few occupational groups better illustrate the unevenness of working-class consciousness and the complexities of ethnic and racial conflict and accommodation in the United States than the men who labored “along shore,” loading and unloading ships. The longshoremen were classically proletarian. They worked with their hands, developed a muscular workplace culture, and were rooted in dense communal networks that merged class, ethnic, and racial identities. They organized unions as early as the 1840s and engaged in strikes that paralyzed the economic life of major metropolitan areas. They were at once insular and cosmopolitan—reflecting the relatively self-contained mores of their neighborhoods and yet linked by their work to a wider world of commerce and culture, intensely local in their allegiances but willing to turn for leadership to Communists, syndicalists, and other critics of capitalism.

In the nineteenth century, immigrants from Ireland and Germany competed for employment on the docks with northern free blacks and southern slaves. In the early twentieth century, new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe entered the labor market in large numbers and changed the face of the waterfront. The embattled Irish succeeded in maintaining several major enclaves. Blacks were driven from the docks in some cities but predominated in others. Mexicans gradually created a niche for themselves on the Texas Gulf Coast and in the booming port of Los Angeles. Along with “swarthy” Italians, they complicated the question of race by creating a sizable intermediate stratum of people who were not “black” but not yet “white” either.

In organizing unions and exercising some control of their work environment, longshoremen continually came up against questions of race and ethnicity. Who qualified as one’s fellow worker? Was it only kin, neighbor, and countryman? Or was it any able-bodied candidate who joined the ranks of job seekers at the “slave markets” where dockworkers vied for employment each day? There was no single answer to these
questions. For many years longshoremen in each port worked out their own solutions. In the twentieth century, however, when trade unions finally developed a stable presence, they sought to impose more uniform patterns not only of wages and conditions but also of racial accommodation and exclusion.

Of course, employers, the state, and other forces in the larger society played an important role in determining the complexion of the longshore labor force. Successive waves of new immigrants pressed against the ramparts of protected ethnic niches. Employers sought to increase the supply of labor and to exploit ethnic and racial differences for their profit-maximizing purposes. The state endeavored to bring a modicum of order to a notoriously disorderly environment and sometimes intervened in the chaotic rhythms of maritime commerce. Nonetheless, a long-term perspective suggests that the self-activity of the longshoremen themselves was vital, and sometimes decisive, in shaping patterns of ethnic and racial inequality on the waterfront.

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Today technology has rendered the longshoreman almost obsolete; the giant cargo container, which has dramatically reduced the need for labor in the loading and unloading of ships, is rightly called the longshoreman’s coffin. But for centuries, wherever there was a harbor and waterfront commerce, an abundant supply of men labored along the shore. Their work routine was erratic, for ships sailing from distant ports and facing the vagaries of weather along the way could hardly be expected to keep a predictable schedule. And so the longshoreman waited, and then, if lucky enough to be chosen to work the ship’s cargo, he might face twenty (or thirty, or even more) consecutive hours of frantic effort, stowing lumber or cotton, throwing sacks of coffee or sugar—in short, handling anything from steel beams to a passenger’s luggage—driven always by the stern injunction that “the ship must sail on time.” The transition from sail to steam reduced the unpredictability somewhat, but with its alternating rhythms of enforced idleness and hard, often dangerous, work, the waterfront remained a quintessential site of “casualism.”

Longshoremen lived out these rhythms in an environment characterized by extraordinary occupational diversity and geographic range. Waterfront communities, varying in size from the massive port of New York to the smallest lumber port in the Pacific Northwest, dotted a vast coastline stretching from Down East Maine all the way to Brownsville,
Texas, and from San Diego to the Canadian border. In addition, there was a complex network of inland waterways, centered on the Great Lakes and the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. The centerpiece of this far-flung system was the port of New York, by far the largest in the nation. With more than 770 miles of shoreline and 350 miles of developed water frontage, the port encompassed seven major bays, the mouths of four large rivers, and four estuaries, stretching from Manhattan to Brooklyn to Staten Island and along the New Jersey coastline to Bayonne, Hoboken, Jersey City, and Port Newark. Perhaps 300,000 workers were employed in the handling of waterborne commerce in the port of New York—as seamen, longshoremen, checkers and weighers, tugboat and lighter men, truck drivers and freight handlers, railroad and shipyard workers, ship chandlers, and customs brokers. Among these occupations, the longshoremen were by far the most numerous. In 1914 well-informed observers estimated that between 40,000 and 60,000 dockworkers worked in the port. As late as 1938, a careful student of “the waterfront labor problem” concluded that New York accounted for about a third of the 150,000 longshoremen employed in the United States.²

Some dockworkers were specialists who handled only one type of cargo—coal heavers, grain shovelers, cotton screwmen, lumber handlers, and banana “fiends.” They worked in gangs that ranged from four men in lumber and cotton to more than thirty in the case of banana handlers. General longshoremen, who dealt with the wide array of goods that most ships transported, were divided into three groups that constituted a clear but permeable occupational hierarchy. The most skilled men worked on deck, operating winches, rigging gear, and guiding the cargo from one place of rest to another. Then came the hold men, whose ability to stow cargo evenly was vital to a ship’s safety. Finally, the dock men loaded and unloaded goods on the pier. Although the dock men began as the lowest stratum of the longshore hierarchy, the introduction of motorized vehicles and other mechanized equipment on the piers gradually propelled them ahead of their counterparts in the hold. “I worked in the [hold] for ten years before I got outta there,” New York longshoreman Roy Saunders recalled in 1989. “That was the dogs. That was the worst. Cold in the wintertime, hot in the summer. They thought the men in the hold was the lowest.”³

In the popular idiom, the longshoreman—wherever he worked—was a stereotypical creature, large of back but small of mind, at once a free spirit and the passive victim of oppressive circumstance. The long
bouts of enforced waiting led to the portrayal of “men with a small
capacity for mental analysis who are taking things exactly as they find
them.” In the novelist Theodore Dreiser’s words, “They stand or sit
like sheep in droves awaiting the call of opportunity. You see them in
sun or rain, on hot days or cold ones, waiting.” But another novelist
captured a quite different dimension of the longshoreman: the happy-
go-lucky fellow who, according to Ernest Poole, was “huge of limb, and
tough of muscle, hard-swearin, quick-fisted, big of heart.” Living in a
waterfront world that was “enlivened with the most picturesque aspects
of human nature,” he cursed, he drank, he fought, and he lived for the
moment and gave little thought to the morrow. The journalist
J. Anthony Lukas provided a memorable portrait of such a man in his
depiction of a Boston longshoreman who fought a barroom battle with
cargo hooks; and then, after his opponent had driven a hook through
his lip and out the middle of his chin, the bloody but unbowed victim
“staggered to the bar and knocked back a shot of whiskey, which drib-
bled out through the hole in his chin.”

Beyond the stereotypes were the realities that the world “uptown”
showed little interest in acknowledging. The hard-drinking, hard-
swearin longshoreman of legend was often a family man who struggled
against great odds to provide for his wife and children, engaging in a
race with time against injury and the physical debilitation that years
of dock labor inevitably wrought. In Liverpool it was said that a man
could not work as a coal heaver for more than five years; in New York
a veteran longshoreman told the federally appointed Commission on
Industrial Relations that work on the docks used men up in ten years.
And yet somehow they persevered. According to an estimate in an
official report on dock employment in the port of New York, the major-
ity of the longshoremen were between thirty and forty. Charles Barnes,
the most careful observer of waterfront labor in the early twentieth
century, implied that the average age was closer to fifty. Barnes and
others were struck by the absence of young men on the docks. No
doubt many younger men came and went. For those who stayed, the
waterfront became a way of life. “After a man works at [the trade
for] ten or fifteen years,” said the superintendent of New York’s larg-
est stevedoring firm, “he gets into a groove and is not good for any-
thing [else].”

But he was, of necessity, good at what he did. Technically, longshor-
ing was not skilled work; it was not acknowledged as a craft and did
not require a formal apprenticeship. But in a workaday environment
where human error and the ravages of weather could—and frequently did—bring injury and death, doing the job right required a touch that only “intelligence, experience, and superior judgment” could provide. A Liverpool union official declared that the “all-round” dockworker required “the intelligence of a Cabinet Minister . . . [,] the mechanical knowledge and resource of a skilled engineer, and, in addition, the agility and quick-wittedness of a ring-tailed monkey.” More prosaically, the author of a comprehensive government survey entitled “Longshore Labor Conditions in the United States” concluded that “when it comes to handling the ship’s winches or to stowing the cargo in the ship’s hold, . . . such work can be learned only after several years of constant and persevering application.”

On the job, moreover, the longshoreman was not a free-spirited individual but a participant in a collective endeavor that required constant cooperation in order to equalize the expenditure of energy and to prevent accident or death. “They work in gangs so much,” said one close observer of the waterfront, that “they learn the value of fellowship in . . . way[s] that other men largely have not.” One form this fellowship took was the tradition of monetary support for workers who had been hurt on the docks. Although they labored in one of the most dangerous occupations in the United States, longshoremen were seldom compensated for their injuries by the employers or the state. Thus they developed an informal system for taking care of their own. In 1907 Ernest Poole noted that on payday, at almost every pay window, “stood a man with an empty cigar box, into which each docker dropped fifty cents or one quarter out of his pay.” John Dwyer, a longshoreman born in 1915, affirmed the remarkable longevity of this tradition. “If somebody got hurt,” he recalled in 1989, “they had a box every payday. The guys were good about throwing [in] a buck or two. . . . If you got hurt, you got whatever was in the box.”

Another mode of fellowship was more combative. Barnes observed that although dockworkers rarely obtained formal recognition from the shipowners and were almost invariably defeated when they went on strike, they nonetheless developed a tradition of solidarity that allowed them to exert considerable influence on the job, often informally, in a single gang or on a single pier. Generally, unions played no direct role in this activity, but longshoremen acting in concert were still able to compel wage increases, affect the pace of their labor, and have some say over the size and composition of their work gangs. “Whenever an advance in wages has been secured,” Barnes wrote, “it has been the
result of a demand pressed with calm determination.” In many instances the companies were “forced to yield by the united resolution of the men to hinder the work in all possible ways until they won their point.” Barnes found, moreover, that unions were gradually able to compel informal recognition on some of the most important piers in New York, until the companies instructed their hiring foremen not to reject union members. If a foreman were to do so, the men “would all quietly quit work.”

