beginnings in the basements of residents, and it evolved into a prominent African American Church in Cambridge, founded by former slaves and sharecroppers after the end of the Civil War," referencing an old version of the church's history page.⁸⁶

Until Reverend Adam Smith began his congregation in his 11 Harrison Street home, there was no such equivalent spiritual place of gathering for Somerville's Black community. As a handful of them moved to Elmwood Street from Cambridge, they likely continued to maintain connections to their own congregations in Cambridge or Boston as they were longer established, or more specialized, such as a Black Catholic organization. Reverend Smith's home services were attended by Black folks from "Somerville, Charlestown, Cambridge and Boston,"

⁸⁴ *The Somerville Directory of the Inhabitants, Institutions, [Etc.]*, no. 42 (1919).

⁸⁵ The Cambridge Chronicle, 16 December 1899. <https://cambridge.dlconsulting.com/?a=d&d=Chronicle18991216-01.2.124>

⁸⁶ "Union Baptist Church, Cambridge, Massachusetts," accessed February 10, 2026, <https://pillarsfoundations.blogspot.com/2020/02/union-baptist-church-cambridge.html>.

according to a 1911 *Cambridge Chronicle* article. For years, he held services at home, until the congregation of the West Somerville Congregational Church moved out. The article indicates that Reverend Smith held his first Sunday services in the physical church building in January 1911, but that the rest of the neighborhood began proceedings to “draw a color line” against the “negro congregation.”⁸⁷ Just as Somerville’s Black residents attended services in Cambridge and Boston, so too did Boston and Cambridge’s Black residents go to Somerville to attend Rev. Smith’s services. This is a testament to not only the importance of social and spiritual connection, but to the cohesion, influence and visibility of the Black community in West Somerville.

Neighborhood Migration

Scholars argue that the Great Migration exists in a global context of migration in the late 19th and into the 20th century. This places it in the discussion of international immigration to the United States, contributing to the analysis of city formation through various racial and ethnic groups. Sarah-Jane Mathieu, a scholar of African American history emphasizing global connections and immigration, wrote that for all affected by the 19th century international population relocation, “migration was spurred on by labor needs, food crisis, political persecution, urbanization, natural disaster, and of course free choice.”⁸⁸ She noted that Black migration was “distinctly American” due to racialized violence and “using relocation as a measure of their freedom,” but that it is useful to consider this mixed domestic-international migration in the context of mass migration patterns of the period.⁸⁹ Additionally, even in terms

⁸⁷ The Cambridge Chronicle, 21 January 1911. Vol. LXVI, no. 3.
<https://cambridge.dlconsulting.com/?a=d&d=Chronicle19110121-01.2.1>

⁸⁸ Sarah-Jane (Saje) Mathieu, “The African American Great Migration Reconsidered,” *OAH Magazine of History* 23, no. 4 (2009): 19–23.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

of being an immigrant neighborhood, the Black residents had different origins as well. So despite discrimination on the color line they may likely have experienced, further factors may have affected them differently. Mathieu, in the context of Great Migration patterns, writes that “Some Spanish, French, and Dutch-speaking black migrants remained largely linguistically marginalized, where African Canadians could move seamlessly through American society. A Trinidadian accent singled one out with the bosses, just as an Alabaman accent would, but with different obstacles to each workers’ advancement.”⁹⁰ This is likely to have occurred, in a neighborhood with native-born Southern Black migrants, Barbadians, and African Canadians, with the foreign White mix of Italians with some Irish and Scottish around as well. Between the factories, railroads and car houses, and all the people, imagine the *sounds* of this neighborhood.

The conversation of Black migration as a global process is crucial when studying West Somerville, because it was not in isolation. Especially where these residents were living, across from and alongside largely first-generation Italian immigrants, and having bought property from some Irish migrants, this was a *migrant* neighborhood, not just a Black neighborhood. As I discussed in the previous chapter, land desirability and pricing impacted the ability to own homes, but that was a status sought after by marginalized communities. Mathieu writes that students and scholars must consider not only the “uniquely black domestic migratory movement” but remember that those southern Black migrants “ran headlong into... migrants also trying to outpace famine, crop failures, poverty, malady, and totalitarian regimes,” including their Italian neighbors.⁹¹ These reasons were not unlike their own experiences, migrating towards a promise of better jobs and making a living, and, of course, leaving the violent Jim Crow south.

⁹⁰ Sarah-Jane (Saje) Mathieu, “The African American Great Migration Reconsidered.”

