

# **An African-American Community in Cape Breton, 1901-1904**

Elizabeth Beaton

Volume 24, Number 2, Spring 1995

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad24\\_2art04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad24_2art04)

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**Publisher(s)**

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

**ISSN**

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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**Cite this article**

Beaton, E. (1995). An African-American Community in Cape Breton, 1901-1904. *Acadiensis*, 24(2), 65–97.

ELIZABETH BEATON

## An African-American Community in Cape Breton, 1901-1904

IN SYDNEY, NOVA SCOTIA, on 8 August 1902, preparations were well underway for celebrating the imminent coronation of Edward VII. Local businesses, large and small, would be represented by floats; veterans from the recently ended Boer War would march; all would be led by several prominent local bands. But the highlight of the parade was to be the miniature steel works on wheels drawn by six and four horse teams, presented by the Dominion Iron and Steel Company [DISCO]. One local newspaper reported that: "The employees of the Steel Company will march over the bridge 1500 strong....The employees have spent over \$6000 in getting their feature in shape."<sup>1</sup> The parade took place the following day.

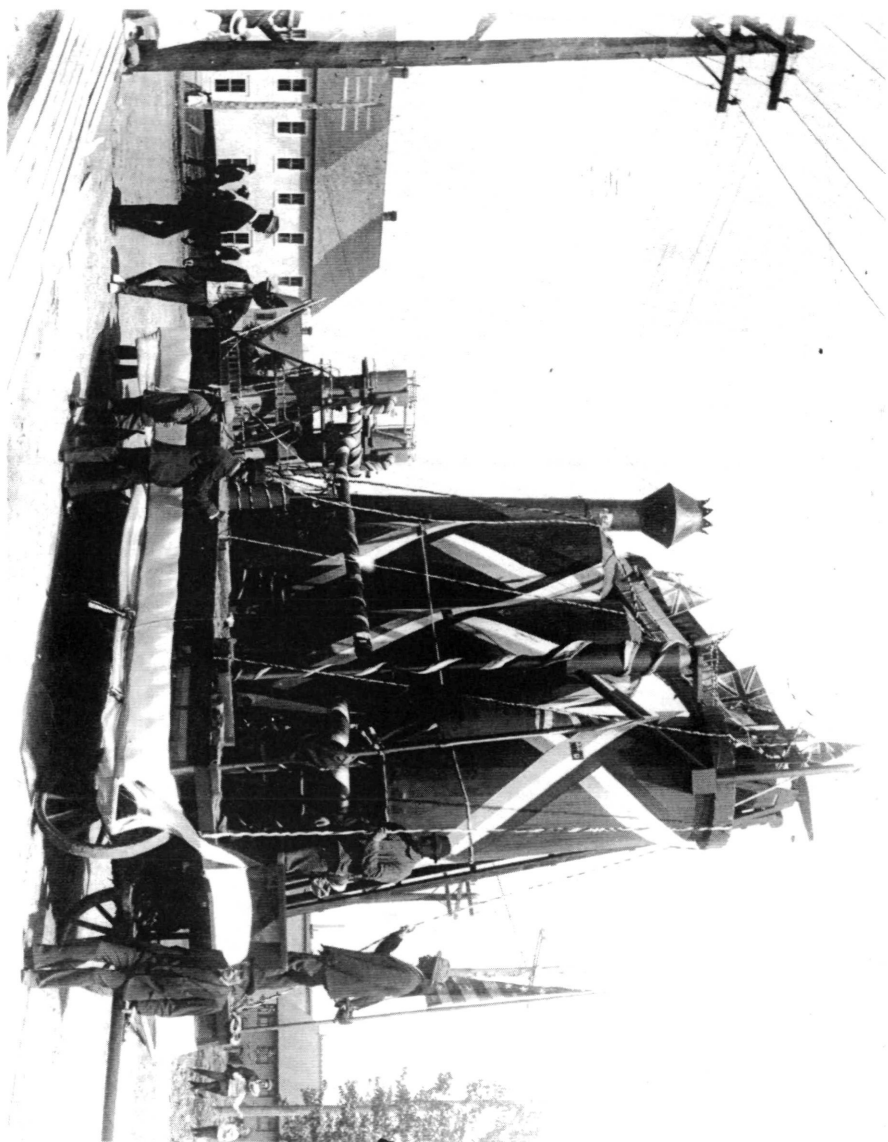
The second division comprising the various floats of the Dominion Steel Co....was headed by the Sydney Coronet Band and in it the people of Sydney had exhibited to them a steel plant in miniature, including the manufacture of coke. Lieutenant Collidge was in command and each department was under its own marshals. The following departments were represented...: ore hoisting and shipping piers, the open hearth and blast furnaces, blooming mills, mechanical and electrical, foundry, pattern shop, transportation, warehouses and coke ovens....An American gentleman viewing the Coronation parade from the veranda of the Sydney Hotel said he never in his life saw better.<sup>2</sup>

Aside from the irony of Sydney's biggest parade, honouring an English King, being commented upon by an American, what was noteworthy about this event? The answer is found in a remarkable photograph, taken that day, of an imposing seven metre-high "miniature" blast furnace riding on a flatbed. The flag-bedecked, bunting-wrapped replica, plainly an important part of the coronation spectacle, was "marshalled" by a group of black men, dressed in suits, who were clearly in charge. This scene was an anomaly, for, in the context of racial attitudes in early 20th

1 I am indebted to Delphin Muise, Rusty Bittermann, Joy Mannette and Graham Reynolds for their helpful suggestions; also to Mary Keating for her ideas on Sydney's early schools; to Kate Currie of the Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton for her able archival assistance and her editorial suggestions; to a group of steelworkers who responded to the presentation of an earlier version of this paper, especially Frank Murphy and Wally MacKinnon. "Preparation for Big Celebration: Coronation of King Edward", *Daily Record* (Sydney), 8 August 1902, p. 5. Sydney's *Daily Record* showed several variations in its name over the years: *Daily Record*, *Sydney Record*, *Sydney Daily Record*, *The Record*; Sydney's *Daily Post* underwent similar name changes.

2 "Coronation", *Daily Post*, 11 August 1902, p. 1.

century Sydney, black men would not normally be given such significant public responsibility. Who were these men?



“Black steel workers marshalling blast furnace ‘miniature’ in coronation parade”. Photograph no. 91-602-2253, Beaton Institute, photographer unknown.

These black men were among several hundred African-American skilled furnace men brought to Sydney to work at DISCO's blast furnaces during its foundation years. Small business people, including a barber and several tavern, restaurant and dance hall owners came along with the steel workers.<sup>3</sup> They came with women and children and settled, for a brief period, in Sydney, in the Whitney Pier area, where they can be defined as a "community".

Any attempt to document the experience of this community of Blacks must, for the most part, be based on 'outsider' depictions derived from steel company records and newspaper references, which provide, essentially, a white, male, authoritarian perspective. But 'insider' portrayals are also available to a limited extent. For instance, in archival sources we find identifiable persons with names, families, homes, and with connections to community institutions. Also, through newspapers the Blacks told their own story of their hopes for their sojourn in Cape Breton and of their long journey back home to the United States.

Historically, the presence of African-Americans in Cape Breton from 1901 to 1904 was a result of the movement put in train by the transition of American Blacks from slavery to farm labourers to industrial workers, and the national and world-wide work migrations which were sparked by industrialization. These demographic shifts are well documented in a broad range of literature. African-American work migrations to Canada from the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought farmers to Central and Western Canada; others came north to work as sleeping car porters.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to calculate exactly how many African-American men, women and children came to Cape Breton from the United States during the period 1901 to 1904. Several hundred men were in Sydney over the entire period; in all likelihood they were part of a migratory community experiencing the same constant movement all over North America typical of other foreign worker groups at DISCO. Such a pattern is implicit in the variety of arrival and departure dates found in the available records. The wives of the black steel workers probably accounted for a relatively small proportion of the migrants. At the same time, the description of a social occasion on Tupper Street in Cokeville in 1902 implies the presence of a significant number of unattached women in the African-American community.<sup>5</sup>

This study of the brief African-American experience in the Cape Breton steel industry presents perhaps the first documentation of the American Blacks,

3 *Sydney Record*, 10 October 1902; Toby Morris papers, MG7, G2, Beaton Institute; also informal discussions with Frank Murphy, 1992-1994, who recalled delivering the daily newspaper in the Coke Ovens in the 1920s.

4 Howard and Tamara Palmer, "The Black Experience in Alberta", in *Peoples of Alberta: Portraits of Cultural Diversity* (Saskatoon, 1985), pp. 365-93; Agnes Calliste, "Sleeping Car Porters in Canada: An Ethnically Submerged Split Labour Market", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, XIX, 1 (1987), pp. 1-22; James Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada* (Ottawa, 1980), pp. 67-9.

5 "Squabble at Dance...", *Sydney Record*, 10 October 1902. This was not unusual, for Sydney was, in effect, part of the diaspora in which most of the American black women who travelled North between 1870 and 1910 were unmarried, separated or widowed. See Jacqueline Jones, *Labour of Love, Labour of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1986), pp. 155-6.

involving not only male workers, but also the women and children who accompanied them as part of an industrial work migration. A consideration of the experience of this group — their arrival, their accommodations, through to the evolution of their social life — can serve to suggest how the skilled status of the male members of the community, the blast furnace workers, was off-set by the realities of racial and paternalistic attitudes which affected the experience of the group as a whole.

That black men were hired for work in the blast furnace is in keeping with the recognized hierarchy of jobs in the work culture of steel-making. The blast furnace, which produced molten iron from iron ore, coke and limestone, was the first step towards producing basic carbon steel. This part of steel making was considerably more dirty and dangerous than the steel producing open hearth operation, which was the next stage in the process. The open hearth workers, by virtue of actually 'making' the steel, were the highest ranking workers at the plant, along with the skilled craftsmen like the machinists, bricklayers and carpenters. The blast furnace tended to hire lower status local whites, foreigners, or black workers, while the open hearth was reserved for white anglophone workers. This informal 'policy' was ubiquitous in the North American steel industry until the 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

Blacks had worked in the American iron-making industry as early as 1842, when industrialist Joseph R. Anderson successfully employed slaves as puddlers, heaters and rollers at the Tredegar Iron Works, a foundry and rolling mill complex in Richmond, Virginia. By the end of the Civil War, over 2,000 slaves were labouring in numerous iron mills in Tennessee's Cumberland River Valley.<sup>7</sup> With the development of modern iron and steel works in the decade after the American Civil War, employers continued to hire these black iron workers, often seeking to use them as strike breakers during labour disputes.<sup>8</sup> However, the recruitment of Blacks also reflected their abilities as iron workers; indeed, during the period from 1875 to the First World War, black iron workers were recognized as skilled.<sup>9</sup> At the Homestead Steel Works, for example, some Blacks rose rapidly to skilled positions.<sup>10</sup> By 1907, at the Homestead Steel Works, 17 per cent of the black workforce were identified as 'skilled'; similarly 27 per cent of Pittsburgh's black

6 For documentation and discussion of the hierarchy of job locations, see John A. Fitch, *The Steel Workers* ([1910] Pittsburgh, 1989), Introduction by Roy Lubove, pp. 22-31, 148-9; Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883-1935* (Toronto, 1988), pp. 76-8. These views are confirmed by research carried out by the Beaton Institute Steel Project; see, especially, interviews with steel workers, MG 14, 206, C and D. For early documentation of the dangers in the blast furnace, see L.A. Spring, *Non-Technical Chats About Steel and Iron* (New York, 1917). The retardation of up-to-date safety practices in the blast furnace may be related to the traditional status of its workers.

