Rev. John B. Dawson: Social Activist and Early Settler of Chicago’s Avondale Neighborhood
by John D. Cameron

Avondale is a two-square-mile community area in the heart of Chicago’s sprawling Northwest Side, located between the Chicago River’s North Branch on the east and Pulaski Road on the west, with Diversey Avenue as its southern border and Addison Street to the north.1

As part of Jefferson Township, it was initially outside the city boundaries and sparsely settled before the Chicago Fire. Up to then it was primarily rural with a cluster of dwellings along the Milwaukee Plank Road, which ran diagonally northwest through the community. The township was incorporated into the city in 1889, by which time Avondale had begun to fill in as the railroads, streetcar lines, and then the Logan Square branch of the El arrived, transforming it from a “suburban” village into an increasingly dense concentration of working-class homes.2

As such, it drew large numbers of immigrant families from Germany, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe. By the 1920s, Avondale was a “mature” urban community and a third of its residents were of Polish descent, its largest ethnic group. Little of that would change over the next several decades and the area typified what were called Chicago’s “white ethnic” neighborhoods in mid-20th Century. Such traits included a rigidly enforced racial segregation: In the 50 years between 1920 and 1970, not a single black Avondale resident was recorded by the US Census.3

Over the next 10 years, the community would start to undergo yet another demographic change. By 1980, one in five Avondale residents identified as Hispanic; that number would double again over the next decade and reach 62 percent by the end of the century.4 Today the area remains predominantly Latino but increasingly, newcomers—younger professionals looking for affordable housing—are starting to replace the older residents. Most are white but some are people of color, and black residents now make up some 2 percent of the community.5

Rev. John B. Dawson

What all but a very few Avondalers, old and new, would be surprised to hear, is that the community was once home to a small but vibrant neighborhood of African-American residents in the last quarter of the 1800s. The man responsible was the Rev. John Brown Dawson.

Dawson was the remarkable and resourceful sort that was drawn to Chicago during the bustling years leading up to the Civil War. Born on the banks of the Ohio River in Wellsburg, (now West) Virginia in 1819, he and his parents would be among the “Free Colored Persons” recorded by the town census the following year.6 His father, Richard, was listed as a tradesman, craft unspecified. Son John would be trained as a barber and so listed 30 years later in the 1850 town census. By then he was wed to Julia Ann Coleman, had one son by her and another from an earlier relationship, and was living with his aging parents (both had been born shortly after the Revolutionary War). The race for all family members was designated as “Mulatto.”7

2. Ibid., 84.
Still part of the Old Dominion State, Wellsburg was located in its far northern spike, squeezed between Pennsylvania and Ohio. The town’s economy was dependent on the river trade and most residents were more western than southern in orientation and attitude. Though slavery was legal, it was not particularly common: in 1860, the county census would count just 18 slaves and 51 “free people of color” (out a population of more than 5,400). Most of John Dawson’s neighbors were tradesmen like him and white, as were presumably most of his barber chair customers. Wellsburg’s residents would subsequently be among the strongest opponents of secession by Virginia after the Civil War broke out.

Though barbering was his trade, and one at which he would prosper, John Dawson had a much loftier vocation: he became a Minister of the Gospel. Ordained by the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, the nation’s first independently black denomination, he would soon head west in the full zeal of its evangelical mission. By 1856, John, his wife and sons (Julia had borne three more by then, with another on the way) had relocated to Illinois. Described in church records as a “trailblazer” and “toiler,” the Rev. Dawson traveled extensively and was busily helping form new congregations for the church among the small black communities scattered across the region. In the 1860 Census, he was to be found (without his family) preaching in Quincy, Illinois, along the Mississippi; a few years later he organized the Bethel A.M.E. church upriver in Davenport, Iowa.

