

Western Illinois Historical Review



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Letter from the Editors

The editors are pleased to present the spring 2025 issue of the *Western Illinois Historical Review*. This is the thirteenth issue of the publication, which showcases the best scholarship of undergraduate and graduate students in the Department of History at Western Illinois University. There are four articles in this year's issue, which take readers from race, ethnic, and class conflict in the coal mines of late nineteenth century Illinois to a contemporary ethnic conflict in Ghana to an ancient Hellenistic controversy during Alexander the Great's rule in Persia to the Rust Belt of the American Midwest. We hope that students, scholars, and general readers will find the diverse topics in this issue of interest and usefulness.

Aaron Kennelly, in "Southern Illinois Coal Wars: Southern Black Workers as Outsiders," investigates four strikes by coal miners and the race riots that accompanied each strike. Building on previous scholarship, Kennelly compares and contrasts these strikes, the use of African American strikebreakers, and the ensuing social conflicts that followed. He argues that when African Americans were considered outsiders by the local population they were treated harshly, though when seen as part of the local population they were not. Kennelly offers a nuanced approach to race, ethnic, and class conflict in Illinois coal mining history.

In "Exploring Government Actions and Their Impact on the Twenty-First Century Nkonya and Alavanyo Conflict in Ghana," Emmanuel Ennin examines a century-old land dispute in Ghana. Overtime, according to Ennin, due to government actions and in some cases inaction, the conflict evolved into an ethnic conflict that has led to multiple deaths. Ennin presents a convincing historical analysis of the conflict's evolution and offers suggestions on how it could be solved by implementing existing legal decisions and governmental policies.

Alexander the Great is one of the most studied historical figures of the ancient world, though varying interpretations of his imperial rule remain. Natalie Gibson analyzes Alexander's use of proskynesis after his conquest of the Persian Empire in her article, "Alexander the King: Proskynesis and Other Adopted Cultural Practices." She argues that "his reasoning for adopting aspects of Persian culture can be attributed to his own goals of cultural syncretism, legitimization of kingship, and his own deification." Gibson evaluates Alexander's success at incorporating Persian customs into his rule in terms of its impact on Persians and Greeks.

In the twenty-first century, the industrial Midwest is less of the manufacturing colossus it was in decades past. Peyton Ward, in "Echoes of a Sleeping Industrial Giant: The Impact of Northwestern Steel & Wire on Sterling and Rock Falls, Illinois," presents to readers the rise and fall of a manufacturer that had tremendous economic and social impact on two Illinois communities. Northwestern Steel & Wire Company employed thousands of workers over the years and attracted laborers from across the United States and beyond the country's borders. Along with driving the local economy, the company's workers shaped the cultural landscape of this corner of Illinois.

Dorothy Agyapong, Natalie Gibson, Melissa Freddy, Viktor Wallace, Dr. Febe Pamonag, and Dr. Greg Hall Co-Editors

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Southern Illinois Coal Wars:
Southern Black Workers as Outsiders

By

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From the Haymarket Affair in 1886 to the Pullman Strike in 1894, in the Midwest, particularly in Illinois, the late nineteenth century was a hotbed of labor conflict and violence. Though lesser known, the Illinois Coal Wars of the 1890s were perhaps more significant because they helped guide both the labor movement and racial relations down treacherous paths during the post-Reconstruction era after 1877. A major issue in the Coal Wars pertained to the United Mine Workers of America's (UMWA) failure to properly integrate Black workers into their union. With early labor unions failing to organize the whole working class, capitalist interests were able to exploit racial divisions for their own benefit. This paper examines four different race riots that occurred in Virden, Pana, Carterville, and Spring Valley, in Southern Illinois, in the 1890s to show how labor conflicts exacerbated racial tensions. Although these riots were all racially motivated, I argue that the native white residents of these mining towns resorted to lethal means only when they viewed Black strikebreakers, who were imported from the South, as outsiders who they believed had no right to take their jobs.

Historiography

Much has been written about how racial and labor conflicts intermingled in the post-Reconstruction era. In his book *Organized Labor and the Black Worker 1619-1973*, Philip Foner examined the early years of the labor movement and communicated pointedly how the UMWA hampered their cause with racist union policies. The labor director Herbert Hill fully explained why Black workers felt forced to work as strikebreakers in his journal article "The Problem of Race in American Labor History." He argues that Black citizens in the United States had been systematically subjugated and repressed throughout the history of the United States.¹ In many ways, working as replacement workers was a response to the abuse they had endured from white people. In his article, "'A Revolution in Labor': African Americans and Hybrid Labor Activism in Illinois during the Early Jim Crow Era," Alonzo M. Ward shows that industrialists easily found replacement workers from the South largely because miners were earning lower wages in the South and were enthusiastic to head north for higher pay. The lower wages in the South can partly be attributed to the fact that the UMWA had been unsuccessful in its early attempts to organize southern coal mines. The regional differences were nearly as stark as the racial differences.² In his article "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America," Herbert R. Northrup argues that Black strikebreakers were not simply tools of the capitalist class. They had compelling reasons for wanting to work as

¹Herbert Hill, "The Problem of Race in American Labor History," *Reviews in American History* 24, no. 2 (1996): 197, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030646>.

²Alonzo M. Ward, "'A Revolution in Labor': African Americans and Hybrid Labor Activism in Illinois during the Early Jim Crow Era," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 115, no. 2/3 (2022): 97–131. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48763384>.

strikebreakers. They were poor and had few opportunities to receive the same pay as white workers. They were ambitious and wanted to have a good life of their own. Strikebreaking offered them one of the only chances to get a foot in the door.³

Several historians have examined the major conflicts in the Illinois Coal Wars. David Markwell explores how the Battle of Virden in 1898 kicked off a spate of race riots in Southern Illinois when striking UMWA workers were replaced with Black miners imported from the South.⁴ In his book *Bloody Williamson*, Paul Angle shows how one mine owner in Carterville, Illinois, pitted local white workers and imported Southern Black workers against each other to extract more profit for himself.⁵ In her essay “‘Lynch-Law Must Go!’,” Caroline Waldron made a compelling case that European immigrant miners in Spring Valley, Illinois, were treated more harshly by locals than their Black counterparts due to the immigrants’ lack of status as American citizens in the eyes of their neighbors. Waldron argues that community members in Spring Valley viewed African American replacement workers as legitimate workers and that the striking European immigrant miners were viewed as outsiders.⁶

This paper builds off Waldron’s study by arguing that African American strikebreakers were viewed as outsiders—not as rightful American citizens—by the local populace when they were brought into the Southern Illinois coal mines. Thus, nativism triggered race riots as much as racism did. Examining the differing outcomes of the riots in Virden, Pana, and Carterville relative to the riot in Spring Valley elucidates this argument.

While there has been abundant research on each of these riots, this paper seeks to add to the historiography by comparing them against each other. When viewed collectively, the difference between the treatment of African American strikebreakers in Spring Valley and the other three towns becomes apparent. Waldron’s depiction of a hierarchy based on insider and outsider status is evident in the later three riots. In Spring Valley, striking European immigrant miners were viewed as outsiders by the residents, while in Virden, Pana, and Carterville, imported Black strikebreakers from the South were viewed as the outsiders. In Spring Valley, violence was mostly contained, but the other three riots ended in bloodshed. Thus, this paper illuminates how when racism and nativism were intertwined, labor disputes were more likely to lead to violent outcomes.

³ Herbert R. Northrup, “The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America,” *Southern Economic Journal* 9, no. 4 (1943): 313–26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1052655>.

⁴ David Markwell, “A Turning Point: The Lasting Impact of the 1898 Virden Mine Riot,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 99, no. 3/4 (2006): 211–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40193882>.

⁵ Paul M. Angle, *Bloody Williamson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952).

⁶ Caroline A. Waldron, “‘Lynch-Law Must Go!’: Race, Citizenship, and the Other in an American Coal Mining Town,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20, no. 1 (2000): 50–77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27502644>.

Numerous primary sources were used throughout this paper. These primary sources mainly come from newspaper accounts detailing the riots when they occurred. The most useful primary source, especially on the Pana riot, comes from the *Omaha Daily Bee*. While Markwell and Waldron thoroughly researched the riots in Virden and Spring Valley, less information is available about the Pana riot, so this article proved essential. Additionally, newspaper articles, including those from the *Chicago Tribune*, were invaluable in showing how the riots affected the whole region.

Origins of Organized Coal Miners

The life of a coal miner in the late 1800s was not easy. They did difficult and often dangerous work in terrible conditions for poor pay. Miners in Southern Illinois in 1895 made about \$250.00 per year (equal to around \$10,000.00 adjusted for inflation in 2025).⁷ Most miners lived in company housing without running water or central heating.⁸ Though there were many days when mines were not in operation, miners were never paid during these shutdowns.⁹ It was a dirty job full of grime and soot, and miners had little recourse to bargain for better conditions. If a miner participated in a strike, he could not only be fired but also denied any back pay due to him.¹⁰

To combat these poor working conditions, Paul Angle remarks, “Ever since the Civil War the coal miners of the country had been trying to form a permanent union on a national basis.”¹¹ Despite some success, the American Miners’ Association and the Miners’ National Association fell apart relatively quickly.¹² When the National Federation of Miners and Mine Labors was about to fall apart, too, organizers called for a convention in 1889.¹³ After the conference, the United Mine Workers of America was formed, and in 1890, the UMWA secured large pay increases for miners across the country through negotiations with mine operators.¹⁴

Black Workers in the United Mine Workers of America

Although the Knights of Labor did admit Black workers into their ranks, most early labor unions did not allow Black workers to join.¹⁵ According to Phillip Foner, when the UMWA formed in 1890, they inherited about

⁷Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 92.

⁸Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 92.

⁹Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 93.

¹⁰Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 93.

¹¹Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 91.

¹²Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 91.

¹³Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 91.

¹⁴Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 91.

¹⁵Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker 1619-1973* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 82.

1,000 Black Knights of Labor members.¹⁶ As recounted in Foner's *Organized Labor and the Black Worker 1619-1973*, at its founding convention, the UMWA stated its intention to "unite in one organization, regardless of creed, color or nationality, all workmen ... employed in and around the coal mines."¹⁷ Foner argued that it would have been impractical for the union to try to organize on a whites-only basis considering African Americans had been working in coal mines in the South since the time of slavery.¹⁸ Richard L. Davis, a Black miner, wrote a letter published in the *United Mine Workers Journal* on November 24, 1891. In his letter, he argued that, "Take the Negro out of the organization and you have a vast army against you, and one that is strong enough to be felt and heard."¹⁹ Yet, despite these warnings, the UMWA often invited that army to act against them.

According to Herbert Hill, the former labor director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the *United Mine Workers Journal* referred to "hordes of Black, brown, yellow and striped workers ... who have not the slightest idea of the meaning of organization."²⁰ The *United Mine Workers Journal* also asserted that they were seeking to uphold the "Caucasian ideals of Civilization."²¹ Black UMWA members often complained that they were denied well-paying jobs in the mines because of racist union policies.²² They also seldom held union leadership roles at the local and national levels. Because of the unfair treatment of Black workers in the UMWA, Richard L. Davis, a black miner and delegate at the UMWA's first convention, wrote, "It is just this treatment that has caused the negro to take your places when you were striking".²³ Most labor unions during the nineteenth century did not just fight for workers' rights; they also fought for white supremacy. This caused problems not only for Black workers but also for all workers, as the working class was divided along racial and ethnic lines.

Black Strikebreakers

Companies used this division to further separate the working class by pitting white workers and Black workers against each other, further inflaming racial tensions. In many instances, when white workers went on

¹⁶Foner, *Organized Labor*, 82.

¹⁷Foner, *Organized Labor*, 83.

¹⁸Foner, *Organized Labor*, 83.

¹⁹Foner, *Organized Labor*, 83.

²⁰Hill, "The Problem of Race," 197.

²¹Hill, "The Problem of Race," 197.

²²Foner, *Organized Labor*, 95.

²³Foner, *Organized Labor*, 83, 96.

strike, companies would bring in lower-paid Black workers to replace them. Labor historian Herbert G. Gutman states in his essay, “Labor in the Land of Lincoln,” that, during the Braidwood strike in 1877, the superintendent of the Chicago, Wilmington and Vermilion Coal Company, Alanson L. Sweet, wrote in a circular to stockholders that “With the mines filled with colored men, it is believed the company will not be burdened with the expense of another strike for many years.”²⁴ Companies hired strikebreakers because they did not want their workers striking. Strikes were bad for business. Native white coal miners kept going on strike and demanding fair treatment. Consequently, companies brought in Black workers as replacements, thinking they would be less likely to complain because of their economic precarity.

In “African-American Strikebreaking from the Civil War to the New Deal,” economist Warren C. Whatley argues that the rationale for Black workers to cross picket lines was simple: They had more race consciousness than class consciousness.²⁵ Black people have been discriminated against, segregated, and killed throughout the history of the United States. While white workers were fighting for issues like better wages, Black workers also had to fight simply to be included in the job market, according to Alonzo M. Ward.²⁶ Black workers formed a bond through their race when a bond to white workers did not exist through their work—even though it resembled white industrial workers’ challenges, with its deprivation and deflated wages. It was only natural for Black workers to not feel solidarity with workers who, though in the same economic class, had exhibited racist attitudes towards Black workers. This was reiterated by a Black miner from Indiana, who wrote in *United Mine Workers Journal* that even unionized Black miners break strikes “simply because you refuse to allow the colored man to work alongside you in times of peace. If such be true, then, is it any wonder that in times of trouble, these men retaliate for the treatment they received at your hands?”²⁷

Strikebreaking was a more prominent factor in racial violence in the Midwest than in the South, since, according to Warren Whatley, “most strike-breaking by African Americans occurred in the North.”²⁸ Moreover, Herbert R. Northrup argues that the southern coal industry was “strictly non-union” for about forty years after its

²⁴ Herbert G. Gutman, “Labor in the Land of Lincoln,” in *Power & Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, ed. Ira Berlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 178.

²⁵ Warren C. Whatley, “African-American Strikebreaking from the Civil War to the New Deal,” *Social Science History* 17, no. 4 (1993): 526, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1171303>.

²⁶ Ward, “‘A Revolution in Labor,’” 99.

²⁷ Foner, *Organized Labor*, 98.

²⁸ Whatley, “African-American Strikebreaking,” 529.

inception.²⁹ The UMWA's biggest problem was not that companies brought in Black strikebreakers from the South; their main problem was that they were unable to organize Appalachian coal miners. This issue spilled over into the Midwest when non-union workers were brought in during strikes. Early use of African American strikebreakers mostly occurred in only a few industries, such as mining and the railroad.³⁰ Whatley also showed that African American strikebreakers were used in nearly every major labor dispute, starting during Reconstruction.³¹ The first documented instance of African American strikebreakers being used during a coal mining strike in Illinois occurred in 1874, outside of Freeburg. A newspaper report stated that the white striking miners, "drove off the negro miners who had been employed, and robbed their shanties."³²

Instances with Black strikebreakers replacing white miners in Illinois continued, though the violence would not ratchet up for a few decades. During a strike in Braidwood in 1877, an article in the *Ottawa Free Trader* noted that the company "imported about 400 negroes and put them into the mines."³³ This was in stark contrast to a labor dispute in Braidwood in 1874, when the Vermillion Coal Company brought in "both recently arriving European immigrants and white workers" as strikebreakers.³⁴ In 1874, the union miners met with the replacement miners and were able to convince them to leave within days of their arrival. In 1877, the striking white miners in Braidwood did not have a meeting of the minds with the Black replacement miners. Instead, they gave them an ultimatum: "leave town 'peaceably or forcibly'."³⁵ While the violence did not spiral out of control in Braidwood in 1877, the difference between strikes featuring white and Black strikebreakers was stark.

Coal companies in Illinois continued to bring in Black strikebreakers when they saw how successful the tactic was. The Vermillion Coal Company welcomed violence in Braidwood because it allowed them to use measures such as bringing the state militia to ensure that their mine kept operating.³⁶ As more instances of

²⁹Northrup, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America," S 315.

³⁰Whatley, "African-American Strikebreaking," 529.

³¹Whatley, "African-American Strikebreaking," 529.

³²"Telegraphic," *Rock Island Daily Argus*, February 20, 1874, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn92053942/1874-02-20/ed-1/seq-1/>.

³³"The Braidwood Miners," *Ottawa Free Trader*, August 4, 1877, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84038582/1877-08-04/ed-1/seq-4/>.

³⁴Ward, "'A Revolution in Labor'," 100.

³⁵Ward, "'A Revolution in Labor'," 101.

³⁶Ward, "'A Revolution in Labor'," 101.

companies hiring Black strikebreakers occurred in Illinois coal mining towns, violence started to become more common.

During an 1880 strike, one Black strikebreaker was shot and killed in Rapid City, near Rock Island.³⁷ A month before, four Black strikebreakers wrote a letter that was published in the local newspaper stating that they “had been greatly deceived by the coal operators,” and that they “were told there was no strike here.”³⁸ Also in 1880, the predominantly European American mine workers in Springfield went on strike. When the mine owners brought in Black replacement workers, they were protected by the local police.³⁹ In 1886, Black workers were brought in from Kentucky to work the mines in Grape Creek, Illinois, and 200 white European American miners marched to the mines with guns and forced the Black workers to leave.⁴⁰

Bringing in Black strikebreakers served a few purposes. Coal companies needed workers in the mines. Earlier attempts at bringing in white American and immigrant replacements, such as in Braidwood in 1874, proved fruitless. Additionally, mine owners played off existing racial tensions and stoke the flames. Instead of being upset at the mine owners, striking workers instead focused their ire on the workers replacing them. State and local authorities also did not want race riots breaking out and sent in police and militias to quell any violence. Thus, mine owners had an incentive to bring in Black strikebreakers because it meant more protection was afforded to their property.

While tensions had been bubbling, the violence did not erupt until the 1890s, as a series of failed strikes began to mount.⁴¹ The UMWA knew that the coal companies would only bring in more Black strikebreakers if the union tried to turn the conflict into a race issue, so they encouraged Black workers to join the union.⁴² While in reality, the vast majority of strikebreakers throughout the history of American strikes had been white, white workers began to perceive Black strikebreakers as the reason why their strikes were failing.⁴³ During the 1894 packinghouse strike in Chicago, the white workers hung up an effigy of a Black worker with the word “nigger

³⁷John H. Keiser, “Black Strikebreakers and Racism in Illinois, 1865-1900,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 65, no. 3 (1972): 317, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40191383>.

³⁸“The Coal Miners – The Present State of Affairs,” *Rock Island Daily Argus*, February 4, 1880, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn92053943/1880-02-04/ed-1/seq-4/>.

³⁹Ward, ““A Revolution in Labor’,” 104.

⁴⁰“The Peril at Grape Creek,” *The Indianapolis Journal*, July 14, 1886, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015679/1886-07-14/ed-1/seq-2/>.