7 Dennis C. Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible: Black Steel Workers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980* (Albany, 1986), p. 8.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10; see also, Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York, 1977), pp. 121-3, 152.

9 Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible*, pp. 7-26.

10 Margaret Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Milltown* ([1910] Pittsburgh, 1974), p. 14.

iron and steel workers were skilled.<sup>11</sup>

Blacks from a variety of backgrounds have worked at the Sydney steel plant during its entire history. Most of the available information focuses on West Indian workers, the first reports of whom appeared in 1909, although some probably arrived earlier.<sup>12</sup> And migrant black workers from mainland Nova Scotia were undoubtedly at the plant from its beginnings and were also working in the coal industry.<sup>13</sup> Their exact numbers and dates of arrival are difficult to ascertain, but they probably followed the same work patterns as other rural Nova Scotia workers in the steel industry, travelling back and forth as work was available in industry or in their home communities. The present-day Nova Scotian Blacks are well-integrated with the West Indians. Black steel workers from the United States are remembered in the oral tradition of the community, but have merited only passing mention in scholarly and popular studies.<sup>14</sup> On the whole, the American black steelworkers remain something of an enigma, partly because there is no evidence of their descendants in present-day Sydney, but especially because many of them held unusual status as skilled workers in the early Sydney steel plant, a status not afforded other black steel workers until the 1960s.

Distinctions between 'skilled' and 'unskilled' are well recognized as the chief demarcations within the early 20th century working class in Canada, as elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> In the steel industry, the persistence of the recognized value of skilled workers confirmed the social distance between them and the industry's 'yard' labourers. However, the work context of the early steel industry — steel or iron men, mechanics or tradesmen versus labourers or yard workers — had definitions that were often based more on the racial, ethnic or religious background of a worker than on knowledge or expertise. These distinctions, which were to carry through many years, were crystallized by the influx of immigrant workers.

In Sydney, as in other industrial towns, this class system within a class was

11 Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible*, p. 20.

12 Elizabeth Beaton, "Is Cape Breton a Caribbean Island?: West Indian Black Immigration to Industrial Cape Breton", Report, Beaton Institute; Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada*; Robin Winks, *Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal, 1971). Individual family histories have vague references to 1906-07 arrivals of single men.

13 Interview, Marion Reid, 1994 (transcript in Elizabeth Beaton Papers, MG12, 198, Beaton Institute); see also, The HERO Collection, Dalhousie University Archives. Familiar Nova Scotian Black names are absent from the 1901 census, possibly because of the transient nature of this workforce.

14 Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, p. 300. As well as mentioning the African-Americans in Sydney, Winks hints that population increases in Hamilton and Windsor were due to the immigration of Blacks. See also, Heron, *Working in Steel*, p. 12; Elizabeth Beaton and Mary Keating, "From the Pier, Dear": *Images of a Multicultural Community* (Sydney, 1993), pp. 13-14.

15 Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1975); Bryan Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal, 1979); Greg Kealey and Bryan Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labour in Ontario, 1880-1900* (New York, 1982). Recent scholarly discussions, such as Heron, *Working in Steel*, pp. 52-4, have changed this view, acknowledging a broadened base of "skilled" knowledge, thus blurring definitional boundaries of the function and worth of workers.

signalled by the location of workers at the workplace, and by their rates of remuneration. Within the broader community, it was signalled by the type, quality and location of their dwelling places. Indeed, the development of Sydney as an industrial city was characterized by these differentiations, with each group — plant management, skilled workers and labourers — living in distinct communities. Whitney Pier, the district close by the dirtiest end of the coke and steel making processes, became known as the settlement area of ‘labourers’ from all over the world. Ashby, located further away from the plant, but close enough for walking to work, housed management and many skilled workers.<sup>16</sup>

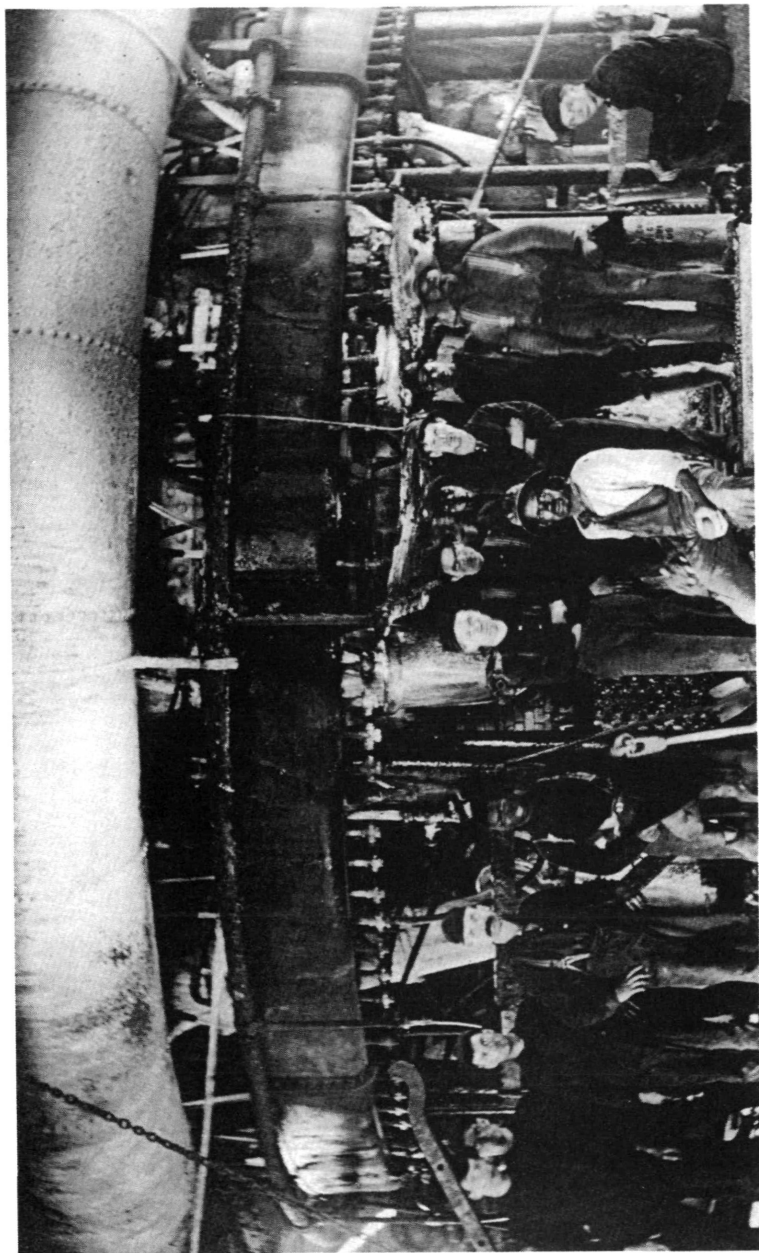
The process of importing foreign workers for the plant’s start-up, whether skilled or labourers, was carried out under an agreement between Nova Scotia’s government and DISCO.<sup>17</sup> Not only were the skilled workers invited by the steel company; their transportation was arranged, and they lived, at least initially, in accommodation provided by the company. That these workers often brought their families with them further proclaimed their ‘skilled’ status. While white Americans were generally welcomed into the workforce, considerable debate surrounded the importation of Slavs, Italians and Blacks.<sup>18</sup> Such attitudes were reflected in Cape Breton newspapers which hailed the arrival of supervisory American workers, but portrayed other newcomers in a generally negative light, often referring to them as ‘labourers’, even though they might have been brought in for their specific expertise. Nativist, and sometimes racist, sentiments were evident when foreigners were hired instead of local men. Thus, for example, a letter to the *Daily Post* editor in 1902 described black workers as “foul-mouthed...niggers” who replaced good, “god-fearing” native workmen.<sup>19</sup> On another level, many local citizens subscribed to the notion, also founded in racism, that American Blacks were brought to work at the Sydney plant because black people could better stand the heat of the blast furnaces.

16 See E. Beaton, “Industrialization, Urbanization and the Peopling of Whitney Pier”, in “Housing, People and Place: A Case Study of Whitney Pier”, Ph.D. thesis, forthcoming. Also, Beaton and Keating, “*From the Pier, Dear*”.

17 See, Mary Jane Lipkin, “Reluctant Recruitment: Nova Scotia Immigration Policy, 1867-1914”, M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1982, pp. 57-8.

18 Lipkin, “Reluctant Recruitment”, pp. 58-9. There is a large and well-known body of Canadian and American literature which deals with immigration policies and nativist attitudes regarding foreign workers. See, Donald Avery, *Reluctant Hosts: Canada’s Response to Immigrant Workers, 1896-1994* (Toronto, 1995); Howard Palmer and Jean Burnet, *Coming Canadians: An Introduction to a History of Canada’s Peoples* (Toronto, 1988); Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer, *Patterns of Prejudice: A History of Nativism in Alberta* (Toronto, 1982).

19 Letter to the Editor by D.W.S., “Steel and Native Labour”, *Daily Record*, 14 April 1902. See also, “Steel Co. and Home Labour”, *Daily Record*, 11 April 1902.



“Black blast furnace workers on the DISCO cast house floor”. Photograph no. 80-101-4281, Joe Beaton Collection (No. 24), Beaton Institute, 1901, photographer unknown.



The recruitment of skilled workers from the United States was of particular importance because the Sydney plant represented an almost total transfer of American steel-making technology. Most of the construction engineers were American, as were the department managers at every level. These supervisory personnel stayed for brief periods of one or two years, after which they returned to the United States. Their comings and goings were avidly reported by local newspapers, as Sydney found itself in the company of other major steel cities in the United States.<sup>20</sup>

Networking between steel plant supervisory employees across the continent ensured that the hiring situation in the steel industry was well known. And incoming supervisors usually hired skilled workers from amongst their former colleagues or employees.<sup>21</sup> The first Superintendent of Furnaces at DISCO, Shiras MacGilvray, came from Pittsburgh. In the glow of the first iron cast in late 1900 and the anticipation of three more furnaces starting up in early 1901, MacGilvray noted in a letter to a foreman at Ferona, Nova Scotia, that there were local "labour problems" in terms of the lack of experienced workers.<sup>22</sup> He sent further letters to associates at steel plants in Pennsylvania, Ohio and New York State, seeking foremen and other experienced men. For instance, he wrote to W.W. McKeown of Leetonia, Ohio, in 1901, asking for a foreman and complaining that, "As we expected the labour here is poor...not having any experience in this work".<sup>23</sup> In July 1901, MacGilvray moved on to work for Carnegie Steel in Pittsburgh. He was immediately replaced by John H. Means, whose family was connected with the Means Fulton Iron Works in Birmingham. Means had turned down an offer of \$12,000 from Empire Steel and Iron (Catassuaga, Pennsylvania) in favour of Dominion Iron and Steel.<sup>24</sup> Almost as soon as he took up his position with DISCO, Means began recruiting amongst his network of Alabama and Pennsylvania steelmen. He also brought in workers from Buffalo and Tonawanda

