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# Regulating Beauty: The Licensing of Barbers and Beauticians in Alabama and the Nation

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Using Alabama as a case study of the beauty industry, this paper will demonstrate how licensing laws and regulations affected barbers and beauticians as they struggled to gain more clientele than their competitors. In the early twentieth century, white men dominated the market for cutting hair. Though the process started mid-century, by 1980, that relationship was inverted as women found themselves far outnumbering men. This research helps explain the gendered inversion of labor market trends while providing more general insights into the role of licensing laws in labor markets. Importantly, this work explores how race shaped labor market regulations, which affected and continue to affect labor markets and individual businesses in important ways.

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The goal of this paper is to explain the multivariate causes of this important labor market reversal using an analysis of race, gender, and political economy. It will argue that the advocacy for restrictive licensing laws and regulations, the failure to innovate and adapt to new styles in hair, and the racial and gendered makeup of the Barbers, Beauticians, and Allied Industries (BBAI) led to the ultimate failure of the union and the overall decrease in barbers during the latter half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the degree to which black women were represented on licensing boards and played a role in the unique structure of cosmetology groups and unions led and contributed to the proliferation of cosmetologists during the same period.

The labor market for haircutting in the United States changed significantly during the twentieth century. In the early twentieth century, men outnumbered women as barbers and hairdressers. The process started midcentury, but by 1980, that relationship was inverted. At the start of the century, there were 131,116 barbers and hairdressers. Of that total, 125,542 were men, while only 5,574 were women.<sup>1</sup> The number of people cutting hair ballooned over

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1. In 1900, census collectors grouped barbers and hairdressers into the same category but differentiated the total by gender.

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the next eighty years. In 1980, the total reached 664,714. Of that total, male barbers and cosmetologists made up 196,399 while female barbers and cosmetologists made up 505,306. Notably, only 90,939 of the men cutting hair were barbers, meaning that the number of barbers overall decreased during the twentieth century. Men and women could work in either sector, but barbering was and still is often associated with men, while cosmetology and hairdressing were and still are associated with women.<sup>2</sup> The largest category of haircutters in 1980 was female cosmetologists, numbering 490,785. The transition to a service-based economy in the postwar era helps explain these trends, but it does not answer a fundamental question: Why did women come to dominate an industry previously controlled by men? White men dominated the market for cutting hair in the early twentieth century and had every reason to believe they would continue to control their industry.<sup>3</sup>

Using evidence from Alabama's beauty industry and the unions involved, this paper will explain how barbers lost their supremacy over female cosmetologists in the market for cutting hair. The advocacy for restrictive licensing laws and regulations, the failure to innovate and adapt to new styles in hair, and the racial makeup of the BBAI destroyed what was an influential union and accelerated the overall decrease in barbers during the latter half of the twentieth century. In the sector directly competing with male barbers—cosmetology—the representation of black women on licensing boards and in cosmetology professional organizations and unions contributed to the proliferation of female haircutters. This research helps explain the gendered reversal of labor market trends while providing more general insights into the role of licensing laws in labor markets. Importantly, this work explores how race shaped labor market regulations, which affected and continue to affect labor markets and individual businesses in important ways. Neither race nor gender dominates the analysis of these dynamics, as the two cannot be disentangled.

Scholars have examined the history of cosmetology and barber businesses, but none have focused on the significance of licensing laws in shaping the beauty industry more generally. In *Permanent Waves*, Julie Willett provides a general overview of the history of cosmetologists and the social environment behind a major occupational group in the beauty industry.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, *Knights of the Razor* by Douglas Bristol Jr. provides a historical overview of the barber industry, though Bristol specifically deals with the interesting history of black barbers.<sup>5</sup> Few scholars have considered the history of cosmetology and barber industries together and how licensing laws and regulations affected them. Similarly, few scholars have considered how the two industries interacted. In some ways, the two trades were fluid and allowed men, and sometimes women, to choose or switch between them. However, in many ways, barbers

2. What differentiates cosmetologists and barbers can be complicated. In states where both professions are licensed, their respective laws would designate what each profession is permitted to do and the requirements needed to obtain a license. Still, census data for professions allows individuals to self-report their profession, meaning that individuals could self-report as being barbers or cosmetologists while operating without a license.

3. U.S. Census Bureau. 1900 Census Special Reports: Occupations at the Twelfth Census 1980. Detailed Occupation of the Experienced Civil Labor Force by Sex for the United States and Regions: 1980 and 1970.

4. Willett, *Permanent Waves*. For more on the history of cosmetology and the connections between beauty salons and politics, see Tiffany Gill's *Beauty Shop Politics*. Though Gill says very little about licensing laws, her work speaks to the rich culture of black beauty shops.

5. Bristol Jr., *Knights of the Razor*. For more on black barbers, see Quincy Mills *Cutting Along the Color Line*. Mills says very little about licensing laws, but his work highlights the rich history of black barbers shops as important cultural and civic institutions.

and cosmetologists encouraged gatekeeping as they competed over clientele and tried to lobby state legislatures for favorable regulations.

Over the last twenty years, economists and economic historians have become increasingly interested in occupational licensing laws and their economic effects. To cite just one example, Frank Adams et al. find that cosmetology licensing laws result in a \$1.7 billion transfer to the cosmetology industry and that cosmetology licensing laws result in a deadweight loss (inefficiency<sup>6</sup>) to the economy of roughly \$177 million.<sup>7</sup> Other scholars, such as David Bernstein, have shown the degree to which licensing laws were historically advocated for as a way to exclude blacks from any given profession. Since most licensing laws were passed in the early twentieth century when blacks lacked the education and capital needed to afford licenses, Bernstein argues that “even purely public-spirited licensure laws, if such things actually existed, necessarily harmed blacks.”<sup>8</sup> Research is limited, but at least one article considers the history of barber licensing in a specific state—Arkansas. Using that state as a case study, scholars found that advocates of barber licensing laws justified them to state legislatures as measures to ensure public health and sanitation. However, they argue that the true motivation behind getting the laws passed was a hope among union barbers that such laws would increase the wages of established barbers by restricting the entry of new barbers into the labor market.<sup>9</sup>

The history of barbers and cosmetologists fits into larger historical narratives on black businesses and black poverty. In *The Color of Money*, Mehrsa Baradaran argues that black poverty was historically driven by “the coercive hand of the state that has consistently excluded blacks from full participation in American capitalism.”<sup>10</sup> While the history of cosmetology and the role of the state is more complicated, black men were largely excluded from the profession of barbering through the enforcement of state licensing laws. Using the coercive hand of the state, the BBAI, a predominantly white male union, crafted and lobbied for regulations that put black Americans at a stark disadvantage in the labor market for cutting hair. Baradaran’s work focuses on the exclusion of black Americans from banking, but her thesis that the use of state power caused black poverty is supported by the history of barber licensing laws.<sup>11</sup>

Licensing laws affect numerous professions and shape labor markets in important ways. Yet, historical studies of licensing laws are almost nonexistent. Though it is unfortunate, there are clear reasons why scholars do not research the history of licensing laws. Licensing laws are local regulations requiring archival research in individual states and sometimes individual counties. Licensing laws are often similar across states, but the fact that they are not federal laws and were passed in different years makes easy generalizations impossible. This paper

6. Deadweight loss is when a market is not in equilibrium (not efficient). This typically occurs when an industry is monopolistic. In such a scenario, consumer surplus and producer surplus are not equal. In this case, producers have more surplus than consumers since cosmetologists (due to licensing laws) can charge a higher price than if licensing laws were not in place.

7. Adams, Jackson, and Ekelund Jr., “Occupational Licensing in a ‘Competitive’ Labor Market,” 261–278.

8. Bernstein, *Only One Place of Redress*, 90. Although his work was mostly based on economic theory, Milton Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom* was one of the first monographs to raise the issue of licensing laws. For an introduction to the issue from someone who wrote polemically against licensing laws, see Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom*.

9. Corley and Witcher, “Barber Licensing in Arkansas,” 115–138.

10. Baradaran, *The Color of Money*, 7.

11. Corley, Witcher, and Lucas, “License to Exclude,” 132–148.

uses Alabama as a case study, and the previously mentioned paper used Arkansas for those reasons. Also, licensed professions are not always organized since workers typically work for themselves. The barbering profession offers a unique opportunity for research because there was an American Federation of Labor (AFL) and eventually an AFL-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)-affiliated barber union (BBAI). This union kept extensive records that can be found in one place, which makes a more general study of the haircutting profession possible. Another complicating factor in the study of licensing laws is that they regulate individual professions, making their impact partial and gradual. Still, these laws, as this paper shows, greatly affected individuals and the labor market they regulated.

