

## **Atlanta's Washerwomen Strike - (1881)**

### **African-American Laundry Women Go on Strike in Atlanta**

In July 1881, African-American laundry women in Atlanta formed the Washing Society and organized a strike to gain higher wages and respect for their labor. Utilizing door-to-door canvassing and with the support of black churches, the Society quickly increased its membership from twenty to three thousand. Aside from the "Letter to Mr. James English," written by the washerwomen themselves, these articles from the *Atlanta Constitution* are the only surviving documents of the strike. Although hostile to the strikers, and sympathetic to measures taken by white citizens to undermine the strike (which included making plans for a new steam laundry, proposing to tax the laundry women's organization, and finally charging its leaders with "disorderly conduct"), the paper nonetheless notes the "vast proportions" of the laundry women's "thoroughly organized association." Although the historical outcome of the strike is in doubt, it served as a reminder to the white community of the importance of African-American labor in the post-Civil War South, and remains an extraordinary testament to the resolve and political sophistication of the strikers.

**21 July 1881**

#### **“The Washerwoman’s Strike”**

The laundry ladies' efforts to control the prices for washing are still prevalent and no small amount of talk is occasioned thereby. The women have a thoroughly organized association and additions to the membership are being made each day... During the day the house of every colored woman who is not a member of the association is visited and a regular siege begun, and in nearly every instance an addition to the membership is the result. In this way the meetings, which are had every night, are largely attended and generally very demonstrative... Speeches advocating their rights and exhorting the members to remain firm are numerous and frequent. To several families whose washing left home Monday morning the clothing has been returned [w]ringing wet, the woman having become a member of the association after taking the washing away. It is rumored that house help is also on the eve of a strike.

**24 July 1881**

#### **“The New Steam Laundry”**

The washerwomen of Atlanta having 'struck' for very unreasonably high prices, a number of our most substantial citizens have quietly gone to work to make up a large cash capital, and will at an early day (as the strike is nearly all subscribed already) start an extensive Steam Laundry. The capacity of a new laundry will be equal to the wants of the whole city... From fifty to one hundred smart Yankee girls experienced in the business, will be employed in running it and the calculation of those having the enterprise in hand, is that at the very moderate charge, say an

average of twenty, to thirty cents per dozen the profits will be sufficient to give all the stock holders fair dividends and their washing besides. We are glad to chronicle this movement...

**26 July 1881**

**“The Doughty Washwomen: Holding Out for an Advance in Wages”**

The Washerwomen’s strike is assuming vast proportions and despite the apparent independence of the white people, is causing quite an inconvenience among our citizens. In one instance the demand for one dollar per dozen was acceded to. Those who decline to give this price are still wanting washers. Several families who have declined to pay the price demanded, have determined to send their clothing to Marietta where they have secured laundry service. The strikers hold daily meetings and are exhorted by the leaders, who are confident that the demands will be granted. The committees still visit the women and induce them to join the strike and when a refusal is met threats of personal violence are freely indulged in to such an extent as to cause a compromise with their demands. There are some families in Atlanta who have been unable to have any washing done for more than two weeks. Not only the washerwomen, but the cooks, house servants and nurses are asking increases. The combinations are being managed by the laundry ladies.

**26 July 1881**

**“A Move in the Right Direction”**

We learn that at the next meeting of the city council, an ordinance will be offered requiring all washerwomen belonging to any ‘association’ or ‘society’ to pay a business tax or license....

**29 July 1881**

**“The Wet Clothes”**

Police court was well attended yesterday morning...

Among other cases disposed of were those against Matilda Crawford, Sallie Bell, Carrie Jones, Dora Jones, Orphelia Turner and Sarah A. Collier. The sextette of ebony hued damsels was charged with disorderly conduct and quarreling, and in each case, except the last, a fine of five dollars was imposed, and subsequently paid. In the case of Sarah A. Collier, twenty dollars was assessed, and the money not being paid, the defendant’s name was transcribed to the chain-gang book, where it will remain for forty days.

Each of these cases resulted from the washerwomen’s strike. As members of the organization they have visited women who are taking no part in the strike and have threatened personal violence unless their demands were acceded to and their example followed. During their rounds they met with persons who opposed the strike and who declined to submit to their proposition to become members. This opposition caused an excessive use of abusive and threatening language and the charge of disorderly conduct and quarreling was the result...

**3 August 1881**

**“Letter to Mr. James English”**

Mr. Jim English, Mayor of Atlanta

Atlanta Georgia, August 1 [1881]

Dear Sir:

We the members of our society, are determined to stand to our pledge and make extra charges for washing, and we have agreed, and are willing to pay \$25 or \$50 for licenses as a protection, so we can control the washing for the city. We can afford to pay these licenses, and will do it before we will be defeated, and then we will have full control of the city's washing at our own prices, as the city has control of our husbands' work at their prices. Don't forget this. We hope to hear from your council Tuesday morning. We mean business this week or no washing. Yours respectfully,

From 5 Societies, 486 Members

**16 August 1881**

Upon the resolution imposing a license of \$25 upon washerwomen an adverse report was made by the ordinance committee and adopted by the council.