- 20 "Presentation to J.W. Brophy", *Sydney Record*, 15 April 1904, referred to a farewell "do" at the Savoy Theatre for the American foreman of the blooming mill mechanical department who was leaving to work in Buffalo's Lackawanna plant after several years in Sydney; see also, "Five iron workers registered from New York staying at the Bellevue", *Daily Record*, 7 January 1901.
- 21 This pattern is emphasized in a remarkable series of letterbooks from the DISCO Blast Furnace Department, which outline the experiences of a succession of furnace supervisory personnel. The importance of these letterbooks goes beyond elucidating the availability of jobs and the process of hiring, for the letterbooks also give the names of the hired personnel and insights into their personal situations. DISCO Furnaces Letterbooks, MG 14, 38, Beaton Institute [hereafter referred to as DISCO Letterbooks].
- 22 S. MacGilvray to W.G. Taylor (Ferona, Nova Scotia), 19 December 1900, DISCO Letterbooks. Taylor subsequently became foreman of the DISCO iron yard.
- 23 S. MacGilvray to W.W. McKeown, 22 April 1901, DISCO Letterbooks. Also, MacGilvray to Andrew Graham (New York), 28 December 1900; E.L. Messler (Eliza Furnaces, Pittsburgh), 9 March 1901; Wm. Smith (Eliza Furnaces, Pittsburgh), 19 March 1901; Thomas Slater (Lorraine, Ohio), 13 April 1901; L. Grammer (Cleveland, Ohio), 14 April 1901; Means to McCrery (DISCO General Superintendent), 25 May 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.
- 24 MacGilvray to Means, 8 July 1901; Means to Sims, 31 July 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

and requested workers from Maryland.<sup>25</sup> Superintendent Means wrote to David Baker, DISCO General Superintendent, that "We are sadly in need of some competent men there [at the pig machine] to handle that part of the business".<sup>26</sup> Repeatedly he complained of the inexperience of the men working for him, particularly Newfoundlanders and Italians.<sup>27</sup>

It was Means who opened the door to African-American blast furnace workers at the Sydney plant. Already a mobile work force, the black workers were prepared to respond to Means' suggestion that they travel to Cape Breton. Given the shortage of experienced furnace workers throughout the North American iron and steel industry at the time, it seems reasonable to surmise that Means was offering higher wages than the workers were currently receiving at American plants. Certainly, he was offering significantly better rates of pay than MacGilvray had offered in the previous months. For instance, a 'keeper' was paid \$2.25 per 12 hour day by MacGilvray, but was offered \$2.75 by Means as of August 1901; a Hot Blast-Man under MacGilvray received \$1.80 per day compared to Means' rate of \$2.25; Means' 1st Helper got \$2.20 compared to the previous rate of \$1.70 per day. The highest rate, \$3.00 per day, was for iron carriers.<sup>28</sup> These rates represented the most important jobs of the process of the blast furnace. Except for the 'keeper', who was in charge of ensuring the correct amounts of raw materials, the skilled workers were found in the cast house, from where the operation was controlled. Labourers, paid considerably less, worked at the 'back' of the furnace constantly 'charging' layers of limestone, coal and iron ore into the top of the furnace.<sup>29</sup>

Means found the prospect of hiring black workers particularly attractive since he believed that they were more likely than their white counterparts to bring a large number of their fellow workers with them. This opinion he based on the argument that they would feel more comfortable and be safer in larger numbers.<sup>30</sup> Privately, however, Means expressed some reservations as to the length of time the Africans-Americans would stay, or even whether they would agree to come. On 10 August

25 Means to H. O'Shea (Johnstown, Pa.), 26 July 1901; E.L. Penruddock (Care Foundry, Birmingham), 20 August 1901; W.H. Miller (General Foreman, DISCO), 31 August 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

26 Means to Baker, 10 August 1901; see also, Means to Bryan (DISCO Time Keeper), 21 August 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

27 Means to Baker, 19 August 1901; to Bryan 21 August and 26 August 1901; to Baker, 27 August 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

28 MacGilvray to Graham (New York), 28 December 1900; "Notice" posted by Means, 27 July 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

29 The blast furnace operated continuously, smelting up to 400 tons of iron per day. Heated by blasts of hot air from several huge adjoining stoves, the raw iron ore dripped through red-hot coke and a reducing agent, limestone, in the 80 foot high "salamander", or barrel, of the furnace. The "cast" of molten iron took place every four hours unto the sand troughs below and the waste, or "slag", fell into pits nearby.

30 Means to Thomas Goodwin (Woodward, Ala), 30 August 1901, DISCO Letterbooks. Thomas Cozzolino's Autobiography [1935] tells of attacks made on black workers by white workers, Thomas Cozzolino Papers, MG 1, vol. 1191 C, Public Archives of Nova Scotia, also available as a Report, Beaton Institute.

1901, he wrote DISCO's General Superintendent that, "We had a wire from the South saying that men are very scarce, and that there may be some trouble getting them here, and even did they come, they were only expected to stay until winter, whereas the men you would probably bring [from Eastern Pennsylvania and Maryland] we might be able to hold right along".<sup>31</sup> In correspondence with transportation agents, Means mentioned another reservation: "I have not made up my mind definitely about this matter, as I fear the men will be unable to stand this climate".<sup>32</sup>

Means' recruitment of African-Americans from Birmingham, Pittsburgh and Colorado was based in a complex labour network, one which kept black steelworkers in touch with each other wherever they went to work.<sup>33</sup> Except that it was racially-based, this networking was not unlike the communications between other industrial workers, considered to be the "most natural and most wide spread factor in mobilizing a workforce", significant evidence of which is found in archival records, both written and oral.<sup>34</sup> However, issues relating to working conditions would have been especially pertinent to the black workers since their history of being used as strike-breakers often prejudiced the attitudes of white workers against them in violent ways.<sup>35</sup>

Means contrived to attract African-American blast furnace workers to Cape Breton by using their co-workers as his recruiting agents. In one case he initiated the process through two foremen at the Woodward Iron Company, Tom Goodwin and W.S. Hutton, both white men. On 7 August 1901, Means telegraphed Hutton:

Want Tom Goodwin to come to me and bring seventy good men. None but good ones....Wages as follows: Keepers, two seventy five, Sand cutters two twenty five, Iron carriers three, Fall men two, Ladle cleaners two, Stove men two twenty five, Scrappers one sixty. Will pay transportation here, and send them home middle of December if they are not satisfied. Let Tom get a house in town for his wife, and we can bring her later if necessary.

Answer my expense.<sup>36</sup>

31 Means to Baker, 10 August 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

32 Means to Turner, General Passenger Agent (Baltimore), 23 August 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

33 Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of a Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* (Urbana, 1985) argues that the black workers' experience "was shaped by...racial realities and that the workers used Black institutions and various social and economic networks...to resist second class citizenship", cited in Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible*, p. 5. See also David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* ([1960] New York, 1969) p. 185.

34 Fitch, *The Steel Workers*, p. 143. For examples, see the range of documentation in the Ethnic Files, MG 7, Beaton Institute.

35 Stanley Lieberman, *A Piece of the Pie: Blacks and White Immigrants since 1880* (Berkeley, 1980), p. 102-4, discusses the practice of lynching Blacks who were strike breakers; see also, Gutman, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America", in *Work, Culture and Society*, p. 121.

36 Means to W.S. Hutton, 7 August 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

Another worker who received correspondence from Means was a black man, George Strong, at the North Birmingham Furnaces and the South Birmingham Iron Works. Strong, who was apparently in a position to recruit workers, was also in contact with Goodwin and Hutton. On 9 August 1901, Means telegraphed him:

George Strong (Colored)  
Care North Birmingham Furnaces,  
North Birmingham, Alabama.

Your Letter received. The money same as America. I will give all transportation free to the men. See Mr. Goodwin and Mr. Hutton, they will explain everything to you.<sup>37</sup>

This was followed with a telegram promising arrangements for Strong's co-workers, Bill Bowling [Bolden?] and his wife, and then a persuasive letter indicating that the black workers would be, in effect, sojourners. It is plain that Means wanted highly skilled workers, that he was familiar with the men and their work, and that he was offering to pay top dollar. His recruitment and travel arrangements for these iron workers give no indication that their status as skilled workers was in any way compromised by their colour.

August 29th, 1901

George Strong Esq.  
South Birmingham Iron Works,  
South Birmingham, Ala.

Dear George.

Your letter came to me yesterday and I am very much gratified that you and Will have taken such interest in this movement for me. There is an opportunity here for about 50 real good men to do well and I should like to see you boys come and stay until next Fall. By that time you should have saved a good bit of money and placed yourselves in nice shape to return home. What I especially need to get right now is two good Keepers, about 10 or 12 good Sand Cutters and 10 or 12 first class iron carriers. Men like John Williams, Ely Coleman and Frank Humphreys and that class. They have to break three casts of iron in 12 hours with about 20 to 25 beds in each cast and carry same out. I work 4 men a turn on this, for which I am willing to pay \$3.00 a day.

I dont want you and Bill to bring any men who are not first class in every way. Men that I can rely on at all times. I will put you in a furnace that is well-housed, and I do not see why you cannot stay in this country as well as I, or anybody else, so make up your mind to come with the intention of sticking by me for a year or 18 months at the inside and I

37 Means to Strong, 9 August 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

think you will be amply repaid for same.

After the men get here and get settled, if they want, their wives can be brought up to them later on, or any washerwoman or cook that they may prefer.

Let me hear from you as soon as you get your gang together... and I will make arrangements for you.<sup>38</sup>

It is apparent that Means wanted Hutton and Goodwin to be in charge of bringing the black workers to Sydney, but he warned them not to be conspicuous. On 30 August, he wrote Goodwin:

Write to me fully immediately upon receipt of this...and give me the names of the men you can bring. I do not want anybody but first class men in every particular. Geo. Strong and Bill Bowling are now getting up men for me and I should not wonder if they can handle the situation among the niggers better than you, so any men that you see you had better send to them, and *allow them to be the movers in the whole thing*, keeping yourself in the background. You need not say anything about coming up here yourself, but *just send these men to George and Will....*

Be sure to observe my instructions about getting these men to George and Will. These niggers are more apt to induce others to come than white people would be. You had best make arrangements to bring your stove men with you.<sup>39</sup>

John Means' brother, R. Preston Means of the Means Fulton Iron Works in Birmingham, was asked to gather more men for Sydney as well as to coordinate the efforts of Hutton.<sup>40</sup>

DISCO arranged the transportation of the black workers by informal tender in correspondence with several American railway or "road" agencies. In August and September, 1901, Means negotiated with the Merchants and Miners Transportation Company (Baltimore), the Central Georgia Railway Company (Birmingham), Southern Railroad (Birmingham) and "L and N" (Birmingham). These companies offered not only to transport the workers but also to act as agents in finding them. Means was prepared to take advantage of the competition amongst the carriers: "I think we should get a very favourable rate on these men".<sup>41</sup> The offer of transportation to the black workers was qualified with certain restrictions consisting of deduction by instalment or refund, with return fare based on six months' work. These limitations were not always clear in correspondence with the prospective employees, but Means made the arrangements very clear to General Superintendent

38 Means to Strong, 29 August 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

39 Means to Goodwin, 9 August 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

40 Telegram, John Means to R. Preston Means, 16 September 1901; telegram, John Means to Hutton, 4 October 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

41 Means to Baker, 28 September 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

Baker.