Though no comprehensive study of the political economy of haircutting has been undertaken, at least one example of such a study exists for the medical profession. In *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, sociologist Paul Starr charts how the medical profession achieved what he calls “professional sovereignty.”<sup>12</sup> According to Starr, the medical professions’ ascendancy to cultural and political authority occurred during the historical transition from Populism to Progressivism. During this transition, “traditional certainties were breaking down,” allowing occupations requiring professional authority to fulfill people’s reverence for “those who claimed specialized, technical knowledge, validated by communities of their peers.”<sup>13</sup> Like the white unions that represented barbers and cosmetologists, the medical profession “actively sought out licensing” to maintain power and reduce labor market competition.<sup>14</sup> Barbers, hairdressers, and doctors have little in common. Still, their respective historical narratives share a professionalizing impulse that sought to use state power to reduce competition and grant included members economic and cultural privileges of authority.

This paper takes a similar approach to Julie Willett and Douglas Bristol Jr.’s in that it seeks to understand how two professions changed over a long period. However, this work of business history and political economy is more concerned with how legislators created regulations and regulatory bodies that affected individual businesses and the labor market for barbering and hairdressing. Here, the concern is for what will be referred to as the “beauty industry,” but more specifically, the market for cutting hair. Individuals who cut hair are the primary focus, but unions, local politicians, state legislatures, and licensing boards, along with their regulations, have also played an important role in shaping the beauty industry.

## Early Local Barber Regulations in Alabama

Alabama was the last state in the country to license barbers. Although Alabama did not have a statewide licensing law until 1971, much of Alabama was already covered by local licensing ordinances. Indeed, as early as 1935, Mobile County licensed barbers working in its jurisdiction.<sup>15</sup> While localities licensed barbers throughout the early twentieth century, it is still worth

12. Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, 5.

13. Ibid, 19.

14. Ibid, 28.

15. To Define, Regulate and License Barbers and Barber Colleges, Act No. 290, Alabama Legislature, Regular Session of 1935, *Internet Archive*, Alabama Department of Archives and History, <https://archive.org/details/alabama-acts?&sort=date>.

considering why the entire state did not fall into line as soon as the rest of the country. Obvious answers to why Alabama was the last state to pass a state licensing law are not readily available, but Alabama's political culture and constitution might explain why barbers were unable to lobby for a licensing law sooner. As Alabama historian Wayne Flynt explains, "organized labor had only sporadic success among Alabama workers."<sup>16</sup> In early twentieth-century Alabama, economic slowdowns led to wage cuts, which in turn sparked organized strikes. Taking the side of employers over labor, Alabama Governors ordered workers to end strikes and were willing to use the National Guard to disband them. Organized barbers did not strike for better wages since they usually worked for themselves, but a general antipathy between Alabama politicians and organized labor might explain why legislatures were unwilling to pass a barber licensing law.

Alabama's 1901 Constitution offers another explanation for why Alabama did not pass a barber licensing law sooner. Beyond disfranchising black voters, Alabama's constitution also distorted the state's budgetary system. By capping property taxes, Alabama's constitution made it difficult for politicians to find the revenue to fund state services. Lacking potential revenue accrued from property taxes, politicians turned to "license and privilege taxes, sales and occupational taxes," and "personal and corporate income taxes."<sup>17</sup> This could be a reason that counties licensed barbers across the state before the state passed a licensing law. It is likely that organized barbers still wanted a law on the state books, but county licensing laws would have made a state law less necessary.

The prominence of black barbers may have also contributed to the general weakness of the BBAI in Alabama. Barbering served as an avenue for black men to find economic and social success in the early twentieth century. As Douglas Bristol Jr. explains, barbering was associated with servitude, making it open to blacks and "repugnant to white southerners who disdained it as 'nigger work.'"<sup>18</sup> As a result, "Black barbers embraced the respectability that they forged out of white racial stereotypes to cultivate white guardians and establish first-class barbershops."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, throughout the early twentieth-century South, upper-class white men sought out black barbers who were most skilled in the craft. The same was true in Alabama. Indeed, newspapers from the period reveal a preference amongst employers and consumers for black barbers. In a 1920 advertisement from Birmingham, an employer sought "A first-class colored barber wanted [sic] to wait on white people; a real good job."<sup>20</sup> Eight years later, an employer in Anniston sought out "3 first class colored barbers to wait on white trade."<sup>21</sup> By all accounts, black barbers were able to find success in Alabama relatively well into the twentieth century. When Will Lockett, a prominent black barber, died in Selma in 1962, the *Selma Times* announced the funeral for the "Negro barber who served the white patrons of Crocheron's shop for more than 60 years."<sup>22</sup> The success of black barbers in Alabama and their potential resistance

16. Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 39.

17. Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 17.

18. Bristol Jr., *Knights of the Razor*, 52.

19. Bristol Jr., *Knights of the Razor*, 69.

20. "Employment: Help Wanted-Male," *The Birmingham News*, August 5, 1920, 22.

21. "WANTED," *The Anniston Star*, August 1, 1928, 7.

22. "Rites Set Thursday for Negro Barber," *The Selma Times-Journal*, October 16, 1962, 8.

to the licensing scheme could have made it difficult for the mostly white BBAI to lobby for a licensing law as compared with other states where black barbers were less prevalent.

Few sources from Alabama demonstrate black resistance to the mostly white BBAI and their lobbying efforts, but there are examples from other locations. Black barbers in Muncie, Indiana celebrated when a barber license bill was struck down in their state legislature. The black barbers believed that the bill was “introduced for the sole purpose of legislating directly against him [black barbers]. We as colored barbers of Muncie ardently opposed the bill.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, David Bernstein discusses how blacks resisted barber licensing in early twentieth-century Virginia. When a bill was introduced, the Virginia Commission on Interracial Cooperation and the Barbers’ Protective Association, “an organization of African American barbers, both vigorously opposed the bill.”<sup>24</sup> In reality, black resistance to licensing and unions was to a degree a widespread phenomenon of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Paul Moreno explains, AFL unions “used local ordinances controlling licensing and apprenticeship to keep blacks out of their trades.”<sup>25</sup> As a result, many blacks began to believe that “even where unions did not exclude blacks, their ultimate goal was to limit or ultimately drive them out.”<sup>26</sup>

Another reason Alabama did not get a state barber licensing law until 1971 is that citizens and journalists tended to be against licensing bills from the start. As early as 1903, the *Fairhope Courier* ridiculed a barber license law that was introduced in the legislature because it believed it would have the effect of “making it much harder for poor men to make a living by acting as barbers.” Indeed, the newspaper assumed that the bill “probably originated with some barbers who want to monopolize the barbering business, under the guise of protecting the public.”<sup>27</sup> In later years, Alabama journalists made efforts to educate the public on the undesirable aspects of barber licensing laws. Bill Brooks, a journalist in Alabama, sought out barbers who were proposing a barber license law in the 1950s. He found that some barbers who supported the law were rather candid, as one admitted that “he figured the law would help those who are here now, that it will raise the price of hair-cuts, and keep out competition.”<sup>28</sup>

Alabama politicians also tended to criticize barber licensing laws, perhaps seeing them as a byproduct of labor activism. Harboring anti-union sentiments, politicians saw through the barber licensing scheme and pointed out who they benefitted. *The Birmingham News* reported that a 1903 bill to license barbers was introduced by Mr. Cunningham<sup>29</sup>, “himself a practical barber operating one of the largest shops in Birmingham.”<sup>30</sup> After a barber bill was introduced in the 1923 House of Representatives, *The (Montgomery) Times* reported that “the bill drew quite a few underbreath laughs, and whispers that some country barber had shaved the

23. George Knox, “He is not satisfied,” *The Freeman*, vol. XVI, issue 6, February 7, 1903, 4.

24. Bernstein, *Only One Place of Redress*, 38.

25. Paul Moreno, *Black Americans and Organized Labor*, 96.

26. *Ibid.*, 97.

27. “More ‘Protection’ Nonsense-And Worse,” *Fairhope Courier*, February 1, 1903, 1.

28. Bill Brooks, “It ‘Says Here,’” *The Brewton Standard*, April 28, 1955, 4.

29. Though little is revealed about Cunningham in the sources, the newspaper did report that the representative was “popular with the labor elements of Jefferson county.” Cunningham, like others who were able to get licensing laws passed, also justified the law as being a “great assistance to the State and county health officers in stamping out epidemics.”

30. “That Barber Bill,” *The Birmingham News*, January 24, 1903, 5.



representative with the back of a razor.”<sup>31</sup> Charles Long, in seeking renomination as a state representative of Lauderdale County, made opposition to barber licensing a centerpiece of his 1962 campaign. Indeed, Long called a 1959 bill that was proposed to license barbers a “special interest legislation” that would allow barbers to “set their prices as high as they please and force the people of this country to pay them.”<sup>32</sup> Though some ordinances did get passed for specific counties, it appears that statewide barber licensing bills were met with a mixture of indignation and humor.

