

# Fight Like a Tiger

## Conway Barbour and the Challenges of the Black Middle Class in Nineteenth-Century America

Victoria L. Harrison

“In *Fight Like a Tiger*, Victoria L. Harrison brings to light the singular Conway Barbour, a mid-nineteenth-century man on the move. Her meticulous research and lucid prose lead readers into Barbour’s previously hidden life; in the process she challenges how we think about class, race, and place.”—**Dana Elizabeth Weiner**, author of *Race and Rights: Fighting Slavery and Prejudice in the Old Northwest, 1830–1870*

Examining a fascinating and unconventional  
life of upward mobility

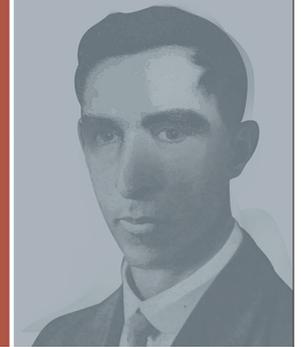
Focusing on the life of ambitious former slave Conway Barbour, Victoria L. Harrison argues that the idea of a black middle class traced its origins to the free black population of the mid-nineteenth century and developed alongside the idea of a white middle class. Although slavery and racism meant that the definition of middle class was not identical for white people and free people of color, they shared similar desires for advancement.

Born a slave in western Virginia about 1815, Barbour was a free man by the late 1840s. His adventurous life took him through Lexington and Louisville, Kentucky; Cleveland, Ohio; Alton, Illinois; and Little Rock and Lake Village, Arkansas. In search of upward mobility, he worked as a steamboat steward, tried his hand at several commercial ventures, and entered politics. He sought, but was denied, a Civil War military appointment that would have provided financial stability. Blessed with intelligence, competence, and energy, Barbour was quick to identify opportunities as they appeared in personal relationships, business, and politics.

Despite an unconventional life, Barbour found in each place he lived that he was one of many free black people who fought to better themselves alongside their white countrymen. Harrison’s argument about black class formation reframes the customary narrative of downtrodden free African Americans in the mid-nineteenth century and engages current discussions of black inclusion, the concept of “otherness,” and the breaking down of societal barriers. Demonstrating that careful research can reveal the stories of people who have been invisible to history, *Fight Like a Tiger* complicates our understanding of the intersection of race and class in the Civil War era.

# FIGHT — LIKE A — TIGER

Conway Barbour  
and the Challenges  
of the Black Middle  
Class in Nineteenth-  
Century America



VICTORIA L. HARRISON

Paper: 978-0-8093-3677-7  
E-book: 978-0-8093-3678-4  
\$27.50, 184 pages, 20 illus.

**Victoria L. Harrison** is an instructor in the Department of Historical Studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She has published essays in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* and *Ohio Valley History*.

To request a review copy, schedule an author for an interview or a signing, or obtain information about course adoption, contact [siupresspublicity@siu.edu](mailto:siupresspublicity@siu.edu)

For rights and permissions inquiries, contact [rights@siu.edu](mailto:rights@siu.edu)

To order  
Online: [www.siupress.com](http://www.siupress.com) · Phone: 1-800-621-2736  
Also available at bookstores and online retailers

**SIU** SOUTHERN ILLINOIS  
UNIVERSITY PRESS  
CARBONDALE

Acknowledgments

## Introduction

The introduction establishes the book's argument that the black middle class developed alongside its white counterpart in the decades before and during the Civil War, and includes a brief historiography on the topic.

### 1. Lexington and Louisville

Describes the dangers and opportunities for free people of color living in a slave society in the antebellum era. Conway Barbour and his wife Cornelia recognized their challenges and acted to protect themselves as residents of Louisville. Conway's participation in Martin Delany's 1854 Emigration Convention, however, prompted the family to relocate to Cleveland.

### 2. Cleveland

As a participant in the convention, Barbour was introduced to Martin Delany and other prominent men. Barbour's small role in the convention gave him a taste for politics, although not for emigration. His decision to move Cornelia and the children to Cleveland helped facilitate his bigamous relationship with Frances Rankin in Alton, Illinois.

### 3. Alton

Explores Conway's years as a businessman in Alton, Illinois. He first took the helm of the Mercantile Restaurant, then upgraded to the Fifth Avenue Hall, and finally opened a hotel and restaurant above Alton's new train depot. He received a great deal of praise and support in the local newspaper, but with each move, he got deeper in debt. Facing financial disaster, Barbour returned to the South.

### 4. Little Rock

Examines Barbour's election and service as a state representative in Reconstruction Arkansas after relocating there in 1869. A loyal defender of beleaguered governor Powell Clayton throughout the legislative session, Barbour was rewarded with an appointment as tax assessor of Chicot County in the far southeastern corner of the state.

### 5. Lake Village, Arkansas

Describes Barbour's unhappy surprises in Chicot County. Among them was his competition, James W. Mason, the mulatto son of Arkansas's largest antebellum slaveholder. The two men engaged in a bitter feud over local offices and political power until Mason's death in 1874. Meanwhile, Barbour tried to rebuild his finances. His last few years again found him struggling for economic survival.

## Conclusion

On 8 July 1876, the *Arkansas Gazette* announced Barbour's death. Chicot County has no death certificate to help illuminate the circumstances of his passing. What we do know of him suggests in each place he lived, we find that he and others like him were pursuing opportunities and seeking to better themselves vocationally and economically, seeking respectability and stature in their communities. The conclusion also discusses his family.

Appendix: The Other Children

Notes

Bibliography

Index