In regard to the men in the South: The propositions I made these men after consulting with Mr. Moxham [General Manager of DISCO], was as follows:-

If they came up here and stayed until the middle of December we would give them transportation here and back. This was to bridge over our troubles until skilled workmen from Germany arrived. It took us some little while to work this movement up in the South on account of the delay in writing and getting answers.<sup>42</sup>

As a result of these efforts, on about 15 October 1901, 33 men and three women arrived in Sydney. The *Daily Post* announced the arrival of this group of "Coloured Furnace Men" as labourers, not skilled workmen, reporting that "Thirty colored labourers arrived from Pittsburgh [sic] last night to work about the furnaces of the steel company".<sup>43</sup> Their names, including reference to their wives, were posted in the DISCO Mailing Room as "coloured men from Alabama".<sup>44</sup> Bart Bryan, DISCO's time keeper, had the same list for deductions from pay for furnace shoes. The names appear again in orders relating to reimbursement for travel expenses, and in a note to a Sydney haberdasher requesting that work clothing be supplied to individual workers: "Please give Ike Kennedy 2 suits of heavy cheap underwear. Horton one pair of overalls and one suit heavy cheap underwear. Tom Cadenhead one pair overalls, charging same to my account. If you have not got these overalls, please get them for [me]".<sup>45</sup>

Concurrent with these arrangements for men, mainly from Alabama, a strategy to bring more black ironworkers from Pennsylvania was implemented. As with the first group, Means insisted on getting only "good" experienced men:

Mr. James Jackson,  
#16 Fifth Avenue, Rankin Borough,  
Braddock, Pa'

42 Means to Baker, 30 September 1901, DISCO Letterbooks. European workers came in at least two batches, both at approximately the same time as the American Blacks: "Iron Workers from Austria", *Daily Record*, 15 October 1901; "Austrian and German Workers for Sydney", *Daily Record*, 23 November 1901.

43 "Local News of Interest", *Daily Post*, 16 October 1901. There is no evidence that this group came from Pittsburgh.

44 Means to Mailing Clerk, 29 October 1901: Willis Capers, Jim Thomas, Will Davis, Ike Kennedy, Josh Jamison, John Watts, Jeff Bowers, Tom Cadenhead & wife, Joe Hill, Fred Barnes, Louis Fletcher, John Lewis, Simon Pearson, Rich Horton, Arch Drake, George Strong, Toney McCoy, Jim Scott, Chas Stewart, Albert Martin & wife, Walter Griffin & wife, Louis Massey, John Taylor, Ed Moore, John Mayfield, Wm. Bolden [Bowling?], Geo. Williams, Isiah Robinson, Henry Bell, George Newsome, Hugh McGlathery, John Watts.

45 Means to Bryan, 1 November 1901; "Meals in transit" [no date]; Means to Messrs. Blackie and Company (Sydney), 21 October 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

Dear Sir:-

Your son Harry tells me that you would like to come here to work for us and would bring us a lot of good men with you. If this is so we will make arrangements to pay your way and the men with you; of course the transportation being refunded to us on the instalment plan after you get here. What we need just now are iron carriers and sand cutters. We work four iron carriers on a shift for which we pay three dollars a day, and four sand cutters. If we work more than this, the wages of course will be lower, but I see no necessity for working more than four men.

There is an opportunity for good men to do well. We have no labour trouble of any kind, but we need experienced hands and are willing to pay for them, but we do not want any but experienced men, and any man that comes up here with the idea that he can fool us will get left, but good men will be placed in a good position.

Let me hear from you at once as to how many men you can bring, and do not bring any but first class ones. I will make arrangements to furnish you transportation immediately upon receipt of your letter.<sup>46</sup>

A follow-up letter to DISCO's General Superintendent verified Jackson's credibility:

I hand you herewith a letter from James Jackson, a negro who is working at Braddock. His two boys are working here for us now. Please see what he says and if you wish to furnish transportation. I think it is well to get them as Harry (his son) told me the other day that his father had written to him that these men he would bring with him are all good ones.<sup>47</sup>

John Means had also written to Squire White in Pueblo, Colorado, informing him and his fellow workers of the jobs available, wages and transportation arrangements. He obviously believed that the arrival of the first lot of black workers would influence their decision to come: "I have 33 men and 3 women who will arrive here from North Birmingham tonight [or] tomorrow night. Mr. Hutton is with them. John Watts, Albert Martin, Will and quite a lot of the boys that you know....In case you boys make up your minds to come here I think I can arrange your transportation".<sup>48</sup>

As Means explained to General Superintendent Baker, the pay increases promised the new workers were premised on the assumption that these skilled workers would increase the efficiency of the new No. 3 blast furnace.

As to wages these men were to get; iron carriers \$3.00 per day provided four men carried the iron. \$2.50 if 5 men carried it; or \$2.00 if we worked 7 as we do now. The sand cutters were to be paid \$2.25 with 4 men to

46 Means to Jackson, 2 September 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

47 Means to Baker, 18 September 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

48 Means to White, 14 October 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

furnace, instead of six now at \$2.00. Fallmen were to get \$2.00 for two men in the fall instead of three, as we have now at, at \$1.80. Scrappers were to be paid \$1.60 as we pay them now. These men are all cast shed men, keepers, sand cutters and iron carriers, fall and scrap men.<sup>49</sup>

Clearly the high rate of pay was based on cutting the normal personnel per turn by almost half. The possibility of doing this in a new blast furnace was, at best, remote. Nevertheless, even experienced men, perhaps swayed by the overwhelming publicity about the new Cape Breton plant, which was promoting itself as the most modern in North America, apparently accepted the argument that such efficiency could be achieved.<sup>50</sup>

The incoming men were not informed that they were to be a stop-gap work force until German workers arrived. Although they had been officially encouraged to stay as long as 18 months, they were not expected to stay longer than six. Yet, it is possible that Means did not expect or want the German workers, and that he preferred to have Southern Blacks at the furnace. Means saw the first 33 men as a "trial lot.... Should I be able to satisfy them with the place I am going South myself to move about 100 [men]".<sup>51</sup> A couple of months later, the *Daily Post* noted:

J.H. Means, General Manager of the Dominion Coal and Iron Company [sic], Sydney, Cape Breton, has left on his return to Nova Scotia with three carloads of Tennessee and Alabama negroes who will go to work in the furnaces there. Mr. Means encountered some opposition to the deportation of the negroes, but finally got them. He took the wives and daughters along with the men. Mr. Means has already a number of negro hands at Sydney where the furnaces are located and it appears that their work has been satisfactory.<sup>52</sup>

The migration to Canada appeared to be closely watched by American newspapers. According to the *Bangor Daily News*, the same "three carloads" of black workers and their families, mentioned by the Sydney paper, travelled by way of the Pemaquid Line steamer to Mt. Desert Ferry, then on the Maine Central train to the border. Looking back in 1903, the Bangor reporter's recollection of the group was somewhat clouded by his stereotypical perceptions of Southern Blacks as musical, happy-go-lucky cotton workers who did not have enough sense to mind the cold:

49 Means to Baker, 30 September 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

50 For examples of this boosterism, see, "Progress of Completion of the Sydney Steel Works", *Halifax Herald*, 31 August, 1901; "The Pivotal Point of the World Commerce: The Sydneys, Cape Breton, The Great Coal and Iron Centre at Tidewater", *Halifax Herald*, 31 August 1901; Waldon Fawcett, "Supplement" ["The Sydney Steel Works"], in *Scientific American*, (April 1902).

51 Means to Jacob, 4 September 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

52 *Daily Post*, 21 December 1901.



At the last end of the procession came a crowd of 250 colored people ranging in size from a baby in arms to old men barely able to walk. They were dressed in all kinds of fantastic garb, none which seemed sufficient to half warm a person and which made me shiver to look at. But they didn't seem to mind it at all. They laughed and joked with one another and to the other passengers and railroad men. They cared not for the cold, it didn't cause them the least worry, though it caused them to shiver and made the little ones cry from their suffering. Those who had musical instruments played upon them. Not sad and disheartening music, but the gayest of gay, rollicking jigs and that kind of stuff. They had been that way all the distance from Rockland, said the steam boat men...To one who seemed a bit more intelligent than the others, the writer propounded the question, where they were heading. "Gwine, child?" said he, "why, we're gwine to Sidney [sic], Cape Breton, to work in the steel mill and we's gwine to get big wages is we uns. It's gwine to be mighty sight nicer'n working in the cotton fields, so tis, honey." And then he was away and aboard the cars.<sup>53</sup>

More information was sought from a man who may have been Superintendent Means: "The white man who accompanied and apparently had charge of the party...stated that they were going down to Sidney[sic] to work in the mills, and that they were to be paid good wages, and it was thought that they would be better off. That was as near as anyone learned at the time as to the wages they were going to receive".<sup>54</sup>

It is unclear whether these workers insisted on bringing their families to Cape Breton as a condition of their coming to work at the Sydney plant. But whatever the reasons, in the case of each group of Southern workers who came to Sydney, arrangements between the company, the workers and the transportation agencies included spouses.<sup>55</sup> Three of the men in the first group had brought their wives, although the company initially promised only that wives, washerwomen or cooks could be brought after the men were settled. And the inclusion of women in this first group was mentioned, perhaps as an enticement, to the Colorado workers when Superintendent Means noted in passing that "33 men and 3 women will arrive from North Birmingham tonight".<sup>56</sup>

The figures given by the Maine newspaper along the route suggest that several hundred persons were involved in this part of the migration alone. In contrast, a newspaper in Bath, Maine reported 60 "negroes on their way to Sydney" on 20

53 "Their promised Land was one of despair: Sad Plight of 250 Alabama negroes who came North in search of riches", *Bangor Daily News*, 13 January 1903, p. 10.

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Daily Post*, 21 December 1901; Telegram, Means to Jones ("L and N" Railway), 30 September 1901; "Meals in Transit" [no date]; Means to Strong, 29 August 1901; Telegram, Means to Strong, 29 August 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

56 Means to White (Colorado), 14 October 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

December 1901.<sup>57</sup> It is possible that these were the male workers in the three railcars referred to earlier. Whether there were, as reported, actually 250 people in this group is uncertain and perhaps unlikely; it was probably an approximation. Although the precise number of migrants remains elusive, it is clear that the recruitment efforts had borne fruit and, by the beginning of 1902, significant numbers of workers had arrived in Sydney to take up the jobs they had been offered. These new recruits, some of them with families, required immediate accommodation.

The housing accommodation provided for the skilled black workers and their families gives the first real hint that, for DISCO's management, as for the rest of the community, race superseded skill in determining the status accorded to black workers. Many scholarly studies on housing have identified a connection between housing and status, particularly when the status is based on race. Discriminatory housing policies and residential segregation, in turn, affected the inhabitants' position "as workers in the labour market by limiting and constraining their economic and political behaviour".<sup>58</sup> The experience of living in inadequate housing and being confined to undesirable areas was certainly not new to American Blacks who migrated north to find work.<sup>59</sup> However, the American Blacks had expected a different situation in Sydney. They and their families were given "[a]lluring promises of fine houses to live in, garden spots, cheap living and more".<sup>60</sup> Instead, their housing would consist of company 'shacks' and other poorly outfitted dwellings. These shacks, which normally housed single men, became the quarters of both men and women in the case of the African-Americans. This was especially significant in a town where housing for skilled and semi-skilled workers of Anglo-Celtic background ranged from company hotels to hundreds of substantial and well-built double and single family dwellings in the Ashby area of Sydney.<sup>61</sup> The African-Americans, in contrast, lived in Whitney Pier, on the northeast side of the steel plant or coke ovens, close to its operations, in the area known at that time as

57 *Daily Post*, 21 December 1901.

58 Jose Ramon Sanchez, "Residual Work and Residual Shelter: Housing Puerto Rican Labour in New York City from World War II to 1983", in Rachel G. Bratt, Chester Hartman and Ann Meyerson, eds., *Critical Perspectives on Housing* (Philadelphia, 1986), p. 202. See also, D.M. Smith, *Geography, Inequality and Society* (Cambridge, 1987); David Hummon, "House, Home and Identity in Contemporary American Culture" in Setha Low and Erve Chambers, eds., *Housing Culture and Design* (Philadelphia, 1989), pp. 207-28; James S. Duncan, *Housing and Identity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (London, 1981); David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (London, 1973).

