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ARTICLE

Organizing Black Business: The National Negro Business League, 1900–1915

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Abstract

Founded by Booker T. Washington in 1900, the National Negro Business League (NNBL) sought to unite Black business owners, promote entrepreneurship, and develop economic power. Despite its prominence in the early twentieth century, the group declined after Washington's death in 1915. As a result, little is known about its organizational development. This study uses data on state and local Negro Business Leagues (NBLs), along with active and life members of the NNBL, to better understand the group's first fifteen years. Analyses reveal that the NNBL's development reflected closely the social and economic context of early twentieth century Black America. Generally speaking, the NNBL was stronger in states with larger urban Black populations and where the value of Black-owned farms was higher, consistent with the importance of agriculture to Black business during this era. These results both shed light on the NNBL's early success and suggest avenues for future research on its decline.

Keywords: National Negro Business League; NNBL; Booker T. Washington; Progressive Era; Federation

Introduction

During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, Americans built civil society and social capital through large, federated voluntary associations (Crowley and Skocpol, 2001; Gamm and Putnam, 1999; Skocpol 2003; Skocpol et al., 2000). This organized activity was particularly noteworthy among Black Americans (Liazos and Ganz, 2004; Skocpol et al., 2006; Skocpol and Oser, 2004), who joined fraternal orders at rates that surpassed their White counterparts, leading Skocpol and Oser (2004) to refer to Black Americans as "super joiners" (pp. 402-411).

Early twentieth century Black Americans also formed, led, and joined a wide variety of professional, intellectual, and reform organizations. One such organization is the National Negro Business League (NNBL), formed in 1900 by Booker T. Washington and other Black business leaders. The group, which took an accommodationist approach that sought to empower Black citizens without directly challenging segregation, was part of Washington's so-called "Tuskegee Machine." It strove to represent the economic interests of an entrepreneurial Black middle and upper class, but little is known about where it was

able to gain an organizational foothold or its success in achieving its goals (Jackson 2005; but see Burrows 1977; Garrett-Scott 2006).

This analysis systematically explores the NNBL's organizational infrastructure from its founding until Washington's death in 1915; to our knowledge, this is the first time these data have been analyzed. We begin by describing patterns in four state-level measures of group strength—whether or not a state had an NNBL affiliate, the number of local NBL chapters affiliated with the NNBL, and the numbers of active and life members. We then examine the relationship between variations in these indicators and two contextual factors relevant to early twentieth century Black economic power: the urban Black population and the value of Black-owned farms.

Our findings show that both contextual factors, along with the creation of state-level NBL organizations, were critical to the NNBL's strength in 1915 and its development up to 1915. Yet, the contextual factors did not always affect the four measures of NNBL group strength in the same ways, revealing that the NNBL's development was a combination of urbanity, often a pre-requisite to widespread organizing, and the Black population's connection to agriculture, which was often a business pursuit that Washington fostered. In these ways, the NNBL's organizational infrastructure in the first two decades of the twentieth century was reflective of the economic and social realities of Black America at the time. However, the conditions that contributed to the group's rapid development also suggest that the organization was poorly equipped to continue its development after Washington's death in 1915. The group's accommodationist stance, and its strength in southern population and agricultural centers, were obstacles in the face of coming changes in the tone and strategy of the Civil Rights Movement and sociodemographic shifts in the Black community during the Great Migration.

Black Organizing in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, federated voluntary membership associations, from fraternal orders to labor unions to women's organizations, rose to prominence across the United States (e.g., Gamm and Putnam, 1999; Schlesinger 1944; Skocpol 1997, 2003). The largest of these associations almost exclusively targeted White, native born citizens. Of the more than forty associations identified by Skocpol and colleagues (2000) as recruiting 1% or more of the nation's male and/or female population at some time during this period, just one organization specifically targeted Black members: the Colored Farmers' Alliance, which only lasted from 1888–1892 and was led, in part, by White men (Miller 1972). Some other predominantly White associations also allowed Black members and/or allowed states or local chapters to charter segregated units (e.g., the Grand Army of the Republic, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the Young Men's Christian Association), but many did not.

This does not mean that Black Americans did not participate in civil society. Instead, the Black community fostered its own vibrant associational life. Black fraternal orders, whether paralleling major White orders (e.g., Masons [White] and Prince Hall Masons [Black], Independent Order of Odd Fellows [White] and Grand United Order of Odd Fellows [Black]) or arising indigenously without White counterparts (e.g., Knights and Daughters of Tabor, the United Brothers of Friendship and Sisters of the Mysterious Ten), were quite popular (Skocpol et al., 2006; Skocpol and Oser, 2004). In fact, Black men likely joined more fraternal lodges per capita than their White counterparts (Skocpol and Oser, 2004), and these fraternal orders were central to the network of elite Black leaders across all types of voluntary associations (Chamberlain and Yanus, n.d.). Black women also played an integral role in fraternalism, especially in groups without parallel White organizations (Skocpol and Oser, 2004).

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But, Black organizing went far beyond fraternalism. Civil rights and reform organizations that welcomed Black members are among the best-known groups today. They include the NAACP, formed in 1909, and the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes (now the National Urban League), established in 1910. Earlier civil rights organizations included the National Afro-American League, the National Afro-American Council, and the Niagara Movement (see Jones 2010). Black women also organized groups, including the National Association of Colored Women (later, Colored Women's Clubs), which paralleled the segregated General Federation of Women's Clubs (see Jones 1982; Shaw 1991).

