Chapter 5
FLIGHT, FRIGHT, AND FREEDOM:
The Illinois Training School for Boys at St. Charles, 1920-1950

Rick Andrews,\(^1\) an eleven-year-old African American boy from Chicago, wound up at the Illinois Training School for Boys at St. Charles in 1933 because he stole an eight-year-old boy’s shoes. After trying to sell them to a shoe repair shop, he was arrested and sent to Cook County’s Juvenile Court. By the time Rick ended up at the Training School, he had already gone through the ordeal of being separated from his mother and brother and being placed in foster care after his father abandoned them and they were evicted because they could not afford to pay rent. Rick and his family subsequently moved into a one-room kitchenette apartment with two other relatives and slept on the kitchen floor since it was the only space that was available to them. Juvenile Court caseworkers noted in his file that he stole the shoes because he needed the money, and that his crime was a result of the extreme poverty of his family. They ultimately concluded that separating him from his family and putting him in foster care would be in his best interests. For reasons that were not made apparent in his case history, his placement with the foster care family was unsuccessful, and he was committed to the State Training School for Boys.\(^2\)

When Rick arrived at the Training School for Boys, he entered an institution that was in the midst of a dramatic upheaval. Between 1920 and 1950 the Illinois State Training School for Boys at St. Charles (hereinafter St. Charles), became a site through which social and political

\(^1\) The actual names of boys at the State Training School for Boys—with an exception of those whose stories may have wound up in newspapers or published works—have been replaced with a pseudonym to protect their privacy. I have kept the initial letters of their first and last names the same in the interest of scholars and investigators who may want to access the boys’ files. This decision is in accordance with Illinois state laws intended to protect the privacy of children who have been charged with crimes in juvenile court.

\(^2\) Monthly report of Managing Officer Robert F. Havlik Nov 8, 1933, Series 2 Box 8 Folder 112, Mary Bartelme Papers, UIC Special Collections Library.
contestations over delinquency, demographic change, and black freedom were contested. African American boys’ experiences at St. Charles not only elucidates they ways in which intersecting notions of race, age, gender, and sexuality shaped the administration of justice, but also illustrates a process of racialized criminalization within a juvenile justice institution. Their story also underscores the real and symbolic significance of the juvenile justice system in the African American community. The Training School at St. Charles, like the Training School for Girls at Geneva, was born out of the Progressive child-saving movement, and was an integral part of Cook County’s juvenile justice system. The emergence of Cook County juvenile court in Chicago marked the political viability and ascendance of the idea that children who committed crimes—unlike adults—were inherently innocent and entitled to a separate justice system that would ‘rehabilitate’ them. The juvenile court—the first of its kind in the nation—was the cornerstone of the city’s juvenile justice system.

Notions of childhood innocence were rooted in notions of whiteness however, and by 1920 it was clear that the demographics of Cook County’s juvenile justice system were experiencing a dramatic demographic transition that paralleled population change in Chicago. Many southern African American men, women, and children who sought new employment opportunities pinned their hopes for a new life on the city. The Chicago Defender, the most widely read black newspaper in the South, painted an image of a vibrant exciting city with a strong, educated, and assertive black community. The lure of these images and job opportunities, as well as the blatant racial violence and economic disenfranchisement they faced in the South, made Chicago an irresistible option for many African Americans.³

The growing association of African Americans with criminality exacerbated white Chicagoans’ feelings of racial hostility towards the new migrants. The Chicago Commission on Race Relations’ 1922 report found widespread beliefs among white Chicagoans that “the Negro is more prone than the white to commit sex crimes particularly rape…[and] that he commits a disproportionate number of crimes involving felonious cuttings and slashings.” White Chicagoans’ belief that black men were inclined to commit sexual crimes is significant, as the cultural fiction that black men were inclined to rape rationalized the lynching of over 2000 African American men between 1880 and 1930. This cultural fiction also helped ignite a sex scandal at St. Charles, which involved an African American boy accused of raping a white boy at the school. The scandal even prompted Illinois state officials to directly intervene into the management of the school.

The increasing number of African American boys at St. Charles caused staff members, state legislators, and residents in cities surrounding the institution to refine their notion of what kind of boy St. Charles’ initial rehabilitative mission was meant to apply to. Newspaper articles about boys at St. Charles fueled whites’ anxieties over demographic change and ultimately fueled a backlash against the rehabilitative ideal. Notions of black male-ness, which was increasingly represented through a hyper-masculine trope embodying danger, criminality, and menacing sexuality during the early twentieth century fueled changes in school policies. Demographic change during an era when black people were largely treated as non-citizens, posed a problem for the Training School at St. Charles’ mission to train boys for “manhood and citizenship.” By the 1930s, black boys’ hyper-visibility in the school was reflected through their institutional records. Widespread notions of black criminality as well as white residents’

discontent over black migration also shaped the way in which the schools’ administrators and
state legislators addressed seemingly new challenges—like the problem of inmate escapes.

African American families, legislators, and community activists on the other hand
increasingly identified St. Charles as an institution whose policies had important implications not
just for African American boys, but their own lives in Chicago. St. Charles became a site through
which Black Chicagoans engaged in contestations over freedom and equality. African
American boys in St. Charles also reacted to the politically driven institutional upheavals going
on around them by resisting their confinement.

It is important to note that despite the emergence of juvenile justice institutions in
Chicago and other major cities, a significant number of African American boys continued to be
incarcerated in northern adult prisons during the early 20th century. In 1910 for example,
African American children made only 14% of the youth population, but three out of four boys
confined to adult prisons, jails, and workhouses were black. One out of three incarcerated white
boys were confined in similar institutions.5

“Training Boys for Manhood and Citizenship”

The St. Charles Home for Boys was established in 1901 by the Illinois legislature’s
Act for the Treatment and Care of Delinquent Boys. Representing the legislature’s commitment
to the care and protection of dependent and delinquent children, the Act was part of
Progressives’ efforts to separate delinquent children from adult criminals.6 The Illinois Home

---

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (Forthcoming) 2012), 75-76.
6 Under the Juvenile Court Act of 1899, a 'dependent child' referred to any male child who, while
under the age of 17 years, or any female child, who while under the age of 18 years was for any
reason is destitute, homeless, or abandoned. A 'delinquent child' was any male child who while
for Delinquent Boys, which was renamed the ‘Training School for Boys at St Charles’ in 1905, was located forty miles from Chicago in Kane County. In the founders’ vision, it would serve as both a reform institution for delinquent boys, and a haven from the ‘vices of the city’. Like other industrial schools and reformatories that sprung up around the country, the school’s site was purposely located in a rural pastoral area in order to protect the boys from the dangerous of city life. The school was composed of 898 acres and seven farms. At that time, no other state public institution in the United States owned as much land as the State School for Boys. 

When the institution opened in 1904, 365 boys under the age of thirteen at Pontiac State Prison, and inmates from other institutions for delinquent children like the John Worthy School, and Chicago Parental School, were among its first inhabitants. The local newspaper, the *St Charles Chronicle* noted the school’s opening with pride and affection, referring to it as “the greatest institution of its kind...[an experiment] that has ever been attempted in America, if not in the known world.” Like other homes for delinquent boys that emerged in the context of the child-saving movement, administrators utilized a “family-style” cottage system, which included a housemother and housefather to make the institution seem less prison-like. The average daily population of boys at St. Charles stayed around 400 through 1915, with about one-third being foreign-born. Roughly the same proportion of boys came from Cook County. By the 1920s, the

---

under the age of 17 yrs, or any female child, who under the age of eighteen years, violated any law of this State. T.H. MacQueary, "Schools for Delinquent Children in Illinois," 9, no. 1 (1903): 10-12.

7 In St Charles Home for Boys, "1st Biennial Report " (Springfield: Abraham Lincoln State Library, 1904), ———, 2nd Biennial Report (Springfield1906), ———, 5th Biennial Report (Springfield1912), St Charles School for Boys, 3rd Biennial Report (St Charles, Il1908). 1905 the institution’s name was changed to ‘St. Charles School for Boys’. In 1939, it was renamed the Illinois State Training School for Boys. St Charles Home for Boys, 2nd Biennial Report 6, Feld, *Bad Kids: Race, and the Transformation of the Juvenile Court*, 48-54, ibid.
daily population was regularly at a minimum of 600, and the school often housed an average of between 700 and 800 boys.8

St. Charles instituted a number of programs to educate the boys and ease their transition into the outside world once they were released. School administrators instituted vocational programs for the boys early on. Much of the training centered on agricultural work, so the boys spent much of their time in the dairy barn, creamery, horse barn, and farm. By 1911, the school added four more cottages and vocational programs, and expanded to include a printing plant, carpenter shop, paint shop, wagon shop, tailor, and blacksmith shop. The boys typically spent half of their day learning these occupations, and the other half in an academic program. St. Charles also boasted extensive medical and dental departments with fully licensed professionals that helped maintain the health of boys in the school. The Institute for Juvenile Research maintained a close relationship with St. Charles, and furnished counseling and assessment services for the boys. In 1925, administrators even approved the building of a student run zoo with two bears, four foxes, two monkeys, a wolf, swan, and other small animals with the support of “friends of the boys’ school.” All these amenities gave St. Charles the reputation of being a premier home for delinquent boys.9

Child-saving was at the heart of the institution’s early mission. Administrators and staff members at the St. Charles believed they were engaged in the important task of not only

---


separating boys from male adult criminals, but saving and protecting delinquent boys from a life filled with crime. The first superintendent, N.W. McClain, described the important service staff members were providing to the state by taking on the “hard” task of “saving neglected and delinquent boys.” For him, finding the “cure for delinquency” required a specialized “knowledge of the causes of delinquency.” McClain urged state officials to continue financially supporting the school by warning them of the dangers that could accompany “sending a boy, who has committed some minor offense into confinement involving…intimate association with older and hardened criminals.” He argued that an “ounce of prevention” and protection from the influence of vice and poverty was the most potent method of curbing delinquency, as “bitter poverty” could make “thieves of young men.” As late as 1931, St. Charles continued to embrace an explicit mission to protect “boys” and “correct and rebuild them for a useful and proper place in society.”