⁴¹Eric Arnesen, “Specter of the Black Strikebreaker: Race, Employment, and Labor Activism in the Industrial Era,” *Labor History* 44, no. 3 (2003): 321, <https://library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/18650602.pdf>.

⁴²Northrup, “The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America,” 318.

⁴³Arnesen, “Specter of the Black Strikebreaker,” 320.

scab” written on it.⁴⁴ It was no wonder then that Black workers gave up hope in the UMWA. From 1902 to 1910, the UMWA swelled in ranks from fewer than 100,000 to over 250,000; at the same time, its Black membership declined.⁴⁵

The UMWA had attempted to integrate Black workers into their union, but they ultimately failed. The leadership may have had the best of intentions, but the rank-and-file workers had their own interests. Integrating Black workers into their ranks meant that native-born white workers had to give up their higher place in the social hierarchy. White workers had benefited from the racial hierarchy, and, after the abolition of slavery, they were forced to compete with Black workers for good-paying jobs. Also, many white miners harbored racist attitudes and beliefs. Such attitudes and beliefs did not end when they went into the mines. In some instances when white and Black miners were covered under the same UMWA contract, white miners still refused to ride on the same train cars coming out of the mines with their Black union brethren.⁴⁶ Simply being admitted into the union would not be enough to convince Black workers that the union would benefit them if they were still abused while at work.

The UMWA faced other problems during its early days. Although the UMWA soared out of the gates with substantial pay increases for miners upon its founding in 1890, the rest of the decade would not be as kind to the miners’ fortunes. The Panic of 1893 saw an economic depression that put the miners back on their heels. By 1895, miners were only receiving pay at sixty percent of the pay scale from the year before.⁴⁷ The author of the Illinois Coal Report for 1896 writes, “There are many days during the year in which work is nominally suspended and the mine is shut down (...) Then, too, the miner is entirely dependent upon that one industry for his livelihood. In most cases he is isolated from all opportunities of employment at any other calling.”⁴⁸

Spring Valley Race Riot of 1895

In 1895, at the nadir of race relations in downstate Illinois, a race riot broke out in Spring Valley. By that time, historian Caroline A. Waldron explains that immigrants were 46 percent of the population of Spring Valley, while only 2 percent of the larger neighboring town, Princeton, consisted of immigrants.⁴⁹ While only

⁴⁴Arnesen, “Specter of the Black Strikebreaker,” 321.

⁴⁵Foner, *Organized Labor*, 99.

⁴⁶Foner, *Organized Labor*, 97.

⁴⁷Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 92.

⁴⁸Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 92.

⁴⁹Waldron, ““Lynch-Law Must Go!,”” 52.

one African American lived in Spring Valley in 1890, 135 African Americans had moved in by 1900.⁵⁰ Princeton residents were mostly farmers and merchants and were better off financially than the residents in Spring Valley.⁵¹ As a result, ethnic tensions were already boiling over between the elites in Princeton and those in Spring Valley, whom the Princeton residents saw as radical and uncouth. Waldron describes how the Princeton residents formed a racial hierarchy with themselves at the top, African Americans in the middle, and the Spring Valley white European immigrants at the bottom.⁵²

In 1894, the Spring Valley miners went on a strike that, with the help of the United Mine Workers of America, spread across the country.⁵³ After the strike proved unsuccessful, the UMWA leadership persuaded local unions to settle.⁵⁴ This caused bitterness to form among the immigrant miners in Spring Valley. Emboldened, the Spring Valley Coal Company began hiring African Americans to take the place of immigrant mine workers who went on strike.⁵⁵ While both immigrant and native-born miners were on strike, the most confrontational miners during the battle with the Spring Valley Coal Company were the Italian, French, and Belgian immigrants.⁵⁶ A newspaper article at the time described the trouble as such: “There are but few Poles, a great many Dagos and a large number of Belgians together with the Hungarians that are at the bottom of the whole trouble.”⁵⁷ The immigrant workers in Spring Valley felt subjugated not only by the mine operators but also by the Black residents of Princeton.

Four days before the riot began, in recognition of this collective feeling, the Journal of the Knights of Labor published an article that states, “Chattel slavery is preferable to industrial slavery.”⁵⁸ On August 3, 1895, an Italian miner in Spring Valley was robbed and shot three times by assailants whom he reported as a group of Black males.⁵⁹ Five African American men were arrested and released after a preliminary hearing, at which time

⁵⁰Waldron, ““Lynch-Law Must Go!,”” 52.

⁵¹Waldron, ““Lynch-Law Must Go!,”” 53.

⁵²Waldron, ““Lynch-Law Must Go!,”” 56.

⁵³Waldron, ““Lynch-Law Must Go!,”” 53.

⁵⁴Waldron, ““Lynch-Law Must Go!,”” 54.

⁵⁵Waldron, ““Lynch-Law Must Go!,”” 54.

⁵⁶Waldron, ““Lynch-Law Must Go!,”” 54.

⁵⁷Waldron, ““Lynch-Law Must Go!,”” 54.

⁵⁸Waldron, ““Lynch-Law Must Go!,”” 57.

⁵⁹Waldron, ““Lynch-Law Must Go!,”” 58.

a mob began to form. The mob made their way to the home of S.M. Dalzell, the mine's manager, and demanded that he fire all the Black workers. He refused because, he said, "They are American citizens."⁶⁰ The mob then proceeded to raid the homes of African Americans. According to a newspaper report at the time, "Women with three and four children running after them were driven over the hills and through the woods, many shots being fired after them as they fled."⁶¹ Although there were no deaths, over 100 Black citizens were assaulted and driven from Spring Valley and had to seek refuge in nearby Seatonville.⁶²

The crisis descended into a series of hostile meetings. African American Illinois State Representative J.C. Bucknor gave an account of a meeting in Chicago, where 1,500 African Americans gathered arms and prepared to head to Spring Valley. Bucknor prevented their planned trek by telling them that, "The colored people of Illinois had never taken the law in their own hands."⁶³ Nonetheless, with reports reaching Spring Valley about armed African Americans set to come from Chicago and Peoria, white miners were enlisted from the nearby towns of Sudd and Toluca to be on standby, so that "5,000 white miners could be mustered together in this city in less than two hours."⁶⁴ Peace was restored the following day after Illinois Governor John P. Altgeld sent Colonel Hugh E. Bayle to Spring Valley to mediate. Altgeld told Bayle that "all American citizens, regardless of color or race, were to be protected."⁶⁵ Bayle established peace after getting the miners to adopt a resolution at a mass meeting in the public square. It states, "Resolved, That we, miners of Spring Valley, in mass meeting assembled, declare it to be our belief that all men regardless of race, color, or creed, are born with the same equal rights and should enjoy the same opportunities in pursuit of life and happiness."⁶⁶ After the meeting, union officials met with Bayle and outlined a path forward that included allowing the Black workers back in the mine if Dalzell agreed to rehire white miners who had lost their jobs during the 1894 strike.⁶⁷

Spring Valley's African American residents were not done with their fight, though. African American

⁶⁰Waldron, "'Lynch-Law Must Go!'," 59.

⁶¹"The News," *The Ely Miner*, August 14, 1895, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn90059182/1895-08-14/ed-1/seq-6/>.

⁶²"Trouble Settled," *Rock Island Daily Argus*, August 8, 1895, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn92053934/1895-08-08/ed-1/seq-1/>.

⁶³"Two Stories Told," *Rock Island Daily Argus*, August 7, 1895. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn92053934/1895-08-07/ed-1/seq-1/>.

⁶⁴"Two Stories Told."

⁶⁵"Trouble Settled."

⁶⁶"Trouble Settled."

⁶⁷Waldron, "'Lynch-Law Must Go!'," 63.

communities across the state set up committees and raised funds to mount legal cases, and the African American press also went on the attack. An article in the Langston City Herald declared that the Italians in Spring Valley were “a band of lousy, dirty, despicable, low bred, treacherous dago miners.”⁶⁸ The African American community compiled reports on the riot and used them to file complaints with Justice A.M. Swengle in Princeton.⁶⁹ The day after they filed the complaints, the county sheriff showed up at the mine in Spring Valley with thirty-six arrest warrants.⁷⁰ At the trial, the African American victims’ citizenship was used as a cudgel against the defendants. Afterwards the defense attorney complained, “He had heard the expression ‘American citizen’ used in this trial to a considerable extent until it now rung in his ears.”⁷¹ Eight defendants—Italian, Polish, and French—were eventually found guilty of riot and criminal assault. Their fate was likely sealed when the trial was held in Princeton—in front of a jury that was already inclined against them.

Battle of Virden and Lynching of F.W. Stewart

In late 1897, the UMWA went on a statewide strike in Illinois, which was described by David Markwell in “A Turning Point: The Lasting Impact of the 1898 Virden Mine Riot.”⁷² By this time, the UMWA had been severely weakened. When the 1897 strike began, only 400 of the 35,000 coal mine workers in Illinois were part of the UMWA.⁷³ Even though very few workers in Illinois were in the UMWA, the vast majority of miners in the state walked off the job when the strike started.⁷⁴ Spurred by public pressure, in January 1898, the state’s mine operators came to a joint agreement with the union that included pay scales for various districts in Illinois. For the first time in seven years, miners received a pay raise.⁷⁵ The agreement included an eight-hour workday, which should have been seen as a major victory for the UMWA.⁷⁶

For the workers in Virden, however, it was decidedly not a victory, as the Chicago-Virden Coal Company

⁶⁸Waldron, “‘Lynch-Law Must Go!’,” 65.

⁶⁹Waldron, “‘Lynch-Law Must Go!’,” 66.

⁷⁰Waldron, “‘Lynch-Law Must Go!’,” 66.

⁷¹Waldron, “‘Lynch-Law Must Go!’,” 64.

⁷²Markwell, “A Turning Point,” 213.

⁷³Markwell, “Turning Point,” 213.

⁷⁴Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 94.

⁷⁵Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 95.

⁷⁶Markwell, “Turning Point,” 213.

refused to honor the agreement the union came to with the other mine operators and made plans to bring in African American strikebreakers.⁷⁷ If Spring Valley was the tipping point in race relations in downstate Illinois, the 1898 Battle of Virden can be seen as racial violence entering hyperdrive. As the strike in Virden lingered into the fall months of 1898, the Chicago-Virden Coal Company had a stockade wall built around the mine in Virden for protection when the strikebreakers arrived.⁷⁸ Tensions continued to mount as the striking workers were impatiently waiting for a trainload of strikebreakers that could be due at any moment. On October 5, the miners held a meeting with state labor leaders, where they made plans, according to the *Rock Island Daily Argus*, for “a more vigorous war against the Blacks and the operators.”⁷⁹ Mine manager Frank W. Lukens expected the government to protect their ability to conduct business, but Illinois Governor John Reilly Tanner refused to send in troops.⁸⁰ Lukens instead hired private guards to guard the arriving train full of strikebreakers.

On October 12, the train from Alabama finally arrived. A newspaper account at the time estimated the waiting mob of strikers to be between 500 and 1,500 in number.⁸¹ They were met by fifty Pinkerton and Thiel detectives working on behalf of the Chicago-Virden Coal Company, who got off the train and opened fire immediately after pulling into Virden.⁸² The resulting fracas caused a dozen deaths, including striking workers and guards, and numerous others were wounded, including Black travelers on the train.⁸³ After the fighting was over, residents of Virden were left “with windows and doors barricaded, trembling in fear that the riots will begin again.”⁸⁴

The dead miners were buried in the Union Miners Cemetery in Mount Olive, Illinois, where renowned labor organizer Mary Harris “Mother” Jones was later buried with “her boys.”⁸⁵ The African American families

⁷⁷Markwell, “Turning Point,” 213.

⁷⁸Markwell, “Turning Point,” 215.

⁷⁹“Outbreak Imminent,” *Rock Island Daily Argus*, October 7, 1898, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn92053934/1898-10-07/ed-1/seq-4/>.

⁸⁰Markwell, “Turning Point,” 216.

⁸¹“Bloody War at Virden, Ill,” *Marshall County Independent*, October 21, 1898, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87056251/1898-10-21/ed-1/seq-6/>.

⁸²“Bloody War at Virden, Ill.”

⁸³“Bloody War at Virden, Ill.”

⁸⁴“Bloody War at Virden, Ill.”

⁸⁵Markwell, “Turning Point,” 224.

on the train ended up stranded at the train's next stop in Springfield for a time before a group of "friends of the miners" paid for them to travel to St. Louis.⁸⁶ There they were left to either find their way back to Alabama or fend for themselves without food, clothing, or money. The miners had steeled their resolve, and the Chicago-Virden Coal Company knew they could not import more workers because of the backlash to the riot. The company caved and settled on the union's terms by November.⁸⁷

The ripples of the Battle of Virden would cause racial violence throughout the state. Less than a month later, about two hours away in Lacon, an African American man, F.W. Stewart, was lynched. Stewart was accused of assaulting the daughter of a miner from nearby Toluca.⁸⁸ Due to the events in Virden, native-born white residents in Toluca had recently designated it as a sundown town, off limits to African Americans after sunset.⁸⁹ According to the account of the lynching in the *Chicago Tribune*, "The white miners grew more bitter against the colored men as they heard how the negroes were being imported from the South, and many colored men were forced to leave town because feeling was running so high."⁹⁰ Stewart chose to stay in Toluca. After his arrest for the assault, a mob of 100 white miners from Toluca stormed the county jail in Lacon, dragged Stewart off, and hanged him from a tree.⁹¹

Pana Riot

When the Virden miners went on strike in 1898, so did the UMWA workers at the Pana Coal Company, which also refused to honor the joint agreement with the other mine operators. Several initial attempts by the Pana Coal Company to bring in strikebreakers to run the mines failed after being met with heavy resistance by the striking workers.⁹² Historian Victor Hicken writes in "The Virden and Pana Mine Wars of 1898" that the company recruited Black workers in Alabama by falsely telling them that a new mining operation was opening in Pana and that most of the miners had gone off to fight in the Spanish-American War.⁹³ When some Black miners reached Pana and found out the truth, they refused to cross the

⁸⁶Markwell, "Turning Point," 220.

⁸⁷Markwell, "Turning Point," 222.

⁸⁸"Miners Hang a Negro at Lacon," *Chicago Tribune*, November 8, 1898, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/chicago-tribune-lacon-lynchingchicago-d/76621703/>.

⁸⁹"Miners Hang."

⁹⁰"Miners Hang."

⁹¹"Miners Hang."

⁹²Victor Hicken, "The Virden and Pana Mine Wars of 1898," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 52, no. 2 (1959): 266, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40189660>.

⁹³Hicken, "Virden and Pana," 267.

picket line.⁹⁴ According to a September 1, 1898, entry in *United Mine Workers Journal*, sixty-five Black strikebreakers had left Pana to go back to Birmingham to tell all their friends not to go north because of the poor conditions imposed by the company, as recounted by Keona K. Ervin in “Black Coal Miners and the Issue of Strikebreaking.”⁹⁵

In October 1898, trainloads of Black passengers headed to Pana were stopped and diverted back in numerous towns across central Illinois, including Tower Hill, Galesburg, and Minonk.⁹⁶ After the violence in Virden, the Illinois National Guard was sent to Pana to keep the peace and ensure that no more Black strikebreakers were allowed into Pana.⁹⁷ However, in March 1899, Governor John Riley Tanner had removed the troops from Pana after stating that he had received assurance from the sheriff that he could keep the peace and that the troops were not needed any longer.⁹⁸ On April 9, 1899, numerous families of strikebreaking workers attempted to leave Pana but, according to a newspaper report, they “were being prevented by negro guards armed with rifles furnished by the Pana Coal company, who claimed the goods the negroes were moving were company property.”⁹⁹ The families were then taken to the union hall, where they were protected by the white union workers, who feared the other Black strikebreakers who did not want them to leave would prevent their departure.¹⁰⁰

The riot started the next morning after a Black miner got into an altercation with a deputy sheriff that led to a shootout in the middle of the streets, a few blocks from the mine.¹⁰¹ Once the bullets started flying, pandemonium broke out in the streets, as white striking miners descended on the shootout and Black strikebreakers left the mine when they heard one of their own had been shot and arrested.¹⁰² Six people—Black and white—ended up dead and many more bystanders were injured. As had happened in Virden, the violence forced the Pana Coal Company to give up a losing battle. James W. Loewen stated in *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American*

⁹⁴Hicken, “Virden and Pana,” 267.

⁹⁵Keona K. Ervin, “Black Coal Miners and the Issue of Strikebreaking,” in *The Black Worker*, Volume 4: *The Black Worker During the Era of the American Federation of Labor and the Railroad Brotherhoods*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis (Temple University Press, 1979), 209, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvn5tvsvx.8>.

⁹⁶Hicken, “Virden and Pana,” 273.

⁹⁷Hicken, “Virden and Pana,” 278.

⁹⁸“Pana Miners’ Deadly Riot,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 11, 1899, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn99021999/1899-04-11/ed-1/seq-1/>.

⁹⁹“Pana Miners.”

¹⁰⁰“Pana Miners.”

¹⁰¹“Pana Miners.”

¹⁰²“Pana Miners.”

Racism that the company closed the mine and stranded the Black workers without even paying for their return to Alabama.¹⁰³ By October, the Pana Coal Company had re-hired the striking workers and agreed to pay them at the new UMWA scale rate.¹⁰⁴ According to Loewen, the Pana Riot served as the impetus for the native white residents in Pana to turn Pana, like Toluca, into a sundown town “complete with signs at the edge of town.”¹⁰⁵

Carterville Mine Riot

There was yet another UMWA strike that was still ongoing in downstate Illinois—this one in Carterville. The violence in Pana led almost immediately to more violence in Carterville. The mine in Carterville was operated by the St. Louis and Big Muddy Coal Company, owned by Samuel T. Brush.¹⁰⁶ The mine opened in 1893 and was producing more coal than any mine in the state of Illinois by 1897.¹⁰⁷ The miners in Carterville lived in company houses that had no weatherboarding on the outside, no central heating, and no running water.¹⁰⁸ When the UMWA went on strike in 1897, Brush circumvented the strike by offering his workers a pay raise if they stayed on the job.¹⁰⁹

Brush may have thought he had averted a work stoppage, but he was not in the clear for long. By January 1898, the workers at the St. Louis and Big Muddy Coal Company had started to organize their own UMWA local.¹¹⁰ When the UMWA met with Illinois mine operators in early 1898, the pay scale they agreed upon for Williamson County was more than what Brush was paying.¹¹¹ As he was not involved in any of the negotiations, Brush refused to honor the higher rate.¹¹² When the Carterville miners’ contract expired on March 31, 1898 and Brush was still not offering a rate commensurate with the UMWA pay scale, eighty percent of his workforce went on strike.¹¹³ Brush continued running the mine with the workers who did not go on strike for six weeks before offering the strikers an ultimatum: return to

¹⁰³James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 161.

¹⁰⁴Hicken, “Virden and Pana,” 278.

¹⁰⁵Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 161.

¹⁰⁶Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 90.

¹⁰⁷Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 91.

¹⁰⁸Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 92.