Professional organizations, however, were among the first Black groups to rise to prominence. For example, the National Medical Association organized in 1895 to unite Black medical professionals, and the National Colored Teachers Association formed in 1904 before expanding in 1907 to include White teachers in Black schools in the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools. And, as noted in the introduction, Black business leaders came together in 1900 to form the National Negro Business League (NNBL). The NNBL also spawned the creation of appendant organizations such as the National Negro Bankers' Association, the National Negro Funeral Directors' Association, and the National Negro Press Association (see Burrows 1977). The NNBL therefore served as an important organizing force among a growing class of Black entrepreneurs.

The NNBL as an Important, but Understudied, Organization

The NNBL was a vehicle of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Machine. Adopting its leader's accommodationist approach, the NNBL did not advocate direct political action against segregation but focused instead on business development and self-improvement through industrial education. In his biography of Washington, Robert J. Norrell (2009) describes the group as, "a kind of black chamber of commerce created to nurture entrepreneurship" (p. 299). The organization officially adopted a federated model in 1906, encouraging state and local Negro Business Leagues (NBLs) to affiliate with the national body. By uniting local NBLs, Washington hoped to use the NNBL to share information and build solidarity among Black business owners. This organizational approach was typical of large, voluntary associations—both Black and White—of the era; building a network of affiliates and members enabled organizations to facilitate communication and collaboration, craft a consistent agenda, and increase political, economic, and social clout (e.g., Chamberlain and Yanus 2023; Skocpol 2003).

Washington's ideas were different than those of his rival, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Du Bois's allies in the Black community, especially outside the South. Du Bois opposed Washington's accommodationist approach, instead advocating for political equality and an end to segregation. As an outgrowth of the Niagara Movement of 1905 (Jones 2010, 2011, 2016), Du Bois helped to establish the NAACP in 1909. Like the NNBL, the NAACP chartered local chapters, providing another outlet for Black professional voices and Du Bois's mission. But, unlike the NNBL, the NAACP was decidedly political (see Reed 1997; Sullivan 2009) and its membership was not solely confined to those involved in commerce.

Undeterred by the rise of the NAACP and other groups, the NNBL continued to expand, though perhaps without the level of activity and coordination Washington desired. By 1914, published claims suggested there were over 600 local NBLs. Official NNBL records, however, listed 278 affiliates—and there were serious concerns over how well the vast majority of these groups were functioning, especially outside the South (Burrows

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1977). The NNBL's difficulty in tracking local groups is not unique; it parallels previous findings about the challenges faced by major White-led, predominantly southern organizations (Chamberlain et al., 2020). But, it was a harbinger of things to come. After Washington's death in 1915, the NNBL's influence began to wane, though the group continues today as the National Business League.

However, little research exists on the NNBL (Jackson 2005). Among existing studies, one published dissertation (Burrows 1977) documents the organization's history until 1945; another masters' thesis explores the same period (Garrett-Scott 2006). Other studies focus on key leaders. For example, Louris R. Harlan (1988) evaluates the NNBL in a collected work on Washington, and David H. Jackson (2002) studies it in relation to prominent Black businessman Charles Banks. Additional case studies focus on local NBLs, including a study of Washington, D.C., photographer Addison Scurlock (Piper 2016) and an analysis of the New York City NBL that suggests that this branch aided in the expansion of Black business (Boston 2021).

This lack of scholarship and the overall decline of the NNBL might be rationalized as the result of Washington's death and a shift away from the accommodationist approach. But, the NNBL was a vital contributor to the early twentieth century Black community that spawned many relationships among members of the Black commercial class (Chamberlain and Yanus, n.d.). Thus, its organizational development from its origins to 1915 deserves closer examination.

Expectations: Context and the NNBL

To better understand the development of the NNBL as an organization, we must consider the socioeconomic context in which the group formed. Previous literature leads us to consider several key factors— region, urbanization, and agriculture—and informs our preliminary expectations about the trajectory of the NNBL.

We begin by considering region. The NNBL was a national group, established in Boston and headquartered in Tuskegee, Alabama. Yet most of the group's potential members—89% of the Black population in 1910—lived in the South (defined as the eleven states of the Confederacy), and Washington's accommodationist message resonated more in this region. But, organizing and maintaining voluntary associations in the early twentieth-century South was complicated by a culture defined by elite participation, a lack of infrastructure, and a predominately rural population (Chamberlain et al., 2020). Outside the South, organizing was easier as a result of modernization, urbanization, and the relative ease of transportation (see Chamberlain et al., 2017). Still, we expect the NNBL developed more local chapters, and attracted more members in the South—even if not always in perfect proportion to the Black population—simply because of the concentration of Black citizens in the region.

Urbanization likely affected where the NNBL developed, too. Previous research finds that agrarian societies struggle to develop and maintain groups due to distance between people and demanding jobs; some level of urbanity is needed to foster widespread organizing (Brown 1974; Chamberlain 2020; Gamm and Putnam, 1999).[1] Urbanization was clearly occurring in the early twentieth-century South, as many Black citizens left farms for cities. The result was a burgeoning class of elite, urban, Black, male business leaders (Schweninger 1997)—exactly the individuals most likely to be drawn to NBLs. Thus, we expect there were more NBLs and NNBL members in states with larger urban Black populations.

At the same time, and unique to the NNBL's goals and core constituency, the group's development may also have been tied to the level of Black-owned agriculture in a community. Washington encouraged agricultural innovation; the Tuskegee Institute

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was home to the Negro Cooperative Demonstration Service, part of the United States Department of Agriculture's program to improve farming methods in the South (Ferguson, 1998). Perhaps more critically, Washington's book, *The Negro in Business*, devotes its second chapter to the importance of agriculture for Black Americans, noting, "Agriculture has not infrequently served as an entrance for members of the Negro race into business" (Washington 1907, p. 21). In later writings, he also praised early twentieth-century Blacks for embracing agriculture and their role "in the work of building up the farming industry in the South" (Washington 1912a, p. 181) and advocated for the development of rural, agrarian, Black-led communities (Washington 1912b). As such, we expect that states with more Black-owned farms had more NBLs and NNBL members.

