



## George William Crockett, Jr.

### 1909–1997

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1980–1991  
DEMOCRAT FROM MICHIGAN

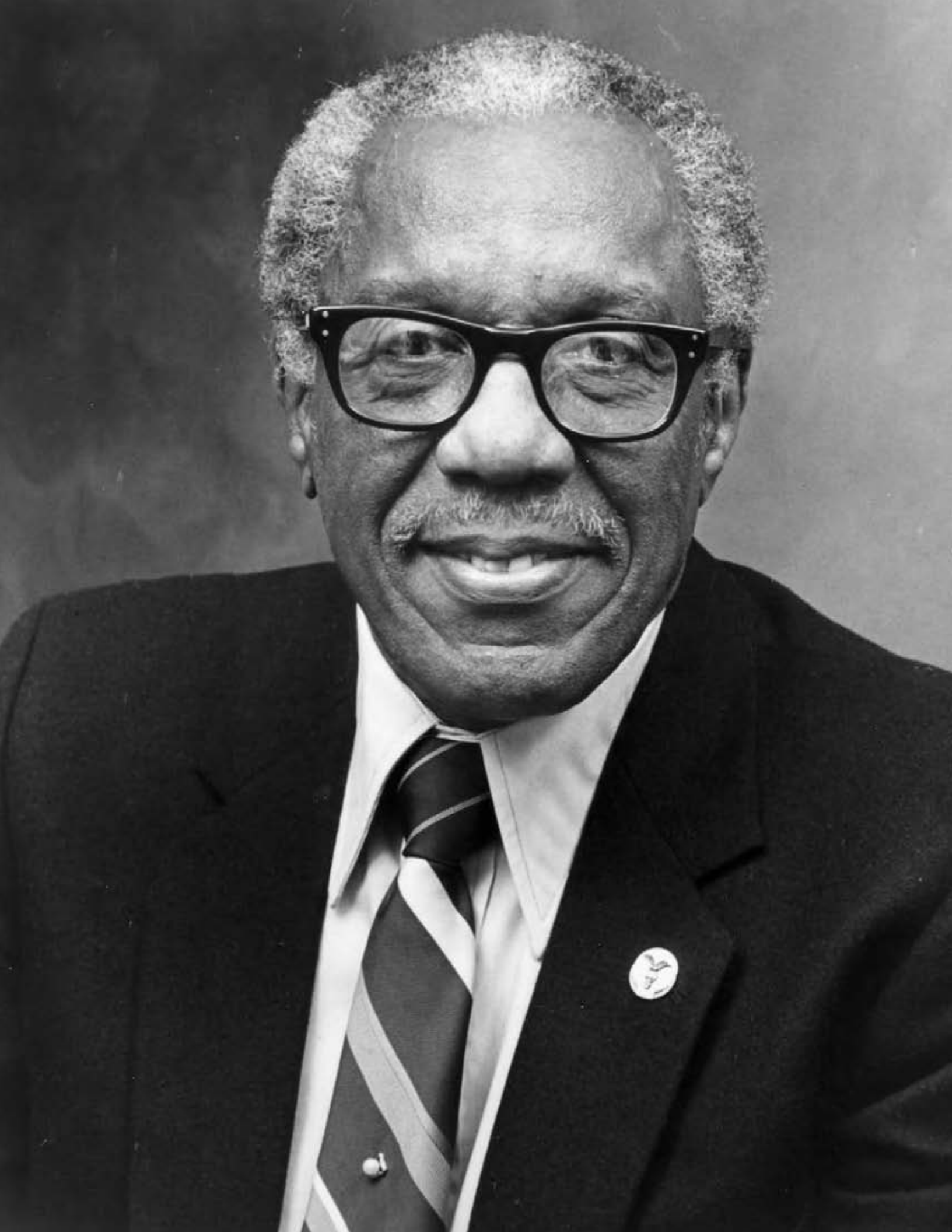
George Crockett won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1980 after a lengthy career as a lawyer and a judge. At age 71, he was the oldest African-American Member ever elected to Congress. The Michigan Representative came to the House with a reputation as a tireless civil rights advocate and a staunch defender of civil liberties. An earlier prison sentence for contempt of court that resulted from the zealous representation of his clients in a contentious federal trial shaped much of his outlook on American justice and politics: “If there’s one thing you learn in a place like this, it is patience. Time is always passing, and your time is bound to come.”<sup>1</sup>