In sharp contrast to this quiet but proud tradition of solidarity, there was another reality on the docks: of raw exploitation, routine humiliation, and the common perception of the longshoreman as a hapless victim of a harsh environment. “When an accident takes place,” said one observer, “often a man will lie there on the pier . . . and in winter will be swept by the wind and snow for . . . hours before anyone gets around to him.” The city hospitals had a “thoroughly bad reputation” in this regard, for “a longshoreman[,] when he comes up from the
hold[,] is generally so dirty and dusty . . . that he is the last sort of person they want in the hospital; and if they can let him lie there they let him lie there.” Far more common, but no less humiliating, was the daily reality of “bull driving” by foremen who were determined to get as much work out of their charges as possible. Often men were compelled to carry heavy sacks, weighing hundreds of pounds, “on the run,” up and down gangways made slippery by rain, sleet, or snow. “There is too much bullying,” said longshoreman Timothy Carroll. “The foremen are after you all the time, and they don’t treat you like men. . . . If you want to go to the toilet or anywhere, they go down and pull you out.” When asked to compare the pace of work in New York with that in his native Liverpool, Carroll replied, “I think this is Chinese labor [compared] to . . . Liverpool.” Carroll was a recent immigrant, but already he had intuited that “Chinese labor” symbolized the antithesis of “American manhood.”

Here was another contradiction. Hard physical labor on the docks and at construction sites engendered its own mystique of manhood. Although the work was exhausting and irregular, it implied physical prowess and independence in ways that white-collar employment, and even the confining regimen of the factory, did not. But the “bull-driving” foremen and the imperative that “the ship must sail on time” threatened this mystique. One response was overcompensation and a cult of hypermasculinity. Many longshoremen took a perverse pride in the danger of their work environment and in their ability to withstand the bull driving. To outsiders, they often appeared “swaggering and overbearing,” and their quickness to settle disputes with their fists was “alarming.” Drink provided another form of release. Alcoholism allegedly reached epidemic proportions in waterfront neighborhoods. And men who were robbed of their self-respect on the job were sometimes inclined to take out their frustrations on wives and children. Harold Gates, a teamster who grew up among longshoremen in working-class Greenwich Village, remembered it as “a terrible life.”

But there were compensations—in familial and ethnic networks, in the church, and even on the job. Dockworkers Sam Madell and Roy Saunders recalled one legendary aspect of longshoring. “There was a lot of stealing going on around the docks,” said Madell. “It became particularly prevalent when a whiskey ship came in. Then it seemed like everyone on the waterfront would descend on the ship.” Saunders agreed.
CHAPTER ONE

The whiskey business was bad, guys takin’ cases and stashin’ it. . . . And rum. When that rum was comin’ in there in sixty-gallon barrels, 161 proof, the guys used to go down there and drill a hole in the barrel, make a peg first, so that when he fill up his pail, he sticks that peg in there to stop it from runnin’.

Well, he’d go out and buy a nickel’s worth of ice from the hot-dog man, and he’d put four or five Pepsi-Colas in it, and come around like a water boy. He’d walk right by the boss with that thing. One half a pail would make twenty-one men drunk. That was the whole gang.12

At the heart of the longshoreman’s world, his curse as well as the key to his survival, was the shape-up, the daily routine at the pier head where the hiring foreman—the waterfront’s true autocrat—selected the men needed to work a ship. As early as 1861, Henry Mayhew, the great English chronicler, gave an unforgettable portrayal of the “shape” in the port of London, where the livelihoods of twelve thousand workers depended on the docks but there was sufficient work for only four thousand. It was, Mayhew wrote, “a sight to sadden the most callous, to see thousands of men struggling for only one day’s hire; the scuffle being made the fiercer by the knowledge that hundreds out of the number there assembled must be left to idle the day out in want.” In New York there was perhaps less scuffling, but as late as the 1950s a journalist saw the same “anxiety, eagerness, and fear” among the men in the shape, the same “relief and joy” among those chosen, and “bleak disappointment,” even “despair,” among those who were rejected.11

The shape-up was the means by which the employer guaranteed himself a surplus of labor and ensured a high rate of productivity from workers driven by the fear of the men “waiting at the gate” to replace them. The International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA), the predominant labor organization in the industry, also favored the shape-up because it swelled the number of union members, kept their dues flowing into the ILA treasury, and offered ILA officials numerous ways to pad their pockets via kickbacks and other forms of graft. For all of these reasons, trade union and social reformers issued persistent calls for the abolition of the shape. In 1943 a U.S. Senate subcommittee declared with exasperation that it “is wasteful and inefficient; it has been condemned for over thirty years; it should be tolerated no longer.” But many longshoremen appear to have accepted the shape—for some, even among the regularly employed, because it reflected their “casual frame of mind”; for others, because it offered at least the hope of a
day's work at relatively high hourly wages, an opportunity that the implementation of any decasualization plan might have foreclosed. "It was one thing to stop new men entering the trade," wrote historian Eric Hobsbawm of the British experience; "quite another to throw Bill and Jack (and perhaps oneself) out on the streets."14

Critics of the shape-up were correct to point out that it encouraged a vast oversupply of labor and hence favoritism in the assignment of jobs. But even in New York the employers' need for a skilled and stable labor force and the longshoremen's need for a modicum of security and a living wage led to the development of regular gangs of twenty or more men who asserted their right to priority on a given pier and established local patterns of "custom and practice." Foreign-owned steamship companies such as Hamburg-American and North German Lloyd in Hoboken and the Cunard and White Star Lines in Manhattan hired workers "on a more or less permanent basis," beginning in the early years of the twentieth century (perhaps earlier). In 1938 a survey of dockworkers living in Greenwich Village noted the prevalence of regular gangs on Manhattan's West Side and pointed out that extra men were hired only after the regulars had been assigned. "A steady gang sticks to one pier," the survey team concluded, "and has an agreement with the stevedore that they will get work whenever there is any on that pier."15

The men who worked in steady gangs made up the core of the port's dock labor force, but they may have accounted for no more than half of the total. The regulars predominated in the foreign trade; the "extras," or "casuals," were more common in the coastwise trade. But virtually every dock attracted about twice the number of men it needed on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, the persistence of an unregulated and overabundant supply of labor inevitably meant that even the regulars faced economic insecurity and, sometimes, a condition close to poverty. This becomes strikingly evident from the data collected by the Greenwich Village survey team among longshoremen in one of the port's better and more secure working environments. Of course, 1938 was a Depression year, and that fact had a significant bearing on the data collected by the survey team. But in talking to 278 longshoremen, 217 of whom were heads of households, the Greenwich Village researchers found a level of deprivation that owed nearly as much to the character of the waterfront labor market as it did to the temporary weight of the Great Depression. The average annual family income of these men was nine hundred dollars, which at the prevailing rate of pay on the docks indicated that many of them had worked no more
than half of the normal working days in the previous year. Many families depended on more than one breadwinner, although “usually it was the son or daughter who went to work, seldom the wife.” Remarkably, after nearly a full decade of the Great Depression, only 29 percent of the families had ever been on relief, but this reflected their dogged aversion to the dole more than their economic circumstances. The survey team found that many of the families had lived in the same neighborhood, even the same house, for more than ten years, and in some cases more than twenty. And yet 91 percent of them still resided in old, walk-up tenements, and nearly half (47 percent) were compelled to use shared toilets in the hallways of their tenements. “From two to four families shared this kind of toilet,” the survey team reported, “no matter how many people there were in the families. In many houses the toilets were so neglected by the janitor that foul odors permeated all the poorly ventilated halls.”

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Whether they labored on Manhattan’s West Side or along the East River, or for that matter in Boston or Baltimore, longshoremen were likely to be members of kinship, neighborhood, and ethnic networks that revolved around the waterfront’s peculiar rhythms but also provided sustenance and solace against its harsh realities. In a trade where men labored collectively, under conditions that were often life-threatening, easy communication and mutual trust were vital to their well-being; and this trust developed most readily among family members, neighbors, and men of the same ethnic group. In the cities along the Mid- and North Atlantic coast, ethnicity was deeply ingrained in the dynamics of urban geography and politics. For those seeking work on the waterfront, the labor contractor and hiring foreman held the key, and winning their favor was often facilitated by ties of race and nationality. Thus ethnic camaraderie was a natural, even necessary, feature of waterfront life, and a distinct and resilient tradition of ethnic particularism continued to characterize the longshore labor market well into the twentieth century.

The Irish became the dominant force on the New York waterfront in the 1850s, and as late as 1880 95 percent of the city’s longshoremen were Irish and Irish American. (The remaining 5 percent, Barnes estimated, was made up of “Germans, Scotch, English, and Scandinavians.”) But the question of how the Irish established their ethnic niche and which groups they displaced requires closer scrutiny. Is it
possible that many of their predecessors were not native-born whites or other European immigrants but African Americans? And did the Irish feel compelled not only to displace blacks from dock labor but to erase any memory of their presence and to reconstruct the waterfront as “white” space?18

Recent historical investigation has confirmed that slaves and free blacks worked as seamen and dock laborers during the colonial period, and they continued in these roles during the early years of the new republic.19 In the 1790s a British visitor to the United States recorded his impression that most of the “inferior” labor in New York City was performed by blacks; and census data and city directories reveal that in the early years of the nineteenth century 40 percent of the free black male heads of household were “laborers or mariners.” Since more than a third of the nation’s trade passed through the port of New York, it is likely that many of those who showed up in the city directories as laborers worked as longshoremen, and that blacks were prominently represented among them. As late as the 1830s, blacks still worked as sail makers, shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, and blacksmiths in New York; another British visitor observed that the men who worked as scavengers, porters, dock laborers, barbers, and waiters in hotels were “all, or nearly all, black,” and that “nearly all of the maid servants were . . . black women.” Increasingly, however, white aggression was pushing African Americans to the margins of the job market. According to historian Paul Gilje, the rioters who terrorized New York’s black community during the infamous July Days of 1834 were mainly “journeymen and mechanics sliding down the economic scale or young workers whose hold on an occupation was tenuous.” The riots began with attacks on the homes and churches of white abolitionists whose alleged crime was the advocacy of “immediate emancipation” and the “amalgamation” of the races. From there the reign of terror spread to the black community. Not only did the rioters attack individual workers and work sites, but they also demolished black schools and churches and ransacked black homes. Their targets imply a rage whose roots were deeper than the competition for bread. For many whites, especially those who found little stability and sense of community in their own daily existence, black schools and churches represented a mature and stable associational life that seemed to signify an inversion of the “natural order.”20

Although job competition between blacks and whites was real enough in the early years of the republic, African Americans were soon
inundated by the great surge of immigration from Britain, Ireland, and Germany that began in the 1820s. New York City’s population quadrupled between 1830 and 1860. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, between 200,000 and 400,000 immigrants landed in the city every year; and by 1855, when the census recorded only 11,840 African Americans in New York, 51 percent of the city’s population of 630,000 was foreign-born. No wonder Frederick Douglass lamented the fact that “every hour sees the black man elbowed out of employment by some newly arrived emigrant whose hunger and whose color are thought to give him a better title to the place.”