Data and Methods

The goal of our analysis is to situate the NNBL as organization within the context in which it operated, and to use insights from this analysis to better understand the group's position within the Black community in 1915.

We consider several dependent variables representative of the organization's presence in a state. First, we examine whether a state had a state-level NBL affiliate (=1) or not (=0) in 1915. These affiliates—which the NNBL did not charter in all states—play an important role in continued organizational growth and member recruitment (Skocpol et al., 2000).

We also consider three indicators of state-level organizational strength: the number of chartered local NBLs, active members (individuals who joined the NNBL directly for $2 a year), and life members (individuals who contributed a one-time membership fee of $25).[2] Taken together, these data allow us to study the growth and expansion of the NNBL, as well as where the organization was most vital. They also shed light on whether the locus of the NNBL's organizational strength (measured as affiliates) aligned with that of its power brokers (measured through memberships).

Data on each of these state-level indicators was collected from the *Annual Report of the National Negro Business League* beginning in 1905 for memberships and 1907 for local chapters (on the use of similar records, see Chamberlain and Yanus, 2021). All series end in 1915. These reports include directories of affiliates by state and local community, as well as lists of active and life members with members' locations (state and local) provided. All reports are available on microfilm, created from publications archived at the Tuskegee Institute (Hamilton 1994).

Some scholars may have concerns about the completeness or reliability of these reports. In particular, there were claims of over 600 local chapters in 1914 but only 278 chartered locals were listed in the annual directory. This disparity is likely not the product of false reporting, but the result of ad hoc or informal groups that did not formally federate with the organization. According to John H. Burrows (1977), "…the existence of unchartered leagues was substantiated…by word-of-mouth or written statements" made to the NNBL's secretary, Emmett J. Scott (p. 108). Therefore, the data accurately portray the NNBL's officially chartered locals.

Reports of individual annual and life memberships are almost certainly highly accurate. These were based on dues paid directly to the national body, which published the proceedings. While these types of memberships are not typically studied, the struggles of tracking activity in local NBLs meant that these members, and not local affiliates as in other federated organizations, were the only ones consistently paying into the national body, a key point Scott raised to Washington in 1913 (Burrows 1977). Therefore, it is imperative to investigate the individuals that were willing to join the

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NNBL (in place of or in addition to local NBLs) as an additional test of the NNBL's presence and strength.

Contextual Predictors of Organizational Strength

We begin our exploration of these indicators of organizational strength with a descriptive analysis of each variable from 1905 to 1915. These analyses pay special attention to fluctuations within indicators over time, the relationships between measures, and regional differences. Specifically, descriptive analyses consider distinctions between the South (the eleven former states of the Confederacy), the Border South (Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Oklahoma, West Virginia), and non-South. Given the distribution of the Black population in the early twentieth century, we expect higher levels of NNBL organizing in the South than elsewhere.

Region is closely tied to our two main contextual predictors, the urban Black population and the value of Black-owned farms in a state (correlations with region of.71 and.76, respectively). Previous research offers a more compelling explanation of the importance of the latter contextual indicators (which are related one another but distinct; correlation.58). Thus, where it is employed in multivariate analyses, the South dummy variable should be interpreted with great caution.[3]

To measure urban Black population, we use the 1910 U.S. Census reports of the number of Black citizens residing in incorporated communities with 2500 or more citizens—the Census Bureau's standard for urban in the early twentieth century. This is scaled per 10,000 in the population. And, to measure the value of Black-owned farms (in land and buildings) per $10,000 in each state, we rely on data 1910 Census data reported by the IPUMS National Historic Geographic Information System (Manson et al., 2023).[4] In both cases, as discussed in the preceding section, we expect that these contextual indicators will drive organizing, develop more local NBLs and attract more members to the NNBL (Brown 1974; Chamberlain 2020; Gamm and Putnam, 1999; Schweninger 1989; Washington 1907, 1912a, 1912b).

Models

As noted above, the NNBL was a federated organization. However, the NNBL was not *fully* federated: by 1915 it had only chartered state organizations in twelve states. Thus, our first goal is to study the degree to which the contextual predictors described above affected the presence (=1) or absence (=0) of a state NBL affiliate.[5] Then, we use this variable as a predictor in other models, as it potentially affected the chartering of local NBLs and the interest in active and life memberships in the NNBL (Skocpol et al., 2000). When modeling the presence of a state NBL affiliate, we rely on Firth logistic regression. This is an appropriate model choice for small-N situations with a small number of positive cases (Firth 1993).

Next, we estimate the effects of the contextual variables on counts of local NBLs, active members, and life members. These dependent variables are all over-dispersed count data. Thus, it is appropriate to use negative binomial regression with incident rate ratios reported. Finally, we also study changes in counts of local NBLs (1907–1915) and active and life members (1905–1915). Change models are estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression because changes in counts are not strictly counts, and the dependent variables can take on negative values. Taken together, these models allow us to estimate how strong the NNBL was in each state, as well as how the NNBL changed as an organization between 1905 and 1915—the year of founder Booker T. Washington's death.

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Results

Summary Statistics

We begin by providing summary statistics on local NBLs, active members, and life members by state. First, Table 1 illustrates the growth in local NBLs affiliated with the NNBL from 1907 to 1915. In this table and others in this section, southern states are indicated in bold, Border South states are indicated in italic, and all other states are shown in regular text. In addition, states with an NBL affiliate are denoted with an asterisk.

