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Florida Frontiers Radio Transcripts

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## Florida Frontiers Radio Program #438

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## Transcript

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

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This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, on the web at [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org). I'm Ben Brotemarkle and coming up on the program, we'll talk with Jada Wright-Greene about her book, "Florida's Historic African American Homes."

### **Jada Wright-Greene**

People like D. A. Dorsey in Miami, and Garfield Rogers in Tampa, and A. L. Lewis in North Florida, not only were wealthy and had their money, but they also opened doors and opportunities for blacks to own homes, to be in better housing.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

We'll discuss activism among black and white progressive women.

### **Connie Lester**

Despite contemporary eulogies to the moral superiority of white women, they expressed the same racism as their fathers, husbands, and brothers.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

And the first female astronaut trainees all that ahead on Florida Frontiers.

### **(Music Break)**

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Jada Wright-Greene's book, "Florida's Historic African American Homes," is part of Arcadia Publishing's Images of America series, those books with sepia tone covers that tell community history through vintage photographs. Jada Wright-Greene first became fascinated with Florida's historic African American homes when she walked into the Mary McLeod Bethune House Museum as a teenager.

### **Jada Wright-Greene**

I definitely remember the smell, very prominent remembering, you know, the smell, old staleness of you know things and just taking aback with the beauty of the home and the preservation of the home. You know, now having the knowledge that I do have a preservation and handling of objects and different things, it's just remarkable even at that time of how I have such an appreciation for it. And with my mother, she recently passed away in January, I applaud her and give her honor and reference. She introduced me to it, and history, and museums, and historical homes, and traveling across a lot of the Caribbean islands, and insisting that we did city tours and went to different places. And so that was

always ingrained in me. So as a teenager, you know, at 16 walking in and just being taken aback with this beautiful home owned by this woman that started the college that I just kind of knew I was going to attend since the age of twelve.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Some of the homes pictured in Jada Wright-Greene's book no longer exist, like those in Tampa's Scrub neighborhood. Some are in private hands, like Zora Neale Hurston's last home in Fort Pierce. Others are open to the public, like the John G Riley House Museum in Tallahassee.

### **Jada Wright-Greene**

So the John G Riley House has been excellent preserved there in Tallahassee. Actually, the woman that worked the forward to the book out to me, Althemese Barnes, is worked with the home for years. She's retired and really was a driving force, the driving force with the John Riley home. So that home has been preserved, I think since 1800s John Riley was, you know, now looking back, we understand a millionaire, an educator, businessman as well, and bought property and built the home. Now the home, of course, is being preserved as not only a museum but a center interpreting and African American history of Tallahassee, of course, and it's situated near the Smokey Hollow neighborhood, which is another area that African Americans were very prevalent.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Many of the images presented in the book are homes of community leaders like L.B. Brown in Bartow, Howard Thurman in Daytona, and Elsie Hankins in Orlando. The home of educators Harry T and Harriet V. Moore in Mims was destroyed by a bomb on Christmas night 1951, making them the first martyrs of the contemporary civil rights movement. A replica of the Moore home is open to the public.

### **Jada Wright-Greene**

Sonya Mallard, who's there now, has been wonderful woman, making sure that history is preserved there down at the site. A replica is there, and it really tells the story of the Moores which sometimes you know, sometimes these untold stories are not out there as much. Just because you know they're not the Martin Luther King or the Rosa Parks of the civil rights movement, but definitely, like you say that a martyr of the civil rights movement. And there are tons of houses that are in the book that really reflect a wide perspective of African Americans during the time, not just the millionaires, but like you said, the working class. What I love about this research that I did because I had such a different view of what I thought the book should come out to be, I was able to really capture life, not just of the millionaires, but reflect the show and exhibit the life of the working class. And what I really love is that and you can see it in the book, in the Tampa area, the Scrubs in Miami area, over town, how these people, you know, didn't have the best house, but the pride that they took in their homes, the way the plants were on the porch, the cleaning of the porch, even the women. One of my absolute favorite photos in the book is actually not one of these big homes, but a picture of a woman working on her back porch doing laundry. It speaks so much to me because these neighborhoods, these individuals, took pride in what they have. Also, these neighborhoods were bustling. They had black-owned stores, and barber shops, and hair salons, and cleaners, and nightclubs, and you have very famous people that went through those neighborhoods performing and it was just a rich, rich culture and heritage during that time.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Chapters in Jada Wright-Greene's book focus on African American beach communities, including American Beach, Daytona Beach, and Butler Beach.