The “training” at St. Charles included instilling military-style discipline and rigorous athletics, reflecting the gendered approach to building healthy males. Building and teaching citizenship lay at the heart of reformers’ and administrators’ attempts “rehabilitate” and “save” delinquent and “potentially delinquent” boys. As McClain noted in the First Biennial report, “changing ignorant bad boys into intelligent manly youth” who could become useful citizens was a central part of the institution’s mission. Military training became part of the boys’ daily regimen to facilitate this mission, and promote “obedience and respect for authority.” The military training was also meant to foster “patriotism, civic duty, and individual responsibility.” Staff members and administrators of the school also promoted a rigorous athletic and recreation

---

program because they believed it played an important role in “training boys for manhood and citizenship.”\textsuperscript{11}

The school’s mission to train boys for proper “manhood and citizenship” was also reflected in their vocational training program. Unlike the State Training School for Girls at Geneva, where residents were taught sewing, cooking, beauty culture, and other thought important for preparing girls for a “proper home-life,” boys at St. Charles were exposed to a more varied curriculum. In addition to military training, boys at St. Charles were exposed to a diverse sample of trades intended to teach them to be carpenters, blacksmiths, tailors, printers, painters, barbers, and mechanics.\textsuperscript{12} These programs reflected and reinforced the gendered structure of society.

Staff members at the school closely monitored the boys’ sexuality so that they could quell any signs of ‘deviance’. Staff members and administrators’ anxiety over of possible homosexual acts in the institution reflected broader homophobia in the society. Boys, in contrast to girls, were rarely arrested and sent to juvenile court for engaging in “sexual behavior” with the opposite sex. Boys who engaged in sexual behavior with other boys however, were often processed in court and sent to correctional institutions. Like employees at correctional institutions across North America and Europe, staff members at St. Charles closely monitored homosexual activity and

punished boys who engaged in it.\textsuperscript{13} In order to prevent homosexual behavior, staff members reportedly arranged cottage beds in a way that made surveillance of the boys easier, prohibited them from going to cottage basements without supervision, and subjected them to a rigorous recreational and physical education program. When boys were found engaging in “immoral” practices, staff members punished them by making them stand silently for up to three hours, whipping them, or putting them in a detention cottage.\textsuperscript{14}

In most cases, St. Charles continued to monitor former residents even after they were released. School administrators—through their own discretion or by order from Juvenile Court officers—put boys on parole or in foster care before releasing them to the general public. Like other institutions that housed children and adults convicted of crimes, St. Charles had a high recidivism rate. Poverty, the stigma of having been committed to an institution for a crime, the temptation to fall back into the same behavior patterns, or conflict with host families often overwhelmed newly released inmates and caused them to be recommitted to institutions. African American boys who were paroled from St. Charles—particularly those who were socially stigmatized because of their race—faced additional challenges.

**Migration and Demographic Change in Chicago and the Training School for Boys**

The dramatic increase in the number of African American boys committed to the Illinois Training School for Boys at St. Charles coincided with the school’s transition to a more punitive

The number of African American boys at St. Charles began to increase rapidly in the 1920s, and continued to do so through the 1940s. Between 1915 and 1923, the percentage of African American boys at St. Charles increased from 8 to 12.5 percent—roughly half as rapidly as the African American population in Chicago. In 1934 African Americans made up 22% of the population but by 1942, they comprised a solid 30% of the school population. What these startling statistics occlude is the dramatic impact African American boys’ commitments to St. Charles had on black communities in Chicago. Since the school’s opening, boys from Cook County had made up approximately half of St. Charles’ population, while boys from other counties made up the over half. Over time, Cook County Juvenile Court began to send a large and growing proportion of black boys to St. Charles.

The Chicago Commission on Race Relations picked up on the rapidly increasing number of African American boys in the institution. The Commission’s investigation found that between 1915 and 1921, the proportion of African American boys committed to St. Charles by Cook County Juvenile Court had increased half as rapidly as Chicago’s black population. An Illinois Board of Welfare’s 1937 study revealed that seven times as many African American boys were committed to St. Charles by Juvenile Court as should be expected based on their population. Sociologist George Faris’ 1941 study of boys age 15 and under committed to St. Charles by Chicago’s Juvenile Court in particular revealed that a whopping one half of the boys sent to the

15 A Report and Recommendations Submitted to the 61st General Assembly of the Illinois Legislature, 56.; Document entitled “Age of Boys,” 1941, Series 1 Box 0, Folder 87, Russell Ward Ballard Papers, University of Illinois Special Collections Library.
school that year were African American.\textsuperscript{18} A 1949 institutional survey of boys age ten to eighteen in St. Charles’ academic program yielded a similar result. Of the boys who had been committed by Cook County’s Juvenile Court, 45% percent were African American. At that time of the study, African American boys made up 33% of St. Charles’ total population.\textsuperscript{19} The proportion of African American girls committed to the Illinois Training School for Girls between 1920 and 1950 was similarly startling. Between 1935 and 1938 for example, 75% of the girls Cook County Juvenile Court sent to Geneva were African American. Like St. Charles, approximately half of the girls at Geneva were from Cook County, and African Americans made up roughly one third of the total school population.\textsuperscript{20}

This over-representation of African American children at St. Charles and other such institutions for youth signaled the juvenile justice system’s inability to escape the institutional racism of the broader criminal justice system, child welfare services and larger society. Public and private child welfare institutions discriminated against African American children by excluding them because of their race. The increase in the number of African Americans in Chicago, as well as the relatively small number of private and public institutions that were willing or able to care for dependent African American children made St. Charles the default option for poor or orphaned boys who were not able to find a suitable foster or institutional placement. A high proportion of boys admitted to the St. Charles between 1910 and 1940 were actually labeled ‘dependent’ in Juvenile Court. African American sociologist Earl Moses found in his 1936 study of black delinquency in Chicago that, “The difficulty of providing adequate

\textsuperscript{18} George Faris, "A Study of Boys under Fifteen Committed to the Illinois Training School for Boys" (University of Chicago, 1941), 13-14.
\textsuperscript{20} Letty Joyce Grossberg, "A Study of Negro Girls Committed to the Geneva State Reformatory in 1937-1938" (University of Chicago, 1940), 4.
care for the dependent and neglected colored children constitutes one of the greatest problems with which the Court has to deal. The situation is complicated by a lack of resources in the community comparable with those available for white children in the same circumstances. Practically no institutions are to be found in the community to which this group of colored children may be admitted.”

The experiences of Chris Taylor and Wayne Stevens illustrate how some dependent African American boys wound up at St. Charles. When Wayne Stevens’ parents died, he was sent to St. Charles after court and public welfare agency officers could not find him a suitable home. School records describe Wayne as a “very quiet boy” whose inability to get placed apparently had to do with the perception that he was “lazy, stubborn, and unreliable.” Luckily, after a few months Wayne was paroled to a middle-class African American family in Chicago’s Morgan Park neighborhood. Juvenile Court and public welfare agency officers were having a difficult time finding an appropriate institutional or foster care placement for fifteen-year old Chris. After his mother and father passed away, he lived with his aunt until she got sick and died. Thereafter, he had a brief stint in a foster home before being sent to the Chicago Parental School—a boarding home for truant children who either played hooky or had behavioral problems in school. There, Chris was labeled “incorrigible” for reasons that were not made apparent in his school records, and sent to St. Charles.

In some cases, boys who were victims of physical or sexual abuse also ended up at St. Charles. Edward Adams, a seventeen-year old African American boy from Chicago had spent

---

22 Monthly report of Managing Officer Robert F. Havlik Nov 8, 1933, Series 2 Box 8 Folder 112, Mary Bartelme Papers.
23 Memo to Ballard from Lake County Dept of Public Welfare Court House, Mar 27 1943 Series 1 Box 0, Folder 76, Russell Ward Ballard Papers.
most of his life under some sort of state supervision or care before being committed to St. Charles in 1933. His parents had abandoned him when he was an infant, and he was temporarily placed in the Illinois Children’s Home and Aid Society. Thereafter, Edward was placed with an older man who had other foster children. When Edward’s foster father decided to move to Ohio he sent him back to the Children’s Home and Aid Society, which transferred his case to the Catholic Home Society Bureau. It was later revealed that Edward, and some of the other children in the home, had been sexually abused by their foster father. Unfortunately, a social worker advised a woman who was interested in taking care of Edward not to adopt him because he had been involved in “sex perversions” and “prone to be a degenerate.” As a result, Edward was committed to St. Charles.24

Black Hyper-Visibility and Segregation at St. Charles

Early institutional reports form the Training School for Boys at St. Charles made virtually no reference to the racial composition of boys in the institution. Unlike the Illinois Training School for Girls which tracked the number of immigrants, native born whites, and African Americans from the moment it opened, St. Charles tracked nationality, European ethnicity, and religion but not race, until the 1920s. In a 1908 report for example, St. Charles documented that 186 out of 388 boys were “foreign born.” The majority of boys with foreign heritage were from Germany, Ireland, Russia, and Italy. Although a very small number of African American boys were present at the institution, they were included under the American count. In the next biennial report, Superintendent C.W. Hart noted that although there was “a large increase in the number of boys of foreign parentage, and a slight decrease in the boys of

24 Ibid.
American parentage” in the institution, “the percentage of Afro-Americans in the school is small.” African Americans were again included in the American count.\textsuperscript{25} Between 1910 and 1928, institutional reports also only refer to the number of “American” and “foreign born” boys in the institution. This lack of specific mention of the number of African American boys at St. Charles indicates that administrators did not feel a need to document the specific number of African American boys in their reports.

