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Blanche Armwood of Tampa and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation

by KEITH HALDERMAN

Blanche Armwood was born in Tampa on January 3, 1890, into a well-established middle-class black family. Her maternal grandfather, Adam Holloman, had been appointed in 1875 to the Hillsborough County Commission by then-Governor Marcellus L. Stearns. That same year he purchased four parcels of land which totalled 123 acres. Her great uncle, John Armwood, had been a negotiator between the Seminoles and white settlers on the southern Florida frontier. He also became an early landowner when he successfully homesteaded 159 acres in Hillsborough County. Her father, Levin Armwood, was Tampa's first black policeman and subsequently served as county deputy sheriff. He and Blanche's brother, Walter, jointly owned and operated the Gem, which was for many years Tampa's only black drugstore. Walter Armwood also held positions as professor at Bethune-Cookman College and, during World War I, as Florida state supervisor for the U.S. Bureau of Negro Economics. One of her sisters, Idela Street, became a licensed businesswoman in Tampa in 1910. Blanche matriculated from St. Peter Claver Catholic School, Tampa's best school for blacks at the time, at the age of twelve. She then passed the Florida State Uniform Teachers Examination that same year. Enrolling immediately at Spelman Institute in Atlanta, she graduated at age 16 with a degree in English and Latin.¹ During the next seven years she taught in the Tampa public schools. During those early years

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1. Otis R. Anthony, *Black Tampa: The Roots of a People* (Hillsborough County Museum, Tampa Electric Company Black History Project, 1979), 3. See also 1875 legal document, undated memorandum, and undated business license, Box 1, File 2, Donald L. Fredgant, *A Guide to Florida Drugstores Before 1920* (1971), 57, Box 2, File 5, and *Tampa Tribune*, Box 2, File 6, Armwood Family Papers. Much of the information for this article was found in the Armwood Family Papers, Special Collections, University of South Florida Library (cited hereinafter as Armwood Papers).

she developed a deep and lasting concern for the social questions which her education and experiences raised in her.²

The Tampa in which Blanche Armwood grew up was both dynamic and static. It was dynamic in the sense that it was growing rapidly in population and its public-spirited citizens were becoming interested in obtaining the public services— paved and lighted streets, water and sewer facilities, and the like— which were expected of cities in the Progressive Era. But it was also static in the sense that racial segregation was firmly in place, enforced by both law and custom. Black citizens were denied full participation in the growth that their community was experiencing.

While many blacks in Tampa and, indeed, much of the United States, may have seemed resigned to their lot, there were many others looking for ways to respond to a situation which they felt unfair and oppressive. The more militant might follow the example of T. Thomas Fortune and his Afro-American League, demanding justice in strident tones.³ Others took a more practical approach, accepting the realities of a segregated society and attempting to achieve through cooperation what they could to ameliorate an unfair system which was not of their making. This was the course of Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial School. Washington had been widely applauded for his famous 1895 Atlanta Compromise address in which he said, “in purely social matters we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential.”⁴ While some blacks condemned him as “the Benedict Arnold of the Negro race,” and “the great traitor,” his more modest approach seemed to others to be the only feasible course to follow.⁵

Whether Blanche Armwood made a conscious decision to follow Washington or whether circumstances simply propelled her in that direction, her remarkable career reflects an unwavering commitment to the cooperative approach which Washington advocated. In her work with business, government, private social welfare agencies, and political parties, she was consistent in her ef-

2. *The Weekly Challenger*, February 4, 1989, Armwood Papers, Box 1, File 2.

3. Emma Lou Thornbrough, *T. Thomas Fortune: Militant Journalist* (New York, 1972), 119-122, 178-180.

4. Louis R. Harlan, “Booker T. Washington and the Politics of Accommodation,” in John Hope Franklin and August Meier, eds., *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 1982), 24.

5. *Ibid.*, 6.

forts to gain the maximum interracial teamwork possible. She almost always defined problems and solutions in terms that made implementation of her ideas beneficial to both races. She also saw the issues of race and gender to be interconnected, and worked to advance the causes of both blacks and women. While she was unable radically to change the social and economic conditions for black people, she did succeed in improving the quality of life for some— and earned the respect and admiration of people of both races in the process.