59 Jones, *Labor of Love*, pp. 183-5, 262-3, documents the housing conditions in Chicago, of tenement buildings with small, congested, damp and often leaky rooms that were fire hazards and located in areas infested by rodents which carried disease. Byington, *Homestead*, pp. 50-2, and Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible*, pp. 55-60, describe rental conditions for Blacks in Homestead and other steel towns in Pennsylvania. Other examples are found in Litwack, *North of Slavery*, pp. 168-70; Brody, *Steelworkers in America*, p. 186; John Bodnar, *Steeltown: Immigration and Industrialization, 1870-1940* ([1977] Pittsburgh, 1990), p. 6.

60 "Negroes Walking Back to Alabama: Ridiculous Story about Sydney Published in the Lewiston Journal, A Negro's Pitiful Tale Asserts that 250 Destitute Negroes have Started to Walk From Sydney", *Sydney Daily Record*, 17 January 1903, p. 7.

61 See Beaton, "Housing a Boom Town Society" in "Housing, People and Place".

'Cokeville' or 'Cokovia'. Cokeville was the designated area for foreign white workers of lower status, and was the least desirable area of Whitney Pier.<sup>62</sup> (See Plan of Sydney, 1902, showing Cokeville in Ward V (Whitney Pier).)

Shacks, or very basic bunk houses, were the most common shelter supplied by the steel company for unskilled workers.<sup>63</sup> Foreign skilled workers, including the Italians and Hungarians, also found accommodation in company shacks. These shacks could be found at several locations on the steel plant grounds or near the plant in Whitney Pier (see 1903 map indicating "Shackville").<sup>64</sup> Most were occupied by Italian workers.<sup>65</sup> After the completion of the construction of the steel plant, DISCO sold off some of the company owned shacks.<sup>66</sup> In 1901, in a statement regarding health conditions in Whitney Pier, the steel company noted that it "had only a few men in the shacks".<sup>67</sup> But evidently the company held on to some of these structures, using them to house their African American recruits later that year.<sup>68</sup> Thus, a 1902 newspaper report refers to "coloured shacks" or to "*old Steel Company shacks*", describing one such as a two storey building in which "coloured people of both sexes" lived, located "near the Steel Co.'s fence at the blooming mills".<sup>69</sup> By 1905, however, Poll Tax collectors expressed surprise at finding the "coloured quarters" in Cokeville occupied "not by negroes, but by Hungarians, Poles and Newfoundlanders".<sup>70</sup> Their description gave a picture of conditions in the shacks as they must have been for the black workers who arrived in 1901:

The conditions in some of these places are bad beyond description. Some of the houses are fairly clean, but the majority are exceedingly filthy. There is no sewage or water connection and the ventilation is foul. The

62 In more recent years the colloquial name for Cokeville has been 'the Coke Ovens'.

63 Ron Crawley, "Off to Sydney: Newfoundlanders Emigrate to Cape Breton, 1890-1914", *Acadiensis*, XVII, 2 (Spring 1988); Leo Jessome, "The Price Paid", Report, Beaton Institute.

64 Shacks were also used at steel company locations outside Sydney at Crawley's Creek, at the limestone quarry at George's River and at gravel quarries or water lines at Sydney River. It is likely that rents were paid as deductions from salary: such information is not presently available.

65 Informal interviews with Ron DiPenta, 1990-1993. Also, see "Warehouse and Shack for 50 Italians burned at George's River", *Daily Record*, 2 April 1903, p. 1. Company-owned shacks should not be confused with 'shacks' operated by local entrepreneurs from 1900 (ca.) until the 1940s.

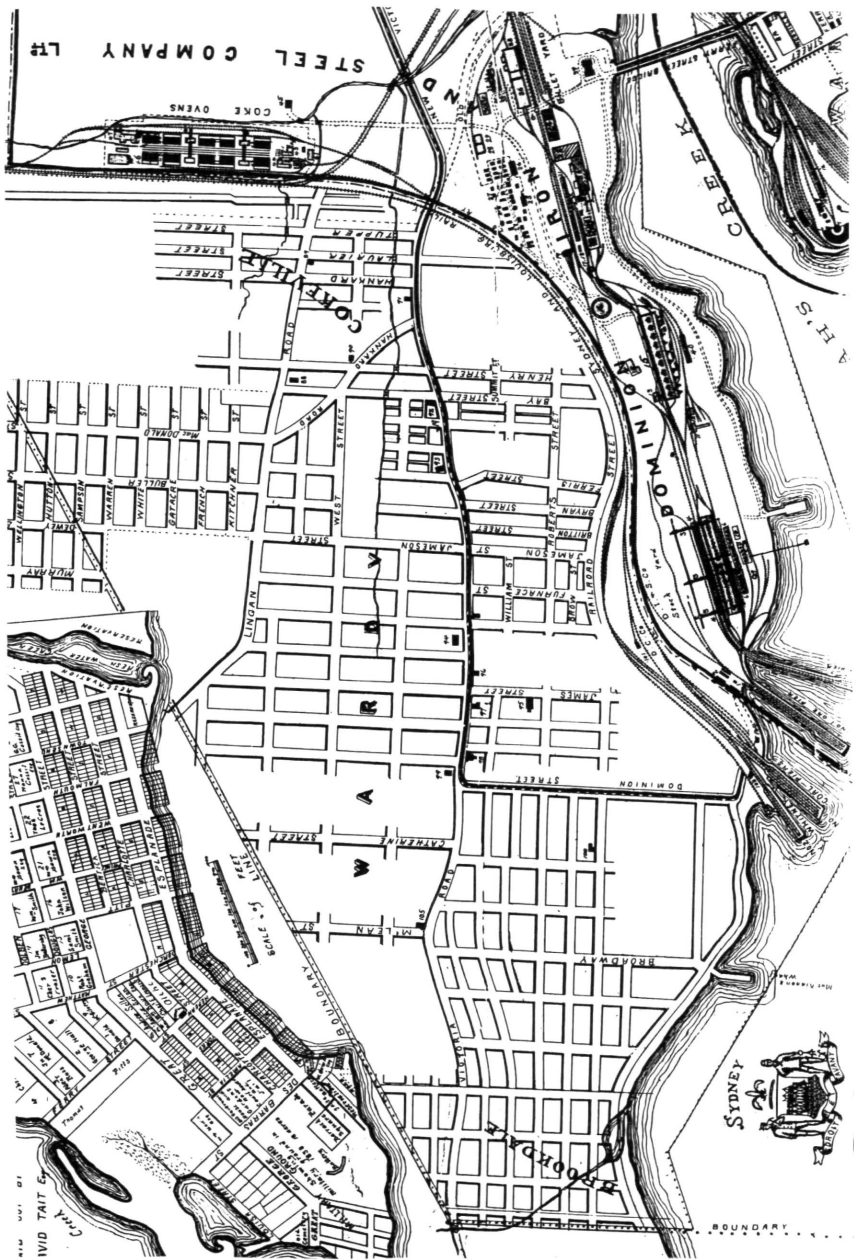
66 Descriptions of such accommodations are provided in advertisements placed in local newspapers by the DISCO Boarding House Department. For instance, in 1900, DISCO advertised a shack at Sydney River: "For Sale: furniture, sheets, blankets, mattresses, pillows, heating and cooking stoves...very cheap, and a shack building 160 feet by 40 feet". "For Sale", *Daily Record*, 14 August 1900. See also, Cozzolino Autobiography [1935], p. 33.

67 "Board of Health", *Daily Record*, 1 May 1901, p. 8.

68 Other workers continued to use the shacks as well: "Strikers (mainly Italians), got notice to quit their shacks", *Sydney Record*, 2 March 1902.

69 "Squabble at Dance ends in Tragedy", *Sydney Record*, 10 October 1902, p. 1. Almost a year later the *Daily Record*, 9 July 1903, had a reference to John Mayfield, "a coloured man and his wife...near their home in the steel co. shacks", p. 8.

70 "Condition of the Coloured Shacks", *Daily Post*, 26 November 1905.



Albert Almon Plan of Sydney, 1902. Whitney Pier (Ward V), indicating “Cokeville”. Courtesy of the Whitney Pier Historical Society and the Beaton Institute.

beds are simply a big deal table about seven feet broad which runs down the whole length of the room. The men wrap themselves up in their blankets and lie on this shelf as close as they can pack. There is also in the room a stove, which the inmates seem to think it a point of humour to keep as hot as possible, and hanging from the ceiling which is about ten feet high, are the spare clothes of the men. None of the beds are ever aired, for as soon as one shift is out of them, another is in.<sup>71</sup>

Nor had the Blacks permanently disappeared from the area, for these same buildings were the shacks with "mostly coloured tenants", which remained on the plant property between Railroad Street and the rolling mills and were documented on a 1907 Fire Insurance Atlas.<sup>72</sup> (See 1907 Goad's Fire Insurance Atlas.)

The steel company also built, or at least renovated, houses for the African-Americans. However, based on the incomplete records available, it would appear that the buildings designated for the use of the black workers and their families were substandard. One recorded problem was with regard to heating. On two occasions Superintendent Means asked the time keeper to fix the heating by re-routing the stove piping through the cellar and the unheated rooms in several houses. The obvious fire risk of this solution was not mentioned. Means also endeavoured to hurry the rehabilitation of alternate housing. His urgent tone implied that a commitment to proper housing was necessary if they were to retain the black workers, whose skills were critical to the operation of furnaces. He wrote to the DISCO time keeper:

I wish you would send a carpenter over to the houses occupied by the Niggers and have the stove pipes led through the rooms that have no fire in them so that they may be partially heated by the radiation.