The school’s 1928 annual report marked an important shift. For the first time, St. Charles specified the number of African American boys in its institution, and continued to do so in subsequent years. The superintendent reported that 163 of the 800 boys were “colored.” The number of “American” and “foreign born” boys were still documented in the 1928 report, but this too changed in 1929. The institutions’ Annual Report to the Department of Public Welfare that year marked a moment when the boys’ nationality and ethnicity became less important in institutional records than their race. The report noted that of the 760 boys in the institution, 168 “colored” boys made up 22% of the institution while 592 were listed as simply “white.”\textsuperscript{26} This trend of ignoring ethnicity and focusing on race, continued in the Department of Public Welfare Reports well into the 1950s. Administrators, legislators, and community members’ anxiety over the dramatic shift in the demographics at St. Charles—along with the growing belief that there was “a different sort of boy” in the institution—lead to notable institutional changes. This collapsing of European ethnicity into whiteness in record keeping mirrors the shift in the

\textsuperscript{25} 3\textsuperscript{rd} Biennial Report: 388; 4\textsuperscript{th} Biennial Report: 3; “Age of Boys at Institution” Russell Ward Ballard Papers, Series 1 Box 0, Folder 87


14
construction of whiteness elsewhere in the city and the nation.

After 1928, specific concerns—like the intermingling of black and white boys, attempted escapes, and runaways—became more salient, and led the state to advocate for a more punitive treatment of boys in the institution. Ultimately the state constructed its first maximum-security—initially for the ‘new’ type of child they believed was too dangerous for St. Charles—for boys who were unlikely candidates for rehabilitation. Unlike the State Industrial School for Girls at Geneva where the practice of racial segregation was formalized within a decade of its existence in 1910, administrators at St. Charles did not racially segregate boys until 1935. Institutional reports echo the Chicago Commission on Race Relations 1921 findings, which found that boys at the school did not experience any racial division earlier in the school’s history. “Negro and white boys live in the same cottages, eat in the same dining room, and use the same playground.” African American boys at St. Charles even had the opportunity to take on leadership roles in the institution, as the report found “four out of the twelve cadet companies have Negro captains, and these have more white than Negro boys under them.” No “racial difficulties in regard to employment or discipline,” were reported, “and the general conduct of Negro and white boys was reported to be the same.” St. Charles Managing Officer, Colonel C.B. Adams, told investigators, “I really think mentally, and I am sure physically, the colored boys such as come into the institution today are superior to the white boys. We make much of the athletics in the school and the best athletes we have are colored boys.” Similarly, social scientist Evelyn Randall found during her 1925 visit to St. Charles, that under the school’s official admission plan, the rule was that “colored boys are to be sent to all cottages and farms in
accordance with the classification [system] outlined…”  

In 1929, a reporter for the *Chicago Defender* praised St. Charles for not resorting to racial segregation when he became aware of the institution’s integrationist ethos. As the reporter noted, “In many institutions where boys of the Race are confined we find them segregated into separate groups, but not so at this great training school. In every cottage throughout the entire institution, members of the Race are assigned and in many instances find them commanders of companies and leaders of details.” Interestingly enough, the *Defender* indicated that school administrators had considered racial segregation in 1922. Rumors that the cottages would become racially segregated led to negative comparisons to the Geneva girls school, where girls “of the Race are all thrown together in one cottage.” This fear never came to pass however, because in 1932, the *Defender* praised St. Charles again: “the outstanding feature of the school is the absolute absence of the race question.”

By 1935, when black migration to the city had reached an ethos, administrators at St. Charles had concluded that boys in the institution had severe behavioral problems that could be cured only through racial segregation. Although earlier school reports did not link any specific instances of bad behavior with racial integration the school’s managing officer, William T. Harmon, began a plan of racial segregation the in the cottages the summer of 1935 because he thought it would lead to “good behavior.” Mr. Harmon “reported that by the gradual process of elimination of the white boys, one cottage had been turned over completely for colored occupancy with good results.” A school secretary similarly concluded that “the largest colored

---


boys were segregated with satisfactory results” and “recently the smaller boys had been segregated by color.”

Mr. Harmon’s report indicated that the school was undergoing a general “readjustment of the populations,” and that “the establishment of certain cottages exclusively for colored boys” was a part of the reorganization of cottages by age and size. This new policy of racial segregation led to severe overcrowding in black cottages—particularly cottages belonging to the older African American boys.

This new policy of racial segregation had immediate impact on black boys in the institution by severely compromised their living conditions there as well as in the Juvenile Court’s detention center. Because each cottage at St. Charles had a maximum occupancy of forty boys by law, administrators’ decision to restrict African American boys to a set number of cottages created a backlog at the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center, which held children before they were transferred to a correctional institution. Boys sentenced to St. Charles could be held in juvenile detention for as many as three to four months before even beginning to serve their time. In 1938 a “Mr. Barry” of the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center complained that the “necessity of holding the boys awaiting commitment” was causing disciplinary problems. The overflow at the Juvenile Detention Center meant many of the older boys—both black and white—were forced to take up residence in the center’s basement, which

29 Minutes of St. Charles Advisory Committee, 7/31/35, St Charles Advisory Committee Minutes of Meetings, 1933-1937 (IJR), Record Group 266.00, Illinois State Archives at Springfield; Minutes of the St. Charles Advisory Committee Meeting Chicago Bar Association, Friday, March 13, 1936, St Charles Advisory Committee Minutes of Meetings, 1933-1937 (IJR), Record Group 266.00 Ill State Archives Springfield.

meant they had no immediate access to toilets and limited opportunities to get out. Mr. Barry reported that the increase in disciplinary problems “developed from [the boys’] resentment at being held for months without counting on time to spent in St. Charles.”

**A ‘Different Kind of Boy’: Escaped ‘Fugitives’ and Hysteria**

African American boys were not simply passive observers of their increasing hyper-visibility, or objects of St. Charles’ new segregation practices. Rather, they resisted the increasingly dehumanizing nature of their confinement. At times, they protested against physical abuse or threatening behavior by staff through physical assault or defense. Seventeen-year-old Noah Betts was removed from St. Charles and sentenced to the Kane County jail in Geneva in 1942 on a charge of “assault with a deadly weapon.” He reportedly attacked two staff members with a mop handle during an altercation before being overpowered by other staff members. More often than not however, African American boys used a method of resistance other boys in the institution also used—they attempted to escape.

Newsapers like the *Chicago Tribune, St. Charles Tribune, Elgin Daily Courier, and Geneva Republican* increasingly featured stories about African American boys hiding in and running through their towns in an effort to escape the harsh nature of their confinement at St. Charles. These often sensational journalistic accounts fueled notions of black hyper-masculinity, erased African American boys’ youth, and reinforced notions that black men were menacing, innately dangerous criminals. These depictions helped instigate public cries for physical

---

31 Minutes of the St. Charles Advisory Committee Meeting, June 17 1938, July 19 1938, St. Charles, IL School for Boys 1937-1939; Record Group 266.00 Illinois State Archives at Springfield; Minutes of the St. Charles Advisory Committee called at the request of Mr. Brown at the Medical and Dental Arts Building, July 19 1938, St. Charles, IL School for Boys 1937-1939, Record Group 266.00 Illinois State Archives at Springfield; Minutes of the St. Charles Advisory Committee Meeting June 17 1938, July 19 1938; St. Charles, IL School for Boys 1937-1939, Record Group 266.00 Ill State Archives Springfield
punishment and stricter discipline at the school.

The boys who were featured in these newspaper accounts—many of them were trying to find their way back home to Chicago—utilized a variety of tactics in their escape attempts. They often formed groups—sometimes across racial lines—and concocted elaborate escape plans. They climbed fences, destroyed school property, physically overpowered staff members, and sometimes stole food and money from neighboring homes. The boys’ resistance against their confinement, as well as newspaper accounts of the growing menace of St. Charles escapees, was one of the factors that led to a dramatic institutional and legislative crackdown.