⁹¹ Ibid.

3. LABOR

Employment for Black Men

Through the first decades of the 20th century, industries appeared in and around Somerville that supplied a consistent income and living for people. These included meat packing plants, war-related industries including the Navy Yard and Watertown Arsenal, and extension of railroads. This allowed residents, especially Black residents, to exit personal and domestic service fields. As the population of Black residents in Somerville increased, so did the proportion of those working in jobs that scholars, including John Daniels, thought of as more prestigious roles than service or general labor. John Daniels was a sociologist studying and writing about Boston's Black community in the early 1900s, publishing "In Freedom's Birthplace" after a fellowship at the South End House in 1914. I seek to complicate some of his notions about the Northern Black industrial workers by inspecting Somerville's community.

Using Census records, John Daniels categorized Boston's Black working men into three groups of professions: menial and common labor occupations, skilled manual labor and clerical occupations, then proprietors and professionals.⁹² He categorized "domestic and personal service" occupations (bootblacks, janitors, laborers, servants, waiters, and stewards) and some "trade and transportation" work (hostlers [horse stable employee], messengers, errand boys, office boys, porters in stores, and steam railroad laborers) into the lowest grade of work.⁹³ Daniels also posits that there are "men-of-any-work," which we may see on the census records as "jobbing" or in general "labor," rather than specializing in particular trades, occupations, or businesses. In essence, though the public may have seen these occupations as "low grade," the

⁹² John Daniels, "Industrial Conditions Among Negro Men in Boston". P. 511.

⁹³ Ibid.

men working in this category, such as waiters and stewards, were often doing quite well for themselves through the tips earned on top of weekly wages.

John Daniels went on to discuss a diverse swath of jobs of higher grade, including “clerks, salesmen, agents, stenographers, teamsters, engineers and firemen, carpenters, metal working trades, and printers.” Somerville’s working community included men who held these jobs. He argued that they were seen as more respectable in public esteem, but are not as prestigious as proprietorship or professions.⁹⁴ Proprietorship and professions were argued to be most respectable in the view of Boston’s public and among the Black community.⁹⁵ In Somerville records, I identified fewer men working in these jobs, but often found them with other records, including the business directory or in newspapers, leading me to believe they held visible roles in the neighborhood. Professionals often needed a different degree of education to be in a specialized field, like dentistry, ministry, or musicianship. Proprietorship appears to go with some of the other occupations, where in the practical examples from the census, it is not so simple as store- or shop-owning. Many of the proprietors I found were proprietors of a trade. I find that they complicate Daniels’ viewpoint, as they own a business but the business is, technically, of a ‘lower grade’ occupation. Therefore, Daniels’ understanding of work ought to be complicated through these examples.

In the ensuing sections, I call in specific Somerville residents, especially in the West Somerville neighborhood, and examples to complicate these earlier notions of menial jobs. Some portray transience or class mobility, where some Black men moved from jobs of low esteem up to higher status jobs, or were employed in the most consistent or high earning fields.

⁹⁴ John Daniels, “Industrial Conditions Among Negro Men in Boston”. P. 513.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

1910

The 1910 Census reveals a Black working population of seventy-eight men. About half worked in menial labor. They constituted general laborers, porters (not Pullman car), hotel workers, drivers, “errand-boys” (younger men), stable hostlers, elevator-men and railroad signalmen. Additionally, there were teamsters (drivers of draft animal teams), railroad porters, janitors and butlers. A few of these men owned homes on Cameron Ave or Elmwood Street: notably George W. Reavis, a janitor in private homes and Robert B. Goode, a hostler in a stable. Both men were early residents of this neighborhood. One notable piece of this population was that all four teamsters present in the city at this time either owned their homes or lived in an owned home. Men working in skilled manual occupations were the most common Black homeowners in Somerville in 1910.

Homeownership among different classes of workers points to a combination of class mobility and ideals in the North while emphasizing how the location of the West Somerville neighborhood contributed to this possibility. As I discussed in my neighborhood chapter, with railroad porters living very near to a major car house, and teamsters and wagon drivers living in a quickly industrializing area, the overlap of labor and life is apparent. Some of the job trajectories of neighborhood residents highlight upward mobility, while others are more reflective of an “any work” reality. For an example of potential upward mobility, George A. Reavis, a 16-year-old “elevator-boy” in 1910, was listed in the 1912 City Business Directory as a professional electrician.⁹⁶ His father, George W., was a janitor, so this is a convincing example of a payoff of the ideals of moving North and being able to increase economic opportunity.

