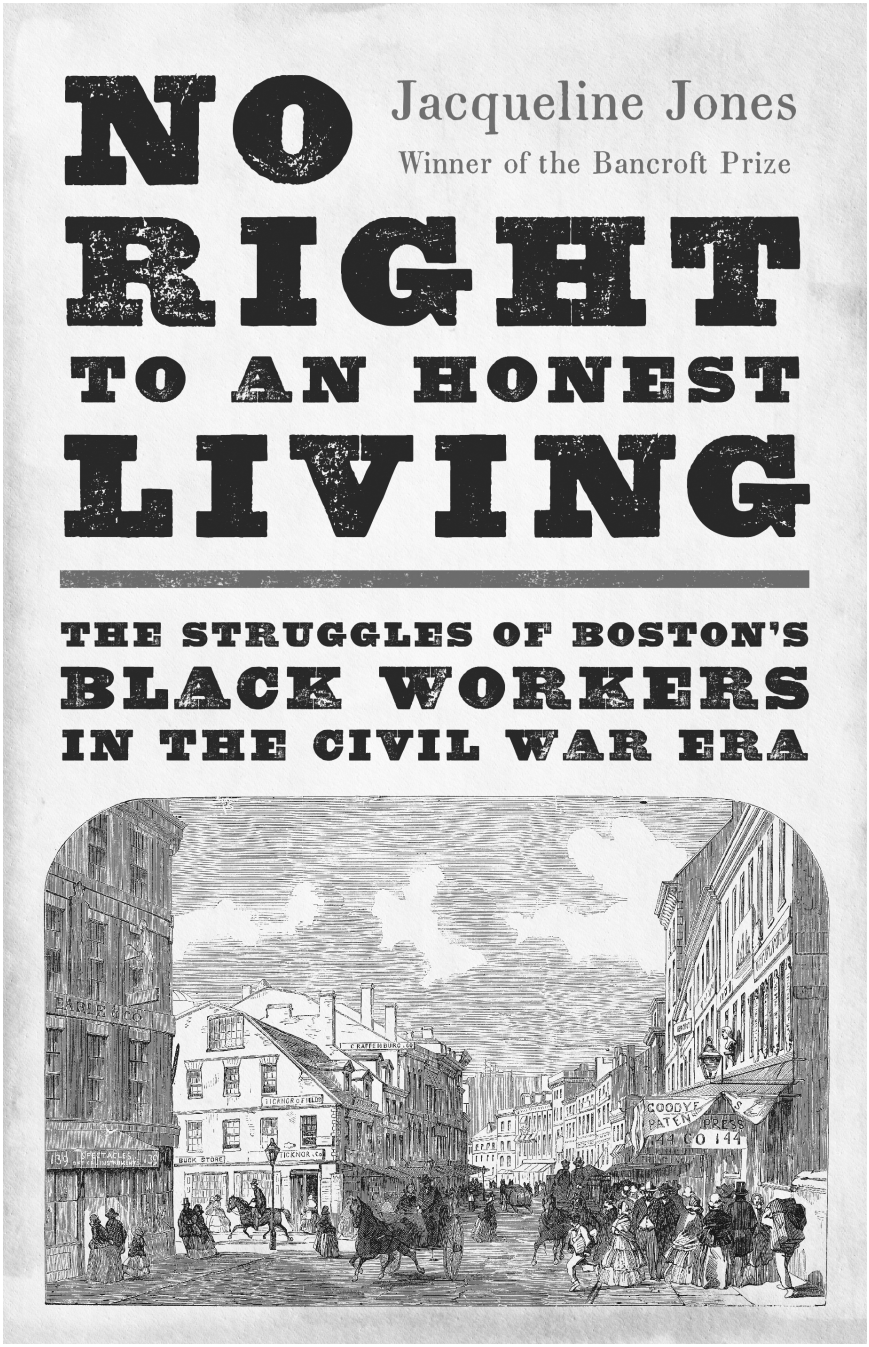


No Right to an Honest Living by Jacqueline Jones is published by Basic Books (2023).

