

## Records About the American Worker

From National Archives - Great Lakes Region

During the years before the American Civil War, the experience of work and workers was most commonly documented in county courts, not by the United States Government. Only in the rare instances when an enslaved person of African ancestry escaped from Southern slavery to the North and became the center of a federal Fugitive Slave Act lawsuit would the subject of a person being "bound to labor and service" become a federal government responsibility.

During the Civil War though, the massive mobilization of human labor and the need for manufactured military goods required the U.S. Government to employ and manage white male and female workers, as well as "contrabands" - escaped slaves. The National Archives-Great Lakes Region preserves records from the Rock Island Arsenal in Illinois about the daily military orders that governed the working hours, wages, and work conditions of male and female workers in the arsenal's manufacturing buildings.

Federal court records from the era of the 1850s-1880s also contain numerous admiralty case records about the employment, wages, and work conditions of Great Lakes sailors and cooks, as well as steamboat pilots, deckhands, and roustabouts on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Admiralty court records are particularly rich in their documentation of a mostly forgotten work culture on Great Lakes sailing vessels and inland riverboats, the dangerous and poorly paid jobs that people performed, and the occasional incorporation of white women into crews as cooks, African-American men as crew members or roustabouts, and African-American women as maids.

The growth of Midwestern mining, manufacturing, and transportation, during and after the Civil War years, led to changing interpretations of the role of the federal government in regulating society and labor relations. A federal bankruptcy act in 1867 permitted individual persons, iron mills, railroad companies, and other industrial firms to seek protection from creditors in the cash-poor years of the late 1860s and the depression of 1873-1878. The surviving bankruptcy case files from federal courts across the Midwest contain evidence of the preferential claims by a

firm's workers to money from any liquidated assets of the company.

Other companies that sank into debt ended up as the defendants in civil lawsuits by creditors or investors. Those civil lawsuits in federal courts, called corporate receivership cases, led to a new legal premise in July 1877: if a company is under federal court receivership protection, then a strike by the company's workers to protest wage cuts constituted interference with the federal court. A national railroad workers strike that began in Martinsburg, West Virginia, in July 1877, which particularly crippled railroads across Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, prompted federal judges in Cleveland, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Springfield, Chicago, and other cities to issue injunctions against interference by striking railroad workers, followed by contempt of court charges against individual railroaders.

The complaint of "government by injunction" was raised by workers in many trades throughout the late 1870's until 1894, when a railroad strike on the Northern Pacific Railroad, a coal miners strike in the Midwest, and the Pullman Strike and Boycott of June-August 1894 culminated in sweeping federal court injunctions, massive contempt-of-court proceedings against hundreds of people, criminal conspiracy indictments against officers and members of the American Railway Union, and the intervention of the U.S. Army in some places.

The National Archives-Great Lakes Region preserves more than one thousand cubic feet of historical records about the history of American workers, spanning two hundred years from an 1807 fugitive slave court case in Ohio to Progressive Era wrongful death lawsuits about industrial accidents, and from the 1920s files of the Train Service Boards of Adjustment to a mid-1970s Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service labor dispute file about a strike at an agricultural processing plant in Danville, Illinois.

In many instances, finding aids or other descriptions of the records of a federal court or agency may not immediately reveal the full contents of the records about labor history. Our staff invites researchers to discuss their research interests with us by calling (773) 948-9001 or by writing us at [chicago.archives@nara.gov](mailto:chicago.archives@nara.gov).