### **Jada Wright-Greene**

Butler Beach, which I was not familiar with at all, I was familiar with American Beach being that I grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, but Butler Beach, started by Frank Butler, who saw a need for, you know, blacks to be able to relax. And so he owned the house not only in Saint Augustine, but also Butler Beach, which is Anastasia Island. And he was a businessman and a real estate investor and decided, you know, there needs to be opportunity for blacks to relax and, you know, rejuvenate as well. A.L. Lewis did the same thing with the American beach. He was the owner of the Afro American Life Insurance Company and recorded as one of the first black millionaires in Florida, opened American beach. You also have, that people don't know is D.A Dorsey in Miami, he actually purchased Fisher, what we know now it's Fisher Island in 1918. He eventually started a year later, but the purpose behind him purchasing the beach was for blacks to be able to go to a beach in Miami.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

A collection of postcards from the Smathers Library at the University of Florida shows African American homes in Gainesville.

### **Jada Wright-Greene**

It's amazing. All these houses, I want to say maybe 10 to 12 of them, and I spent days, really a large part of my research trying to locate as much history as I could about the owners of the home. Unfortunately, there wasn't a lot I did was able to find some names. But these are just during that time fairly large houses that were in the Gainesville area and the houses, actually some of them, I did find they were owned by professors, different people in the community, but just this nice, wonderful collection of homes.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Jada Wright-Greene's focus ranges from the homes of economically disadvantaged people to residences of the wealthy. Miami's Overtown community is a good example.

### **Jada Wright-Greene**

I just get told taken aback. Even the row of houses that we spoke about with the flowers on the porch. Across the street is a meat market and a grocery store. How convenient was that for them to just walk across the street to go to the store. And then you have a photo of a woman and children on the porch, children playing in the yard and advertise it for laundry. You know, that was a way for them to make money by doing laundry. And then there's another photo of a woman just kind of walking past one of the houses. All of these homes were just preserved, even the interior of a house that I found all these nice wood furniture and decoration that tells you just the pride and the care that they have for their houses. But again, that neighborhood was bustling African Americans there living, having a better way of life with what they have available to them. I just had to make sure that that was shown, and then shown that people like D.A. Dorsey in Miami, and Garfield Rodgers in Tampa, and A.L Lewis in North Florida, not

only were wealthy and had their money, but they also opened doors and opportunities for blacks to own homes to be in better housing. And during park homes in Saint Petersburg, he gifted the land to the city so that these homes could be built for blacks to be able to live in.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Jada Wright-Greene believes that home ownership is still an important symbol of accomplishment in the African American community.

### **Jada Wright-Greene**

Absolutely, I do. I do. I mean, the housing market right now as we all know at this state 2021 is just kind, I'll describe it as bananas. But for us to own property, it's just something that is major, I think back to one of the women that are in the book, Dorothy Tookes, who was an educator, who thought I needed to open opportunities for blacks to be able to stay and have housing when they're traveling. So, she took her house, her own house and said I'm transitioning into a rooming house, a hotel and eventually grow into a full hotel, and she was one of the first women to have a neon sign placed in her yard. But the importance of owning that property in order for her to even transition it into a, you know, a rooming house, a hotel, it's just remarkable. The forethought even to have it and to do it while being an educator is just, you know, remarkable. So, I feel like African Americans today, we definitely stand on the shoulders of these people. And having a piece of land, part of what we say is the American dream. You know the white house with the picket fence and two kids and a dog, I think anyone of any color race they want to, you know, have home ownership.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Jada Wright-Greene's book, Florida's historic African American Homes, is part of Arcadia Publishing's images of America series.

