“Won’t You Please Help Me Get My Son Home”: Peonage, Patronage, and Protest in the World War II Urban South

Risa L. Goluboff

During World War II, young African Americans from southern cities left their homes for what appeared to be patriotic job opportunities harvesting sugar cane in Florida. When returning workers described peonage and slavery instead, parents worried about their children’s safety. After attempting to contact their children directly, the parents appealed to the federal government. Their decision to mobilize the federal government and the strategies they used to do so reveal important aspects of wartime African American protest that historians have previously overlooked. This article focuses on families instead of atomized individuals, revealing the importance of families, neighborhoods, and communities to the emergence of rights consciousness. It also complicates the historiographical dichotomy between rights consciousness and patronage relationships. Patrons served as liaisons with law enforcement agencies and provided links to a law-centered rights consciousness. For many historians, until protest exits the realm of patronage ties, it is not really protest, and once interactions with government themselves become bureaucratized they cease to be protest any longer. The efforts of the peons’ families challenge both ends of this narrow category of protest; they both used patronage relations to lodge their protests and also forged rights consciousness within the legal process itself.

Risa L. Goluboff is a joint degree candidate for a Ph.D. in history at Princeton University and a J.D. at Yale Law School. In a different form, this work was presented to the American Studies Association 1998 Annual Conference. The author would like to thank Bob Gordon, Nell Painter, Daniel Rodgers, Todd Stevens, James Turner, and the participants in the Modern America Workshop at Princeton University for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this work. The author especially thanks Dirk Hartog, Ariela Dubler, and Richard Schragger for their assistance and support.

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0897-6546/99/2404-777S01.00
Harvey Lee Branner's parents were worried. Sixteen-year-old Harvey Lee had left Memphis in early November of 1942 to cut sugar cane in Clewiston, Florida. It was already January 1943, and rumors about the United States Sugar Corporation's "slave camp" abounded in Memphis's African American neighborhood of Hollywood. Some of the men with whom Harvey Lee had gone to Florida had already returned, spreading horrific stories of night watchmen brandishing guns, guards shooting people as they tried to flee, and workers swimming across lakes and canals to escape to freedom (Earlie Fisher in Johnson 1942, 16–17). Along with other workers' parents and relatives, Harvey Lee's mother, Christianor Branner, sought help from Zannie Jones, the business manager of the Junior Herd of Elks in Hollywood (Keane 1942, 9). Jones helped Christianor send Harvey Lee a special delivery letter, which was returned to her with the notation "not called for" written on it. Jones told agent John Keane of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that although he had written several letters on behalf of Hollywood families to M. E. Von Mach, the personnel director of the United States Sugar Corporation (USSC), he had received no reply. Von Mach did respond to Christianor's own letter, however. He told her that Harvey Lee wanted to stay at the Miami Locks Plantation Village where he was working and that he was free to return home at any time. In light of all the rumors, Christianor took little comfort in Von Mach's reassurances.

As February approached, Harvey Lee's father, Walter Branner, decided to go to the FBI field office himself to report his son's predicament. As Walter told the story, in November his son had seen an advertisement for the cane-cutting job and decided to go. Walter had received only a single letter from Harvey Lee in the almost four months since. Although that letter contained no complaints, Walter was suspicious. The returning neighborhood boys and men had told stories of mail tampering and censorship, so Walter thought that Harvey Lee had been afraid to tell the truth for fear that his letter would be read before being sent. Walter was even more concerned because Harvey Lee had not written back to any of Walter's subsequent letters, the special delivery letter Zannie Jones had helped send was returned, and Harvey Lee had said he would be home in a month in his first and only letter. More than a month had passed. Von Mach's letter, which his wife had given to Zannie Jones, did little to assuage Walter's fears. Having tried to contact his son on his own and then through a community leader, Walter Branner finally approached the FBI on his own to ask for help (Keane 1942, 11–12).

This article will describe how parents like the Branners mobilized assistance to retrieve their children from Florida. Special agents of the FBI recorded similar stories again and again in southern cities during 1942 and
1943. Young men and women\textsuperscript{1} had left their homes for what appeared to be lucrative, patriotic, and exciting job opportunities in Florida. When returning workers described peonage and slavery instead, parents increasingly worried about the safety of their children.\textsuperscript{2} They first attempted to contact the workers directly. When these attempts largely failed, the parents turned to the federal government for help. While some wrote directly to Washington, others visited FBI field offices in person. At first they arrived at FBI offices with employers, white elites, or prominent blacks by their sides, but as time passed they more often arrived unaccompanied. Their decision to mobilize the federal government and the strategies they used to do so reveal important aspects of wartime African American protest that historians have previously overlooked.

In fact, historians of the emerging rights consciousness of African Americans during World War II have largely overlooked the South altogether.\textsuperscript{3} The existing literature largely focuses on the migration of men to the North and their experiences in industry and the military. Because of this emphasis on northern organizations and institutions, the central actors of

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\item Those who responded to the advertisements were not all male. Many of the migrants mention that women and girls traveled to Florida with them, but they rarely appear in the camps as described by the men or as witnesses afterward. Although women appeared to migrate to Florida, none appear to have escaped, and none were interviewed by the FBI. In a letter to the FBI, Ousley Perkins suggested that it might have been more difficult for women to escape. His brother Joe could probably escape, "But he have his wife with him and don't want to leave her in this Place" (Perkins 1942). As a result, there is very little information about possibly different treatment for men and women. Some returning male Alabama workers noted that they could either eat in the mess hall or purchase food from the commissary and “have one of the women cook” the meals. The FBI reported, “The boys and girls were housed separately, however, they said that they were not discouraged from finding a girl that they liked and living with her. All three [interviewed here] admitted that they had done this” (Morrow 1942, 6). According to another account, men and women were housed together, and the women were “mistreated the same as the men workers” (Greenlea n.d.). T. H. Steel wrote that the “ridding bosses is using” girls ages 16 to 20 “if they will yeal to them” (1943). Women’s experiences outside of these few comments is impossible to decipher. My evidence is thus biased toward men, and I will refer to the workers as men.

\item Peonage is a form of involuntary servitude in which one is forced to labor in order to work out a debt. Peonage violates the Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution and the Peonage Act of 1867 (14 Stat. 546 [1867]), which had initially targeted Mexican-derived peonage in the American Southwest. By the turn of the century, peonage reformers had turned the statute to the service of African Americans in the South. In Bailey v. Alabama (219 U.S. 219 [1911]), the Court invalidated an Alabama statute criminalizing certain breaches of contract. Three years later, in Reynolds v. United States (235 U.S. 133 [1914]), the Court upheld a criminal prosecution for peonage and in the process struck down Alabama’s criminal surety statute. Such statutes, and peonage itself, survived throughout the interwar period nonetheless. By World War II, peonage cases were rare, and successful convictions even rarer. Although this case began as a peonage prosecution, due to the DOJ efforts to expand enforcement of civil rights laws (discussed below), it broadened into involuntary servitude and slavery more generally.

\item This historiography includes Dalfume 1968; Kelley 1994; Korstad and Lichtenstein 1988; Modell, Goulden, and Magnusson 1989; Sitkoff 1971; Samuel 1996; Wynn 1993. The main exceptions to the historiography's northern emphasis are Korstad and Lichtenstein's discussion of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and Kelley's discussion of Birmingham.
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this article—call them the unorganized, the unaffiliated, the marginal—rarely enter the historical literature. The parents of the workers caught in the USSC’s peonage mobilized the government not because of their involvement with a political party or a radical protest organization; they did so in order to retrieve their children from a distant place and an apparently dangerous situation. Although some local leaders of the NAACP became involved, neither the peons nor their relatives were members of that organization.

Peonage complainants were parents, first and foremost. They were also domestics, laborers, servicemen. Although they do not conform to the northern model of militant mass protest and NAACP and union membership, the protest strategies these parents resorted to also underwent a transformation during the war years. Documenting that transformation among unorganized southerners—previously overlooked in favor of the transformation of organized northerners—is the first task of this article.