As with other A.M.E. clergy, John B. Dawson’s commitment to moral uplift went beyond the spiritual; serving the Lord also meant an active involvement in the freedom struggle for all African-American people. Not long after settling in Chicago, he was one of the principles in the “Committee on Friends of Emigration to Haiti,” one of many efforts initiated by A.M.E church leaders “in behalf of our now oppressed race.” Throughout the Civil

8. Jacob, J. G., Being a Record of Prominent Events Occurring in Brooke County, W. VA., From the Settlement of the Country until January 1, 1882/Also, a List of the Marriage and Deaths, From January 1, 1870 to 1882, (Wellsburg, WV: J. G. Jacob & J.M. Murphy, 1882), 133.
10. Jacob, Brooke County, 137.
War years, Rev. Dawson was prominent both locally and in national affairs of the church as an outspoken supporter of abolition, the Union cause, and President Lincoln.\(^{15}\)

Yet he also had a practical side that was equally devoted to economic empowerment. As early as 1858, he was the founding president for the “Colored People’s Savings Institution of Chicago.”\(^{16}\) Such issues were very much on the mind of John Dawson. While serving as a minister at the Quinn Chapel A.M.E. Church, he set up his barbering business a few blocks to the south on Harrison Street, just west of Clark.\(^{17}\) The war brought an influx of new congregants, many freed slaves from the South with few urban skills and little or no financial resources. A second church, Bethel A.M.E., had been organized in 1862 to accommodate them with Rev. Dawson serving as its first pastor; he would still be the minister there at the war’s end.\(^{18}\) Meanwhile the Dawson barbering business would thrive: his oldest son, Philip, had become his partner by 1866, and the younger ones helped out at the shop while they learned the trade.\(^{19}\)

In addition to faith, politics, and business, another important tenet that the Rev. Dawson shared with his A.M.E. brethren was a focus on education as a key to a better life for African-American people. Perhaps no one better epitomized that than John’s second son, Richard A. Dawson. Richard would study first at Oberlin College, and then move on to the newly founded University of Chicago’s law school in 1869.\(^{20}\) The following year he would become the first black man to have earned a bachelor’s degree from any college in Illinois, and only the second admitted to law practice in the state, all the while helping out at his father’s downtown barber shop.\(^{21}\) Much more would be heard from Richard.

In the postwar years, the black population in Chicago continued to grow, and yet a third A.M.E. church was founded on the city’s West Side, known first as the “Hubbard Mission” and later as St. Stephen’s A.M.E., and again Rev. Dawson was called on to minister to the new congregation.\(^{22}\) But John Dawson was seeking more than just another church: He had begun to look for a location where African-Americans could not only worship but own their homes and build a community. And by the beginning of the following decade, he was in a position to make that happen. The 1870 Census recorded the barber/minister as still living downtown, but also owning $20,000 in real estate, an impressive sum when land around Chicago was selling or $2,500 to $3,000 an acre.\(^{23}\)

**Dawson’s Settlement**

After the Chicago Fire in October 1871, John B. Dawson would no longer be listed in the municipal directory as a barber. His shop, then located on Clark just south of Harrison, was close to the fire’s origin but may well have escaped the conflagration, and his sons would go on operating their hairdressing business from that address.\(^{24}\)

Now over age 50, the Rev. Dawson sought to realize his ambition of a new community for his African-American flock by purchasing 7 acres of land north the city limits in the newly platted “town”

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21. Ibid.
of Avondale. Actually, though the area had already been subdivided, it was largely empty except for a few homes along the Milwaukee Road that exited the city at what is now Logan Square Park. In 1873 the Dawson household settled on the south side of the plank road, just a little farther north near Diversey Avenue.

Across Milwaukee from there, several short diagonal streets had been laid out running to the northeast. Most bore the names of local realtors and landowners, but the longest one would be named Dawson Street, after the reverend. Two blocks over was Allen Street, at the northern end of which sprung up the Allen A.M.E. chapel; when its doors opened in 1876 it would be the first place of worship erected in Avondale.

The adjacent residential lots began to fill in and by 1880 John Dawson’s vision had been achieved, at least in part. The new neighborhood had grown to include 16 households home to 71 residents of color. (The settlement families made up two-thirds of all the African-American residents listed in the Jefferson Township census that year.) Their household heads included a few tradesmen but most of the adult males were listed as laborers, as were most men who were congregants in Rev. Dawson’s pews.

John and Julia’s home included their two youngest sons, Frank and Thaddeus (Lincoln), while his oldest son Phillip and family lived next door.

Phillip continued to run the downtown barber-shop (now located on Van Buren Street), where his half-brothers Douglass and John B., Jr. where also employed. Rev. Dawson’s sixth son, William, was living farther south on Third Avenue (Dearborn), near 12th Street (Roosevelt Road), not far from his older brother Edward, a city employee, while lawyer Richard had moved to Arkansas.

