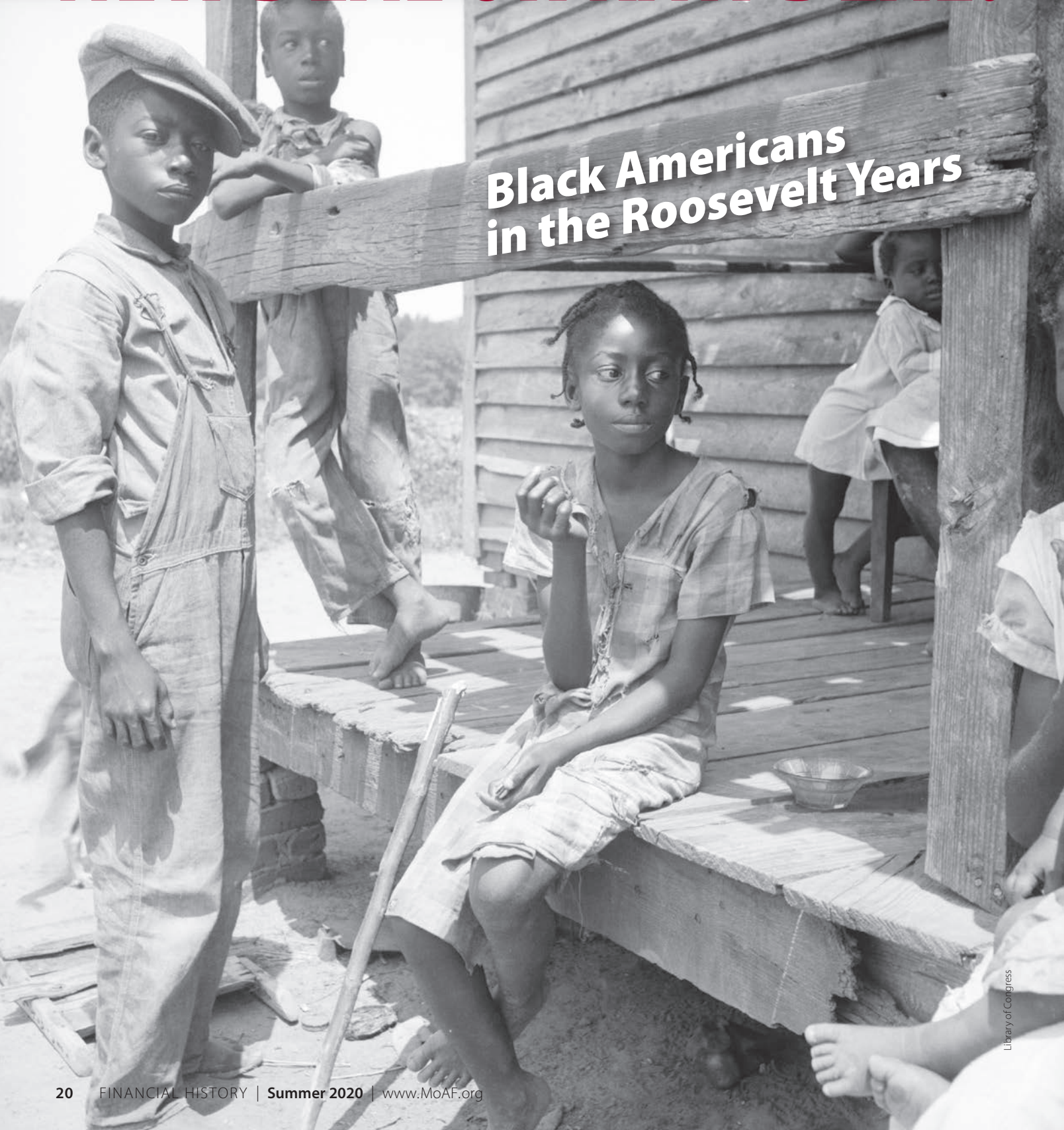


NEW DEAL OR RAW DEAL?

Black Americans
in the Roosevelt Years



By Jill Watts

During the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Black Americans were appointed to federal posts at historically large numbers. Together they eventually formed an advisory body known as the Black Cabinet, which was led by the crusading educator Mary McLeod Bethune and the brilliant economist Robert Weaver. But early on Black inclusion was met with stiff resistance, and appointees had to fight for both a voice in the administration as well as relief for the Black community.

IN AUGUST 1933, Robert Weaver returned to his academic post at Greensboro's North Carolina Agriculture and Technical College. He dreaded going back. While he was a popular professor, he found teaching there a chore. He felt smothered by Greensboro's omnipresent segregationist traditions and laws; he isolated himself, refusing to patronize segregated stores and entertainment venues.