¹⁰⁹Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 95.

¹¹⁰Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 95.

¹¹¹Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 96.

¹¹²Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 96.

¹¹³Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 96.

work or he would start replacing them with African American workers he was bringing in from Tennessee.¹¹⁴

Within a week of Brush's ultimatum, 178 African Americans from Tennessee were working in the mine; the strikers quickly conceded and returned to work.¹¹⁵ The mine in Cartersville operated for a year with the native-born white miners back on the job working alongside the Black workers who had been brought in as strikebreakers. Then, Brush offered up a new contract that included the eight-hour workday and a pay rate even higher than the one the UMWA had secured during the 1897 strike, but it was on the condition that he refused to recognize the union.¹¹⁶ The union called a strike on May 15, 1899 and, according to Angle, "it happened that every one of Brush's white miners, with no more than seven or eight Negroes, went on strike, while every one of those who remained at work was a Black man."¹¹⁷

After the Pana strike ended in June, Brush hired some of the displaced African American Pana strikebreakers to come work his mine, still under strike.¹¹⁸ According to a newspaper report, as a train full of forty-seven African American miners from Pana pulled into the train station in Lauder, three miles northwest of Cartersville, fifty armed striking miners from Cartersville were hiding in the grass waiting for them.¹¹⁹ The leader of the mob, an Italian miner, then demanded the strikebreakers to exit the train.¹²⁰ When the train conductor tried to leave, the striking miners opened up fire and killed Anna Karr, one of the strikebreakers' wives.¹²¹ Although many were injured by gunfire, the miners from Pana eventually made their way to Brush's mine.

That night, 200 armed strikers surrounded Brush's mine and company houses and opened fire.¹²² After this, the Black workers fought back. Near the mine, the union had built a cluster of shacks which they referred to as Union City.¹²³ Union City housed the few Black workers who had joined the striking white workers. The strikebreakers were

¹¹⁴Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 96.

¹¹⁵Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 97.

¹¹⁶Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 97.

¹¹⁷Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 98.

¹¹⁸"Ambushed by Strikers," *The Record-Union*, July 1, 1899, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015104/1899-07-01/ed-1/seq-1/>.

¹¹⁹"Ambushed by Strikers."

¹²⁰"Ambushed by Strikers."

¹²¹"Ambushed by Strikers."

¹²²Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 100.

¹²³Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 100.

incensed by the death of Anna Karr and surrounded Union City, opened fire, and then burned the shacks down.¹²⁴ By this point, the violence had reached a fever pitch. Black workers were attacking other Black workers. Though they were still living in shacks and not seen as equals in the eyes of white workers, some of the Black workers who had originally come to Cartersville as strikebreakers from Tennessee had now joined their union. Not only that, but numerous Black workers also joined the white workers confronting the Black strikebreakers from Pana as they arrived at the train station.¹²⁵

To quell the violence, Governor John Tanner sent in the Illinois National Guard. The violence in Cartersville was far from over, though. The strike dragged on into September 1899. By this point, the striking white workers had refused to let any Black workers even enter the town of Cartersville.¹²⁶ On September 11, Governor Tanner had removed the troops who were stationed in town.¹²⁷ On September 17, fifteen Black miners marched into town to go to the train station, armed and ready for a confrontation with the white workers.¹²⁸ Upon hearing about the Black workers at the train station, the striking white miners grabbed their guns and went to meet them. One of them, Lem Shadowens, opened the station door and yelled, “Come out, you damned Black scab sons-of-bitches; we’ve got you—come out and take your medicine.”¹²⁹ A skirmish broke out and shots were fired. The striking white miners then chased the Black miners through town, eventually killing five strikebreakers.¹³⁰ A newspaper article in The Indianapolis Journal told the story of one of the Black men who was killed. After being shot twice and falling immediately in front of the mayor’s house, “One of the white men then ran up and shot him through the head with a rifle.”¹³¹

After that, the Illinois National Guard, which had just left town a week prior, was back in Cartersville to reestablish law and order. Seven Black men and two white men were arrested for the killing of Anna Karr, and twelve white men were arrested for the five murders on September 17.¹³² All nine defendants in the Anna Karr case were

¹²⁴Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 100.

¹²⁵Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 105.

¹²⁶“Negroes Shot,” *The Indianapolis Journal*, September 18, 1899, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015679/1899-09-18/ed-1/seq-1/>.

¹²⁷“Negroes Shot.”

¹²⁸“Negroes Shot.”

¹²⁹Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 103.

¹³⁰“Negroes Shot.”

¹³¹“Negroes Shot.”

¹³²Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 105.

found not guilty. The trial for the September 17 murders proved anticlimactic because, as Angle put it, if they “would not convict Negroes for killing Negroes, could there be any real possibility that white men would be punished for the same offense?”¹³³ The Black miners’ murderers would not be punished. The strike in Carterville never technically ended. Brush continued to run his mine with strikebreakers without recognizing the union until he sold it off in 1906.¹³⁴ While the violence in Carterville subsided, Brush paid a modest price. The St. Louis and Big Muddy Coal Company produced 320,000 tons of coal in 1897. Between 1900 and 1905, they never produced more than 245,000 tons.¹³⁵

Comparing The Four Race Riots in Southern Illinois

Of these four race riots, the one in Spring Valley stands in stark contrast to the other three. The Black strikebreakers in Spring Valley came from the local population. Originally residing in neighboring Princeton, many African American Bureau County residents had already moved into Spring Valley before the strike started. They were relatively integrated into the community. Although the riot in Spring Valley was horrific, no deaths occurred during the conflict, whereas the riots in Virden, Pana, and Carterville resulted in multiple deaths. Not only that, but the African American victims in Spring Valley also saw justice applied against their tormentors—something that did not happen for victims in any of the other riots.

The African American residents in Spring Valley were able to achieve this because they had community support. Not only did the local residents find their treatment deplorable, but they also received support from African American communities in cities across the state. When violence happened in the other mining towns, the victims were quickly discarded or shipped off to different locales. Furthermore, after the tension in Spring Valley, the whole community was able to recover after restorative justice repaired the fractures in the community. The Black miners were welcomed back into the mines, and the white miners agreed to such a resolution without too much of a fight. Conversely, after the riots in Pana and Virden, both communities became sundown towns—completely unable to recover.

Conclusion

As this paper has shown, there were varying reasons for the differing outcomes of the riots. The Black strikebreakers in Spring Valley were viewed as American citizens with just as much right to take a job as anyone else—something that the local institutions reaffirmed repeatedly during the conflict. The Black strikebreakers in the other towns were viewed as invaders who did not belong to the community. Additionally, the rioting white European immigrants were seen as the ‘others’ in Spring Valley. They were the ones who did not belong. Thus, they were the ones causing trouble.

¹³³Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 112.

¹³⁴Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 116.

¹³⁵Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, 115.

A peculiar thing happened in Carterville as that conflict raged on for years. While the first wave of strikebreakers imported from the South stuck around town, they slowly became assimilated into the community. By the end of the conflict in Carterville, some of these African American residents, who were originally from Tennessee, saw the new Black strikebreakers transplanted after the Pana strike as outsiders who were coming to take their jobs. This incompatibility between the rightful citizen and the outsider was expressed during a strike in Rapid City, Illinois, in 1880, by one striking white miner when he commended the local Black workers who did not cross the picket line, despite the company coaxing them to do so. He stated, “Most of the colored men in this place are wide awake to these foul fellows, who act as agents for those bloodsucking companies.”¹³⁶ To him and so many others, the “foul fellow” was not the local Black miner but the migrant Black miner.

¹³⁶Gutman, “Land of Lincoln,” 203.

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Exploring Government Actions and Their Impact on the
Twenty-First Century Nkonya and Alavanyo Conflict in Ghana

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Tony Cooper, a specialist in the study of terrorism and extraordinary violence, defines conflict as “a collision of opposing interests,” emphasizing that such collisions can range from mild disagreements to exceedingly violent encounters.¹ This definition aptly frames the ongoing and deeply entrenched conflict between the neighboring towns of Nkonya and Alavanyo in Ghana. Although Ghana is widely recognized for its peaceful conditions, ranking first in West Africa, second in Africa, and thirty-eighth globally in the 2021 Global Peace Index, the country has not been immune to internal conflicts, many of which trace back to the twentieth and earlier centuries. Notable examples include the Dagbon chieftaincy conflict (1953-2018), the Peki-Tsito conflict (1919-2025), and the Mamprusi-Kusasi dispute (1957-2025). The Nkonya and Alavanyo conflict, rooted in land and resource disputes, stands out as the most protracted, spanning over a century from 1906 to 2025, with intermittent periods of peace and resurgence of conflict. Despite its reputation for peaceful governance since gaining independence in 1957, Ghana has struggled to resolve this long-standing conflict effectively.

This study examines the Nkonya and Alavanyo conflict within the broader context of Ghana’s internal conflicts. I argue that government interventions in the twenty-first century have failed to resolve the conflict, inadvertently prolonging the dispute. The solution to the conflict has long passed the phase of enforcing the court rulings on the land under dispute. By exploring the complexities of governmental responses, this paper sheds light on the reasons why peace efforts have been ineffective and what lessons can be drawn for future conflict resolution in the region.

The Nkonya and Alavanyo communities are neighboring towns in Ghana’s Volta and Oti regions. Their shared border is at the heart of a long-standing land dispute. The Nkonya communities, part of the Guan ethnic group and believed to be aboriginal to Ghana, are about five miles north of Kpando. It is bordered east by the Akpafu and Bowuri communities and to the west by the Volta River.² The Alavanyo communities, comprising seven towns within the Hohoe district, trace their origins to migrants from Yorubaland³ and primarily speak the Ewe language. They are located seventeen miles south of Kpando and eight miles north of Hohoe. The contested border lies between Nkonya-Tayi and Alavanyo-Kpemi, making the conflict a direct dispute over territorial boundaries.⁴ Various committees, court records, and early scholarly works have consistently identified this border dispute as the root cause of the conflict that persisted for over a century. This paper offers a nuanced understanding

¹ H. H. Cooper, “What Is Conflict?,” *Journal of Police Crisis Negotiations* 3, no. 1 (2003): 85-100, https://doi.org/10.1300/j173v03n01_06.

² For the vicinity map click here. <https://ars.els-cdn.com/content/image/1-s2.0-S0962629817303803-fx1.jpg>.

³ Explanation to the Yorubaland can be find here <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldcivilization/chapter/the-yoruba-states/>

⁴ For the vicinity map click on the link above.

of the dispute, which began as a land dispute and transformed into something much more difficult to adjudicate.

The research for this essay uncovered overlooked patterns of the Nkonya and Alavanyo conflict—patterns that have received little attention from sociologists, anthropologists, and scholars of peace studies. While existing scholarship on this century-long conflict largely stems from fields like conflict and peace studies, sociology, and anthropology, historians have yet to provide a comprehensive analysis of its evolving nature. Understanding these conflict patterns is essential for policy formulators and peacekeeping committees to stay up-to-date on the conflict's progression and better strategize sustainable solutions.

This research demonstrates how past interventions have shaped the conflict's trajectory and development. Earlier non-historical studies on the Nkonya-Alavanyo conflict primarily emphasized land as the singular and most significant cause. Based on my examination of a diverse range of sources, including archival materials (court records), newspapers, and documentary videos, I argue that the conflict has moved beyond the land as the singular cause, and therefore, enforcing the court ruling will be ineffective in dealing with the conflict. The news articles and documentary sources that I used in this study are drawn from credible, widely recognized platforms that provide firsthand coverage of events in Ghana. Central to this research is the question: What major government actions have exacerbated the conflict instead of mitigating it? In exploring this question, other critical questions emerge: What patterns have defined the Nkonya and Alavanyo conflict in the twenty-first century, and what specific government efforts have been made to resolve it? Unlike much of the existing literature, this study combines narrative and analytical methods to demonstrate that the government's interventions have failed to end the conflict and instead contributed to the conflict's prolonged nature.

Historiography

The Nkonya and Alavanyo conflicts have been the subject of several peace studies. For example, alternative dispute resolution measures in the Alavanyo-Nkonya conflict were examined in an article titled “Assessing the Effectiveness of the Alternative Dispute Resolution Mechanisms in the Alavanyo-Nkonya Conflict in the Volta Region of Ghana.”⁵ Perpertua Francisca Midodzi and Imoro Razak Jaha establish that while previous mediations had failed, the 2003 mediation committee seemed to be making progress. Thus, the authors suggested that mediation be employed. Prince Adjei Duah looked into what was preventing the conflict from being resolved, and he found that it was the incapacity of court rulings to be executed. He also makes the case that the dispute has political roots.

⁵ Perpertua Francisca Midodzi and Imoro Razak Jaha, “Assessing the Effectiveness of the Alternative Dispute Resolution Mechanism in the Alavanyo-Nkonya Conflict in the Volta Region of Ghana,” *International Journal of Peace and Development Studies* 2, no. 7 (September 2011): 195-202.

The findings of Adjei Duah highlighted land as the single most important factor for the conflict and suggested that by implementing the court decision, the conflict would end. Adjei Duah examined the conflict through the lens of the Nkonya people, disregarding the perspective of Alavanyo.⁶ In “Conflict and Conflict Management: A Case Study of Nkonya and Alavanyo Conflicts,” Francis Mensah, Gifty Serwah Mensah, and Phyllis Oteng concluded that the mediation process is critical to resolving the conflict.⁷ The authors also discussed issues, such as poverty, unemployment and corruption, as contributory factors for the continuity of the conflict.

Other scholars identify varying ways of managing and resolving this conflict. Emmanuel Abeku Essel investigates how the conflict has impacted the region’s commercial activity and local economies.⁸ To Essel, the government is the reason for the conflict because it would have been difficult for the youth and communities to fight if the economy was booming, and everyone was employed. Another study, “Identities, Imbalances, and Conflict in Ghana,” indicates that the conflict resulted from social and economic inequalities in the communities and is not wholly an issue about land.⁹ Dennis Penu and Patrick Osei-Kufuor conclude in their research that the Nkonya-Alavanyo conflict can end sooner by examining the actions of the different actors.¹⁰ To them, the positive “attractors” (term used by the authors to mean positive indicators) outweighed the negative “attractors” (negative indicators) that can help end the conflict. In other words, the conflict would end if the positive attractors were encouraged.

This study builds on existing studies while considering new perspectives and addressing critical gaps. Unlike previous works that emphasize the need for court ruling enforcement (Duah) or the role of socio-economic factors (Mensah, Essel), this study goes beyond the communities themselves—long the focus of most studies—to the government’s role. It establishes that the government’s failure to resolve the conflict has inadvertently contributed to the continuation of the Nkonya and Alavanyo conflict. While the government’s failure to enforce the court’s decision has been criticized by Duah, my investigations suggest that the government’s subsequent action

⁶ Prince Duah Agyei, “Understanding the Persistence of the Nkonya-Alavanyo Conflict: An Nkonya Perspective” (PhD dissertation, University of Tampere, 2014).

⁷ Francis Mensah, Gifty Serwah Mensah, and Phyllis Oteng, “Conflict and Conflict Management: A Case Study of Nkonya and Alavanyo,” *Africa Development And Resources Research Institute* 25, no. 6 (April 2016): 1-16.

⁸ Emmanuel A. Essel, “Impact of Land Conflict on Agriculture Production: A Case Study of the Alavanyos and Nkonyas of Ghana,” *Economic Sciences for Agribusiness and Rural Economy* (June 8, 2018): 182-187, <https://doi.org/10.22630/esare.2018.1.25>.

⁹ Dzodzi Tsikata and Wayo Seini, “Identities, Inequalities, and Conflict in Ghana,” *CRISE* (November 2004) 1-54. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228917698_Identities_Inequalities_and_Conflicts_in_Ghana

¹⁰ Dennis Penu and Patrick Osei-Kufour, “Understanding Conflict Dynamics: Identifying ‘Attractor’ in the Alavanyo-Nkonya Conflict,” *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 6, no. 8 (2006): 1-9.

of taking over the disputed land had the potential to resolve the conflict. However, by leaving the land bare and undeveloped, the government allowed the land to remain as a symbolic and practical basis for the continuation of the conflict. This study further contends that the trajectory of the conflict has shifted from the initial land dispute to other causes that are sometimes unrelated to the land. The government's failure to adapt its conflict resolution strategies to address deeper structural issues has aggravated the situation. By re-evaluating the role of government interventions, this study highlights how unresolved historical grievances persist when surface-level solutions fail to address the evolving nature of the conflict.

Background To the Twenty-First Century Nkonya And Alavanyo Conflict

As an ethnic group in Ghana, the Guans are commonly known to be indigenous to Ghana. However, scholars who reject this claim, including historians Albert Adu Boahen, have argued that the Guans are not indigenous to the place but were the first migrants to arrive in the country. The Nkonya town is made up of Guan people, which suggests that they lived in the area before the arrival of other ethnic groups. It is estimated that they have inhabited the place since the sixteenth century.¹¹

The Ewes' story of origin is primarily a migrant one. Their tradition indicates that they migrated from Yorubaland during the region's expansion and finally settled in Ghana following their dispersal in Notsie during the late fifteenth century.¹² The Alavanyo emerged from this group. The Alavanyo arrived in the area in about 1840, and Nkonya provided them a place to settle.¹³ They began intermarriage and lived peacefully. When eight Alavanyo farmers began cultivating Nkonya land without following the proper rules (i.e., encroachment) in 1906, the disagreement over the land began. This area of about 6,460 acres has excellent soil for timber plantations and contains gold, mercury, and clay deposits.¹⁴ This issue caught the attention of the British colonial government, and in 1913, the colonial government tasked Dr. Hans Gruner, assisted by Paul Sprigade, with designing a map. This map was designed to help solve the emerging conflict, but it did nothing to help the situation.

The Nkonya chiefs attempted to resolve the conflict by sending nine of their elders to meet with the

¹¹ Henry Kwadwo Amoako, "Detailed History of the Guans: AD 2020 Marks 1,020 Years of Their Entry into Ghana," African Research Consult, December 18, 2020, <http://african-research.com/research/african-countries/african-tribes/detailed-history-of-the-guans-ad-2020-marks-1020-years-of-their-entry-into-ghana/>.

¹² James Anquandah, "The People of Ghana: Their Origins And Cultures," *Historical Society of Ghana*, no. 15 (2013): 1-26.

¹³ Felix Ohene, "The Facts of the Case between Nkonya and Alavanyo," *Modern Ghana*, March 22, 2013, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/454229/the-facts-of-the-case-between-nkonya-and-alavanyo.html>.

¹⁴ Joshua Awienagua Gariba, *The Nkonya-Alavanyo Land Dispute in Ghana: Land Struggle, Power and the Challenges of Belonging* (Accra, Ghana: Joshua Awienagua Gariba, 2017), 24.

Alavanyo elders to discuss the situation in 1923, but they were greeted with contempt.¹⁵ They were savagely beaten, and this move resulted in the first violent confrontation between these two factions. The British colonial government, represented by Esq. Norton Jones, proposed in 1931 that a portion of the contested land be set aside as a Plateau Forest reserve.¹⁶ In this request, the Gruner map was employed, and both sides agreed to use the map that had previously failed to solve the conflict.

