

The following research paper is different from those the *Journal* has published in the past. It is a research essay that probes the historical meaning of the African-American celebration of “Jubilee.” It pushes the reader to re-examine the usual White interpretation of the Civil War and other civil rights events.

This is one type of social science and humanities research. Overall, such research critically analyzes human social life and expression using qualitative and quantitative methods. The studies posit original arguments, question commonplace assumptions, and draw unique conclusions. The conclusions are used to better understand the human condition past and present, to plan and execute public policy, to cultivate an aesthetic sensibility, and, in general, to give more control to people throughout the world over their lives.

The structure of humanities and social science research papers can vary but, in general, researchers set forth a thesis statement that defines a question relevant to the particular field of study and to advancing knowledge. Researchers examine and analyze appropriate primary evidence and/or theory using logic and reason. We draw conclusions that tie the thesis to the analysis of the evidence and its application to the world today. These studies use the Chicago, Turabian, or MLA style citations.

This type of research draws on a history of critical analysis and an engagement in public debate that has stood at the heart of democracies for 2500 years beginning with Socrates’ concept of the examined life and Aristotle’s reflective citizenship. Social Science and humanities research is an intellectual engagement essential for democracies because it provides researchers and the readers of the research with the tools necessary to enter into increasingly sophisticated conversations over the complex issues in our modern world. It is “hands-on, minds-on” research at its core.

We hope you enjoy the following study and we look forward to receiving more such submissions for future journals.

## **African-American Jubilee: A Recurring Fifty-Year Rejuvenation**

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### **Abstract**

Jubilee is an occurrence known and celebrated by many different cultures and religions. It is also an African-American interpretation of the era directly after the Civil War, based on the common biblical interpretation of Leviticus 25:9-10. By examining civil rights primary documents every forty to fifty years from the Civil War to present day, Jubilee, or the idea of forgiveness and hope, is continually carried through. These documents from such famous figures as W.E.B. Dubois after the turn of the twentieth century in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* and moving speeches from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement show the importance of civil rights in their time period, and overtime, how the meaning of Jubilee evolved into a sign of progress for all. Jubilee is not just something of the past, but it is still continuing on today, transcending the color line, evolving into an American Jubilee.

### **Introduction**

Jubilee is an occasion known and celebrated by many different cultures and religions on fifty-year anniversaries. It comes from the Bible. In Leviticus 25:9-10, it says that every fifty years, “[C]ause the trumpet of Jubilee to sound.... Proclaim liberty throughout all the land... it shall be Jubilee for you and you shall return every man into his own possession and you shall return every man back to his family.”<sup>1</sup> Then the Bible passage goes on to detail forgiveness of debts and land redistribution. In the United States, Frederick Douglass

first used the term to emphasize his message in his speech, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro." He said "God speed the year of jubilee...when from their galling chains set free...to man his plundered rights again restore."<sup>2</sup> He was talking about how African-Americans were looking forward to their year of Jubilee when all slaves would be set free. African-Americans first celebrated Jubilee on "Emancipation Day," or "Jubilation Day," June 19, 1865, the day that federal troops came to report that the slaves were freed.<sup>3</sup> Besides just their physical freedom, African-Americans interpreted this Bible passage as meaning that they would receive what was rightfully theirs, that finally there would be equality with Jubilee being a representation of hope and forgiveness. Looking back more closely, using primary historical evidence, Jubilee can be applied to more than just the freed slaves after the Civil War. From the time of the end of the Civil War in 1865 until present day, about every forty to fifty years, the southern African-American community has experienced some form of Jubilee.

Right after the end of the Civil War, America moved into an era called Reconstruction. It lasted from 1865 to 1877 and was a period of rebuilding for much of America, especially the South. A way to understand this time period from an African-American point of view is through the first-hand account by J.T. Trowbridge. He was a famous American author who wrote many novels, juvenile tales, and worked under the pseudonym Paul Creyton. One of his works, "The President...Seemed to Forget" in his book *The South*, was published after the Civil War in 1866. During his trip to the South, he saw a village of several ex-slaves, or Freedmen, after they had received their land allotments. They had received them through the Southern Homestead Act. This Act confiscated the land of previous slave plantation owners and divided it into forty-acre plots. Freedmen were given one of these forty-acre plots where they had to pay six percent of its

value every year, live on it, and farm it for three years before they could receive title. Trowbridge described the village:

I found it a thrifty village, occupied chiefly by freedmen... A sash-factory and blacksmith's shop, shoemakers' shops and stores, enlivened the streets. The business of the place was carried on chiefly by freedmen, many of whom were becoming wealthy, and paying heavy taxes to the government. Every house had its wood-pile, poultry and pigs, and little garden devoted to corn and vegetables. Many a one had its stable and cow, and horse and cart. The village was surrounded by freedmen's farms, occupying the abandoned plantations of recent Rebels [Confederates]. The crops looked well, though the soil was said to be poor. Indeed, this was by far the thriftiest portion of Virginia I had seen.<sup>4</sup>

This description of what the ex-slaves received after the end of the Civil War is exactly what Jubilee is all about. Freedom was what the ex-slaves wanted and expected after the end of the war to escape so many of the injustices of slavery. After the war, with the Emancipation Proclamation, the slaves were freed, and with the Southern Homestead Act, the land was re-distributed, which was so important to them: land, labor, and freedom. This is an example that shows the beginning of Jubilee in modern United States history.

The turn of the twentieth century was also a pivotal time period for the southern African-American community. One famous leader and Progressive reformer during this time period was W.E.B. DuBois. During his lifetime he was the founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the editor of its magazine *The Crisis*. In 1903, he wrote the book *The Souls of Black Folk* explaining his dissatisfaction with the economic

policies of Booker T. Washington. This book was aimed at the southern African-American community. It pointed out the flaws in Washington's teachings, namely wanting African-Americans to give up, at least for the time being, three things: first, political authority; second, persistence on civil rights; and lastly, higher education for "Negro youth." Instead, Washington wanted African-Americans to focus their efforts on industrial education, the accumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South. Dubois argued instead for higher education for "Negro youth" and for equal civil rights for all African-Americans. He felt that Washington did not value the privilege and right of voting but rather belittled the effects of caste distinctions. This book was crucial because at the time of its publication America had just ended the Spanish American War (which included combat in the Philippines). The aftermath of this war exposed how White Americans had been treating African-Americans because they were now doing the same thing to the people of the Philippines. White Americans questioned if Filipinos had the intellectual and moral capacity to become equal citizens in a democracy because of their dark skin color, questions that White Americans had been asking of African-Americans for so long. Renewed focus on racial oppression through the people of the Philippines brought the long fought battle of African-American civil rights to the fore. The meaning of freedom was different to these two groups of people: African-Americans wanted equal rights and Filipinos wanted to finally have their revolution and national independence, but essentially they both just wanted *their* freedom not to be decided by White Americans. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois said "By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to men, clinging unwaveringly to those great words which the sons of the Fathers would fain forget: 'we hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are

created equal.”<sup>5</sup> DuBois believed that African-Americans needed to peacefully continue to push for their undeniable rights. At this crucial turn of the century, experiencing a new form of Jubilee about forty years after slaves had been given their freedom, African-Americans in the South were moving forward to equalize their rights. DuBois inspired the African-American community to continue to fight for their political power, civil rights, and higher education for African-American youth, the three things Booker T. Washington was asking them to give up.

To this day, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is one of the most famous activists in American history. He was a strong civil rights worker and a member of the executive committee of the NAACP. He became not only the symbolic leader of African-Americans, but also a world figure. At the age of thirty-five, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The events of the Civil Rights Movement are what Dr. King is most well-known for now. In the South, the majority of the public sector was segregated by signs that said “White” and “Colored,” such as over the entrance to buildings, drinking fountains, train carriages, restrooms, etc. One of the significant acts of the movement was the court case *Brown v. Board of Education*. This case rebutted the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* which had upheld “separate but equal.” The new court case claimed that segregation was inherently unequal because it associated superiority with only one group. This case was a limited doctrine applied to integration in public schools. Another defining moment in the Civil Rights Movement was the result of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott she helped to start after she refused to give up her bus seat to a White man. This is the cause that brought Dr. King to give a speech in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 5, 1955. In this speech, Dr. King talked about how the whole situation had been inevitable, but he was glad that it had been raised to the public eye “with

such a fine person as Rosa Parks.”<sup>6</sup> He said the movement they were starting with their boycott was right, following the non-violent teachings of Jesus. He believed this was their time, a time to stand up for their rights, and in doing so they “injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization.”<sup>7</sup> At one part in his speech he says, “We, the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity. And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality.”<sup>8</sup> Dr. King meant that these were their rights –African-American rights– the basic rights that all Americans deserved. The Montgomery bus boycott, which was a boycott of public transportation, lasted 381 days and ended only after the White business community complained about how much it was costing them. Finally, southern African-Americans were gaining their rights about fifty years after the teachings of Dubois. They were on a much more equal level with White Americans, gaining what had always been rightfully theirs. The court decision and the boycott forced the White South to change. Through unity and activism, the African-American community received more equality and hope, another time of Jubilee