Please get this done for me at once as it is important that I make these men as comfortable as possible. Also, please let me know what Mr. Baker thought of the scheme for the two big houses with the furnaces in the cellar.<sup>73</sup>

A few days later, a memo to General Superintendent Baker seemed to suggest that houses would be built by the company:

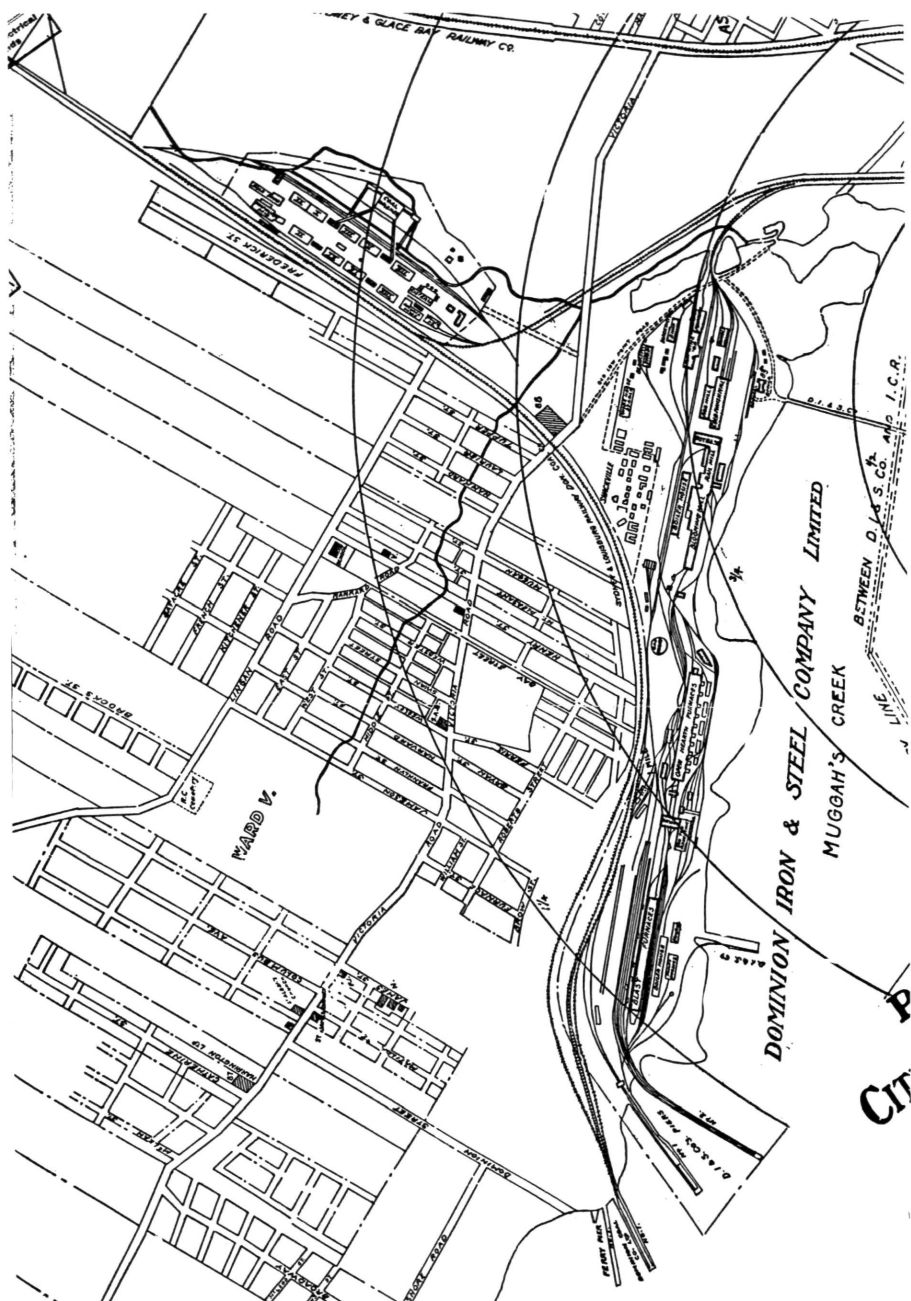
I beg to hand you herewith specification of a house that I would like to have for the Negroes and which I am sure would please most of white men with small families. This house possibly will cost here about \$225 and will rent for \$5.00 a month.<sup>74</sup>

71 *Ibid.*

72 E. Goad, *Fire Insurance Atlas for Sydney* (1907), p. 14.

73 Means to Bart Bryan, 24 October 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.

74 Means to David Baker, 28 October 1901, DISCO Letterbooks.



City of Sydney Plans, 1903. Whitney Pier (Ward V), indicating "Shackville".  
 Courtesy of the Whitney Pier Historical Society and the Beaton Institute.

It is unclear where the houses were to be located, or whether they were finally built. But it is probable that many African-Americans rented accommodation other than shacks, for it seems unlikely that several hundred men, women and children would live in shacks for their entire sojourn in Sydney.<sup>75</sup>

During that sojourn, the little Black community would establish their own working class culture, which white Sydney, would, for the most part, perceive as negative and threatening. The social life of the African-Americans was most often depicted, in police reports and the local newspapers, in stories of violence between men, or between men and women. Black women were particularly singled out for charges of drunkenness, vagrancy and prostitution. The conditions of life for the newcomers, and their responses to them, in so far as they can be glimpsed in such reports, were typical of boom town societies across North America in the early 20th century. Sydney's response to the situation reflected middle class attitudes typical of North American industrial cities of the time.<sup>76</sup> The city, or at least the middle class sector of the city, aspired to be sophisticated and refined, and consciously tried to sustain that view of itself through its press. The inevitable gaps in that self-perception were blamed on the behaviour of working class immigrants, particularly those at the lower end of the social scale. In Sydney, blame for social disorder was most commonly placed on Blacks and Italians.<sup>77</sup> Newspaper reports of a shooting incident involving two African-American iron workers, which resulted in a death, demonstrated both police and press attitudes toward the Black community. Curiously, police attitudes seemed to be based on Southern American stereotypes not necessarily attributed to Blacks:

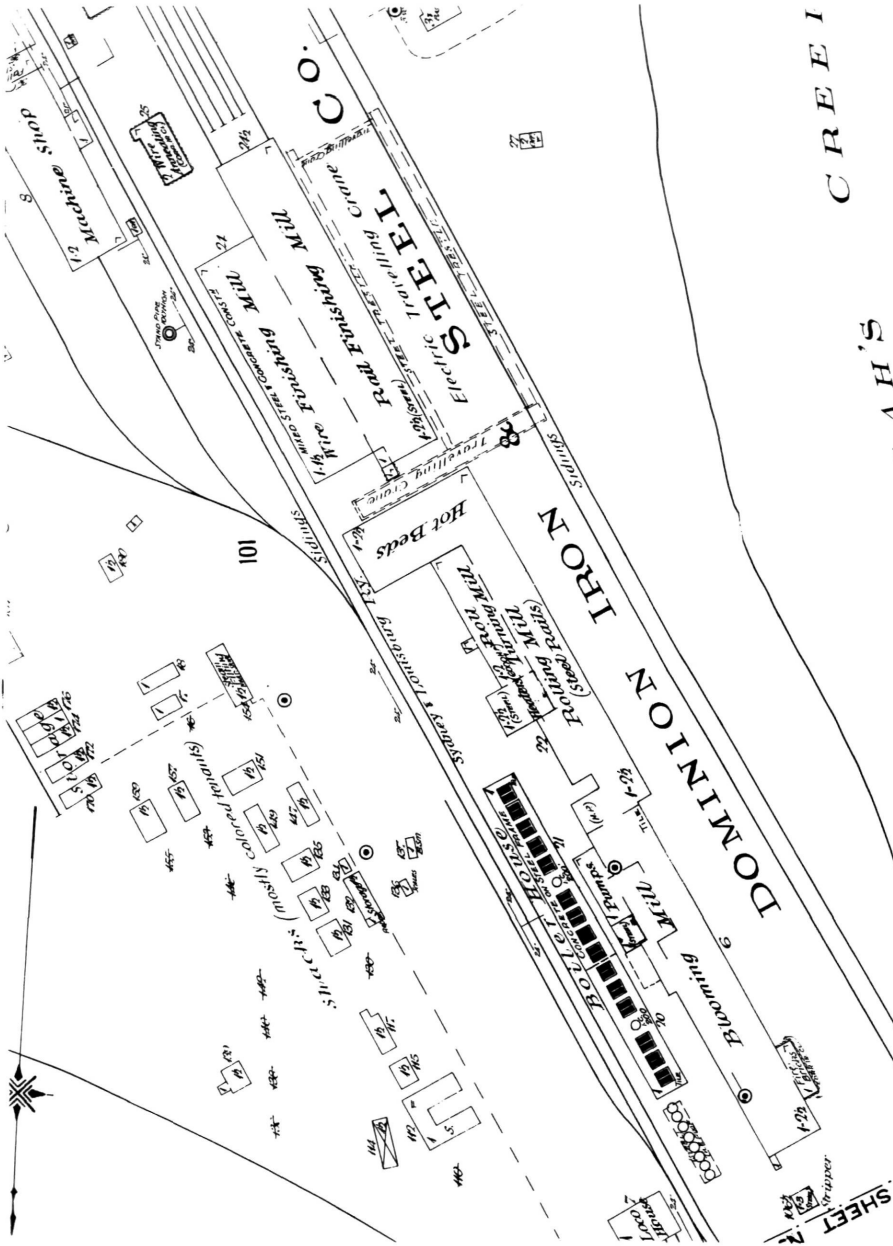
Just before the arrival of the chief, the *Record* man asked Officer McDonald if he was going back home then. "No", replied the officer, "these fellows around here might start some of their Southern antics and attempt to lynch this man, and I am going to stay here and keep order." He ordered all those who were not immediate friends of the wounded man out of the room, all obeying promptly, without a show of objection.<sup>78</sup>

75 *MacAlpine Directory* (Sydney), 1903, indicates that two of the first group, William Bowling and Hugh McGlathery, had private boarding accommodations; Isiah Robinson lived in a rented house. The Directory is not, of course, a dependable source in locating persons of lower (job or social) status.

76 Bodnar, "Maintaining the Social Order" in *Steelton*, p. 77, notes that concerns were raised by city leaders about Blacks whose "conduct and manners" were "distressing" and who, if they could not live in "respectable" houses, were urged "not to select a place so close to Front Street". See also A.F. Artibise, *Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth* (Montreal, 1975); Terry Copp, *Anatomy of Poverty: The Condition of the Working Class in Montreal, 1897-1929* (Toronto, 1974).

77 *Daily Record*, 19 February 1901: an Italian was charged for stabbing a woman at the shacks; 11 November 1901: a Negro was charged for drunkenness and wife beating; *Daily Post*, 27 October 1902: an Italian was accused of theft.

78 *Daily Record*, 10 October 1902.



H.E. Goad Insurance Plan, Sydney 1907. Area of dominion Iron and Steel Company, indicates "Shacks (mostly colored tenants)". Courtesy of Beaton Institute.



The press viewed this tragedy, which had occurred at a local dance hall, as further evidence of the undesirability of the Blacks, and implied that such incidents were to be expected.<sup>79</sup>

In their portrayal of life in "Shackville", local gossip columnists focused on squalor, violence and sexual immorality. Domestic disputes figured prominently in such reports. For example, on 27 September 1902, the *Daily Post* carried the story of "[a] coloured gentleman from Shackville" who

related a tale of woe at the police station yesterday morning. The root of all his troubles he attributed to the inconstancy of his wife, who he said had other admirers calling upon her while he was away absent at work. The lady is at present in Truro while her admirer is at present in Sydney. The husband wishes to have him punished to the full extent of the law "just" he says to "to teach other young fellows who are guilty of similar offenses a lesson".<sup>80</sup>

In contrast, "Domestic Troubles at Shackville", detailed the experience of a woman who had moved out of her home and into another man's home, and was now asking for police protection from her husband.<sup>81</sup> Such reports about life in "Shackville" were juxtaposed against news items about the activities of Sydney's more 'respectable' citizens, descriptions of piano recitals, dramatic productions, or the latest millinery additions to one of the town's fine stores.

In contrast to their 'respectable' white middle-class counterparts, black women, particularly unattached women, were regularly depicted as explicitly immoral or implicitly suspect. There is no evidence that domestic work, the most common employment for single black women in other cities, was an option for those who came to Sydney.<sup>82</sup> It is likely, therefore, that some did turn to prostitution as the surest means of making a living.<sup>83</sup> The presence of these women was a civic

79 *Ibid.*

80 *Daily Post*, 27 September 1902.

81 *Daily Post*, 3 October 1902. For a discussion of the relationship between black men and black women vis-a-vis racial solidarity between genders in the context of oppression, see, bell hooks, "Representations: Feminism and Black Masculinity", in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Toronto, 1990), pp. 65-77.

82 On the other hand, the Canadian Immigration Department correspondence suggests that West Indian black women were welcomed to Sydney as domestics after 1910. Canadian Immigration Branch Records, file 810666, National Archives of Canada. The 1901 census shows that many single white women, mainly from rural Cape Breton, worked as domestics.