⁹⁶ *The Somerville Directory of the Inhabitants, Institutions, [Etc.]*, no. 35 (1912).

James Hawkins, on the other hand, had a varied work life. He was listed on the 1910 census as a boarding house proprietor: not only a business owner but an employer. His wife, Rosa, may have supported his boarding house efforts through cooking and cleaning. However, in the 1909 and 1912 city directories, he submitted that he was a choreman, and in 1914, 1915, and 1917, he was listed as having a restaurant.⁹⁷ In 1919, he had no occupation listed, and in 1920, his census record in Somerville showed that he was a valet for a private family. At first glance, his record speaks of multiple jobs, and perhaps he could be seen as a failing businessman. One could say he was one example of a “man-of-any-work” who pursued the promises of life in the North. As we know, he owned land on Cameron Avenue. I posit that he may have used a series of mortgages to gain access to capital necessary to try different enterprises, as some of the deeds’ dates correspond with different occupations like boarding house proprietor and restaurateur. It is difficult to tell if this is true as I have been unable to identify what his restaurant was, or where. What I do suspect is that Hawkins experienced the relative security of homeownership and used it to move through these different professions, though the mortgage records and his last will reveal that he did not profit greatly in these trials.

World War I Impact

An important shift in the general economy and manufacturing trades was brought on by the United States entering World War I in 1917. Immigration from Europe slowed during the war, so other laborers, including Black workers, had to fill in the gaps, opening new positions and industries to them in the North. Industrial employment for Black men nearly doubled, and

⁹⁷ *The Somerville Directory of the Inhabitants, Institutions, [Etc.]*, (Boston, MA). Nos. 32 (1909), 35 (1912), 37 (1914), 38 (1915), 40 (1917), and 42 (1919). <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100493160>

factory work became available, allowing men to leave service fields.⁹⁸ In a series about the American Labor movement, the National Archives wrote that “African Americans made significant gains in industrial employment, particularly in the steel, automobile, shipbuilding, and meatpacking industries.”⁹⁹ The census showed an overall increase in Somerville’s Black population and the variety of jobs. In the War service fields located at the Charlestown Navy Yard or United States Arsenal, Somerville men worked in the foundry, machine shops, and as general laborers.

By referencing young Black men’s World War I draft registration cards, I was able to better understand the roles of this community in the war effort. While these men filled out 1918 draft cards, I cannot find evidence they formally enlisted or were sent into service. Many of these men filled out their cards in the third draft, ages 18-45, on September 12, 1918.¹⁰⁰ The draft cards do show where these men were employed, providing another layer to their stories. I found that their work in war industries was indicative of the increased employment opportunities for Black men in the North. Louis Henry Cousins worked at the Boston Navy Yard in Charlestown as a general laborer by 1918. In 1918, Charles Herbert Bruce was a pattern maker and still held this job in 1920. Isaac T. Stewart was a laborer, or “general helper” in the “supply department” at the Navy Yard. John Thomas Wood was a machinist at the Watertown Arsenal. Winston Coffee, though working at a Boston estate on his 1918 draft card, worked at the Watertown Arsenal as a

⁹⁸ James Gilbert Cassedy, “African Americans and the American Labor Movement,” National Archives, August 15, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/american-labor-movement.html>; Charles H. Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850-1925; a Study in American Economic History* (Vanguard press, 1927), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000339538>.

⁹⁹ James Gilbert Cassedy, “African Americans and the American Labor Movement”.

¹⁰⁰ Ancestry.com. U.S., *World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918* [database on-line]. *Massachusetts, Middlesex County, Draft Board 3, Draft Card C*. United States, Selective Service System. World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration. M1509, 4,582 rolls. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005.

laborer in 1920, and Stuart Sheldon was a fireman (draft card) and blacksmith (census) at the Arsenal, likely serving this dual role because of the building and skills he already had or gained over a few years working in this location.¹⁰¹

As for armed service in the war, Charles E. Montier sailed out of Newport News, Virginia, on March 30, 1918, as part of an African American national guard unit under French command. He left a corporal and returned as a sergeant in February 1919.¹⁰² Montier reported to be a policeman on his 1920 census record, yet his 1919 Somerville city directory entry reports that he was a laborer, along with his father and brothers.¹⁰³ However, he was also on the Boston city directory starting in 1920, where he was also listed as a policeman.¹⁰⁴ In 1922, the Boston directory was more specific that he served out of a station in Roxbury.¹⁰⁵ Because Boston's Black community was bigger, Montier may have found it more possible to get a professional job that used his experiences as a sergeant, rather than a laborer, in the city in a Black neighborhood than in Somerville.