While state barber licensing laws were consistently met with resistance, local licensing ordinances did get passed frequently. Indeed, at the barber union’s international convention in 1968, delegate Jerry Crow explained that “80 percent of the barbers in the State of Alabama are covered by a barber license law. Every major city, with the exception of Tuscaloosa, has a county law.”<sup>33</sup> Few scholars have researched county licensing boards. This is likely because it is very difficult to understand the inner workings of such boards since they were so local and numerous. Nonetheless, the sources in Alabama provide a sense of how these boards worked and whom they harmed. Local licensing boards were more likely than state boards to abuse their discretionary power in attempting to control the supply of barbers.

County licensing boards appear to have had full discretion when it came to administering examinations. As such, examinations often did not serve to prove the proficiency of barbers but rather served to restrict entry into the profession. For instance, the Mobile Barber Examiners, at times, forced candidates to be able to shave lather off a balloon using a straight-edged razor to receive a license.<sup>34</sup> The same Mobile barber board was later exposed in Alabama’s Court of Appeals for administering exams that had little to do with the practice of barbering. After being denied a barber license since he lacked an elementary education, G. W. Hardeman appealed the decision to an Alabama circuit court, which ruled that Hardeman was entitled to a license.<sup>35</sup> Subsequently, the Mobile County Barber Commission appealed the decision in 1945. On hearing the commission’s appeal, Alabama’s Court of Appeals upheld the original decision and found that the barber examinations, which contained 50 questions, “cannot possibly throw any light on whether a man is qualified to follow the occupation of barber.”<sup>36</sup> Since Hardeman did not have the necessary education to qualify for a license, the commission administered an educational test that asked questions such as “What is science?,” “What is art?,” and “How much of the earth is water?”<sup>37</sup> In revealing the absurdity of the Mobile County Commission and the exams they administered, the court pointed out that people should not have to have “an elementary education in order to be an efficient and successful barber. We

31. “Here’s a Bill To Make Your Barber Sharpen His Tools,” *The Times*, July 10, 1923, 1.

32. Charles Long, “The Barbers’ Bill Issue in the Forthcoming Election,” *The Florence Herald*, May 17, 1962, 10.

33. Report of Committee on State Associations, 1968, Box 1, Folder Proceedings of the Twenty-Third Convention of the Journeyman Barbers, Hairdressers, Cosmetologists, and Proprietors, International Union and Reports of the General President and General Secretary-Treasurer, Bal Harbour, Florida, July 24-29, 79, BBAI papers, Archival Division The SHSW, Madison, Wisconsin.

34. Martin, “Alabama,” in *Interest Group Politics in the Southern States*, ed., Hrebenar and Thomas, 254.

35. It is unclear from the legal record and newspapers when Hardeman appealed his being denied a license. In any case, the time spent without a license would have hurt his business and livelihood.

36. *Barbers Comm’n v. Hardeman*, 31 Ala. App. 627 (1945).

37. *Barbers Comm’n v. Hardeman*, 31 Ala. App. 628 (1945).

must remember that some of the most efficient and successful barbers we ever knew” also “had no school training whatever.”<sup>38</sup>

Some local licensing boards also had the power and discretion to administer and revoke licenses without explanation. In one case, a disgruntled barber challenged a county board and won in court. In 1952, a white barber by the name of Curtis Lee<sup>39</sup> had his license revoked by the County Commission in Opelika County. Though Lee had already paid for and received his barber license, the commission decided to take it away, citing bad moral character on Lee’s part for being arrested several times in the past. When Lee’s lawsuit against the commission made its way to the Alabama Supreme Court, the court found the commission’s ordinance that licensed barbers to be unconstitutional. Specifically, the court found that section one of the ordinance was unconstitutional since it left the power to revoke licenses to the “uncontrolled and arbitrary discretion of the city governing body.”<sup>40</sup> The court did make it clear that the state could license barbers to ensure public health and sanitation, but that “the ordinance in question is not such a one, but is a typical revenue raising regulation.”<sup>41</sup> While these particular barbers found justice in Alabama’s courts, it is likely that other barbers had similar experiences but lacked the funds to challenge local boards and commissions in court.

Local licensing boards also attracted board members seeking to profit from the newly created government jobs by limiting competition and increasing their market share. In *The Decatur Daily*, a barber by the name of William Clements attacked Decatur’s barber board as being “one of the most unfair boards that could exist.” Clements claimed that the “only barbers who have been denied the right of a barber license” are those who end up “going to work in cutrate barber shops.” Meanwhile, those who “have no qualifications of certificate from barbers schools” were able to “work for one of the members of the barber board.”<sup>42</sup> Other boards in Alabama simply curated rules and regulations that gave board members and established barbers ample control over those attempting to enter the barber industry. In Marshall County, the local barber commission decided to start enforcing an ordinance in 1962 that was written in 1939. The ordinance required that those seeking a barber license “apply in writing on blanks prepared and furnished by the commission” and their application had to be “accompanied by the recommendation of at least two barbers of the county not related to the applicant.”<sup>43</sup> Local ordinances and regulations of this sort would be difficult to justify on public health and sanitation grounds. It is more likely that such ordinances were promulgated with the intent to control and restrict the supply of barbers, to the benefit of board members and their fellow established barbers.

Even when Alabama passed a bill to license barbers statewide in 1971, county boards continued to act in bad faith. When the state law was passed in Alabama, barbers suddenly had to get a license from their county board and state board. In a letter to Governor George

38. *Barbers Comm’n v. Hardeman*, 31 Ala. App. 628 (1945).

39. Using Ancestry to search for a barber named Curtis Lee living in Opelika County during the 1950s, it appears that Lee was a white barber.

40. *Lee v. Renfo*, 257 Ala. 679 (1952).

41. *Lee v. Renfo*, 257 Ala. 681 (1952).

42. William H. Clements, “Public Forum,” *The Decatur Daily*, December 11, 1959, 4.

43. “1939 Barber Ordinance for county to be enforced,” *Sand Mountain Reported*, September 20, 1962, 1.



Wallace as late as 1974, a barber by the name of Robert Jones<sup>44</sup> complained that despite having his state license, the Mobile County Board would not issue him a license. Jones told the governor that he went to the Mobile County Board and talked to “the lady on the Barber Board” who said, “I wouldn’t pass [and] that they had to protect the Barbers here [and] that I would be wasting my money to take the test.”<sup>45</sup> Though it is unclear how often such abuses occurred, the president of the State Board complained in a letter to the governor regarding Robert Jones, saying that he had received “many of the same complaints by telephone.” Indeed, the president, despite doing little, lamented that “the Mobile area have had such little cooperation from the Mobile County Barber Commission.”<sup>46</sup> With little oversight and despite the existence of a state law, county boards could often do as they pleased without facing many repercussions.

### State Licensing Law for Cosmetologists in Alabama

In some ways, the passage of a cosmetology licensing law in Alabama mirrors what occurred for barbers. Alabama did not license cosmetologists statewide until 1957, but much of the state was covered by local cosmetology licensing boards. However, these county boards and the state board appear to have been much less corrupt than the barber boards. There are several reasons for this. One reason is that the larger barber-dominated union (BBAI) did not influence Alabama’s cosmetology licensing laws. Thus, controlling the supply of cosmetologists was not a major concern in Alabama. Cosmetologists in Alabama were often organized but in smaller, fragmented groups and unions with different motivations and goals. These smaller unions and groups were also more representative of black women, unlike the mostly white BBAI.

Black women, like black men, found opportunities in the beauty industry throughout the early twentieth century. As Julie Willett explains, black women often chose to be hairdressers to “escape white kitchens, white households, and white control.”<sup>47</sup> Before licensing regulations became widespread, hairdressers were free to work out of their homes—giving them the ability to care for their children and housework while making money. It is also worth noting that some black women found enormous economic success in the beauty business. Julie Willett and others have written about some of the notable black beauticians and entrepreneurs such as “Madam C. J. Walker, Annie Turnbo Malone, and Marjorie Steward Joyner whose ideas and innovations transformed hairdressing into a respectable occupation and beauty

44. It is difficult to identify the race of Robert Jones. Jones moved around Alabama and spent many years working as a barber in Florida before moving back to Alabama. The person who most closely aligns with Jones’ description in *Ancestry* is white, but this may be a different Robert Jones.

45. Robert L. Jones to Governor George Wallace, 8 July 1974, Folder Correspondence From Governors, Box Administrative Files, State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982), Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

46. Martin G. Durden (President) to Governor George Wallace CC: Robert Jones, 23 August 1974, State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982) Box Administrative Files, Folder Correspondence From Governor’s Office, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

47. Willett, *Permanent Waves*, 19.

shops into important community institutions.”<sup>48</sup> Though this paper is more concerned with working-class hairdressers, it was the successful and wealthy hairdressers who in many ways served as role models that inspired others to join the industry.