83 This is in keeping with recent studies of women's "alternative economies" in industrial society: for instance, Jones, *Labor of Love*, pp. 181-2 discusses some of the negative "incentives" for prostitution amongst black women: concentrations of civic crime and the inability of the woman to support herself by other means; Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, p. 636, in response to white observations of the 1880s that black women were "promiscuous" and prone to be involved in prostitution, suggests that the "weakened social position of women" and the fact that the courts offered little support for them, may have accounted for their lifestyles. See also, Marion Goldman, *Gold Diggers and Silver Miners: Prostitution and Social Life on the Comstock Lode*

embarrassment:

A shocking sight was witnessed at Cokeville about noon yesterday, three coloured women in a helpless state of intoxication were lying on the side walk of the principal street of that district. Passersby in order to avoid a shower of abuse turned their steps the other way. The coloured part of the population of Cokeville now predominate and judging by their actions of late will require strict police surveillance.<sup>84</sup>

In most news reports, the women's full names were not given. If a woman was identified at all, it was in reference to the man to whom she was related, or her first name was given in a joking tone. The exception was when there was an actual charge of prostitution, vagrancy or theft. In such cases reporters regularly used inflationary literary devices to further degrade the women. For example, women charged with vagrancy were often described as "ladies in their finery", a phrase which functioned euphemistically to identify prostitutes. Sadie Whallen, a "coloured beauty of Cokovia", was charged with relieving a Swedish sailor of his "roll".<sup>85</sup> It is likely that the "disorderly houses raided and wrecked" in 1902 in Whitney Pier housed at least some black prostitutes.<sup>86</sup> Newspaper articles provide little more than vague hints of the social conditions of African-American women in Sydney. Yet the women's experiences, as viewed through the prism of local newspaper reports, suggest that many black women who came to Sydney, especially, though not exclusively, those who might fall into the category of "camp followers", were at both the service and the mercy of their own men or of white men in authority.

Yet, there were more positive social interactions between black men and women which indicated a co-hesiveness of community. These took place at Curry's dance hall, located on Tupper Street in Cokeville. It appeared that on each pay day (weekly) at the steel works, "the usual coloured ball was held in the coloured hall on Tupper Street".<sup>87</sup> The dances there offered an opportunity for men and women to meet and court in a situation that was removed from the critical view of white society.<sup>88</sup> We might not have known about this aspect of the Blacks' social life had

(Ann Arbour, 1981); Richard Symanski, *The Immoral Landscape: Female Prostitution in Western Societies* (Toronto, 1981).

84 *Daily Post*, 22 September 1902.

85 *Daily Record*, 6 December 1901.

86 "Cokovia Crows Virtuous", *Daily Record*, 24 January 1902.

87 *Daily Post*, 10 October 1902.

88 Little attention has been paid to the dance hall in the study of working class leisure. Yet it might be compared, in terms of its separateness from authority, to the bar room as discussed by Roy Rosenszweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Work and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 40-5. Unlike most bar rooms, however, the dance hall allowed for the legitimate participation of women, and accommodated a range of community activities, including showers and weddings. Whitney Pier has a long tradition of dance halls which were usually ethnically exclusive; some were privately owned and some had connections with mutual benefit societies. For a discussion of dancing in Alberta's urban and rural communities see, Donald Wetherell with Irene Kmet, *Useful Pleasures: The Shaping of Leisure in Alberta, 1896-1945* (Regina, 1990), pp. 237-7.

it not been for a tragic incident, an altercation resulting in the death of 47 year old, North Carolina native, G.B. Scott, who was unmarried and lived in Shack no. 4. He was a "sort of floor manager" at the dance hall. The fatal shot was fired by 46 year old James Brooks, who was himself critically wounded. A resident of Shack no. 7, Brooks was married, with a family in Georgia. He was at the dance hall with "a lady friend".<sup>89</sup> Although the newspaper report of this tragedy depicts the African-Americans as "restless" and violent, it also hints at the emergence of a leisure culture. The social activities alluded to in this case had a material significance: they took place in a building recognized as a focus for the community. The men involved emerge as distinct individuals, who had lives outside the work place, and "homes", however impermanent. They were members of a community which had begun to take root.

Religion formed the basis of another level of cohesion amongst the Blacks, and one which was more acceptable to the white community. Given the widely understood importance of Black spirituality throughout their entire North American history, it is not surprising to find that religion played a vital part in the lives of the American Blacks who came to Sydney.<sup>90</sup> In January 1902, shortly after the arrival of black workers and their families, an African Methodist Episcopal [AME] congregation was established in Sydney. Its organizer was Reverend John Coleman, who was "Presiding Elder of Missions among coloured people in the Maritime Provinces" for the AME. As such, he would be aware of black communities throughout the region, and would attend to those seeking the spiritual guidance of the AME.<sup>91</sup> A native of Holmes County, Mississippi, Coleman had trained in Theology at Victoria College at the University of Toronto, and was the author of "several works dealing with the condition and characteristics of his people".<sup>92</sup> Coleman initiated his public work in the black community by seeking out the white authority figures of Sydney and the steel company, to get their

89 Both men had arrived in Sydney on 16 December 1901. *Daily Post*, 10 October 1902.

90 For comments on the role of specific churches in black steel communities, see, Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible*, pp. 65-8, 111, 114; Bodnar, *Steelton*, pp. 107-8; Leon Litwack, "The Gospel and the Primer", in *Been in the Storm So Long*, pp. 450-501. See also, J.A. Mannette, "'Stark Remnants of Blackpast': Thinking of Gender, Ethnicity and Class in 1780's Nova Scotia", in *Alternate Routes* 7 (1984); C.H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia, 1986); E. Beaton, "Religious Affiliation and Ethnic Identity of West Indians in Whitney Pier", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, XX, 3 (1988).

91 The papers of the AME were not examined in this research, but attempts by the AME to start a congregation in Sydney in 1923, when most of the Blacks were West Indian, and either Anglican or Methodist, suggests that the AME was prepared to proselytize where it was not specifically invited. See, "New Church to be Erected at Whitney Pier", *Cape Breton Post*, 23 January 1923. Such a congregation did not organize; instead, an African Orthodox Church was built at that time.

92 "Coloured Congregation: African Church regularly organized by Rev. Coleman near Steel Works Church Built in Spring", *Daily Record*, 24 January 1902. The historic importance of the AME Church to African Americans is outlined in Leon Litwack, "The Church and The Negro", in *North of Slavery: the Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago, 1961), pp. 187-213.

permission and blessing.<sup>93</sup> He had obtained an introduction to General Superintendent Baker of DISCO through correspondence with Sydney Mayor, Walter Crowe:

Mr. Baker received him very kindly, and it was arranged that one of the unoccupied shacks should be reconstructed and converted into a temporary place of worship, where Mr. J.L. Hill, local preacher, assisted by Messrs Kennedy and Harris, will officiate until a pastor is sent to the congregation. In the spring a comfortable church will be built in the vicinity of the steel works, where the coloured people reside.<sup>94</sup>

Rev. Coleman used the local press, who called him a “fine specimen of his race”, to attempt to bring about a more positive view of the black families:

[He] assured the Post that there would be no race problem here and he deprecated the reports of certain newspapers on that subject. “Why”, said Mr. Coleman, “there can be no objection in the districts from which they come, as the white people there are strongly opposed to them leaving their American homes.”

“How do your people like Sydney?”

“They like it well, and strange as it may appear to you, the climate agrees with them. They say the day on which they left Alabama was colder than any they have experienced here.” ...He says that his people are intelligent, cleanly and devout. Among the young coloured people here are several high school graduates.<sup>95</sup>

The AME used “shack 81” as its “Cape Breton mission headquarters”, at least for a time.<sup>96</sup> It is believed that the AME church was located on Tupper Street; but it is possible that no actual “church” was ever built and that Tupper Street was simply the location of shack 81. Ultimately, however, the continuing success of the Church would depend upon the support of its parishioners. In August 1904, the *Daily Record* reported that the Blacks had been without a preacher for the past three

93 This procedure was in keeping with industrialists’ “philanthropic” policies in dealing with workmen throughout North America and Britain. For instance, E.M. Bainbridge and G.B. Walker, “Dominion Coal Company Ltd., Report on Mines and Properties (1904)”, recommended that in dealing with workmen, the company should, “[w]ork with the clergy as much as possible, ...let them feel that in philanthropic work they can always have the sympathy and support of the Company”, Steel Papers, MG14, 13, 8A, Box 37, file 22, p. 24, Beaton Institute. See also, Fitch, *The Steel Workers*, p. 224, which notes that steel workers felt that the clergy was “one of them” [management]; Bodner, *Steelton*, pp. 6-9.

94 “Coloured Congregation...” *Daily Record*, 24 January 1902. The involvement of J.L. Hill, “local preacher”, who had arrived with the first group of Blacks from Birmingham, suggests that there may have been some informal religious organization amongst this group before the arrival of Rev. Coleman.

95 “Coloured Congregation...”, *Daily Record*, 24 January 1902.

96 *Ibid.*

months, but that Rev. Coleman was seeking \$1200 to find and hire young men to “preach and teach the coloured children of which there were fifty in Sydney....[A] considerable sum has already been subscribed by coloured people and white people in Sydney”.<sup>97</sup> But by this time, the numbers of American Blacks had begun dwindling and there is no evidence that another clergyman was sent.

Schooling for black children, apparently the result of lobbying by the AME, and yet another signal of community formation, followed the same pattern of initial success and then a rapid decline in 1904. In early 1902, Rev. Coleman had reminded the City of its obligation to provide education for black children, pointing out that the wife of the AME preacher was already teaching on an informal basis: “There is no provision yet...for educating the children, but until something is done in that direction, our people have secured the services of Mrs. Hill. There are quite a number of children there, and the matter is somewhat important.”<sup>98</sup> Shortly thereafter, in September 1902, a school for the “Coloured Children”, called Cokovia School, was opened by the City of Sydney. The *Daily Post* reported: “In addition to the ordinary schools it was found necessary to provide a school with a teacher of their own, for the coloured people residing at Cokeville, and this matter has been engaging the attention of the Board for some time with result that it will soon be established”.<sup>99</sup> The school, located on Henry Street, had one classroom with 32 pupils taught by a Mrs. Selena Williams, a Nova Scotia Black.<sup>100</sup> In the city’s 1902 annual report, the chairperson of the school board, Mayor Crowe, declared that the Cokovia School had the best record of attendance for the year, the pupils having attended an average of 74 of 84 days.<sup>101</sup> In the city’s annual report for 1902, the salary for the Cokovia School teacher was recorded as \$68.46; in 1903 her salary was \$145.67 for teaching 34 pupils for 187 days. The “Coloured School” was still operation in 1904, but by 1905 it had disappeared from the city’s records.<sup>102</sup>

The virtual disappearance of the American Blacks from Sydney by the end of 1904 raises questions, especially since many of them had stayed longer than expected, and had begun to lay the foundations for a permanent community. Why did they leave? A variety of possibilities present themselves.

The Cape Breton climate is still cited in local lore as the main reason for the Blacks’ departure. In early 1902 DISCO denied a report by an unidentified Halifax paper that “a large number of the first contingent and some of the second have

97 “Coloured Church”, *Daily Post*, 31 August 1904.

98 “Coloured Congregation...”, *Daily Record*, 24 January 1902.

99 “The Schools of Sydney”, *Daily Post*, 2 September 1902.