Although corporal punishment was not an official part of the school’s policy, newspaper stories about St. Charles revealed that some staff members regularly used physical violence to discipline the boys. At the height of one such controversy over the use of corporal punishment at St. Charles, and the beginning of the state’s move to institute more punitive treatment of child offenders under the law, residents in the surrounding community began to strongly encourage corporal punishment at the school. The spectacle of Nathaniel Moffet’s 1928 attempt to escape from St. Charles led nearby residents to not only call for corporal punishment, but a harsher form of military training. A sixteen-year old African American boy who had escaped from St. Charles, Nathaniel was later caught stealing a Mrs. Richard Hunter’s purse and sent to county jail. This wife of a Chicago advertising executive endured bruises and scratches from beating him off until he fled with her purse. Chief of Police Ruben Anderson criticized St. Charles administrators declaring that “Women residents are afraid to venture out at night since the Hunter case.” Other municipal officers, civic leaders, and residents of Kane County also cried out to school administrators and urged the “immediate return of strict military training and corporal punishment” because they believed it was the “only effective method of discipline for
the inmates.” Major Butler, a former superintendent who had authorized the use of corporal punishment, had the support of many Kane County residents during his tenure, and agreed with community members during a newspaper interview that, “Whipping is the only remedy for these young criminals.”

In one of the most notorious escape attempts, in 1941 eight African American boys—one from Evanston and the rest from Chicago—threw Kane County residents into a panic when they broke out of St. Charles and eluded capture for over twenty-four hours. According to the Chicago Tribune, “All available police and deputy sheriffs in the surrounding towns were sent, thrown into the hunt for the fugitives.” The group of escapees included two fourteen year olds, two sixteen year olds, two seventeen year olds, and two eighteen year olds. The boys were all housed in Harding, the receiving cottage for boys who had been in the institution for less than thirty days. Their “carefully planned” escape began when the boys pretended to study on the first floor of the cottage. When the housemother’s back was turned, one of the boys signaled and they all ran to a window. Another boy raised a chair and smashed it through a window before three others forced the heavy screen out. The boys, all of whom were barefoot, ran thirty yards to the corner of the thirteen-foot barbed wire steel fence enclosing St. Charles, and climbed over. The more agile members of the group assisted the boys who needed help climbing the fence. One of the school’s patrol guards caught the last boy by the heel as he scrambled over the fence, but the boy successfully pulled away from the guard. The boys then “disappeared into the cornfields.”

---

33 Chicago Tribune 1928 (Nov. 16) Tribune Return of Strap Rule Demanded for St. Charles
Their escape was short-lived however, as six of the boys were found in the fields the next day. The last two were found “wet and hungry” on the west side of Chicago two days later. According to the Chicago Tribune, the residents near St. Charles began “breathing easier” after all of the escapees were found. Assistant managing officer Harold Johnson intended to hold all eight of the boys in the disciplinary cottage for thirty days as a punishment, but the Illinois director of public welfare, Rodney Brandon, urged Criminal Court Judge Julius Miner to sentence five of the oldest boys to a more “secure place” like the state penitentiary at Pontiac. Judge Miner took up Brandon’s call and resentenced two of the boys to Pontiac for a term of one year to life in prison. Judge Miner stated that these harsh penalties were intended to protect both police and the public by sending a warning to boys at St. Charles. “The public and the police must be protected,” he asserted. “This will serve as a warning to all boys sent to the training school that the courts are not joking and will not hesitate to send them to the penitentiary if they violate the confidence judges place in them by sending them to the school.”

Despite the sudden crackdown and increasing public concern about escapees, runaway boys had always been a problem at St. Charles. As Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, the first housefather and housemother to take charge of a cottage after the school’s opening told managing officer William Harmon in 1939, “We had runaways right from the beginning…There have always been runaways.” A 1915 newspaper article cited an institutional report that showed one out of six boys at St. Charles—over one hundred boys—were missing as a result of absconding from the institution. Additionally, the chances that these boys would be returned to St. Charles, was supposedly less than one in ten. Despite these startling statistics, there were no rallying cries for

---

35 "8 Smash Way out of State Boys’ School.", "Capture 8 Who Broke out of Boys School.", "5 Boys Who Fled Training School Called to Cour..", "Sent to Prison."
36 A Report and Recommendations Submitted to the 61st General Assembly of the Illinois Legislature, 42.
more rigorous military discipline, stricter rules of confinement, or bodily harm. More importantly, the *St. Charles Chronicle*, which had followed happenings at the school since its 1901 founding and reported on minutiae like the school cattle getting inspected, also failed to sound rallying cries before the late 1920s.

Nevertheless, the issue of runaways became particularly salient in the late 1920s and was viewed as a new crisis. This erroneous perception that boys escaping from St. Charles was a new problem, led to community-wide calls for the containment and punishment of St. Charles’ escapees. Kane County residents read newspaper headlines like “Colored Boys Escape State School,” “Three Negro Youths Who Escaped School Held to Grand Jury,” and stories about high profile incidents—like the Nathaniel Moffet case and mass escape by a group of eight black inmates. One *Chicago Tribune* reporter wrote that members of Chicago’s “young 42 gang”; Negroes, who have escaped from half a dozen jails; small bright eyed youngsters, and every variety of juvenile hoodlum and petty offender” occupied St. Charles. These new reports were likely to include references to escapees’ physical size or perceived strength if they were black. Newspaper reporters often described black boys as “husky,” and featured information about their height and weight. These physical characteristics were not mentioned for informational purposes but to underline to potential danger they posed to the community, since most of articles features stories of boys who had been caught. For example, the *Chicago Tribune* report about the group of eight black escapees obliterated the chance any potential readers would consider the fourteen year olds’ you a mitigating factor by mentioning that one of them stood over 6ft tall. Similarly,

---

38 For references to newspaper coverage of everyday happenings at the school see, *St. Charles Chronicle*, Jan 31, 1909, May 21 1909
former superintendent Major Butler used an image of a physically imposing black youth to rationalize his use of corporal punishment to news reporters. He relayed the story of a “Negro youth, standing over 6 feet in height and weighing more than 185 pounds” who was whipped for terrorizing a “small white boy.”

These news reports were often accompanied by reporters’ and community members’ calls for a “stricter regime” of discipline and corporal punishment at the school. News articles like “Return of Strap Rule Demanded for St. Charles,” “Five Towns Live in Fear of 'boys' at State School” and “Whipping Urged to End Mass Escapes,” began to appear with frequency in 1928 and continued to do so through the 1940s, underscore this point. Over time, St. Charles began to develop an increasingly notorious reputation among Kane County residents. Accusations by community members that runaway attempts and successful escapes occurred because school personnel “coddled or pampered” St. Charles’ inmates put administrators on the defensive. Residents in the surrounding neighborhood’s “constant fear of escaped hoodlums from the St. Charles school” who were “husky enough to be in the prize ring” was linked to a deviation in the school’s use as a home for “dependent boys.” They even decried the school’s failure to reinstitute the “the harmless but effective practice of throwing cold water at unruly miscreants” As late as 1939, former Superintendent Major Butler supported community

members’ urging of administrators to publicly support whipping and enforce stricter confinement and punishment practices at the institution.  

The change in the demographic composition in St. Charles’ runaways as a result of the dramatic increase in the number of African American boys in the institution, and local newspapers’ relentless headlines featuring stories of school runaways, contributed to community members’ sense that the escapee issue had reached a crisis level. Within the context of popular conceptions surrounding African American males’ innate proclivity for rape and other violent crimes, Kane County residents’ growing hysteria is not surprising.

In 1939, the negative sentiment surrounding community members’ angst over the escape issue caused A.L. Bowen, director of the Illinois Department of Public Welfare to respond to criticism by hurling accusations at the state legislature. Bowen argued that he “lacked legislative sympathy and cooperation,” and could not effectively address the problem without legislative support. St. Charles superintendent William Harmon hurled the blame for the community’s “constant fear of burglary, robbery, and rape” at Cook County Circuit Court judges for “sending unruly and tough criminals to the school.” Judge Frank H. Bicek of the Circuit hurled the accusations right back at Superintendent Harmon, claiming it was “Harmon’s job to keep the inmates in check.”

In 1936 Superintendent Harmon himself attributed the difficulties managing the boys to “radical changes in the population of Illinois during the last half of the century,” and the consequent introduction of “racial stocks which mature more quickly” into the institution. Harmon’s belief that his difficulty managing the boys’ behavior could be attributed to “radical

changes” due to the new presence of different “racial stocks” emanated from a worldview that held that biological racial differences existed, and translated into behavior. He also blamed immigration and the proliferation of urban slums for the “quickened maturity of all so-called juvenile delinquents.” As he explained, “today we are no longer dealing with petty criminals, but boys who have the ambition for becoming gangsters and elite criminals…At the same calendar age of the delinquent of thirty-five years ago he is vastly older in experience, and he obviously requires much stern treatment” [emphasis added]. Harmon alleged that the situation was so dire, “separate institutions may be necessary” to separate boys who had committed petty crimes from “elite criminals.”45 Superintendent Harmon did not specifically refer to African American migrants in his discussion of new “racial stocks which mature more quickly” into the institution. However, the demographic changes in the institution and anxiety surrounding the dramatically increasing number of African Americans in Illinois make it likely that black boys’ growing presence at St. Charles contributed to his sense that they were dealing with a “type of boy” the institution was no longer equipped to deal with.46