Edward C., the third son, was the proverbial prodigal. While still in his 20s, he was caught in some financial misdeeds involving the Quinn Chapel. Though his father stepped in and mortgaged property to cover for him, Edward lost his city job and left town. He would return two years later in 1879, only to announce that he had become a Democrat and had teamed up with the newly elected mayor Carter Harrison—he got his job back with the City Health Department.

Still a controversial figure, Edward was subsequently prosecuted on a somewhat dubious charge of forgery; again his father intervened and cleared him, largely on the basis of his own reputation.

Rev. Dawson’s paternal forbearance must have bordered on the biblical, especially as he himself remained a stalwart and active Republican; in 1883 he would be elected delegate from Jefferson Township to the party’s state convention in Springfield. Over the last two decades, he had been closely associated with most prominent African-American G.O.P.

politicians in the city, many of who were also leaders in the A.M.E. church. Those connections as well the high regard for the Reverend generally had led to his appointment as a chaplain to the Illinois State Senate.

His Jobian patience, however, would be stretched to the limit when yet another son’s legal troubles nearly cost him his legacy. Douglass, two years younger than Edward and the son named after the famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass, had left barbering after a dispute with brother John (who was also dabbling in Democratic Party politics) for the courthouse where he became a bail bondsman, or “straw-bailer” in the jargon of the day. He, too, borrowed money on his father’s name; the debt was subsequently transferred through several hands—forgery again was involved—ending in an attempt to foreclose on the Dawson homestead along Milwaukee. Once more a judge, in deference to the Reverend’s reputation, ruled in his favor and restored him the title. (Douglass would move on to the publishing business and became editor of a small newspaper, The Sentinel, before he died in 1892.)

The Dawsons’ Avondale property had become much more desirable for such schemers after Jefferson Township was annexed by the City of Chicago in 1889. Its growing population sought the benefits of city services, including water, sewers, and better streets. The move followed years of growing discontent among the locals, particularly with the Milwaukee Plank Road, then operated as for-profit venture by the despised Chicago millionaire Amos Snell. Snell would meet his end as the victim of a mysterious murder in his posh West Side home in 1888. After the Illinois Supreme Court ruled against his heirs’ attempt to maintain his toll operations two years later, a number of locals put the Avondale tollgate to the torch.

Incorporation into the city brought a residential boom as Milwaukee Avenue, now no longer a toll road, was paved and the streetcar lines were extended, and then the newly constructed elevated rail line reached Logan Square. The rest of the Dawson brothers would move north, Richard having returned to the city, then John B. Jr., and finally William.

In 1891, John B. Jr. and his youngest brother, Thaddeus, were operating a barbering business on Milwaukee, near its intersection with Dawson Avenue. By that time, the Reverend had moved the family home farther north on Milwaukee, across Central Park Avenue, and with other improvements, had doubled his property’s value.

Throughout these years, John B. Sr. continued his work for the Lord, and could be found preaching out in Quincy or upriver in Davenport, at church conferences in downstate Lincoln or at many events at the city’s Quinn Chapel and Bethel church. In 1890 he took on a new assignment as pastor of the Ebenezer Chapel, the first A.M.E. church in north

44. Chicago, Illinois, City Directory, 1891, Dawson, John B., Thaddeus L., 611.
46. Chicago Tribune, “Religious,” 14 August 1871, 1; also “New Building for Bethel Church,” 18 October 1875, 2; “Sunday-Schools/Special Dispatch to The Tribune,” 14 June 1877, 2; “Did His Son Commit Forgery/Developments in the Suit of the Rev. Mr. Dawson to Recover Property,” 21 February 1891, 3; also The Inter Ocean, “The African Methodists,” 13 September 1876, 5, “African Methodists,” 27 August 1891, 6
suburban Evanston. He was still there three years later and still a missionary of moral uplift; at a church picnic he invited a former Civil War colonel to address, “The Advancement of the Negro Since His Emancipation.” During this time, Rev. Dawson continued to reside (and vote) from his Avondale home, 10 miles to the south. By 1896 he had taken over as minister for the neighborhood Allen Chapel.