### **(Music Break)**

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. I'm Ben Brotemarkle visit us anytime online at [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org) to find a variety of engaging educational resources exploring Florida history and culture and much more. That's [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org). [music]

Joining us now is Connie Lester, Associate Professor of history at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES Digital Archiving project, and editor of the Florida History Quarterly. Connie, I know you've been thinking a lot about past issues of the Quarterly as we reach the publication of the 100th volume.

### **Connie Lester**

Indeed, I have. I was looking at the issues published under the editorship of Kari Frederickson in the 1990s, when I had a pleasant surprise. I found an article written by Patricia Dillon on club women and activism in Tampa. At the time, she was a Ph.D. Candidate at Mississippi State University. I was a member of her dissertation committee, and knew she had published an article in the Quarterly, but until I found it, I was not aware that it was part of a special issue that focused on the transformation of women's history in the late 20th century.

## **Ben Brotemarkle**

Was there anything in particular that stood out for you?

## **Connie Lester**

Yes, Dillon's article on Tampa activists in the Progressive Era, and Maxine Jones' article on African American activists, intersected in interesting ways that provide insights on the complex connections between race and gender in this period of reform. Women of both races engaged in reform efforts to improve education, sanitation, healthcare, work conditions, women's wages, criminal justice, and childcare. They also fought for woman suffrage. That said, the racial construct that supported white supremacy meant that they fought largely for these reforms separately, and that black women fore-fronted efforts to protect their families and communities from the injustices that accompanied Jim Crow segregation and disfranchisement. As the field of women's history gained its place in the discipline, the Southern Association of Women's Historians fostered research that, among other things, delved into the history of race and gender in the Progressive Era. What historians of this era found was not always uplifting. Despite contemporary eulogies to the moral superiority of white women, they expressed the same racism as their fathers, husbands, and brothers. At the same time, historians found evidence of pragmatic efforts between black and white club women to reach common goals. And this is what links Dillon's and Jones' articles. Dillon's article focuses on the progressive reform efforts of Willie Lowry, a white club woman in Tampa. Her activities included membership on the board of the Urban League, an organization that fostered interracial cooperativism between blacks and whites, and introduced her to Blanche Armwood, a black club woman and activist. Dillon notes that Lowry characterized herself as, and this is a quote, "a true child of the South in every sense," and notes that even as Tampa's White Club women made common cause with black club women, they fully supported segregation. How did this work? In their reforming efforts, middle class black and white women were brought together in spaces in which their interests intersected, not only in Tampa, but across Florida and the south. Those spaces included the Urban League, the YWCA, and settlement houses. The local boards of these organizations not infrequently included both black and white members. As Anita Goodstein noted in a journal of Southern History article on Nashville Women, the representatives of the two races built a working relationship and a degree of trust over time that enabled them to make progress on local reform.

## **Ben Brotemarkle**

What types of reforms did these women undertake?

## **Connie Lester**

Women have similar interests in childcare and kindergartens, in creating juvenile justice systems, and providing separate facilities and matrons for female prisoners, and in building libraries and public parks and playgrounds. They were interested in public sanitation and in maternal health care, and they made advances in those areas for both races, but generally for whites first and blacks later, if at all. The construction of Carnegie Library in Tampa provides an example. In 1912, the city voted to accept funds from the Carnegie Foundation to construct a library. White women's organization strongly supported the library, and while they could not vote, they successfully campaigned for its construction. Race became a factor in the campaign. As those opposed worried that the library would encourage interracial

mixing. As the Tampa Tribune reported, library supporters assured the public that and this is the quote, "no Southern city has ever or would ever permit the negro to use the same books as whites." When the library opened, blacks were barred from using the facility. In the 1920s, the Urban League, working with prominent black businessmen, successfully petitioned the city for a branch library to serve black patrons.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Connie, what was the bridge that enabled black and white reformers to work together?

