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*ORGANIZATIONS: National Association For The Advancement Of Colored People, National Association For Equal Opportunity In Higher Education, National Association Of Negro Business And Professional Women's Clubs Inc., National Business League, National Newspaper Publishers Association, National Urban League and Opportunities Industrialization Centers Of America

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The growth of black voting power

The roots of modern black political power can be traced to one isolated sub-division in Maryland, the Fourth Legislative District.

The district, located in West Baltimore around Druid Hill Park, was long a home to blacks, but a series of events at mid-century awakened the black community to the opportunity to seize power.

For decades the Fourth District was controlled by political bosses whose interests lay in representing the western half of the Fourth District while ignoring the eastern and southern half, where a majority of blacks lived.

Blacks had been sending representatives to City Council from the central city since 1895. Before 1932, most blacks voted Republican. When the first modern City Council redistricting plan was developed at the turn of the century, most Republicans, were crammed into the Fourth District by Democratic legislators.

In 1932 local Democrats rode the coat-tails of Franklin Roosevelt's landslide victory and gained control of the City Council, including the Fourth District. The last blacks elected to the City Council were Warner T. McGuinn and Walter Emerson, were part of the 1932 national rout of Republicans.

The decline of black voting power coincided with the rise of the Jack Pollack organization in the Fourth District and the Thomas D'Alesandro II forces in the southeastern First District.

For almost thirty years, the fortunes of the city would be decided largely by these two men. Both were poor boys who grew up to wield inordinate power. In their life story is also the story of the political maturity of two ethnic groups, and the lessons for a similar political maturation of the black community.

Thomas D'Alesandro and James (Jack) Pollack knew each other as boys growing up in Baltimore. Pollack was a tough guy, a small-time gangster and boxer who had more than his share of brushes with the law.

D'Alesandro was as a youth won the attention of William (Uncle Willie) Curran, the undisputed boss of local politics through the early years of the century.

Both men worked for Curran as youngsters. D'Alesandro won election to the state General Assembly in 1926, when he was 22. He served two terms in the General Assembly.

Both men broke away from Curran after the 1932 relections. After campaigning hard for Roosevelt and winning a federal post, D'Alesandro had begun establishing a power base in the largely Italian and ethnic First District of southeast Baltimore. That district would be the base for D'Alesandro's subsequent elections to the City Council once, Congress five times and the mayoralty of Baltimore three times before the twilight of his political career.

Pollack would grow to control Maryland politics as a shrewd, behind the scenes man. At the height of his powers, he would bec ome the prototypical political boss — the man who could always deliver the votes for a friend or break an opponent.

In 1959, the Baltimore Sun stated that Pollack controlled twelve state legislators, five city judges, five City Council members, and scores of public employes and minor office-holders.

His base of power was the Fourth District, then an odd-shaped, gerrymandered district which lumped the blacks in the southern end and a large Jewish population in the northwest end.

The large-scale black exodus from the Republican party did not occur until 1936; but by then it was too late. Pollack and D'Alesandro effectively controlled the Democratic party, and for practical purposes, it was the only party in town.

In the early Fifties prominent black Baltimoreans began planning ways to capitalize on the increasing Black political strength in the 4th District. The massive influx of blacks during the war years had led to a black majority of the district's population, but representation was still limited to whites.

Harry A. Cole, a prominent black lawyer, and Emery Cole, a black businessman, decided to run as Republicans for state senator and state delegate respectively in 1954. Their inclusion on the Democratic ticket was impossible of course, since that avenue was controlled by Pollack's organization, the Trenton Democratic Club.

A black independent, Truly Hatchett, also ran as a state delegate, surprisingly on the Pollack ticket. However, he had not been supported in the primaries by Pollack. His inclusion was actually just a formality, since he was one of the Democratic primary winners.

Photo courtesy of Enoch Pratt Free Library
SHELL SHOCK — A black defense plant worker inspects a shipment of artillery shells.