The mayor of St. Charles, Dr. Langu, expressed the views of many in the community when he claimed that the “criminal type of boy” at the school had the seemingly new tendency “to run over [their] countryside wherever they [took] it into their head to do so.” In other words, the school was no longer harboring the kind of boy it had once housed. As the sense of crisis reached a boiling point, school administrators and legislators began to institute new policies. In 1935, St. Charles’ administrators introduced a new rule that provided for the confinement of boys to a disciplinary cottage for six months if they stole a car as part of their effort to run away. This

46 “Cases Illustrating the Problem,” Case D pp. 1 Supplement 1 Box 0, Folder 44, Russell Ward Ballard Ballard Papers.
measure was intended to mitigate “the attendant antagonistic feeling” which had developed over the issue of runaways in the surrounding community. This policy change was only a first step however, as legislative recommendations in 1939 made clear.47

Crisis at the 61st Illinois General Assembly: Control and Containment

The sense that St. Charles administrators, Kane County residents, and some state legislators had that there was a different kind of boy in the institution led to dramatic proposals for change. The 61st session of the Illinois General Assembly in 1939 was intended to serve as a brainstorming session, which would result in a series of recommended changes and solutions for perceived problems at St. Charles. A Joint Commission was charged with studying “conditions existing at the St. Charles School for Boys to determine whether the present method of grouping inmates is satisfactory or whether a system of segregation should be maintained.” Segregation here referred to age and type of infraction rather than race. The committee consisted of five house members and five senate members.48

Representatives of Illinois’ public welfare agencies, St. Charles administrators, and citizens from Cook and Kane Counties all journeyed to Springfield to weigh in on the proposed changes. The main question was not if policy changes should be implemented at St. Charles, but what changes should be implemented, and how they should be accomplished. An objective discussion of the runaway issue would have revealed that the percentage of escape attempts had significantly decreased. In 1933, 52% of St. Charles’ inmates had attempted to escape, while

47 A Report and Recommendations Submitted to the 61st General Assembly of the Illinois Legislature, 21.;
48 Ibid., 1.
17% and 20% had in 1937 and 1938 respectively. Nonetheless, the debate focused on whether changing the age range of boys admitted to the school, excluding boys who committed certain kinds of crimes, and changing criminal and juvenile court sentencing policies would effectively remedy the problem. They also debated whether boys who were considered too dangerous to be included in St. Charles’ general population should be housed in a new facility, or a separate branch at the men’s reformatory at Pontiac.

A.L. Bowen, director of the Department of Public Welfare, favored an age limit of fifteen or sixteen and implementing a program “that will save boys, who we know can be benefitted by treatment,” and working out a separate plan for boys “for whom the school can do nothing…” Director Bowen recommended “special segregated quarters…at one of the prison branches, preferably Pontiac” for boys considered incapable of benefitting from St. Charles’ program. He believed a separate branch would be cheaper than establishing a completely new building.50

St. Charles’ Superintendent William Harmon also suggested that courts only place boys under the age of sixteen—but older than ten—in St. Charles.51 For him, regulating the age of boys in the institution was a pivotal part of solving the problems there. Age was intimately tied to race, and the alleged problems accompanying the new “kind of boy” in the institution. As Harmon noted three years earlier, St. Charles had been confronted with the new problem of overseeing “racial stocks which mature more quickly” who “at the same calendar age of the delinquent of thirty-five years ago…is vastly older in experience.”52 The solution to the problem of boys who were allegedly physically larger and more experientially mature was thus fixing the

---

49 Ibid., 38.
50 Ibid., 5-6.
51 Ibid., 7.
age at which boys could be admitted to the institution. Considering the larger context of Harmon’s thought process, his recommendation that committing judges “be required to verify ages through presentation to the school of certified copies of birth certificates” in cases when a boys’ proclaimed age seemed dubious, is not surprising.53

Staff members, community members, and the legislature’s underlying belief that there was a new type of child in the institution can be implied through a curious debate about the original purpose of the institution. One state senator asked whether St. Charles was meant to be a home for dependent boys alone, delinquent boys alone, or a home for dependent and delinquent boys. Illinois law mandated the establishment of a “State Home for Delinquent Boys.” The school’s earliest administrators were aware that St. Charles “was founded for the express purpose of caring for delinquent boys between the ages of 10 and 17,” even though dependent boys were committed there in some instances. The school’s mission and ‘rehabilitative’ programs were all geared to ‘delinquent’ boys. 54 A. L. Bowen claimed however “that the purpose of this institution was to take care of dependent and neglected boys who were likely to become delinquent, because of their neglect and dependency.” Judge Frank Bicek of Cook County’s Juvenile Court disagreed with this characterization of the law, and accused Bowen of conflating dependency with delinquency. Senator Marovitz resolved the confusion by reading the relevant portion of the statute. 55

The General Assembly’s final recommendations centered around instituting measures that would provide for the more efficient control and containment of boys at St. Charles. Among

the Assembly’s final recommendations was an amendment to the 1901 Act, which would effectively “exclude any one convicted of a felony from being committed.” The Assembly also instituted a new age limit for boys admitted to the school, a complete case history and verification of committed boys’ ages, and the photographing and printing of all boys admitted to the school. The state legislature passed Senate Bill No. 399, emergency legislation with the express purpose of erecting a wire fence and properly lighting St. Charles at night because of Kane County residents’ “inherent right…[to] demand that the state protect them.” The Chicago Tribune noted the recommendations and passage of the Bill with glee.

The General Assembly’s approval of the “acquisition of property” and construction of a maximum security facility forty miles away from St. Charles and sixty miles away from Chicago however, was considered the highlight of the new provisions. The legislature’s approval of the maximum-security prison was also however, one of the most important markers of Illinois’ increasingly punitive approach to children delinquent children. It represented a clear and dramatic shift away from the rehabilitative ideals that undergirded the emergence of juvenile justice in Chicago. The state’s policy toward delinquent children was no longer rooted in the belief that children were inherently innocent and could be reformed no matter what crime they committed. Rather, it was rooted in a belief that some children were not only inherently unmalleable and extremely dangerous—but deserving of harsh punishment.

The changes implemented as a result of the Joint Committee’s recommendations marked not only important turning point in St. Charles’ institutional history, but the state’s policy in relation to delinquent children. The changes not only resulted in increased efforts to control

and contain boys at St. Charles, but the construction of the state’s very first maximum-security
prison for youth. This maximum-security prison, named the State Reformatory at Sheridan, was
originally intended to be a branch of St. Charles that operated under the same administrative
control of the Training School.

Race, Rape, and Scandal at St. Charles

Neither social scientific studies of inmates at St. Charles, staff memoirs nor
institutional records make much mention of sexual acts between boys at the institution. Although
same sex acts at St. Charles were certainly considered “immoral” and staff members were
expected to closely monitor and prevent it, institutional records gave scant attention to the issue.
In contrast, reports and institutional records for the Illinois Training School for Girls at
Geneva—where housing arrangements, class schedules, and daily activities were arranged in a
way to prevent interracial sexual acts in particular—explicitly detailed and analyzed sex acts
among the girls.57 This is likely linked to the reality that unlike for boys, early twentieth century
perceptions of deviance and delinquency among girls were primarily linked to their sexual
behavior so institutional staff members had an incentive to monitor it.

The institution’s relative lack concern over sexual acts among the boys differed
markedly from the wider society, where hypervigilance over sexual acts between men
predominated, and homosexuality was characterized as an unacceptable form of sexual
perversion and punished. In Chicago, boys who were found engaging in homosexual behavior
were promptly brought before Cook County Juvenile Court, sent to correctional institutions, or
sent for psychological treatment at the Institute for Juvenile Research. This divergence between

57 Ordahl, "Study of 341 Delinquent Boys," 83, Myers, "Embodying Delinquency: Boys' Bodies,
Sexuality, and Juvenile Justice History in Early-Twentieth-Century Quebec," 387.
St. Charles’ approach to homosexual activity among boys and the larger society’s treatment it converged however, as a result of an alleged incident that sent shockwaves all the way up to the state capital. The controversy surrounding this incident, which involved the alleged rape of a white inmate by a black inmate, was exacerbated by ‘new’ public knowledge that homosexual acts at St. Charles were common. The community’s reaction—as well as the state’s intervention—was fueled by an explosive intersection of notions of childhood, race, gender, sexuality, and white residents’ belief that black males are prone to committing sex crimes.

In May 1949, Gerald Klindinst, a fifteen year-old white resident of St. Charles, accused Albert Racliffe, a fourteen year-old black resident of subjecting him to a “crime against nature.” When Gerald told his father about the incident during visiting hours at the school, his father promptly took him to a nearby hospital for an examination. When the doctor’s report concluded that Gerald’s injuries “might have been caused” by the sexual acts, his father notified the State’s Attorney Preston Kimball and Hancock County Judge J.A. Baird. Mr. Klindinst demanded that St. Charles administrators release his son, and Gerard’s case was brought before a grand jury. School administrators and staff members did not believe Gerald was “without fault” however, as he was older and heavier than the other inmate. The case was publicized and widely reported in area newspapers. The grand jury, which was composed mostly of women, declined to indict the child, deciding that school officials should resolve the case. A grand jury member told a reporter, “You couldn’t send a boy to the pen in such a case. It goes on throughout the school—been going on for years.” When Judge Baird of Hancock County heard about the grand jury’s decision, he said he would hesitate to send more boys to the training school: “I’ve been sending boys there for nine years but in view of [this] admission that such immoralities are common at

the school, I don’t know...They don’t appear to be excited at all by the case.”