My second task is to reevaluate the trajectory from patronage to rights consciousness described in the existing literature. From the post- Brown vs. Board of Education (347 U.S. 483 [1954]) perspective of recent historians, rights appear as the obvious strategic choice, the most effective way of securing governmental assistance in redressing racial discrimination and inequality. Writing within this post-Brown perspective, historians see the change from attitudes of supplication and invocations of paternalism to assertive, even aggressive, rights-conscious demands on government agencies as a triumph of the future over the past. Only when many African Americans moved North with the war and entered impersonal relationships with whites through industrial work and the military did they finally throw off paternalism’s encumbrances and manage to mobilize the federal government. The northern rights consciousness of the historiography emerges out of organizational and mass experiences. It occurs within unions, the military, the Urban League, and the NAACP. Proof of political consciousness takes the form of increased membership in such groups and participation in their organized activities. Historians view the kinds of paternalistic ties more characteristic of southern than northern black life at mid-century as a hindrance to effective mobilization of government protection.4

Stories like the Branners’ suggest a reevaluation of the historiography’s assumption of rights as preeminent resources and patronage as a deficient

4. Modell et al., e.g., describe southern African Americans as “un-'modernized' persons” (1989, 846) who were “in a relationship to their employers that was not a freely formed and freely entered cash nexus.” They argue that “[t]hrough much of the South (even the urban South, to a degree), this fact influenced both relations between whites and blacks and the cultural outlook of blacks themselves” (1989, 845). It was upon these “un-'modernized' persons” that the effects of new work relationships “governed by impersonal, public, rational rules aimed at task-specific efficiency” were greatest; these new relationships “contributed to their unwillingness to accept the prewar structure of racial dominance that characterized the nation” (1989, 838).
and lacking second-best. They remind us that African Americans in World War II lived in a post-Plessy v. Ferguson (163 U.S. 537 [1896]), pre-Brown world in which the federal courts had not yet vindicated the rights of African Americans in any significant way, and the president had not yet dispatched troops on their behalf. In this pre-Brown world, claims to equality and federal protection against local injury were often emphatically denied. As a result, appeals to patron-client relationships with white and black elites appeared more promising avenues for assistance than organized mass protest. Those with access to the resources of patrons—such as black community leaders, white employers, and white elites—turned everywhere but to the federal government, turning there last, only after all else had failed. Moreover, the peons’ families use of patrons as a bridge to government assistance proves false the historiography’s dichotomy between patronage and rights consciousness. Historians often consider only protest that emerges out of individual relationships between African Americans and the government, unmediated by patrons of any kind, as evidence of genuine rights consciousness (Kelley 1994, 69; Modell, Goulden, and Magnusson 1989, 838). This article argues that patronage and rights consciousness can not only coexist but that patron-client relationships can facilitate the emergence of rights consciousness.

This article undermines a second historiographical dichotomy as well: that between “communal ties with other blacks” (Modell et al. 1989, 838) and individualistic rights consciousness. Like patronage relationships, black community ties also fostered rights consciousness for the parents who responded to peonage. The emergence of rights consciousness did not occur on the level of the atomized (usually male) individual but rather within families, neighborhoods, and communities. Because so many young people5 from particular neighborhoods in Memphis, Birmingham, Jackson, Bessemer, and Tuscaloosa had gone to Florida together, informal bonds linked their relatives as they embarked on new experiences with the federal government. In contrast to the northern emergence of individual rights consciousness within organizations, the southern transformation neither began on an individual level nor culminated in organizational membership.

Finally, the nature and potential of federal protection of black civil rights described in the historiography requires revision as a result of stories like the Branners’. The government figures centrally in the historiography of African American protest, and it figures centrally here as well: the perceived availability of the law and the federal government partially determined the strategies these parents used to free their children. Historians emphasizing mass protest have described legalistic interactions with government agencies largely as failures. They view protest at the point of produc-

5. The vast majority of migrants for whom I have documented ages were under 21, and almost all were under 30.
tion as the ultimate goal, and governmental bureaucracies as appropriately playing only a facilitative and not a primary role (Korstad and Lichtenstein 1988). Once interactions with government become bureaucratized or respectable, historians no longer see them as methods of protest but rather as diversions from protest (Korstad and Lichtenstein 1988; Sitkoff 1971).

The peonage complaints in this story demonstrate that mobilizing federal bureaucracies within the legal system was in itself a form of protest. The very bureaucratization of governmental interactions that signals the end of rights consciousness and the beginning of decline for some historians is an integral part of this story. The government’s activities only surface here as they interact with, shape, and validate the shifting strategies of the families of the USSC’s unfortunate workforce. The emphasis is on those strategies and the slowly emerging rights consciousness they reveal. For many historians, until protest exits the realm of patronage ties, it is not really protest, and once interactions with government themselves become bureaucratized they cease to be protest any longer. The Branners and their neighbors challenge both ends of this narrow category of protest; they both used patronage relations to lodge their protests and also forged rights consciousness within the legal process itself.

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By World War II, the Department of Justice (DOJ) had been battling peonage with differing degrees of enthusiasm and success for 40 years. How such cases found their way to the federal government had changed dramatically during that period. The department’s files on peonage reveal a steadily increasing involvement of peons and their families in the litigation process from the turn of the century to the forties. Early in the century, neither peons nor their families had initiated cases. Rather than victim-complainants who contacted the government, white lawyers designed and sought out test cases specifically to challenge peonage in federal court (Schmidt 1982, 676–77, 692–98; Daniel 1972). By the thirties, however, letters from peons themselves and their relatives were pouring into the DOJ. Through their letters, victims, rather than reformers and government officials, at least partly determined who and where the department investigated involuntary servitude. Instead of being acted upon as objects in labor and law, peons asserted their agency in both the coerced labor relationship and the legal process by complaining to the federal government.6

Those who wrote to complain about peonage across the South in the thirties recognized the availability of law to help them, and they attempted to harness the federal government’s power to serve their local needs. They

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6. I am not arguing here that black agricultural workers had previously passively accepted the coercion that permeated their lives, but rather that the act of writing to the federal government constituted a new kind of overt, explicit resistance. On everyday resistance, see Scott 1985; Kelley 1994.
were confident of slavery's illegality and the government's desire to combat it. Joel D. Hankins of Shorton, Alabama, wrote of "this system of slaving us Negroes" (Hankins 1937, 1), and numerous letters called the conditions in which they labored, and the coercion used to force them to labor, "slavery." They viewed the federal government as a resource, and they tailored their epistolary rhetoric to fit the strategies they deemed most effective. They wrote directly to the president or the first lady and presumed the existence of a paternalistic relationship between themselves and the highest officers of the national government. The letters began with statements like "I am a widow negro woman" (Williams 1937), and "I am a pore colored man" (Blotan 1936; see also Campbell 1935; McAllister 1938; Williams 1938, 1). The writers indicated that they viewed their requests as impositions. One wrote, "I am sorry to have to ask you to go to so much trouble" (Owen 1938), and another emphasized that this was his "first time to embrace yo with such mater" (Blotan 1936). Several called their requests for assistance "favors" (see, e.g., Hutcherson 1938; Myles 1935). Finally, writers often described themselves as helpless. One pleaded with the president, "Please sir Don't Be mad with me Because I can't Help my Self" (Williams 1938, 4), and another told "Unicle Sam," "poor me ant got know one to Help me Hear so I know if I write and tell you. that you woumd help a poor woman like me" (Rodgers 1939, 2). As "poor," "helpless" "negros," they apologetically requested help in a paternalistic relationship with the leaders of the nation.