In a court case in 1953, Paul Kojo Ahane, who claimed ownership of the land, served as the plaintiff, and Nana Akotor Kwasi, the paramount chief, served as the co-plaintiff. The defendants for the Alavanyo side were seven men, and the co-defendants were Nana Daniel Adjisan, Divisional Chief of Akpafuto-Todji, Kwasi Stepe of Alavanyo-Wudidi, and Nana Atakora VI of Alavanyo-Kpemi. These individuals, supported by their chiefs, have been to the district, high, and appeal courts to bring an end to the land dispute between them. Although the main actors in the land dispute were private individuals, the chiefs from both sides have supported them in their legal endeavors, thereby making the conflict look like an ethnic conflict. The High Court of Accra ruled in favor of the Nkonya in 1957, the Court of Appeal ruled in their favor in 1959, the High Court of Ho ruled in their favor in 1970, and the Court of Appeal affirmed the High Court of Ho's verdict in 1975.¹⁷ In 1980, Justice Cecilia Koranteng-Addow quashed an order for the re-demarcation of the boundaries. In 1983, a violent conflict erupted over timber in the disputed area.¹⁸ The 1983 conflict was one of the most violent clashes that have characterized this conflict between the two towns. National soldiers were dispatched to the region to maintain law and order. There were two violent battles in the twentieth century, and the court was used more often to solve the conflicts.

Patterns of the Twenty-First Century Nkonya and Alavanyo Conflict

As demonstrated above, the Nkonya and Alavanyo conflicts of the twentieth century were primarily rooted in disputes over land ownership. Court records reveal that most conflicts brought before the courts involved accusations of encroachment and violent clashes triggered by visits to the disputed land. However, in the twenty-first century, the nature of the conflict has evolved, taking on multiple forms beyond land disputes. While some clashes remain linked to land, others involve isolated shootings that lack a clear connection to the original conflict, while others were linked to illegal activities in the contested area.

¹⁵ Ohene, "Facts of the Case between Nkonya and Alavanyo."

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

In the twenty-first century, land-related conflicts between the two communities include violent episodes in 2003, 2004, 2012, and 2017, many of which were marked by shootings and retaliatory attacks. In 2004, the violence escalated on the disputed land, where members of opposing communities shot anyone they suspected of being from the rival side.¹⁹ This led to a cycle of violent clashes between Nkonya and Alavanyo residents, deepening the hostilities between the two sides. The 2012 conflict similarly centered on the disputed land, with shootings occurring as both sides attempted to assert control or prevent encroachment.²⁰ By 2017, frustrations reached a boiling point. Although the conflict remained tied to the land, the violence became more indiscriminate, as members of both communities, exhausted and embittered by the prolonged conflict, began targeting perceived enemies.²¹

The shooting that marked the onset of the twenty-first-century phase of the Nkonya and Alavanyo conflict was disconnected from the original land dispute and instead driven by ongoing illegal activities on the contested land. Key among these activities was the cultivation of Indian hemp, which is illegal in Ghana, and unauthorized timber operations. By law, timber operators must obtain approval from the government through the Land Commission before conducting their activities. Yet in 2003, outsiders and alleged Alavanyo members operated without such authorization. Following police investigations, it was revealed that much of the violence that year was instigated by individuals involved in protecting their illegal ventures. Guns were confiscated from hemp cultivators, along with packs of harvested Indian hemp discovered in the area.²² Additionally, illegal timber operators in the Kpeyitor Forest were found to be responsible for some of the violence.²³ Such cases elucidate a critical shift in the nature of the conflict—what initially began as a dispute over land boundaries has increasingly

¹⁹“Peacekeepers Avert Clash between Nkonya and Alavanyo,” *Modern Ghana*, April 12, 2004, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/53245/peacekeepers-avert-clash-between-nkonya-and-alavan.html>; “Alavanyo/Nkonya Conflict Flare up as Two Are Killed,” *GhanaWeb* August 2, 2004, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/regional/Alavanyo-Nkonya-conflict-flare-up-as-two-are-killed-63099>.

²⁰“One Killed in Shooting Incident in a Bush between Nkonya and Alavanyo,” *MyJoyOnline*, December 30, 2012, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/one-killed-in-shooting-incident-in-a-bush-between-nkonya-and-alavanyo/>.

²¹“Two Dead, 1 Injured in Nkonya-Alavanyo Shooting,” *Citi News*, April 20, 2017, <https://citifmonline.com/2017/04/two-dead-1-injured-in-nkonya-alavanyo-shooting/>; “Girl, 17, Killed in Suspected Nkonya, Alavanyo Clashes,” *MyJoyOnline*, April 22, 2017, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/girl-17-killed-in-suspected-nkonya-alavanyo-clashes/>; “Boy, 15, Shot Dead in Nkonya,” *GhanaWeb*, May 11, 2017, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Boy-15-shot-dead-in-Nkonya-536980>; “One Shot in Renewed Nkonya-Alavanyo Clash,” *Pulse Ghana*, August 28, 2017, <https://www.pulse.com.gh/ece-frontpage/volta-region-one-shot-in-renewed-nkonya-alavanyo-clash/nrtmfv8>.

²²“Arms Retrieved at Alavanyo/Nkonya,” *Daily Graphic*, June 23, 2003, <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=ATxN-qF6v8HoC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q=Daily%20Graphic%3A%20February%201%2C%202003&f=false>.

²³“Look into the Nkonya/Alavanyo Boundary Conflict -Dr. Adjei,” *GhanaWeb*, March 1, 2003, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Look-into-the-Nkonya-Alavanyo-boundary-conflict-Dr-Adjei-33432>.

become intertwined with economic and illicit activities, making resolution more challenging.²⁴

In addition to shootings tied to illegal activities on the disputed land, isolated shootings with unidentified causes have also fueled the conflict between Nkonya and Alavanyo. These incidents, when broadcasted as extensions of the land dispute, intensified the volatile environment in both towns, perpetuating cycles of violence. For instance, the shootings in 2013 had no direct connection to the land, as the victims were neither visiting the disputed area nor directly involved in the ongoing conflict. Instead, they were shot within their homes or in their town, thereby illustrating how the conflict has expanded beyond its original territorial basis.²⁵ The violence in 2013 escalated tensions further, drawing the Alavanyo inhabitants into direct confrontations with state security forces and resulting in many casualties. In another example, the shootings in 2015 illustrate how the conflict has taken on new dimensions unrelated to the original land dispute. A series of violent incidents led to the deaths of five individuals in Nkonya and Alavanyo, none of whom were tied to encroachment or land visits.²⁶ Instead, such incidents reflect how mistrust and animosities between the two communities have deepened over time, making violence more spontaneous and widespread. Such incidents suggest that the trajectory of the conflict has shifted far beyond land, evolving into a broader and more complex conflict shaped by mistrust, illegal activities, and socio-political tensions.

Government Actions in Ending the Twenty-First-Century Nkonya and Alavanyo Conflict

Maintaining peace is essential for a country's development, which is why governments worldwide prioritize conflict resolution. In Ghana, the Nkonya and Alavanyo conflict has posed a major challenge to national stability. This section examines the key actions taken by the Ghanaian government to address the conflict. Drawing on court records, committee reports, and news coverage, it identifies five major governmental actions that have inadvertently failed to solve the conflict but, in some instances, led to its continuation: deploying security detachments, forming mediation committees, involving traditional leaders, imposing curfews, and taking over the disputed land.

²⁴ For more on the conflict, see "More Feared Dead in Nkonya-Alavanyo Clashes," *GhanaWeb*, February 6, 2003, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/More-Feared-Dead-in-Nkonya-Alavanyo-Clashes-32506>; "Alavanyo Royal Murdered?," *GhanaWeb* February 14, 2003, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Alavanyo-Royal-murdered-32811>.

²⁵ "Alavanyo-Nkonya Dispute: Man in Late Sixties Murdered," *Joy News*, June 1, 2013, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/alavanyo-nkonya-dispute-man-in-late-sixties-murdered/>; "Renewed Alavanyo, Nkonya Clash: 2 Shot Dead, One Injured," *Modern Ghana*, June 26, 2013, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/471276/renewed-alavanyo-nkonya-clash-2-shot-dead-one.html>.

²⁶ Starfmonline, "Man, 47, Shot Dead at Nkonya," *GhanaWeb*, February 18, 2015, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Man-47-shot-dead-at-Nkonya-347135>; "68-Year-Old Woman Killed at Alavanyo (Photo)," *Daily Graphic*, March 25, 2015, <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/68-year-old-woman-killed-at-alavanyo.html>; "Two Women Shot at Alavanyo," *Modern Ghana*, June 3, 2015, <https://www.modernghana.com/blogs/621148/two-women-shot-at-alavanyo.html>; Emmanuel Kojo, "Man Shot Dead in Alavanyo," *Pulse Ghana*, July 21, 2015, <https://www.pulse.com.gh/news/conflict-man-shot-dead-in-alavanyo/jbt4s9y>.

Deploying Security Detachments

The first action taken by the government in mitigating and ending the Nkonya and Alavanyo conflicts in the twenty-first century was the establishment of a detachment of a joint military and police service to reduce the tension and restore calm. In 2003, when the first violent clash of the twenty-first century took place, the Hohoe Divisional Commander of Police dispatched a reinforcement of police to maintain peace and order in the area.²⁷ In 2004, the police and military detachment station averted an attempt at a clash in the Nkonya and Alavanyo areas.²⁸ The commanding officer of the 66th Artillery Regiment in Ho advised the inhabitants of Nkonya and Alavanyo to be peaceful and obey the government. The government, through the police unit, was able to maintain peace in the area with armed policemen. Subsequently, in 2004, the police detachment was removed from the towns. When the conflict resurfaced in 2012, a police reinforcement was sent into the area, and peace was restored. However, this time, the peace was short-lived. In 2013, the conflict was resurrected, even in the presence of security personnel, which led to the imposition of curfews in the area.

Forming Mediation Committees

The second step has been the search for a long-term solution through the implementation of various conflict management strategies. Mediation, a widely endorsed approach in peace studies, has been one of the key strategies adopted by the Ghanaian government. Acting through the Ministry of the Interior, the government formed two separate mediation committees to address the underlying causes of the conflict and worked toward a sustainable resolution. This decision followed a major escalation, an attempted ambush of Nkonya-Tayi by members of Alavanyo-Kpemi, which highlighted the urgent need for a structured investigation into the conflict's twenty-first-century dynamics.

Consequently, on June 16, 2004, the Volta Regional Security Council officially established the two committees to aid in resolving the ongoing land dispute.²⁹ The Mediation and Settlement Committee and the Consultative Committee were established to assist in resolution. The Mediation and Settlement Committee, chaired by the Right Reverend Livingstone Buama (Moderator of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church), was to assist the

²⁷“Police Avert Clash between Nkonya and Alavanyo,” *Modern Ghana*, January 6, 2003, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/29673/police-avert-clash-between-alavanyo-and-nkonya.html>.

²⁸“Peacekeepers Avert Clash between Nkonya and Alavanyo,” *Modern Ghana*, April 12, 2004, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/53245/peacekeepers-avert-clash-between-nkonya-and-alavan.html>.

²⁹“Two Committees Inaugurated to Resolve Nkonya-Alavanyo Dispute,” *Modern Ghana*, June 17, 2004, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/57138/two-committees-inaugurated-to-resolve-nkonya-alava.html>.

feuding parties in reaching a peaceful resolution to the long-running conflict.³⁰ Each of the feuding parties had five members on the Consultative Committee. The committees were tasked with “adopting and implementing measures to reduce tension and establish trust and goodwill among the belligerents.”³¹ According to the Volta Regional Minister Kwasi Owusu-Yeboah, committee members were “a collection of brilliant men and women who commanded respect and confidence of the people. However, the role of the committees in the settlement process will be essentially that of a facilitator. The committee will, therefore, need genuine commitment and cooperation from the parties to succeed.”³² The committee claimed that settlement is a voluntary act of the parties that cannot be adequately enforced through external compulsion.³³ Thus, the role of the mediation committees was set to fail due to their structural limitations and lack of enforcement mechanisms, making it difficult for the committees to deliver a sustainable solution to the Nkonya and Alavanyo conflict. The mediation strategy adopted by the Ghanaian government, though well-intentioned and in line with established conflict resolution practices, was fundamentally flawed. The committees, including the Mediation and Settlement Committee and the Consultative Committee, were designed to facilitate dialogue and reduce tensions, but they were restricted to acting as mediators rather than decision-makers with binding authority. This reliance on voluntary cooperation and goodwill from both parties weakened the process, as progress depended entirely on the willingness of the communities to commit to peaceful resolutions, an unlikely prospect given the conflict’s entrenched nature.

Involving Traditional Leaders

Following the failure of the mediation strategy, the government turned to traditional authorities in the region, seeking their influence and expertise to help restore peace between the feuding communities. Recognizing the significance of traditional leaders in conflict resolution, the President of the Volta Regional House of Chiefs took decisive action. On April 18, 2014, he summoned the chiefs of Nkonya and Alavanyo to an emergency meeting in Accra to address the escalating violence and explore alternative pathways to reconciliation.³⁴ This meeting was intended to find solutions to the unending conflict and constant shootings in the area. During the meeting, Nkonya and Alavanyo signed a memorandum of understanding. The memorandum states, “If someone

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² “Two Committees Inaugurated to Resolve Nkonya-Alavanyo Dispute,” *Modern Ghana*, June 17, 2004, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/57138/two-committees-inaugurated-to-resolve-nkonya-alava.html>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “Togbe Afede Warns Alavanyo, Nkonya Chiefs over Violence,” *GhanaWeb*, October 19, 2013, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=271573>.

from Nkonya kills another in Alavanyo, the chief must be able to find out; if someone from Alavanyo kills another in Nkonya, the chief must find out who is behind that killing.”³⁵ Additionally, the chief whose member attacks the other will be arrested and sanctioned by the Volta Region House of Chiefs. Despite signing a strong memorandum of understanding backed by the two chiefs and the Volta Regional House of Chiefs, this approach ultimately failed because the chiefs lacked the authority and mechanisms to enforce the agreement effectively. The deep-rooted mistrust between the communities, coupled with the inability to identify perpetrators and hold them accountable, rendered the memorandum symbolic rather than practical, allowing the cycle of violence and retaliatory attacks to persist.

Peace treaties have been utilized at both the national and local levels in efforts to resolve the conflict. In January 2015, during a tour of the disputed area, Ghana’s Vice President, Dr. Paa Kwesi Amissah Arthur, facilitated the signing of a peace treaty between the chiefs of Nkonya and Alavanyo. Through this agreement, both chiefs pledged their commitment to fostering peace and ending the violence.³⁶ In November 2015, the interior minister at the time, Mark Woyongo, stated that to solve the conflict, an inter-ethnic peace committee should be formed.³⁷ In December 2015, a peace deal was reached between Nkonya and Alavanyo chiefs, and to seal this peace deal a peace durbar was arranged at Kpando on December 20th.³⁸ This time, local committees were established to give members the opportunity to iron out their differences and suspicions to bring peace to the area.

A common factor across the mediation, memorandum of understanding, and peace treaty strategies adopted by the Ghanaian government to resolve the Nkonya and Alavanyo conflict is their reliance on voluntary cooperation, goodwill, and symbolic agreements, without adequate legal backing or enforcement mechanisms. The mediation committees, traditional leaders, and local peace committees were all tasked with facilitating dialogue, fostering trust, and drafting peace agreements, but none of these entities had the power to enforce decisions or impose penalties when parties failed to comply. This lack of binding authority made it easy for agreements to be ignored or broken, stalling the peace process.

Imposing Curfews

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Maxwell Okamafo Asamani Addo, “Veep Appeals to the Chiefs & People of Nkonya and Alavanyo to End Their Long Standing Conflict and Pave the Way for Development,” *Modern Ghana*, January 11, 2015, <https://www.modernghana.com/amp/news/591396/veep-appeals-to-the-chiefs-people-of-nkonya-and-alavanyo-t.html>.

³⁷ Kwame Okoampa-Ahoofe and Asante, “Alavanyo-Nkonya Conflict Needs Dialogue,” *News Ghana*, January 13, 2015, <https://newsghana.com.gh/alavanyo-nkonya-conflict-needs-dialogue/>.

³⁸ “Nkonya and Alavanyo in Another Attempt at Peace,” *GhanaWeb*, December 19, 2015, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Nkonya-and-Alavanyo-in-another-attempt-at-peace-402027>.

The government of Ghana imposed curfews on the Nkonya and Alavanyo communities from 2013 through 2017, adjusting them as deemed necessary in response to ongoing tensions. While intended as a security measure, the curfews had significant impacts on the daily lives and economic activities of the local population. Farmers, for instance, were restricted from leaving their homes before six o'clock in the morning, delaying their ability to start work early before the afternoon heat made farming difficult. They were also required to return home early in the evening, limiting their working hours and forcing them to manage household chores within a restricted time frame. Similarly, traders experienced disruptions as they left for the market later in the day and were required to return home by six in the evening, cutting into valuable selling hours. Such restrictions affected not only economic activities but also communal life, including cultural and religious events. For example, as reported by Joy News, the curfew imposed during the 2013 Christmas season left both Nkonya and Alavanyo communities at a standstill, preventing celebrations and gatherings.³⁹

Notwithstanding such negative impacts, most residents reluctantly adhered to the curfews, recognizing them as measures intended to ensure their safety and avoid confrontations with law enforcement. However, there were occasional instances of defiance, particularly among the youth, which have resulted in clashes with security forces. Such tensions highlight the need for a delicate balance between maintaining security and allowing communities to carry on with their normal lives — a balance that, if not carefully managed, risks further alienating the population.

Taking Over the Disputed Land

During the early years of the conflict, the British colonial government proclaimed that the Forestry Commission had taken over and controlled the disputed land. However, there was little evidence that the Forestry Commission took over management of the land. In the twenty-first century, the first discussion of the government taking over the land began in 2015. Ghana's Defense Minister Dominic Nitiwul stated in parliament that "The Ministry of Defense, in collaboration with the National Security Council Secretariat, proposed to establish a military training jungle and mountain warfare training school at the disputed land between Nkonya and Alavanyo Traditional Areas in the Volta Region."⁴⁰ In November 2015, during the vice president's tour in the Nkonya and Alavanyo areas, he also disclosed that there was "A plan to build a permanent military base here that will lead to training, improve the training [among military officers] and some of the other activities of the military people."⁴¹

³⁹ Joy News, "Curfew on Alavanyo Nkonya Because of Conflict," YouTube video, 6:38, posted December 24, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHqd3wWWJ_A.

⁴⁰ Parliament, Hansard., 7th Parliament, 2018, Fourth Series, Vol. 99 no. 47, 5909-5912.

⁴¹ "Veep Appeals to the Chiefs," Modern Ghana.