1920

In 1920, the jobs performed by Somerville's Black men were more varied, and the population of working men increased to 98. Breaking down the data from this census year

¹⁰¹ Ancestry.com. U.S., *World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918* [database on-line]. *Massachusetts, Middlesex County*.

¹⁰² The National Archives at College Park; College Park, Maryland; Record Group Title: *Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, 1774-1985*; Record Group Number: 92; Roll or Box Number: 146. Ancestry.com. U.S., *Army Transport Service Arriving and Departing Passenger Lists, 1910-1939* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2016.

¹⁰³ Ancestry.com. Massachusetts, Middlesex County, Somerville. *1920 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA.; and *The Somerville Directory of the Inhabitants, Institutions, [Etc.]*, no. 42 (1919).

¹⁰⁴ *Boston, Massachusetts, City Directory, 1920*. Ancestry.com. U.S., *City Directories, 1822-1995* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011. P. 1174.

¹⁰⁵ *The Boston Directory Containing the City Record*, no. CXVIII (1922). Sampson & Murdock Co. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/chi.101955306> P. 1244.

suggests that more men were working in skilled manual labor than in low grade, unskilled labor. I found about forty men working as laborers, wagon drivers, janitors, choresmen, in domestic service, in hotel service and waiters. In 1920, the population of men working in higher-grade jobs was closer to forty-five men, including men working for the post office, jewelry factory, in sales, printing, baking and confectionery. Overall, by 1920 more were in factories, working for the city, or working with cars, as opportunities arose in various industries after 1910.

As an example of a combination of a higher grade job with proprietorship, William J. Smith, a resident of Cameron Ave, was a paper hanger. He is listed as such in the 1919 City Business Directory, giving public recognition to his business and profession.¹⁰⁶ Smith had his name and address listed in this publication alongside other residents across the city as a business owner. His expertise may, then, have been viewed in public esteem with respect for his work. Additionally, he was established enough at this address to publicize that he was working and reachable there, a display of permanency and achievement.

Census data shows that Somerville had a few Black professionals, including musicians, electricians, and clergy. There were very few ‘professional’ men in the 1910 records, so at this point I focus on the later part of the 1910s and into 1920. The most clear man of professional status over time is Reverend Adam Smith, who began a congregation of the African Union Methodist Church out of his home at 11 Harrison Street in 1905.¹⁰⁷ As there is little other mention of any African Methodist Episcopal churches in Somerville publications, Reverend Smith’s congregation likely filled an important role for the community. As I found looking at the

¹⁰⁶ *The Somerville Directory of the Inhabitants, Institutions, [Etc.]*, (Boston, Mass.), no. 42 (1919), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100493160>.

¹⁰⁷ *The Somerville Directory of the Inhabitants, Institutions, [Etc.]*, no. 29 (1906).

neighborhood and role of the church for recent arrivals, there were many established churches that served members of this community in Cambridge and Boston, further demonstrating the newness of this Somerville neighborhood as a center of Black life.

Outside of the Cameron, Elmwood, and Harrison Street neighborhood, a Boston lawyer and Civil Rights advocate, Charles L. Rayson, lived on Hudson Street, off of Central Street in the heart of the city. There were a couple of musicians, including D. Clarence Atkins, who played trombone and banjo and toured with a South End jazz band.¹⁰⁸ These professionals, though few in number, contributed to the Somerville, Cambridge, and Boston Black communities through their connections and work.

There are some examples of specific residents' experiences to portray movement and various economic forces impacting Black men at work from 1900-1920. William N. Goode, a homeowner in West Somerville, was a chauffeur; his father, Robert B. Goode, one of the original Black homeowners on Cameron Avenue, was a hostler in a stable. They each worked in transportation service, keeping up with their own industry's innovations. The census reports that William Goode worked for a garage in 1910, and for a private family in 1920 and later. His 1917-18 Draft Card lists his chauffeur work at A. B. See Electric Elevator Co. in Boston – effectively, he had steady work as a chauffeur in an elevator company, also a relatively new, sought-after industry.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Roger House and James Fox, "How Frederick Douglass Square Gave Birth to a Jazz Scene," in *South End Shout*, Boston's Forgotten Music Scene in the Jazz Age (Lever Press, 2022), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12735924.8>.