Within the paternalistic relationship they set up between themselves and the federal government, these letter writers required action on the part of the government as a response to their status as "poor," "helpless" "negros." The absence of explicitly rights-oriented language does not reflect the absence of demands. Were self-help or help from others available, the letter writers indicated that they would not feel justified in requesting the federal government's assistance. They asserted their poverty, their helplessness, and their need as sufficient conditions to mandate government action. Their status satisfied their half of the paternalistic relationship; the government now had to fulfill its part of the bargain. Although not couched in the rights-conscious language of the NAACP, these letters asserted the preconditions necessary for action in a paternalistic relationship and thereby asserted the rights they expected the government to vindicate.

7. Some writers complained of slavery, like Nina Baldwin (1937) and Ellen McAllister (1938), while others complained of "bondage" (Coleman 1937).
8. I have left unchanged the words of complainants in both letters and affidavits, and I have omitted the distraction of "sic" to note incorrect spelling or grammar.
9. Similar language can be found in workers' letters to the Department of Labor, which are discussed further below. Although some workers' letters apologize for writing, couch their complaints and requests in terms of favors, and emphasize that they have nowhere else to turn, most of the letters included in Markowitz and Rosner do not reveal such language (1987).
Why did these African Americans view the federal government as party to such a relationship? On the most general level, the federal presence in the everyday lives of most Americans grew immensely during the Depression decade. From Roosevelt's fireside chats to the expansion in the scale of the federal government, from Social Security to unemployment compensation to the whole slew of programs included in the New Deal's "alphabet soup," the federal government increased in its size, visibility, and interference with daily life (see, e.g., Brinkley 1995). More specifically, for the first time since Reconstruction, African Americans may have profited from this federal presence in a significant way. More than half a century after the mixed performance of the Freedman's Bureau,10 the New Deal offered a potentially beneficial federal presence for southern blacks. By 1935, 40% of African Americans were either enrolled in a relief program or the Works Progress Administration (Markowitz and Rosner 1987, 152). Although the material benefits varied with each program, often leaving much room for improvement, many African Americans felt the president cared about their plight. In particular, Eleanor Roosevelt's outspokenness on behalf of African Americans allowed the president to appear more favorable to black civil rights than he would have in view of the programs he implemented and the politics he played to maintain the support of the white, Democratic Solid South. Willie Dixon of Bossier City, Louisiana, wrote to the attorney general, for example, "I am told that President Roosevelt is a true friend to the negro people. I want you and him to aid me please" (Dixon 1939).

Many viewed the president and first lady as potential advocates of black rights, especially in contrast with many local white elites. One woman wrote to the DOJ, "It would be a futile gesture to call the attention of the Mississippi law enforcement officers to this case [of peonage]. Negroes are not American citizens in the states of the far south. No public official would jeopardize his own position to protect a Negro in his civil or personal rights where the word of a white man is involved" (Wims 1939).11 More generally, in a 1941 survey, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) found that African Americans thought "the only hope for mere subsistence on the farm is by the Government having closer supervision over the Southern whites to see that the proper amount of help is distributed proportionately to Negro farmers" (1941a, 2). As a result of this combination of some federal but little local change, historians have described the thirties as a time when the seeds of

10. On the Freedman's Bureau, see generally, Bentley 1955; Nieman ed. 1994; Rose 1964.

11. G. L. Lewis used a slightly different rationale when he wrote Eleanor Roosevelt: He did not want peonage turned "into a mere football for local politicians to play with; Mrs. Roosevelt, so [he was] writing the First Lady of the Land about it" (1940).
civil rights were sown if not yet reaped, when expectations rose even as they remained unfulfilled (Sitkoff 1978).

Beginning in the 1910s, moreover, federal agencies encouraged such appeals. The Children's Bureau actively solicited letters by advertising that the bureau provided mothers with a friend in government, and mothers responded with thousands of inquiries and requests for advice (Ladd-Taylor 1986, 45). Thousands of workers, both men and women, also wrote to the Department of Labor to complain about long hours and little pay, speed-ups, bad conditions, and hungry children (Markowitz and Rosner 1987, 5). The impetus for these letters may have resided in Roosevelt's radio personality during his fireside chats: since listeners believed he was talking to them personally, they felt comfortable communicating to him personally as well (Markowitz and Rosner 1987, 11). During the mid-thirties, the USDA similarly received some 400 letters per week regarding the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) and its local injustices (Daniel 1994, 89). Many sharecroppers wrote to Washington during the Depression, because federal access by mail was the only resource they had to challenge landlords who often controlled local political and economic power. Both the push of a lack of local resources and the pull of the government's apparently open ears thus led not only peons but other poor and working people across the nation to turn to Washington for help during the Depression.

The Second World War intensified the government's presence in the daily lives of Americans. In addition to the economic programs and benefits of the New Deal, the federal government ran training programs, established local draft boards, rationed food and necessities, and issued war bonds. In its role as coordinator of military, manufacturing, and manpower strength for the war, the federal government even more dramatically expanded the active presence it had fostered during the Depression. The fruits of wartime government intervention for blacks were as ambivalent as its peacetime programs. Especially in the realm of employment, frustration accompanied progress. Even after the United States Employment Service (USES) federalized local and state employment agencies, it continued to segregate jobs according to employer preference and local custom (see Myrdal 1944, 417–18). Even with the March on Washington Movement's (MOWM) success in obtaining the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), the FEPC remained underfunded, and training programs and war employment continued to discriminate. Yet the centrality of federal power, however disappointing it ultimately was to black workers, did increase during the war. Especially in the South, Roosevelt expanded a visible federal presence with military bases and war industries to correct the region's "colonized" economy (Schulman 1994; see also Daniel 1990; Sullivan 1996). Many blacks consequently viewed the federal government as a potentially responsive, if at times ineffectual, resource.
Many southerners victimized by or witness to peonage continued to write to this highly visible government during the war, while others began to approach the federal government in person. Wartime letter writers had much in common with their prewar counterparts, but the improved economy and the war's demands on their patriotism provided them with additional rhetorical resources. With few exceptions, wartime peonage complainants across the South made the government's obligations much more explicit than their Depression-era predecessors. Many African Americans began to assert that “the government ought to” do a whole lot of things for them, as one Bureau of Agricultural Economics report put it (1941b, 9). Although the writers did not replace a language of assistance with one of rights, they began to require definite obligations of the government in exchange for their loyalty and patriotism.

The basis for requiring government action shifted from helplessness to wartime service. Letter writers invoked their own or others' veteran status and availability for the draft, or positioned their perpetrators as enemies of the nation as the basis of a reciprocal relationship with the federal government. A man who signed his letter “Col. Elton D. Wright VI” wrote the Department of Justice “on the wrong did to me by 3 men of the Hitler type.” Moreover he emphasized his prior military service: he had “served in the U.S. Army from June 20, 1918, to Dec. 1, 1922, Hon. Discharged character excellent” (Wright 1943). Another, who identified himself or herself only as “A Neighbor and Citizen,” wrote on behalf of a girl held in “slavery” whose father was a veteran of World War I. The writer requested that the president draft the perpetrator so that the girl could go free (“Neighbor and Citizen” 1944). This writer based her appeal on two different notions of worthiness: her own as a citizen making a demand on the government and the prior military service of the victim's father.