In response, Fred K. Hoehler, the Illinois Director of Public Welfare (who was responsible for overseeing the state’s charitable and correctional institutions) initiated an effort to “determine the extent of sex perversion practices” at St. Charles. Hoehler said he was shocked when the Assistant Superintendent and Clinic Director at St. Charles characterized “immoral acts between the boys as ‘common’.” Hoehler decided to go to St. Charles himself to determine how common the practices were. He sought the cooperation of members of the legislature’s State Youthful Offenders Commission in eliminating these practices. He told the Chicago Tribune, “Now I am going out there myself. If these immoral acts between young boys are ‘common’ we’ve got to find some way to check them. I must find out how often they have been reported and whether there’s any evidence of how often they occur.” State Senator Walker Butler, chairman of the Youthful Offenders Commission, concurred: “The problem of erratic sex behavior in the training school should receive the first attention of the [school’s] managing officer...Perversion should not only be kept to a minimum at the school, it should be stopped...Some professionals in the field of juvenile delinquency are too inclined to write off some problems as natural, therefore hopeless. That philosophy should not control at the training school.”

Hoehler and Butler ordered the superintendent Charles W. Leonard, to “have ready all records which may throw any light on acts, legally called crimes against nature.”

It is not clear what—if any ‘evidence’—Hoehler and Butler found as a result of their investigation. They did however receive Superintendent Leonard’s public support for taking homosexual acts between the boys more seriously. Hoehler recommended the school keep

60 "Ohoehler Acts on Immorality in Boys School."
careful records of “any infraction of rules that might have even a remote connection with sexual
misbehavior, including exposures that might be unintentional.” As one Tribune reporter noted,
“Superintendent Leonard now understands that anything in the character of an infraction must be
reported immediately...In the future he will immediately make a report to [state] General H.E.
Thornton.” This publicized scandal only fueled white city residents’ perceptions that black boys’
mere presence in the institution bred chaos and danger.

Black Freedom, Citizenship, and Democracy at the 61st General Assembly

Alarmed white neighbors, government officials, and school administrators were not the
only constituencies that inserted their voices into the debate about policies at St. Charles. African
American state legislators and representatives’ of the Urban League and Y.W.C.A. interjected
their concerns about the experiences of African American boys at St. Charles into the legislative
debates. State senator William A. Wallace and Assemblyman Charles J. Jenkins’ decision—as
some of the few African Americans legislators at the time—to call upon the General Assembly
to address the unique experiences of black inmates at St. Charles is significant. As
representatives of Chicago’s African American communities, they were charged with voicing
black residents’ concerns, making sure city and state resources addressed their needs
appropriately, and generally promoting their best interests.

By the early 1930s, African Americans in Chicago had identified St. Charles as an
institution where the “problem of wayward youth” in the community could be addressed. They
hoped it would function as the child-saving institution Progressive Era reformers had originally
envisioned. In 1932, black community activists together with court and state agency officials
journeyed from Chicago to St. Charles to get the answer to one question: “What shall we do with
our delinquent boys?” Among the attendees was Judge Albert Gorge, a member of the state board of pardons, Howard Robinson of the Chicago Urban League, and “welfare workers and directors of the Race work under the auspices of the Chicago Church Federation.” They met with managing officer Robert Havlik to “formulate some feasible plan whereby the wayward youth of our Race may be reclaimed from the ranks of the potential criminal and made useful members of society.” Brainstorming about ways to prevent African American boys from being committed to the institution in the first place, or recommitted because of parole violations, was at the top of the agenda.62

At the General Assembly debate several years later, Representative Jenkins declared that “the problem of (N)e gros youth, to those of us who are serious minded, is of the greatest problem in our opinion in this country today.” The Chicago Urban League and Y.W.C.A’s activism on behalf of African American boys at St. Charles also underscored that the issues black youth faced were important to their organizations. Black legislators and community activists’ decision to insert themselves into the conversation surrounding St. Charles shows that they identified the institution as a site that had an important influence on black children in Chicago. It also indicates their belief that the institution’s approach to African American boys symbolized the black community’s present and future interests in the state. Reporters for the Chicago Defender documented the General Assembly’s handling of the race question during the debate about St. Charles in great detail.63

Racial segregation at St. Charles was the chief concern of State Senator Wallace and Representative Jenkins. Senator Wallace introduced a resolution demanding that racial

62 "Pledge Aid to Boys at St. Charles School."
segregation and discrimination in the institution cease. Embedded in their words was the powerful idea that racial segregation at St. Charles both marked black residents with a stain of inferiority and compromised the nation’s progressive move towards full democracy and freedom. Representative Jenkins, who served as the spokesperson for Senator Wallace’s resolution, started out by directly addressing Committee members and St. Charles’ administrators, and pointed out the illogical basis for racial segregation of the boys. First, he noted that four of the nineteen homes at St. Charles were “set aside on a segregation rule for the Negro boys only, and that two homes “in which the American Rule is observed” were not racially segregated. Jenkins then questioned the utility of this policy when reports indicated the “conduct of the boys who are in the mixed homes is just as good as the conduct of the boys who are in the other homes.”

Jenkins’ reference to the interracial cottages as homes “in which the American Rule is observed” was not coincidental. Rather, it was a rhetorical move meant to underscore the discontinuity between racial segregation—a social practice that limited black freedom—and the United States efforts to cultivate is image as a nation characterized by freedom and democracy. This was particularly significant on the eve of the Second World War when the United States would soon be fighting Nazi racism on the battlefields of Europe. Jenkins also portrayed racial segregation as an inherently backward practice the United States was moving away from. “I care not whether it has existed for a half a century,” Jenkins asserted. “We are living in a new era, an era when our country is the last bulwark of freedom...we are living in an era where we must practice democracy.” Representative Jenkins also argued that racial segregation violated a 1937 state law, which provided that “any person in charge of any State building who does not allow the facilities equally to all citizens should be discharged by the appointed authority.” He added,

---

64 A Report and Recommendations Submitted to the 61st General Assembly of the Illinois Legislature, 53.
“I have always felt that above all things, State institutions and things that belong to the State should be blind, like the image of Justice, when it comes to the question of race...[State institutions] should set the example for citizens of the State, by rising above petty prejudices.” 65

Representative Jenkins’ argument amounted to an assertion that the state—vis-à-vis the racial policies at St. Charles—was discriminating against African American boys on the simple grounds of their race and denying them the equal treatment they were entitled to on account of their citizenship.

Mr. Bose of Chicago’s Wabash Avenue Branch of the Y.M.C.A. and Joseph Jefferson of the Urban League took issue with the relatively small number of black employees at the institution. Although these organizations addressed issues surrounding discriminatory employment practices in their activism, they were particularly concerned about the negative impact the lack of black employees at St. Charles had on African American boys. “[W]e do feel that the number of Negro boys in St. Charles,” Mr. Jefferson stated, “warrants more Negro men of training and educational background to be out there to serve as an inspiration...” Representative Jenkins also expressed concern that there was “not a single colored housefather” there since “approximately one-third of the population at the St. Charles School for Boys is colored.” Mr. Jefferson and Mr. Bose expressed concern over the “very rapid turn-over in the employment of Negro men,” and believed “there must be something wrong when seven are seemingly dismissed within one year.” Their concern that racial discrimination created a hostile work environment for black employees who were appointed by civil service was linked to their general concern about the racial climate African American boys in the institution encountered. 66

After Mr. Jefferson and Mr. Bose’s testimony, Representative Jenkins answered concerns

65 Ibid., 53-54.
66 Ibid., 53-55.
that “perhaps the Negro boys will not obey the colored housefather as they will the white
housefather.” He argued that any evidence of that was “a relic and product of slavery…an
inferior complex that should be attempted to be destroyed even in a penal institution.” Mr. Bose
supported Representative Jenkins’ sentiments by arguing, “[I]n the last ten years I have been
working as a Boys Work Secretary…I had nothing but favorable response.”

The attention black state legislators and community activists paid to African American
boys’ experiences at St. Charles, as well as the symbolic implications of the institution’s racial
policies, indicates that institutions for delinquent children were an important site for
contestations over black freedom in Chicago at that time. Yet scholars of civil rights struggles
and Black community and leadership formation have neglected this critical dimension of Black
experience. Chicago’s African American community began to mount an increasingly cohesive
grassroots struggle for economic freedom and access to public and private facilities in 1930s and
early 1940s. Black residents’ increasing agitation for social, economic, and political rights
mirrored the development of early civil rights struggles that accelerated in urban areas across the
North during World War II.

Representative Jenkins embraced this struggle by highlighting the ‘American-ness’ of
black citizens in the United States, and arguing that the very fate of Democracy lay in the state’s

---

67 Ibid.
68 Grossman, Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration, Christopher
(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Black
Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City.
69 Alan B. Anderson, and George W. Pickering, Confronting the Color Line: The Broken
Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in Chicag (University of Georgia, 1987), 29, James R.
Ralph, Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movemen
70 Martha Biondi, To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City
elimination of racial segregation at St. Charles:

During the Revolutionary War when our country was established, some 1200 negroes served as soldiers for the United States in the United States Army. The first blood was shed by Crispus Attucks... We didn't have Negro segregation then. We have since developed that segregation, and the Congress of the United States has before it a proposition to destroy that sort of thing in the United States Army, and to open up the Navy and the Aviation Corps to all alike...I say therein lies the fate of Democracy, because if we are to exist, this local problem of ours is just as urgent as the problem of racial prejudices today [emphasis added].