In 2017 during a parliamentary question and answer session, Nitiwul stated that the proposed military school in the disputed area was under construction and was almost seventy percent completed.⁴² When he was asked again whether the government intended to take over the land, he replied, “the government has no intention of taking over the land forcefully; it is just to be used as a training ground since it is suitable.”⁴³ Thus, the members of parliament suggested that the land is in use and that by 2018, the school would be completed.

Analyzing Government Actions

Despite some promising initiatives, the Ghanaian government’s actions that sought to address the Nkonya and Alavanyo conflict ultimately failed to resolve the conflict and, in some cases, exacerbated it. Key issues include the ineffective shift from a legal framework to a mediation-based approach, the government’s failure to utilize the disputed land as proposed, and the inability of the police and security services to respond effectively to shootings or investigate incidents thoroughly. Furthermore, the government’s failure to enforce the terms of the memorandum of understanding, coupled with a lack of comprehensive understanding of the conflict’s complexities before implementing resolution measures, has prolonged the violence and deepened the divisions between the two communities.

The government’s failure to accurately read the nature of the Nkonya and Alavanyo dispute has contributed significantly to its escalation and persistence. Court records show that the original conflict was a private land dispute involving individual litigants, with their respective chiefs acting as co-plaintiffs and co-defendants due to their role in selling portions of the contested land.⁴⁴ However, the government assumed that the conflict was a broader township or ethnic dispute, leading to ineffective, poorly tailored interventions. This mischaracterization caused the conflict to evolve into an ethnic standoff, even though the Alavanyo chief clarified as late as 2017 that the dispute was between individuals, not the two communities.⁴⁵ The government’s flawed approach overlooked this distinction, resulting in interventions that did not address the key players driving the dispute.

Mediation committees focused on chiefs, councils of elders, queen mothers, opinion leaders, youth representatives, conflict leaders, and women’s groups within the communities, as noted in the committee’s report

⁴²Parliament, Hansard., 7th Parliament., 2018, Fourth Series, Vol. 99 no. 47, 5909-5912.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Paul Kodjo Anane v. Kwasi Asigbetse and seven others, Transferred Land Suit, No.19/153, 125 (GCAHV. 1957), Public Records Archives and Administration Department, Accra.

⁴⁵“Nkonya and Alavanyo- My Community,” *Joy News*, (December 8, 2014, video, 12:14), Documentary <https://youtu.be/9x-m7J3McxCo>

and the work of Vincent Adzahlie-Mensah and George Hikah Benson.⁴⁶ However, these groups, though influential, were not the central figures involved in the land dispute. The conflict's primary actors—individual landowners and litigants—were largely excluded from the mediation process. As a result, the grievances that fueled the conflict remained unresolved, undermining the effectiveness of the committees. While chiefs may have agreed to mediation outcomes, discontented community members continued their opposition, thereby perpetuating the cycle of conflict. This case suggests that effective resolution is unlikely when the root cause and primary actors are misunderstood or ignored. As the committee itself admitted, “We began by doing a requirements analysis and a map of potential conflicts.”⁴⁷ However, this evaluation failed to produce actionable outcomes because it did not address the root causes of the conflict or engage the individuals most directly affected. Without their involvement, the mediation efforts were superficial and had little impact on the conflict's trajectory. This failure highlights the need for conflict resolution strategies to focus on the actual stakeholders if long-term peace is to be achieved.

A major flaw in the process arose when the mediation committee decided to conduct a new survey of the disputed land in 2009.⁴⁸ The decision triggered a backlash, as one group withdrew from the peace process to meet with their relatives and discuss the freshly surveyed territory. This decision was problematic for several reasons. First, the committee did not have the legal authority to conduct or enforce a land survey, which undermined its credibility and effectiveness. Second, the survey reignited old tensions because the land had already been surveyed twice during earlier conflicts, with the existing Gruner map of 1913 serving as a reference point.⁴⁹ The Nkonya community was unlikely to accept any new survey results if they contradicted the existing surveys, while the Alavanyo community, having rejected earlier surveys, would similarly refuse to accept any survey that confirmed the previous conclusions. The failure of the committee to navigate the issue of the land survey effectively derailed the peace process. Instead of fostering dialogue and consensus, the survey heightened mistrust and led to the withdrawal of one group, ultimately contributing to renewed conflict in 2012. The committee's own admission—that it conducted a requirements analysis and conflict mapping—did little to bridge the divide because it failed to address the deeper issues surrounding land ownership and grievances. Without the ability to enforce its decisions or bring the major actors to the table, the committee's efforts were largely superficial, making long-term resolution unattainable.

⁴⁶ Vincent Adzahlie-Mensah and George Hikah Benson, “The Process Model of Conflict Resolution,” *International Journal of Community and Cooperative Studies* 6, no. 3 (August 2018): 5-8.

⁴⁷ Adzahlie-Mensah and Benson, “The Process Model,” 5.

⁴⁸ “Stakeholders in Alavanyo/Nkonya Conflict Dialogue for Peace,” *Modern Ghana*, March 25, 2013, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/454691/stakeholders-in-alavanyonkonya-conflict-dialogue-for-peace.html>.

⁴⁹ Paul Kodjo Anane v. Kwasi Asigbetse and seven others, 130,131.

Comparing the peace enjoyed in the area where the court was used as the medium to solve the conflict, it is evident that the area enjoyed more peace when the judicial system was used. Peace lasted in Nkonya and Alavanyo for sixty years after the first violent clash in 1923. The next violent clash was in 1983. Togbega Tsedze Atakura, the Alavanyo chief, revealed in an interview that the first violent episode, which happened on May 25, 1923, was resolved by the end of June when the justice system ruled on the issue and imposed retribution on those found guilty.⁵⁰ The judiciary's strong response prevented any violent conflicts from escalating. Atakura disclosed that after 1923, the next major conflict happened sixty years later, in 1983.⁵¹ Thus, the judiciary was effective in handling the land dispute for two major reasons. First, it had the power to enforce the adjudication and make sure it was obeyed. Second, the legal system is respected and feared, and so it was able to control the faction that lost the case in court.

Whereas the government's decision not to enforce the memorandum of understanding between the two groups made the two factions greater than the government, and they were virtually out of control. In 2013, the two chiefs of Nkonya and Alavanyo were made to sign a memorandum of agreement to make sure that their members did not kill any members of the opposite side. The memorandum made it clear that the chief would be arrested, and his chieftaincy position scrapped. In June of that year, a shooting occurred, and an Alavanyo was killed. This meant that the Nkonya chief was to be arrested, but the arrest did not take place. The Alavanyo chief, Togbega Tsedze Atakura, disclosed how he was displeased with the delay and disregard of the memorandum of understanding. He called for the police to arrest the Nkonya chief to give meaning to the memorandum. Due to the delay, the Alavanyo retaliated, and the Alavanyo chief and six of his elders were arrested. Three of the elders of Nkonya were also arrested.⁵²

Although the security service and joint police and military formations played a significant role in reducing the intensity of the conflict, their activities escalated the conflict. The Alavanyo chief argued that the Guan card was used by the Hohoe Divisional Commander of Police.⁵³ He maintained that Mr. Gyewu, a Guan, was always on the side of the Nkonya, who were also Guans.⁵⁴ The ethnic card, he believed, was not helping the situation. "No one is penalized for anything," he said, "Therefore, the problem persists."⁵⁵ The Alavanyo chief further noted that

⁵⁰ "Alavanyo/Nkonya Conflict: Chief Blames Security Agencies," *Citi News*, December 5, 2014, <https://citifmonline.com/2014/12/alavanyonkonya-conflict-chief-blames-security-agencies/>.

⁵¹ "Alavanyo/Nkonya Conflict," *Citi News*.

⁵² "Nkonya and Alavanyo- My Community," *Joy News*.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ "Alavanyo/Nkonya Conflict," *Citi News*.

the security personnel had their camp among the Nkonya. For this reason, the Alavanyo people saw the soldiers as supporting the Nkonya people. Getting closer to an actor in the conflict led to suspicion by the opposing group. The military and police must settle in a neutral place that would allow them to examine the conflict and react to it without being identified as biased toward a certain group. The Alavanyo had stated in media interviews that they did not trust the military or the police structure in the area.⁵⁶ This trust issue led the Alavanyo faction to disobey the security service and take actions they deemed right, which exacerbated the conflict.

Police investigations of shootings in the towns have not been effective, contributing to the persistent violence. Peace and trust in the police and the government would have likely been restored if the perpetrators had been apprehended, an inquiry conducted, and punishment meted out to the wrongdoers. To determine if the shootings are linked to the land or something else, an arrest and comprehensive investigation would have been necessary. The inactivity of the government agency made it difficult for the residents of these towns to trust the government with their lives. Because of the loss of their loved ones, they wanted to defend themselves and avenge their loved ones. Such was the case of certain members of the Alavanyo tribe who were reportedly in continual anguish and have taken the law into their own hands to retaliate against the perpetrators.⁵⁷ However, if people in power investigated the concerns of the two communities and those who commit such crimes were punished, it would be a deterrent.⁵⁸

The security service was similarly ineffective in preventing gunshots during curfews. In some instances, the circumstances surrounding the shooting could have been avoided. For example, the shooting that killed a seventeen-year-old boy could have been avoided if security staff had intervened. After being chased away by the military troops, the shooters reappeared. They would not have returned if the military personnel had arrested them. The district and regional commanders constantly issued press releases, but they have yet to share the results of their probe. As a result, people perceive them as irresponsible. There have been times when the Alavanyo and the security officers have clashed. Elders in both Nkonya and Alavanyo communities stated that the military misused its position in the area and this could lead to retaliations from the communities.⁵⁹

An important but long-delayed government plan has been to seize control of the land that has been at the

⁵⁶“Police bias against Alavanyo fanning tensions,” Ghana Web; “Alavanyo/Nkonya Conflict,” Citi News; “Nkonya and Alavanyo- My Community,” Joy News,

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹“Military Abuses curfew,” Peter Adattor, (2018), documentary, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74NRqJkg784>

heart of the conflict. In 1931, the administration claimed that they had taken possession of the land for preservation. The colonial administration placed the land under the auspices of the Forestry Commission, but it was never occupied. The commission was invited to support or dispute the notion that both parties had recognized the 1913 Gruner map during the 1953 court case presided by Justice Van Lare.⁶⁰ Sir Norton Jones had utilized that map to obtain a portion of the disputed land for the government, and this was the basis for the invitation. Since the Forestry Commission could not use the contested area, the conflict dragged on well into the twenty-first century.

Because of Ghana's land tenure structure, conflict management scholars like Prince Duah Adjei contended that taking land by the government was problematic. However, the Administration of Land Act of 1962 empowers the government to act in national interest. Act 23 of the law states that "Subject to article 20 of the constitution, the president may authorize the occupation and use of land to which this act applies for a purpose which, in the opinion of the president, is conducive to the public welfare or the interest of the states."⁶¹ Additionally, according to Act 23, the lands in the country are vested in the president's trust. It states, "Where it appears to the president in the public interest to do so, the president may, by executive instrument, declare any stool land to be vested in the president in trust and, accordingly, the president may, on the publication of the instrument, execute a deed or do an act as a trustee in respect of the land specified in the instrument."⁶² These two clauses, as well as the other provisions of the Administration of Lands Act of 1962, stipulate that the government has enormous powers over the lands in the country and may take over such lands when it is in the public interest. The government failed to exercise this power to control the land in the early conflicts in the area.

There have been calls for Ghana's government to assume control of the disputed territory to restore peace. I argue that if the land is the source of the dispute, the conflict will be resolved if the government takes control of the land and uses it, and there will be nothing else to fight over. Togbe Afede, the head of the Ho House of Chiefs, had offered a similar argument in 2013. After the failure of the mediation process, he urged the government to take ownership of the disputed Nkonya-Alavanyo territory to restore lasting peace to the community. The administration ignored this call, perhaps due to political reasons. The government was likely concerned that taking harsh or brutal actions in the conflict might be unpopular and cost them an election.

In 2015, there was a discussion about the government taking over the land in parliament. In the parliamentary Hansard (the document that contains the business of the parliament of Ghana) dated December

⁶⁰ Paul Kodjo Anane v. Kwasi Asigbetse and seven others, 43.

⁶¹ Administration of Land Act of 1962, ACT 123, First National Assembly, 2d sess. (June, 14, 1962), 804.

⁶² Administration of Land Act, 805.

19, 2017, the interior minister revealed that in 2015, there was a proposal to establish a military training jungle and the Mountain Warfare Training School on the disputed land. In the Hansard, the minister suggested that the school was 70 percent completed, and he stood firm on his words when the question was asked again. Evidence from members in the area indicated that nothing was done on the land in 2015 and the years after (2016, 2017). The vice president said in his speech when he visited the area that the government would take over the land and use it for the building of military bases and military training schools.⁶³ As of March 2017, nothing had been done on the land. Clemence Gyato, the Nkonya and Alavanyo peace ambassador, had called on the government to seize the land and use the resources for developmental work. Gyato said that the land in dispute could be used to build a factory where young people in the area could work. Nana Apem Darko also admonished the government to use the land. He stated, “Make good use of the field, so we cannot go there to fight.”⁶⁴ In summer 2017, the Nkonya and Alavanyo accepted that the government should take possession of the land. The chief of Nkonya, Nana Apem Darko, even suggested that a police station and a military school should be established on it.⁶⁵ This call, which was supported by chiefs and members of the two communities, suggests that the communities were ready to end the conflict, but it seemed that the government was not ready. As of 2025, there is still no development ongoing on the land as suggested by the interior minister.

The inability of the government to use the land for development as it has suggested has given way to the conflict’s persistence today. Until the land is taken over and used, the land will continue to be used as an excuse for the ongoing skirmishes in the area. Different ethnic and political groups in the conflict make it difficult for the ruling government to take firm decisions. Moreover, some academics suggest that taking over the land would be unfair to the Nkonya people. The government must be bold and sacrifice its election concerns to bring the conflict to an end, especially when all the actors are calling for such action.

Confiscation of the Disputed Land and Making Use of It: The Best Option in The Twenty-First Century

The proposal to confiscate and establish a military training school on the disputed land between Nkonya and Alavanyo appears to be an appropriate and potentially feasible solution due to its potential to address multiple

⁶³“Veep appeals to the chief,” *Modern Ghana*.

⁶⁴“Government Must Takeover Alavanyo/Nkonya Land - Peace Ambassador,” *Modern Ghana*, March 18, 2017, <https://www.modernghana.com/amp/news/762645/government-must-takeover-alavanyonkonya-land-peace-ambass.html>.

⁶⁵Justice Kofi Bimpeh, “Nkonya, Alavanyo Conflict: Traditional Rulers Back Gov’t Takeover of Disputed Lands,” *Prime News Ghana*, June 9, 2017, <https://www.primenewsghana.com/general-news/nkonya-alavanyo-conflict-traditional-rulers-support-gov-t-s-acquisition-of-dispute-land.html>.

dimensions of the conflict. First, by transforming the contested area into a military facility, the government could create a neutral space that prevents either side from claiming ownership or using the land as a basis for renewed violence. This neutralization strategy would remove the symbolic value of the land in the conflict, effectively diminishing its role as a trigger for violence.

Second, the presence of a permanent military base could provide continuous security, deterring illegal activities such as unauthorized timber operations and the cultivation of Indian hemp, which have previously contributed to conflict escalation. By maintaining a visible and sustained security presence, the military could also foster an environment of stability, allowing residents to focus on rebuilding trust and engaging in peaceful economic activities. Additionally, using the land as a military training ground, rather than forcefully expropriating it, appears to be a strategic compromise. Defense Minister Dominic Nitiwul's statement that the land would not be "forcefully taken over" reflects the government's attempt to avoid further inflaming tensions by allowing for a functional but non-permanent use of the space. This approach positions the military not as an occupier but as a neutral entity utilizing the land for national purposes, which may help mitigate potential resistance from either party.

However, the feasibility of this solution ultimately depends on follow-through and effective implementation. For this strategy to succeed, the government must ensure the school's completion, establish clear legal ownership and use agreements, and implement measures to prevent illegal encroachments or attempts to reclaim the land. If properly managed, this approach could remove the land from the center of the conflict while providing long-term security and stability in the area.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the twenty-first century Nkonya and Alavanyo conflict has evolved and assumed different patterns, making it difficult to blame it solely on the land disputes. The Nkonya and Alavanyo conflict—originally a land-centered dispute—has evolved into a complex struggle driven by illegal activities, socio-economic tensions, and mistrust. The progression of the conflict from land-based clashes to a broader and more sporadic violence highlights the inadequacy of past resolution efforts that focused narrowly on land ownership. Thus, addressing this conflict requires more than enforcing legal rulings—it demands a multifaceted strategy that targets the economic reasons behind illegal activities, improves socio-political relations between the communities, and prevents misinformation that fuels unnecessary violence. By understanding the shifting nature of the conflict, policymakers can develop targeted interventions that address both the evolving triggers and long-standing grievances, offering a more sustainable path toward peace. The study also discussed the measures taken by the government to resolve the

conflict, such as instituting curfews and forming mediation committees. This paper has shown that the government's actions to some extent have been ineffective and sometimes inadvertently aggravated the conflict. This paper shows that an extended period of peace was enjoyed when the judicial system was used than when the mediation committee was employed. However, by moving away from the court rulings, it will be difficult to return to it as a solution to be used, especially because some of the actors in conflict do not accept the ruling.

My research findings suggest that one of the most effective ways the government could solve this problem is to take over the land and use it for a military training ground or an economic project. The two parties have all accepted that the land should be used to benefit the two conflicting sides and potentially heal the deeply-entrenched enmity developed over time between these groups. The British colonial government confiscated the land in the twentieth century, but this action did not resolve the conflict, as the land remained undeveloped. It is this same action that the twenty-first century Ghanaian governments are taking, and it worsened the conflict. Deducing from the trend of the conflict, I conclude that a significant and critical action the Ghanaian government must undertake is using the land, which will either end the conflict or help the government understand the current trend of the conflict well.

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Alexander the Great is one of the most influential individuals in history. His infamous military campaign created a vast empire that would spread Hellenism across the ancient world. As a king and conqueror, Alexander captured Asia Minor and lands as far east as India, with his most notable acquisition being the Achaemenid Persian Empire.¹ Though he is known for spreading his own culture, Alexander adopted practices from the lands he acquired during his reign from 336-323 BCE. After becoming king of Persia following King Darius III's defeat at the Battle of Gaugamela,² Alexander indulged in the Persian capital cities, embraced Persian styles of dress, and attempted to integrate Persian practices of deference to the king. This paper will examine the *proskynesis* event that occurred during Alexander's conquering of the Persian Empire and evaluate how it fits into his role as king of both Macedonia and Persia. I postulate that his reasoning for adopting aspects of Persian culture can be attributed to his own goals of cultural syncretism, legitimization of kingship, and his own deification.