In Greensboro and its surroundings, Weaver became exposed to the rawest versions of white southern racism. As he traveled in and out of town, he passed sharecroppers' shacks and the cotton and tobacco fields where Black farmers barely scratched out a living. The Depression had hit North Carolina hard. By fall 1933, 25% of all families there depended on some kind of public or private assistance; the NAACP estimated that the rate was far higher for the Black rural population.

And poverty haunted not only rural areas but also the cities. The textile industry was one of North Carolina's largest employers, and it had collapsed with the Depression's onset. Large textile mills stood on the hills surrounding Greensboro—they had dominated the city's economic life. As the economy deteriorated,

Black mill workers were laid off or cut back to starvation wages at a far greater rate than white workers.

At night, Weaver meticulously pored over the numbers, mining them for irrefutable proof that Black communities were in a downward spiral. That summer he tracked the data of 12,000 Black cotton-mill workers nationwide who had managed to hang on to their jobs. He determined that 75% of them were grossly underpaid and overworked, despite the National Recovery Administration's mandates regarding minimum wages and maximum hours. Times were hard and people took any job they could get—even if they earned almost nothing. This was, as Kansas City's *Plaindealer* pointed out, a “new kind of slavery.”

As Weaver walked Greensboro's Black neighborhoods, he witnessed firsthand the impact of the Great Depression and the suffering it caused. Families were homeless; children went hungry. For Weaver, the experience marked the beginning of a transformation. His determination to resist American racism grew. “The lash of prejudice is not the overt lash; it's the subtle lash of feeling yourself up against an iron block of prejudice that is the most cutting. Because I had been protected, I felt the cut more deeply,” he reflected.

The Robert Weaver who came to Greensboro was a man of limited but rare privileges. In 1933, he was only 26, but he was impressive in nearly every way. Handsome, with a chiseled jaw and a sly smile, Weaver radiated confidence, pride and dignity. His grandfather, DC dentist Robert Tanner Freeman, remained a celebrated figure in Washington's Black community. His grandmother, Rachel Turner, born out of wedlock to white parents, had been raised by an African American family and lived her life as a Black woman. Weaver's mother, Florence was born shortly before her father's early death. Rachel Turner remarried in 1890—and well at that. Her second husband, Albert J. Farley, was a clerk for the Supreme Court, and his salary enabled the family to move to the middle class, interracial Washington, DC suburb of Brookland.

Weaver's father, Mortimer Grover Weaver, came from far humbler origins. He was born on a farm in Fauquier County, VA. His mother was a domestic and his father was a former white slaveholder who had sided with the Confederacy. As a child, Mortimer worked in the fields. But when he reached his teens, he was sent off to attend high school in the District of Columbia. A few years after graduation, he secured a prized position in the city's post office. A careful guardian of his earnings, Mortimer Weaver saved his money and, in 1901, married Florence Freeman. He purchased a home in Brookland and, eventually, a seaside cottage for weekend getaways. The Weavers quickly added two sons to their family, Mortimer Grover Jr. and Robert Clifton.

The Weavers were intensely proud of their sons and were determined that they should have the finest that could be offered to African American children. The closest Black secondary school was the top in the country—Paul Laurence Dunbar High School. Dunbar was rigorous and challenging, requiring students to master all academic disciplines. In Weaver's era, 80% of the school's graduates attended northern colleges; many were admitted to the most prestigious in the nation.

Robert Weaver graduated near the top of his class at Dunbar. In 1925, he enrolled at Harvard and declared an economics major. After finishing his bachelor's degree with honors, he then attempted to do what no African American had ever done before—earn a PhD from Harvard's extremely conservative economics department. It was not a welcoming environment. Weaver remembered that the department's most influential scholar, Frank Taussig, “didn't think that Black men had aptitude for economics.” Nonetheless, Weaver excelled. After passing his comprehensive examinations with high marks, he focused on crafting his thesis, entitled “The High Wage Theory of Prosperity.” In 1931, he headed to Greensboro to teach.

On weekends, he often returned to Brookland to work with his long-time friend John P. Davis. They founded an

Impoverished Black children in the Mississippi Delta, July 1936. Dorothea Lange, photographer.



Mary McLeod Bethune, Black Cabinet leader and the National Youth Administration's Director of Negro Activities, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and NYA Executive Director Aubrey Williams at the opening session of the National Conference on Problems of the Negro and Negro Youth sponsored by the NYA in Washington, January 7, 1937.