¹⁰⁹ Ancestry.com, U.S. World War One Draft Registration Cards, 1917-18. United States, Selective Service System. *World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration. M1509, 4,582 rolls. Imaged from Family History Library microfilm.

By 1920 in the census records, there were a number of Black chauffeurs and mechanics or machinists for automobiles. While chauffeurs would be generally classified as working in a low-grade transportation occupation under Census records, the type of job (especially when employed by a private family, as some in Somerville were) would also be classed as personal service. There was a lot of room for movement and prestige within this field. As the early owners of cars were often wealthy white men, they could employ others who possessed or had developed the knowledge and skill to operate automobiles.

Historian Helen A. Gibson, writing about automotivity for Black chauffeurs and motorists, emphasizes that “the mechanical knowledge and skill required made the job of chauffeur both sophisticated and sought-after, conferring social status and the prospect of steady employment upon those with the requisite experience.”¹¹⁰ Additionally, as Somerville continued to expand, housing and factories developed towards the west and the city lost agricultural land. The development of new roads and routes engaged Black chauffeurs who “embraced their transition from horse-drawn carriage to car as one of prestige, arguing that Black motorists were quintessentially modern in their early, exclusive mastery of the skill of driving.”¹¹¹ And, though difficult to spot, there is evidence of this “automotivity” in the neighborhood, as the Rev. Adam Smith petitioned the city to have a garage to house his automobile on his Harrison Street property in the 1920s.

Pullman Porters

¹¹⁰ Helen A. Gibson, “Access to Labor and Leisure in Cars: Early Black Motorists’ Automotivity in Miami,” *Mondes Du Tourisme*, no. 21 (June 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4000/tourisme.4549>. p. 31

¹¹¹ Ibid.

The West Somerville neighborhood was effectively, in its formation, a porter's neighborhood. With eight Pullman porters in West Somerville on the 1910 census and nine Pullman porters listed on the 1920 census, piecing together a snapshot of the life of these men is crucial to understanding the neighborhood. There were a number of Pullman Porters in the Boston area as it grew to be a major train transport hub in New England, and the job helped shape the formation of Black neighborhoods, drawing workers city-to-city to work along rail lines. As I discussed in my discussion of migration through the early life of James Hawkins, the railroad expansion brought Black workers, and then their families, up to Greater Boston from the South to Northeast after the Civil War. The Pullman company formed in the 1850s and began overnight service in the 1860s. Then, after the Civil War, the Pullman company began to hire newly freed Black men to staff the cars. These overnight trips consisted of long hours and potentially demeaning public interactions with the men referred to as "boy" or universally as "George."¹¹² However, they were extremely reliable jobs, with many men working the New York to Boston corridor.¹¹³ This may explain why for the 1910-1920 period and into years beyond, the same men continue to work as Pullman Porters.

Blacksmiths

With roots in skilled artisanship, blacksmithing was devalued in the Southern plantation economy and in immigrant communities. Smiths worked in foundries, doing physically demanding work with long hours, heat, and fire exposure. In Somerville, manufacturing industries afforded many opportunities to work as a blacksmith. For example, looking at fire

¹¹² Robert C. Hayden: Transcripts of oral history interviews with Boston African American railroad workers. 1977-1991, bulk 1988-1991. University Archives and Special Collections Department, Joseph P. Healey Library, University of Massachusetts Boston. Accession Number 092-02.

¹¹³ Gerald L. Gill, "Introduction to Part V: Protest and Progress, 1900-1945" in *Making a Living*, p. 503

insurance maps of local industrial buildings at the time, it is clear where there were foundry buildings on site, such as in the meatpacking plants or the United States Arsenal in Watertown, where Somerville blacksmiths were employed. Some of the employed smiths were immigrants from Jamaica or the West Indies, including Arthur Harper and Naaman Breedy, whereas some were born in the states, often in the South in either North Carolina or Virginia. Another industry listed by a blacksmith on the census was the steamship company, likely Atlantic Works in East Boston, an employer during WWI and supplier of steamships for local transportation industry.¹¹⁴

City Service

An interesting finding is that some of the men working in city service, in various roles from menial labor to postal clerk, were working in Boston, not Somerville. This implies that a commuter structure from West Somerville into Boston existed and supported Black homeownership. This structure may have supported the livelihood of John C Holmes of 36 Elmwood Street, who in the 1909 Somerville City Directory has listed that he is a “porter P O, B h 36 Elmwood” which means he is a porter at a post office in Boston and lives at home at 36 Elmwood Street.¹¹⁵ The other two city laborers, doing skilled manual labor as a construction worker and teamster, were likely in Somerville. In 1920, the number of city laborers doubled, and added a few more post office roles on top of this number. Residents in 1920 reported that they were city laborers, groundskeepers, a policeman, a postal clerk, plus a porter and mechanic at the post office. Again, the skilled positions including policeman and postal clerk were working in Boston, but others were likely in Somerville.