While they shared similarities with black barbers, black cosmetologists were different in that they formed groups and unions that fought for representation and nondiscriminatory licensing laws. In the industry of cosmetology, two unions emerged as the most dominant. One of the unions was called the National Hairdressers and Cosmetologists Association (NHCA). As Julie Willett explains, this predominantly white male and female union sought to professionalize the trade of cosmetology. However, “the professionalism the NHCA was trying to enforce was not only an attempt to disassociate the industry from women’s work but also non-white service work.”<sup>49</sup> The other major union, the National Beauty Culturalist League (NBCL), represented black female cosmetologists. As Tiffany Gill explains in *Beauty Shop Politics*, the black cosmetology union “organized to get representation on the newly forming state beauty code boards.”<sup>50</sup>

In Alabama, the white NHCA did not play much of a role in state politics, but one black cosmetology union and several cosmetology professional organizations did.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, in the same year that Alabama passed its cosmetology licensing law, the Montgomery-based *Alabama Tribune* reported that at a convention sponsored by the National Beauty Culturalists’ League, a black cosmetology Union, part of the agenda was to “encourage the admission of Negro beauticians on state boards of cosmetology as members, supervisors and inspectors.”<sup>52</sup> Even before Alabama had a law to cover all cosmetologists, more local black organizations were pushing for representation. At a meeting where amendments were proposed to alter Jefferson County’s cosmetology board, a committee of local black beauticians expressed their desire that “a member of colored cosmetology be represented as an inspector.”<sup>53</sup> Another smaller group in Montgomery, the Alabama Association of Modern Beauticians, held a meeting in 1953 where they “recommended the endorsement of a Colored representative on the Board of Cosmetology.”<sup>54</sup> Unlike black barbers, who, as a result of previous experience tended to distrust unions, black cosmetologists played an active role by forming professional organizations and lobbying for representation and fair licensing laws.

Though it can be difficult to generalize the experience of all black cosmetologists, Elizabeth Barker’s career offers a unique glimpse into the business of black beauty. Elizabeth Barker was a prominent hairdresser in Washington, D.C., who, in many ways, was representative of black beauticians’ experiences during the first half of the twentieth century. As with other black beauticians, hairdressing ran in Barker’s family. Her grandmother, Emma Warrick, was a

48. Ibid, 13.

49. Ibid, 6.

50. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 72.

51. It is not obvious why the NHCA played no role in lobbying for cosmetology licensing in Alabama. It might be because so many black groups and unions were formed already, but the sources do not provide a simple explanation.

52. “Beauticians Study Scholarship Fund,” *Alabama Tribune*, August 9, 1957, 3.

53. “B’ham Beauticians Propose Cosmetology Law Amendments,” *The Weekly Review*, September 27, 1947, 3.

54. “Beauticians 9th Annual Session Hailed Successful,” *The Huntsville Mirror*, June 6, 1953, 1.

hairdresser, and some of Barker's earliest memories were of being in her shop, which she remembered "always being very busy" and seeing her patrons who "were essentially white."<sup>55</sup> Similar to black barbers, black cosmetologists mostly served a white clientele in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though Barker would serve black women in her shop, too. Barker did not immediately follow in her grandmother's footsteps, but she eventually became a hairdresser once she had young children. Lamenting the fact that she constantly had to leave work to care for her sick children, Barker decided to become a hairdresser. Since there were no regulations at the time, and "most black hairdressers did work in their home," Barker saw hairdressing as an opportunity to make money while still caring for her children.<sup>56</sup>

The way Barker ran her business also reveals a key difference between black hairdressers and barbers. Throughout much of the twentieth century, popular hairstyles changed, and Barker "kept up with the trends as they've changed, the style trends in hair, and that has done a great deal."<sup>57</sup> The key to the success of black beauticians was their ability to adapt and change to new trends. Indeed, it was a common occurrence for groups like the "Alabama Independent Beauticians Convention" to hold conventions, such as the 1964 convention in Birmingham where the theme was "The Pursuit of New Knowledge in Beauty through Science and Education."<sup>58</sup> Black beauticians also differed from black barbers in that they succeeded in getting representation on state licensing boards. Barker herself served on D.C.'s cosmetology licensing board. In her position on the board, she fought white board members to make it easier, not harder, for black women to become cosmetologists. Seeing that many black women could not afford to pay the fee required to attend beauty school and get a cosmetology license, Barker suggested that the board offer a shampoo license so that "the operator can shampoo in a shop and make money and it would be a sort of on-job training program." This proposal was fought bitterly by a white member who told Barker, "what we're trying now is to get away from these kind of people (what she wanted to say was poor black people) who were not a credit to the industry." Despite the efforts made by white members to increase regulations and make it harder for black women to enter the industry, Barker had an influence and was successful at getting rulings passed that gave black women more opportunities to work.<sup>59</sup>

From her position on the Washington D.C. Board of Cosmetology, Barker commented on the pressure the licensing board felt from outside unions attempting to influence regulations. Though Barker talked about the National Beauty Culturalists' League and its efforts to help black beauticians and their businesses, she found that "the white organizations were very active and tried very hard to influence everything we did." Indeed, Barker's board was pressured by white unions to "raise the standards of the beauty business, by closing those young blacks out and insisting on 2000 hours and no on-job training program or anything."<sup>60</sup> Again, while Barker's story and experience do not represent all black hairdressers' experiences, many of her observations shed light on the divergence between black barbers and

55. Barker, interview by Marcia McAdoo Greenlee, 8 December 1976, in *The Black Women Oral History Project*, ed. Ruth Edmonds Hill, 1.

56. *Ibid.*, 6.

57. *Ibid.*, 21.

58. "Colored Beauticians At Birmingham Convention," *The Clarke County Democrat*, June 25, 1964, 8.

59. Barker, *The Black Women Oral History Project*, 24.

60. *Ibid.*, 37.

beauticians. While both found success in the early twentieth century serving white patrons, black hairdressers continued to proliferate into the twentieth century as black barbers contracted in number. The efforts of black organizations and individuals made cosmetology licensing boards and regulations equitable.

## State Licensing Law for Barbers in Alabama

By the time Alabama passed a statewide barber licensing law, most counties were covered by a local ordinance and local licensing board. Nonetheless, the passage of a state law in 1971 altered the industry in Alabama by providing a more uniform standard of rules that all barbers would have to follow. Following the passage of the law, more attention was paid to prosecuting barbers cutting hair in their homes. Though this was a common practice throughout much of the rural South, state licensing boards made efforts to prosecute those breaking the law. Two years after the Board of Barber Examiners was established, a barber by the name of Alton McGee was caught cutting hair in his home and was shut down by the board.<sup>61</sup> In a letter to Governor Wallace, one of McGee's friends and patrons explained that the barber inspector threatened to fine McGee "\$100 if he caught him cutting anyones [sic] hair anymore. The poor man is just not able to comply financially." Given that McGee was an old man who only cut a few people's hair in the community a month, the friend pleaded with the Governor for a way "he could continue to cut hair in his home."<sup>62</sup> Another barber by the name of James Cagle wrote to Governor Wallace in 1975, fuming over the fact that one of the Barber Board members came to collect \$90 "which he said was owed back to 1971." Cagle could not comprehend why he owed a fee for "cutting hair only part-time and then on my home premises." Curiously, Cagle also pointed out that the Health Department in Alabama could have just as easily "assume [sic] the health of hygiene inspections" if the whole point of the barber law was to ensure sanitary conditions.<sup>63</sup> The Barber board, after hearing such complaints, explained to the barbers that there were no exceptions to the law.

Another barber, who also served as a minister in Alabama, was caught by the state board cutting hair in his yard after someone reported to the board that he was breaking the law.<sup>64</sup> The minister, Ralph Smith, wrote a fervent, polemic letter to the State Board of Barber Examiners. Smith complained that the board members were "[a]fraid I might make a nickle or two. People are hoggy. Selfish. And greatly toward their fellow man. Out to hurt people. And not trying to keep like

61. Martin G. Durden to Mr. Ferguson, 17 December 1973, File Correspondence From Governor's Office, Box Administrative Files, State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982), Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

62. Willie Marvin Ferguson Jr. to Governor George C. Wallace, [date: unknown], File Correspondence From Governor's Office, Box Administrative Files, State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982), Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

63. James C. Cagle to Governor George Wallace, 16 December 1975, Folder Governor's Office, Box Administrative Files, State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982), Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

64. The sources do not tell us whether Smith was arrested or who reported him. However, most reports made to the Barber Board were made by licensed barbers. This is unsurprising because unlicensed barbers could steal clients from licensed barbers. It is also most likely the case that Smith was simply forced to stop cutting hair and was perhaps only threatened with arrest if he did not comply.

such like people gona stand with god almighty. No. in no wise. You people are walking dangerously. With god [sic].”<sup>65</sup> Though the letter meanders about, with Smith condemning the board members for yielding to man’s laws when they should be adhering to God’s laws, it does get at what was superfluous about the barber law—it prevented hair cutting on people’s own property.