Bettmann

organization, the Negro Industrial League, dedicated to exposing the weaknesses becoming alarmingly apparent in the New Deal's main jobs program under the National Recovery Administration. Testifying before congressional committees throughout 1933, Davis and Weaver gained increasing attention in the Black press with Davis emerging as the charismatic leader and Weaver appearing as the dignified academician with the facts and figures.

Weaver had also set his sights on a government job. In the spring of 1933, just after President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office, he had begun attempts at securing a federal post. Government work had been a tradition in the Weaver family and among their social set. Yet, like other African Americans seeking federal employment as the New Deal dawned, Weaver was repeatedly rejected. That summer, after the Negro

Industrial League made its first splash, Davis began lobbying for the National Recovery Administration to give his partner a position. The agency's answer was a flat no.

In late August 1933, Weaver learned that the Roosevelt administration had established the Office of the Special Adviser on the Economic Status of Negroes. The idea had originated with the Rosenwald Fund's Edwin Embree and Will Alexander, who had been peddling it around Washington throughout the summer. Alexander had become convinced that Roosevelt "was a sort of messiah" and that "perhaps the next stage in race relations in this country would sort of center around what happened in Washington, DC." The Rosenwald Fund proposed to underwrite the special adviser's salary and office expenses for the first few years. That would allow Roosevelt to avoid a confirmation process that might trigger retaliation against the

New Deal by southern Democrats, who consistently opposed any kind of support for African Americans.

Reportedly, the Secretary of the Interior, Harold L. Ickes, a Chicagoan with Rosenwald ties, finally got the plan in front of the President. Ickes could be irascible, but as the past president of the Windy City's NAACP, he had established a reputation for being liberal on the issue of race. Roosevelt approved the proposal and placed the office under Ickes, allowing him to choose the man to occupy the special adviser's position. Rather than consult with the many African American leaders he knew personally, Ickes demanded Alexander and Embree provide him with a list of names. Ickes picked the last name on their list—Clark Foreman, a white southerner.

The reaction from the Black community was shock and dismay. The NAACP



Clark Foreman, first head of the Office of the Special Adviser on the Economic Status of Negroes, pictured in 1946 at a Citizen's Political Action Committee meeting.



In 1934, Black Cabinet founder Robert C. Weaver would succeed Clark Foreman and take over leadership of the Office of the Special Adviser on the Economic Status of Negroes. Weaver became the first Black American to serve in a White House Cabinet after President Lyndon Johnson appointed him the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in 1966.

telegrammed Ickes, protesting that there were numerous African Americans, with equal or superior educational credentials, better suited for the job. *The Chicago Defender* observed, "It was certainly bad enough to select any white man for this particular post, but to select one from Georgia was certainly adding insult to injury."

After Foreman's selection was announced, the NAACP's Roy Wilkins confided to the Associated Negro Press's wire-service editor Claude Barnett that the Rosenwald Fund had intentionally made an end run around the NAACP. In his opinion, the special adviser would accomplish nothing; the naïve Foreman had been put in to block, rather than to address, Black grievances. Wilkins declared that the NAACP would call for the appointment to be "bitterly fought by all Negro organizations, especially the Negro press, not on the grounds that Foreman is personally objectionable, but that no white man can speak for Negroes in this time of stress."

This was the message the NAACP's lead Washington attorney, Charles H. Houston, carried directly to Ickes. Face-to-face

with Ickes, he argued that an African American appointee was far more qualified to be a special adviser on issues critical to Black Americans. Ickes emphatically disagreed. The "time" was "not ripe" for a Black appointment, he sputtered. A white man had access to people and places, both on Capitol Hill and in the South, that were off-limits to Blacks.

Houston next confronted Foreman, who, after some waffling, admitted that he too believed there were more capable African Americans who could have filled the special adviser's job. In an attempt to demonstrate his commitment to Black inclusion, Foreman pledged to fill out his staff with Black assistants and secretaries. He would carry his fight against discrimination beyond the Interior Department and battle it in agencies throughout the federal government.

The Black community had good reason to be skeptical of Foreman. While he was an eager champion of Black causes and had worked on racial affairs for both the Rosenwald Foundation and Alexander's Commission on Interracial Cooperation, Foreman's Georgian roots ran deep and were tied to the slaveholding past. His

grandfather had fought for the Confederacy and had been a leader among white southern Democrats. Foreman was raised in the traditions of the white South, where racial divisions were a given and African Americans were presumed naturally to occupy an inferior position in society.