The Irish were prominent among those doing the elbowing. During the thirty years preceding the onset of the Great Famine in 1845, between 800,000 and 1 million Irish men, women, and children emigrated to North America. For more than a century the overwhelming majority of those sailing westward had been skilled and Protestant and from the northern counties of Ulster, but by the end of the 1830s it was the unskilled and the Catholic, from the Gaelic South and West, who predominated in the emigrant stream. The famine not only added to the flow (between 1847 and 1851 nearly 850,000 Irish entered the United States through the port of New York) but accentuated its poor and “papist” character. By 1860 New York had become the world’s most Irish city; its Irish-born population of 203,000 surpassed that of any city in Ireland.

“The poor Irishman,” said Ralph Waldo Emerson, “the wheelbarrow is his country.” Indeed, Irish immigrants built canals and railroads in the United States; they worked in the “sweated” trades; and they quickly came to dominate the fields of domestic service and common labor. Their destiny, it seemed, was to “dig and delve, and drudge, and do domestic work.” But only gradually did they build an inclusive Irish identity. In the United States as well as in Britain, immigrants from Ireland were notorious for the intensity of their local and regional loyalties. “I am unable to hire a Connaught man,” one Liverpool employer reported; “he is always spoken of in terms of contempt” by his fellow workers, who in this case were likely to be from the eastern province of Leinster or the northeast of Ulster. A Connaught man “is discovered immediately,” lamented the employer, “and they will persecute him till he quits.” Among canal diggers in the United States, there were murderous feuds between Connaught men and “Corconians.” “So deadly was the character of their enmity towards each other,” an Irish immigrant observed, “that one of a different party even passing by the other party would be run down like a rabbit by a pack of blood-
hounds, & murdered on the spot.” Often these faction fights reflected the precarious position of immigrants and native-born workers in an intensely competitive labor market. But increasingly, Anglo-Protestant Americans were loath to distinguish between different groups of Irishmen, all of whom were stereotyped as “drunken, dirty, indolent, and riotous,” as a threat not only to law and order but—insofar as they were Catholic—to the very principles of liberty upon which the American nation was founded. Nativist hostility endowed the Irish with a dramatically enhanced sense of how much they had in common. The tragedy of the famine, the surge of nationalism that developed in its wake, and the remarkable institutional development of the Catholic Church all served to deepen and consolidate a shared sense of Irishness, until it became an indelible part of the American landscape.23

In seaboard cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, the Irish overwhelmed their competitors in the lower echelons of the labor market. By 1855 there were 21,749 Irish-born laborers and porters in New York, compared with 702 blacks. Thomas Mooney, a temperance advocate and unabashed moralist, lamented the predominance of the Irish in longshore work, because its inherent casualism resulted in “an idle, lazy kind of life” that “seldom yields to those who stick to it any other result than hardship.” But in turning to the waterfront for employment, Irish immigrants were only following the well-worn path trod by their countrymen in British ports such as Liverpool, Glasgow, and London. By 1848 an Irishman in Liverpool could observe that the Irish “perform nearly all the labour requiring great physical powers and endurance. Nine-tenths of the ships that arrive in this great port are discharged and loaded by them.” In Glasgow two-thirds of the dockworkers were estimated to be Irish-born by the 1850s, and that percentage remained remarkably constant for the rest of the nineteenth century. In London it was said that “the loading and unloading of ships, and the principal hard work all down the [Thames], was done by Irishmen.” Irish domination of some docks became so pronounced that “the story was told of a foreman named Donovan, who was said to have taken on 57 Donovans for work in one day, and was only stopped by the men threatening him with violence if he took on any more relations!” The secretary of the dockworkers’ union, himself a London Irishman, admitted that by the 1880s his organization had become a “close hereditary corporation.”24

In New York, on any given day, five thousand to six thousand men were likely to be employed in the loading and unloading of ships. They were hired, even then, via the shape-up, and they faced the same irreg-
ularity of work and oversupply of labor that were endemic to the trade. Thus it became important to limit their numbers, if possible to kin, neighbors, and countrymen. Three instruments—the labor contractor, the ethnic neighborhood, and the trade union—played a vital role in the attainment of this objective. The labor contractors, or stevedores, were often former dockworkers. As the longshore workforce became increasingly Irish, so too did the ranks of the stevedores, who then helped to hasten and consolidate the process of niche formation by giving priority to their countrymen in the assignment of jobs. Then, in the Irish neighborhoods that adjoined the West Side waterfront, especially Greenwich Village, Chelsea, and Hell’s Kitchen, Irish-born and Irish American residents developed a sense of entitlement and fought—sometimes literally—to defend the jobs they regarded as theirs by right against incursions by “strangers.” Finally, in an industry characterized by multiple actors and interests and a high degree of decentralization, trade union organization tended to be highly decentralized as well. Often informal boycotts, slowdowns, and other acts of solidarity on an individual pier proved more effective than strikes, and the bonds that derived from kinship, ethnicity, and community provided the fertile soil in which this sense of affinity could take root and grow.25

Dock unionism was “resilient rather than continuous,” historian David Montgomery reminds us; “unions in all the major ports were incessantly formed, broken, and reformed.” The first union that survived for any length of time on the New York waterfront was the Longshoremen’s United Benevolent Society. In October 1852 the city’s dockworkers met and resolved that because the “necessaries of life . . . have been for a long time beyond our reach,” they would refuse to work for any stevedore or merchant who would not consent to accept the rate of thirteen shillings a day for laborers and fifteen shillings for foremen. They also warned that should anyone in their ranks attempt to work for less, “we will denounce him as a recreant and an enemy to his class and consider it a degradation to be seen in his society.” The following evening the dockworkers met again and formed the Longshoremen’s United Benevolent Society. One hundred forty-two men came forward to pay a one-dollar initiation fee and thereby signify their membership in the new organization, which soon claimed fourteen hundred members.26

The character of the society was vividly evident in the banner its members carried in New York City’s Fourth of July procession in 1854. One side of the banner featured the flags of eight European nations
and above them, the stars and stripes of the United States and the
word “Unity.” At the top of the banner the words “We know no distinc-
tion but that of merit” were inscribed. The other side featured the figure
of Charity, holding two orphan children by the hand and presenting
them to members of the society for protection. Although it was not
evident on the banner, the society also existed to represent its mem-
ers’ economic interests and to negotiate with the shipowners on their
behalf. The society’s leaders affirmed their commitment to establishing
and sustaining “that spirit of cordial feeling which should always exist
between workingmen and their employers.” But when the latter refused
to listen to reason, the organization simply stated the wages for which
its members would work and then prepared to “stand out” if the ship-
owners were unwilling to accommodate them. Any member who was
“unmanly” enough to work for less than the wages the society estab-
lished faced the prospect of expulsion. Always, however, the leader-
ship’s emphasis was on compromise and forbearance in relations with
the employers and virtuous conduct on the part of the society’s mem-
ers. The society’s vice-president recommended “abstinence from all
intoxicating drinks . . . and an orderly and obliging demeanor”; its pres-
ident declared that “we are peaceable and law-abiding citizens, who
seek to earn our bread in the sweat of our brow, and disclaim all connec-
tion with riotous and disorderly proceedings.”

But “riotous and disorderly proceedings” were a recurring fact of life
on the waterfront, especially when the shipowners tried to drive down
the price of labor. Strikes by longshoremen and seamen ranged from
nonviolent mass mobilizations marked by “great coolness and order”
to angry bursts of activity that one historian has called “collective bar-
gaining by riot.” In 1825 there were reports of “wharves thronged with
crowds of labourers standing out for higher wages” and effectively dis-
rupting “nearly all the ships in port.” On this occasion, “two very active
and noisy individuals who employed themselves in . . . preventing
those disposed to work from doing so” were arrested and thrown in jail.
Three years later the New York Evening Post reported that “between two
and three hundred riggers, stevedores and laborers” struck to protest a
wage cut and were “guilty of . . . irregularities” that included throwing
paving stones at those who resisted their demand to quit work. Order
was restored only when scores of policemen and a troop of cavalry
arrived on the scene and arrested some of the rioters. In 1836 parades
of striking dockworkers pulled “more than eight hundred men” off their
jobs and effectively shut down the port. Although they had no trade
union organization, the workers published a lengthy statement of their grievances and carried their own trade banner as they marched along the waterfront. But the authorities were unimpressed. When attempts to disperse the protesters landed a policeman in the hospital with a fractured skull, the mayor called out a militia regiment and compelled the strikers to return to work. A decade later about five hundred Irish longshoremen on the Atlantic Dock in Brooklyn demanded higher pay and reduced hours of work, and they went on strike to enforce their demands. When the employers turned to recently arrived German immigrants to break the strike, the result was bitter ethnic conflict and a level of violence that again led to the use of militiamen against the strikers.28

In some of the earliest strikes, newspaper reports and court records highlighted the participation of blacks as well as whites but did not otherwise identify workers by nationality. Thus a seamen’s protest in 1802 involved separate black and white contingents, with the blacks acting “in a subordinate capacity”; and the longshoremen’s strikes of 1825 and 1828 included “both white and colored persons.” Thereafter, however, there were no references to race, until blacks appeared as strikebreakers in the 1850s. In the meantime, the massive influx of European immigrants had driven African Americans to the margins of the labor market and triggered a sustained period of interethnic rivalry and accommodation.29

The fact that the flags of eight European nations adorned the Longshoremen’s United Benevolent Society’s banner in 1854 suggests that at the outset the organization was committed to incorporating the multinational immigrant constituency that had transformed the waterfront workforce in the 1830s and 1840s. From the beginning, however, men named Kelly, Donohue, McManus, and McGrath were prominent in the society’s leadership, and the dynamics of immigration and occupational networking were turning the dock labor force “green.” By the end of the 1850s, the society’s members were “overwhelmingly Irish.” They turned out, “six hundred strong,” in New York’s Saint Patrick’s Day parades, “dressed in handsome green and gold regalia and carrying Irish and American flags and the Society’s imposing banners.” This became an enduring—almost sacrosanct—tradition. In “The Day We Celebrate,” Irish American playwright and songwriter Edward Harrigan paid homage to the groups that headed the massive Saint Patrick’s Day parades of the 1870s:
Harrigan took it for granted not only that New York’s longshoremen were an integral part of the larger Irish American community, but that in this case occupation and ethnicity had grown together as naturally as the oak tree sank its roots into Irish soil. What remained unspoken was the means by which other European immigrants, and above all African Americans, had been displaced from the docks. Harrigan took it for granted not only that New York’s longshoremen were an integral part of the larger Irish American community, but that in this case occupation and ethnicity had grown together as naturally as the oak tree sank its roots into Irish soil. What remained unspoken was the means by which other European immigrants, and above all African Americans, had been displaced from the docks.