Born in Jacksonville, Florida, on August 10, 1909, Crockett was the son of George Crockett, Sr., a carpenter, and Minnie Jenkins Crockett. He attended public schools in his native city and graduated with an A.B. from Morehouse College in Atlanta in 1931. Crockett went north to study law at the University of Michigan, where he earned a J.D. in 1934. That same year he married Dr. Ethelene Jones, the first black woman to practice obstetrics and gynecology in Michigan and the first woman president of the American Lung Association.<sup>2</sup> The couple had three children: Elizabeth Ann Hicks, George William Crockett III, and Ethelene Crockett Jones. After his wife died in 1978, Crockett remarried two years later, to Harriette Clark Chambliss, a pediatrician with two sons.<sup>3</sup>

Crockett worked in Jacksonville, Florida, and Fairmont, West Virginia, as a lawyer in private practice. His involvement with labor law took him to Washington in 1939 as the first African-American attorney with the U.S. Department of Labor.<sup>4</sup> In 1943 President Roosevelt appointed Crockett a hearing examiner with the newly formed Fair Employment Practices Committee. A year later, he moved to Detroit to direct a Fair Employment Practices office with the United Auto Workers. During this

time he remained active in the defense of labor unions and civil rights organizers, representing clients before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the U.S. Supreme Court. Crockett gained notoriety in 1949 for his participation in a highly publicized federal trial in which 11 communist leaders were convicted of subversion against the U.S. government under the Smith Act, a law which made teaching about the overthrow of the government a criminal offense. Upon the conclusion of the nine-month proceedings, the judge sentenced Crockett and the other defense attorneys to jail for alleged attempts to delay and confuse the proceedings. The Supreme Court eventually upheld the penalty.<sup>5</sup> Recalling his four-month prison term, the Michigan lawyer said, “I think I have always been a champion of the underdog in our society and, if anything, that segregated prison life probably pushed me a little farther along the road.”<sup>6</sup> Crockett also argued before the Supreme Court on behalf of Eugene Dennis, the top defendant in the 1949 trial, for an earlier sentence for contempt of Congress and was one of the defense lawyers in the influential case *Dennis v. United States*, which upheld the convictions of the communist leaders and the constitutionality of the controversial Smith Act.<sup>7</sup>

During his career before Congress, Crockett established a solid civil rights record. He helped found Michigan’s first integrated law firm and organized the Mississippi Project to provide free legal services for civil rights workers imprisoned in Mississippi.<sup>8</sup> As a judge of the Recorder’s Court in Detroit from 1966 to 1978 and the presiding official of the court for the latter four years, Crockett often dispensed lenient sentences for defendants arrested in civil rights protests.<sup>9</sup> Of the belief that African-American judges should be the “conscience of the judiciary,” Crockett garnered national attention in 1969 when he released more than 100 members of a black separatist group after





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a violent encounter with the Detroit police.<sup>10</sup> Crockett defended his actions by asking, “Can any of you imagine the Detroit police invading an all-white church and rounding up everyone in sight to be bused to a wholesale lockup in a police garage?”<sup>11</sup> After retiring from the Recorder’s Court, he served as a visiting judge on the Michigan Court of Appeals and as corporation counsel for the City of Detroit.<sup>12</sup>

As a celebrated leader in Detroit’s black community, Crockett entered the race for the House seat left vacant by the resignation of Charles Diggs, Jr., in 1980. The overwhelmingly Democratic congressional district, entirely within the city limits of Detroit, encompassed the downtown commercial center. During his campaign Crockett promised to fight unemployment, improve health care and provide housing opportunities for the residents of Detroit.<sup>13</sup> His integrity and civil rights record, along with the backing of Detroit Mayor Coleman Young and former Representative Diggs, helped Crockett secure the Democratic nomination with a 42 percent plurality in the crowded August primary.<sup>14</sup> He went on to defeat his Republican opponent, Theodore Wallace, easily with 92 percent of the vote in the 1980 special election to fill the vacancy for the remainder of the 96th Congress (1979–1981). He also trounced Republican M. Michael Hurd in the general election for the full term in the 97th Congress (1981–1983), again earning 92 percent of the vote.<sup>15</sup> Crockett retained his House seat for another four terms, rarely facing any formidable challenge in the majority-black, inner-city district, except in his final primary run against future Representative Barbara-Rose Collins, when he collected only 51 percent of the vote.<sup>16</sup>