The letters the USSC workers' relatives wrote to mobilize the government likewise emphasized wartime patriotism and citizenship. In her letter to Mrs. Roosevelt, Viola Cosley of Birmingham used both the paternalistic rhetoric on which the prewar writers relied and the novel resource of the war. Cosley's letter reveals the multilayered relationship wartime letter writers envisioned between themselves and the federal government:

I am a colored mother and need you to help. My boy answered an advertisement in our Post paper for a job as he was out of work and had myself and two younger boys depending on him. As it turned out they were sent to Clewiston, Fla a month ago and he can't get away or write. I am worried about him as I've talked to some white people and told them just how they are being treated guarded all night by armed guards and not allowed to write home. Won't you please help me get my son home. And please dont send this letter back because I am afraid if they find out I've written to you they will kill my boy. his name is Marion
Henry Cosley and he is at this address. c/o U.S. Cane growers Clewiston Fla. Now Mrs. Roosevelt my boy and the other 48 that left with him are all subject to draft and I am afraid maybe this is a Nazi camp of some kind and they are holding all the boys to keep them out of the Army so won’t you please investigate this and see if you can send my boy hom we need his help. (Cosley 1942)

Cosley’s letter is reminiscent of Depression-era letters in her choice of audience, in the supplicating terms in which she couched her request, and in her attempt to gain credibility by writing that she had spoken to some whites about her son’s treatment. Cosley did not, however, depend solely on her own helplessness, her status as “a colored mother” needing Roosevelt’s “help.” Rather, she pointed to issues of national security and demonstrated her own patriotism when she speculated that her son, a potential draftee, was being held in a Nazi camp. By invoking her son’s potential service to the nation, Cosley demonstrated her own understanding of national political issues and used those issues to lodge her protest. She invoked much more explicitly than prewar writers that the government’s right to call on its citizens for service obligated it to vindicate the rights of those citizens as well.12

Ousley Perkins’s letter from Memphis even more unmistakably demonstrates that Perkins was aware of the rhetorical importance of the war to his appeal and that he already possessed, or had recently gathered, a great deal of information concerning both his brother and the federal government. He wrote directly to “Mr. J. Edgar Hoover, director F.B.I. dept.:

Washington D.C. dear sir:—in November 1941 The U.S. Sugar Corporation, appealed to the local office of the national employment, here for 500 laborers, to cut sugar cane at their huge Plantation in Florida. they promise good wages, fair living condition. upon the recommendation of the local employment office;—Agricultural division located at 815—Arkansas St. Memphis tenn. My Brother Joe Perkins, and his wife Ozel Perkins, signed to go to Florida, the were sent Dec 2, 1941 along with others. Memphis, is Joe’s Home. He left on good terms with his family. Neither I, or mother, nor any of my several Brothers and Sisters heard from him direct. it is unnatural that Joe would be gone these two and a half months without communication with us. I have talk with several People that was shiped with Joe, they say that the foremans on this sugar plantation lock up the hands at night. Will not let any write letters to their Home or receive any—that the ran thru

12. The gendered bias of the FBI reports discussed above also biases the nature of these appeals. Such arguments could only be made on behalf of men who could serve in the military. Citizenship based on military service only applied to men, and so appeals for women workers would have required alternative justifications. On the gendered meanings of citizenship, see Cott (1998) and Kerber (1998). Along with the female workers themselves, alternative justifications were absent from the DOJ files.
the cane at night Swimed a large lake to freedom. That the foremans, carry Black Jacks and Pistols that men have been Killed because the insisted for the wages or insisted on return home, that my Brother Joe could probably escape by night to safety. But he have his wife with him and don’t want to leave her in this Place. that he is on and island of the aforesaid corporation known as Bear-Beach Florida Surround by water—Joe is in His early twenties and is of the draft age, that is taking place today feb. 16, I am writing you this letter with a Prayer, that you will direct the F.B.I. to make an impartial, but firm investigation and adivise of my Brother and sister-in-Laws status. I went to the local Office of the Agricultural div. where Joe were shiped from. they gave me the following information. Joe Perkins and Wife; were sent to Mr. . . M.E. Van Mack. Personnel director of the U.S. Sugar Corpora-
tion Clewiston Florida. (Perkins 1942)

Perkins’s letter suggests that he had already utilized other resources at his disposal before he wrote to Hoover. He had visited the USES office and requested specific information about his brother so that, unlike Viola Cos-
ley, he had the exact address and name of the personnel director of the USSC. He knew both Hoover’s identity and his title. Not only did he write to the correct agency within the government, but he also evinced knowl-
edge of the function and federal nature of the FBI when he expressed his hopes that Hoover would direct the Florida office to investigate the USSC, instead of simply requesting that Hoover bring his brother home. Moreover, knowing that the government was in need of fighting men, Perkins implied that had his brother been released from Florida, he might have been serving his country at that very moment.

Similar uses of the war had become a standard rhetorical strategy for African Americans engaged in the “Double V” campaign everywhere, as they urged victories for democracy at home and abroad. The realities of African American life in the United States fell far short of the stated prin-
ciples of the international war effort, and African Americans highlighted that gap in order to compel government protection of their civil rights. But the Florida migrants’ relatives had an additional reason to expect the government to respond to their calls for help: many of the workers had embarked on their trip to Florida believing that the cane cutting was part of the war effort. Unable to join the armed forces because of their young age, or awaiting their call by the draft board, the workers seized what they understood to be an opportunity for patriotic service. Many recalled various figures at the local offices of USES telling them that the cane cutting was a government job. The whole group of young men who went to Florida from

13. The Pittsburgh Courier coined the phrase on Feb. 14, 1942. The Double V campaign marked a departure from the “closed ranks” policy of WWI, when black leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois urged African Americans to set aside their grievances during the course of the war (Du Bois 1918).
Jackson, Mississippi, believed this. Thomas James Buchner described a man at the Mississippi Employment Agency making "a speech about working for the government" (as quoted in Myers 1943, 6). His friend Jimmie Lane was excited to work for "Uncle Sam," "getting the sugar to our soldiers" (as quoted in Myers 1943, 4). Thomas's mother initially hesitated to allow him to work in Florida. When she found out that it was a government job, she relented (Myers 1943, 6).

Recruiters across the South similarly preyed upon the patriotism of the youth. The man who hired Cornelius Long in Tuscaloosa "said the farm was Government owned and that it was a National Defense job" (as quoted in Glasser 1942c, 8). Likewise, "[t]he man from the Employment Agency" in Bessemer told Roosevelt Franklin that "he had a government contract for some men" (as quoted in Bedell 1943, 10). Other recruits simply assumed that the sugar plantations were run by the government. Florence Perkins and her son Robert Mitchell both "believed from reading the advertisement under the title United States Sugar Corporation, that [Robert] was to be employed on a Government Defense job" (Keane 1942, 5). The bold words "United States" allowed for a misunderstanding that the USSC was loath to correct.

Federal employees at USES contributed to these misunderstandings. When potential workers entered the employment offices to explore this new job opportunity, they encountered mostly white women who worked for USES and mostly white men who worked for the USSC (Armitage 1943, 3; Eddie Hall in Bedell 1943, 3). Under the circumstances, the public-private nature of the enterprise was often blurred, as many workers could not differentiate between USES and USSC employees (e.g., Louis J. Coleman in Hoffman 1943, 2–3). A "white woman" in Memphis herself told some workers that they would make five to six dollars a day (Joe Willie Robinson, as quoted in Johnson 1942, 18), which contrasted sharply with the less than two dollars they eventually received (see, e.g., Glasser 1942a, 1). USES officials recruited so aggressively on behalf of the corporation that one even disregarded the agency's minimum age requirement, frequently informing those under 18 of the minimum, asking them their age again, and accepting 18 as an answer: "You have to be 18, are you?" (James Moffett, as quoted in Johnson 1942, 4; see also Keane 1942, 3, 6, 18). USES also allowed the USSC much freedom in its own representations. One USES employee admitted that USSC recruiter "Mr. Grey would take them all to the back of the office and talk[ ] to them there" without any USES oversight (as

14. Buchner's understanding that he was embarking on a government job was bolstered by his first experiences in Florida: When he was examined by a doctor and fingerprinted in Ft. Myers, he assumed that was because the government required such processing (Buchner in Myers, 7).