The extensive use of African Americans as strikebreakers began in the mid-1850s. Apparently, by that time blacks had come to see strike-breaking as the only means to regain access to a field of labor where they had once been prominently represented. They were offered employment during a strike in 1855 and, predictably, “anti-Negro violence resulted.” When the strike ended, almost all of the strikebreakers were discharged, and the issue of race apparently did not flare up again until 1862 and, even more so, 1863, when the waterfront became the site of a “labor war” that reached a gruesome crescendo with the infamous draft riots in July. The claim that “hordes of darkeys” would soon overrun the northern states and work for “half wages” was for the most part a demagogic scare tactic, but on the waterfront job competition between blacks and whites had become a stark and dangerous reality, not only in New York City but also in Albany, Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit. In each of these cities, employers used black labor to break strikes by white longshoremen in 1863. In April, on the Manhattan waterfront, hundreds of Irish longshoremen, who were allegedly “inflamed by drink,” shouted “Kill the niggers” as they assaulted black strikebreakers. In June New York dockworkers went on strike “en masse” and formed the Longshoremen’s Association, which enrolled three hundred members within a week. In Buffalo a confrontation between Irish strikers and black strikebreakers in early July left three Negroes dead and twelve others badly beaten.

A week later the draft riots erupted in New York City, with the goal of preventing the implementation of the new federal Conscription Act and its lottery system of recruiting fresh troops for the Union Army. Although the riots involved a wide swath of the city’s population, the role of the Irish caused much comment. Influential Irish Catholic voices—above all, the Freeman’s Journal and Catholic Register—had
CHAPTER ONE

damned the Emancipation Proclamation as a “crime . . . against . . . the holy precepts of Christianity,” denied that slavery was a sin, and denounced African Americans as a “semi-savage race” (a term that many Anglo-Protestants were wont to use in describing the Irish). The longshoremen and their communal allies used the riots as a pretext to drive blacks from the docks. But far more than job competition was at stake in their murderous pogrom. Themes of amalgamation, sexual conquest, even annihilation, were dramatically evident in the behavior of the mobs. On the first day of the riots, a waterfront lynching party hanged William Jones and burned his body. The next morning, black sailor William Williams was assaulted by longshoreman Edward Canfield and two other laborers . . . when he walked ashore at an Upper West Side pier to ask directions. Like many racial murders, this attack developed into an impromptu neighborhood theater with its own horrific routines. Each member of the white gang came up to the prostrate sailor to perform an atrocity—to jump on him, smash his body with a cobblestone, plant a knife in his chest—while the white audience of local proprietors, workmen, women, and boys watched with a mixture of shock, fascination, and, in most instances, a measure of approval.

After purging the harbor district of African Americans, the longshoremen announced that henceforth “work upon the docks . . . shall be attended to solely and absolutely by members of the ‘Longshoremen’s Association’ and such white laborers as they see fit to permit upon the premises.”

In the midst of a rebellion against duly constituted authority, Irish longshoremen were aggressively claiming full citizenship in the White Republic. It was a claim that would be greeted with widespread skepticism for another generation. To the guardians of American manners and morals, the Irish could become “white” only when they became “civilized” and abandoned the alleged traits of character that bound them to the Negro. But to the Irish becoming “white” meant creating social and psychological distance between themselves and African Americans and, as a first priority, severing the occupational and residential ties that linked the two groups in the popular imagination. Frederick Douglass warned that in taking jobs away from blacks the Irish would “assume our degradation.” But Irish longshoremen developed a compelling answer. To avoid the “taint of blackness,” and the heavy psychological burden of “slaving like a nigger,” they would drive
blacks from the labor market altogether and, in the process, redefine the jobs they appropriated as “white.”

Remarkably, however, the day after the draft riots ended, some blacks dared to reclaim their jobs, and the fact that they survived unmolested encouraged others to do the same. Some black longshoremen even returned to the Erie Railroad Company piers, which suggests that the crusade for an “all-white” waterfront may not have been entirely successful after all. Although few outsiders—least of all blacks—were able to circumvent the Irish near monopoly on the docks, there are indications that African Americans retained a marginal presence there between the draft riots and the next great upheaval, in 1887. In 1879 Charles H. Farnham recorded his impressions of a day spent on the New York waterfront for *Scribner’s Monthly*. Characteristically, he found much that alternately fascinated and repelled him in an environment that featured “toilers and idlers, drift and treasure, blooming youth and cold cadavers.” But in the case of the black laborers he encountered, the tone was entirely one of fascination. Although bales of cotton weighed five hundred pounds, he reported seeing “two negroes put fourteen of them, or 7,000 pounds, from the ground upon a wagon in nine minutes. It was a treat to watch their sinewy arms and strong backs as they tossed the bales about with apparent ease.”

Gradually, mass emigration from southern and eastern Europe built up a reserve army of labor that the shipowners were bound to use to their advantage. In January 1887 a lockout of about 150 coastwise longshoremen employed by a single steamship line triggered a general strike that spread across the entire waterfront and became—in Barnes’s words—the “greatest sympathetic strike which . . . had ever taken place in New York City.” Although the dispute continued for months at some piers, the general strike ended in defeat for the longshoremen on whose behalf it had been fought, and many employers took advantage of the situation to impose another wage cut. Even more important, the strike marked the beginning of what Barnes called the “Italian invasion in waterfront work.” Barnes estimated that as of 1912, “while the Irish (including Irish-Americans) were still in excess of any other nationality, the Italians ranked a close second, making up about one-third of the total.” Two years later, when the Commission on Industrial Relations investigated conditions on the New York waterfront, several informed observers expressed the belief that the Italians constituted as much as half of the estimated longshore labor force of about forty-five thousand men.
Ironically, it was the “invaders” from Italy, along with Slavs and Jews from eastern Europe and Greeks and Syrians from the eastern Mediterranean, who made the Irish appear more American, and “white,” to their WASP counterparts. By the 1880s, when the new immigration accelerated, a substantial Irish middle class had developed, many an Irish worker had made the transition from unskilled to skilled labor, and the Catholic Church had demonstrated its mettle as an instrument of Americanization and social control. In the popular imagination, riotous Paddy was giving way to genial Pat. To be sure, Pat was still a clumsy figure, prone to drink and disorder. But traits that had once seemed ominous now became hilarious, especially on the vaudeville stage. And in any case, the key comparison was no longer with the “wild Irish” of old but with the seemingly unassimilable Italians, Jews, and Hunkies, who—according to an eminent Protestant clergyman—were “races of far greater peril to us than the Irish.” Relative to the new immigrants, a New England Yankee declared, the Irish “do not bring habits or institutions differing greatly from those of the Americans themselves.”

On the waterfront, however, the Irish found that their newly minted whiteness was not necessarily something they could take to the bank. Indeed, for the most part they were helpless to stop the flow of “strangers” to the docks, and the steamship companies were willing to exploit their resentment to hasten the process of displacement. Barnes reported that “if a gang of ‘Ginnies,’ or ‘Dagoes’ . . . was put in the hold with the Irish, the latter would quit. Accordingly, sharp foremen . . . took advantage of the irascibility of the Irish to force them out and so gain the advantage of employing the Italians.” Brooklyn, especially, became an Italian stronghold. “When you come down to the Bush [Terminal],” Barnes wrote of the port’s largest concentration of shipping, “probably two-thirds of the men . . . are Italians, and, of course, conditions are a little worse.”

In Barnes’s interviews with veteran longshoremen, and in the hearings of the Commission on Industrial Relations, the theme of decline was nearly pervasive. “Years ago we had the Irishmen,” said the superintendent of the port’s largest stevedoring firm. They were “all good men—good, able men; the best men physically for hard labor.” Lamentably, “them people have all died out,” and an imagined but nonetheless resonant golden age died with them. But the Irish managed to defend several key enclaves, especially along the Hudson (or
North) River in Manhattan, where the Cunard, White Star, and other European steamship lines docked their great passenger liners. Here, two thousand or more men worked in regular gangs and earned wages well above the average. The White Star Line’s Pier 60 was unique in this regard. By reputation, it was a place where “the gangs work . . . steadily all the time” and thus a “place to make a big week.”

When the Irish monopoly of these jobs was threatened, the longshoremen—and members of the West Village and Chelsea communities—fought desperately to defend their turf. This became vividly evident during a portwide strike in 1907, when the shipowners employed Italian strikebreakers on the North River piers, including Pier 60. At the conclusion of the strike, the White Star Line paid off these men, and three hundred of them ran “like frightened deer” to the nearest elevated railway stations. According to the New York Times, strikers “armed with cotton hooks, clubs, and paving stones” attacked them; the strikebreakers “drew stilettos and turned upon their pursuers, but before they had a chance to use the knives they were knocked down, kicked, and trampled upon.” Several blocks away, a crowd of women cornered a group of fourteen strikebreakers and assaulted them with “all kinds of missiles.” One woman, “armed with an iron poker,” knocked down three Italians and pounded them on the head with it. Another woman, the New York Times reported, “was seated upon an Italian and was pounding him with a baseball bat.” At a third site, police reserves attacked strikers with fists and clubs, and women in nearby tenement windows retaliated by hurling flower pots, iron cookware, and bottles at the police below them. When the officers charged up the stairs of the buildings, most of their targets managed to flee across the rooftops and climb down fire escapes to safe havens below. Only one woman, the wife of a striking longshoreman, who was “caught in the act of throwing an iron pot at a policeman,” was arrested and jailed.