As expected, most NNBL chapters (59.6% in 1907 and 61.2% in 1915) were in the South. If we include the Border South, these percentages rise to 76.5% and 79.3% of all

Table 1. Count of Local NBLs in States Recording at Least One Local NBL, Ranked from Highest to Lowest in 1915

State	1915	1907	Δ 1907-1915
North Carolina*	**26**	**2**	**+24**
Texas*	**23**	**9**	**+14**
Alabama*	**19**	**9**	**+10**
Georgia	**19**	**10**	**+9**
*Oklahoma**	16	7	+9
Tennessee	**15**	**3**	**+12**
Virginia*	**18**	**7**	**+11**
Kentucky	13	3	+10
Mississippi*	**12**	**5**	**+7**
Florida*	**11**	**3**	**+8**
Louisiana*	**11**	**2**	**+9**
South Carolina*	**11**	**2**	**+9**
Kansas*	9	4	+5
New Jersey	9	4	+5
West Virginia	8	0	+8
Illinois	7	1	+6
Maryland	6	3	+3
Missouri	6	1	+5
New York	3	1	+2
California	5	2	+3
Arkansas*	**4**	**1**	**+3**
Indiana*	4	2	+2
Massachusetts	4	1	+3
Ohio	4	0	+4
Pennsylvania	4	2	+2
Colorado	2	0	+2
Connecticut	2	1	+1
Rhode Island	2	1	+1
Delaware	1	1	0
District of Columbia	1	1	0
Nebraska	1	1	0
% South	61.2	59.6	
% Border South	18.1	16.9	
% Non–South	20.7	23.5	

Note: Southern states indicated in bold. Border South states indicated in italic. States with a state NBL affiliate indicated with an asterisk.

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chapters. Though these numbers are substantial, as a proportion of the total Black population, non-southern chapters were proportionally overrepresented. In 1910, 89% of the United States' Black population lived in the South and in 1915, just over 20% of chapters were located outside the South and Border South. Nevertheless, the NNBL's organization was more developed where there were more Black citizens.

Table 1 also reveals that the number of affiliated NBLs grew in nearly every state, but especially in the South. North Carolina saw the largest gains (twenty-four additional NBLs), with Texas (14), Tennessee (12), Virginia (11), and Alabama (10) rounding out the states that added ten or more locals. Four of these states also had a state NBL affiliate, suggesting a positive correlation between state federations and local chapter development. The Border South states of Kentucky (9) and West Virginia (8) also saw significant growth. Outside the South, where the Black population was more concentrated in a smaller number of urban enclaves, fewer locals were chartered between 1907 and 1915, but the number of chapters still saw modest growth.

A second indicator of organizational strength is the number of individuals who joined the NNBL directly, as active members, by state. These data are shown in Table 2, which lists states in rank order of number of active members in 1915. This table reveals that direct membership in the NNBL was quite small in comparison to that of many other early twentieth-century voluntary associations, both Black and White. Moreover, active membership declined over time, dropping from 339 in 1905 to 216 in 1915.

It is also useful to consider trends in the distribution of active members by region. In 1905, 41.3% of active NNBL members came from southern states; by 1915, this percentage shrunk to 32.4%. Border South states contributed 5.1% and 7.4% of active memberships, respectively, which means more active members always resided outside the South, rising to 60.2% of active members in 1915. These numbers defy expectations based on the distribution of the Black population but can potentially be attributed to the growing number of federated NBLs in the South. Black business owners who could join and participate in local (and often state) NBLs may have thought it unnecessary to also join the NNBL. Outside the region, however, the smaller Black population and fewer affiliated NBLs may have led individuals seeking solidarity and a professional network to join the national organization.

A final descriptive statistic to consider is the number of life members. Table 3 displays this by state, ranked from most to least life members in 1915; data from 1905 are also presented for comparison. In 1905, there were sixty-eight total life members. This increased to 220 by 1915, showing a marked increase in the number of individuals who paid a $25 fee to formally associate with the NNBL for life. In 1915, moreover, the number of life members was higher than the number of active members by four, a notable difference considering the cost of life membership. Clearly, there was a committed business elite that sought a permanent connection to the NNBL.

Considering life members by state and region adds additional insight. In 1905, 48.5% of life members resided in non-southern states; by 1915, this markedly declined to 33.8%. But life memberships increased from 44.1% in the South to 51.2%; in the Border South, they rose from 7.4% to 15%. The increase in the number of life members was particularly notable in Oklahoma (from no life members in 1905 to fifteen life members in 1915), Mississippi (from 4 to 19), Tennessee (from 6 to 19), Arkansas (from 6 to 15), and Alabama (from 5 to 10). Four of these five states had a state NBL affiliate, suggesting that a fully realized federated structure may have compelled individuals to make a lifetime commitment to the organization.