15. USSC called for only "colored" workers, and USES obliged (U.S. Employment Service flyer n.d.).
quoted in Glasser 1942a, 2). Such practices led one assistant U.S. attorney in Memphis to suspect agency complicity. He paid two visits to the employment agency after receiving complaints from several families and reported: “The agency assured me, which assurance I did not accept entirely, that the Government officials had thoroughly inspected this plant and its methods at different times and had voiced their approval” (McClanahan 1942). In summarizing the facts of his investigation, an FBI agent also noted “misrepresentation on the part of the employment agency” in Birmingham (Bedell 1943, 1).16 Although the employment services officials might not have deliberately misled the prospective cane cutters, they certainly allowed the USSC to discriminate on the basis of race, accepted underage applicants, and provided the USSC free rein in its misrepresentations.17

Since the patriotic rhetoric of the USSC and USES convinced both workers and parents alike, parents likely felt particularly justified in requesting the protection of the federal government. Regardless of whether the letter writers saw their rights as stemming from these particular circumstances or from a broader conception of citizenship and government obligation, their letters’ repeated references to the war and the draft marked a substantial departure from letters of the thirties. That the writers used the war—in reference to citizenship and as reason for the federal government to act—cannot be overemphasized. African Americans changed their epistolary position from helpless ward to deserving citizen, but they did not take the rhetorical resource citizenship offered for granted. These writers did not simply assume that they were and should therefore be treated as citizens. Rather they endeavored to prove their citizenship by invoking service to the war. They premised their claim to citizenship on their actual or derivative military service, then required the government to act because they could prove their patriotism through war. The invocations of citizenship in these letters stand in stark contrast to earlier letters premised solely on paternalism and governmental obligation to the helpless.

The frequency with which complainants in the forties personally visited government offices marked another departure from peonage complaints in the thirties. The Department of Justice Peonage Files literally overflow with letters from the thirties (and even earlier). Letters, usually invoking the paternalistic relationship described above, provided the most common mode of communication between peons, their families, and the federal government. In contrast, the wartime files are filled with FBI investigative re-

16. USES as far afield as Kennet, Missouri, played their part in recruiting sugar workers (Fladwed 1942, 2).

17. It is impossible to determine who knew what about the conditions at the camps. When confronted with the differences between the promises and the reality, camp superintendent Neal Williamson stated, “I don’t know what that man up there told you, but this is the way it is: you’ll have to stay here until your transportation is paid” (as quoted in Johnson 1942a, 14).
ports based on telephone or personal complaints from worried relatives. Many families directed their pleas to the federal presence in their own cities: the FBI field offices. Certainly the spread of the telephone, with faster access to information and easier entry into local offices of government agencies, played some role in this change. More important, in turning to local offices, these African Americans demonstrated an understanding of the organizational divisions of the federal government, a willingness to enter into face-to-face contact with federal officials, and more certainty that they had a right to call on the federal government for help. Perhaps their New Deal and wartime experiences with the government had endowed them with a certain bureaucratic sophistication, as it had other poor Americans. As poor African Americans in the thirties joined the WPA, received relief checks, or attempted to obtain their share of AAA subsidies, they had learned to navigate federal bureaucracies. Such sophistication enabled them to contact the government in person, which, judging by the frequency with which they did so, they deemed more effective than writing letters to Washington.

Even the image evoked by the words "the federal government" differed for the personal complainants. The law was no longer the instrument of a paternalistic benefactor but rather a tool formalized in an office by the people who inhabited that office. Those who wrote letters to the Roosevelts in both the thirties and the forties constructed the law as a personal relationship between themselves and the president or first lady. In contrast, those who went to an office in their cities, met with whatever FBI agent happened to be assigned to their case, and participated in the formal drawing up of a complaint had a very different impression of and interaction with "the law" and "the government." The very process of interacting with federal officials in person provided the families with an education in the workings of government. Some parents, for example, initially went directly to the U.S. attorney's office in Memphis, where they were referred to the FBI field office (McClanahan 1942). Once there, these parents became "complainants" who provided official statements to FBI agents. In such circumstances, the law appeared more like an instrument of bureaucratic government than largesse in the context of a patron-client relationship with the president.

As the story of the Branners illustrates, however, personal complainants joined letter writers in using some form of patronage to mobilize government support. Personal complainants utilized a complex combination of patron-client relationships and direct, unmediated appearances in order to reach the federal government on a local level. The Branners tried several different strategies to find their son before turning to the FBI. First, they wrote him letters. Then, along with other families in their black Memphis neighborhood, they turned to a community leader, Zannie Jones, the business manager of the Junior Herd of Elks. With Jones's help, they sent Har-
vey Lee a special delivery letter that he never received. Having secured only pat reassurances from an untrustworthy source—the personnel manager of the USSC—the Branners must have felt that they had exhausted both their own resources and those of their community. Finally, they went personally to the FBI.

Many other relatives also turned to resources within African American communities. Those who could traveled to Florida to bring back family members. Johnnie Green initially went to Florida from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, to join his brothers George and Andrew, who were already working for the USSC. As soon as his brothers saw him, they told him he should not have come, “for they were all in prison there” (Glasser 1942a, 12, 9–10). He decided immediately to leave, and he returned to Tuscaloosa. He traveled back to Florida, slipped in to announce his presence, and then picked up nine workers as they lay by the highway at night (Glasser 1942a, 12). Most workers and their families, however, did not have the resources to travel to Florida to retrieve their relatives. Those who could sent money, train tickets, and bus tickets for their children’s journeys home (see, e.g., Laura Henderson and Ophelia Jemison in Glasser 1942b, 2, 4). Others appealed to prominent, middle-class African Americans, usually members of black civic and civil rights organizations.

Contrary to some depictions of wartime working-class blacks rejecting the leadership of traditional black elites (Korstad and Lichtenstein 1988, 789), these families not only accepted that leadership but sought it out. Such elites possessed resources—of status, information, and access—that they themselves lacked. Across the South, black elites came to the peons’ aid. In Florida, African Americans provided assistance in connecting fleeing workers with law enforcement. J. D. Woodham and Solomon Brookings, Exalted Ruler of the Elks and president of the Pensacola NAACP, told the FBI about Coy Love Jr.’s situation. They “both stated they were impressed with the apparent honesty of this negro” (Armitage 1943, 5–6). In Memphis, the Branners were among many who turned to Zannie Jones. He told the Memphis field office that “many of the negro families in Hollywood had come to him concerning their sons” (Keane 1942, 8). Before approaching the federal government, he had attempted to resolve the situation himself, by sending two airmail letters and a telegram to Von Mach inquiring about the Memphis migrants. Receiving no response, he had turned to the government (Keane 1942, 8). A loyal Memphis reader wrote to the Pittsburgh Courier, a black newspaper, that he knew the editor would be able to stop the “Real Slave Market” of the USSC. The editor, P. L. Prattis, forwarded the

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18. Sending tickets by mail was not always effective due to mail tampering and the difficulty of leaving the USSC property and reaching the bus or train station without detection. Sometimes the workers even sent the tickets back to their families (John Henderson in Glasser 1942b, 3).
letter directly to Victor Rotnem of the Civil Liberties Division with words of thanks and encouragement as part of an ongoing correspondence (Steel 1943; Prattis 1943).

In Birmingham, the only African American attorney in the city, Arthur Shores, requested that the FBI send an agent to his office in the Negro Masonic Temple building to discuss the USSC. Perhaps uncomfortable with the implications of assenting to such a request from a black professional, the agent justified his visit with his need to obtain entrance to the Temple building in connection with another investigation (Morrow 1942, 3). When the agent arrived, he found, in addition to Shores, Reverend C. C. Welch of nearby Brighton and three of the migrants. Welch stated that he had received many complaints from the parents of these boys, who had escaped, and from the parents of others who had not. While the agent was questioning the workers, Dr. E. W. Taggart, an African American dentist and official of the NAACP in Birmingham, and Emory Jackson, editor of the black newspaper, the Birmingham World, entered the room as well (Morow 1942, 4). The room overflowed with prominent African Americans of Birmingham gathered on behalf of working-class teens. The status of these professionals facilitated the mobilization of the government, as illustrated by the FBI’s visit itself and also the care with which the agent detailed the credentials of the elite members of the group.