The passage of a state licensing law in Alabama in 1971 may also have negatively affected black barbershops—a safe space where black men felt comfortable talking about politics and civil rights. One prominent black barber in Alabama, Nelson Malden, revealed the discretionary power held by the state board. Like most black barbers in the South, Malden “was raised up basically in the barbershop. So no one needed to teach me to cut hair.”<sup>66</sup> Luckily for Mandel, he was barbering already when the state law was passed, meaning he was grandfathered in without having to take exams in order to be a licensed barber. Yet, once a state licensing law was passed, Mandel found that “most of the black businesses were afraid for their business to be used for civil rights because they could be punished by the licensing.” According to Malden, this was because the “state license are all controlled by white people and if any of them get out of line, they could always find a technicality to revoke their license.”<sup>67</sup> It is unclear the degree to which Alabama’s barber board members abused their position to cripple black businesses that supported civil rights, but Malden does get at a fundamental issue with state barber boards. State barber boards tended to lack black representation and were dominated by white men with discretion to do as they pleased.

Alabama was the last state to pass a statewide barber license law, and it was also the only state to de-license barbers. Indeed, only six years after Alabama got a state board, Alabama’s Board of Barber Examiners’ legitimacy was being called into question. In a review of the Board by Alabama’s Examiner of Public Accounts in 1977, the examiner found “several weak areas.” Among numerous small offenses, the examiner found that “over the last five fiscal years, receipts have decreased approximately 8% and disbursements have increased approximately 32%.”<sup>68</sup> Beyond these issues, Board members were also accused of corruption. In 1979, the Alabama Ethics Commission received information alleging that a board member, Martin Durden, “make [s] it easy for a prospective barber to obtain a Barbers License” if they agreed to use his “Markham training or buy Markham products from [Durdin].” The informant also alleged that Durden would “arrange for barber students to leave school prior to graduation in order that they may work in your [Durdin’s] barber shops.”<sup>69</sup>

Alabama’s Board of Barber Examiners was also criticized for not having any black members. At a board meeting in June of 1979, Quintman Mitchell, likely the prominent black barber from

65. Reverend Ralph W. Smith to Board of Barber Examiners, 4 September 1980, Folder Complaint File, Box Administrative Files, State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982), Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

66. Nelson Malden, interview by Candacy A Taylor, 31 December 2018, in the *Occupational Folklife*, 1.

67. Ibid, 10.

68. Leon G. Meados, Jr. Examiner of Public Accounts to Alabama Board of Barber Examiners, 8 August 1977, Folder Correspondence With Other Boards, Box Administrative Files, Special Review of Board of Barber Examiners, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

69. Melvin Cooper to Martin Durden, 10 February 1979, Folder Correspondence With Other State Agency and Legislation, Box Administrative Files, State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982), Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

Jefferson County<sup>70</sup>, told the board that “the barbers were satisfied with the law except for the fact that there is no black barber on the Board.” In the same meeting, it was reported that the State Association for the BBAI wanted “blacks, women and instructors on the board.” Another attendee of the meeting, Leck Hall, said “he wants a black on the Board.” Yet, at time complaints could be contradictory. In the same meeting, another attendee named Joe Davis said “he thought the majority of barbers did not care if they had a board.”<sup>71</sup>

A short time after these complaints, Alabama’s State Legislature removed funding for the Alabama’s Board of Barber Examiners. In 1982, the board announced to barbers in the state that “[y]our state representatives did not see a need for a barber law” and that if the barbers wanted a law, they “will have to be organized and work together.”<sup>72</sup> Though Alabama’s Board members were criticized for abusing their power, it is possible that the board was terminated for less dramatic reasons. Barber boards in the 1970s were struggling to maintain revenue during a time in which barbers were losing prominence to cosmetologists.

### Changing Beauty Norms and the Barbers, Beauticians, and Allied Industries

The explanation for why Alabama’s Board of Barber Examiners was quickly terminated in 1983 lies in the national changes occurring in the beauty industry. As early as the 1960s, barbers across the nation were struggling to adapt to new cultural norms. Much debate occurred amongst unionized barbers as to how they should deal with the new willingness amongst men to let their hair grow out and get it styled or cut by a cosmetologist. Unionized barbers were also faced with the new prominence of female cosmetologists in general. For much of the early twentieth century, barbers dominated the haircutting market. However, by mid-century, women were becoming more numerous in the beauty industry, much to the chagrin of established barbers. Barbers also suffered in the general economic climate of the 1970s. During much of the decade, barbers grudgingly faced recessions and economic slowdowns, as well as the public’s new attitude toward regulations. Politicians suggested decreasing regulations and consolidating government boards. Under such pressures, the Barbers, Beauticians, and Allied Industries union was forced to merge with a larger union, and the preeminence of barbers came to an end. Though white barbers gained immense regulatory control over their own industry in the early twentieth century, they

70. In the minutes recorded by the Barber Board, the people in attendance are not identified beyond their names. I have found evidence of a Quitman Mitchell (spelling is different in the source), who was supposedly the first black man to serve on the Jefferson County Commission (which regulated barbers in that county). There was also a major in Bessemer County during the 1990s that was named Quitman Mitchell. Nonetheless, we can at least assume Mr. Mitchell (and the other individuals who made complaints) was a barber, as barbers were encouraged to attend meetings.

71. Minutes 1971 to 1974, 4 June 1979, Folder State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982), Box Administrative Files, State of Alabama Board of Barber Examiners, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

72. The Alabama Board of Barber Examiners to All Barbers in the State of Alabama, 1 September 1982, Folder Correspondence With Other Boards, Box Administrative Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.



were ultimately unable to control culture, female workers, and broader macroeconomic developments.

At the BBAI's 1963 international convention, delegate beautician Naomi Lovett lamented that out of 750,000 licensed beauticians in the U.S. and Canada, only 3,100 were union members, and "[o]ne third of this amount organized in the State of New York."<sup>73</sup> Various factors contributed to the failure to organize beauticians, but union members at the same convention blamed it on the fact that "the majority of those engaged in this industry are women" and that "we have not as long nor as successfully controlled our [cosmetology] school problems."<sup>74</sup> While cosmetologists proliferated outside the union, barbers—long the lifeblood of the union—decreased in number. In 1973, the president of the BBAI sadly announced that while at the last convention the union could boast of having 67,000 members, in 1973, "we have approximately 45,000."<sup>75</sup> Just three years later, at the 1976 international convention, one of the speakers noted that "[b]eauticians outnumber the barbers 11 to 1" and that "statistics show a loss of about 10,000 a year among the barbers."<sup>76</sup>

As the number of barbers in the United States continued to dwindle, the barber-dominated union made serious efforts to fend off the tide of beauticians taking over the business of cutting hair. A major development that threatened barbers was the rise of unisex shops in the 1960s and 1970s. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, beauty and barbershops were mostly segregated by sex. However, by the 1960s the practice of men getting haircuts from women had become increasingly common. As such, the BBAI made attempts to put an end to the unisex shop. At an international convention in 1973, Committee Secretary Gerald Gormon announced that "a cosmetology law for the State of Illinois was introduced showing where the cosmetologists cannot cut, trim, or shape the hair of men."<sup>77</sup> Similar laws were passed in other states, but none proved to be effective at curtailing men from getting their hair cut by a woman.

During the turn of the decade between the 1960s and 1970s, unionized barbers struggled over what to do about what they and others called the "long hair fad."<sup>78</sup> Barbers in the

73. Naomi Lovett (Delegate Beautician), Convention Proceedings, 1963, Box 1, Folder 3rd Day 1963 Convention Proceedings, 308, Barbers, Beauticians, and Allied Industries International Association (additions), (hereafter BBAI papers), Archives Division The State Historical Society of Wisconsin (hereafter SHSW, Madison, Wisconsin).