### **Connie Lester**

In an earlier article on Blanche Armwood, Keith Halderman suggests that her middle class upbringing and college education facilitated Armwood's entry into the world of progressive reform. But her support for the ideas of Booker T. Washington was the bridge to interracial activism. Indeed, she was sometimes lauded by whites as the Booker T Washington of Tampa, while whites found Washington's views more compatible with their own efforts towards social uplift and improvement, it did not always mean support in the black community. Benjamin Mays, Armwood's successor in the Urban League, attributed the favorable relations in Tampa to what he called reciprocal flattery and benevolent paternalism, a characterization with considerable merit. As black reformists discovered throughout the South, Whites often solicited their support for community projects that benefited them, but failed to follow through on projects that were important to whites. Maxine Jones article demonstrates that other black women across Florida pursued reform and built interracial bridges, but their work also built a new generation of black women ready to challenge Jim Crow without compromise or fear, including the women from FAMU, who participated in picketing and boycotting in downtown Tallahassee in the 1960s. After her release following a 49 day jail sentence, Patricia Stevens remained defiant. "When I get out, I plan to carry on this struggle. I feel I will be ready to go to jail again, if necessary," she said. The cover of the FHQ, in which the Dillon and Jones articles appeared, provides a visual understanding of the defiance of 1960s black women. Wearing their Sunday best in heels and pearls, these black college coeds are smiling for the camera as they await sentencing for their participation in the picketing of a segregated movie theater, there is no backing down in their faces. They are the daughters and granddaughters of black women who fought for reform in the 1910s, 20s, 30s and 40s. One would like to believe that the FSU white coeds who joined the picket lines were likewise the daughters and granddaughters of White Club women who pragmatically joined Black Club women in reform during the Progressive Era.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Very interesting. Thanks, Connie.

### **Connie Lester**

You're welcome.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Connie Lester is Associate Professor of History at the University of Central Florida, director of the Riches Digital Archiving project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly.

### **(Music Break)**

## **Ben Brotemarkle**

This is Florida Frontiers. Women astronauts became fairly commonplace with the shuttle program. Holly Baker has this report on the first female astronaut trainees.

## **Holly Baker**

In the late 1950s, a competition began between the Soviet Union and the United States to achieve space flight capability. What became known as the Space Race began on October 4th, 1957, when the Soviet Union launched the first man-made satellite, Sputnik 1, into space. In 1958, as a response to Sputnik, President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, or NASA, the first human space flight program of the United States, Project Mercury began 6 days later. A group of astronauts known as the Mercury 7 were selected to fly spacecraft for Project Mercury. At the same time, there were thirteen women pilots who also wanted a chance to fly in space. They were known as the First Lady Astronaut Trainees, or the FLATS, sometimes referred to as the Mercury 13. Doctor Amy Foster is an associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida, specializing in gender, and the history of aviation in the U.S. space program.

## **Amy Foster**

We don't call them the Mercury 13. That's a moniker that was kind of created in the 90s by a documentary filmmaker. The first person who kind of floated that as a term was Claire Booth Luce. She wrote an article in 1972 kind of uncovering this story for the first time that these women had gone through the medical testing that the Mercury astronauts did and that they weren't given the opportunity to fly, but they never actually referred to themselves as the Mercury 13.

## **Holly Baker**

In 1958, aerospace physician Doctor Randy Lovelace was appointed as chairman of the NASA Special Committee on Life Sciences, and Brigadier General Don Flickinger was appointed vice chairman. Lovelace and Flickinger were in charge of the medical tests for the men who were considered for the Mercury project's astronaut candidacy program. The two men suggested that it might be more practical from an engineering standpoint to send women rather than men into space due to their lower body weights and oxygen requirements.