Other relatives relied on the white patronage relationships in which they were involved to procure assistance in returning their children. These often included employers, ministers, or local civic leaders and officials. Women, particularly those working as domestics and cooks, often chose their employers. Pearl Wilkes, the aunt of James Price Jr. worked as a cook for J. Walter McDonnell. After she told him that she had heard that one nephew had been killed and another still worked for the USSC, he informed the assistant U.S. attorney of Memphis (Keane 1942, 7). Similarly, Mrs. G. G. Booker contacted the Birmingham field office on behalf of “her colored maid,” Lila Martin, who was worried about a daughter who had gone to Florida. As part of the report’s discussion of letters that had possibly been tampered with or never received, the agent wrote, “Upon further questioning, Mrs. Booker stated that she herself had personally mailed two special delivery letters to the girl,” but they had been returned (Breckenridge 1943, 3–4).

Still other peons and their relatives appealed to prominent citizens like ministers. Vernon Lawhorn appeared at the Memphis field office accompanied by Dr. Stanley Lutz, “white minister to a colored congregation” (Keane 1942, 10). In a letter to his sister, James E. Dooks told her to show his letter to Mrs. Josephine Trammel at the Birmingham USES, as well as Reverend Hardgrove, who “will read it on the radio when he preach on Sunday night so the white people know how we are treated” (Morrow 1942, 2).
lawyers, like the Bessemer firm of Lipscomb and Lipscomb and the Birmingham firm of Silberman and Silberman, got involved, furnishing the FBI with lists of those who might make good witnesses in the case (Armitage 1943, 6).

Some peons and their families appealed to local officials, thereby challenging the familiar dichotomy between responsive federal officials and repressive local ones. In most southern states until late in the war, state and local statutes that facilitated the perpetuation of involuntary servitude remained on the books long after the U.S. Supreme Court held them unconstitutional in Bailey v. Alabama (219 U.S. 219) in 1911 and United States v. Reynolds (235 U.S. 133) in 1914. During the intervening 30 years, state legislatures and courts had evaded federal restrictions on involuntary servitude. Convict lease and criminal surety laws, prima facie fraud, vagrancy, and crop lien laws facilitated coerced labor across the South (see Novak 1978; Cohen 1976). Moreover, local law enforcement officers often personally participated in creating systems of involuntary servitude. In Clewiston, Florida, for example, Chief of Police Bell and Justice of the Peace Small “would walk into a saloon in Clewiston and arrest a negro boy there drinking and give him the option of going to jail or going to work for the [USSC]” (Armitage 1943, 11). One of the plantation superintendents for the USSC, E. W. McLeod, was a deputy sheriff who would arrest workers who joined poker games on the plantation in which he did not receive a cut. Such workers were fined 25 dollars each, “which fine they were allowed to work out on the cane fields” (Glasser 1942a, 11).

Local law enforcers were no more of a monolithic evil than federal officers were a uniform help to African Americans, however. The response of local officials to the complaints of Florida peons and their families during the war demonstrates that the federal-local dichotomy cannot hold. John P. Godfrey Jr., assistant county solicitor of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, informed the FBI in Birmingham of “numerous complaints” about the USSC (Glasser 1942a, 1). Sherman Shelvy and Percy Evans received help from Claude Guice, an agent of the Department of Public Welfare, in Fayette, Mississippi (Orr 1942, 1). Guice took their statements himself and then sent them to the FBI with an explanatory letter. Three men reported their experiences to Robert S. Glasgow Jr., chief clerk of Local Draft Board 4, in Adamsville, Alabama. Two of the men were from Missouri and explained that they were prevented from reporting to their local boards by the “virtual slavery” of the USSC (Glasgow, as quoted in Glasser 1942b, 2). These local liaisons were only one means of eventually reaching federal assistance, but they were a particularly important one, as they demonstrate that at least some black southerners either did not distinguish between local and federal officials or that they saw local as well as federal officials as potential resources for assistance.
In approaching the government through some kind of mediator in 1942, the parents revealed which strategies they thought would be most effective in procuring assistance. Some might have used mediators because they lacked information about which government agency was appropriate for their particular problem, where that agency was located, or what kind of information to bring with them. Thus those who approached the county solicitor might not have realized his different position from a federal agent. For others, however, choosing mediators among the black and white elites meant procuring the support of those who could, in essence, vouch for them. They might have feared that a lack of literacy or adequate vocabulary would hinder their effectiveness, or that the color of their skin or the shallowness of their pockets would impede their credibility. As a result, rather than take their chances relying on their own citizenship rights, they turned to those whose rights appeared more secure than their own, attempting to put those rights to work for themselves.

The FBI reports reveal the correctness of these patronage strategies. They show that, in fact, white government officials did initially believe that white and middle-class black statements carried more authority and validity than did those of the victims and their parents. Why else would the FBI emphasize that Mrs. Booker “stated that she herself had personally mailed two special delivery letters” to her maid’s daughter? Why else would Bessemer and Birmingham law firms furnish the FBI with lists of those they thought would make good witnesses in the case? Would the FBI have sent an agent to the home of a black domestic in response to such a request as it so promptly sent one to the office of Arthur Shores, backed as he was by his professional status and prestige?

Such indications that federal officers did not find poor blacks’ statements entirely credible are corroborated throughout FBI, USES, and DOJ files and activities. An FBI report on black “agitation” in Birmingham, for example, emphasized that blacks there were “at times even below normal intellectually, while the average Negro is considered not to be susceptible to work and, generally speaking, is slow, lazy, happy, carefree and irresponsible” (Hill 1995, 262). It is hardly surprising within this historical context that the supervising employment interviewer for the industrial division of USES would conclude that the peons’ complaints resulted from “the simple fact that workers so far removed from their homes suffer from a good old-fashioned case of homesickness, and not in any way from the working conditions or ill treatment at the hands of the corporation” (Goad 1942). Moreover, both FBI agents and DOJ lawyers valued the testimony of whites more than that of blacks, at least in part for strategic reasons: juries gave greater credence to such testimony. One DOJ lawyer in an unrelated peonage case lamented that “[t]he sole witness that we could offer to the Court would be a negro who admittedly has the mind of a child” (Barry 1942).
Although "[l]n theory this makes out a clear violation," DOJ declined prosecution because the case was "lacking in those elements which promise profitable or successful prosecution" (Berge 1942c).

In light of this evidence that the use of patrons was strategically savvy, those who arrived at the field offices alone appear to be either bereft of other resources or at the end of their tethers. Throughout the mobilization, relatives approached the FBI on their own, unaccompanied by a patron (see, e.g., Glasser 1942b, 2–3; Glasser 1942a, 16). In late 1942 and early 1943, the number of parents appearing alone increased, especially in Memphis and Birmingham.19 For some, military service—like the rhetoric of military service in letters—may have provided an additional resource, a greater sense of citizenship, and consequently greater self-assertion. James Hurd Sr. and his son W. J. reported James Jr.’s situation directly to the FBI. The FBI found W. J.’s uniform so impressive that the agent included his full army details in the report (Breckenridge 1943, 1–2). This incident supports Robin Kelley’s comment that, “[i]n a world where clothes carried a great deal of social meaning and were often signifiers of power (or the lack thereof), black men in uniform saw themselves as representing a higher authority and, therefore, felt empowered to act on principle” (Kelley 1994, 64).

The mention of Hurd’s uniform is unusual, however, and such factors cannot account for the numerous direct visits of family members, particularly mothers, to the FBI. While the greater industrial workforce, union presence, FEPC hearings, and civil rights activities might have led to a heightened self-assertion for those in Birmingham, such factors cannot explain direct approaches in a city with more traditional race and class relations like Memphis.20 More likely, two factors encouraged the peons’ relatives to approach the field offices unaccompanied. First, many parents had exhausted all of their other resources. They had requested valuable favors from employers, deferred to middle-class leaders of their own race, and turned to local officials they might have known previously. With nowhere else to turn, they were then forced to rely on the strength of their own citizenship rights.