Jubilee more fittingly applies to southern segregation, which was more pronounced, than to segregation in the North. In looking at the North, or within a time period less than fifty years, the trends of Jubilee do not apply. For example, this 1960's image represented the military aspect of the Black Power Movement.<sup>9</sup> It shows the lack of hope northern African-Americans had in the non-violent movement of Dr. King. There are, in black and white, seven young African-American men with afros and sunglasses, dressed in slacks, black leather shoes, and collared jackets, their clothing suggesting military garb. All of the men are standing, with their arms crossed, in front of a doorway, blocking it. They all have stern, focused looks on their faces, and the man on the end appears to be holding a noose. They are all staring straight ahead, appearing to look into a crowd or group in front of them. This image represents the Black Power Movement of the 1960's and 1870's, fathered by Malcolm X. "Black Power" became a rallying cry for those who felt bitter about the government's failed attempt to stop violence against civil rights workers. Eric Foner, an American historian, wrote that "Black Power means Black Freedom... Black Power suggested everything from the election of more black officials to the belief that black Americans were a colonized people whose freedom could only be won through a revolutionary struggle for self-determination."<sup>10</sup> Many of these activists were African-Americans who had moved to the North during the Great Migration between 1910 and 1920, when half a million left the South in search of higher wages and better education during the WWI era. These migrants moved to the large cities and as a result inner-city ghettos were created from Northern segregation policies. In the 1960's ghetto uprisings, African-Americans rioted against White police, especially in the Watts uprising of 1965. Here, in the African-American ghetto of Los Angeles, just days after President Johnson signed the Voting Rights



Act, fifty thousand people took part in the “rebellion” against the police and White-owned businesses in African-American neighborhoods. They were protesting the high African-American unemployment rate. Many Americans feared a racial civil war. During other northern protests in 1966, Dr. King joined the Chicago Freedom Movement to end discrimination by employers and unions, to gain equality in access to mortgages, to integrate public housing, and to construct decent low-income housing in the North. His efforts were not as effective against northern inequality. The Black Power Movement was a defiant stand against Northern inequality that showed activism, but not Jubilee.

Approximately fifty years after the successful protests for civil rights in the South, the African-American community made one of the largest advancements in history with the election of the first African-American President, Barack Obama. On November 4, 2008, 95% of African-American voters voted for Obama. Also in this election, 43% of White voters voted for Obama, 67% of Hispanics; 56% of women, and 49% of men.<sup>11</sup> The overall turnout of voters and votes for Obama proved historically significant, illustrating the success of the struggles the African-American population had fought since the time of slavery. To review Obama’s first one hundred days in office, Lou Cannon, a journalist, compared Obama’s plans and ideas to that of previous presidents, especially the fortieth President of the United States, Ronald Reagan.<sup>12</sup> Cannon argued that Reagan reformed the nation’s agenda and political language more than any other president since Franklin Roosevelt. Reagan quickly restored devastated public opinion with an overall approval rating in the 60-68% range, one of the many similarities Reagan and Obama share according to Cannon. They are also similar in that they are practical Presidents, movingly cautiously toward their plans. Their biggest, not as positive, similarity is their “tendency to indulge best-case

economic scenarios.” Reagan never actually gave a balanced budget to Congress and he increased shares of GDP spending to a high of 24.4%, quickly increasing the national debt to \$3 trillion. There are some worries that President Obama might do the same, with the Congressional Budget Office estimating that his spending plans will increase the national debt over the next ten years by an additional \$9.3 trillion. In the end though, their biggest similarity is their overall appeal to the American people. An African-American man becoming President of the United States is one of the greatest examples of Jubilee, of forgiveness and hope, showing how far our society has come.

In conclusion, from the time of Reconstruction in 1865 to the present day, the southern African-American community has experienced a Jubilee about every forty to fifty years. During Reconstruction, Congress abolished slavery and tried to redistribute land with the Southern Homestead Act to give ex-slaves what was rightfully theirs. At the turn of the twentieth century, African-Americans, following the leadership of Dubois and his writings, proved their ability to move forward towards equality. Fifty years later, during one of the most significant moments in African-American civil rights history, Dr. King helped to change southern society drastically. After all of this, American culture reached one of the highest landmarks in 2008, just fifty years after the Civil Rights Movement in the South, with the historic election of the nation’s first African-American President. Before, Jubilee was a basis of African-American hope, but it has now transcended the color line to become an American Jubilee.

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