## **Amy Foster**

So, these two men kind of sat down and said, well, can these women pass the same tests that we just put all of these potential Mercury astronauts through, and their first step was to invite a woman, Geraldine Cobb, Jerry Cobb, that's what she went by. So, they invited Jerry to the Lovelace clinic and put her through all of these tests in 1960, and she passed with flying colors. And so the next step was ok so that's one woman, let's test more. And so, with Jerry's help, they kind of culled through the list of women who had pilots' licenses and she started writing letters inviting them. And I think 18 more in addition to Jerry went through the medical testing and a total of 13 passed those tests.

## **Holly Baker**

During Doctor Lovelace's Women in Space, program trainees had to undergo uncomfortable and invasive tests for the opportunity to be part of America's space team. The women were given



psychological evaluations and placed in a soundproof isolation tank for hours on end to study sensory deprivation. They even had ice water shot in their ears to induce vertigo. Many of them excelled at the tests. Wally Funk scored higher on the test than John Glenn, one of the Mercury 7 astronauts who became the first American to orbit the Earth. Even though Doctor Lovelace and Don Flickinger conducted the physical testing of female pilots in order to select potential astronauts for the U.S. space program, the experiment wasn't authorized by NASA.

### **Amy Foster**

The third phase was actually to go through some some additional testing at Pensacola Naval Air Station. And Jerry Cobb is the only one of those 13 who actually went through with that. When it became clear that, ok, we have 12 other women to test in Pensacola, that's when the Navy reached out to NASA and said, are you behind this? And NASA went, no, this isn't our program, it's a distraction that that we can't deal with, right now, because right now it's 1961 and this was after Kennedy had made the announcement that we're going to go to the moon by the end of the decade. So, NASA is trying to figure out how to do that. When Kennedy made that announcement, the only American who had flown in space at that point had been Alan Shepherd, and it was a suborbital flight. We had not yet even orbited the earth and Kennedy says we're going to go to the moon. So that's what NASA is dealing with in 1961, when these women are going through the testing and moving on to phase two and phase three. And so, when the Navy reaches out to NASA to say, are you behind this? NASA is like we don't have time to think about this. There's actually a letter in the NASA archives and on the bottom of the letter, which is about continuing a program to put women in space. Lyndon Johnson wrote, let's stop this now, and the consequence of that is the testing of these women didn't move forward. NASA moved ahead with trying to figure out how to get to the moon, and the Soviet Union ends up putting the first woman in space in 1963.

### **Holly Baker**

20 years after Soviet Union cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova flew in space, Sally Ride became the first American woman in space in 1983. Even though the First Lady Astronaut Trainees never had the chance to fly in space with NASA, they paved the way for women in the U.S. space program; Doctor Amy Foster.

### **Amy Foster**

The efforts and the presence of all of the women who went through the medical testing in the 60s, the 13 who passed, but also the 6 who came and went through that medical testing, they were stepping outside the norm. And these women grew up flying, women had been flying since a decade after the Wright brothers invented the airplane. Because it was so brand new, there were no limits or expectations about who did what. Men and women were both doing it, and so these women are part of that longer history of what those early female aviators were doing in the 1910s and 20s, and a wonderful and great steppingstone to the success of women in the Space Shuttle program beginning in the 1980s.

### **Holly Baker**

NASA's space program has made advancements in gender diversity with the recent classes of astronauts having a mostly equal number of men and women. In July of 2021, 82-year-old Wally Funk finally had the opportunity to fly in space. 60 years after her training, she became the oldest person in space when

she flew with entrepreneur Jeff Bezos and two others on a rocket developed by Bezos' firm Blue Origin, exceeding John Glenn's record at the age of 77 in 1998.

For Florida Frontiers, I'm Holly Baker, public history coordinator for the Florida Historical Society and Archivist at the Library of Florida History in Cocoa.

**Ben Brotemarkle**

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You've been listening to Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. Please join us right here again next week. Until then, visit us anytime online at [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org) and on Facebook. Production assistants for Florida Frontiers come from Holly Baker and Connie Lester. The program is edited by John White. Have a great week. I'm Ben Brotemarkle.

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