Although a discussion of racial discrimination was not a part of the 1939 General Assembly’s agenda, activism on behalf of African American boys by black state legislators and community activists resulted in an important addition to the Committee’s recommendations. Even though Superintendent Harmon denied the allegations of racial bias at St. Charles and argued that black employees and inmates were all treated with the “utmost respect”—despite its policy of racial segregation, the General Assembly addressed the black legislators’ and community activists’ concerns in its final recommendations. They mandated that a “a larger percentage of members of that race [be] presented in the institution's supervising activities.” This measure achieved some success, as one of the discharged African American employees, Fletcher Thompson of Chicago, was eventually reinstated to his position as recreation instructor. Although he alleged he had been dismissed because of “race prejudice,” he credited the Chicago Urban League and Civil Service Commission for his reinstatement. Internal memos from St. Charles show administrators did in fact take up the activists’ and legislators’ calls for increased diversity among its staff. Administrators began contacting “employment agencies on the Southside [of Chicago, and] some churches,” because they believed they were an important part
of “tapping resources” in Chicago’s black community. Unfortunately, racial segregation among the youthful inmates was not taken up as an issue that warranted change until tragedy struck and an African American inmate at St. Charles was killed.

The Murder of James Williams and the Increasingly Punitive Turn

On Thursday February 13, 1941, James Williams, a sixteen-year old African American boy, became the first inmate to die at the hand of staff members at St. Charles. He died in a Kane County hospital as a result of a skull fracture and other injuries he sustained when two housefathers beat him. The two employees, Robert Adams and William Laird, were formally charged with murder by the Kane County state attorney’s office. Other residents at St. Charles who had witnessed the incident, stated that the beating started Wednesday afternoon while James and some other inmates were shoveling coal near the cottage. James approached housefather Adams, who was supervising the boys and may have been drunk at the time, and told him he was not feeling well. Adams responded by slapping him and saying, “You wait till I get you in the cottage. I’ll give you a hot reception.” Adams then told James to “step back into line.”

When it was time to go back to the cottage, James was so ill that he was slow to walk back and remove his clothing for a shower in the basement. Adams allegedly yelled, “Get in with the others” and struck Williams with a wooden paddle. Later, when James dressed more slowly than the others because of his illness, Adams hit him with the paddle again. This time, Adams hit...
James with so much force that the paddle broke. When James screamed out in pain, Adams yelled “Shut up! I’ll give you the hose, I’ll turn the water on you”. Adams ordered another inmate, Norman De Vore to bring him a hose. Adams then took a brass nozzle and club off the shelf and proceeded to beat James with the back of the club. James then picked up a chair and covered himself in order to protect his body from Adams’ blows. Eventually, Adams chased James into the shower room and apparently tussled with him on the floor. When house father Laird, entered the room, Adams screamed, “Hit him with the nozzle!” Laird then hit James with the nozzle so hard, that he collapsed and became unconscious. 73

James Williams’ death caused a shakeup at the institution of “of proportions unheard of.” The scandal of having a boy die at the hands of employees for the first time, along with James Williams’ identity as an African American, inevitably raised questions about the culture of discipline and racial bias at the institution. Governor Dwight Green ordered State Welfare Director Rodney Brandon to investigate the incident. Superintendent Frank Whipp opined to Chicago Defender reporters, “There is no doubt it is murder.” State Representative John Friedland of Elgin reportedly sent Governor Green a telegram demanding the removal and suspension of managing officer William Harmon. Although managing officer William Brandon did not lose his post, over twenty-four employees at St. Charles were forced to resign less than three weeks later, and superintendent Whipp personally took charge of the school.74

Chicago’s African American community was incensed at James’ murder, and demanded even more institutional responses to the incident. A group of black clergymen sent a telegram to the legislature calling James’ death a “major blot in the penal history of Illinois and America,”

73 “Boy Auto Thief Killed: Guards Admit Slugging."
74 Report of the Board of Public Welfare: Commissioners on Re-organization of SC, Nov 1941, Supplement 1 Box 0, Folder 44, Russell Ward Ballard Papers; "12 Face Ouster in Death of Reform School Boy."
and insisted the governor launch a more extensive investigation of the tragedy. Reverend J. Branham of Olivet Baptist church, Joseph M. Evans of Metropolitan Community Church; U.S. Robinson of Carey Temple A.M.E. Church; Bishop James A. Bray of the C.M.E. Church, and Dean H.M. Smith of the Chicago Baptist institute all signed the telegram. Attorney Georgia Jones-Ellis, one of the most prominent women lawyers, began to procure a group of “militant women” that would “go to St. Charles, look into the death of the young inmate there,” and put pressure on the authorities. Despite the evidence of the victim’s injuries and attempts to flee, a jury in Geneva, Illinois acquitted Robert Adams of murder charges after he claimed he only beat the James out of self-defense.75

In December 1941, State Representative Ernest A. Green introduced a resolution that called for a more extensive investigation of James’ death. The proposed committee would not only examine the circumstances surrounding James’ death, but the disciplinary methods St. Charles had employed for the last two years, the qualifications of employees currently working at the institution, and would have the power to subpoena witness in support of their investigation.76 The Board of Public Welfare and St. Charles’ administrators subsequently began to publicly embrace Representative Jenkins’ calls to end segregation in the institution, and hire a new black administrator. On March 24, state representatives Charles Jenkins and Ernest Greene met with the Board of Public Welfare and managing officer William Harmon. They linked the murder of James to the racial bias inherent in the school’s segregation policies, and again asked them to stop “the un-American custom of segregation” and pointed out its illegality under state law. They urged the Board to “cease and desist from any discrimination…and to treat all alike.”

76 “Guard Freed in Death of Boy Prisoner.”, "24 Resign Posts after School Slaying."
As result, the state Welfare Commission—with the support of director Brandon and managing officer William Harmon—forbade discrimination of any sort at St. Charles. A mere five months after James’ murder, St. Charles hired Walter J. Payne as a child counselor, becoming the first African American administrator at the school.\textsuperscript{77}

Despite their emerging public criticism of racial discrimination, administrators and staff members at St. George resisted implementing change. At a 1941, meeting, all attendees voiced “agreement that the statute which provides that there shall be no segregation in State institutions is democratically sound and should be adhered too.” Nevertheless, they did not believe an immediate end to racial segregation in the institution was wise. Rather, they recommended that, “no racial change should be made at once but that within a reasonable length of time.” In other words, they instituted a policy where segregation would be abolished slowly, “through a process based upon a scientific classification of all boys regardless of race.”\textsuperscript{78}

\textbf{Clamp Down at St. Charles: The Emergence of the First Maximum Security Youth Prison}

The culture of physical brutality and the vulnerability of inmates at St. Charles that was revealed as a result of James Williams’ death did not thwart the growing thirst for harsher discipline and containment of juvenile inmates at St. Charles or Sheridan. The laws governing the commitment of delinquent children to state correctional facilities grew more and more punitive. An Illinois law passed in 1941 mandated that “every person, male or female, over ten years of age” found guilty of a felony or any other crime “punishable by imprisonment in a

\textsuperscript{77} "Order Color Line Dropped at St. Charles," \textit{Chicago Defender}, April 5, 1941 1941, George Faris, "A Study of Boys under Fifteen Committed to the Illinois State Training School for Boys" (University of Chicago, 1941).

\textsuperscript{78} Study and Reorganization of Illinois State Training School for Boys, pp 19, Supplement 1 Box 0, Folder 44, 1941 Russell Ward Ballard Papers.
penitentiary,” shall in fact be sentenced to a penitentiary. Although the law gave the court
discretion over where to send the child, this change marked a dramatic shift in the treatment of
delinquent children, as it codified into law the notion that children who committed certain crimes
were by default, ineligible for admission to youth facilities that were built for—and intended to
fall under the cloak of—“rehabilitation.” This meant that any child over the age of ten could be
sentenced to adult prisons. In 1949, an amendment made the maximum security Reformatory at
Sheridan the automatic institution any boy under the age seventeen who was convicted of a
crime punishable by imprisonment at a penitentiary was committed to. In 1951, the
Reformatory at Sheridan severed all of its connection to St. Charles and became an independent
maximum-security prison for youth with its own staff and administration.

The fear and resentment Chicago area residents and state officials had of delinquent boys
at St. Charles and Sheridan continued to run high. Despite the construction of a new fence at St.
Charles, and the transfer of the most ‘problematic’ boys to Sheridan, residents in the surrounding
communities continued to fear the possibility of boys escaping from the school. Governor
Dwight H. Green eventually responded by ordering police squads to patrol the fence surrounding
St. Charles and installing floodlights that would illuminate the fence. The St. Charles
Chronicle indicated community approval of Russell Ballard, who became the new head of St.
Charles in 1941 as a result of his promise to “weed out the thugs and incorrigibles” there and

---

79 62nd General Assembly of the Illinois Legislature, vol. Illinois State Archives at Springfield:
Record Group 266, St. Charles School for Boys 1943-1949 Folder (Springfield, Ill1941)., Illinois
State Archives at Springfield, Record Group 266: Folder-St. Charles School for Boys 1943-1949
82 "Highway Police Posted at State Training School," Chicago Tribune, Jan 28 1942, "St. Charles
Floodlight Order ", Chicago Herald-American, Jan 29 1942. Series 1 Box 0, Folder 67, Russell
Ward Ballard Papers.
send them to the new branch at Sheridan. An administrator at the Juvenile Detention Home wrote to Governor Green imploring him to prohibit boys at Sheridan from using tools since he feared the boys “would use them as weapons and a means of escape, perhaps attacking the guards with fatal results.” Meanwhile, the *St. Charles Chronicle*, along with newspapers like the *Chicago Tribune*, and *Chicago Sun*, monitored the physical containment of boys in the school very closely.