Overall, the summary statistics reveal both similarities and differences in where local NBLs, active members, and life members were located by 1915. Pearson correlations of the

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Table 2. Count of NNBL Active Members in States Recording Membership, Ranked from Highest to Lowest in 1915

State	1915	1905	Δ 1905-1915
Massachusetts	32	9	+23
New York	21	36	–15
New Jersey	16	13	+3
District of Columbia	15	16	–1
Virginia*	**13**	**30**	**–17**
Pennsylvania	12	40	–28
Alabama*	**9**	**19**	**–10**
Connecticut	9	9	0
Georgia	**8**	**26**	**–18**
Indiana*	7	13	–6
Mississippi*	**7**	**12**	**–5**
Rhode Island	7	9	–2
South Carolina*	**7**	**8**	**–1**
Florida*	**6**	**8**	**–2**
Texas*	**6**	**5**	**+1**
Louisiana*	**5**	**4**	**+1**
Maryland	5	2	+3
North Carolina*	**4**	**5**	**–1**
Missouri	4	1	+3
*Oklahoma**	4	0	+4
Illinois	3	18	–15
Arkansas*	**3**	**17**	**–14**
Ohio	3	11	–8
Kentucky	2	9	–7
Tennessee	**2**	**6**	**–4**
Kansas*	2	5	–3
Delaware	1	5	–4
California	1	0	+1
Iowa	1	0	+1
Arizona	1	0	+1
Colorado	0	2	–2
Washington	0	1	–1
% South	32.4	41.3	
% Border South	7.4	5.1	
% Non–South	60.2	53.6	

Note: Southern states indicated in bold. Border South states indicated in italic. States with a state NBL affiliate indicated with an asterisk.

three state-level organizational measures in 1915 confirm this finding. The numbers of active and life members are modestly correlated (.45), suggesting that membership in the national organization—whether for a single year or for life—was more common in some states than in others. Yet, the number of life members in a state is more highly correlated to the number of local NBLs (.52) than the number of active members is to the number of local NBLs (.27). As such, these first-cut results suggest that active memberships are distinct from the development of the NNBL as a federated organization (i.e., state federations, local affiliates, life memberships).

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Table 3. Count of NNBL Life Members in States Recording Membership, Ranked from Highest to Lowest in 1915

State	1915	1905	Δ 1905-1915
Mississippi*	**19**	**4**	**+15**
Tennessee	**19**	**6**	**+13**
New York	18	13	+5
Arkansas*	**15**	**6**	**+9**
*Oklahoma**	15	0	+15
Alabama*	**10**	**5**	**+5**
Florida*	**9**	**1**	**+8**
Illinois	9	2	+7
Kentucky	9	4	+5
Massachusetts	9	5	+4
Indiana*	8	4	+4
District of Columbia	7	2	+5
South Carolina*	**7**	**0**	**+7**
Louisiana*	**6**	**1**	**+5**
Pennsylvania	6	5	+1
Virginia*	**6**	**2**	**+4**
Georgia	**5**	**3**	**+2**
Kansas*	5	0	+5
North Carolina*	**5**	**1**	**+4**
Texas*	**5**	**1**	**+4**
Ohio	4	2	+2
Missouri	3	0	+3
California	2	0	+2
Delaware	2	1	+1
Maryland	2	0	+2
Connecticut	1	0	+1
Iowa	1	0	+1
% South	51.2	44.1	
% Border South	15.0	7.4	
% Non–South	33.8	48.5	

Notes: Southern states indicated in bold. Border South states indicated in italic. States with a state NBL affiliate indicated with an asterisk. In 1915, thirteen life members were not listed with a place of residence. They are excluded from all calculations shown in the table.

Contextual Predictors of Organizational Strength

We begin our multivariate analyses by determining the correlates of NNBL state affiliates; the results are shown in Table 4. Model 1 considers the presence of a state affiliate in 1915 as a function of urban Black population and the value of Black-owned farms. Model 2 adds a control for region (South=1).

The results are clear. State NBL affiliates were not the product of increasing urban Black populations or the South. Instead, they were more likely to be present in states where the value of Black-owned farms—a key component of Washington's Tuskegee Machine—was higher. For example, as shown in Figure 1, after holding urbanity and region at their mean levels, the predicted probability of a state NBL affiliate in a state rises from.17 in a state with the mean value of Black-owned farms to.40 at one standard deviation above the mean and.68 at two standard deviations above the mean.

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Table 4. Firth Logit Models Estimating Presence of State NBL Affiliate, 1915

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2
Urban Black population	.03	–.12
	(.08)	(.14)
Value of Black–owned farms	.002	.001
	(.001)*	(.0005)*
South	———	3.22
		(1.98)
Constant	–2.85	–2.57
	(.72)*	(.71)*
Wald Chi–Sq.	12.71	14.48
Prob.>Chi–Sq.	.002	.002

Notes: N=48.
* p<.05, two-tailed test.
Firth logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