Middle class blacks as a group have been criticized by some scholars. The leading treatise on the subject is E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* which was written in 1957. Frazier described that portion of the population as suffering from an inferiority complex and consequently being overly concerned with social position. He argued that black politicians followed an opportunistic course, pandering to white political machines. Black social workers, too, cared only about pleasing northern philanthropists. Of black teachers, Frazier wrote:

The Negro teachers had accepted their teaching positions because of the social status and economic security which the positions provided. Unlike their white colleagues, they were conservative and had no interest in social questions.⁶

Writing in 1990, Willard Gatewood contended that the small black upper classes wanted to keep themselves separate from the rest of the race. Blanche Armwood fitted into neither of these assessments.⁷

Like other black leaders such as Fanny Jackson Coppin, Lucy Laney, Fanny Barrier Williams, Hallie Brown, and Mary Talbert, Blanche Armwood began her career in the public schools. Also like them she believed that teaching naturally involved a commitment to improving the conditions of blacks, a burden borne disproportionately by women. In 1910 there were 17,266 black female teachers in the South. Black males numbered only about a third of that. Their salaries were less than half— about 45 percent— of that paid to white teachers. When Armwood began teaching, Hillsborough

6. E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York, 1957), 83.

7. *Ibid.*, 86, 98, 146, 204; Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color* (Indianapolis, 1990), 9.

County paid black women about \$35 per month for their teaching responsibilities. The amounts spent by state and local governments on black students was also much lower than that spent for whites. In 1908, Florida's expenditures amounted to \$16.62 per white student and \$4.59 for blacks. The Jim Crow system was so pervasive that state law forbade the storing of textbooks used by blacks in the same places as those used by whites. Conditions such as these concerned Blanche Armwood and some of her beleaguered colleagues.⁸

But they were not the reason she gave up teaching in Tampa in 1913. In November of that year she married Daniel Perkins. Although the marriage was annulled in 1914, that was not until the couple had already relocated to Knoxville, Tennessee.⁹ It was there that Blanche Armwood Perkins first became active in public affairs. At the sixth annual session of the Tennessee State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, in July 1914, she served as mistress of ceremonies press correspondent, and a member of the committee on arrangements. The motto of the organization—Lifting as We Climb—suited her quite well. Defying Frazier's stereotype of the black middle class, she began a lifelong affiliation with organizations dedicated to improving the lot of ordinary folk. She worked on issues such as juvenile delinquency, basic health care, improved sanitation, daycare for working mothers, unemployment during the Great Depression, playgrounds for black children, expanded educational opportunities, and voting rights for women.¹⁰

During a long association with the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and the Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (FCWC), she held offices in each. These two organizations and, later, the Urban League offered her opportunities to work for racial progress at the same time she advocated the interests of

8. Nettie L. Napier, "Mary Burnet Talbert, 1862-1923," in Hallie Q. Brown, ed., *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction* (New York, 1988), xxviii, 180; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family From Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985, 143-145; Louis R. Harlan, "The Southern Education Board and the Race Issue in Public Education," in Charles E. Wynes, ed., *The Negro in the South Since 1865: Selected Essays in American Negro History* (New York, 1965), 206-209; C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York, 1966), 102; and William M. Holloway, "Florida Superintendent of Public Instruction Biennial Report, 1908-1910."