None of the black candidates were given much chance for victory. After all, Baltimore was a Democtatic city, and black voters had no record of high turnout.

The Baltimore AFRO-AMERICAN Newspaper conducted an enthusiastic get-out-the-vote campaign.

Their efforts proved successful, as Cole and his two running mates beat the Pollack candidates. The elections marked the first time since 1927 that blacks had been elected to political office in Baltimore.

As the Pollack organization began to rebound from the stunning defeat, Baltimoreans turned their attention to a major battle which would gain reformers city-wide attention and help weaken the D'Alesandro image.

In August 1957 Mayor D'Alesandro announced that he would push to build a new Civic Center in Baltimore's Druid Hill Park directly north of Druid Lake. Most citizens had thought the park site would be abandoned after language in a 1956 bond issue excluded the Druid Hill Park site.

The venerable park, built during the nineteenth century, has long been a popular metropolitan haven for Baltimoreans. D'Alesandro's decision galvanized community leaders to fight the intrusion.

Photo courtesy of Enoch Pratt Free Library
SHIP SHAPE — A black shipyard worker helps prepare another freighter for the war effort.

In short order the mayor rammed a bill through City Council transferring control of the land from the Water Department to the Civic Center Commission. The only three opponents to the measure were City Councilmen William Donald Schaefer and Micheal J. Hankin of the Fifth Councilmanic District and Maxwell Alpert of the Fourth District.

Scores of upper middle class blacks spearheading a move west to better housing had begun to move into the area. Jewish synagogues and former schules that dot the area today are the only remnants of the Jewish residents who edged out of the Mondawmin area as the blacks moved in.

Groups as diverse as the Greater Baltimore Committee, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, the Mount Royal Improvement Association, Committee for Downtown, and others joined the broad-based movement.

The group sent out 8,000 telegrams to supporters in the days before a special Aug. 7, 1957 City Council hearing debate the plan. The debate turned into a one-sided show of D'Alesandro's power. City Council members lambasted the opponents of the plan, praised the mayor, and voted 15-3 to approve the D'Alesandro's decision.

But the battle wasn't over. In July of 1957 a little-known attorney named Hyman G. Pressman, wrote D'Alesandro a letter in which he threatened to sue the city if the Civic Center Site in Druid Hill Park was approved.

D'Alesandro ignored the threat and subsequently Pressman sued.

Six months later, in February 1958, Baltimore Judge Rueben Oppenheimer ruled against the city. In his opinion the judge stated that city park land belonged to the Bureau of Parks and recreation, and the city's charter did not give the mayor or City Council the authority to transfer jurisdiction over the area from the Park Board to another city agency.

D'Alesandro conceded defeat on that same day, and eventually settled for the present downtown site of the Civic Center.

The battle was a watershed struggle which determined which way Baltimore would go in the future and who would control that direction.

It brought together various elements of a reform group that would pave the way for black political development in Baltimore.

William Donald Schaefer would one day become mayor of Baltimore. Hyman Pressman became City Comptroller a year later.

The losers in the battle soon faded from center stage. D'Alesandro ended his elective career ignominously. He lost, in quick succession, the mayoral primary to J. Harold Grady, (present city Supreme Bench Judge) and an ill-starred race for the United States Senate to incumbent Republican J. Glenn Beall.

The civil rights movement in

Continued on Page B-8

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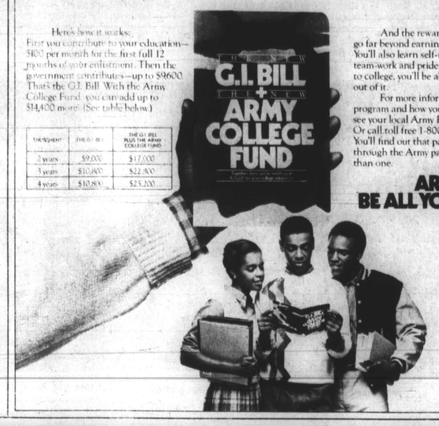

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