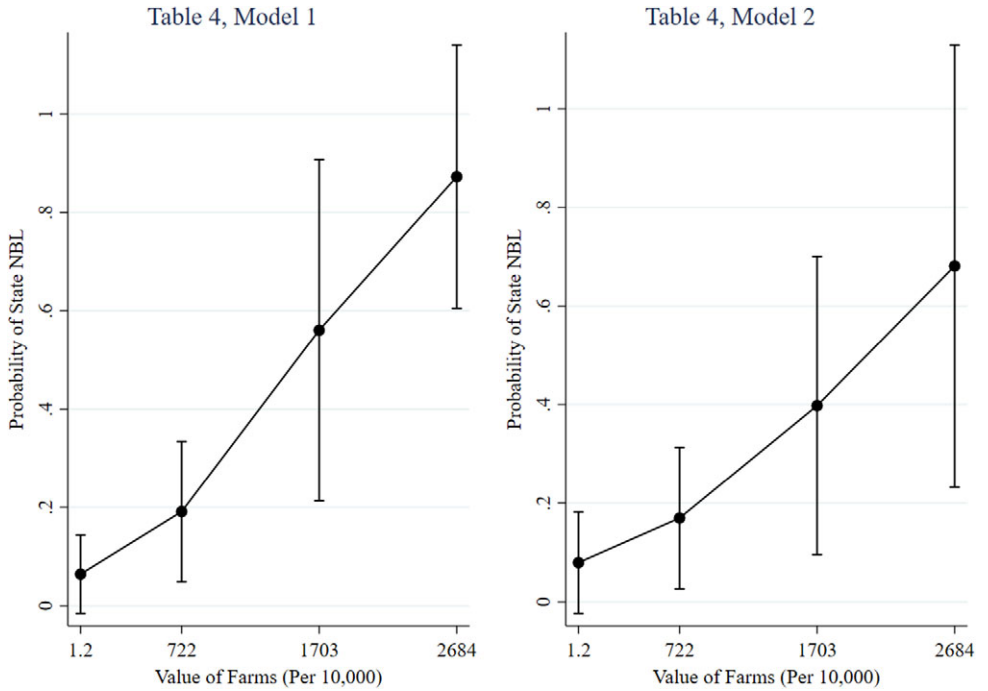

Figure 1. Probability of State NBL Affiliate by Value of Black-Owned Farms.
Notes: Left panel based on estimates from Table 4, Model 1; right panel based on estimates from Table 4, Model 2. The y-axis sets the value of farms (per 10,000) at one standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and one and two standard deviations above the mean (rounded). All other predictors are held at their mean values. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

The next step is to consider the effects of context on each measure of NNBL strength; a series of negative binomial regressions is presented in Table 5. For each of the three dependent variables, three iterative models are presented. Model 1 uses urban Black population and the value of Black-owned farms, Model 2 adds the state NNBL dummy

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Table 5. Negative Binomial Regressions Estimating Counts of Local NBL Affiliates, NNBL Active Members, and NNBL Life Members by State, 1915

	Local NBLs			Active Members			Life Members		
Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Urban Black population	1.15 (.03)*	1.15 (.03)*	1.19 (.04)*	1.18 (.06)*	1.17 (.05)*	1.22 (.07)*	1.19 (.05)*	1.20 (.05)*	1.24 (.06)*
Value of Black–owned farms	1.0004 (.00)*	1.0001 (.00)	1.0002 (.00)	.9998 (.00)	.9995 (.00)	.9996 (.00)	1.0004 (.00)*	1.0000 (.00)	1.0001 (.00)
State NBL	———	2.36 (.93)*	3.09 (1.27)*	———	2.41 (2.02)	3.97 (3.68)	———	3.35 (2.03)*	4.34 (2.70)*
South	———	———	.43 (.21)	———	———	.28 (.27)	———	———	.40 (.25)
Constant	1.15 (.27)	1.11 (.25)	.96 (.23)	1.57 (.50)	1.53 (.48)	1.33 (.42)	.71 (.25)	.62 (.22)	.53 (.20)
LR Test	35.56*	25.94*	25.90*	143.09*	136.93*	128.78*	107.01*	101.33*	100.11*
Pseudo r^2	.14	.16	.17	.05	.06	.07	.10	.12	.13

Notes: N=48.

* p<.05, two-tailed test.

Negative binomial regression models; incident rate ratios reported with standard errors in parentheses.

variable (which the models shown in Table 4 reveal is closely related to the value of Black-owned farms), and Model 3 adds the South dummy variable.

The results shown in Table 5 reveal that more local NBLs, active members, and life members existed in areas with larger urban Black populations. This relationship is positive and statistically significant in all models. Since these are incident rate ratios, with 1.00 being the baseline, each additional unit increase in the Black population (per 10,000; $\bar{x}\approx5$; sd≈6) multiplies the rate of local NBLs by 15-19%, the rate of active members by 17-22%, and the rate of life members by 19-24%, depending on the model. These effects are illustrated in Figure 2, which is based on the predictions of Model 1 for each dependent variable, holding the value of Black-owned farms at its mean value. Quite clearly, predicted counts of local NBLs, active members, and life members increase as the urban Black population increases; moving from the mean to one standard deviation above the mean increases the predicted count of local NBLs by 4.08, the predicted count of active members by 4.89, the predicted count of life members by 4.12. And, despite large confidence intervals (due to the small n) at two standard deviations above the mean, predictions are significant at the $p<.05$ level for local NBLs ($p=.047$); they are just outside the $p<.05$ range for active ($p=.083$) and life ($p=.053$) members.

The models shown in Table 5, Model 1 also reveal that that the numbers of local NBLs and life members increase as the value of Black-owned farms increases. However, as expected based on the results shown in Table 4, the inclusion of the state NBL variable