9. Anthony, *Black Tampa*, 3.

10. Program of the Sixth Annual Session, Tennessee State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, Armwood Papers, Box 3, File 10.

women. As an educated member of the black middle class with an interest in social uplift and improvement, she shared interests with other members of these organizations in strengthening the black family. It is in this realm that the connections between her interests in racial and gender concerns can best be seen. She was especially concerned with the well-being of black children. In an article entitled, "Women's Sphere of Helpfulness," she wrote that "no honor conferred upon humankind can compare with that conferred upon women in the gift of motherhood."¹¹ With this belief and with no children of her own, Blanche Armwood made the problems of juvenile delinquency and the provision of homes for troubled black youth her primary goals.¹²

Armwood focused on the issue of black juvenile delinquency from the outset of her involvement with women's organizations. At the aforementioned Tennessee meeting in 1914 she delivered an address entitled "Juvenile Courts." In that speech and in a 1915 article with the same title, she deplored judges who delivered punitive rulings against youngsters without investigating their home lives or considering the legislation which she felt "manufactured criminals." But, she also offered solutions. "There is some hidden good in every child," she wrote. "The true duty of the juvenile court is to seek that good and develop it by training provided in state institutions."¹³ She thought that this was the most important task of the National Association of Colored Women. Protecting children should be the primary effort of the club women. At the same time, the realistic and practical Armwood recognized that providing state institutions for "at risk" children would require significant cooperation between black and white leaders.¹⁴ Although she never wavered from this primary concern, it was in an entirely different sphere of interracial cooperation that she enjoyed her first successes.

Technological advances in what is now called the "private sector" had provided opportunity for improved living standards as well as corporate profits in Tampa during the Progressive Era. But

11. Blanche Armwood Perkins, "Women's Sphere of Helpfulness," unidentified newspaper clipping, Armwood Papers, Box 3, File 2.

12. Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925* (Knoxville, 1989), 193.

13. Blanche Armwood Perkins, "Juvenile Courts," *Tampa Daily Times*, June 26, 1915, Armwood Papers, Box 2, File 9.

14. *Ibid.*

better education was required to make them realities. As historian Jacqueline Jones has written, "Gas and electric appliances could work miracles if used properly, but offered the resentful domestic an opportunity to wreak havoc on her employer's pocketbook and nerves."¹⁵ It was usually inadequate training rather than intentional malice which caused problems of poorly cooked food and large gas bills. Most important of all for the Tampa Gas Company, it retarded the sale and use of gas in Tampa homes. Organized in 1895 with Peter O. Knight as a charter member, the company had an inauspicious beginning. It narrowly escaped collapse in 1898 when the city contracted to purchase 250 gas street lights. Then, in 1900, an eastern syndicate headed by John Gribbel purchased the company. Ten years later it had 1,600 customers and boasted annual sales of 35 million cubic feet of gas. Its plant was expanded in 1912. With an enlarged plant and a huge storage tank, it then needed to increase its cash flow.¹⁶

Blanche Armwood returned to Tampa in 1914 and went to work for the Tampa Gas Company as a demonstrator. It was a fortuitous arrangement for the young woman seeking ways to apply her skills and energies and for the company wishing to expand the sales of its product. Roger Nettles, the company manager and Armwood's supervisor, sought the help of the local Colored Ministers Alliance and the Hillsborough County School Board in starting a school to teach black women how to use gas appliances. Armwood was named to develop and operate the company-financed Tampa School of Household Arts.¹⁷

The company was quite serious about Armwood's school. She was required to become a member of the National Commercial Gas Association, an undertaking which included passing a detailed examination. After writing an essay on the transformation of "colored" cooks and housemaids into economical consumers, diagramming a coal gas plant, calculating the cost of converting coal to gas, and figuring the percentages of gas used by various activities, she passed her examination on January 3, 1916. During its first year of operation, the Tampa School of Household Arts enrolled 225 pupils, slightly over 200 of whom matriculated and received certifi-

15. Jones, *Labor of Love*, 165.

16. Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa: A Story of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg, 1950), 239-240.