¹¹⁴ Atlantic Works Collection, Hart Nautical Collections, MIT Museum.
<https://mitmuseum.mit.edu/collections/collection/atlantic-works-collection>

¹¹⁵ *The Somerville Directory of the Inhabitants, Institutions, [Etc.]*, (Boston, Mass.), no. 32 (1909),
<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100493160>.

Women at Work

Black women's work in Somerville encompassed the home, family, and professions in various ways. Renowned historian of Boston's Civil Rights movement, Gerald Gill, wrote that "for 80 percent of black women workers," domestic work or personal service "were the only [jobs] available, as few opportunities existed in other lines of work," and that "single and married black women worked either to supplement the wages of male relatives or to support female-headed households."¹¹⁶ In 1900-1910, Black women were largely in domestic servitude, but also worked in garment professions as seamstresses or doing laundry, and some were employed in factories.¹¹⁷ The rate of employment outside of the home increased towards 1920. Black women had a high rate of employment compared to native-born and immigrant white women, as women's inclusion in the national Black working population increased from 36.2 percent in 1890 to 54.7 percent in 1910.¹¹⁸

In Somerville in 1910, with fifty-six Black women over age 10, thirty-two are at work (57%). The youngest worker, Martha Midgett, was recorded as 13 years old, a servant living in a private home on Broadway. The oldest worker, at 82 years old, Adelaide Howard, was a laundress out of her home, which she owned independently, on Otis Street in East Somerville. By my calculation, 27 of 32 (84%) working Black women in Somerville were in domestic servitude or laundresses. One woman worked in a factory as a machine worker; one was a hotel

¹¹⁶ Gerald L. Gill, "Introduction to Part V: Protest and Progress, 1900-1945" in *Making a Living* p. 501.

¹¹⁷ Louise Venable Kennedy et al., *The Negro Peasant Turns Cityward : Effects of Recent Migrations to Northern Centers*, in *The Negro Peasant Turns Cityward : Effects of Recent Migrations to Northern Centers*, Studies in History, Economics and Public Law ; No. 329 (Columbia University Press, 1930). P. 88

¹¹⁸ Charles H. Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850-1925; a Study in American Economic History* (Vanguard press, 1927), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000339538>. P. 233

cook, but marked as a servant in her census household; one was a dressmaker; one was a nurse; and one was a nursemaid.

Scholars have claimed that Black women tended to be high wage earners.¹¹⁹ Wage earning is difficult to assess for women in Somerville, as there was no income data collected on the 1910 or 1920 censuses, but there is evidence of Black homeownership and women as widowed or single heads of household, demonstrating a potential payoff of this work and of saving. Many took on work to support their husbands in these goals and experiences.

In the 1920 Census, Somerville's Black women worked not just as laundresses, servants, and domestic service workers, but as teachers, nurses, a cook, a dental sterilizer, a jewelry polisher, and office and state house clerks. They also demonstrate that professionalization and access grew in the decades since 1900. In 1920, there were 134 women over age 10; forty-six at work. This is down to 34% of Black women at work when compared to all Black working-age women, and 32% of the total Black working population. Twenty-five of the working women were still working in domestic servitude or as laundresses, so over 50% in the most menial occupations, though many more were now in more professional service.¹²⁰ For women, there are some examples from years selected between the census recordings that may add some nuance to the statistics and recorded silences of changing occupations and non-working women.

Though this section has largely been about the rise and diversification of jobs for Black folks in the greater Boston area, it is important to shed light on the hidden labor, obscured from us through the choices of the government and census takers over time. When considering

¹¹⁹ Kennedy et al., *The Negro Peasant Turns Cityward : Effects of Recent Migrations to Northern Centers*.