Sworn in to office on November 12, 1980, Crockett briefly served on the Small Business Committee before switching to the Judiciary Committee—a spot he retained from 1982 through the 101st Congress (1989–1991). He also served on the Select Committee on Aging from the 97th Congress until his retirement at the end of the 101st Congress and on the Committee on Foreign Affairs for his entire congressional career. During the 100th and

101st Congresses (1987–1991), Crockett chaired the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, which oversaw United States policy in Latin America and the Caribbean. His appointment earned the disdain of some conservative groups that categorized Crockett as a security risk. “I’ve never collaborated with the Communist Party as such,” Crockett responded. “Admittedly, some of the positions I’ve taken, dictated by the U.S. Constitution, have coincided with desires and positions of the Communist Party, like supporting freedom of speech.”<sup>17</sup> In his position as chairman of the Western Hemisphere subcommittee, the Detroit Representative strongly denounced President Ronald W. Reagan’s policy in the region, speaking out against the administration’s support of the contras in Nicaragua.<sup>18</sup> He also participated in lawsuits against the President—for authorizing military aid to El Salvador and the American invasion of Grenada.<sup>19</sup> Greatly interested in U.S. foreign policy, Crockett served as a member of the United States delegation to the 42nd General Assembly of the United Nations in 1987 and 1988. He also traveled with a U.S. congressional delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Conference in Havana, Cuba, in 1981 and to the Seventh U.N. Congress on Prevention of Crime meeting in Milan, Italy, in 1984.<sup>20</sup>

During his congressional tenure, Crockett rarely introduced any measures on the House Floor. The Michigan Representative explained, “We have enough legislation now to take care of just about every situation that arises, if we will just enforce it and apply it.”<sup>21</sup> He did, on occasion, make exceptions to this practice. In 1984, for instance, Crockett authored a resolution calling for the release of Nelson Mandela, the imprisoned South African leader; the Mandela Freedom Resolution went on to pass the House.<sup>22</sup> Throughout his tenure in Congress, he remained a consistent critic of the apartheid regime and was arrested in 1984 for participating in a demonstration outside the South African Embassy.<sup>23</sup>

Only a few months after President George H. W. Bush proposed a more stringent antidrug policy in September 1989, Crockett made headlines as the first Member of



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Congress to call for the decriminalization of drugs. The former judge, known for taking controversial positions, noted, “Our courts are burdened down with these drug cases and there is nothing we can do about it.” He went on to point out that federal money slotted for drug enforcement could be invested in programs to help his urban constituents and other impoverished Americans.<sup>24</sup>

In March 1990, at the age of 80, Crockett announced his intention to retire from the House: “After 68 years of working, I’m hoping to enjoy a little time off.” The Michigan Representative denied that his decision had been influenced by the prospect of another difficult primary race against Barbara-Rose Collins. “I’ve just gotten older and wiser,” he said.<sup>25</sup> In his retirement Crockett continued his record of activism, joining the Detroit branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in its fight in 1996 to prevent the closing of the Detroit Recorder’s Court, the court where Crockett began his career as a judge.<sup>26</sup> On September 7, 1997, Crockett died of complications from cancer and a stroke.<sup>27</sup>

#### FOR FURTHER READING

“Crockett, George William, Jr.,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000919>.

#### MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

**Howard University** (Washington, DC). Moorland–Spingarn Research Center. Papers: 1980–1990, approximately 155 linear feet. The papers of George Crockett consist of speeches, photographs, correspondence, and other material documenting his legislative activities, particularly his service on the Select Committee on Aging, the Committee on Foreign Affairs, and the Judiciary Committee. An inventory is available in the repository.

**Wayne State University** (Detroit, MI). Walter P. Reuther Library Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs. *Oral History*: 1968, 42 leaves. Oral history interview with George W. Crockett, Jr.