A punitive thirst and fear of inmates at the new maximum-security reformatory also began to develop among residents in Sheridan. Boys at Sheridan were housed on a campus enclosed by two steel fences—one twelve fight high, and the other eight feet high. Barbed wire was placed on top of and inside the fences. Armed guards who were stationed at four different tower on the campus were prepared to shoot any would be escapees. Nevertheless, neighbors of Sheridan protested against State Senator Thomas Gunning’s attempt to make the reformatory there more “comfortable and pleasant for inmates.” Speaking on behalf of the town’s residents, R.W. Dovrak of the Chicago Crime Commission argued, “Inmates in such an institution shouldn’t be coddled. They should be taught obedience and should understand they are being punished. Sentimentality and the maudlin sympathy for criminals are poor substitutes for

---

84 Letter from the Juvenile Detention Home to Governor Green, Nov 6, 1941, Series 1 Box 0, Folder 86, Russell Ward Ballard Papers.
85 "Steel, Concrete to Hem Toughs of St. Charles ", "Harmon Blamed for St. Charles' Useless Fencing," *Chicago Tribune*, Sep 26 1940, ibid. *The Chicago Sun*, “Age Differences Problem at Training School”; *Chicago Sun" Dangerous hoodlums, in their late teens and as old as 21, Sit in the Same Halls with Impressionable Youngsters of 10, Series 1 Box 0, Folder 66, Russell Ward Ballard Papers.
material safeguards.”87 When staff members at Sheridan held an open house to ease the surrounding community’s fear of the boys, they were shocked to find that “the people came with many distorted ideas about the School and the boys.” It seemed as if “all the visitors were anxious to see the boys, expecting to see something strange and unusual.” One of the visitors stated with surprise, “Why they look like any other boy on the street, there really is nothing different about them.” Another visitor commented, “Why they even smile.” Such comments reflect the many years of negative media publicity of both St. Charles and Sheridan. Employee notes reveal their sense that people generally came with “a hostile attitude” about the school. Visitors reportedly left with a “sympathetic attitude” after they were reassured by staff members’ statements, and the physical setup of the school, which it made “the impossibility of escapes from the School” clear. One visitor noted with relief, “Gee, nobody will ever get out of there.”88

Only a few years after its opening, African American boys were even more disproportionately represented at Sheridan than they were at St. Charles. In 1943 African American boys made up 36% of the population at Sheridan, and 29% of the population at St. Charles. That same year, staff members at Sheridan toyed with the idea of placing well-behaved boys on the first floor, and leaving the doors unlocked. This idea was vetoed however, on suspicion that “such a setup may segregate the white boys from the colored and lead to race distinction.”89 This suggests that even within the maximum security youth prison, staff members believed African American boys were the least well-behaved and most dangerous inmates.

88 Memo: Open House, Series 1 Box 0, Folder 86, Russell Ward Ballard Papers.
89 Sheridan Branch Monthly Statistics May 1943, Series 1 Box 0, Folder 87, Russell Ward Ballard Papers; Ages of Boys in SC School 6-30-43, Series 1 Box 0, Folder 87, Russell Ward Ballard Papers; Minutes of Sheridan Staff Meeting July 14, 1943, Series 1 Box 0, Folder 86, Russell Ward Ballard Papers.
Conditions at St. Charles and Sheridan continued to be a source of controversy among legislators and Chicago area residents through the 1940s. Rather than quell or mitigate any concerns surrounding delinquent boys in state institutions, the legislature’s creation of a new maximum security facility at Sheridan and increasingly stricter punishment and containment policies at St. Charles only seemed to fuel hysteria and misperceptions about incarcerated delinquent boys. It was as if the public desire for the control, discipline, and punishment of delinquent boys could not be satisfied. Despite rampant evidence of the abuse inmates of both institutions suffered at the hands of staff members, a number of community members continued to accuse legislators and institution administrators of failing to “discipline misbehaving inmates.” Legislators and administrators conducted investigation after investigation in an effort to identify even more severe control, containment and disciplinary policies. In 1949, a state general assembly committee held a whopping thirty-two meetings to discuss St. Charles and conduct a “[c]areful study of the many complex problems” surrounding the issue of juvenile delinquency.90

This hysteria and introduction of harsher institutional arrangements was part and parcel of the increasingly punitive nature of state juvenile justice laws. Although the 1899 Juvenile Court Act that gave the court jurisdiction over delinquent children had always had its opponents, controversies over the juvenile justice system began to rise in the 1920s. The Juvenile Court Act, which gave the Court jurisdiction over boys to age seventeen, and girls to age eighteen, appeared to be in conflict with the Illinois State Constitution, which fixed the age of criminal responsibility under common law to age ten. The constitution gave the main criminal court in every county primary jurisdiction. The Illinois Supreme Court attempted to resolve the tension between the act and the state constitution in its landmark 1926 Fitzgerald decision. In People v.

90 1948 Tribune (May 18) 3 Legislators to Pen Inquiry at Boys School; 1950 (Nov 5) Assail Sending Criminal Type to St. Charles; 66th General Assembly of the Illinois Legislature, 3.
Fitzgerald, a case involving a sixteen year old boy sentenced to the Illinois State Reformatory at Pontiac for twenty-three years by a criminal court, the state Supreme Court ruled that the juvenile and criminal courts held concurrent jurisdiction. This meant that juvenile courts and criminal courts were equally empowered to hear children’s cases. The court that acquired jurisdiction over a case first was vested with the authority to try the case without interference from the other. This meant that the juvenile court was prohibited from interfering in the case of child who was being tried in criminal court. The Court affirmed its decision in its 1931 case, People v. Bruno, when a sixteen-year old boy convicted of armed robbery was sentenced to Pontiac for a term of one year to life.91

The conflict between the Juvenile Court’s supporters and opponents reached a crescendo in 1935. As noted in Chapter 3, that year the Cook County Criminal Court’s Chief Justice launched a campaign for an amendment to the Juvenile Court Act that would give criminal court judges sole jurisdiction over all children age ten and over who committed crimes. The proposed amendment would also give criminal court judges the authority to sentence children to adult correctional institutions. Although the proposed amendment was not approved by the state legislature, the Illinois Supreme Court overturned its prior decision and divested the Juvenile Court of any primary jurisdiction in People v. Lattimore. The case involved Susie Lattimore, a fifteen-year old African American girl not surprisingly, who was convicted of killing another girl during a bar fight and sentenced to twenty-five years at the State Reformatory at Joliet. When her lawyer appealed, the state Supreme Court ruled that Cook County’s Criminal Court always had final jurisdiction over any child age ten and over, and gave the

91 People v. Fitzgerald, 322 Ill. 54; 152 N.E. 542 (1926); PEOPLE V. BRUNO, 346 Ill. 449 (1931), 179 N.E. 129; Dodge, "Reform Struggles and Legal Challenges: The Cook County Juvenile Court, 1924-1999 a Historical Overview," 84-85, Tanenhaus, Juvenile Justice in the Making, 148-53.
State’s Attorney sole discretion over which children would be tried in Juvenile or Criminal Courts.\textsuperscript{92}

\textbf{Conclusion}

African American boys who found themselves in the Illinois Training School at St. Charles after 1920 entered an institution that was in the midst of publicly abandoning its original child-saving mission. These changes coincided with an increase in the number of African American children in the institution. This shift in the public perception about the type of boys inhabiting the institution coincided with school administrator’s decision to implement racial segregation in residences as an official school policy at St. Charles for the first time, and the state’s decision to build its first maximum-security youth prison. St. Charles’ transition to a more punitive institution reveals the contingent nature of conceptions of childhood rehabilitation and delinquency, as well as the impact intersecting notions of race, gender, sexuality, and age had on the evolution of juvenile justice. School administrators, state legislators, and the public at large essentially constructed a dividing line between ‘salvageable’ and ‘unsalvageable’ children even as they re-articulated the very meaning of ‘juvenile justice’.

The chapter also reveals the importance of a heretofore-unexamined site of early 20th century black civil rights and freedom struggles. Children have always been deeply implicated in the United States’ efforts to regulate black life. Legislators and community activists implicitly recognized this and inserted themselves into legislative debates about institutional crises. As a result, they helped shape institutional policy and the practice of juvenile justice in Illinois. Although they were not able to completely ameliorate the harsh nature of the boys’ confinement,

their advocacy helped reform St. Charles’ racially discriminatory employment and segregation practices. The race-based punitive turn in juvenile justice was matched with resistance from a slowly emerging civil rights struggle and rising black political clout in Illinois. This story of contested transitions at the Illinois Training School for Boys at St. Charles both adds to our understanding of the way early juvenile justice institutions reacted to African American children, and sheds new light on contours of urban black life in the urban North.