¹²⁰ Ancestry.com. Massachusetts, Middlesex County, Somerville. 1920 United States Federal Census [database online]. Provo, UT, USA.

working women versus non-working women, I found it important to recognize that for women in the city and in households then and to this day, family labor is a hidden job. In an earlier census, even 1900, a woman, a wife or mother, would have been “keeping house” or “at home” as her occupation, but in 1910, enumerators were told to list her as having “none.” This erasure continued for older daughters, where in 1900, enumerators were explicitly told that “grown daughters assisting [mothers] will be reported without occupation.”¹²¹ Think also of the way the laundresses take in others’ laundry to their homes while having a family of six children and a boarder below their names on the census. The enumeration guides were sure to specify that children doing chores or completing odd jobs with parents were not employed and therefore listed as “none,” especially if they are not making money. Lillian Harper, whom I wrote about extensively in the migration section, is a prime example of this experience in the city.

Finally, I found that fewer women who lived in West Somerville were in domestic service as servants or maids. The women in West Somerville were more likely to be living with family units, often as a wife and mother. Elsewhere in the city, especially in areas that were known to consist of wealthier families such as around Central Street or Summer Street, there were many single women in servant or chambermaid roles. They were, at least on the Census, not engaging in daily community in the same way, or with the same visibility. While it is still probable they attended churches with members of the Black community, the daily lives of women in domestic servitude did not encompass this experience. Inspecting women’s work elsewhere in the city would be a clear next topic to research to expand the scholarship about Black community in Somerville.

¹²¹ William C. Hunt. “US Census Bureau Special Reports: Occupations at the Twelfth Census.” Appendix A. 1900. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1900/occupations/1900-census-occupations-5.pdf>

Conclusion

Despite the fact that Somerville's Black population from 1900-1920 consisted of only a few hundred people in a city of 93,000 residents, studying the conditions of their community's formation shows that the microhistory of the West Somerville neighborhood presents a compelling case study for Black experiences in the North. Through this paper, I have explored neighborhood and community formation through place-based history of the built environment, interactions with neighbors, and opportunities for affecting change. I researched the migration and immigration experiences of Southern Black people and families after Reconstruction, West Indian families from Barbados, and African Canadians from Nova Scotia to learn how the global contexts of their journeys led them to settle in Somerville. Finally, I discussed labor for men and women, considering location, opportunity, and global contexts all together.

Undesirable land and low-cost housing in West Somerville formed the conditions for economically disadvantaged people, including Black individuals migrating from the South or Italians immigrating overseas, to achieve what they each saw as success: homeownership. Railroads allowed them to live far outside the city of Boston and far outside of other race-based enclaves, like the Italian North End or predominantly Black South End. Somerville's new housing was prime real estate for groups with little income to gain equity and make a better life than that of their predecessors. This was especially important among the West Indian Black immigrants, whose purposes for immigration included reaching middle-class status by participating in the American economy, then returning to their home country.¹²²

Immigration and migration to the Boston area in a global context highlighted conditions for leaving, methods of migration, and reasons for staying. Economics and opportunity were

¹²² Violet Showers Johnson, *The Other Black Bostonians: West Indians in Boston, 1900-1950*.

important components of these experiences. Black individuals leaving the American South did so to evade political oppression and violent racism. They did so by following work or following family, migrating through different cities before settling in the North, like in the case of train lines and railroad workers. African Canadians from Nova Scotia immigrated from rural to urban environments to seek new employment opportunities. West Indians immigrated for skilled employment, using their prior education to gain secure work in America and elevate their class status. Some West Indian's immigration years also coincide with major hurricanes and natural disaster events impacting their island of origin. Therefore, migration occurred first by those seeking employment and new opportunities, then often by their family members.

Labor and economic opportunity was a primary reason for migration, and the low cost of housing both made the West Somerville neighborhood appealing and homeownership achievable. The neighborhood was also located along a major railroad line with a central car storage house, and near a jewelry factory. There were high incidences of neighborhood residents working at these two locations, with a remarkably high concentration of Pullman car porters, and a variety of jewelry workers. Other industries across the city influenced the work lives of the Black residents. Most women were domestic workers or seamstresses, supporting husbands with rent or homeownership. Men and women were impacted by World War I increasing available factory and industrial work. Economic opportunity influenced people's decisions to migrate, and their wages impacted their ability to remain in the neighborhood.

Before embarking on this research, everything I knew about the Black community in Somerville was anecdotal. Even when working for a local history organization, it was acknowledged that somewhere, there had been a neighborhood of Pullman porters. I understood that this history was understudied aside from the work a few individuals and families have done.