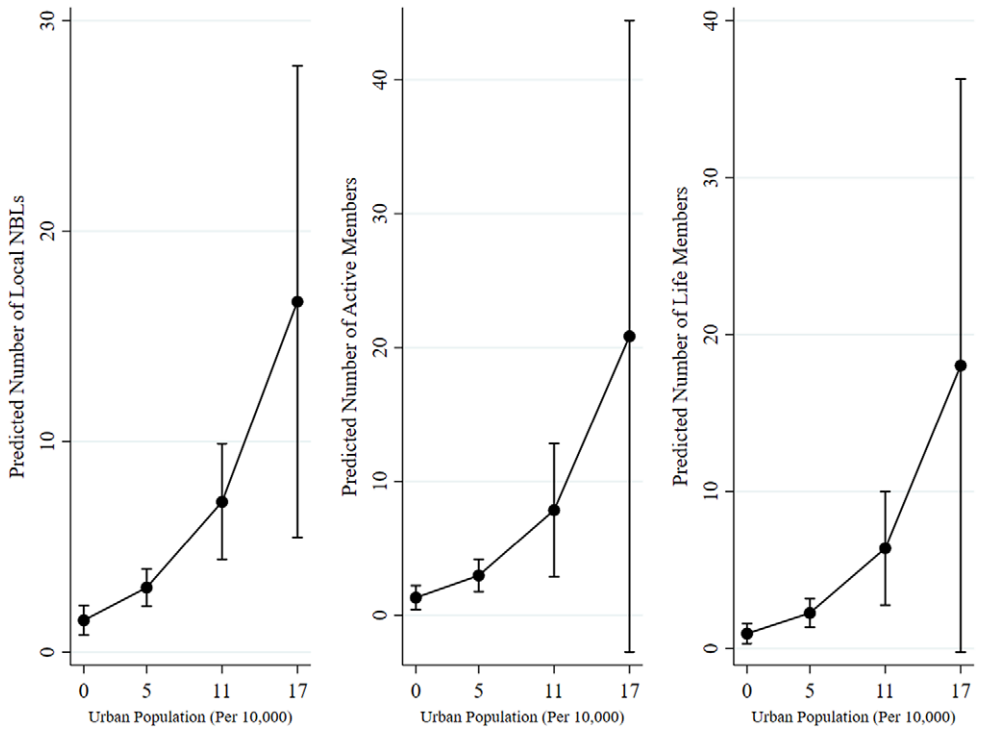

Figure 2. Predicted Local NBLs, Active Members, and Life Members by Urban Black Population.
Notes: Predictions based on Table 5, Model 1 for each dependent variable. The y-axis sets the value of urban population (per 10,000) at one standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and one and two standard deviations above the mean (rounded). The value of Black-owned farms is held at its mean. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

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in Model 2 eliminates this significant effect. Instead, the state NBL dummy variable is positive and significant in both models. The effect of a state NBL is quite strong; states with an NBL affiliate have 136% more local NBLs than states without an NBL affiliate and 235% more life members. Substantively, this means that over the range of the variable, the presence of a state NBL increases local NBLs from 2.5 to 6 and life members from 1.7 to 5.5.

Finally, it is worth noting that the South dummy variable in Model 3 is never significant.[6] Thus, our analyses suggest that the urban Black population was the most consistent predictor of greater NNBL strength in 1915, with the presence of a state NNBL affiliate (itself driven by greater values of Black-owned farms) also contributing significantly to the number of local chapters and life members. This finding underscores the divide between the NNBL's active national membership and its attempt to build a federated organization. While its active membership—which was shrinking by 1915—was primarily urban, its organizational base and infrastructure—which was growing—relied on the Black agricultural wealth at the center of Washington's and the Tuskegee Machine's agenda.

Organizational Change Over Time

To better understand the changing environment and the group's attempts to adapt to shifting realities, we consider state-level changes in local NBLs, active members, and life members from 1905–1915. These change models, estimated using OLS regression and following the same iterations presented in Table 5, are shown in Table 6.

These models reveal a positive and significant relationship between urban Black population and the growth of local NBLs. And, like before, changes in the number of local NBLs were driven, at least in part, by states with more valuable Black-owned farms and, by extension, a state NBL. The South dummy is not significant.

The findings for life memberships are similarly consistent with those of previous analyses. In all model iterations, life memberships increased most in states where the value of Black-owned farms was higher. State NBL affiliates—closely related to Black property

Table 6. Regressions Estimating Changes in Counts of Local NBL Affiliates (1907-1915), NNBL Active Members (1905-1915), and NNBL Life Members (1905-1915) by State

	Local NBLs			Active Members			Life Members		
Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Urban Black population	.41	.40	.36	–.72	–.72	–.78	.09	.08	.10
	(.09)*	(.00)*	(.10)*	(.19)*	(.19)*	(.23)*	(.08)	(.08)	(.10)
Value of Black–owned farms	.002	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.002	.002	.002
	(.001)*	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.002)	(.002)	(.001)*	(.001)*	(.001)*
State NBL	———	2.44	2.00	———	.78	.11	———	2.55	2.80
		(1.48)	(1.61)		(3.23)	(3.54)		(1.38)	(1.51)
South	———	———	1.48	———	———	2.21	———	———	–.82
			(2.05)			(4.49)			(1.91)
Constant	.22	.21	.34	.54	.54	.74	.57	.56	.48
	(.60)	(.59)	(.62)	(1.28)	(1.29)	(1.37)	(.57)	(.55)	(.58)
Adj. r^2	.63	.64	.64	.24	.23	.21	.46	.49	.48

Notes: N=48.

* p<.05, two-tailed test.

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models.

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values—were never significant but were positively signed and close to significance (p=.07) in both the second and third iterations.

On the other hand, active memberships declined most in states with larger urban Black populations; the other variables were never significant. This indicates that the decline in active memberships paralleled the rise in local NBLs; once organizational capacity was created, members stopped paying directly to the national body.

In short, Black urbanization significantly predicted increases in the number of local NBLs and decreases in the number of active members, and greater Black-owned farm values significantly predicted increases in the number life members. These findings are displayed in Figure 3, relying on Model 1 to show linear predictions for each of the dependent variables; as can be seen, these effects are not just statistically significant but also substantively important. For local NBLs, the shift from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean urban Black population led to a gain of 4.5 locals, a noteworthy increase because the mean of the dependent variable was 3.9. For active members, a similar shift led to a decline of around eight active members; this, too, is noteworthy, given that the mean of the dependent variable was -2.5. For life members, a similar shift in the value of Black-owned farms led to a gain of 4.1 life members, which is also greater than the mean of the dependent variable (2.8). Thus, these findings once again underscore that context was statistically and substantively significant to the NNBL's organizational development from 1905–1915.