Knowing that his labors were drawing to a close, the reverend made out his will in May of that year. In addition to his wife, he named his six surviving sons—Philip D., Richard A., John B., William C., Frank R., and Thaddeus L.—as his heirs. In keeping with his pious ways, he warned them all against strong drink, idleness, and legal disputa-

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50. Chicago, Illinois, City Directory, 1896, Methodist/African/Allen Chapel, 20; also The Inter Ocean, “Ejected Her From the Church/That is Mrs. Adams’ Charge Against Pastor Dawson and Others,” 23 April 1896, 8.
tiousness, on pain of disinheritance.51

Still his work was not done: in 1897, he was appointed minister for the A.M.E. church in Aurora, then the following year in Lake Forest.52 Not quite reaching his 80th year, John B. Dawson finally went to his rest in November 1898; after a funeral at the Quinn Chapel, he would be buried in the Union Ridge Cemetery off Higgins Road in the far Northwest Side of city.53 There, he joined his eldest son Phillip, who had died the previous year.54

The estate inherited by his widow now included land in the triangle north of Diversey, south of Milwaukee to Central Park and adjacent property west of Central Park to Ridgeway Avenue, north of George Street, labeled on contemporary maps as “Dawson’s Subdivision.”55 Julia was still living there in 1900, her household also including sons Richard, John, and William, as well as two grandchildren. (The census form notes that Julia had five surviving children, but had given birth to a total of 14, though the 1910 Census would list just half that many.)56 Youngest son Thaddeus, married with family of four children, had his own home on Ridge-way, while his brother Frank, also married with two daughters, had recently left Avondale and moved to the South Side.57

By then, Rev. Dawson’s dream of an African-American community had been swallowed up among the influx of newcomers to Avondale. The}

51. “Record of Wills, 1879-1928,” Ancestry, Illinois, Probate Court (Cook County); Record of Wills, Book 29-30, 1898-1899, John B. Dawson, 132-135.
52. The Inter Ocean, “African M.E. Appointments,” 22 September 1897, 2; also “funeral of J.B. Dawson,” 14 November 1898, 3.
53. “Cook County, Illinois, Deaths Index, 1878-1922,” Ancestry, FHL Film No. 1033055.
54. “Cook County, Illinois, Deaths Index, 1878-1922,” FHL Film No. 1033042.
Along with Little Rock attorneys Lloyd Garrison Wheeler (a fellow Chicagoan and the first black lawyer admitted to the Illinois bar) and Mifflin Gibbs, Dawson sued a Pine Bluff saloonkeeper in 1873 for violations of the Civil Rights Act of 1866. He was elected the Republican State Senator for Jefferson County that same year.

The next year he was elected county clerk for a two-year term. In May 1877, the 30-year-old Richard had decided the time had come to settle down and he married 17-year-old Alice Moore. He was again elected to the legislature and served in the 1879 Arkansas Assembly. Yet by then the counterattack against Reconstruction was in full force, and like Wheeler, he would return to the North.

Although he had been active in the 1880 presidential contest in Arkansas, he would land in New York City later that year, having switched his allegiance to the Democratic ticket. He subsequently appears to have moved across the Hudson to Jersey City, and there taken up his old trade of barbering. Later that decade he would resume his political activism, having returned to the Republican Party but always as a strong advocate for African-American rights. In 1890, he served as delegate to the “Colored Men’s Convention” from New Jersey.

The next year he was back in Chicago and would appear on the 1892 voter registration roll as having lived on Milwaukee Avenue for the previous 12 years. He again became a locally prominent activist, opposing lynching and other “outrages of the South.” He served alongside Ida B. Wells as an officer of the Colored Men’s Congress, which brought the renowned and now aged Frederick Douglass to speak at the new Art Institute on the eve of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893. Richard also sat on the World’s Fair Committee of Colored Men.

He would further be selected as a state commissioner to the “Cotton States and International Exposition” held in Atlanta two years later. By then he was commonly referred as “Judge Dawson,” apparently an honorific title, as there are no records of him having served on the bench in Illinois, Arkansas, or New Jersey. Like his father before him, he had now become an elder statesman for the people and causes for which he had labored so long.