74. Macel Anderson, Report of Beauticians Committee, 1963, M87-229, Box 1, Folder 4th, 5th, and 6th Days 1963 Convention Proceedings, 594, Barbers, Beauticians, and Allied Industries International Association (additions), Archives Division The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

75. Address of President Richard A. Plumb, 1973, M87-229, Box 1, Folder Proceedings of the Barbers, Beauticians and Allied Industries International Association AFL-CIO-CLC, 24<sup>th</sup>, International Convention Caesars Palace, Las Vegas, September 23-28 1973, 4, Barbers, Beauticians and Allied Industries International Association (additions) Archive Division the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

76. Address by Jack Carter, 1976, M87-229, Box 2, Folder Minutes of Meeting of General Executive Board, Orlando, Florida, February 2, 3, 1976, 5, Barbers, Beauticians and Allied Industries International Association (additions), Archives Division The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

77. Report of State Association Committee by Committee Secretary Gormon, 1973, M87-229, Box 1, Folder Proceedings of the Barbers, Beauticians and Allied Industries International Association AFL-CIO-CLC, 24th, International Convention, Caesars Palace, Las Vegas, September 23-28, 1973, 97, Barbers, Beauticians and Allied Industries International Association (additions), Archival Division the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

78. The BBAI and newspapers in general discussed frequently the "long hair fad" and the effects it was having on barbershops. To cite one example: Associated Press, "Long Hair Fad Trims Barbers in Chicago," *Hope*

*Journeyman Barber* agreed that the “current style of long shaggy locks is hurting the barber profession. All over the country barbers are feeling the effects of this style.” However, barbers had different solutions to the problem. The barber quoted above shared a billboard put up by his State Association that “encourages men to keep the Clean American Look” and “represents the most widespread campaign against the very extreme shaggy trend of the hippies.”<sup>79</sup> The General President of the BBAI at the time, Joseph DePaola, similarly bemoaned that while long hair used to be a trope of “musicians and intellectuals,” it was becoming “an accepted mode of hair fashion for too many men, who, by no stretch of the imagination, could be called hippies.” Like the other barber, he encouraged the dissemination of “window banners on barber shops saying, ‘Look At The Back Of Your Neck—Everyone Else Does.’”<sup>80</sup> The General President also gave reason to believe that the long hair fad might end soon. While DePaola pointed out that the long hair fad had affected not just the young but professional men too, he figured that the “growing public irritation with campus unrest, bombings and other acts of lawlessness traced to hippie types” would eventually lead men to “return to the Clean American Look, if only to protect their image and income.”<sup>81</sup>

While the president of the union and general members recognized and bemoaned the fact that the long hair fad was hurting their businesses, some found ways to adapt or even profit from the new trend in style. Earl Roach, a union barber, argued that it was “not the long hair styles that have cut business, it’s the attitude of the barbers. They have to give the customer what he wants, not what they want.” Many considered Roach a hairstylist rather than a barber, and he noted that “[s]tylists have ridden the crest of the long hair tide and have benefited financially from it.”<sup>82</sup> Similarly, another barber criticized his colleagues for making fun of the long-haired youth. The barber in question urged his fellow barbers to “take a look at your business, are you blaming everyone but yourself for your loss of business? If so, look again.”<sup>83</sup> Another barber from Tennessee, Eddie Basham, claimed that “the long hair trend helps.” In adapting to new norms, Basham “found that a slight trim brings the patron back sooner than the regular haircut.”<sup>84</sup> Though some barbers adapted and found the new trend to be favorable, most barbers were stuck in their ways. Considering that the BBAI played a role in the

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Star, August 22, 1970, 6. Reporting on union barbers in Chicago, the Associated Press reported that “The number of barbers in Chicago has been trimmed by the long-hair fad.” In response, the union was “urging them [union barbers] to cut their patronage of the shaggy maned.” The secretary-treasurer of the local union in Chicago who recommended this response went even further, arguing that “They should kick these long hairs out of school, as dirty as some of them are. This is a national problem, it’s hurting barbers all across the country.”

79. “Long Hair: What’s Being Done??,” *Journeyman Barber* 66, no. 2, February 1970, 8, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

80. “Editorial: Long Hair,” Joseph N. DePaola, *Journeyman Barber*, 66, March 1970, 3, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

81. “Editorial: Public Opinion vs. Unkempt Hair,” Joseph N. DePaola, *Journeyman Barber* 66, no. 10, October 1970, 3, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

82. “Barbering Profession Problems Discussed at Baltimore,” Earl Roach, *Journeyman Barber* 66, no. 11, [From front page Special-Report in a September 22, edition of Baltimore, Maryland’s “The New American”] November 1970, 21, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

83. “Barbering: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow,” *Journeyman Barber* 66, no. 11, November 1970, 24, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

84. “Area and Local News, Memphis, Tennessee,” *Journeyman Barber* 67, no 1, January 1971, 19, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

standardization of the profession and that the average practicing union barber was 55-60 years old in 1970, it is unsurprising that so many were unable to adapt to new circumstances.<sup>85</sup>

If male barbers were often reluctant or unable to serve men with long hair, female cosmetologists were more than willing. In a *New York Times* article from 1972, journalist Michael Kaufman reported that over the previous six years in New York, there was a “decrease of 2,183 barbers in the state and an increase of 21,810 cosmetologist.” While a law had been passed in 1946 making it illegal for women to cut men’s hair in New York, Kaufman found that unisex shops “had been allowed to exist because of the conflict between the business law and the state’s antidiscrimination statute.”<sup>86</sup> In a similar *New York Times* article the year before, journalist Angela Taylor provided insight into the new unisex shops in New York and how the younger generation was changing the culture of beauty. Taylor found that although barber and beauty shops used to be strictly regulated by sex, “nothing is so square to the under-30 generation (and some of its older followers) than going to the beauty parlor or the barber’s.”<sup>87</sup> Indeed, by the early 1970s, unisex shops and the practice of men getting their hair cut by women were becoming commonplace. In a 1980 edition of the *Journeyman Barber*, a barber succinctly reflected on the changes felt during the previous two decades. This barber pointed to the “equal rights law in 1966<sup>88</sup> [1964]” as a significant contributing factor, since before the law’s passage “few state licensing boards for barbers and cosmetologists permitted the beauty parlor operator to style or cut men’s hair.” He also complained that “[u]nisex in hair and dress is coming full circle in competition for equality” and predicted that “the barber shop will have completely disappeared in the next decade unless the pendulum of men’s hairstyles swings back to shorter hair.”<sup>89</sup>

Union barbers found themselves affected by cultural changes relatively outside their control, but much of the union barbers’ troubles were self-inflicted. Organized barbers made licensing central to their efforts to increase wages and decrease working hours.<sup>90</sup> Those licensing laws and the union that lobbied for them decreased the supply of barbers while stifling innovation and creativity through the standardization of business practices. By forcing every potential barber to overcome the hurdles of going to barber college, passing examinations, and paying educational and regulatory fees, the BBAI decreased the supply of barbers and standardized barbering practices—thus increasing the demand and cost of getting a haircut. Beyond the general cost of time and money put toward union and licensing fees, barber unions across the country forced new barbers to learn about subjects that had at best a questionable connection to cutting hair. For instance, unionized barbers in Arkansas bragged that a new barber school was using “Gray’s Anatomy—the main standby of the four-year

85. “A Future For Young Barbers,” Tom Pence, *Journeyman Barber* 66, no. 6, June 1970, 10, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

86. Kaufman, “Barbers, Beauticians, and Other Debate Unisex Salons at Hearing,” *The New York Times*, February 2, 1972, 45.

87. Taylor, “Hair Grooming Goes Unisex,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 1971, 38, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/08/12/archives/hair-grooming-goes-unisex.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

88. It can be assumed the barber meant 1964 since there was not an equal rights law passed in 1966.

89. “Hair Destroyed the Barber Pole,” Joe Buck, *Journeyman Barber and Beauty Culture*, June 1980, 13–15, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

90. Corley and Witcher, “Barber Licensing in Arkansas,” 115–138.

course in medicine” to teach their barber students.<sup>91</sup> State boards that administered barber examinations on such questionable material sharply curbed the influx of barbers throughout the twentieth century. Some states serve as clear examples of outrageous barber examinations. As mentioned above, Alabama required barbers to shave a balloon. Arkansas forced barbers to answer in essay format questions such as explaining the “Scientific Fundamentals Barbering” and other anatomical questions.<sup>92</sup>

Members of the BBAI themselves admitted at their international convention that most exam questions were superfluous. Recognizing the decline of barbers at the 1978 international convention, Simon Avara’s report on barber boards warned members that “[y]ou can no longer go on with 60 or 70 percent of your questions dealing with the entire anatomy. You don’t make a living in our business by knowing all the blood and all the nerves and all the veins throughout the body.”<sup>93</sup> In the same report, Don Knauss claimed he could “stand here without fear and tell you that most of the barber and cosmetology examinations that are given in the United States are useless.” In his report, he suggested that boards adopt the examination created by the National Board of Barber Examiners since it “does not discriminate, does not limit entry into the industry, and it is not cost prohibitive.”<sup>94</sup> The union’s goal had been to limit the number of barbers through licensing laws and examinations, but they underestimated how successful their efforts would be.