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NOTES

- 1 Iver Peterson, "Judge Caps Career in Race for House," 10 August 1980, *New York Times*: 25.
- 2 George Crockett, Jr., *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 10 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1995); "People," 13 August 1981, *Washington Post*: DC4.
- 3 Kathleen E. Bethel, "George W. Crockett Jr.," in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 1999): 236 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAM*); Martin Weil, "Former Rep. George Crockett Jr., 88, Dies," 9 September 1997, *Washington Post*: B06.
- 4 Weil, "Former Rep. George Crockett Jr., 88, Dies."
- 5 "11 Top Reds Found Guilty and Medina Jails Counsel," 15 October 1949, *Washington Post*: 1; Lewis Wood, "Top Court Upholds Contempt Jailing," 11 March 1952, *New York Times*: 11.
- 6 Weil, "Former Rep. George Crockett Jr., 88, Dies."
- 7 "Justices to Review Dennis' Conviction," 8 November 1949, *New York Times*: 14; Willard Edwards, "Court Upholds Prison Terms for 11 Top Reds," 5 June 1951, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 6. For more on the Supreme Court case, *Dennis v. United States*, see Kermit L. Hall, *The Oxford Companion to the Supreme Court of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): 225–226.
- 8 Bethel, "George W. Crockett Jr.," *NBAM*; Bill McGraw, "Activist Crockett Fighting for Life; Retired Congressman Comatose After Stroke," 5 September 1997, *Detroit Free Press*: 1A; Robert McG. Thomas, Jr., "George W. Crockett Dies at 88; Was a Civil Rights Crusader," 15 September 1997, *New York Times*: B7.
- 9 Weil, "Former Rep. George Crockett Jr., 88, Dies."
- 10 William K. Stevens, "Black Judges Becoming a Force in U.S. Justice," 19 February 1974, *New York Times*: 1.
- 11 Jerry M. Flints, "Judge in Detroit Answers Critics," 4 April 1969, *New York Times*: 18.
- 12 Bethel, "George W. Crockett Jr.," *NBAM*.
- 13 Peterson, "Judge Caps Career in Race for House."
- 14 John Hyde, "13 Democrats Vie for Diggs' Old Seat in Detroit Primary," 4 August 1980, *Washington Post*: A1; *Politics in America, 1982* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1981): 610.
- 15 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at [http://clerk.house.gov/member\\_info/electionInfo/index.html](http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html); Michael J. Dubin et al., *United States Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1998): 714, 720.
- 16 *Almanac of American Politics, 1990* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1989): 620.
- 17 Joanne Omang, "Rep. Crockett and the Volley From the Right," 10 February 1987, *Washington Post*: A19.
- 18 John Flesher, "Outspoken Liberal to Retire," 28 March 1990, Associated Press.
- 19 Omang, "Rep. Crockett and the Volley From the Right"; Martin Tolchin, "45 in House Sue to Bar Bush From Acting Alone," 21 November 1990, *New York Times*: A11; Bethel, "George W. Crockett Jr.," *NBAM*.
- 20 Bethel, "George W. Crockett Jr.," *NBAM*.
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- 23 Ed Bruske, "Apartheid Foes Freed Without Arraignment," 2 December 1984, *Washington Post*: B1.
- 24 "Michigan's Crockett First Congressman on Record for Decriminalization," 17 December 1989, Associated Press; Thomas, "George Crockett Dies at 88; Was a Civil Rights Crusader"; Bernard Weinraub, "President Offers Strategy for U.S. on Drug Control," 6 September 1989, *New York Times*: A1.
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“IF THERE’S ONE THING YOU  
LEARN IN A PLACE LIKE THIS,  
IT IS PATIENCE,” CROCKETT  
WROTE WHILE SERVING A PRISON  
SENTENCE FOR CONTEMPT OF  
COURT AS A RESULT OF HIS  
ZEALOUS REPRESENTATION OF  
HIS CLIENTS’ CIVIL RIGHTS IN A  
CONTENTIOUS FEDERAL TRIAL.  
“TIME IS ALWAYS PASSING, AND  
YOUR TIME IS BOUND TO COME.”