



CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

PHILIP CUNEY did not live to see his mulatto son rise to leadership of the Texas Republican Party or become an important civic leader, a labor organizer, and the collector of customs at Galveston. Nor did he see his granddaughter become a concert pianist, musicologist, and important member of the northern black elite. Would Philip Cuney have recognized his African American descendants or at least have taken pride in their accomplishments? In many ways Philip Cuney seemed a contradiction. As an antebellum planter he believed in the institution of slavery and sought to maintain that system. He exploited his powerful position as a slaveholder to begin a sexual liaison with his house servant Adeline Stuart. Yet by freeing his slave family and providing them with an education, Philip Cuney recognized on a basic level the humanity of Adeline and their children. In these respects Philip Cuney epitomized Joel Williamson's slaveholding maverick.

The influence Philip Cuney had on his son Norris Wright Cuney appears significant. Wright Cuney, like his father, went into politics. Although a Republican, his political philosophy echoed the limited view of government espoused by Philip. Like his father, Wright Cuney provided an education for his own children. While he never acknowledged publicly his relationship to Philip, Wright Cuney seems not to have criticized him privately. Maud Cuney-Hare suggested this in her biography about her father when she wrote in respectful and positive terms regarding her white grandfather. She gave no indication of any mistreatment by Philip of his slave family or of any hostility harbored by Adeline and

her children toward him. Often, former slaves did not openly criticize their former masters because of fear of retribution by the owners or their families. Yet as a man of some power and influence who had little to fear from such reprisals, Wright did not do so. Just as the father seemed to have developed a fondness for his slave family, the slave family probably held affection for the father.

There are few if any parallels in African American history to the life and career of Wright Cuney. He occupied an unusual position among nineteenth-century black Americans. One striking difference between Cuney and most African American leaders of the era came from his versatility. Whether on the docks of Galveston as the organizer and president of the black Screwmen's Union and as foreman of a screwmen's gang, or serving as alderman on the city council and as commissioner of water, or leading the Texas Republican Party and serving as U.S. collector of customs, Cuney showed considerable talents.

Like all African Americans in nineteenth-century America, North and South, Cuney faced white prejudice. He challenged this by turning the liability of color into an asset. While his leadership sometimes seemed paternalistic in nature, Cuney's charismatic style gained the confidence and support of working-class blacks. One of his most important successes came from his labor activities. When the white screwmen's union, because of racial prejudice, excluded black workers from employment on the wharfs and as members of their union, Cuney convinced white business leaders that he could reduce their labor costs while increasing cotton shipments by using black screwmen to break the white union's monopoly. He then secured guarantees protecting the black presence on the Galveston docks. The subsequent success of black screwmen assured their employment well into the twentieth century.

Cuney learned valuable political skills from his mentor, George T. Ruby. As leader of the Texas Republican Party, Cuney used the numerical advantage of black Republicans to solidify his leadership position and maintaining an African American presence in state politics through the late nineteenth century. Through his practical fusion efforts with other parties, Cuney combined the Republican minority status with other dissident elements to increase black political influence in the state. Although his fusion efforts failed to elect a Republican to statewide office, Cuney forced the Democratic Party to expend valuable political and monetary capital to maintain its position. So great was the threat from the fusionists

in the Cuney-Clark campaign of 1892 that many Democrats supporting Gov. James Hogg feared they would lose the election.

Cuney had enormous political skills that he used to gain influence and position within the party. In presidential elections Texas would not be in the Republican column. Cuney knew this as well as anyone, but he refused to let that fact limit the influence of Texas Republicans at the national level. To be influential, the state party had to become a force at national conventions. More often than not Cuney persuaded a majority of Texas delegates to support the eventual presidential nominee of the Republican Party. He added to his influence by creating alliances with powerful party leaders. Because of his effectiveness as a party leader and the alliances he formed, Cuney achieved his personal ambition by receiving the appointment as collector of customs for Galveston and then extended his power and influence within the party through his control of federal patronage in the state.

As an African American political leader, Cuney left a measurable but in some respects problematic legacy. When compared to other black leaders following Reconstruction, Cuney's career appears unequaled. He maintained black control of the state Republican Party and achieved a prominent position in the national organization. He achieved the highest domestic political position allowed to any nineteenth-century African American. Cuney appointed blacks to federal patronage positions under his influence. In Galveston Cuney won election twice as an alderman and became instrumental in protecting and promoting black education. His legacy only becomes problematic when viewed in light of his accomplishments for African Americans generally in Texas. Antagonistic forces beyond his control limited his achievements. No matter how effectively he led the Republican Party, Cuney could not stem the tide of disfranchisement and segregation. His court battles and protest meetings could not halt the erosion of black civil rights. Cuney's place in history remains significant, however, when measured in battles fought as well as in battles won.

Had he lived beyond 1897, Wright Cuney probably would have identified his daughter, Maud, as his most important legacy. No one influenced Maud Cuney more than her father. He provided her with an environment that promoted her intellectual growth while creating pride in her African American heritage. That pride of heritage led her to reject "passing" into white society, which she could have done easily. Wright Cuney helped

create the independence of mind that allowed her to leave the harsh segregation of the South for the less restrictive North. As an African American woman, she refused to accept the roles assigned to either women or blacks in American society. She succeeded outside the home in a professional environment. After her second marriage, Maud Cuney-Hare transcended white prejudice to pursue racial uplift. Her ideas embodied the thought of most African American intellectuals in the early twentieth century. Cuney-Hare, her friend W. E. B. Du Bois, and others of the African American elite hoped to create a black community based on educational, literary, artistic, and musical accomplishments that would create a positive black identity.

Cuney-Hare contributed an impressive body of work in pursuit of that goal. She became an important part of the Harlem Renaissance of the early twentieth century. Her musical concerts and lectures brought an awareness of black cultural history to other African Americans. Through her Allied Arts Centre, Cuney-Hare provided an outlet for young black artists, playwrights, actors and actresses, and musicians. Her research, articles, and book *Negro Musicians and Their Music* explored the history of black music and discovered the roots of African American musical heritage. She showed a distinction between black and white culture while revealing the significant contributions made by African Americans to high culture and American popular culture. Cuney-Hare helped fulfill one of the basic tenants of racial uplift, the creation of black pride in the African American cultural heritage. While she sometimes reflected an elite view of culture, as in her criticism of jazz, Maud Cuney-Hare's research and writing on African American folk music transcended such limitations.