Over time, the Italians earned at least a marginal place even on these bitterly contested piers, first as coal heavers, then as regular longshoremen. But the Irish remained unreconciled to their presence. Caroline Ware, the author of a pioneering ethnographic study of working-class life in Greenwich Village, found in the early thirties that Italian dockworkers could not “use the ‘longshoremen’s rest’ maintained by the union because the place was full of Irish ready to run them out.” As late as 1938 members of the Greenwich House survey team were
struck by “the strong feeling of superiority of the Irish-Americans.” Above all, Irish Americans resented “the intrusion of the Italians,” whom they blamed for “bad conditions” on the waterfront.41

The Italians were allegedly “tractable” and helpless in the face of the “foremen of their race” who controlled their access to employment and regularly skimmed off a part of their wages. Above all, they were not yet white. Testimony before the Commission on Industrial Relations drove this point home again and again. A management representative from Pier 60 informed the commission that neither Italians nor “Polaks” qualified as white men. “In other words,” a commission investigator asked, “you may employ seven gangs of white men and one gang of Italians on a ship?” “Yes, sir,” was the reply. Another management spokesman, from the American Hawaiian pier in Brooklyn, affirmed that “in discharging [the ship] we employ all Italians, and in loading all white men.” The Italians were almost universally regarded as a lower class of labor, and on some piers it was said that “one ‘white man’ is as good as two or three Italians.” This frame of reference was particular—but by no means unique—to the waterfront. According to historian John Higham, in all sections of the United States, “native-born and northern European laborers called themselves ‘white men’ to distinguish themselves from the southern Europeans whom they worked beside. . . . In every section, the Negro, the Oriental, and the southern European appeared more and more in a common light.” For Irish longshoremen, their status as white men conferred real but limited rewards—readier access to skilled and supervisory employment throughout the port, a continuing (albeit precarious) hold on the best piers, and a sense of superiority that could offer psychic gratification one moment but a sense of vulnerability, even betrayal, the next.42

At first the Italians were not especially concerned about differentiating themselves from blacks. Perhaps, as newcomers eager for virtually any employment, they were willing to take this new and unfamiliar world pretty much as they found it. But America had many lessons to teach, and the Irish, if only by example, were among the best teachers. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier found that by the early 1920s, “in order to insure their own standing,” Italian longshoremen were assimilating “the prejudices of the white men” toward blacks. In the classic immigrant tradition, they were learning the “values” of their predecessors and, in the process, becoming white.43

Like the Italians, African Americans served as strikebreakers in 1887, and they were able establish a more secure foothold in 1895,
when the Ward Line employed a contingent of blacks to break a local strike in Brooklyn and thereafter relied on Negro labor “to the exclusion of all other races.” By 1902 there were ten regular gangs of Negro longshoremen in the port, and the number increased to thirty-five in 1904. Census data indicated a total of 1,119 Negro dockworkers in 1910. “At dusk,” Mary White Ovington wrote in her book on the Negro in New York, “Brooklynites see these black, huge-muscled men, many of them West Indians, walking up the hill at Montague Street. In [Manhattan] they live among the Irish in Hell’s Kitchen and on San Juan Hill.” It appears that many—perhaps most—blacks gained access to longshore work through strikebreaking. In Home to Harlem, the Afro-Caribbean novelist Claude McKay offered a frank, often lurid, portrait of the black migrants from the rural South and the West Indies who carved out a place for themselves on the margins of the tight wartime labor market. One of them, a longshoreman named Zeddy, bragged unashamedly that “I’ll scab through hell to make mah living. Scab job or open shop or union am all the same jobs to me.” On a more sober note, Frazier observed that these men “paid with their blood” for whatever inroads they made. A hiring foreman told him that “he could recall the time when a Negro could not walk on Atlantic Avenue,” one of the main thoroughfares intersecting the Brooklyn waterfront.

Although it was common to employ blacks, Italians, and, for that matter, even “white men” as strikebreakers, blacks and Italians were strikers and union members too. There were two major portwide work stoppages in the early twentieth century—the first in 1907, the second in 1919. Both mobilized large numbers of workers—thirty thousand in 1907, forty thousand or more in 1919. Both succeeded in disrupting the normal life of the port; in fact, the 1919 strike idled nearly six hundred vessels and tied up shipping for almost a month. The 1907 strike was triggered by black longshoremen who worked on the Ward and Mallory Line docks. They struck, on their own, for a wage increase to bring their pay up to the standard rate in the port; and although—like the great majority of strikers—they were not members of any recognized union, the chairman of their negotiating committee informed the press that they had their own organization and that they planned to apply for an AFL charter. There were moments of broad and militant solidarity—most notably, on May First, when columns of strikers (most of them Italians who, clearly, were no longer “tractable”) marched along the waterfront behind red banners and the flags of Germany,
Ireland, Italy, and the United States. But for the most part demands were formulated, and the battle was fought, pier by pier, with black strikers pitted against Italian strikebreakers in one section of the port, Italian strikers facing black strikebreakers in another, and the Irish fighting to protect their North River enclave from Italian and black scabs.46

By 1919 unionism had finally come to stay; the International Longshoremen’s Association had defeated its rivals and claimed fifty-four locals throughout the port. But the strike developed in defiance of the ILA leadership, which opposed it from the beginning. According to the New York Times, the strike was a “wild repudiation of all union leadership,” and for good measure the strikers defied Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson and the navy and war departments. As in 1907, there were impressive moments of solidarity. The Italians marched over the Brooklyn Bridge to Manhattan again, in what the leadership of the ILA—men named O’Connor, Riley, and Ryan—clearly regarded as an invasion of Irish territory. And at a packed union meeting, a black longshoreman declared, to thunderous applause, that although “the Negro in New York is suffering more than any other [group] in the city, . . . the Negro will stick with the men and do as they do.” But there was also extensive strikebreaking, by blacks as well as Italians. And even when men from many nations stood shoulder to shoulder in turbulent strike meetings, the ultimate frame of reference remained the grievances on one’s own pier, and the most trusted ally was the worker, neighbor, and countryman with whom one had labored side by side for years.47

This persistent localism was reflected in—but also challenged—the “Irish Patriotic Strike” that occurred in the port of New York in August and September 1920. The strike—actually a boycott of British shipping waged by rank-and-file longshoremen and their allies with no support from the ILA—began on August 27 and spread from Manhattan to Brooklyn and then to Boston.48 This was a pivotal moment in the Irish independence struggle, as guerrilla warfare raged between the Irish Republican Army and British forces in Ireland, and street speakers rallied the faithful in New York’s Irish neighborhoods to the fight for Irish freedom. The immediate cause of the strike was the fate of two Irish patriots who were very much in the headlines at that time. The first was Daniel Mannix, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Melbourne,
Australia; the second was Terence MacSwiney, the republican lord mayor of Cork, who two weeks earlier had begun a hunger strike to protest his arrest by British authorities. Even before his death, after seventy-four days of fasting, MacSwiney’s sacrificial act electrified partisans of Irish independence throughout the diaspora. Comparing him to Christ, his supporters declared that “One Man Can Save a Nation as One Man Saved the World.”

Mannix played an even more direct role in triggering the Irish Patriotic Strike. A former president of Ireland’s National Seminary at Maynooth, he had emigrated to Australia in 1913 and almost immediately had become a towering, and fiercely controversial, figure. He supported the Australian Labour party and helped to make Irish Catholic workers its chief constituency. He denounced World War I as a capitalist war and, in 1916, helped spearhead a successful anticonscription campaign in Australia. Although initially he deplored the outcome of the Easter Rising in Ireland, he soon became, by reputation, a “rabid Sinn Feiner.” When he left Melbourne in the summer of 1920, on the first stage of a journey that was meant to take him home to visit his “venerable mother,” a crowd of two hundred thousand people gathered to see him off. He sailed for San Francisco and then took a train across the United States. Along the route, hundreds of thousands turned out to hear him speak at mass rallies. In New York the mayor honored him with the “freedom of the city,” and fifteen thousand people cheered him at Madison Square Garden. But the climactic moment came on July 31, when he boarded the White Star liner Baltic at Pier 60, intending to continue his pilgrimage to Ireland. The ship’s cooks and stewards threatened to go on strike if the archbishop was allowed to board the vessel; the coal passers, who were mainly Irish, threatened to strike if he was not allowed on board. As the Baltic prepared to depart, thousands of Mannix’s supporters broke through police lines and gathered at the pier; the Fighting 69th regimental band provided musical accompaniment; dockworkers insisted on kissing the archbishop’s ring as he approached the gangway; Sinn Fein leader Eamon de Valera, the “President of the Irish Republic,” appeared by his side at the ship’s railing; and policemen brandished their revolvers to prevent angry longshoremen from pummeling a British heckler. It was, according to the New York Times, a moment “marked by disorders rarely if ever equalled at an American transatlantic passenger pier.”

And the drama had just begun. Spokesmen for the British government had intimated that Mannix would not be allowed to land in
Ireland, and Prime Minister David Lloyd George reaffirmed that position after the *Baltic* set sail. But even allowing him free access to Britain seemed unduly risky, for with the ship scheduled to land in Liverpool, newspapers declared that the Merseyside was “ablaze with Sinn Fein flags and banners, and . . . tense with excitement.” From Ireland, meanwhile, telegrams reported that welcoming bonfires were blazing all along the southern coast, from Mizen Head to Waterford. Finally, a British destroyer intercepted the *Baltic* as it approached England; naval officers removed Mannix from the ship and brought him ashore at Penzance. It was a clumsy act of repression that only fed the fires of Irish nationalism. “Up Mannix,” declared the protest placards. “Down with the Pirates of Penzance.”

It was on the day the *Baltic* returned to New York Harbor, and a berth at Pier 59, that the Irish Patriotic Strike began. About thirty women, mostly Irish immigrants and Irish Americans who called themselves the American Women Pickets for the Enforcement of America’s War Aims, established a picket line on the Chelsea docks and called on the *Baltic*’s coal passers to walk off the ship to protest Britain’s treatment of Mannix and MacSwiney. According to the *New York Tribune*, about 150 of them answered the women’s call, and the strike was on. They were joined, immediately, by Irish longshoremen working on Pier 59 and others nearby. Many of these dockworkers may have been recent emigrants from Ireland and refugees from rural smallholdings in the impoverished west. One veteran unionist recalled that as of 1920 longshore gangs in Chelsea were composed not only of men from the same country but, in the case of the Irish, of men from the same county. They were accustomed to supporting Irish causes; they belonged to their own chapters of the Ancient Order of Hibernians; they were, in many cases, adherents of “physical force” republicanism.

That evening there was a euphoric “victory rally”—one newspaper called it a “tremendous burst of enthusiasm and wild Irish patriotism”—at the Lexington Opera House. Thirty-five hundred people jammed into the opera house; thousands more gathered outside. The assemblage took up a collection for the striking longshoremen that would help to sustain them in the days and weeks ahead. But the heroes of the evening were the coal passers whose walkout had triggered the wider strike. The crowd “howled” with joy when fifty members of the *Baltic*’s engine room crew entered the auditorium and took their places of honor on stage. Frank P. Walsh, former chairman of the Commission on Industrial Relations and a major American spokesman for Irish indepen-
Fig. 1.2. “A handful of brave young women”: In 1920 Irish and Irish American women mounted an aggressive campaign in support of the struggle for Irish independence. Their picket lines on Manhattan’s Chelsea piers triggered a three-week-long boycott of British shipping in New York Harbor. Credit: National Library of Ireland.

dence, captured the spirit of the moment when he declared that the coal passers “symbolize the resistless force of labor in the world today.” But equally significant, for Walsh and his audience, was the success of the Women Pickets in merging the “resistless force of labor” with the struggle of oppressed nations—above all, Ireland—for self-determination. “When a handful of brave young women today brought their banners to the ships,” said Walsh, “they singlehandedly set in motion events which shall cause the downfall of that empire which has built up its great power upon crimes committed against weaker nations all over the world.”

These “brave young women” appealed with consummate skill not only to Irish (and American) patriotism but to the workers’ sense of manhood. Ordinarily the waterfront was masculine space, and a group
of protesting females on the docks would have been little more than an oddity. But in this instance the Women Pickets struck a responsive chord when they called upon “Every Red-Blooded Workingman” to take a stand against “England, the Common Enemy.” Increasingly, it was women who manned the picket lines, in part because the strike was illegal and male pickets would probably have been singled out for retaliation, and in part because the women allowed, and even compelled, the men to “be men.” “The men . . . count on the women not to fail them,” wrote boycott leader Helen Golden, “for it is a great encouragement to them to see a strong picket, and it keeps the waverers from going back.”

The most remarkable feature of the Irish Patriotic Strike, though, was the participation of black longshoremen. The enmity between African Americans and the Irish American community in the United States—above all in New York City—was legendary. Indeed, the radical black journal *The Messenger* characterized the Irish as “the race Negroes . . . dislike most.” On the New York waterfront, Irishmen had seen to it that blacks paid “with their blood” for any gains they made, and in Chelsea they were excluded from most piers, especially those where the work was steadiest and the wages were highest. But on August 27, when the picketers approached the docks where several hundred black longshoremen were working, they walked off the ships and fell in with what had become a remarkably diverse and multinational line of march: Irish American women and Irish longshoremen, “British” coal passers, Italian coal heavers, and now black dockworkers—all of them apparently marching for the cause of Irish freedom. The women, at least, had thought carefully about how they would appeal to the black longshoremen. They came prepared with picket signs that read “Ireland’s Fight Is Our Fight! Up Liberty, Down Slavery,” “The Emancipation of the Irish Is the Emancipation of All Mankind,” and “Ireland for the Irish. Africa for the Africans.”

Few if any developments in the entire history of the New York waterfront could equal, or explain, this extraordinary event and the convergence of class, nationalist, and racial slogans it generated. Partly it was a reflection of the moment—1919 had been an apocalyptic year in much of the world, and the currents of proletarian upheaval and insurgent nationalism that were its hallmarks continued to crest in many places for some time thereafter. In this case, “British” coal passers, many of them wearing small American flags on their coats, stopped work in support of the “Irish Republic”; and according to the *New York World*,
black longshoremen shouted “Free Africa” as they joined the strike. When the boycott spread to the Brooklyn waterfront, rank-and-file spokesman Patrick McGovern declared that “three thousand stalwart men have stopped work to force . . . British troops out of Ireland. It's the Irish spirit—no use—England can't kill it.” But McGovern went on to add, “[It’s not simply an Irishman’s fight. It is the fight of labor all over the world.]” Irish American labor activist Leonora O’Reilly developed this point more explicitly. “They can no longer divide us on religious lines or on lines of nationality,” she told a mass meeting of strikers. “Labor is labor, the same the world over.”

But it is unlikely that labor internationalism alone could have motivated African American workers to go on strike proclaiming that “Ireland’s Fight Is Our Fight.” It appears, rather, that the key factor was the influence of the charismatic black nationalist Marcus Garvey, whose Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was headquartered in Harlem. Garvey had been, and would continue to be, inspired by the example of Irish nationalism. His ringing slogan, “Africa for the Africans at home and abroad,” echoed an oft-repeated Irish slogan, “the Irish race at home and abroad.” He may have named his Harlem headquarters Liberty Hall in conscious imitation of Dublin’s Liberty Hall, the headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union and one of the sites from which the famed Easter Rising was launched in 1916. Above all, he believed that the Irish struggle provided inspiration for the African diaspora, and that the many generations of martyrs for Irish freedom offered a model for the martyrs of the “Negro race” whom Garvey was calling to the “altar of liberty.”

For African Americans the previous decade had brought the hopes and disappointments associated with the Great Migration, the experience of fighting for democracy in a European war and returning home to face the frenzied hatred of lynch mobs and race rioters, and an unprecedented awareness of their own connection with the problems and aspirations of “darker races throughout the world.” Black participation in the Irish Patriotic Strike suggests that, like their Irish counterparts, African American dockworkers were part of a much wider community—in this case, one that was nurtured by chain migration, by newspapers and agitational leaflets, and above all by the relationship of the longshoremen to an informal network of communication that reached from Harlem to the West Indies to London and other European ports and ultimately to various sites in Africa. Just as black Pullman porters and other railroad workers were vital conveyors of information within
Black America, so African American, West Indian, and African seafarers played an important role in developing the links that bound the “Black Atlantic” together. Claude McKay became part of such a community in London in 1920; it was composed mainly of seamen, former soldiers, students, petty professionals, and athletes. A few years later, in Marseilles, McKay encountered a more proletarian version of the same community. Some of its members were dockers; most were seamen—from West Africa, the West Indies, and the United States. According to his biographer, McKay found that all of the black seamen “had been touched in one way or another by the Garvey movement, by radical agitation in Europe, and by the growing movements of anti-colonial protest in West Africa, India, and the Middle East.”

Garveyism, which reached its peak in 1919 and 1920, was critical to the development of this imagined community. The Jamaican-born Garvey had lived in Britain as well as in the United States; and he was determined to use the UNIA and above all its newspaper, the *Negro World*, to build a universal race consciousness among the children of the African diaspora. Thus he focused not only on events in Harlem, Chicago, and the American South, but also in Britain, the West Indies, and Africa. But apart from these formal channels of communication,
black longshoremen and seamen were already accustomed to transmitting information about “the race” from one port to another, often by word of mouth but sometimes by passing newspapers and leaflets from hand to hand or simply by placing them in the hold atop a ship’s cargo. Through these varied channels, black longshoremen on the Chelsea piers might well have known of the humiliating—and tragic—odyssey of the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) during World War I. Like their African American counterparts, members of the BWIR eagerly enlisted in the armed forces, only to encounter a near pervasive pattern of segregation and discrimination. Most of them were excluded from combat and consigned to menial labor under conditions that killed more than a thousand of them. Throughout their term of service they were “subjected to every kind of petty racial abuse” and were ultimately compelled to conclude that “we [were] treated neither as Christians nor as British citizens, but as West Indian ‘niggers.’”

Yet their ordeal did not end with the war’s conclusion. When they were demobilized in port cities such as Liverpool and Cardiff, they confronted not a grateful British public but an escalating sense of resentment at their very presence, a resentment that exploded in Britain’s own season of bloodletting in the spring of 1919. Liverpool witnessed an “anti-black reign of terror”; Cardiff, an organized paramilitary assault on the city’s black community, led by armed “Colonial Soldiers” (in this case, Australians). News of these atrocities rippled outward, toward the Anglophone Caribbean and the growing West Indian enclaves in Atlantic seaboard cities such as New York. When veterans of the BWIR finally reached their Caribbean homes, they became the equivalent of burning embers in parched grassland. Their bitter stories fueled the fires of an enhanced race consciousness and at the same time strengthened the bonds of a militant working-class movement that launched an unprecedented wave of strikes in the islands of the Black Atlantic. The largest of these upheavals occurred in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, and was led in part by ex-servicemen. It began, appropriately, as a dockworkers’ strike and spread from there to rural Trinidad and the island of Tobago. According to local authorities, its leaders were “imbued with the idea that there must be a black world controlled and governed by . . . black people.”

In this context, insofar as the Irish Patriotic Strikers appeared to be merely “white,” black longshoremen might well have felt little sympathy for their cause. But the news from the African diaspora also highlighted the role of Britain as an oppressor of colonized nations, thereby...
complicating the meaning of Irishness and offering two historic antagonists an unprecedented opportunity to discover how much they had in common. Both were, after all, uprooted peoples who—in many instances—believed that they had been exiled from their homelands. “We have been chained together in the same slave ships,” an Irish immigrant wrote to The Messenger in 1919, “and sold into serfdom by the same tyrant—England.” Although few blacks were prepared to acknowledge that the suffering of the Irish was comparable to their own, many of their leaders and most energetic propagandists were eager to hold up the Irish independence struggle as a model for Black America. Thus Claude McKay enthusiastically recounted his attendance at a “monster” Sinn Fein rally in London’s Trafalgar Square in the summer of 1920. “All Ireland was there,” it seemed; “all wearing the shamrock or some green symbol.” McKay “wore a green necktie and was greeted from different quarters as ‘Black Murphy’ or ‘Black Irish.’” “For that day at least,” he wrote, “I was filled with the spirit of Irish nationalism.” In fact, even though he was a Marxist who would join the American Communist party in 1921, soon after his return from England, McKay was deeply moved by Ireland’s fight for freedom. “American Negroes hold some sort of a grudge against the Irish,” he acknowledged. “They have asserted that Irishmen have been their bitterest enemies.” But, he concluded, “I react more to the emotions of the Irish people than to those of any other whites; they are so passionately primitive in their loves and hates. They are quite free of the disease which is known in bourgeois phraseology as Anglo-Saxon hypocrisy. I suffer with the Irish. I think I understand the Irish. My belonging to a subject race entitles me to some understanding of them.”

The Afro-Caribbean intellectual Cyril Briggs also applauded “Heroic Ireland” in the pages of his journal, The Crusader. Briggs, the son of a colored woman and a white plantation overseer, was an “angry blond Negro” and a tireless agitator on behalf of “the sons and daughters of Ethiopia.” Born on the island of Saint Kitts, he emigrated to the United States in 1905 and settled in Harlem, where—drawing on the example of the Irish Republican Brotherhood that had sparked the Easter Rising—he founded the African Blood Brotherhood in 1919. Like McKay, Briggs moved rapidly toward Marxism and membership in the Communist party, but he still regarded “the Irish fight for liberty” as “the greatest Epic of Modern History.” He called upon African Americans to emulate the Irish and to learn from them that “he who would be free himself must strike the blow.” “It should be easily possible
for Negroes to sympathize with the Irish fight against tyranny and oppression, and vice versa,” he concluded, “since both are in the same boat and both the victims of the same Anglo-Saxon race.”

To Briggs, it was self-evident that “two groups fighting the same enemy [should] act in unison and move in co-operation.” But on the Chelsea waterfront, cooperation between Irish and African Americans was a rarity. In March 1920 coastwise longshoremen had struck for higher wages, and their strike dragged on into August. With the help of strikebreakers, some of whom were black, the employers finally succeeded in defeating the strike and breaking the union among the coastwise men. Although the coastwise longshoremen were a separate group from the higher-paid “deep sea” men in the foreign trade, they worked on piers that were not far removed from the transatlantic docks, and their fate could not have escaped their deep sea counterparts. Only a week and a half before the Irish Patriotic Strike began, a group of striking white longshoremen from the Morgan Line pier on Manhattan’s West Side had ambushed about twenty-five black strikebreakers. In the ensuing battle two whites (named Curran and Kearns) suffered gunshot
wounds and four Negroes were hospitalized with fractured skulls. The conflict on the Morgan Line dock continued throughout the boycott of British shipping and featured another melee in which the street adjoining the pier became a “mass of 1,500 fighting men” who attacked each other with cargo hooks, sticks, stones, and fists. More than a decade later, Caroline Ware found that the white longshoremen had long and bitter memories. “Negroes and Spaniards were violently hated,” she reported, “for ruining a decent trade and undercutting wages which the union had achieved.”

The perception of African Americans as strikebreakers was reinforced when, two weeks into the boycott of British shipping, the employers sought to gain the upper hand by bringing in black longshoremen from other areas of the port to work the paralyzed White Star Line piers. These men were union members; they were recruited with the full support of the ILA leadership; the shipowners housed and fed them right on the docks. But in this instance there was no race riot. Garvey sent one of his chief lieutenants, Rev. J. W. Selkridge, down to the piers to “urge all the Negro longshoremen not to load British ships.”

The next evening a contingent of fourteen Irish Americans, including some longshoremen, journeyed to Harlem’s Liberty Hall to seek a closer working relationship with Garvey and the UNIA. According to an undercover agent who was monitoring the UNIA’s activities for the federal government, the visitors “spoke in high terms of Garvey and his movement and pledged their support.” Garvey in turn assured them of his goodwill and affirmed that the quest for “Liberty was common to all mankind, irrespective of creed or color.”

On the following day a remarkable four-way conference took place. It involved Adrian Johnson of the UNIA, Helen Golden of the American Women Pickets, a representative of the striking Irish longshoremen, and the foreman who was supervising the work of the black strikebreakers. The foreman maintained that his men would consider joining “the Irishman in the strike for liberty by virtue of it being a Common Cause akin to that of the Aethiopian people,” but they were also deeply concerned about their exclusion from the piers on which the “wages were highest.” Thus they demanded that “some proper arrangements be made . . . to guarantee them a confraternal consideration with the Irish Workers in the Cause of Liberty which they conjointly are striving to attain.” The spokesman for the Irish longshoremen acknowledged the justice of the black workers’ concerns, but apparently the rank-and-file strikers refused to make any concessions with regard to Pier
Helen Golden explained their rationale. “Is it not understandable,” she wrote on September 19, “that the Longshoremen of the Irish Race should at the present time take the stand that they have taken? The circumstances are peculiar. They have worked that Pier for many years. The *Baltic* (upon which Archbishop Mannix sailed; upon which he was insulted and spat upon by a Britisher; and from which he was forcibly removed by officers of the British Navy) has always docked there.” No one had worked harder to ensure the success of the boycott of British shipping than Helen Golden, and, along with other leaders of the Irish independence movement, her belief that the Irish and African diasporas were engaged in a “Common fight for Liberty” was apparently genuine. Nonetheless, the argument that the Irish monopoly on Pier 60 represented a kind of natural order that had been rendered sacrosanct by the presence of Archbishop Mannix did not satisfy the black strike-breakers. Their decision to keep working sealed the fate of the strike, which was called off two days later.

The Irish Patriotic Strike had little effect on Britain’s decision to grant Ireland independence, which came more than a year later in a manner clothed in sufficient ambiguity that Eamon de Valera and other Sinn Finn partisans were moved to take up arms against the government their struggle had helped to create. Nor did the strike force the British to free Terence MacSwiney. He died on October 25 and was memorialized around the world, including New York City’s Polo Grounds, where de Valera and New York governor Al Smith addressed a crowd of thirty-five thousand mourners and the American Women Pickets served as an honor guard. As for Archbishop Mannix, he was not able to visit Ireland until 1925, and it was hardly a triumphant return. Because of his unrelenting sympathy for Sinn Fein and de Valera, the Irish government and the nation’s Catholic hierarchy virtually boycotted him throughout his visit. Meanwhile, on the New York waterfront, less than six months after the strike for Ireland, Irish longshoremen walked off a Hoboken pier, declaring that they would not work with “smokes.” Indeed, as E. Franklin Frazier found, “One Irishman almost precipitated a race riot by striking a colored longshoreman with a piece of coal.”

But Frazier also discovered something quite remarkable in Chelsea. As a result of the momentous events of August and September 1920, he said, Negroes were now “permitted to work on the White Star piers.” Thus for a brief moment two parallel nationalisms had converged to create genuine bonds of sympathy and a tangible redistribution of re-
sources among workingmen who had long regarded each other with suspicion and even hatred.68

... ... ...

In the early 1920s, there were more than five thousand black longshoremen in New York City. Their presence reflected the momentary needs of a tight wartime labor market but also the accelerating—and apparently irreversible—pace of black migration from the rural South to the urban North. In the two decades after 1910, the city’s African American population increased by more than 235,000. Frazier interviewed eighty-two black longshoremen in 1921 and three years later published a richly documented portrait of them in the Howard Review. Seventy-two of the men he interviewed were born in the South, the great majority of them in Virginia and the Carolinas. Seventy percent had lived in New York City for more than seven years, a third for more than twenty years. Remarkably, few were young; in fact, no one appeared to be younger than twenty-five, and a clear majority were over forty. Sixty-nine of the men were married, and three were widowers. Thirty of their wives were employed, a far higher proportion than among white longshoremen, and several men acknowledged that “without the assistance of their wives they would not like to contemplate their fate.” In general, they were compelled to live in unsanitary and overcrowded tenements, and in many cases churches provided the only associational outlet for their families.69

Seventy percent of the men Frazier interviewed had been in longshore work for more than five years; and nearly half for more than ten years. Apparently, they believed they were “unfit for any other form of employment,” perhaps because of their lack of education. Twenty-eight reported no schooling at all, and thirty-five had gone no further than the fifth grade (in most cases less). Although Frazier found that a “discussion of labor problems . . . was conspicuously absent” from the many conversations he observed, the men were nonetheless prounion. Eighty out of eighty-two answered an “unconditional ‘Yes’ ” when Frazier asked whether they favored unions. A majority believed, however, that “the Negro was compelled to join the unions, primarily, for the convenience of white men.” Outside the ILA he could “scab” on whites; inside it, he could “be controlled.”70

Frazier also interviewed a number of “employing stevedores,” and their responses yield important insights into the pattern of opportunity and discrimination that prevailed in the early 1920s. A Ward Line
stevedore employed an equal number of white and black men, undoubtedly in segregated gangs, and sometimes hired more blacks than whites. Over a twenty-year period, he “found the colored men excellent workers especially under good leadership.” “They sing as they work,” he concluded, “and abstain from [the] profanity that often characterizes the discourse of other men.” A White Star Line stevedore told Frazier that he regularly employed “two gangs of Negroes, three gangs of whites, and two gangs of Italians.” This was a recent innovation, in the wake of the strike for Ireland and the negotiations that had occurred at that time. The stevedore found the Negro workers “as efficient as the others,” and he tried to distribute the work equally among the “three racial groups.” Finally, a French Line stevedore acknowledged that he did not hire black longshoremen. He had attempted to on one occasion, when it became clear that the white longshoremen who monopolized the work were trying to “run him.” But when the whites found that he was planning to hire blacks, they went over his head to French Line officials, and “the company put a ban on the project.”

Frazier found, then, that the longshoremen themselves exercised a not insignificant influence with the stevedores and foremen who hired them, and thus they played an important role in determining the ethnic and racial complexion of the port’s labor force. The hiring foreman, in particular, developed a relationship with his gangs that was one of “mutual fidelity.” He agreed to provide them with as much employment as possible, and they in turn worked with an “ardor” that solidified his relationship with the steamship company. But because the manpower requirements of the industry were not increasing, Frazier said, “these foremen can take on colored men only by displacing their white following. . . . [T]his would be treachery, [and] in the eyes of those depending upon the foremen for their livelihood, worthy of death. As the foremen know this and are aware of the hardened nature of longshoremen, they would not take such chances.”

What this signified was that apart from a few enclaves, black longshoremen would remain on the margins of the dock labor force. Apparently, they were achieving a near monopoly of the work of “coaling the ships,” but these jobs were among the dirtiest, heaviest, and most debilitating in the industry. Beyond that, the most hopeful sign Frazier could identify was that “in some cases the employers have conceded the right of the Negro to appear at all the shapes and take chances of employment after the regular white group has been selected.”
CHAPTER ONE

The port’s ethnic and racial stratification became visible in ways that should have been obvious to even the most superficial observer. The “white” longshoremen—Irish, Scandinavian, and German—performed the most coveted jobs, as foremen, riggers, and winch operators, whereas the Italians started out performing the least skilled work and gradually pulled themselves up to a middling position in the occupational hierarchy. Blacks developed a few enclaves of relative security but more often were consigned to the dirtiest work or remained on the margins, as the most “casual” of the casuals. The stratification also became geographic as well as—perhaps more than—occupational, and certain piers and areas of the port became the preserve of particular groups. The Irish maintained their predominance on Manhattan’s West Side; the Italians, in much of Brooklyn. Hoboken, once home to Germans and Scandinavians, gradually fell to the Italians. Indeed, well into the 1950s Italian remained the most common language on the Hoboken waterfront, and “ship jumpers” (illegal aliens) from a single village in Italy continually reinforced the New Jersey port’s ethnic homogeneity.74

Beyond New York, each city had its distinctive pattern. Boston remained an enclave of the Irish; one observer noted an “unmatched Irishness” among the longshoremen there. In fact, as Irish dockworkers used their control of the port’s ILA locals to limit membership in the union and thereby marginalize rival groups, Boston replicated Hoboken’s pattern of increasing ethnic homogeneity. There were 198 Negro longshoremen in the port in 1930, but only 78 in 1950 and 34 in 1960. Then, in the sixties, as a result of technological innovation, decasualization, and the declining competitive position of the port of Boston, the number of dockworkers in Massachusetts declined to only 766. As Irish Americans defended their embattled ethnic niche and preserved the few remaining jobs in the trade for their family members, blacks were virtually eliminated from waterfront work. In 1970 there were 4 black longshoremen in the entire state.75

From Baltimore southward as far as Lake Charles, Louisiana, the labor force was predominantly black. Here the pattern that prevailed in Boston was often reversed. African American slaves had once performed much of the dock work in the cities along the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico, and blacks continued to make up the overwhelming majority of the labor force in many of these ports. Not that their
substantial presence necessarily translated into power. In Mobile skilled and relatively well-paid whites handled timber and screwed cotton, whereas the black majority was relegated to unskilled labor, low wages, and harsh working conditions. In Savannah a larger black majority fared even worse. But the enduring black presence on the waterfront was a much-needed consolation to an African American community that was steadily losing ground in the labor markets of the South. Although the black portion of the workforce among coal miners and railway trainmen fell precipitously, the percentage of black longshoremen in the South Atlantic and East Gulf ports continued to increase. In the West Gulf, especially Houston and Galveston, the work was divided “more or less equally” between whites and blacks. But on the Pacific Coast, until the 1930s and in some ports for much longer, African Americans were almost entirely excluded from the waterfront.76

In the early twentieth century, Philadelphia offered the sharpest contrast to New York’s pattern of racial hierarchy and ethnic balkanization. As of 1910, there were about three thousand longshoremen in the port, and, remarkably for a northern city, about 40 percent of them were black. Poles accounted for 25 percent of the total; the rest were Lithuanians, Italians, Irishmen, and Jews. The open shop prevailed, and employers for the most part had their own way in shaping the Philadelphia waterfront’s ethnoracial mix. But then, in 1913, organizers for the revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) appeared on the waterfront and, with amazing dispatch, built a union that thrived for the next seven years. Local 8 of the IWW-affiliated Marine Transport Workers was self-consciously interracial; the IWW called it “the most striking example ever seen in this country of... working-class solidarity between whites and Negroes.” The local achieved a remarkable degree of job control, and it was careful to share leadership in the union equally between whites and blacks.77

But gradually, perhaps inevitably, Local 8 fell on hard times. Its interracialism stood in stark contrast to the ugly racial conflicts that pockmarked Philadelphia’s residential neighborhoods. And even on the waterfront, labor struggles sometimes exacerbated racial tensions, as black scabs played a prominent role in undermining several bitterly fought strikes. Finally, with the waterfront labor force swollen to seven thousand by 1920, the employers were in a good position to undermine Local 8, and they received a helping hand from the International Longshoremen’s Association, which had its own reasons for wanting to displace its rival. Black workers became a special target of the ILA’s or-
ganizing campaign, which sought—initially at least—to assign the men to separate “colored,” Irish, and Polish locals. It may be that Garveyism and other currents of black nationalism also played a role in weaning blacks away from the interraciialism of the IWW. In any case, Local 8 eventually collapsed and was succeeded by the ILA. According to a survey conducted in 1930, the union membership was “fairly evenly divided between colored and white, the white workers being predominantly Polish or of other Slavic nationalities.”

If Philadelphia offered the example of a proud and aggressive interracialism that eventually gave way to more muted forms of multiethnic accommodation, New Orleans achieved a pattern of biracial cooperation that was longer lasting and, in the context of the Jim Crow South, even more remarkable. Between 1880 and the early 1920s New Orleans dockworkers created what Eric Arnesen has called “the most powerful biracial labor movement in the nation.” Although German and Irish immigrants were an important component of the Crescent City’s labor force, race was the major motif in Southern society, and white supremacy was the norm. But black workers, as slaves and freedmen, had established a formidable presence on the riverfront, and employers had no interest in acceding to demands for their removal when to do so would only drive up the price of white labor. Gradually, the painful—and sometimes deadly—lessons of experience convinced workers of both races that competition had to give way to cooperation if either group was to achieve a modicum of security.

The most advanced and innovative forms of cooperation developed among the screw men, the aristocrats of the riverfront, whose name derived from the jackscrew they used to stow giant bales of cotton in a ship’s hold. After a disastrous round of competition in the 1890s, the white and black screw men’s unions decided to share the available work equally, with the same number of blacks and whites assigned to each hold. Beginning in 1901, the New Orleans Dock and Cotton Council was built upon this foundation. Initially, it incorporated eight unions—three of them white, the rest black. Two decades later the council had expanded to include twenty-four unions with twelve to fifteen thousand members. Although it observed a pattern of segregated seating at its meetings, and although its constituent unions remained racially separate and by mutual agreement its president was always white, the council achieved a remarkable level of biracial accord at the very moment rigid segregation was becoming the norm throughout the South.
“We have had white supremacy and [...] black supremacy on the levee,” declared a black union official in 1908, “and there was trouble in each case. Now, we have amalgamation and freedom and we are getting along all right.” So well, complained a white state senator, that when the waterfront unions flexed their considerable muscle, New Orleans was “practically under negro government.”

This was, of course, hyperbole verging on hysteria. The leaders of the Dock and Cotton Council were motivated by pragmatism rather than a principled commitment to racial equality. Even black unionists readily acknowledged that their objective was not “social equality with whites” but “meat and bread.” The screw men and longshoremen who dominated the council were unwilling to risk the organization’s resources in gestures of support for the most vulnerable waterfront workers, the freight handlers and cotton teamsters and loaders who in most cases were black. And to the dismay of labor radicals, the council’s leadership insisted on regarding collective bargaining agreements as “binding and sacred.” There were, moreover, clear limits to black-white cooperation. The Dock and Cotton Council refused to support African American struggles against disfranchisement and segregation, and it insisted that foremen’s jobs be reserved for whites. But for the most part black-white unity on the riverfront held until the 1920s, when the combination of technological innovation, regional economic competition, and the spread of antiunion ideology created the basis for a conflict between labor and capital that reduced the waterfront unions to an empty shell. The employers’ principal concern was not biracial unionism as such but the stubborn control that the workers, especially the screw men, exercised over the pace of work on the docks. During a walkout in 1923 steamship operators succeeded in breaking the strike—and the unions—by mobilizing large numbers of strikebreakers from rural sections of the state and then relying on the municipal and state governments and the federal courts to run interference for their “open shop” offensive.

With the defeat of the 1923 strike, a proud tradition of unionism came to an end. So did the era of interracial cooperation. Blacks soon outnumbered whites on the riverfront by a three-to-one margin, and African American longshoremen became increasingly concerned with defending their fragile turf against what they now regarded as white encroachment. Whites, meanwhile, complained that the riverfront had been “Africanized.” For the next generation, racial competition
and conflict would take precedence over biracial cooperation in the Crescent City.82

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New York, then, offered only one among many patterns of ethnic and racial accommodation. But New York was not merely one among many ports. With nearly fifty thousand workers, it was by far the largest in the nation. Indeed, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Chelsea piers alone supplied work “to more longshoremen than any other port on the Atlantic or any other port in the country.” Moreover, as the International Longshoremen’s Association became a national union, New York remained the principal source of its power and leadership and thus helped to define the character of longshore unionism in most of the nation’s port cities. Above all, New York exemplifies the persistence of ethnicity as a medium through which class was experienced and the gradual but seemingly inevitable racialization of working-class identity.83

By forcibly displacing others, and then re-creating the waterfront as “white,” the Irish dominated dock labor in New York for several generations. When the Italian “invaders” came, they were resented as economic competitors and despised as not yet “white.” Although the Irish lost their near monopoly and ultimately their majority status to the Italians, they fought tenaciously to maintain control of their most prized possessions—the Chelsea piers, the upper echelons of the union, even the “longshoremen’s rest” in the West Village. As late as the 1950s, the writer Budd Schulberg found that the Irish “have a better deal than [the] Italians, who in turn are a niche above the Negroes.” For the Italians, then, the process of becoming “white” was slow and uneven; and the wages of whiteness were sometimes meager at best. But like the Irish, the Italians were also the beneficiaries of a “public and psychological wage.” They had relatively untrammeled access to public space; above all, they were linked to neighborhoods, political networks, and criminal gangs that offered them psychic capital and avenues of mobility that barely existed for blacks.84

To be sure, African Americans also increased their presence in New York during the era of the new immigration. In 1890 only one in seventy people in Manhattan was a Negro; by 1930, the ratio was one in nine. Largely because the employers compelled it, blacks were begrudgingly accorded a place on the docks. But even though they appeared to become a critical mass, they were unable to achieve the standing—
the relatively secure niche—that their numbers should have afforded. As we shall see more fully in the next chapter, the distinctive character of waterfront employment in New York, and the unyielding determination of Irish and Italian longshoremen to defend their ethnoracial turf, would keep blacks on the margins.85

This was the key difference between New York and the southern ports. On the waterfronts of the South blacks could not be excluded or marginalized, and they were able to reap the reward when circumstances made durable organization and meaningful change possible. Sometimes organization served to consolidate a virtual black monopoly of longshore employment; at other times it meant a carefully constructed biracial accommodation.86

Even in New York, there were moments of solidarity when longshoremen found that common grievances made broader unity possible. In the strikes of 1907 and 1919, massive rank-and-file insurgency created tentative alliances that appeared to transcend the ethnocentrism of pier and neighborhood. In 1920 an even more remarkable strike created a common ground rooted in larger currents of nationalist insurgency. Indeed, the Irish Patriotic Strike opened access to jobs from which blacks had long been excluded. But apart from this significant concession, the end of the strike meant a return to older and more familiar patterns of localism that would endure for decades. The majority of New York’s longshoremen continued to define themselves in ethnic terms, and even more so, perhaps, as members of family and neighborhood networks. And yet this localism was not incompatible with a larger transformation of their consciousness. Gradually and unevenly, they relinquished their status as “in-between peoples” and laid claim to their inheritance as “white” Americans. In this regard, certainly, they made themselves as much as they were made. And their agency had enormous implications, not only for the lived experience of class but for the patterning of racial inequality, on the waterfront and in the society beyond it.87