But by 1933, the 31-year-old Foreman had rejected white Southern ideologies and had amassed an impressive résumé. He had studied at Harvard, where he met W.E.B. Du Bois. After finishing a doctoral dissertation on Black education at Columbia University, he worked for Will Alexander on race relations. Despite these accomplishments, Foreman had not been the top choice of either Alexander or Embree for the special adviser post. He possessed an abundance of reckless youthful energy and zeal that some, both Black and white, found insufferably brash and overbearing.

When Foreman landed in the Department of the Interior in August 1933, he found plenty of problems. He confirmed that the studies Weaver and Davis had produced were true: The National Recovery Administration's jobs programs were either turning African Americans away

or paying Black workers disastrously low wages. He also discovered that racial bias ran rife throughout the New Deal.

New Deal discrimination was increasingly institutionalizing racist practices into programs and policies at the federal level, and Foreman embraced the fight to end it as his personal mission. One of his first acts was to decline to accept a secretary from the all-white federal pool and demand that Ickes allow him to hire an African American woman. The interior secretary agreed and said he knew just the right person—a fellow Chicagoan, Lucia Mae Pitts.

Besides being a top-notch secretary, Pitts brought to the special adviser's office the much-needed perspective of a Black woman. After completing her secretarial degree, Pitts worked for the Tuskegee Institute, a New York theater, Atlanta's African American newspaper syndicate and the Federal Council of Churches. In the early 1930s, she landed a job in the Illinois House of Representatives' stenographic pool. The pool's only African American secretary, Pitts endured the fridity of her white coworkers and elected officials. But one figure welcomed her, Anna Wilmarth Ickes, a representative from Winnetka, IL, and the wife of Harold Ickes, who was then a crusading local reformer.

When Foreman came calling, Pitts had fallen victim to the state of Illinois's Depression-era layoffs. She jumped at his offer and headed to Washington. On September 5, 1933 she became the first African American woman to serve as a secretary to a white federal administrator at the capital.

Pitts was eager to work but she refused to be flattered and, like other African Americans, harbored serious reservations about Foreman. At the beginning, she maintained a cool, yet professional distance from her new boss. Foreman later described her attitude as "rude," while she characterized it as "unbending."

Pitts remembered the New Deal's formative period as "hectic and busy." Relief and recovery programs were organized and reorganized rapidly. Some were housed within preexisting divisions in cabinet departments; others were new, independent agencies whose purpose required oversight from one or more cabinet secretaries. There was competition among programs and cabinet secretaries, especially for funding. But all those serving in the New Deal realized the seriousness of



President Franklin D. Roosevelt greets scientist and inventor George Washington Carver with a handshake during his second term of office, at a time when whites generally refused to shake hands with African Americans.

Hulton-Deutsch

their charge; they were there to rescue the nation from economic catastrophe. Foreman had already rushed into battle. He spent long days trying to pressure cabinet officials and New Deal heads to appoint African Americans to their divisions.

The iciness between Pitts and Foreman quickly thawed, as she became convinced of his sincerity. He spent long hours in the office receiving individuals and delegations asking for help for themselves or economically devastated Black communities. Pitts not only witnessed but also contributed to the expansion of African American federal appointments, as Foreman sought her recommendations for expanding the Black secretarial corps. He also immediately added "field representative" to her list of duties and dispatched her to Virginia Beach to survey the damage from a deadly hurricane that had left numerous Black families homeless.

While Foreman may have earned Pitts's respect, he still had a long way to go with the Black public. He knew that with each passing day, African Americans were tumbling deeper into economic despair.

He tenaciously charged ahead pushing for jobs and resources for Black citizens. He aggressively buttonholed Roosevelt's cabinet heads and became an unwelcome figure in cabinet and New Deal offices.

Foreman eventually stumbled onto one official willing to hear him out, Secretary of Commerce Daniel C. Roper. A fellow southerner, Roper was eager to do damage control on race relations. The Commerce Department was a major player in the National Recovery Administration, and Roper had taken much of the heat for that program's bigoted practices. Roper had compounded his problems by dismissing a respected African American appointee, a Republican holdover who advised the department on Black-owned businesses. Then he made an unpopular decision even worse by abolishing that position. African Americans demanded the secretary restore the post and either rehire its previous occupant or find a replacement. So, when Foreman came calling in the late summer, Roper seized the chance to fix his public image.

At Foreman's suggestion, Roper agreed to sponsor a conference on the economic

problems of African Americans. The Justice Department's Black adviser Robert Vann was recruited to chair the meeting, which included Black intellectuals, leaders and activists from across the nation. They met in Washington in September 1933 and for two days discussed strategies to speed up relief to Black communities.