However, before discussing events that transpired during Alexander's campaigns in Asia, it is necessary to establish how he came to power. Alexander III was born on July 20, 356 BCE to King Philip II of Macedonia and one of his many wives, Olympias. He ascended to the throne after his father's murder when he was twenty years old.³ Before his death, Philip II established Macedonian hegemony over both the northern tribal groups and the southern city-states of Greece and subsequently united Greek forces against Persia. Alexander, inheriting the throne from Philip II and using his father's military triumphs to his advantage, similarly rallied the Greeks against Persia and embarked on the campaign that his father was never able to carry out. Both the northern and southern Greeks saw the Persians as a threat to Hellenic culture,⁴ which Philip used as a rallying cry in his consolidation of the Greeks under Macedonian hegemony.⁵ Alexander launched his campaign against the Achaemenid Persians in the spring of 334 BCE when his forces crossed into Asia. Over four years, he successfully defeated the Achaemenid Persians under King Darius III in multiple decisive battles. He conquered their lands and placed his men in charge

¹For the purposes of this analysis, Achaemenid Persian Empire, Achaemenids, Persian Empire, and Persians will be used interchangeably unless otherwise specified.

²Waldemar Heckel, *Who's Who in the Age of Alexander and his Successors: From Chaironeia to Ipsos (338-301 BC)* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2021), 144-148; Waldemar Heckel and Lawrence A. Tritle, eds., *Alexander the Great: A New History* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), ix-xiii. The Battle of Gaugamela occurred on October 1, 331 BCE., after which Darius retreated towards Ecbatana to rebuild his forces. However, as his generals' and courtiers' loyalties were wary and divided, he never came back from this defeat. Darius was killed by Bessus and his body captured by Alexander in July 330 BCE.

³Diodorus, *The Library* 16.93.1-95.5, Plutarch, *Alex.* 10-11, Arr. 1.1.

⁴Kyriacos N. Demetriou, "Historians on Macedonian Imperialism and Alexander the Great," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* Vol. 19, No. 1 (2001): 30.

⁵Diod. 16.89.1-3.

of different regions of the existing Persian empire. With Darius defeated at the Battle of Gaugamela, Alexander started to take on the title of King of Asia, alongside his role as the King of Macedonia. The *proskynesis* event, which will be discussed later in this paper, happened in the Spring of 327 BCE after Darius was killed by his own forces. Scholars have debated the role that proskynesis played in Alexander's kingship over both the Greeks and Persians.

Sources and Historiography

The four historical sources relied upon for this analysis of the *proskynesis* event come from the non-contemporary Roman authors Plutarch, Diodorus of Sicily, Quintus Curtius Rufus, and Lucius (or Aulus) Flavius Arrianus (Arrian). Though none of the writers lived during Alexander's time, cross-referencing the Roman authors has allowed historians to piece together clues pointing to the primary sources that they relied on. For example, Plutarch cites twenty-four sources by name in *Alexander* and may have pulled from more that were uncredited.⁶ Scholars have identified few eyewitness sources of Alexander's campaign, including Alexander's court historian Callisthenes of Olynthus, who played a role in the *proskynesis* affair. Also pulled upon by Plutarch are the alleged journals of Alexander himself.⁷ Curtius is thought to be primarily based on an account from Cleitarchus, another contemporary historian of Alexander, although he did not participate in the campaigns like Callisthenes did.⁸ Diodorus likewise based his publications on Cleitarchus.⁹ Curtius and Arrian drew on the writings of King Ptolemy of Egypt, a member of Alexander's inner circle, who is primarily cited for the military history of the Asian campaign.¹⁰ These Roman authors are the basis of most of the existing scholarship on Alexander the Great.

Historians have been writing about Alexander for centuries, as can be seen with the aforementioned Roman authors. Alexander's life, campaign, and impact have been a source of much scholarship. In this paper, I am primarily concerned with the *proskynesis* episode. This event has been covered by numerous historians, of

⁶Robin Waterfield, trans., *Plutarch Greek Lives: A New Translation by Robin Waterfield* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 309.

⁷Waterfield, *Plutarch*, 309.

⁸Waldemar Heckel, introduction to *The History of Alexander* by Curtius, translated by John Yardley (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Classics, 1984), 6-7.

⁹Robin Waterfield, introduction to *The Library, Books 16-20: Philip II, Alexander the Great, and the Successors*, by Diodorus, translated by Robin Waterfield (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), xxx.

¹⁰Heckel, *The History of Alexander*, 7.

whom more recent scholars have been drawn from for this analysis.¹¹ I seek to cross-reference and analyze this existing scholarship on *proskynesis* and its role in Alexander's campaign as a tool of cultural syncretism, self-deification, or legitimization. Alexander successfully led his army to conquer the Achaemenid Persian empire, but how did he conquer (or not conquer) it culturally? An examination of Alexander's implementation of *proskynesis* can shed new light on his view of himself, his Greek companions, the Persian elites and military, and his role as a king in both Greece and Asia. This paper will contribute to this discussion of Alexander's kingship and how Persian culture did or did not assist in the success of his rule.

***Proskynesis* in Greek and Persian Contexts**

The word *proskynesis*, as it was used by Greeks contemporary to Alexander the Great, was not used consistently to refer to a particular action.¹² The term was used to refer to a sign of worshipping the gods by Greek writers. However, Hugh Bowden also writes that Greek authors used *proskynesis* in reference to Egyptian and Persian practices that involved actions such as throwing oneself on the ground or simply only a bow.¹³ The Greek etymology of the word can be found to mean to blow a kiss towards. The ancient sources for Alexander do not seem to agree on what the gesture looked like in practice, nor do all of them use the word *proskynesis* when discussing this event. Plutarch refers to the gesture as merely "the act of prostration."¹⁴ Curtius likewise does not go into detail and refers to it in a similar manner.¹⁵ Arrian refers to the gesture as "a ritual bow."¹⁶ Diodorus, however, does not refer to the gesture, only to Alexander's introduction of Persian ushers to his court.¹⁷

It can be deduced then that *proskynesis*, as it was used in the ancient sources, refers to a Persian symbol of respect to the king that existed in the Near East long before and after Alexander encountered it. The Achaemenid Persian kings inherited this symbolism and a tradition of such acknowledgement of royal supremacy from their

¹¹Hugh Bowden, "On Kissing and Making Up: Court Protocol and Historiography in Alexander the Great's 'Experiment with Proskynesis'," *The Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* Vol. 56, No. 2 Ancient History Issue (2013); Ernst Fredricksmeier, "Alexander's Religion and Divinity," in *Brill's Companion to Alexander the Great* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2003), 274-275; Gregor Weber, "The Court of Alexander as a Social System," in *Alexander the Great: A New History*, eds, Waldemar Heckel and Lawrence A. Tritle (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 97-98; This is a small selection of the modern scholarship that discusses *proskynesis* and is only a collection of some of the sources used for this analysis.

¹²Bowden, 59.

¹³Bowden, 59.

¹⁴Plut., *Alex.* 45, 54.

¹⁵Curt. 8.5.6, 8.5.12, 8.5.21.

¹⁶Arrian, 4.9.9, 4.11.1.

¹⁷Diod. 17.77.4-7.

predecessors. This gesture from Achaemenid culture can be found depicted in bas-relief sculpture, as well as described in Greek literature where the word *proskynesis* is used to describe it.¹⁸ The latter descriptions have led to confusion with the specifics of the gesture, to whether or not it ascribes divine worship to the Achaemenid king, or if it was only the Greeks using their own word to describe the Persian greeting. The Achaemenid kings claimed divine justification for their rule but were not gods themselves. Therefore, the gesture to the Persian king symbolized an acknowledgement of superiority rather than an act of worship to a deity. The Achaemenid king was respected, though, not in the capacity of being a god himself. The specifics of what the gesture looked like are likewise not entirely clear. Reliefs found at the Persian capital city of Persepolis depict officers before the Persian king holding their hand with their palm towards their face.¹⁹

Alexander, Persian Customs, and *Proskynesis*

The actual events in which Alexander the Great attempted to incorporate *proskynesis* to court ritual were preceded by other adopted Persian customs. Alexander is claimed to have chosen to wear Persian styles of dress and, in some cases, a diadem worn by the Achaemenid king in Plutarch, Arrian, and Diodorus.²⁰ Gregor Weber writes that Alexander was selective in what Persian traditions he chose to adopt and that he and his court were still dependent on Macedonian culture and practice.²¹ Wearing Persian costumes shows that he was consciously shaping how others perceived him. As will be explored later, Alexander was aware of how both the Greeks and Persians viewed him and thus needed to maintain his image as a king to both culturally distinct groups. In Diodorus' account, Alexander even had the Companions – the elite cavalry of the Macedonian army – take up Persian costume just as he did. Alexander surrounded himself with Persian courtiers, and in some of the sources, flatterers and concubines as well as forming a bodyguard consisting of noble Persians that included Darius' brother, Oxathres.²² These adoptions received mixed reactions from Alexander's Greek company; however, the king would not be confronted until he attempted to integrate *proskynesis*.

Recounted by Arrian and Curtius, the situation generally played out as follows: Alexander, after already adopting certain Persian customs, decided along with his elite Persian court attendants and Greek flatterers to

¹⁸Bowden, 59-60.

¹⁹Richard N. Frye, "Gestures of Deference to Royalty in Ancient Iran," *Iranica Antiqua* Vol. 9 (1972): 102.

²⁰Plut. *Alex* 45, Arr. 4.9.9, Diod. 17.77.4-5.

²¹Weber, 97-98.

²²Diod 17.77.4-7, Arr. 4.10.5, Curt. 8.5.6-8.

incorporate *proskynesis* at a drinking party, after Alexander took his leave and following a speech made by either Anaxarchus or Cleon that promoted honoring the king.²³ In both instances, the court historian Callisthenes immediately opposed any act of bowing before it could happen. Callisthenes is described as speaking what the other Macedonians and their fellow Greeks were too afraid to say to Alexander himself. However, Callisthenes was not against giving Alexander honors; he was against giving the king divine honors, which would have dishonored both Alexander and the gods. The historian instead proposed giving Alexander honors fit for a mortal human. Curtius adds that Callisthenes was met with both silent and verbal agreement, but that Alexander was unaware of anyone who did agree as he was behind a curtain.²⁴ However, this is not corroborated by Arrian, who instead places Alexander in the room during the speech and Callisthenes's response.²⁵ Regardless, both sources agree that Alexander promptly gave orders to call off the discussion and drop the idea of *proskynesis* with the Greeks.

Immediately following the incident, the Persians who were attending to the king showed their support for Alexander by deferring themselves before him. Arrian and Curtius each report that a Greek with Alexander ridiculed a Persian attendant for submitting himself before the king: Arrian with Leonnatos, son of Antipater; Curtius with Polyperchon; and Plutarch, in an entirely separate event at Babylon, with Cassander.²⁶ The addition of this event to the failed introduction of *proskynesis* is worthy of note in the greater context of Alexander's adoption of Persian customs. Despite relieving the Greeks of their obligation to practice *proskynesis* to the king, Alexander defended the continued Persian practice of the act. However, this event probably did not occur because of its lack of continuity among the sources. Waldemar Heckel writes that it was most likely a later addition to the narrative, colored by Polyperchon's unpopularity or Alexander's hostility towards the sons of Antipater.²⁷

Possible Reasons

Alexander had varying reasons for incorporating Persian cultural practices, some of which were based on pragmatic considerations. *Proskynesis*, in the Persian context, would have made Alexander appear not as a foreign usurper of the throne but as a true Persian king not to be contested. The timing of Alexander's integration of *proskynesis* came after Persian military leader Bessus, the satrap of Bactria, declared himself (unsuccessfully)

²³Curt. 8.5.9-12, Arr. 4.10.5-11.1.

²⁴Curt. 8.5.20-21.

²⁵Arr. 4.12.1.

²⁶Arr. 4.12.2, Curt 8.5.22-24, Plut. *Alex* 74.

²⁷Waldemar Heckel, "Leonnatos, Polyperchon and the Introduction of Proskynesis," *The American Journal of Philology* Vol. 99, No. 4 (1978): 461.

as Darius's successor.²⁸ Alexander had rightfully beaten Darius at the Battle of Gaugamela and had previously demanded that Darius submit to him as the rightful king. However, Bessus was a legitimate threat who claimed justification as a relative to Darius and still had control of the Persian satrapies of Bactria and Sogdiana. Therefore, legitimization is a possible influential factor in Alexander's attempted adoption of *proskynesis*. By cementing his claim to the throne through Persian customs, Alexander most likely looked to hold the support of Persian nobles and military leaders that could potentially claim the throne as Bessus had done. Furthermore, Alexander's creation of a bodyguard that included Darius' brother showed that he had the support of a potential heir of Darius in the wake of his defeat. *Proskynesis* and other adopted court practices, such as Persian dress and the integration of Persian courtiers, would have had significant propaganda benefits for Alexander during a crucial moment to secure the throne.

Another major motivating factor for Alexander in adopting *proskynesis* and other Persian practices was cultural syncretism. Syncretism, the practice of combining beliefs, customs, and traditions, would have allowed Alexander to create a more unified empire, which would have been beneficial for a multitude of reasons. Alexander may have met difficulties managing his now very large empire. By adopting practices such as *proskynesis* that were familiar to the Persian elite, Alexander could make the transition as Persian king seamless and potentially lessen resistance among Persian elites. Alexander could gain the trust of military and religious elites within the Achaemenid empire that could prove to be useful in managing an unfamiliar system. Evidence in the ancient sources suggests that Alexander was in fact consciously thinking of this when he tried to incorporate *proskynesis* and other Persian practices. For example, Plutarch states that when Alexander wore Persian clothing in Parthia, he did so "to associate himself with local customs, on the grounds that the sight of what is familiar and congenial goes a long way towards winning people over."²⁹ In the same passage, Plutarch mentions that Alexander, even before this, would adopt foreign dress when meeting with non-Greek ambassadors. The king, therefore, must have already had a sense of using familiarity as a means of gaining the trust of foreign peoples. Additionally, in his account of the *proskynesis* incident, Arrian states that "in the silence that followed these words, the most distinguished Persians stood up and one by one performed their bows."³⁰ Arrian's reference to "the most distinguished Persians"

²⁸Heckel, *Who's Who in the Age of Alexander and his Successors*, 130-131; Bessus took part in the plot to remove and assassinate Darius. Afterwards he claimed himself king on account of his relationship to Darius and the Achaemenid royal line and his military leadership. He was later abandoned by his supporters who may have been swayed by Alexander's lenient treatment of surrenderers. Bessus was arrested, alongside his remaining followers, in some accounts by Ptolemy or in others directly to Alexander. The ancient sources are conflicted on his treatment after his capture but generally agree that he was tortured and murdered promptly.

²⁹Plut. *Alex* 45.

³⁰Arr. 4.12.2.

suggests that despite the integration of *proskynesis* failing with the Macedonians, Alexander was rewarded with respect from important Persian elites because he respected their cultural practices.

Beyond pragmatic or political reasons, Alexander's affinity to associate himself with divinity and godhood is another possible motivator in his adoption of *proskynesis*. As already established, the Greek understanding of the practice of *proskynesis* was kissing one's hand and sending it forward as reverence to the image of a god, and to do so for a mortal was unheard of. Alexander may have had this in mind when he decided to attempt to introduce *proskynesis* to his Macedonian followers. If Alexander's only motivations were legitimization and cultural syncretism, the king would not need to apply Persian practices to the Greeks who were already loyal to him, unless Alexander wanted to establish his status as a supreme leader or god-like figure.³¹ Alexander may have been using *proskynesis* to launch a formal worship cult with the Macedonians and other Greeks.

The ancient sources seem to color the *proskynesis* episode as an arrogant ploy by Alexander to play up his divine status, a natural progression following the incident in Egypt at Siwa in which Alexander was greeted as a son of Ammon at the god's temple. For example, Arrian begins his description of the *proskynesis* story: "Alexander wanted his subjects to make a ritual bow when greeting him, the underlying idea being that he was more the son of Ammon than of Philip."³² Curtius, with more hostility: "Alexander now believed that the time was ripe for the depraved idea he had conceived some time before, and he began to consider how he could appropriate such honors to himself. He wished to be believed, not just called, the son of Jupiter."³³ Such statements suggest that Alexander looked to use *proskynesis* not only to secure the Persian throne, but also to push his own divinity and worship with the Greeks. However, it is important to keep in mind that the sources were written after Alexander's time and may not accurately reflect Alexander's or his men's beliefs. Nothing can be said for certain about Alexander's self-identification with divinity. In the case where Alexander believed in and wanted to promote himself as god-like, *proskynesis* would have made sense in the context of its Greek use.

Returning to the question of whether Alexander was successful in integrating *proskynesis*, I contend that he had mixed success, depending on the criteria. The specific incident in the ancient sources shows Alexander failing to get his Macedonian followers to perform *proskynesis* before him. Alexander was unsuccessful in this regard, though not entirely. A second event recorded in both Arrian and Plutarch does have Macedonians bowing to Alexander, however, not directly. Both accounts describe Alexander drinking from a cup and passing it around

³¹Fredricksmeyer, 274-275.

³²Arr. 4.9.9.

³³Curt. 8.5.5.

the room, the next person to take it having previously agreed that he was to drain the cup and bow towards the hearth, then receive a kiss from the king.³⁴ Every man in attendance at the drinking party followed suit until the cup came to Callisthenes, who drained the wine but did not bow before going to receive his kiss. Either Hephaestion or Demetrius then warned the unaware Alexander that Callisthenes did not defer himself and accordingly refused the kiss. Though this instance, like the other event, puts Callisthenes in opposition to the adoption of *proskynesis*, Alexander did find success in getting most of his Macedonian followers to defer before him by a salutation to the king's *daimon*, an adapted Persian custom that better fit Greek traditions. Still, Alexander was able, as discussed previously, to gain the respect of important Persian noblemen. The goal of cultural syncretism was likely to allow the king to stabilize his hold on the monarchy in the face of opposition from usurpers like Bessus, and he proved capable of holding the throne until his death in 323 BCE.

The legacy of Alexander the Great lies in the influence he had on the ancient world. Alexander's role as king of Macedonia and Persia certainly defines his character in the histories written about him. Though he is credited with military genius in the face of grave odds, Alexander was a conqueror through multiple means. Whether intentional or not, the king's ability to adapt to his environment and appeal to cultural values were useful in his campaign to rule the known world. The *proskynesis* incident was just one bump in the long road that was Alexander's life as a king and a conqueror. Examining the event, this study finds that Alexander was successful in multiple aspects despite the initial failure to incorporate *proskynesis* with his Macedonian and other Greek followers. The *proskynesis* event is telling of Alexander's persona. He was a pragmatic ruler, though Alexander had tendencies to aggrandize himself through his claimed divine parentage and later self-deification.

³⁴Arr. 4.12.3-5, Plut. *Alex* 54.