What I learned was that I wanted to contribute even a small amount to the work those individuals have put together and shared. Then, it turned out I could keep digging forever, and would happily create a biography of every name I came across and then some. As I uncovered immigrant families bringing their relatives to be their neighbors, or young men marrying and living near their fathers, it became clear that this was not simply a neighborhood of porters but a microcosm of social and political life where I am only scratching the surface.

In this thesis, I began to explore life and labor for a segment of a largely migratory population. Focusing on labor and economic implications was the clearest starting place because I began this work with a close study of a Tufts College janitor for another paper, so I had a foundation in this area's Black labor and economic history. However, I think the next direction for this work would be to uncover as much of a social history as possible. I began to try this with discussions of the churches people attended or were part of, but was unable to dive deeper. For political life, I would have wanted to peruse the poll records and voter rolls as an absolute baseline. When I was doing my study of the janitor, James Burrell, I once got to check a poll records book and found his name. In the face of Jim Crow, grandfather clauses, literacy tests and poll taxes in the South, where he and many of these folks came from, I was so excited to see him as a voting Somerville resident in 1900. I imagine that others of these folks would be among the names on these lists.

For political and social life, I found a few mentions in newspapers of community endeavors and discussion circles hosted at homes in the West Somerville neighborhood. In an era of social clubs, I was not able to look deep enough to see if Black women were part of any of the most popular social organizations, but found that Black women in West Somerville and North Cambridge had an Equal Suffrage Club in 1914. I know that Ruth Veletta Jones, who grew up in

this neighborhood, was the first Black woman registered to vote in Cambridge in 1920, and can imagine her attending these meetings as a young woman.

I found that James Hawkins, once again a man I chased down source after source about, was a member of the American Ethiopian Protestant Association, from a Cambridge newspaper. I was unable to find any further information. I am endlessly curious about Hawkins and his role in the community, in the city, in real estate, in all ways. His life through documents was so compelling.

There were a few sections I planned that I was unable to give attention to. Future research could consider the experiences of Black youth, labor, and education. By searching yearbook records for high schoolers, and newspaper records for mentions of various classes of primary and grammar school students, it appears possible to trace these histories. I hoped to discuss different pathways for youth who went through and graduated high school, those who had to drop out early, and those who never attended high school and went to work as younger adults. This would have gone outside the scope of this project, as my initial sources for this were much stronger in the later 1920s and early 1930s. A project could just focus on education of and by Black individuals in the Somerville system in the future.

One potential lead-in to this expanded understanding, encompassing education and social life is LeRoy (Lee “Pep”) Cousins, son of William H. and Carrie Cousins and brother of Louis Henry Cousins. He became a dentist, one of the professional fields that was accessible to Black men. He attended Tufts Dental School after attending Somerville Latin High School and Brewster Academy in Wolfeboro, NH.¹²³ He was a beloved lettered football player at the high

¹²³ He does not appear to have graduated from Tufts Dental School.

school.¹²⁴ His time as an athlete is the only mention of his life in Dee Morris and Dora St. Martin's book about Somerville, so I find it especially important to uncover more of his experience beyond high school. Though I was unable to include him, or this educational experience, in this project, closer inspection would develop a sense of Black youth and upbringing in Somerville.

This project also resulted in a geographic focus on a specific neighborhood in West Somerville. This was not the sole location that Black individuals and families were living, and I do hope I did not obfuscate the depth and comparative experiences of other Black communities by focusing on this higher concentration. By 1900, there was another Black family in East Somerville, on Otis Street, that owned a home across generations; the matriarch, Adelaide Howard, was one of the oldest Black folks I saw on the census records and it would be a boon to Somerville history to highlight the circumstances of her and her family's homeownership here in an earlier period than those in West Somerville. She was a washerwoman and appears to have had her grandchildren and even a great-grandchild in her home.

In direct contrast, I found a man, Charles Rayson, who purchased a home on Hudson Road, near Central Street, which was quite a wealthy part of the city. Rayson was a lawyer and Civil Rights advocate. The juxtaposition of Howard to Rayson, and of Rayson to Hawkins, interests me greatly, and I would hope to explore this broader context in any future expansion of this work, or see it done by others.

Compiling neighborhood histories is important across the Greater Boston area, especially when highlighting stories of marginalized groups. Bringing these to the forefront in Somerville,

¹²⁴ Somerville Radiator, Vol. XIX, No. 6. March 1910. <https://archive.org/details/radiatorsomervil1909some>

to highlight a small population in a smaller city, demonstrates that the stories of early Black residents still matter as the city changes. It aims to honor those who came before and carved out this space for the Black community, while solidifying their place in the city today.

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