19. For some examples in Memphis, see Keane 1942, 3 (Alberta Fisher came in about her son Earl), 5 (Florence Perkins came in about her son Robert Mitchell), 11 (Walter Branner came in about his son Harvey Lee), 13 (Benjamin Robinson Jr. came in about his brother Joe Willie); Breckenridge 1943, 13. For Birmingham, see, e.g., Bedell 1943, 2 (Raymond Coleman called about his niece Margaret Chester; Ophelia Curry came in about her brother Fred; Eddie Hall spoke on his own behalf and that of his brother and friends), 4 (Emma Carson appeared to discuss her grandson Carl Williams; Berdie Smith called about her son James Randolph Smith), 11 (Nancy L. Peoples discussed her brother Nathaniel Gibson), 12 (Emily Harris notified about her son James); Morrow 1942, 1–2 (David Stewart, Laura Meadows, and Fannie Wren). As these examples show, both women and men approached the FBI unaccompanied by patrons. Thus, even though women were more likely to use household employers, they were not correspondingly less likely to forego patronage altogether.

Second, as a critical mass of individuals within local black communities interacted with the FBI, they may have demystified the bureaucracy for their neighbors and encouraged them to make the trip alone. The large number of migrants from these cities thus goes far in explaining the frequency of unmediated visits. In Memphis, for example, Florence Perkins visited the FBI on her own to procure assistance in returning her son home. When she could not answer the agent’s questions about conditions at the USSC, she told him that “she would endeavor to see another negro boy who lives in her neighborhood who has returned from this same camp.” James Moffett subsequently arrived at the Memphis field office to provide the information Perkins lacked (Keane 1942, 5–6). Moffett then became an informant and witness in his own right.

Moreover, as the FBI began to prepare for litigation in earnest, agents began seeking out witnesses in African American homes and communities. Once the mothers informed the FBI of the plight of their children, the government set its machinery into motion. Between February of 1942 and June of 1943, the FBI sought out, interviewed, and took testimony from workers across the South. No fewer than 20 agents worked on the case at one point or another. No fewer than 100 youths gave interviews. Witnesses and victims were hunted down through the maze of the armed services (see, e.g., Lee 1943, 4; McAndrews 1942). The government took the complaints seriously, and expended manpower, money, and time in two attempts to bring the case to trial. Men and women who entered into a relationship with the government as victims were transformed into government providers of crucial information. Mothers who first contacted the FBI as clients came into their own as witnesses.

The stream of inquiry and appeal thus began to move out from the FBI as well as into it. As numerous parents found their way to the FBI, more and more agents found their way to the black neighborhoods of Memphis and Birmingham, Bessemer and Tuscaloosa. As the FBI interviews often took place in the homes of the migrants, parents, siblings, or neighbors acted as sworn witnesses to the testimony. While “scouring the neighborhood” looking for one particular witness in Jackson, special agents Louis Myers and Roy Porter found Thomas James Buchner and others who had also been to Florida, and the group accumulated six sworn statements (Myers 1943, 1, 5, 10). Their words, which at the start of the process lacked credibility, had become the bedrock on which the government founded its case. As people and information began to flow both to and from the field offices, the USSC’s former workers and their families must have found the prospect of going to the government much less daunting.

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21. The instances are too numerous to cite individually. See, e.g., Bedell 1943, 11; Breckenridge 1943, 7, 9, 10, 12; Johnson 1942, 6, 8, 9, 12, 14, 16, 17, 21, 24, 26, 28, 30.
Personal complaints likely made more of an impact on the government than letters or complaints made through patrons. Parents were able to provide more information during the course of a conversation than in a single letter or through a phone conversation to which they were not party. Without intimate knowledge of the law, a letter writer-client was bound to omit some crucial information without which the government would be unwilling to act. Many letters from the prewar era lack responses in the DOJ files. Complainants who did receive responses were often told that the matter they complained of was "of local concern," or that the facts did not rise to the level of a federal criminal offense (see, e.g., Rogge 1939). In light of the local recalcitrance and complicity discussed above, DOJ attorneys who referred peonage complaints to local officials willfully ignored the realities of state law enforcement and its failings. Even Ousley Perkins, who had gathered a great deal of information before writing to the FBI about his brother, received further instructions from Assistant Attorney General Wendell Berge. Berge wrote Perkins that his brother and the other workers should "send detailed statements of the matter and that such statements be verified by a Notary Public or other official authorized to administer oaths" (Berge 1942a). Only "[u]pon receipt of the above requested information" would the department proceed with an investigation. As Perkins's brother and his coworkers were unable to leave the confines of the USSC plantation or send uncensored letters, procuring such information was a slow and difficult process. Within the course of a conversation at a field office, however, such information could be elicited immediately through questions and answers. Moreover, visits may have been more effective methods of complaint because the physical presence of the complainants in FBI offices must have placed more pressure on the agents to act. The willingness of the parents to go to the offices a first time indicated that they might not hesitate to return and press their rights further.

Once the parents informed the FBI of the plight of their children, the government took their complaints seriously. The Justice Department had received letters complaining of involuntary servitude at the USSC as early as 1937 (Hoover 1942). By World War II, Wendell Berge suspected wrongdoing: "It is requested that it be ascertained why the U.S. Sugar Corporation, if the conditions are as related to Special Agent Bryan by Mr. Von Mach in 1937, has found it necessary to recruit their 1941 workers from the State of Alabama. . . . [If] the wages allegedly offered the workers were in fact paid, sufficient source of labor supply could be obtained from within the State of Florida instead of having to go to the States of Georgia, Tennessee or Alabama" (Berge 1942b, 2). The U.S. attorney in Memphis similarly expressed his "wonderment that an organization in Florida, where there is an ample supply of colored labor, would find it necessary to transport workers from Memphis to that state. . . . I could never ascertain the reason why
they had to send to Memphis and northern Arkansas for employment" (McClanahan 1942). These suspicions had not sufficed as reasons for the DOJ to begin a full-scale investigation in the 1930s, but the flood of complaints about USSC during the first years of the war, combined with both domestic and international political expediencies, had led to increased scrutiny. Domestically, the widespread migrations of African Americans to the North, where they held the right to vote and increasingly critical political power, had led to heightened assertions of rights, especially in relation to work. In both integrated unions (such as Detroit's UAW) and all-black unions (like A. Phillip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), blacks asserted their rights to work and to work without discrimination. Randolph's threatened March on Washington led to Roosevelt's executive order creating the Fair Employment Practices Commission, for example. International politics added urgency to governmental attempts to quell black protest. From the president to the attorney general to FBI agents and DOJ lawyers alike, fear of Japanese war propaganda, which allegedly attempted to undermine blacks' loyalty to the United States, shaped governmental policies (see, e.g., Berge 1942c).

The Department of Justice implemented two, often conflicting, policies to quell real and imagined black protest. On the one hand, the FBI, the investigative arm of the DOJ, began a full-scale investigation into "Foreign-inspired agitation among the American Negroes." FBI director J. Edgar Hoover instructed his agents to seek out evidence of black sympathy for Japan, "Eleanor Clubs" of domestics allegedly inspired by the first lady to resist their employers, and other types of black "agitation" (Hill 1995). While Hoover preferred surveillance and criminalization of potentially subversive African Americans fighting for civil rights, Attorney General Francis Biddle expressed concern for civil rights in general and black civil rights in particular. Biddle stymied Hoover's attempts to charge African Americans with sedition during the war and increased civil rights enforcement. He instructed U.S. attorneys to expedite cases with black victims. His assistant attorney general, Wendell Berge, wrote to one U.S. attorney regarding a peonage complaint:

The matter complained of in the instant case is but one of many in which members of the Negro race have been the victims. Enemy propagandists have used similar episodes in international broadcasts to the colored race, saying that the democracies are insincere and that the enemy is their friend. There has been received from the President an

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23. Biddle was among the few who voiced opposition to the internment of Japanese and Japanese-Americans during the war (Takaki 1989). On Biddle's support for black civil rights, see Eliff (1971) and Hill (1993).
instruction that lynching complaints shall be investigated as soon as possible; that the results of the investigation be made public in all instances, and the persons responsible for such lawless acts vigorously prosecuted. The Attorney General has requested that we expedite other cases relating to Negro victims. (Berge 1942d)

In particular, Biddle stepped up enforcement of antipeonage and involuntary servitude laws. Disappointed at the DOJ’s failure to procure convictions in the recent past, Biddle embarked on a concerted policy of pursuing involuntary servitude violations with black victims wherever they surfaced. He sent a memo to all U.S. attorneys encouraging them to bring prosecutions for involuntary servitude and describing the legal bases for doing so (Circular No. 3591, Dec. 12, 1941, in Belknap 1991, 61). Thus, when the Florida peons’ families deluged the first couple, J. Edgar Hoover, and local FBI field offices with their complaints, the DOJ listened to them and put into motion an extensive investigation. After a federal district judge quashed a first indictment, the department decided to pursue a second. The second attempt failed, and the lawyers pursued the case no further.