17. *Tampa Tribune*, February 26, 1983, Armwood Papers, Box 2, File 6.

cates of completion. The Tampa Gas Company considered their school well worth the expenses incurred.¹⁸

The Southern Gas Association held its April 1916 meeting in Tampa. Mayor Donald Brenham McKay greeted the delegates on their arrival and the Tampa Rotarians treated them to a banquet at the Tampa Bay Hotel. At an early session, multi-millionaire philanthropist John Gribbel rose from the audience and requested that Blanche Armwood Perkins speak about her school. Her unscheduled address at the formal meeting was well-received and made her the star of the program. The *Gas Record* wrote that those in attendance would “in due time” establish more domestic schools as a result of Armwood’s initiative. “That, in brief, is what this feminine Booker Washington did in fifteen minutes of time taken out of her regular morning’s work,” the journal concluded.¹⁹

Her address was not entirely spontaneous, however. She had prepared the audience by having 85 of her students come on stage and sing old-time plantation melodies. Another gas trade publication reported that the songs brought back to these Southerners fond memories of childhood and “mammy.” Armwood’s purposes, however, became clear when she told the audience of finding advertisements for German and Swiss house servants in several southern newspapers. She concluded with an emotional appeal, saying:

We know the southern people love us, no matter what they say, and we love them. They have been nestled in the arms of our people in childhood, and now that the old black ‘mammy’ has had her day and passed on, we are determined not to be cheated out of our rights to serve our people in other ways.²⁰

She expressed the gratitude of the “colored race” for the school as well as her belief that teaching domestic science “raised the ideal of things.” She had consciously used images of the past to create a sympathetic atmosphere and then employed her most effective reasoning for preserving jobs for black people. She calcu-

18. National Commercial Gas Association, “Practical Gas Education Courses Test,” January 3, 1916, Souvenir Booklet Southern Gas Association, April 1916, Armwood Papers, Box 2, File 13, and Box 2, File 15.

19. Milt Saul, “Record Crowd at Tampa Meet,” *The Gas Record*, April 12, 1916, Armwood Papers, Box 2, File 15.

20. *The Gas Age*, April 15, 1916, Armwood Papers, Box 2, File 15.

lated that her audience included men involved in a business which was a leader in the era of technology. "The black mammy has gone her way," she said, "and we are striving to supply her place with the new doctrine of usefulness, scientific utility if you please."²¹ By creating in the minds of the assembled executives a link between black domestics and scientific techniques, Armwood was attempting to undercut competition from white immigrants.²²

The strategy of advancing the interests of black women through practical education fit well with the theories and teachings of Booker T. Washington. Indeed, *The Gas Age* expressed the opinion that if Blanche Armwood were a man, blacks would have a replacement for the recently deceased Washington. The local press also noted the parallel. The *Tampa Tribune* carried the headline, "Feminine Booker Washington Seen."²³

The Tampa School of Household Arts proved to be a happy solution to the problem of black domestic workers and gas appliances. All parties benefitted. Roscoe Nettles, manager of the Tampa Gas Company, was elected president of the Southern Gas Association at the 1916 convention. At a reception in her honor, Blanche Armwood told a black audience that Nettles "shall be known through the gas ages as one of the greatest friends that the Negroes in the South have ever known."²⁴

Gas company profits increased and sales of appliances grew. At one demonstration in New Orleans, consumers purchased 18 ranges, eight irons, and a water heater. Customers who hired graduates of the school employed more efficient servants and benefitted from lower utility bills. Students of the tuition-free school learned, not only how to use gas appliances, but also about food values, balanced diets, correct menu planning, and general home-making efficiency. They additionally received certificates of proficiency which enhanced their self-esteem and gave them legitimate claims to better wages. Blanche Armwood was paid a good salary and garnered attention. She further earned the respect of many influential people and a reputation for positive accomplishment.²⁵

21. *Tampa Tribune*, April 6, 1916, Armwood Papers, Box 2, File 15.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Saul, "Record," *Tampa Tribune*, April 7, 1916, Armwood Papers, Box 2, File 17.

24. Unidentified newspaper clipping, 1916, Armwood Papers, Box 2, File 17.

25. *Ibid.*, *Bulletin*, 1917, *Tampa Tribune*, July 23, 1986, Armwood Papers, Box 2, Files 3 and 12.



The demonstration school which Blanche Armwood started for the Tampa Gas Company was emulated by other firms throughout the nation. Here she is shown at a New Orleans school during World War I. Photograph courtesy of Special Collections, University of South Florida Library.