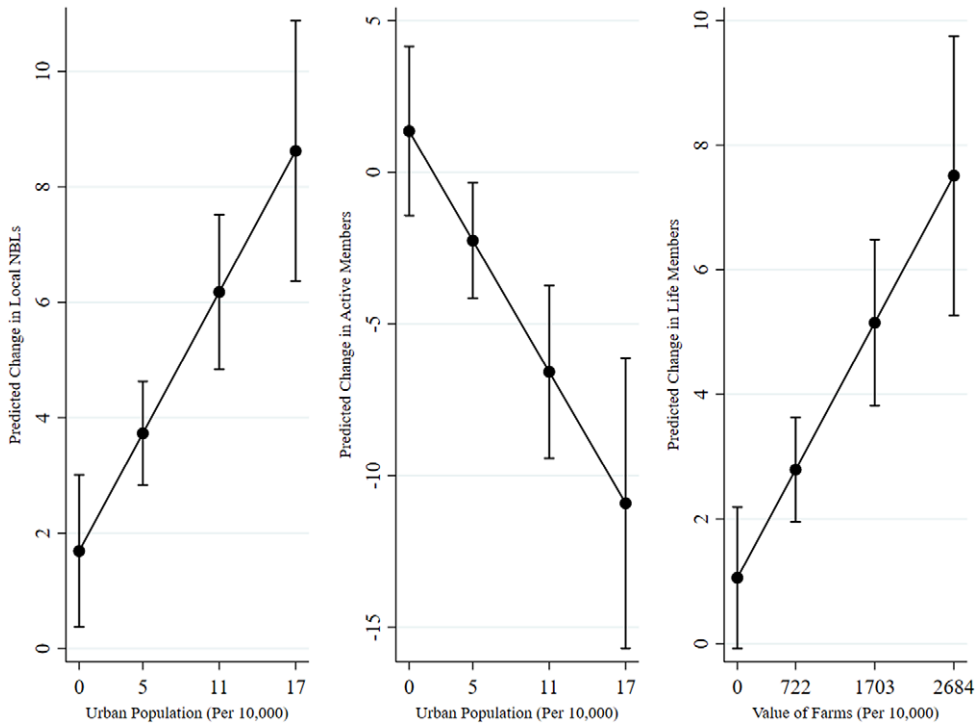

Figure 3. Predicted Change in Local NBLs, Active Members, and Life Members.
Notes: Predictions based on Table 6, Model 1 for each dependent variable. The y-axis sets the value of urban population (per 10,000) or the value of Black-owned farms (per 10,000) at one standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and one and two standard deviations above the mean (rounded). Other predictors are held at their mean values. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

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Discussion and Conclusion

In total, the results provide a clear picture of the NNBL's development by 1915. Specifically, we show that the organization's growth relied on both larger urban Black populations (for local NBLs, active members, and, at times, life members) and more valuable Black-owned farming (for state affiliates, local NBLs, and life members). These findings are consistent with previous research reflecting the role of urbanization in organizing groups (Brown 1974; Gamm and Putnam, 1999) and the Tuskegee Machine's close ties to agriculture as a business and source of Black wealth (Washington 1907, 1912a, 1912b).

Future work needs to develop from this empirical analysis. First and foremost, while the NNBL reflected the economic and social circumstances of Black America in 1915, the findings also suggest the group was ill-positioned for changes that were already underway in the Black community. The South—the region where the NNBL was best organized and where Black farming was most developed—was about to feel the effects of the Great Migration. This shifted Black populations to northern urban centers and upended interest in farming as a path to wealth. As a result, Black-owned farm values decreased around 11% between 1920–1950 and much faster thereafter (Schweninger 1989). Add to this the controversies surrounding Washington's accommodationist approach, which was increasingly challenged by the equality-focused NAACP (formed in 1909), and the stricter enforcement and expansion of Jim Crow laws in the South and anti-integration policies elsewhere, and it is likely that the NNBL found it increasingly difficult to not just grow but to survive (Burrows 1977).

Second, case studies of state organizations and local chapters might reveal interesting insights into how the organization operated. For examples, let us consider Oklahoma and North Carolina. Both states were home to so-called "Black Wall Streets" in Tulsa (e.g., Messer et al., 2018) and Durham (e.g., Prieto et al., 2022), respectively, reflecting opportunities to mobilize Black business leaders for shared goals that may not have existed elsewhere. In addition, in Oklahoma, a large number of Black towns were founded during this period (see Tolson 1970), altering population dynamics and resulting in that state's rapid growth in NBLs (see Table 1). In North Carolina, the state adopted formal segregationist policies later than most southern states, only after the violent ousting of the 1890s Republican-Populist majority in the state government (see Edmonds 1951). Did these unique population and political dynamics affect the NNBL's growth in these states? And how did similar or divergent trends in other states affect the group's ability to establish a foothold in those contexts?

These future questions aside, the present study is the first to provide empirical evidence that the NNBL united Black business owners into a single organizational force and entrepreneurial network centered around the goals and ideas of Booker T. Washington. The findings illustrate the importance of both urbanity and agriculture to organizing Black business, thereby revealing how the NNBL's development reflected the realities of Black wealth in the early twentieth century.

Notes

[1] In particular, groups tend to be more successful in smaller urban areas (Gamm and Putnam, 1999), where population density and income are typically higher, but the number of diversions is not so great as to take citizens away from association activity.

[2] Booker T. Washington did not pay the fee but was made a life member for his role in establishing the NNBL.

[3] We do not measure Border South states in the multivariate models; the contextual indicators better capture the distinctions between these states and others than a regional indicator.

[4] The original measure, the value of Colored-owned farms, also includes those classified as Indians. This is important mainly for South Dakota, which has no NNBL presence but a relatively high value on this measure. Given that this works against our hypothesis, we keep it in our models.

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[5] These are Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia.

[6] This adds credence to the idea that region, as modeled, is inappropriate once other, more direct, measures of the Black population and NNBL organizing are used.

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