Attorney Dawson’s name appears in the county

66. Daily Arkansas Gazette, “City and General Items,” 17 May 1877, 4; also “Arkansas, County Marriages Index, 1837-1857,” Ancestry, FHL Film Number: 983665
77. Kilpatrick, Arkansas Black Lawyers; also The Inter Ocean, “Miscellaneous,” 12 September 1892, 7; Chicago Tribune, “Feast of the Aged Ones/Venerable Colored People Get Together at Quinn Chapel,” 20 May 1895, 8.
The bar association list for 1896, though it was said that, “he paid little attention to the practice of law.” He did, however, remain very active in Republican Party politics, supporting the 1896 national ticket as a leader in the “Cook County McKinley Marching Club.” A widower—there is no indication that his marriage to Alice had borne any children—he would still be living with his mother on Milwaukee Avenue in 1901.

Yet by then he had once again grown disillusioned with the Republicans and returned to the Democratic fold in 1898. After the sale of the family’s Avondale property, he would move downtown. He died in February 1906 at the South Side home of his brother Frank on Armour Avenue and would be buried in the family plot at Union Ridge Cemetery. An obituary at the time called him “one of the old time Afro-American Democrats.”

A COMMUNITY DISPERSES
Just five months after Richard passed away, his younger brother John B. also died in Frank’s home on South Armour (now Federal Street.) He was residing there with his widowed mother, Julia, who had sold off the family’s North Side properties over the last several years. Julia would live until April 1912, reaching the age of 81 before she was buried alongside her husband up at Union Ridge Cemetery. Her fifth son, William, living only a few blocks away on 30th Street, would pass away four months later that same year. Frank, by now a foreman in the Union Stock Yards, would last until 1924 before joining them in the family plot at Union Ridge.

They were far from the only old-time Avondalers who had left for the Near South Side; most of the other households would as well after the turn of the century. Although not all: one family first moved out to west suburban Maywood and another up to Glencoe on the North Shore, though both would later also end up on the South Side. Only Thaddeus Dawson and a few others would live out their remaining years in the old neighborhood.

The move southward was gradual and logical; the neighborhoods south of downtown, between the railyards and the lakefront, had been home to most of Chicago’s African-American residents since the Civil War years; seven out ten black Chicagoans were living there in 1910. What became known as Bronzeville offered greater social and occupational opportunities, including its proximity to the thriving Stock Yards. Thus it would become the prime destination for the influx of black southerners during World War I, the

82. Chicago Tribune, “Democratic Meetings Today,” 11 February 1906, 7; also Kilpatrick, Arkansas Black Lawyers.
83. Kilpatrick, Arkansas Black Lawyers.
86. “Cook County, Illinois, Deaths Index, 1878-1922”, FHL Film 1287650.
87. “Cook County, Illinois, Deaths Index, 1878-1922”, FHL Film 1287629.
88. “Cook County, Illinois, Deaths Index, 1878-1922”, FHL Film 1877532
start of the Great Migration that would go on to shape so much Chicago history.

The 1910 Census would list just six families totaling 21 people of color remaining in Avondale, all on the street named after Rev. Dawson some 40 years earlier. These included his youngest son, Thaddeus, with his wife and three children; he had sold the house on Ridgeway and was now renting from Isabella Wright, a widow and one of the neighborhood’s other original residents. Ten years later the now widowed Thaddeus would be living with his daughter in Logan Square (in the home of his father-in-law, another old-time African-American “pioneer” on the Northwest Side), where he died in 1932.

By 1920, the Dawson Street black settlers had been reduced to just one household, that of widow Laura Goode and her two children. She would also subsequently move south to live with her daughter and son-in-law. Her grandson Robert Lucas would grow up to be an accomplished journalist, getting his start with the WPA’s “Illinois Writers’ Project,” going on to write for the Chicago Defender, the Los Angeles Sentinel, and eventually as an editor for Jet magazine.

Thereafter the US Census would report that there were no residents of African-American descent in all of Avondale. As it turns out, that was not quite correct: One very famous woman of color resided there until her death in 1942. Lucy Parsons, widow of Albert Parsons, the anarchist martyr of the 1886 Haymarket Affair, and herself a world-famous agitator for social and racial justice, was living on North Troy Street with her current (white) anarchist husband George Markstall when the census-taker came around in 1940. Born to an enslaved family in Virginia, the light-skinned Lucy had always been a bit ambiguous about her ancestry, claiming to be racially mixed and part Native American; the census canvasser recorded her as white. Two years later, age 83 and blind, an accidental kitchen fire took her life. Today, the former site of the Markstall house lies beneath the Kennedy Expressway.