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Black Workers in Antebellum Boston

Jacqueline Jones

Editor's Introduction: HJM *is proud to present as our Editor's Choice Award for this issue Jacqueline Jones'* No Right to an Honest Living: The Struggles of Boston's Black Workers in the Civil War Era *(Basic Books, 2023). In each issue, we highlight a book that relates to an aspect of New England history which the editors feel is particularly noteworthy and would be of special interest to our readers. The* Historical Journal of Massachusetts *is especially interested in publishing articles and showcasing books that provide a historical perspective on communities that are less represented in the existing historiography. At 554 pages, Jacqueline Jones' in-depth study is a highly readable but intricately researched account of the way that racial equality was embraced rhetorically in this northern city, while the reality experienced by Black workers was discrimination, exploitation, and segregation. Jones highlights the ways in which Black citizenship was a process, one best understood not through laws and legalities but through the daily lives of Black Bostonians.*

Massachusetts was the location of the loudest and most radical abolitionist voices. Critiquing the efforts of the Congress, Supreme Court, and various Presidents to reinforce the institution of slavery in the 1850s, abolitionists in Boston made powerful moral arguments against the existence of human bondage. Black Americans in Massachusetts had fought for and achieved a number of improvements in their legal and social rights. Interracial marriage was legal and schools were integrated. Property-owning Black men could vote and serve on

juries. However, as just 1.5% of the total population of Boston, they accrued little political power. Boston abolitionists proclaimed the need to abolish slavery while living in a city dominated by deep inequalities of class, race, and gender. Just as white Northerners rarely acknowledged the importance of slavery in creating the wealth of the industrialized North, they also failed to recognize the labor of the free Black population in Massachusetts.

As Jones carefully documents, while African Americans in Massachusetts did have greater rights and political participation than their counterparts in other Northern states, the reality of the workplace continued to be exclusion from regular employment and segregation. Black men could not be commissioned officers in the Army nor earn the same pay as white soldiers, nor could they create their own civic organizations such as the Freemasons or join militias. Messages and displays of white supremacy were ubiquitous and highly visible in daily life. Jones argues, "The prevalence of all-white workplaces in Civil War era Massachusetts calls into question contemporary (and current) claims that the state was uniquely enlightened in terms of granting full citizenship rights to its male residents." (11) Irish immigrants of the 1840s and 1850s drove Black Bostonians out of employment that had been theirs, including on the docks, in factories, or as laborers in construction projects, relegating them to more marginalized roles as peddlers, bootblacks, coachmen, and porters. Black abolitionists in antebellum Boston increasingly pointed out the need to end both Southern slavery and the racism and discrimination that kept Black Americans from earning "an honest living."

Jones' argument is a careful and nuanced one. In the following excerpt from Chapter Five, "The World of the Streets," she delves deeply into the incredibly varied daily lives of Black Bostonians. In No Right to an Honest Living, *Jones paints a vivid picture of antebellum Boston and the lives of its residents, as it transformed itself into a modern city with planned transportation, sewage, bridges, sidewalks, and suburbs. This boom in public works projects was made affordable by the influx of labor, primarily new Irish immigrants, but did not result in greater employment for Blacks in the city. While some Black citizens were educated professionals, such as preachers or lawyers, and others owned a business, such as barbers or seamstresses, the majority survived as laborers, street vendors, and domestic servants. However, as Jones points out, education and status did not always translate directly into economic benefits. While Black abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass were greatly esteemed for their writing and speaking abilities, such skills did not pay well. Jones begins this chapter detailing the wide variety of employment available in the growing city of Boston and the ways in which the political and economic structures were set up to ensure that black workers received little advantage or opportunity.*

Jacqueline Jones is a professor emeritus at the University of Texas, Austin. She is a prolific scholar and author of numerous books on labor and race relations in the United States. Dr. Jones was twice nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present, *which won the Bancroft Prize in 1986, and* A Dreadful Deceit: The Myth of Race from the Colonial Era to Obama's America *(2013).*

* * * * *

Mayor Smith's successor, Alexander Rice, who was elected on the "Citizens" ticket in 1856, was more favorable than Smith to the foreign immigrants of the city, who had faced considerable prejudice from the Know-Nothing politicians. Some of the boys granted licenses to sell goods in early 1856 had surnames such as Mahoney, Murphy, Leary, Kerrigan, and Hogan. Many Black peddlers could not afford a license, but that did not prevent them from offering up goods of questionable origins—the Herald decried their large numbers on State Street, referring to them sarcastically as "the colored merchant princes." Some southern migrants accustomed to selling eggs or baked pies considered the transition to Boston a challenge—it was difficult to keep chickens or grow food in a northern city—but not an insurmountable one.[1]