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Echoes of a Sleeping Industrial Giant:
The Impact of Northwestern Steel & Wire on Sterling and Rock Falls, Illinois

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If someone were asked which city in the United States was once known as the “Hardware Capital of the World,” they might guess places like Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Detroit, Michigan, or Chicago, Illinois. These cities are historically famous for their industrial might. Few would think of and correctly name Sterling, Illinois, unless they had lived there or had previously known its history. While Sterling and its neighboring sister city, Rock Falls, may resemble typical small Midwestern towns today, they once housed major industrial plants that mass-produced barbed wire, steel, and hardware. One of the key industrial plants that contributed to Sterling’s title as the “Hardware Capital of the World” was Northwestern Steel & Wire Company. Northwestern Steel & Wire helped industrialize Sterling during the post-World War II era and forever changed the sister cities in terms of demographics, culture, and economy. Using local newspaper articles, census data, and personal narratives from those who lived through its golden age between the 1950s and 1980s, an exploration of Northwestern Steel & Wire’s historical development and legacy makes clear how the mill’s existence was pivotal in the lives of many families in the region and the towns’ identities.

The twin cities of Sterling and Rock Falls are located within the northwestern region of Illinois on the eastern edge of Whiteside County, divided by the Rock River. It was the Rock River that mainly drove industrialization of these growing towns by bolstering manufacturing companies such as Lawrence Bros. Inc, International Harvester Co., Russell, Burdsall & Ward Bolt & Nut Co., and National Mfg. Co., along with Northwestern Steel & Wire Co. The sister cities are also located within Whiteside County’s extremely productive agricultural region, which saw an excess of \$29,000,000 made off agriculture alone during the early 1900s.¹

One of the first known settlers to the area was a man named Hezekiah Brink, who settled within today’s Sterling in 1834 and named his settlement Harrisburg. Shortly after Brink created Harrisburg, a rival community—still within the bounds of today’s Sterling—popped up named Chatham. After a number of years, the rival communities united under the name Sterling in order to obtain the county seat, a feat that was ultimately unsuccessful.² Sterling officially became a city in February 1857, growing exponentially fast due to the industrial capabilities provided by the Rock River. As Sterling’s population quickly grew, especially in places along the Rock River, a local businessman named A. P. Smith, looked across the Rock River and saw the value of the unutilized southside of the river. In 1865, Smith purchased the rights to use the southern bank of the river to generate waterpower and began to develop industrial projects in what would eventually become the town of Rock Falls.³

¹“Map and Directory of Information, Sterling and Rock Falls, Illinois” (Boston, MA: Map Corporation of America, n.d.).

²“Early Sterling/Rock Falls History,” Sterling Rock Falls Historical Society, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://srfhs.com/early-history>

³“Early Sterling/Rock Falls History.”

This brief look into Sterling's early history provides the context for the state of Sterling when Northwestern Steel & Wire Co., then Northwestern Barb Wire Co., was established in 1879, just twenty-two short years after the founding of Sterling as a city. The geographical location of Sterling set the town up for success, with extremely fertile ground for agriculture and the Rock River, which provided power for developing industrial centers, and ultimately made the town successful. This brief history also illuminates the intertwined history of Sterling and Rock Falls. Although Rock Falls was a later addition to the area, it grew quickly by capitalizing on Sterling's early successes—a theme that will become more evident with the creation of Northwestern Steel & Wire.

After the river rights of Rock Falls or, as it was known back then, Rapids City was sold to A.P. Smith, the area slowly began to grow and was incorporated as a village in 1869. Although people had lived on the land that would eventually become Rock Falls since 1837, it was the foresight and vision of A.P. Smith that molded Rock Falls into the town it is today. Despite not being an extremely wealthy man, Smith purchased an interest in the Rock River power plant, which had previously been built by Sterling, and negotiated and lent his expertise to oversee the construction of factories. As factories opened up along the Rock Falls' riverbank, new companies as well as some established companies in Sterling moved across the river. Moreover, Smith hired John Arey to survey the land and create a layout of the town that would become Rock Falls.

By 1870, Rock Falls' population had grown to 471 residents marking an all-time high for the area. As the population grew so did the need for transportation. To address transportation issues, a railroad track was laid in Rock Falls in 1871 and in 1878 a freeform bridge was built that connected Rock Falls to Sterling. The completed bridge, which connected the two growing industrial giants, opened a year before Northwestern Barb Wire Co. had its grand opening in 1879. Due to the industrial boom in Rock Falls and Sterling, Rock Falls' population doubled by 1880, reaching 894 residents.

As the population and amount of land incorporated within the limits of Rock Falls grew, so did the aspirations of people who wanted to see their town officially recognized as a city. Therefore, during the election of 1889, it was put to a vote and Rock Falls was born as a city. A year after Rock Falls officially became a city, the population doubled, reaching 1,900 residents.⁴ This brief snapshot of the history of Rock Falls illuminates the direct impact industrialization had on the small town. Industrialization, which served as the overarching dream of the town's founder, led to industrial development and infrastructure expansion, and acted as the catalyst for the town's population boom prior to the establishment of Northwestern Steel & Wire. This foundation set the stage for the continued influence of the industrial sector on Rock Falls' future development.

⁴*Rock Falls, Illinois 150th Birthday Jubilee: Historic Keepsake Edition* (Rock Falls, IL: August 5, 2017), 13.

Historiography and Significance of the Study

The historiography of Northwestern Steel & Wire is extremely limited, as it is a niche topic primarily remembered and studied only by those within the Sauk Valley area. The existing historiography mostly consists of pamphlets created by the company itself. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s, Northwestern Steel & Wire produced brief pamphlets on the installation of its first electric steel furnace and on the company's first hundred years of history. These works are titled *The Story of Northwestern Electric Furnace Steel* (196-) and *100 Years of Progress 1879-1979* (1979), respectively. Along with the companies' pamphlets, another work dedicated to Northwestern Steel & Wire is a website titled *Unofficial – Northwestern Steel & Wire Co.* created by Danna Fellows. An employee of Northwestern Steel & Wire for fifteen years, Fellows created the website to archive all things related to the company, including pictures and personal stories. Fellows has also preserved articles from the local newspaper and the Sterling/Rock Falls Historical Society, as well as newsletters, memos, and reports from the company. In addition, Fellows included occasional articles about Northwestern Steel & Wire from sources such as United Press International, *Railroad Magazine*, and the American Metal Hall of Fame. Despite its historical significance to Sterling and Rock Falls, and the greater Sauk Valley area, Northwestern Steel & Wire has received very little dedicated scholarly attention.

Although only a limited historiography exists on Northwestern Steel & Wire Company, its history is representative of a much larger story that illustrates the broader narrative of Midwestern industrialization. During the post-World War II boom, small Midwestern agricultural towns across the Rust Belt, like Sterling and Rock Falls, were able to frame themselves as manufacturing hubs. This process began in the mid-to-late nineteenth century and occurred as the Midwest grew and became more connected to the larger nation through the railroad system. Prior to this development, large urban centers such as Chicago, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, and Detroit had already begun to take shape. However, it was not until the expansion of the railway system that these Midwestern cities gained a fast and affordable way to transport their manufactured and agricultural goods throughout the East. The growing industries took advantage of the Midwest's rich natural resources, including large quantities of coal coming from Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and imported other resources from the Appalachian region. The Midwest's industrial capabilities were based on the availability of coal and access to iron ore from Michigan and Missouri. In addition to the availability of such industrial staples, the Midwest also boasted rich timber reserves and other agricultural products. These resources helped propel the Midwest to its place as the economic center of the nation from the late nineteenth century into the mid-twentieth century.⁵

⁵ Jon C. Teaford, *Cities of the Heartland: The Rise and Fall of the Industrial Midwest* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 50.

In the decades after the late nineteenth century, the Midwest's rapid rise to industrial and economic power would only accelerate, particularly with the emergence of the steel and automobile industries, which would go on to largely define the region's continued growth. Its industrial capabilities continued to grow, and its cities and population expanded alongside them. According to the 1860 Census, not a single Midwestern city ranked among America's five largest. But by 1890, both Chicago and St. Louis were in the top five, joined by three other Midwestern cities to make up a third of the nation's fifteen most populated.⁶ Within half a century, the Midwest was transformed from a sparsely populated frontier into one of the most populated and economically successful regions in the United States of America.

After half a century of economic success, the Midwest began to stagnate in the aftermath of World War I. Like the rest of the country, it faced economic hardships and labor conflicts as the country fell into the 1929 Great Depression. The Midwest was hit especially hard, as unemployment dropped ten to fifteen percent more than in other parts of the country. The Midwestern Rust Belt faced fierce competition from the growing Southwestern Sun Belt.⁷ While the Midwest struggled to maintain its economic foothold, it was hit by another challenge, as those who remained employed began unionizing in demand of better pay and more rights.

With the outbreak of World War II, the Midwest's ideal conditions for metalworking made it the premier spot to manufacture machinery and vehicles of war.⁸ Its isolation, which had once served as the Midwest's greatest weakness, became a strategic advantage during this time of conflict, as military officials viewed its industrial centers as far less vulnerable to enemy attacks than those along the coasts. As the need for increased industry returned to the Midwest, its population began to grow once more. This new wave of immigration helped diversify the region, as Europeans fleeing the war, African Americans and white Americans from the South, and Mexicans from Mexico settled in the Midwest in search of greater economic opportunity.⁹ Although the Midwest was never able to fully regain the complete dominance that it once held on American industrialization, the World War II boom jump started a new era of growth that revitalized its cities, expanded and diversified its workforce, and reaffirmed its role as a vital contributor to the nation's economic and industrial strength.

While the story of Northwestern Steel & Wire may serve as only a molecular dot on the grand scale of Midwestern industrialization, it offers a powerful look at the local impact such a transformative era had on

⁶Teaford, *Cities of the Heartland*, 48.

⁷*Ibid.*, 176-183.

⁸*Ibid.*, 186.

⁹*Ibid.*, 187-197.

smaller, often forgotten communities. By exploring the company's influence on Sterling and Rock Falls, Illinois, not only is a lesser-known chapter of industrial history brought to light, but with it, the voices of a few of those who lived through it are given a chance to share their stories and experiences.

The Origins of Northwestern Steel & Wire

The Northwestern Steel & Wire Company, originally known as Northwestern Barb Wire Company, was established on February 28, 1879, by Washington M. Dillon and his stepbrother, William C. Robinson. Dillon and Robinson had come from families with prominent ties to the steel industry, with Dillon descending from the men who had built the first iron furnace west of the Allegheny Mountains in Dillon Falls, Ohio while Robinson's father owned a hardware and farm equipment store in Ohio. The pair initially settled in Dixon, Illinois, but moved further south to Sterling, following Dillon's service within the Civil War. The duo dreamed of more than just their modest hardware store, and took advantage of the twin cities' geographical location, which made it ideal for nineteenth century water-powered industrialization. This ambition led to the formation of the Northwestern Barb Wire Company.

The factory was based on the Rock Falls side of the river in a three-story building along the edge of the Rock River. Within that building, Washington M. Dillon, his stepbrother, and their ten employees begin producing 600 spools of barbed wire per day. However, Washington M. Dillon's stepbrother William C. Robinson died soon after the company's creation, in 1883, leaving Dillon to manage the company on his own. After his company proved successful, Dillon entered a business relationship with local bale tie magnate J.W. Griswold and started the Dillon Griswold Wire Company in 1893. Dillon's barbed wire production remained in Rock Falls, while the production of bale ties, field fence, and nails began on the north side of the river in Sterling. Once again tragedy struck Washington M. Dillon's business relationship when J.W. Griswold died in 1902. By this time, though, the Dillon Griswold Wire Company had begun to amass immense success, so Dillon tried but was unsuccessful in continuing his business relationship with Griswold's heirs.¹⁰ However, due reportedly to mismanagement issues, the Dillon-Griswold Wire Company filed for receivership and was sold to Sterling's Lawrence Bros. Inc. in 1914. Within the first week of owning the Dillon-Griswold assets, the Lawrence Brothers received an offer from Washington Dillon's son, P.W. Dillon, who bought back the assets for the Northwestern Barb Wire Company for a whopping \$65,000.¹¹ Through this acquisition, Northwestern Barb Wire Company made its transition across the Rock River, leaving Rock Falls and beginning production in Sterling.

¹⁰ Dan Dickson, *100 Years of Progress 1879-1979* (Sterling, IL: Northwestern Steel & Wire Company, 1979), https://www.nwsinfo/?page_id=159.

¹¹ "Northwestern Steel And Wire Company 100 Years of Progress," *Daily Gazette* (Sterling, IL), March 15, 1979, 33, https://sterling.advantage-preservation.com/viewer/?k=northwestern%20steel%20wire&i=f&d=01011936-12312009&m=between&ord=k1&fn=the_daily_gazette_usa_illinois_sterling_19790315_english_31&df=1&dt=10.

Soon after moving into the new Sterling factory, Washington M. Dillon began training his son and protégé, Paul W. Dillon, who is affectionately known today within the Sterling/Rock Falls area simply as Mr. Dillon or P.W. Dillon.¹² Although it was Washington M. Dillon who founded and set Northwestern Barb Wire Company on its path toward success, it is P.W. Dillon who is fondly remembered by the residents of Sterling and Rock Falls today and credited with making the company the massive success that it was.

A New Era Under P.W. Dillon

P.W. Dillon took control of Northwestern Barb Wire Company after his father died in 1920. As president of the company, P.W. Dillon faced many challenges. One of the first challenges to test P.W. Dillon's presidency was a major fire in 1928, that caused three casualties and resulted in at least a quarter-million dollars worth of damage. P.W. Dillon was on a business trip in Chicago, Illinois, when the fire broke out, and he immediately flew back to Sterling to assess the damage. Before his plane landed, P.W. Dillon reportedly had made up his mind that instead of hiring an outside construction crew and laying off his workers, he would instead pay his mill workers to help build a new and larger factory.¹³

The next major challenge P.W. Dillon faced came in February 1938, a winter that saw the Rock River flood after the ice broke up and jammed. The first floor of the mill was completely flooded and workers had to move to the second and third floors of the factory. Row boats were the only reliable method to get around the plant. The workers tried to use dynamite to break up the ice jams but they had to wait nearly a week for the ice to melt and water to recede on its own. The Daily Gazette reported that "[m]ud covered everything. Pools of water stood in all low spots... Motors and equipment which had been removed had to be reinstalled. Motors which [had not] been removed had to be taken out and checked over for damage. Acid from the cleaning house had been carried to the furnaces and had eroded the relays. Dirt, silt, and filth was everywhere from the flood waters."¹⁴ However, Dillon did not lay off the workers. Instead, he paid them to clean up the mess left by the flood until Northwestern Barb Wire Company was fully operational.

One of the major challenges to leadership was the 1929 stock market crash. The crash of the stock market and subsequent Great Depression resulted in Sterling's unemployment rate rising to 25 percent.¹⁵ P.W. Dillon

¹²Dickinson, *100 Years of Progress*.

¹³"Northwestern Steel And Wire Company 100 Years of Progress," *Daily Gazette*, 34.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁵"Life After Steel," *Daily Gazette* (Sterling, IL), March 30, 2006, 37, https://sterling.advantage-preservation.com/view-er/?k=life%20after&t=42606&i=t&by=2006&bdd=2000&bm=3&bd=30&d=03302006-03302006&m=between&ord=k1&fn=daily_gazette_usa_illinois_sterling-rock_falls_20060330_english_73&df=1&dt=10.

knew he had to do something to save not only his business, but the jobs of the workers who depended on him. He then made the historic decision for the company to create its own steel. However, the 1933 National Recovery Act prohibited the installation of any new steel production factories within the country until after the Depression passed. Although it took Dillon a few years to work out the minor details, he eventually found a loophole to bypass the National Recovery Act. To circumvent the rules of the National Recovery Act, which banned the construction of blast furnaces to create steel, in 1936, Dillon proposed and successfully orchestrated the installation of two cutting-edge electric furnaces to begin steel production. This risky addition was ultimately successful in the long run. Thus, on May 10, 1939, P.W. Dillon announced to the shareholders that the Northwestern Barb Wire Company would be changing its name to Northwestern Steel and Wire Company.¹⁶

By this time, P.W. Dillon had stepped down as president and been promoted to chairman of the Board. Another challenge for the leadership arose when a fire broke out on the mill grounds on March 6, 1939. The fire compounded the company's ongoing challenges, including the fallout from the 1938 flood, financial struggles from installing two electric furnaces in 1936 that had yet to pay for themselves, the effects of the Great Depression, and the unionization of its workers. The second fire served as a make-or-break moment for the company. The *Daily Gazette* reported that the unionized workers came together in support of P.W. Dillon and the company's future. The unionized workers worked nonstop night and day shifts to ensure the mill was rebuilt as quickly as possible. Although the Great Depression had hardly come to an end in 1939, the union members offered to work one day without pay per week for four weeks in an effort to subsidize the cost of rebuilding the mill. The management appreciated the offer but paid the workers to get back to work. By three o'clock in the afternoon on the same day as the fire broke out, the workers had already built a new conveyor belt to fulfill orders for the shipping department. Workers who were not filling a role on the line helped transport damaged machines and equipment to Northwestern's old location in Rock Falls where they could be repaired. The community and its workers rallied together around Northwestern Barb Wire Company, illustrating the level of importance that was placed upon the company.¹⁷ The Northwestern Steel and Wire Company was not only a cornerstone of the local economy, but, as demonstrated by the actions of the leadership and the workers, a symbol of resilience and unity for the entire community.

¹⁶Dickinson, *100 Years of Progress*.

¹⁷"Northwestern Steel And Wire Company 100 Years of Progress," *Daily Gazette*, 34.

Northwestern Steel & Wire's Golden Era (1950s-1980s)

By the end of 1939, the mill had almost completely financially recovered from the hardships it had faced throughout the 1920s and 1930s. P.W. Dillon's gamble with using electric furnaces to produce steel had paid off and was widely celebrated as "Northwestern became the first steel mill in the United States to make carbon steel in an EF [Electric Furnace]."¹⁸ By the beginning of 1940s, the Northwestern Steel and Wire Company replaced two small electric furnaces with two fifty-ton furnaces. In the 1950s, the company built a second steel plant, located west of the original mill, and installed two 150-ton electric furnaces, a 46-inch blooming mill, and a twelve-inch merchant bar mill.¹⁹ The company continued to expand and incorporate the newest and biggest technological advancements in their field, growing the value of the mill by nearly \$100 million dollars between 1955 and 1971. By the end of 1979, Northwestern Steel & Wire covered over 600 acres along Rock Falls and Sterling's riverbanks. Northwestern was not only one of the largest factories within the area, but it was also the single largest employer within Whiteside County with an annual payroll of over \$96,000,000 in 1978.²⁰

By the mill's hundredth anniversary, in 1979, the twin cities officially recognized the important role that Northwestern Steel & Wire played in the community. The financial institutions of Sterling and Rock Falls published a joint congratulatory message in the local newspaper: "For a century, Northwestern Steel and Wire Company has been helping the cities of Sterling and Rock Falls grow, both economically and as a community."²¹ However, the mill did not just have an impact on Sterling and Rock Falls' sense of community and economy, it also had drastic effects on the sister cities' population and culture.