The high point of the conference came when Roper, while addressing the gathering, announced his plan to restore the recently eliminated African American post. He then asked the group to put forward names for the position. While the delegates may have been encouraged to hear that Commerce would hire a Black adviser, they agreed that no one person could handle the overwhelming needs of Black America. At the end of the meeting, they informed Roper that they had organized themselves into an official advisory committee. Although they insisted on being based in the Commerce Department, they demanded review power over all decisions affecting African Americans throughout the New Deal. John P. Davis seized the opportunity and lobbied for the department to include Weaver on the advisory committee. He was told no.

While some noted that the Commerce Department's advisory committee on African American affairs threatened to compete with Foreman's office, no doubt many realized that it also had the potential to emerge as the New Deal's Black Cabinet. But that hope died quickly. In the end, Roper named the Urban League's Eugene Kinckle Jones to the Commerce post.

Tall, charming and athletic, the Urban League executive, at the age of 48, was strikingly fit and distinguished. Raised in Richmond, VA, the son of two respected and race-conscious college professors, Jones had been given many opportunities, and he embraced the responsibility of challenging American racism. After earning degrees at Virginia Union and Cornell, he took a job as a field inspector for the Urban League in 1911. The organization was only a year old, and he fully embraced the chance to shape the Urban League's programs dedicated to addressing the conditions faced by African Americans in the cities. In 1917, he became the organization's executive secretary.

Jones's addition to the New Deal team was received with applause, in part prompted by Commerce Department press releases. *The New York Times*

celebrated Jones as "one of the foremost authorities on the problems of Negro life in the cities." Jones's achievement was certainly a milestone. When he arrived on the job in late October 1933, he became the first upper-level leader of a national civil rights organization to occupy an advisory post in the federal government.

Yet for Jones, the transition from Urban League head to Commerce Department adviser was rough. Despite his efforts to rise above the quarrels over his appointment, he entered office under a cloud of suspicion. Additionally, to some Jones seemed a bad fit. A nationally recognized specialist in Black labor, he now headed a division dedicated to the recovery and expansion of Black businesses.

Although Jones was hired at \$5,600 a year (a respectable salary although lower than that of other New Deal officials) and given a spacious suite with two offices, he had no staff and no authority to pursue projects or investigations. It quickly appeared that his role in New Deal relief, outside of serving as the subject of a publicity campaign, was murky at best. Jones soon found himself under a mountain of complaints regarding New Deal inequalities, many from the Urban League itself. With no resources, he was blocked from offering any response.

The fanfare around Jones's appointment was certainly not enough to satisfy those demanding that Roosevelt respond to the crises in Black America. Stories of African Americans struggling against poverty filled the pages of the nation's Black newspapers. Already cash-poor communities watched helplessly as food and fuel prices started to rise when National Recovery Administration wage and price regulations kicked in. As the cost of living increased, Black incomes continued to plummet. One African American journalist reported that "a conservative estimate would place 90 percent of Harlem's population in the breadline."

Howard University Professor Kelly Miller urged African Americans to abandon cities and return to the countryside, where they might make a living off the land. "The city Negro has no definite function or assured status," he told *The New York Times*. "The farm is the Negro's best chance and the best help the government can render him in this emergency is to aid him to avail himself of this chance." Foreman agreed and began to advocate

for African Americans to be admitted to the programs run by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, which placed families on collective farms to communally work the land. Those programs had only accepted white applicants and turned away Black Americans seeking aid.

Far from making him more popular, Foreman's proposal actually damaged his reputation further. He did not advocate for African Americans to be integrated into preexisting projects. Instead he called for separate Blacks-only collective farms. Such plans convinced some Black leaders that the white southerner was really in the business of promoting segregation.

Furthermore, the justice system continued to fail Black citizens in the most horrific ways. Throughout the summer and fall of 1933, the national media was filled with stories of the "Scottsboro Boys," nine African American youths, ranging in age from 13 to 20, who had been arrested for allegedly gang-raping two young white women. While there were both Black and white Americans who spoke out on behalf of the accused, establishing that the charges were groundless, in late fall two of the nine were found guilty and sentenced to die in the electric chair by an Alabama jury. (All nine were much later exonerated.)

About the same time, George Armstrong of Princess Anne, MD, was jailed for an alleged assault of a white woman. While he awaited a hearing and an opportunity to defend himself, a white mob pushed past 25 state police officers assigned to protect him, dragged him through the town, hung him and then burned his body.

Just over 130 miles away, in Washington, DC, President Roosevelt sat silent in the White House. 💰

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