In their attempt to make a living or go about their business on the streets, workers found themselves menaced by hostile passers-by and endangered by an assortment of life-threatening conditions. A Black woman named Sarah B. Thompson paused one day from her work on a sidewalk washing windows to smack a white boy with a broomstick she had on hand. He had called her "nigger," and she wanted to teach him a lesson; her fury cost her a fine of $5. In 1850, Joseph F. Clash was engaged in the same task, standing on a barrel outside his barber shop, when a drunken man came along and kicked the barrel out from under him; Clash broke one of his legs in the fall. Construction workers lost their limbs to blasting rocks and their lives to rickety scaffolds. Porters such as Carter Selden had to navigate narrow streets clogged with piles of bricks, the remnants of collapsed chimneys and walls suddenly dislodged by hoisting machinery. Piles of animal excrement turned streets into avenues of a stinking mess. Pedestrians and workers alike suffered grievous bodily harm from falling into open cellar doors, stumbling on uneven sidewalks, and finding themselves under an awning, store sign, loose gutter, or chunk of ice just as it crashed to the ground. Horse-drawn omnibuses and steam-powered trains ran into and over people. Rabid dogs and runaway horses endangered human lives, as did young swells racing

their steeds in the summer and their sleighs in the winter, careening down congested thoroughfares.[2]

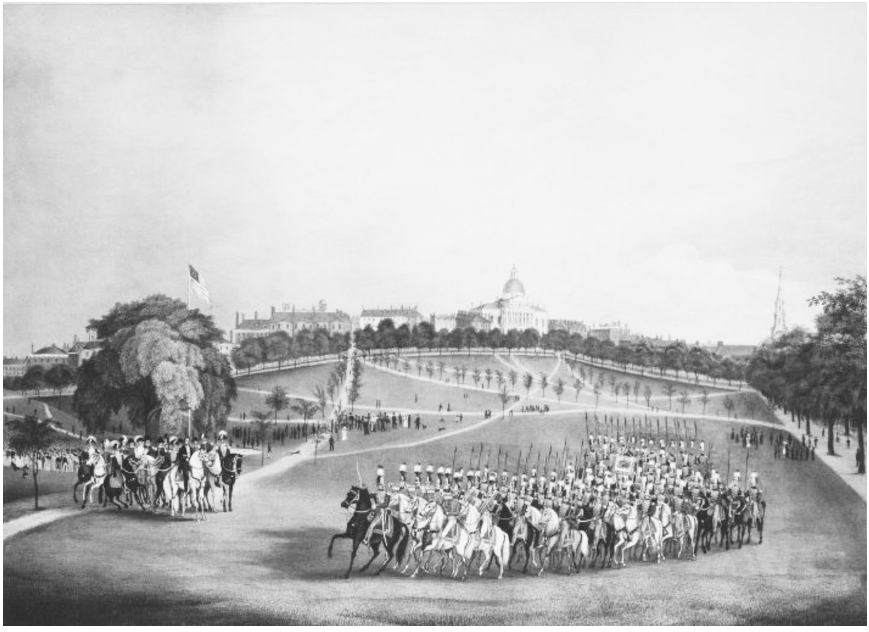
One man's nighttime joyride was a city watchman's nightmare. Joseph H. Elisha, a Black youth, found it difficult to resist appropriating a horse or even a team of horses for an evening's gallop through Boston. The son of a laborer, Elisha proved incorrigible when it came to taking other people's horses, especially those left unattended in the street after dark; such escapades no doubt offered a welcome diversion from his job as a shoemaker, which he began at an early age. In October 1853, he and a friend, George Sawtelle, stole a carriage belonging to the caterer Joshua B. Smith, and together that night they went "driving the same over 'all creation.'" An amused reporter covering Police Court reported that the two had not intended to steal the carriage, just borrow it.[3]

Corner of Winter, Washington and Summer Streets, Boston

This 1857 drawing conveys the energy characteristic of Boston's downtown. A fast-moving carriage forces pedestrians to scatter, while an organ grinder and his monkey attract a crowd. The well-to-do show off their finery, as cartmen and streetcar drivers go about their business. (Boston Public Library)