Cultural and Population Diversification of Sterling and Rock Falls and the Economic Impact of Northwestern Steel & Wire

Since the year 1900, Sterling's population had grown by at least 1,000 people every decade, amassing a population of 12,817 people by the year 1950.²² However, P.W. Dillon's 1939 transformation of the company through the addition of steel production had brought the cities of Sterling and Rock Falls to their maximum

¹⁸ Bill Beck, "Paul W. Dillon," *American Metal Market Hall of Fame*, <https://www.nwsu.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Paul-W.-Dillon.jpg>.

¹⁹ Dickinson, *100 Years of Progress*.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Northwestern Steel And Wire Company 100 Years of Progress," *Daily Gazette*, 37.

²² *1950 Census of Population: Section 5: Florida- Indiana*, ISPMS USA, accessed October 10, 2024, 13-25, <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/resources/voliii/pubdocs/1950/Population/23761117v1ch05.pdf>.

population capacities. Throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s, the population of Sterling, Illinois, began to take off as it attracted workers from across the country and North America. In addition to the twin cities' steady population increase, the end of World War II brought an employment boom that attracted workers. To address housing problems during the mid-1940s, the city of Sterling created what became known as Silver City, a small diverse community of homes made from converted railroad boxcars set up on the West side of Sterling. The majority of its residents consisted of Northwestern Steel & Wire employees and their families.²³ It has become folklore that the residents of Silver City were overwhelmingly Hispanic migrants. In reality, the prospect of employment at Northwestern Steel & Wire, which offered wages up to three times higher than what they had left behind, attracted people from across the country and significantly diversified Sterling's population.²⁴ It was this population diversification that brought about a culture shift that altered the sister cities.

Although American workers from diverse backgrounds and their families came to the Sterling/Rock Falls area to find work at Northwestern Steel & Wire company, it was the Hispanic immigrants that had the most direct and lasting impact on local culture. As Hispanic immigrants began to move to Sterling throughout the 1940s in search of employment at Northwestern Steel & Wire, they brought with them new traditions, holidays, foods, and language. For example, local Sterling resident Irma Chavez's father Juan T. Velazquez immigrated from Lagos de Moreno, Mexico, to Sterling, Illinois, in 1948, after learning of the employment opportunities offered at Northwestern Steel & Wire. The experiences of Velazquez and his family serve as a prime example of how Hispanic immigration impacted the local community. According to Irma, her father first learned of the opportunities in Sterling while temporarily working as a grape harvester in California during the year 1946.²⁵ After learning about opportunities in Sterling, Illinois, he returned to Mexico, married his fiancée, and then moved along with his siblings to Sterling, where he promptly secured employment at Northwestern Steel & Wire as a steel hooker. Velazquez worked at Northwestern Steel & Wire for thirty-four years.

During his employment, he and his wife initially lived in Silver City but eventually settled in the second iteration of the neighborhood, built by P.W. Dillon in Rock Falls. Although Irma was unsure of the exact date these homes were constructed, she recalled it would have been sometime in the early 1950s, as her oldest brother, Ruben, was born in the house in 1952. The home, located on the corner of 14th Avenue and West 21st Street, was

²³“Silver City Facts,” *Sterling Rock Falls Historical Society*, accessed November 17, 2024, <https://srhs.com/silver-city-facts>.

²⁴Christopher Heimerman, “Many Avenues Lead to Silver City,” *Shaw Local*, November 30, 2020. <https://www.shaw.local.com/2015/09/25/many-avenues-led-to-silver-city/arziss/>.

²⁵Irma Chavez, interview by Peyton Ward, personal interview, Sterling, IL, November 24, 2024.

where all eight children were born. A portion of her father's paycheck was deducted each pay period until he eventually owned the home outright, and he remained there until his death. Irma expressed her father's gratitude to P.W. Dillon for providing him and his family with opportunities that would have been unimaginable in Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco, Mexico. Irma related how every Christmas Eve, her mother, Isabel, cooked platters of tamales that her father and his family delivered to the Dillon's home. Irma further elaborated that it is a traditional practice in Mexico to make and eat tamales during the Christmas season. This simple act of gratitude illustrates the ways in which families like Mr. Velazquez's shared and promoted their cultural traditions in Sterling. While there is no way of knowing for certain, it is probable that receiving and consuming those tamales became a part of the Dillon family's holiday tradition, highlighting the cultural impact of such an act.

On a wider level of cultural diffusion, Irma Chavez illustrated the level of influence that the increased Hispanic influence had, and continues to hold, over Sterling and Rock Falls. According to Irma, every Sunday groups of Mexican families would walk across the highway to St. Mary's Church, a Catholic parish located in Sterling, Illinois. Irma explained that church service was one of the few places in which Spanish was used rather than English. Not only was there a service offered completely in Spanish, a tradition that continues in many local churches to this day, but St. Mary also acknowledged and celebrated Mexican-centric church holidays like the Three Kings' Day, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and Día de Los Muertos. Another place in which Hispanic influence began to influence the traditions of the town was through the Latin American Club, which served as a social group that celebrated Mexican traditions, hosted quinceañeras and created the Fiesta Day Parade, a yearly parade within Sterling and Rock Falls that began in 1953, that both highlight and honor Mexican traditions.

Hispanic influence in Sterling is also evident in the establishment of "Mexican Stores" on the west end of Sterling, located near and around Silver City. These "Mexican Stores" specialized in selling cultural foods, cooking ingredients, and general goods. Irma explained that one of the appeals of such stores was that Hispanic immigrants feel comfortable and speak in their native tongue when they shopped.²⁶ Although none of the stores that existed in the late 1960s and 1970s are operational today, the west side of Sterling continues to be home to a large number of stores and restaurants that specialize in Mexican foods and products.

The incorporation of such Mexican traditions, establishments, and practices can be traced back to the Northwestern Steel & Wire Company. In a moment of recognition, on Northwestern's one hundredth anniversary,

²⁶Chavez, interview, November 24, 2024.

the aforementioned Latin American Club of Sterling and Rock Falls took out an ad in the local newspaper that read as follows:

A Proclamation: Whereas the Latin-American Social Club of Sterling and Rock Falls has traditionally striven for the basic rights of the Latin-American Community... basic individual rights such as adequate housing, proper medical care, the right to vote for the candidate of their choice and the right to worship in the church of their choice. And whereas the Latin-American Social Club has, throughout its 28 year history donated to many worthy causes, such as scholarships, various civic organizations and local sports. And whereas the Latin-American Social Club: proud of its contribution to the culture of the Twin Cities, through the medium of the annual Latin-American Fiesta. And whereas the Latin-American Social Club is proud of the contributions made by its membership in the various branches of the military of our country and has provided leadership in various fraternal, civic and service clubs, church and civic government in the Twin Cities... Therefore let it be known to all who read this that we, the officers, members, friends and supporters of the Latin-American Social Club do recognize that much of the success we enjoy today... that many of the goals we worked so hard to attain...that the impetus for a positive response to challenge, the desire to serve our community on the part of so many of our members was made possible to a large extent through the concern and understanding of men such as Mr. Paul W. Dillon who, long ago, had the wisdom to afford us an equal opportunity to earn a living. For this we are grateful and on this, the 100th anniversary of Northwestern Steel and Wire Company we salute you Mr. Dillon. May God bless you and may our company continue to prosper for many years to come.²⁷

This quote highlights not only the Latin American Club's active involvement in the community through scholarship donations and civic engagement but also the opportunities provided by Northwestern Steel & Wire and the importance of the company not just as a business but as a community institution.

The demographic, cultural, and economic impact of Northwestern Steel & Wire on the communities of Sterling and Rock Falls becomes clearer when examining the personal stories of individuals who sought opportunities in such places. The stories of Virginia Johnson and Burl Ward, who relocated to Sterling in 1953 and 1955 from Clinton, Arkansas, illustrate the influx of people from other parts of the country to Sterling and Rock Falls, which defined the golden age of Northwestern Steel & Wire. Their experiences illuminate the economic prosperity and opportunities the mill provided during its peak. When Virginia Johnson uprooted her life in Clinton, Arkansas, at the young age of nineteen, she did so in pursuit of love. The story of Virginia's future husband, Bo (Elvin) Johnson, exemplifies how Northwestern Steel & Wire attracted skilled labor to Sterling during its peak. After learning about employment opportunities at the mill through a friend, Bo traveled from Clinton, Arkansas, to Sterling where he was subsequently offered and accepted a position working as a chemist with Northwestern Steel & Wire.

In 1953, after the workforce of Northwestern Steel & Wire went on strike, Bo returned to Clinton, where

²⁷“Northwestern Steel And Wire Company 100 Years of Progress,” *Daily Gazette*, 32.

he and Virginia were married before moving to Sterling together. At the time, Virginia was six months shy of graduating high school.²⁸ After four years of living in Sterling, Virginia decided to get a job at Lawrence Bros. Inc. mainly for social reasons. Virginia explained that the most challenging aspect of moving from Arkansas to Illinois was leaving family and friends and everything that was familiar behind, so in finding employment at Lawrence Bros. Inc., where she packed the special customer orders, she was able to build a sense of community. She related how many of the female packing employees of Lawrence Bros. Inc. were the spouses of Northwestern Steel & Wire. Thus, although the two companies were competitors, Lawrence Bros Inc. benefited from the workforce that Northwestern Steel & Wire attracted.²⁹ Virginia's perspective as someone living within the community during Northwestern's golden age offers valuable insights into how the success of the mill created a ripple effect that positively impacted other businesses and the local economy. Virginia's younger brother, Burl Ward, also moved to Sterling. He began working at the mill just four days after graduating from high school, offering the perspective of someone who experienced Northwestern's golden age firsthand as an employee of the mill.

Burl began as a laborer and worked his way up to a roller foreman. Burl described his role as a laborer as akin to a janitor's, stating that his day-to-day tasks consisted of sweeping floors and picking up trash. As he moved his way up through the company, he was given more responsibilities. In 1959, he took a break from work to serve in the Vietnam War. After returning from the Vietnam War, Burl was promoted to a hot saw operator and was tasked with cutting the beams of steel in two. Around 1975, he was promoted to roller foreman, which came with the most responsibility as a supervisor of the line. Burl described the process of moving up through the company as an extremely difficult one, which took constantly proving oneself to management.

As a foreman, Burl, like others in upper management, was required to cross the picket line and work during strikes. During the 1985 strike for better pay and working conditions, he recalled being afraid that the striking workers might throw rocks at him as he crossed the line, though no violence occurred. To keep Northwestern Steel & Wire operational during these periods, leadership from other plants would be brought in to work alongside the main plant's upper management for several weeks at a time. During other strikes, which could last for months and did not require his presence at the main plant, Burl would return home to Clinton, Arkansas, to visit his family. Burl Ward's time at Northwestern Steel & Wire suggests that although the work was extremely challenging and time-consuming, it was possible for a person to climb their way up the ranks of factory labor.³⁰ Burl's story is common

²⁸Virginia Johnson, interview by Peyton Ward, personal interview, Sterling, IL, November 4, 2024.

²⁹Johnson, interview, November 24, 2024.

³⁰Burl Glen Ward, interview by Peyton Ward, personal interview, Sterling, IL, November 4, 2024.

to many members of the working communities in Sterling and Rock Falls. The mill generated opportunities for them to develop personal skills and improve their social and economic standing within the community. The mill also contributed significantly to the twin cities' economies.

Burl described Monday night—Monday was Northwestern's payday—as a night when the town of Sterling came to life. He described how every store in the downtown area stayed open late, allowing mill employees from both Sterling and Rock Falls, along with their families, to go shopping. According to Burl, typically, people would buy clothes, especially work clothes, such as shoes or gloves which were a necessity at the mill during the winter.³¹ That businesses were willing and able to stay open late on Monday nights, as a result of the mill's employees being paid, demonstrates the financial impact that Northwestern's presence had on the towns of Sterling and Rock Falls as a whole. Further supporting the claim that Northwestern Steel & Wire positively impacted the local economy is a letter written by the Rock Falls Chamber of Commerce in March of 1987 that specifically thanks Paul Dillon and Northwestern Steel & Wire for the “social economic conditions of our community [being] at their highest levels ever.”³²

The experiences of Irma Chavez, Virginia Johnson, and Burl Glen Ward illustrate how, by attracting a diverse workforce and supporting the local economy, the mill became a cornerstone of the community's identity and shaped the cultural, economic, and demographic landscape of the sister cities. Many residents built their lives around the opportunities that the mill provided, which is why its sudden closure in 2001 left the twin cities and many of its residents in ruins.

Northwestern's Closure and the Trend of Deindustrialization in the Midwest

The sudden closure of Northwestern Steel & Wire in 2001 left many of its employees and the residents of the twin cities in a state of complete shock. In the March/April 2000 edition—the last published edition of *The Lightning Bolt*, which was the Northwestern employee newsletter—then CEO/President Frederick J. Rocchio, Jr. reported a loss of \$13.5 million in the year 1999. Despite that setback, he stated that the company was “improving trends in the steel industry,” for the second half of the fiscal year of 2000. The shareholders echoed an extremely similar sentiment, claiming to be excited about the company's future.³³ However, the Mayor of Sterling, Ted Aggen,

³¹Ward, interview, November 4, 2024.

³²“Northwestern Steel And Wire Company 100 Years of Progress,” *Daily Gazette*, 48.

³³Karen Freres, ed., “The Lightning Bolt: A Publication for Employees and Retirees of Northwestern Steel and Wire Company,” 1997–2000 Lightning Bolt Newsletters, March 4, 2000, 2-3, <https://www.nwsu.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2000-03-04-NWSW-Newsletter.pdf>.

recounted receiving the call on the morning of May 18, 2001, and being told by a representative of the company that at the end of the day it would be closing its doors. Aggen, like the rest of the town, was left in shock and immediately knew what this sudden closure would mean for Sterling and Rock Falls, as over 1,400 people would be laid off.³⁴

The sudden closure of Northwestern Steel & Wire was a symptom of a much larger economic shift, which saw sweeping deindustrialization across the United States, particularly in the manufacturing centers in the Midwest. The term “Rust Belt” was coined in response to the economic changes in the region. This process of deindustrialization impacted cities across the Midwest, claiming millions of jobs beginning in the 1970s and extending well into the twenty-first century, which adversely affected both local and regional economies.³⁵ Despite being the industrial giant of the world throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, the Rust Belt began to decline as globalization increased between the 1950s and 1970s, leading to the expansion of large-scale international trade. The increasingly competitive global market that accompanied this global shift was the beginning of the end for America’s Midwestern industrial dominance. Another factor that contributed to the Rust Belt’s fall from grace included the cultural trend of Americans moving to the Sun Belt, where the climate had milder winters and longer summers.

The final factor leading to the deindustrialization of the Midwest was higher labor costs due to unionization in the Northeast and Midwest, compared to the largely union-free South and West.³⁶ These trends were compounded at the turn of the twenty-first century when China entered the global market and asserted its presence in markets that previously were exclusively controlled by U.S. manufacturing. Since China’s labor force was much larger and less expensive than the United States, they were able to produce large quantities of products at lower prices. As a result, China was quickly able to assert its footing into what had traditionally been uncontested ground for the United States. Among other manufacturing industries, the Rust Belt’s steel industry was hit incredibly hard. Even before the closure of Northwestern Steel & Wire, major steel companies across the Midwest were shutting down. For example, in Youngstown, Ohio, the Youngstown Sheet and Tube facility closed in September 1977, followed by United States Steel Company and Jones & Laughlin Steel, both of which shut down in the city in January 1980.

³⁴“Life After Steel,” *Daily Gazette*, 44.

³⁵Mark E. Schweitzer, “What’s Gone Wrong (and Right) in the Industrial Heartland?” *Economic Commentary*, September 22, 2017, <https://www.clevelandfed.org/publications/economic-commentary/2017/ec-201714-whats-gone-wrong-and-right-in-the-industrial-heartland>.

³⁶William M. Bowen, *The Road Through the Rust Belt: From Preeminence to Decline to Prosperity* (Kalamazoo, MI: W. E. Upjohn Institute, 2014), 11-12, <https://viewer.ebscohost.com/EbscoViewerService/ebook?an=678535&callbackUrl=https%3A%2F%2Fresearch.ebsco.com&db=e020mna&format=EB&proflD=allsources&lpid=&ppid=&lang=en&location=https%3A%2F%2Fresearch.ebsco.com%2F%2Fnewgk%2Fsearch%2Fdetails%2F3v6euli5jv%3Fdb%3De020mna&isPLink=False&requestContext=&profile-Identifier=nrowgk&recordId=3v6euli5jv>.

Between the years of 1970 and 1980 the town of Youngstown, Ohio, lost over 38 percent of its manufacturing workforce.³⁷ The story of Youngstown, Ohio, demonstrates that the sudden closure of Northwestern Steel & Wire in 2001 was not a unique event, but rather part of a broader trend that reshaped communities across the Midwest. As steel mills and other manufacturing plants shut down across the Rust Belt, towns such as Sterling and Rock Falls, which had long relied on industrial employment, were forced to adapt or face economic destruction.

Sterling and Rock Falls After Northwestern

Within the first five years of the mill's sudden closure, the twin cities and the entire Sauk Valley area suffered massive population decline. According to the 2000 to the 2010 census, Sterling suffered a 1.4 percent loss in population while Rock Falls suffered a massive loss of 3.28 per cent.³⁸ According to Burl Ward, many residents moved to places like Pennsylvania, Florida, or Texas where steel mills were still in operation and they could put their skills to use.³⁹ While many residents left Sterling and Rock Falls, those who remained were forced to overcome the economic hole left by the closure of Northwestern Steel & Wire. To bolster the local economy, long time competitors began coming together and forming joint companies. For example, competing development organizations from Sterling, Dixon, and Rock Falls formed the Sauk Valley Partners in Economic Development, a group that successfully negotiated the opening of a Wal-Mart Distribution center on the outskirts of Sterling.⁴⁰ In the years following the mill's closure, the already tight-knit Sauk Valley community followed in the footsteps of Northwestern Steel & Wire's leadership and workers by lifting each other up.

In conclusion, after its closure, Northwestern Steel & Wire's legacy looms large over the communities of Sterling and Rock Falls, Illinois. The cultural and demographic changes the company brought, along with its economic impact, united these twin cities and, in the wake of the company's closure, brought them even closer together. Although Sterling and Rock Falls may no longer be the industrial giants they once were, the echoes of a past era, when they stood as the "Hardware Capital of the World," continue to ring out decades later.

³⁷Teaford, *Cities of the Heartland*, 220.

³⁸*Census of Population and Housing: 2010 Census*, IPUMS USA | Published Census Volumes, September 2012, 105 and 148, <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/voliii/pubdocs/2010/pubvols2010.shtml>.

³⁹Ward, interview, November 4, 2024.

⁴⁰"Life After Steel," *Daily Gazette*, 55.

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