An idea which worked so well for so many was bound to spread. Schools of domestic science sponsored by gas companies began opening throughout the South and beyond. Armwood helped to create institutions in South Hill, South Carolina, Athens, Georgia, and Roanoke, Virginia. *The Gas Record* covered the opening of the school started by the Roanoke Gas and Light Company where Armwood received high praise. The journal wrote that "she used beautiful language modest in expression, thoughtful in composition . . . it was a revelation to the white people as they listened to the superb address by this colored woman."²⁶ At the mid-year conference of the National Commercial Gas Association, her paper entitled "The Relation of Schools of Household Arts to the Gas Industry," received more favorable attention. She even corresponded with a woman in Recife, Brazil who offered to pay her to help establish a school there. In 1917, the Tampa Gas Company agreed to permit the New Orleans Gas and Light Company to employ Armwood to set up the New Orleans School of Domestic Science.²⁷

Her relocation to Louisiana coincided with the nation's engagement in World War I, another opportunity for interracial cooperation. With assistance from her new employer, Armwood became prominently involved in war work, specializing in the conservation of food. The U.S. Department of Agriculture employed her as Supervisor of Home Economics for the state of Louisiana. In that capacity, she wrote a cookbook, *Food Conservation in the Home*, and lectured on the subject at Xavier University. The trade publication, *Modern Milk* carried a story in April 1918 praising her work. Three months later, at the biennial convention of the NACW in Denver, she spoke on "Fighting the Huns in America's Kitchens." Her speech was accompanied by a practical demonstration. The New Orleans Gas Company did its part, spending \$12,000 to finance her course on wartime domestic economy for 1,200 black women. Realizing that patriotic conservation would be a great benefit to the gas business, the company also sponsored cooking exhibitions and related activities. At a meeting held in conjunction with the City Federation of Women's Clubs, Armwood once again attracted favorable notice by demonstrating how to bake "victory bread" using cottonseed flour. Her patriotic demonstration was

26. *The Gas Record*, June 26, 1916, Armwood Papers, Box 2, File 15.

27. *Ibid.*, Mrs. H. M. Balsam to Blanche Armwood, June 11, 1918, *The Gas Record*, Armwood Papers, Box 2, Files 7 and 15.

held in a hall where the national flag was displayed along with such slogans as “A Gas Range is a Blessing for the Poor, Rather than a Luxury for the Rich,” and “Bake Victory Bread the Gas Way and Help Win the War.”²⁸

Booker T. Washington died before the United States entered World War I, but his 1895 call for racial unity in “all things essential” prevailed throughout the conflict. Blanche Armwood never deviated from it. But she did subsequently ignore his admonition to refrain from direct political involvement when she began campaigning for the election of Warren G. Harding as president of the United States.

In his speech accepting the nomination for president, Harding said, “I believe the federal government should stamp out lynching and remove that stain from the fair name of America . . . [Blacks] have earned the full measure of citizenship.”²⁹ Harding’s statement as compared with the record of the Woodrow Wilson administration on race relations convinced Armwood and some black leaders that a Republican victory was in their best interests.

Republicans welcomed Armwood’s assistance. She toured for the party in Louisiana and Michigan. In October 1920, Blanche Armwood Beatty (she had recently remarried) was invited by the Harding campaign to a Social Justice and Woman’s Day affair at the Marion, Ohio home of Senator Harding. After Harding was elected she corresponded with the White House and received formal replies. Armwood continued to work for GOP presidential candidates through 1932.³⁰

In the meantime, she returned to Tampa in 1922 to become Executive Secretary of the Urban League in that city. Two years later the Hillsborough County School Board appointed her Supervisor of Negro Schools. Both positions offered formidable challenges.³¹

28. *The Weekly Challenger*, February 4, 1918, unidentified newspaper clipping, February 21, 1918, and Program, 11th Biennial Convention of the National Association of Colored Women, July 1918, Bulletin, 1918, Armwood Papers, Box 2, Files 4, 12, 13, and 14.