Group identity displayed on the streets could take the form of pitched battles (as when Protestant and Catholic Irish immigrants fought each other in Dorchester in 1852) or orderly processions of fraternal orders, their members resplendent in colorful uniforms. Boston boasted an impressive number of volunteer militias, including the National Lancers, the Washington Light Infantry, the Mechanic Infantry, the Boston Light Artillery, and the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company. Composed exclusively of white men, these groups often paraded through the streets en route to drill on the Common, attracting large numbers of spectators along the way. Some of these militias employed Black men or boys to carry their equipment for them.[4]

Together with uniformed police, watchmen, and firefighters, the white fraternal orders and militias proclaimed the whiteness of the city's administrative and law-enforcement units. No wonder, then, that the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Freemasons chafed at their exclusion from the white parent group; at the same time, they turned that insult into the basis of Black solidarity and pride. Nevertheless, barred from the militias sanctioned by the city and the state, Black men felt keenly the lack of a voluntary



The National Lancers with Reviewing Officers, Boston Common, 1837

Charles Hubbard, American, 1801–1876. Lithograph, hand-colored. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

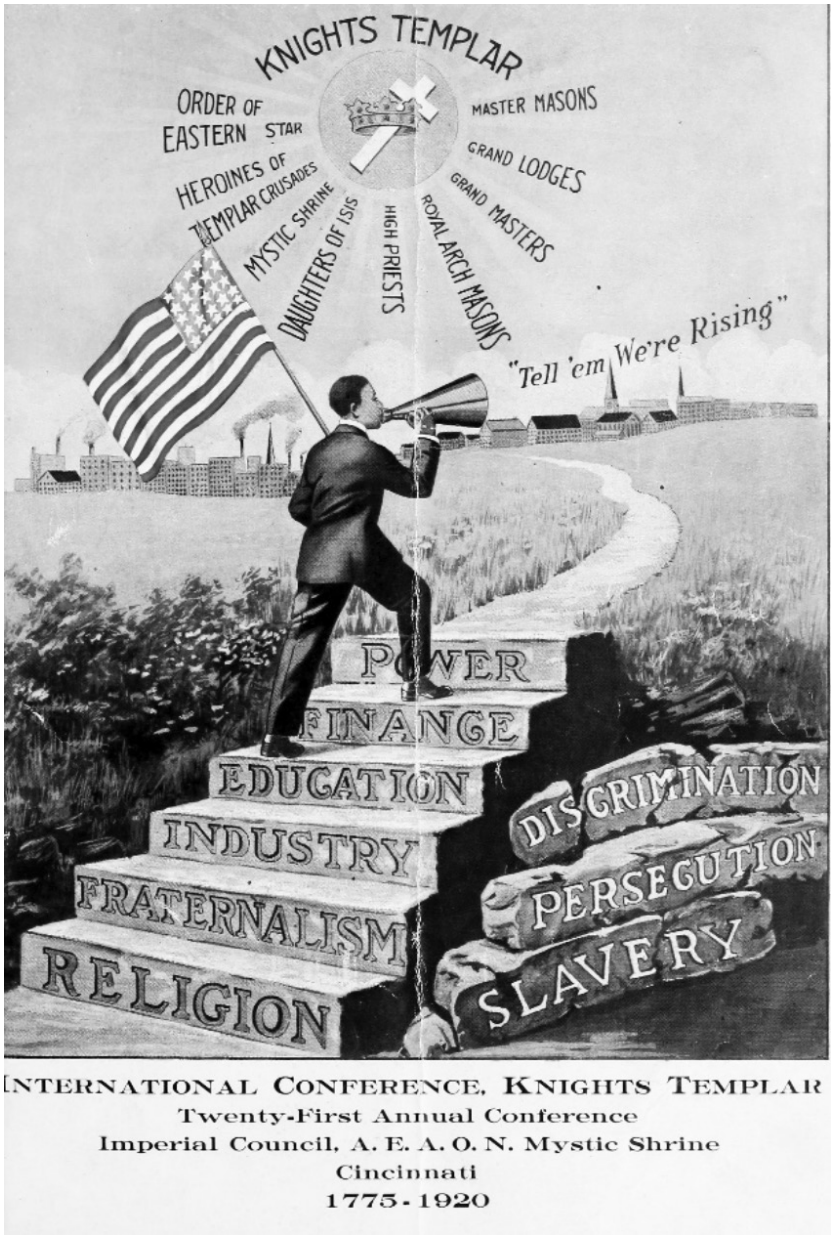


Illustration from a Prince Hall Masonic Convention, 1920

Prince Hall (1735-1803) was a resident of Boston during the Revolutionary War. Hall established the first African Freemason lodge in 1775 and was a prominent abolitionist.