100 Selena Williams was born in Halifax County in 1872. After teaching in Whitney Pier, she taught in Quebec and in black communities on mainland Nova Scotia. She was married to a steelworker (American?) named Joseph Jefferson (date of marriage unknown). It is not clear how she was appointed to teach in Sydney, except that she was part of a “pool” of black Nova Scotia teachers who worked in black communities in the province. See, Doris Evans and Gertrude Tynes, *Telling the Truth: Reflections, Segregated Schools of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1995), pp. 49-50.

101 *City of Sydney Annual Report*, 1902. McConnell Library, Sydney.

102 *City of Sydney Annual Reports*, 1902, 1903, 1904, 1905, McConnell Library, Sydney.

returned to their homes for climatic reasons". DISCO spokesmen insisted that the "southern arrivals stand the climate very well...the coloured are no more migratory in their tendencies than the white employees of the company".<sup>103</sup>

For many black workers, as for other migrant workers, the reason for leaving was assuredly related to the availability of work. After the famous 1904 strike for union recognition, which began on 1 June and ended 23 July, American Blacks were among the many foreign workers who left Sydney. The *Daily Post's* gossip column reported in late July:

Many Italian workman [sic] who...were refused employment at the steel works, because of misconduct during the recent strike, left yesterday by the fast train for different parts of the United States. A number of coloured men who were employed at the furnaces since Mr. Means had charge of them left yesterday for Colorado where they expect to secure employment.<sup>104</sup>

It is possible that the departure of Superintendent Means from the steel plant resulted in the Blacks not having the protection and privilege of skilled status in their work, or jobs of any kind, for that matter.<sup>105</sup>

But substandard housing and inadequate wages for American black workers were the apparent causes of the largest group departure in late 1902. The story became news when Walter Griffin and his wife, part of the original group from Alabama in 1901, arrived at Bangor, Maine, on 13 January 1903, telling of having walked from Sydney as part of a group returning home to Alabama:

According to the story of Walter Griggin [Griffin] and his wife who applied at the police station here today for shelter for two hundred and fifty coloured people who are walking home from Sydney C.B. to Alabama, a jaunt of about 2900 miles. All are penniless, destitute and disappointed. The Griggins [Griffins] who were scantily clad and suffered

103 "Are Staying On", *Daily Record*, 2 January 1902, p. 1.

104 "Left Yesterday", *Daily Post*, 28 July 1904. Participation by immigrant workers in Canadian unions and strikes is discussed to a limited extent by Ron Crawley, "Class Conflict and the Establishment of the Sydney Steel industry, 1899-1904", in Ken Donovan, ed., *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton History, 1713-1990* (Fredericton, 1990), pp. 145-64; Palmer, *Culture in Conflict*; Heron, *Working in Steel*; Donald Avery, "Dangerous Foreigners": *European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto, 1979). There is almost no discussion of early Black participation in union activities in the Canadian literature. However, in American labour history the issue is discussed in depth by Bernard Mandel, "Samuel Gompers and the Negro Worker 1886-1914", in August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *The Making of Black America: The Black Community in Modern America* (New York, 1969), pp. 75-93; Fitch, *The Steel Workers*; Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible*; Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society*; Brody, *Steelworkers in America*.

105 Means' departure was noted in the *Daily Record*, 8 February 1903. Means was succeeded by W.S. Hutton whom he had invited to the plant in 1901. Correspondence between E. Arnold (DISCO Chemist) and W.S. Hutton (Superintendent of Blast Furnaces), 5 March 1903, DISCO Letterbooks.

from hunger and cold, told a pitiful story. They say that about one year ago, an agent came to their town in the South, hiring coloured people to work in the steel mills in Sydney and promising \$2 a day.

Alluring promises of fine houses to live in, garden spots, cheap living and more were held out to them, with the result, the Griggins [Griffins] say, about 100 men and their families, numbering 250 people in all went to Cape Breton last March.[sic]

What, the Griggins [Griffins] said they found [was] not at all as promised them. They got no pay at all until they worked sixty days and then only \$1.25 a day or even less. There had been considerable trouble between the negroes and mill owners which had resulted in many Italians being brought from Pittsburgh to take their places.

The entire colony, so the Griggins [Griffins] said, had decided to tramp back to Alabama and thought they could get there somehow and sometime. They said that the winter had been fearfully cold and they had suffered a great deal.

They think that the others are not a great way behind and that nearly the whole colony of 250 are on the way between Boston and Cape Breton. The local authorities have not yet decided what course to take.

A local steel company official when seen by a *Record* reporter last evening regarding the matter gave the report an emphatic denial. He declared that the coloured people imported from Alabama were all doing well. They were earning twice as much as they ever did before, and they were happy and contented.<sup>106</sup>

The story was denied by the steel company and mildly ridiculed by the Sydney paper. Yet, the experience of Walter Griffin and his wife gains credence when compared with earlier newspaper reports concerning a large number of Blacks travelling through Maine from Alabama to Sydney in December, 1901.<sup>107</sup>

An interview with Walter Griffin as the group left Bangor revealed that they were leading a larger group who had left Sydney six months earlier, in August 1902.<sup>108</sup> They had worked on farms along the way in order to survive. Some of the party had died on the way and some were ill as a result of exposure. The Griffins'

106 "Negroes walking back to Alabama", *Sydney Record*, 17 January 1903, p. 7.

107 Cited in, "... Sad Plight of 250 Alabama Negroes who came North..." *Bangor Daily News*, 13 January 1903, p. 10. There is an apparent discrepancy in the dates of the group's arrival in Cape Breton, given the previous documentation of the arrival of a large group through Maine in December, 1901.

108 "Griffin and Wife Will Leave Today", *Bangor Daily News*, 15 January, p. 5.

plan was to go to Bucksport, Maine, by train and then on to Boston on the steamer *Penobscot*. Their story about the group which followed was verified by railroad men between Bangor and Vanceboro on the Maine Central line, who “constantly hear reports of colored people tramping south”.<sup>109</sup>

The depletion of Sydney’s American Black community appeared to have continued until there was virtually no one left of the group. However, Sydney Directories show that a few stayed in Sydney. In 1907, Henry Bell, from the first group of arrivals in 1901, was a porter at the Sydney Hotel on the Esplanade in downtown Sydney; in 1914, he was “a shoeshine” on Victoria Road; his “home” was on Curry’s Lane in Cokeville. A paper hanger named Henry Bell “roomed” on Curry’s Lane in 1923.<sup>110</sup> According to oral tradition, he ran a drinking establishment on Curry’s Lane for several years, beginning around 1910.<sup>111</sup> Another American Black, Colonel Jim Brooks, known as a “mulatto”, operated a restaurant at 82 Tupper Street, near the coke ovens, for over 20 years. He was the James Brooks, mentioned earlier, who was wounded in the shoot-out with G.B. Scott in the Tupper Street dance hall. Reputedly, Brooks ran a tavern on Curry’s Lane and carried a pistol on his hip.<sup>112</sup> Georgina Cambridge, one of the oldest members of the West Indian Black community, remembers Jim Brooks who, with his American wife, ran a restaurant, not a tavern, on Tupper Street. Mrs. Cambridge heard that he wore a gun, although she never saw it; she knew that he had been shot at a dance hall on Tupper Street.<sup>113</sup> These American Blacks probably stood out in local memory because of their businesses. It is notable that, in 1907 and afterward, neither was employed by DISCO. But one man from the original group, Isiah Robinson, was employed by DISCO in 1907; he had disappeared from the record by 1914.<sup>114</sup> The fact that a few Blacks stayed on may be less important than the disappearance of the group’s institutions, their school and their Church. In effect, the loss of these institutions meant the end of their community.

Why did the American Black community, with its backbone of skilled workers, and inherent potential for permanence found in its institutions, end as it did? It can, perhaps, be suggested that the solidarity that brought the American Blacks to Cape Breton also guided them away in response to their collective will. It was this same solidarity, founded on race, that empowered them to form, and briefly sustain, a community, establishing formal institutions for the practice of their religion, to educate their children and for the purpose of recreation. Because the record is so vague, and almost totally dependent upon white, ‘official’ documentation, we may never fully understand the complexities of the decisions made by this group. Certainly, there is potential for further research that might take us to the industrial

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *MacAlpine Directory* (Sydney), 1907, 1914, 1923.

<sup>111</sup> Joe Keller, interview (transcribed), MG7, G2, Beaton Institute.

<sup>112</sup> *MacAlpine Directory* (Sydney), 1907, 1914, 1918, 1923, 1928. Brooks was also remembered by Joe Keller (transcription), MG 7, G2, Beaton Institute.

<sup>113</sup> Georgina Cambridge, informal interviews, November 1995.

<sup>114</sup> *MacAlpine Directory* (Sydney), 1903, 1907, 1914.



towns and cities of the United States from whence they came and to which they probably returned. At the same time, limited as the sources are, they still serve to deepen our understanding of the recruitment and transportation of African-Americans to Sydney, and of their experiences both as workers and as part of the fabric of Sydney's boomtown society during the early years of the steel industry. The story of these black workers and their families in Sydney provide insights into the definition and importance of 'skill' in the start-up years of Sydney's steel plant, as well as into the process of moving skilled workers from one place to another through complicated networks of work migration.

While the story of this migratory community is solidly grounded in American history, parallels can be found in the Canadian black experience. The American Blacks shared with Canadian Blacks, especially Nova Scotian Blacks, the realization of the importance of religion as the underpinning of community; religion, in turn, propelled the establishment of educational institutions for both black groups.<sup>115</sup> Parallel patterns can also be found with regard to employment opportunities and working conditions, although the American black workers appeared, initially, to be viewed and treated as "skilled", unlike other Blacks in industry at the time. James Walker noted that "blacks have been acceptable in Canada whenever they have provided a needed service to the local economy...[but] [a]cceptability did not necessarily imply equality".<sup>116</sup> Mobility, both in the search for jobs and in the escape from direct or indirect discrimination, is an on-going characteristic of Blacks in Canada of every background. The most prominent example, of course, is the black Loyalists' departure from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone in 1792. But, throughout their history, Blacks have migrated across Canada and across the border to the United States. Indeed, even as the Blacks were coming into Canada during the period 1901-1904, large numbers of young Blacks were leaving Canada to go to the United States where economic and educational opportunities were better.<sup>117</sup>

We can thank the people of Whitney Pier for holding this significant community of African-Americans in their collective memory for so long. Because of Whitney

115 See, Tynes and Evans, *Telling the Truth*; Pearleen Oliver, *A Brief History of the Coloured Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1782-1953* (Halifax, 1953), Frank Boyd, *McKerrow: A Brief History of Blacks in Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1976), Beaton, "Religious Affiliation and Ethnic Identity", Mannette, "Stark Remnants of Blackpast", James Walker, *The Black Identity in Nova Scotia: Community and Institutions in Historical Perspective* (Halifax, 1985). Also, Donald E. Fairfax, "The Black Church and Youth"; Wayne Adams, "The Black Church and the Black Man"; Carolyn Homas, "The Black Church and the Black Woman"; Donald D. Skeir, "The African United Baptist Association and the Black Man in Nova Scotia", in Bridglal Pachai, ed., *Canadian Black Studies* (Halifax, 1979).

116 Walker, *History of Blacks in Canada*, pp. 81-2.

117 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Pier's long-standing oral tradition and because of newly uncovered archival sources, the work and social life of the American Blacks who lived in Sydney from 1901 to 1904, can now be better understood. Through their participation in the industrial experience of the Atlantic Region, these American black men, women and children have become part of Canadian history.