Cosmetology laws did not reduce the supply of cosmetologists since the BBAI was never able to control cosmetology regulations adequately. The dominance of cosmetologists became clear in the 1970s, but the issue of females effectively competing with barbers for customers goes back to at least the early twentieth century. When put to a vote at the 1914 international conventions, members of the Journeymen Barbers International Union of America (JBIUA) voted against admitting women into the union.<sup>95</sup> However, the issue continued to be a topic of debate for the union as it became clear that women would be competing with male barbers going forward. Only a few years later, a barber in the *Journeyman Barber* contended that not allowing women in the union would force them “to run non-union shops which I think is unfair to any worker.”<sup>96</sup> Another barber feared that if women were not allowed in the union,

91. “Deep South on Right Track,” *The Journeyman Barber Hairdressers and Cosmetologist* 45, no. 2, February 1949, 59, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

92. As cited in Corley, Lucas, and Witcher, “License to Exclude,” 15.

93. Simon Avara, Report of Committee on Barber Boards, 1978, Folder: Proceedings of the 90th Anniversary 25th Convention of Barbers, Box 1, Beauticians and Allied Industries International Association AFL-CIO-CLC August 7-10, 1978, Las Vegas, Nevada, 611, BBAI papers, Archival Division The SHSW, Madison, Wisconsin.

94. Don Knauss Barbers, Report of Committee on Barber Boards, 1978, Folder: Proceedings of the 90th Anniversary 25th Convention of the Barbers, Box 1, Beauticians and Allied Industries International Association AFL-CIO-CLC August 7-10, 1978, Las Vegas, Nevada, 617–618, BBAI papers, Archival Division The SHSW, Madison, Wisconsin.

95. “Notes and Comments,” W. E. Klapetzky, *The Journeyman Barber Journal* 10, no. 10, November 1914, 478, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

96. “Correspondence,” G. C. Skaggs, *The Journeyman Barber Journal* 13, no. 10, November 1917, 463, The Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

“they will undoubtedly be granted a federal charter and will be given the support of organized labor.”<sup>97</sup>

Other union barbers had less sympathy for the women. One barber, Charles Rollo from Kansas, worried that if women were allowed to join the union, “it would no doubt encourage more of them to enter the business” until they became so numerous that barbers would “quit the business entirely.”<sup>98</sup> The next year, the same barber frankly told his fellow union members to place their wives “at home in the kitchen where God intended her to be and then go after the pork chops yourself.”<sup>99</sup> Another barber simply opposed allowing women in the union “on general principles” since he believed that “a woman is out of place in a barber shop.”<sup>100</sup> However, other barbers saw what the actual consequences of allowing women into the union would be. Henry Glenwood, showing a concern for keeping the supply of barbers low, recognized that women “have been known to take men’s place for less money and I fear we are on dangerous grounds when we admit them.”<sup>101</sup>

The early resistance and hostility toward female barbers likely contributed to the minuscule representation of women within the union. Another reason women did not join the barber union was simply that they joined other organizations. White women could join the National Hairdressers and Cosmetologists Association while black women could join the National Beauty Culturalists League and other local beautician’s groups. Given the alternative options to organize and the hostility of the BBAI, it is not surprising that the larger union was never able to organize more than a tiny fraction of female cosmetologists.

Barbers recognized that they were significantly outnumbered by the 1970s, but efforts were made by unionized barbers throughout the twentieth century to slow down the shifting of the scales towards cosmetologists. According to Edna Emme, the historian for the NHCA, “Barber boards throughout the country introduced legislation to bring the practice of hairdressing under barber control.”<sup>102</sup> Indeed, it appears that early in the twentieth century, barbers attempted to corner the new market demand for hairdressers who could cut and style women’s hair. At the NHCA’s 1922 convention, the organization condemned the Journeyman Barber Union for advocating for “legislation to require hairdressers to have a barber license to cut hair.” Despite reports of “conflict with the barbers on legislation,” it appears barbers were never successful at limiting hairdressing to those with barber licenses.<sup>103</sup> Accepting that women were not going to leave the market, unionized barbers later attempted to simply limit cosmetologists to only cutting women’s hair. In the “heavy legislative year of 1965,” the NHCA could boast that “An obnoxious barber bill in Texas was defeated, and Wisconsin defeated a

97. “Correspondence,” G. T. Sanford, *The Journeyman Barber Journal* 15, no. 9, October 1918, 399, The Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

98. “Correspondence,” Chas G. Rollo, *The Journeyman Barber Journal* 15, no. 11, December 1918, 468, The Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

99. “Correspondence,” Charles G. Rollo, *The Journeyman Barber Journal* 15, no. 3, April 1919, 100, The Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

100. “Correspondence,” Gus Rademacher, *The Journeyman Barber Journal* 15, no. 4, May 1919, 502, The Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

101. “Correspondence,” Henry Glenwood, *The Journeyman Barber Journal* 15, no. 12, January 1919, 502, The Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

102. International Relations in *NHCA’s Golden Years*, ed. Mitchell Lackman, 10-11.

103. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

bill which the barbers introduced restricting hair cutting by cosmetologists to women only.”<sup>104</sup>

As in other states, organized barbers in Alabama tried to restrict cosmetologists to only cutting women’s hair. The original Act number 403, which established barber licensing and a Board of Barber Examiners in 1971, specified “THE PRACTICE OF BARBERING” as involving shaving and cutting the hair “upon the human male body.”<sup>105</sup> Three years after the Alabama Board of Barber Examiners was created, Norman Lowell<sup>106</sup> complained to the board about “Charles Beauty Academy for teaching men’s hairstyling to cosmetology students.”<sup>107</sup> A year later, at a barber board meeting, the members discussed representative Nat Sonnier’s bill to “allow barbers to hire cosmetologists and cosmetologists to hire barbers in their shops.” The board quickly set up a meeting to “go before the State Administration Committee to try and kill the Bill.”<sup>108</sup> That same year at another meeting, the board discussed “Tim Adams [an Alabama barber] hiring a cosmetologist.” In a solution reminiscent of Jim Crow Statutes, Board members suggested requiring Tim to “put up a partition wall separating the beauty shop from the barbershop and not allow the beauticians customers to be shampooed in the barber shop.”<sup>109</sup> From the beginning, proponents of barber licensing in Alabama sought to segregate beauty and barbershops by sex.

At times, the attempt to segregate verged on the petty and absurd. For several meetings, the Board of Barber Examiners discussed “the advertising in yellow pages that beauticians have been doing under the barbering section in the telephone book and decided that they would make an effort to stop this practice.”<sup>110</sup> After discussing the issue with Alabama’s Attorney General, the attorney delivered the bad news that “[i]t is my opinion that a cosmetologist could advertise in the yellow pages under the listing of Barbers and that a barber could advertise in the yellow pages under the listing of beauty shops.”<sup>111</sup> Though numerous decades separate the events, the complaints made by Alabama’s barber board echo many of the same concerns made by barbers across the country in the early twentieth century. After another discussion among Alabama barber board members over how to restrict cosmetologists to women’s hair, a board

104. Ibid, 57.

105. Act No. 403, 689. When Alabama re-licensed barbers in 2013, the new law did not mention gender in the definition of barbering. Act. No. 371, 3.

106. The sources do not provide Norman’s occupation or relation to the Barber Board in Alabama. However, given that female barbers were a threat to male barbers, it is most likely that Norman was a barber himself, or perhaps an instructor at a barber college.

107. State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982), 14 January 1974, Folder State of Alabama Board of Barber Examiners Minutes 1971 to 1974, Box Administrative Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

108. State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982), 9 June 1975, Folder State of Alabama Board of Barber Examiners Minutes 1975 and 1976, Box Administrative files, Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

109. State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982), 18 August 1975, Folder State of Alabama Board of Barber Examiners Minutes 1975 to 1976, Box Administrative files, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

110. State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982), 10 July 1976, Folder State of Alabama Board of Barber Examiners Minutes 1975 and 1976, Box Administrative files, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

111. William J. Baxley to Mr. Dickson, 14 July 1976, Folder Correspondence with Attorney General, Box Administrative Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.



member, Mark Fronduti, “said that cosmetologist would work cheaper and it was time for a change because if we don’t the cosmetologists would take over.”<sup>112</sup> Barbers consistently worried that women entering the market would bring down prices and lead to fewer barbers. However, Alabama’s cosmetologists, at times, consented to the segregation by sex of barber-shops and beauty shops. In 1979, after a meeting between the barber and cosmetology board, the cosmetology board members “said that cosmetology and barbering were separate and they wanted to keep it that way.”<sup>113</sup>

If these developments to segregate men and women who cut and style hair in the national beauty industry were not enough to kill the BBAI, the general economic conditions and culture around government regulations during the 1970s put the nail in the coffin. As Thomas McGraw explains in *Prophets of Regulation*, the period between the Great Depression and 1970 was defined by consistent economic growth and, thus, a lack of concern over regulations. Regulations proliferated during this period but it was not until the 1970s that “the period of miracle growth abruptly ended,” and “classical microeconomics began to reassert their original value, as unfamiliar concepts about scarcity, overregulation, and the functioning of different types of markets emerged to become the most serious problems for policy.”<sup>114</sup> As a result of the economic shocks of the early 1970s and the subsequent changes in the field of economics and policy, “[r]egulation suddenly assumed a political importance it had not attained since the Progressive Era.”<sup>115</sup> While the economy was growing, state licensing boards and the regulations they enforced avoided receiving too much criticism. However, the economic conditions of the 1970s and concern for deregulation increased the attention paid to licensing boards and regulations.