The legal defeat did not, however, signal complete defeat for the peons and their families. First, parents, patrons, and FBI attempts did yield some successes in bringing the workers home during the season. After Harvey Lee Branner had worked at the Miami Locks Plantation of the USSC for four months, Neal Williams, camp superintendent, informed him that the FBI had written to let him go. Williams gave Harvey Lee 79 cents and told him to leave. Harvey Lee went home to Memphis (Harvey Lee Branner in Johnson 1942, 16–17). There is no record that the FBI actually wrote to the USSC on Harvey Lee’s behalf. It is possible that they did. It is also possible that Williams referred instead to Christianor and Walter’s letters. Regardless, Harvey Lee’s belief that the government had interceded is in itself significant: from his perspective, his parents appealed to the FBI, the FBI intervened, and the USSC released him. Upon returning home, he gave the FBI his sworn testimony. Harvey Lee’s mother Christianor witnessed his statement (Johnson 1942, 17).

Second, the nature of the USSC’s work was seasonal. With the end of each sugar harvest, the USSC neither wanted nor needed the additional workers it sought so avidly at the season’s start. Thus, most workers were probably able to leave and return home or move on in search of new employment. Third, the pressure of the DOJ investigation led the USSC to search for an alternative labor force over which it could exert control without inviting federal scrutiny. Congress provided one by sanctioning the importation of West Indian contract workers to replace African Americans the very next harvest season in 1943 (H.J. Res. 96, Public Law 45, Apr. 29,
1943). Fourth, the DOJ did pursue several other involuntary servitude cases that eventually rose to the Supreme Court and reconfirmed the illegality of involuntary servitude. Finally, the very lack of resources that led parents to turn to the government as citizens in their own right began the process of transforming those rights into resources themselves. During the FBI's investigation, the transformation from patronage to rights consciousness began to occur, and peonage victims like Harvey Lee Branner became the central actors in the case against the USSC.

This article narrates one moment in the transformation from a patronage- to a rights-based world, a moment often lost in the dominant historiography. Like the northern African Americans in that historiography, these southerners looked to law for assistance, seeing the federal government as a forum for protest. The point of the parents' various strategies and modes of expression was a legal one: they intended to access the power of the federal government and the legal system itself. Whether they did so through a paternalistic epistolary relationship with the Roosevelts, patron-client relationships with white and black elites, or on their own, the goal of their protests was to harness the law's power on their behalf. In this way, the bureaucratic nature of their interactions with government fostered, rather than hindered, their emerging sense of rights consciousness.

The experiences of the Branners and the other families also challenge the central role of northern migration in the historiography. The emphasis on migration has led historians to perceive the disappearance of patron-client relationships and the rise of less personal, more formally rights-oriented relationships within large institutions, industrial workplaces, and the government. If one shifts the focus back to the South, and African Americans in southern cities, the supposedly eclipsed relationships reappear. Especially among women engaged in domestic work, personal relationships with employers that often circumscribed black autonomy more than industrial employment also allowed for greater access to the patron's own power. Shifting the focus to the South from the North, and to women and families

24. The West Indies National Council subsequently protested the conditions under which the temporary workers labored, but to no apparent avail (Osborne 1943).
25. Three peonage and involuntary servitude cases went to the Supreme Court during the war. These were Pollack v. Williams, 322 U.S. 4 (1944); United States v. Gaskin, 320 U.S. 527 (1944); and Taylor v. Georgia, 315 U.S. 25 (1942).
26. Although Kelley is an exception to the dominant historiography, in "Congested Terrain" he retains the conventional distinction between northern protest as formalized, collective actions and southern protest as unorganized, individual skirmishes. Kelley describes "the everyday posing, discursive conflicts, and physical battles" (1994, 56) of unorganized protests by streetcar passengers (often female) in Birmingham during the war. These public acts resemble the resistance of the Florida migrants themselves more than the parents' complaints to the FBI. The parents did not simply refuse to accept the status quo, as the streetcar protesters did, they also perceived the availability of the law in assisting them to change it. Whereas the law for Kelley is a repressive backdrop against which nonlegal protest takes place, here it provides the mothers of the Florida migrants with a forum of protest, a strategy for assistance, and a measure of citizenship.
from atomized men, reveals the continued power and relevance, though not
domination, of relationships that the historiography often depicts as already
passé. Patron-client relationships remained valuable resources for African
Americans during the war, but they did not exhaust the many and varied
ways African American women and men expressed their protest. By taking
seriously these relationships, and their potential to serve as liaisons with law
enforcement agencies, this article sees them in a new light: they provided a
link to a law-centered rights consciousness. The protest of the peons’ fami-
lies neither overlooked possible government intervention in favor of protest
at the point of conflict nor treated governmental power merely as a back-
drop, whether repressive or emancipatory. Instead, the families actively en-
gaged the legal system itself. In this respect, the peons’ relatives were in a
much better position than protesters of Jim Crow: their pre-Brown world
was also a post-Reconstruction one. Although some doubted their where-
withal to vindicate their own and their children’s rights—hence turning to
patrons whose rights appeared more secure—they never doubted the illegal-
ity and unconstitutionality of slavery.

The post-Brown perspective of the historiography assumes that the
most assertive, the most forward-looking, the most successful African Amer-
icans during the war were those who asserted their own rights and sense of
entitlement as citizens. But the people in this story did not live in a post-
Brown world. Rather, they lived in a post-Plessy, pre-Brown world, a world
in which the NAACP’s litigation strategy had not yet succeeded in bringing
civil rights to the nation’s attention. The Department of Justice had only
carved out civil rights as a separate section for judicial enforcement in 1939
(Eliff 1971). Although involuntary servitude and peonage were unequivo-
cally unconstitutional, they had flourished with little government opposi-
tion in the interwar era. In such a world, those who called on employers,
prominent whites, and elite blacks believed that they would have a greater
chance of bringing their children home if they used these precious, and
limited, resources. The complainants who went to the FBI unaccompanied
had no other choice but to rest their claims to federal protection on their
own rights, however meager those rights might have seemed. Those who
had other options used them. And some, like the Branners, exhausted alter-
native resources to no avail. They too ended up on their own.

27. Where patronage is addressed directly, as by Robin Kelley, it is seen as somehow a
lesser mode of protest. Kelley laments how domestics’ appeals to employers about discrimina-
tory treatment on Birmingham’s buses “had the effect of redirecting black protest into legiti-
mate, ‘acceptable’ avenues” (Kelley 1994, 69). He mentions, although does not fully
acknowledge, that such methods of protest were often quite effective.

28. There were, of course, some civil rights victories between Plessy and Brown, but they
did not unequivocally vindicate equal African American citizenship. For discussions of Pro-
gressive Era cases as unworthy of celebration, see Kennedy 1986; Klarman 1998. See also
Tushnet 1987 on the NAACP litigation strategy that began in the 1930s.
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