military group that would signal their full citizenship as well as their need for self-defense. Despite the lack of official approval after many futile years of petitioning, in August 1855 Robert Morris and John P. Coburn organized the Massasoit Guards, the first African American militia in Boston's history. Morris noted that it was "not founded on caste," but open to all young men of good character. Sixty strong, the group never received a state charter, though Morris renewed the call for formal authorization periodically thereafter.[5]

The Massasoit Guards disbanded in early 1857 without ever getting underway, but a new group, the Liberty Guard, took shape that August. It did not receive certification from the state, either, but it did make a striking public appearance on Monday, November 16, when its members processed through the streets accompanied by a cornet band. William Cooper Nell, notebook in hand, chronicled every movement of the thirty-five men during this public display. Dressed all in black, they marched from their armory on Joy Street to the State House a few blocks away under police escort. At one point they had to push their way through the throng of spectators, proud people of color but also surly whites. The six top officers included Lewis Gaul, a coachman, along with three laborers, a printer, and a keeper of a billiard saloon on Joy Street—a decidedly less well-off group compared to the Massasoit Guards.[6]

Earlier that day Gaul had instructed the men "to keep eyes constantly ahead, to disregard every insult that might be thrown at them by jealous and rowdy white folk, and above all things, not to leave the ranks in any emergency without orders." On their return to the armory the marchers faced not only whites' "howls and curses," but also a hail of brickbats, stones, and small paper bags filled with flour (this last missile no doubt intended to highlight the men's dark skin when its contents spilled on them). According to Nell, these provocations were "too much for Negro-manity to endure," and several of the Black men seized

Abolitionist William Cooper Nell (1816-1874)

the clubs of their tormenters or "charged bayonets on the rowdies, who fled like cowards before a desperate foe." That night the Guard celebrated with coffee, pies, apples, and ice cream, the repast catered by Joshua B. Smith, at Faneuil Hall. The day proved that a singular event such as this could bring together elements of ritual, violent conflict, the performance of white hegemony, and productive labor (in the form of Nell's reporting for The Liberator).[7]

Black workers were targeted by authorities aiming to quell untoward behavior on the streets such as smoking and loitering, and by white pedestrians aiming to humiliate them. In December 1853, a Black man protested his arrest for smoking a cigar while in his cab, claiming that "the officer complained of him on account of personal feeling against him." The driver was nevertheless fined $2 and court costs. Streets were places where white men, women, and children taunted Black workers, where Black pedestrians had to yield the sidewalk to their white counterparts, and where police officers could arrest a Black peddler and let a white one continue on his or her way.[8]

This *Editor's Choice Award* selection was reprinted with the permission of Basic Books (New York, NY) and is excerpted from Jacqueline Jones' *No Right to an Honest Living: The Struggles of Boston's Back Workers in the Civil War Era* (2023). This excerpt is from Chapter 3, "The World of the Streets," pp. 108-112.

HJM

Notes

1. Boston City Council Minutes, Feb. 11, 1856, 47; ibid., Feb. 18, 1856, 57; ibid., Feb. 25, 1856, 75; "the colored": *Boston Herald*, March 15, 1851.
2. "Nigger": Boston Herald, Oct. 27, 1853; *Boston Herald*, Jan. 24, 1850; Boston City Council Minutes, Feb. 4, 1856, 42.
3. "Driving": *Boston Daily Bee*, Oct. 24, 1853; *Boston Herald*, Feb. 27, 1854
4. *Boston Daily Atlas,* March 25, 1852; *Boston Herald,* July 21, 1851.
5. *Liberator,* Aug. 17, 1855; "not": *Frederick Douglas's Paper,* Sept. 28, 1855; *Boston Herald,* April 12, 1856.
6. *Liberator,* Nov. 27, 1857.
7. "To keep . . . foe": ibid.; *Boston Daily Bee*, Nov. 17, 1857.
8. ""The officer": *Boston Daily Atlas*, Dec. 7, 1853; Boston City Council Minutes, April 22, 1856, 167; ibid., July 7, 1856, 363.

Black Peddlar, 1859

This studio portrait of a man in a stovepipe hat was identified only as "Old Patterson." He is possibly a hawker selling wares from his basket. Many Black workers toiled well into advanced age. (Courtesy of Historic New England.)