In 1972, the secretary-treasurer of the BBAI recognized that “in recent years, reorganization of state government agencies has [assumed] a high priority” among various state legislatures. Amid the numerous reforms proposed by state politicians that the barber believed “poses a real threat to the good barber law and boards,” were the abolition of full-time boards, examinations administered by non-professional employees, inspections made by non-professional inspectors, new departments to be staffed by politicians, and finally, giving public individuals the task of making examinations, rules, and regulations.<sup>116</sup> Understandably worried, the union and its members knew that each proposal would have limited the power of the barber union and their control over regulations. Another popular idea state legislatures pushed for at the time was combining licensing boards. The same barber quoted above again pleaded that “[b]y no means and by no stretch of the imagination can the best interests of the public be served, as far as I can see, by the combination of state’s barber board and beauty culture board.”<sup>117</sup> Such

112. State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982), 8 October 1979, 2, Folder Minutes September 1, 1979 thru, Box Administrative Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

113. State Board of Barber Examiners (1971-1982), 9 July 1979, Folder State of Alabama Board of Barber Examiners Minutes 1971 to 1974, Box Administrative files, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

114. McGraw, *Prophets of Regulation*, 228.

115. Ibid, 259.

116. Roy C. Emerson, “Reorganization-Threat to Barber Laws,” *Journeyman Barber* 68, no. 4, April 1972, 4, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

117. Roy. C. Emerson, “Pay Attention to Detail: Legislation,” *Journeyman Barber and Beauty Culture* 68, no. 6, June 1972, 4, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

proposals and threats could be a tactic to drum up support for the union, but the secretary-treasurer was adamant that such “situations have already occurred in several states and are presently threatening many others.” The secretary-treasurer did note that through compromise, most barber boards remained intact, but that “through legislative and administrative edict the board and [barber] law is weakened.”<sup>118</sup>

The climate around policy and regulation during the late twentieth century likely contributed to the decision to stop funding Alabama’s Board of Barber Examiners in 1983. Another possible contributor was the method by which Alabama funded its board. The original act stipulated that “[t]he compensation and expenses as herein provided and other expenses authorized by this Act shall be paid from the fund derived from the operation of this Act.”<sup>119</sup> Like many other licensing boards, Alabama’s barber board relied on the licensing fees they collected to function. As noted already, the decrease in barbers during this period contributed to a financially unsound barber board.<sup>120</sup> When Alabama did re-license barbers in 2013, the renewed Barber Board was combined with the Cosmetology Board, making it what it is today—the Alabama Board of Cosmetology and Barbering. Unsurprisingly, one of the justifications for relicensing barbers was that “some cosmetologists have dropped their licenses and operated as a barber” to avoid fees and regulations.<sup>121</sup> In Alabama, at least, the feud over the proper gender and role of barbers and beauticians never ended.<sup>122</sup>

## Conclusion

The restrictive and sclerotic nature of organized barbers and the licensing laws they lobbied for initiated the decline of the entire barber industry over the latter half of the twentieth century. During the same period, the cosmetology industry proliferated and captured the market for styling and cutting hair. Unlike organized barbers, cosmetology groups and unions encouraged black representation in organizations and state licensing boards to ensure that regulations did not significantly restrict cosmetologists. Facing these developments in the beauty industry, the BBAI and its members voted in 1980 to merge with the much larger United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW). Though the union members voluntarily voted on whether to merge with the larger union, it was clear that the organization

118. Roy C. Emerson, “Reorganization-Threat to Barber Laws,” *Journeyman Barber* 68, no. 4, April 1972, 4, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

119. Requiring the Registration and Licensing of Barbers, Alabama Legislature, Regular Session 1971, Act no 403, 699, Alabama Department of Archives and History, <https://archive.org/details/alabama-acts?&sort=date>.

120. Leon G. Meados, Jr. Examiner of Public Accounts to Alabama Board of Barber Examiners, 8 August 1977, Folder Correspondence With Other Boards, Box Administrative Files, Special Review of Board of Barber Examiners, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

121. Mike Cason, “Alabama gears up to license and regulate barbers under new law,” *AL.com*, May 31, 2013, Accessed September 15, 2022, [https://www.al.com/wire/2013/05/alabama\\_gears\\_up\\_to\\_license\\_an.html](https://www.al.com/wire/2013/05/alabama_gears_up_to_license_an.html).

122. In the same article cited above, a man who had been barbering in Alabama since 1955 was interviewed for his opinion on the new law. This barber, Henry Nobles, told the reporter “I think barbers ought to work on menfolk and beauticians on womenfolk.” Working in Alabama during the general period of this study, the barber’s sentiments match that of the barber union and its members.

would cease to play a role in the industry without joining the UFCW. Indeed, as a writer for the union's journal put it, "[d]ue to our lack of size and economic power, we are unable to mount successful organizing campaigns." Like others, this barber cited the "conditions in the 1960's [that] brought about radical changes in the world's grooming habits" as a major reason for the union's decline in power. Feeling helpless, the barber noted that "[w]e are faced with problems not of our making."<sup>123</sup> The editorial writer was correct that the union now lacked the power to mount campaigns, but it is less clear who was to blame for the union's declining power. The male-dominated barber union that had been a force in state legislatures since 1887 ceased to play much of a role in state politics thereafter. In a blog post created by the UFCW in 2021, the organization could boast of representing at least seven local barber unions. While "[m]ost UFCW barber shops aren't open to the general public due to being located in military bases, nevertheless they are union and proud!"<sup>124</sup>

Though cosmetologists seem to have triumphed in this struggle, it is not true that the workers in the industry did not suffer from the historical implementation of cosmetology licensing laws in each state. Indeed, cosmetology boards have been criticized for attempting to implement nonsensical barriers to those trying to make a living. In recent years, African Hair braiding shops have opened in numerous states. These beauty shops tend to be run by black women who were taught hair braiding techniques with African roots. When these shops began opening for business, they were seen as a threat to established cosmetologists since they could potentially steal customers from more traditional beauty salons. Recognizing the threat, at least five state Cosmetology Boards attempted to prosecute African hair braiders for not holding a cosmetology license. In 2022, reporting on a bill passed in Idaho that exempted African hair braiders from needing a license, *Forbes* pointed out that "[o]btaining a license [for cosmetology] is no small feat," and to make matters worse, the cosmetology schools did not even "teach African hair styling braiding. Nor are braiding skills on the practical exam."<sup>125</sup> Though states made exemptions following public outcries, the move to exclude black women from braiding hair in the beauty market revealed the motivations and desires of those cosmetologists tasked with regulating their industry.

While white cosmetologists shared the same protectionist impulses that barbers held, the representation of black women in cosmetology unions and groups and on cosmetology boards allowed hairdressers to proliferate in the labor market in the twentieth century. Unlike the barber industry, where white men successfully lobbied for licensing laws that restricted the number of barbers, cosmetologists competed for different forms of licensing regulations. Though white women and men were eager to enact licensing laws that would benefit cosmetologists in the same way that licensing benefited white barbers, black women fought for licensing laws that were not too burdensome.

123. "Editorial: Vote!," *Journeyman Barber and Beauty Culture For the Professional Barber and Beautician*, February 1980, 4, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.

124. "National Hair Day – UFCW and Proud!," UFCW Blog, United Food and Commercial Workers, last modified October 1, 2021, <https://www.ufcw.org/national-hair-day-ufcw-proud/>.

125. "Idaho Will No Longer Criminalize Braiding Hair Without A License," Policy, *Forbes*, last modified April 5, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nicksibilla/2022/04/05/idaho-will-no-longer-criminalize-braiding-hair-without-a-license/?sh=785564785037>.

The history of regulations surrounding barbers and cosmetologists speaks to the role of regulations in shaping the racial makeup of labor markets and the importance of racial representation on local and state regulatory boards. White organized barbers successfully enacted regulations that gave them control over their industry to the exclusion of black barbers. Still, white barbers were unable to control women, culture, and the macroeconomy. Furthermore, white cosmetology unions failed to control black cosmetologists who organized and consistently adapted to beauty trends to maintain a competitive edge.

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