29. *Brochure*, Social Justice and Woman’s Day, October 1, 1920, Armwood Papers, Box 4, File 5.

30. *Ibid.*, undated advertisement, White House Secretary to Blanche Armwood Beatty, May 10, 1921, Armwood Papers, Box 3, File 11, and Box 4, Files 5 and 11.

31. *Shreveport Sun*, September 2, 1922, *Tampa Bulletin*, January 15, 1924, Armwood Papers, Box 1, Files 2 and 16.

During the 1920s, approximately 23,000 black Tampanians lived in what is best described as appalling conditions. In 1927, the Urban League, Tampa Welfare League, and Young Men's Christian Association issued a joint report entitled *A Study of Negro Life in Tampa*, describing limited employment opportunities, inadequate housing, poor sanitation, almost non-existent recreational facilities, insufficient medical care, and neglected schools. The most compelling statistic in this bleak document concerned the death rate. The ratio of white population to black was four to one, but the mortality rate for the respective groups was two to one. In 1927, 57 more blacks died than were born. The only hospital that admitted blacks, Clara Frye, could offer only 17 beds. Black neighborhoods had few sewer and water connections and garbage often remained in heaps for long periods. Only 950 blacks owned their homes. Tampa's rapid growth kept property values so high that owners of run-down dwellings preferred to sell the land rather than improve the housing. Outside the home, black Tampa residents had only one private park, one tennis court, and two theaters available to them. As for educational facilities, "many of these schools have poor ventilation, insufficient blackboard space, poor seating, dark rooms, inadequate desks-some made from boxes. Some of the buildings are old, dilapidated and unfit for human habitation."³² The black illiteracy rate was ten times that of whites and almost 24 percent of the eligible black children did not attend school. As adults, the overwhelming majority of blacks, regardless of education, worked as low paid, unskilled laborers or servants.³³

Conditions such as these were common to cities with large black populations and the National Urban League had been formed in 1911 to address them. Unlike the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which sought reform through legislation, the Urban League chose to apply persuasion and cooperation to the problem. League stationery was emblazoned with the message: "Let us not work as colored people nor as white people for the narrow benefit of any group alone but TOGETHER as Americans for the common good for our common city [and] our common country."³⁴ Local affiliates were encouraged to

32. Benjamin E. Mays, et al, *A Study of Negro Life in Tampa* (Tampa, 1927), 58.

33. *Ibid.*, 7, 9, 14, 23-24, 31, 40.

34. Tampa Urban League stationery, Armwood Papers, Box 1, File 15.

create and implement specific programs for their cities. Blanche Armwood was well-suited to work with the Urban League.³⁵

With her customary enthusiasm and self-confidence, Armwood believed that the League's strategy of biracial cooperation could be effective. And she was not alone. In an editorial entitled, "A Commendable Movement," the *Tampa Tribune* called on its "colored readers" to support the Urban League and added that, "the white people of Tampa should lend their enthusiastic moral support and generous financial assistance to this worthy organization."³⁶ The League's board of directors included an interracial mixture of Tampa's leaders, such as Donald B. McKay, Perry G. Wall, Peter O. Knight, Levin Armwood, Idela Street, and Mayor Charles H. Brown. The mayor declared July 2, 1922, Social Welfare Day and the city sponsored an outing at Oak Grove Park to benefit the Urban League. The *Tampa Tribune* began running a column "Urban League Weekly Bulletin" and the black-owned Central Industrial Insurance Company donated space for a headquarters. The Tampa Ministerial Alliance unanimously endorsed the effort. The West Tampa cigar manufacturers and the *Tampa Daily Times* showed a favorable attitude toward the organization. The open meeting on September 24, 1922, featured an address on the problem of juvenile delinquency, followed by a discussion of necessary improvements of sanitation at the Caesar Street School. Mayor Brown sent Commissioner Sumter L. Lowry to the meeting as his representative.³⁷

Despite the early good will toward the League, its activities were shortly over-shadowed by the national attention given to lynching and the controversial Dyer Anti-Lynching bill, which was repeatedly rejected by the U.S. Congress. