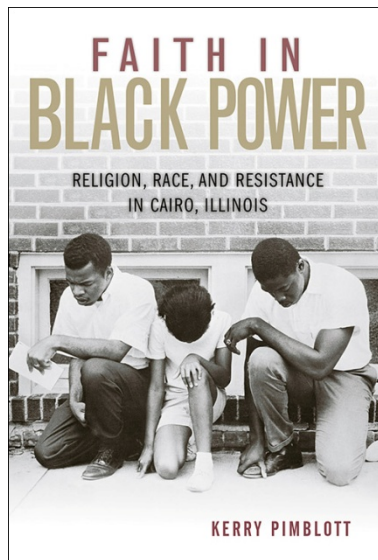


A review of *Faith in Black Power: Religion, Race, and Resistance in Cairo, Illinois* by Kerry Pimblott (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2017. 227 pp., notes and bibliography; ISBN: 978-0-8131-6882-1) reviewed by Eric R. Jackson (Book Review Editor, *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*; jacksoner@nku.edu) Professor of History Department of History and Geography; Director – Black Studies Program; Northern Kentucky University and Heather Crabbe (crabbeh1@nku.edu), Assistant Dean Chase College of Law Northern Kentucky University.



A nineteen year old African American named Robert Hunt was found dead in a Cairo, Illinois police state in 1969. The white city leaders as well as most members of the police department viewed Hunt's death as a suicide. However, most local African Americans saw this incident as murder and ultimately a continuation of the city's use of political oppressive and racial violence to control the activities and destiny of the people of African descent in Cairo. Soon after this incident, however, a rebellion and several protest movements erupted throughout the city. Furthermore, the city became a focal-point for many regional and national Civil Rights groups and organizations. More importantly, African American Cairoites established their own Civil Right organization, known as the United Front, led by Reverend Charles Koen, who helped to fuse the activities and theology of local Black American churches with the emerging Black Power movement in the city. The book under review here,

titled *Faith in Black Power: Religion, Race, and Resistance in Cairo, Illinois*, seeks to analyze this process from its origins to its conclusion.

Scholar Kerry Pimblott, formerly an Assistant Professor of African American and Diaspora Studies and History at the University of Wyoming, but currently a lecturer in International History, with specializations in United States History and African Diaspora Studies, at the University of Manchester – England, explores the origins and objectives of a group of African American community activists that emerged in Cairo, Illinois after a nineteen year old Black American male was found dead in the local police station in 1969 despite the claims of most the officers that the young man committed suicide. More specifically, the author contends that her study rests on several “claims about the relationship between black power, the black church, and African American Christianity” (p. 6). Pimblott also contends that her book “challenges dominant conceptions of black power's deChristianization by demonstrating the sustained and pivotal role played by the black church and African American Christian discourses to the movement mobilization in Cairo” (p. 6).

The author further notes that her study “shows that in their effort to construct a viable black power movement, activists in the Cairo [Illinois] United Front forged important connections with nationally prominent black theologians, urban ministers, and their affiliated organizations” (p. 7). The emergence of this local Civil Rights movement, Pimblott concludes, “both contributes to and complicates our understanding of black freedom struggles in the borderland” [states] (p. 13).

Faith in Black Power is separated into five fairly equally-divided chronological, thematic, and potent chapters. For example, in her first chapter, titled “On Jordan’s Bank,” Pimblott examines the history and plight of African Americans in Cairo from the early 1800s to late 1930s. The author concludes that during these years African American “Cairoites” were regulated “to the lowest rungs of the river city’s declining economy” which “hindered the development of a proletarianized black working class and attendant black middle class capable of sustaining autonomous institutions” (p. 23). During these years, the author also notes that the political reforms passed by the city’s white leadership during the early 20th century “undercut the ward-based electoral power of black voters” that greatly forced most local African Americans into supporting the Black church as the only institution suited for “political protest and social movement activity” (p. 24).

In the next chapter, titled “Redemptive Love, Vigilante Terror, and Rebellion,” Pimblott examines the origins of the Modern Civil Rights movement in Cairo. Specifically, the author discusses the activities of the city’s local NAACP chapter campaign to end the use of segregated public schools soon after World War II, the role that the Black church and its leaders play in these and many other Civil Rights protest activities in the city as well as the impact of white racism and violence as a result of such events. According to Pimblott, this phase of the Civil Rights movement in Cairo ended with “white opposition [forcing] the NAACP underground, frightening away supporters and compelling activists to shift to legal gradualism and accommodation, largely as a matter of survival,” along with connecting with some national Civil Rights organizations and leaders (pp. 63 – 64). Also key in this chapter is that the author shows how that the resurfacing of longstanding divisions over the involvement of the Black church in the local Civil Rights movement led to a redefinition of its role that ultimately became a vehicle for local Black youths, who moved into several leaders’ roles, “to recruit intergenerational and cross-class support” for the next phase of the local Freedom struggle in the city, which was accelerated by the death of a nineteen year old African American male named Robert Hunt, Jr., at the local police station, which led to a sudden, unexpected urban riot.

In the third chapter, titled “From the Seminary to the Streets,” the author explores the creation of the “Cairo United Front, an organization that brought together black Cairoites” from various organizations, classes, generations, ideologies in support of a new, broad-based, and radical phase of the Civil Rights movement in the name of “racial change and social justice” (p. 106). Compared to other similarly-focused organizations, the United Front was rooted in both “black nationalist and radical intellectual traditions” that reflected the political views and aspirations of the “black power militant wing” of the Civil Rights movement (p. 107).

Critical to the change in the local Civil Rights movement was the rise to the national stage of Reverend Charles Keon, who became the leader of the Cairo United Front, as well as the emergence of several local female African American leaders. However, Reverend Keon would quickly find out, Pimblott contends, how maintaining a “united front” in Cairo was a difficult and almost impossible task “because it tied radical activists to multiple competing constituencies that frequently differed in their interpretations of the movement’s goals and tactics” (p. 107).

Next the author turns to an examination of some of the major accomplishments of the “united front” phase of the Civil Rights movement in Cairo. In short, Pimblott contends that “between 1969 and 1974 the United Front secured more than a half a million dollars in grants from church based organizations” and obtained “lobbying, consultancy, and staff support” from numerous local, regional, and national like-minded groups for a cadre of Black power-oriented initiatives (p. 152). Also important during these years, according to the author, was that local Black churches continued to play a prominent and valuable role in the Civil Rights movement in the city. Finally, during these years came the numerous legal cases in Cairo to end decades of economic, political, and social oppression, such as *Young v. Alexander County Housing Authority*, *Kendrick v. Walder*, *Ewing v. Walder*, and *Hollis v. Emerson*.

In the final chapter, titled “The Recession of National Spirit,” Pimblott shows how the infusion of federal money into various Black power organizations, combined with the rise of a very conservative political environment during the early 1970s, left the “united front” in Cairo as well as the nation’s largest Black church denominations, vulnerable to the shifting state agenda and the unpredictable and changing views within a number of local and regional African American churches. Also, the author concludes, during these same years, the “United Front leaders --- like other black power activists across the country --- were subject to a systematic campaign of repression at the hands of federal agencies, including the FBI and the IRS” (p. 184). Also important on the state and local level was the election of a Republican Governor in Illinois and the rise of the Republican Party throughout the state that was able to repress and almost totally erase all of the gains of the United Front as well as dismantle its network and leadership. Along with a series of internal missteps, a narrowing of funding options, and various structural problems, the Black power (united front) movement in Cairo gradually declined and slowly disappeared, with its lasting legacy being only in the legal arena.

Overall, Pimblott’s *Faith in Black Power* offers a new and unique interpretation of the relationship between the Black church and the Black power years of the Civil Rights Movement. For this point alone, the author should be congratulated. However, there are some limitations. First, more details should be added to the role of African American women in the city’s Black power movement. Second, more attention is needed on the topic of the involvement of children and young adults in the city’s Civil Rights movement. Finally, the legal aspects of the Civil Rights movement in Cairo should be expanded. Despite these shortcomings, rooted in an enormous amount of newly discovered primary sources, this path-breaking book contributes greatly to our understanding of the second phase of the African American led Freedom struggle.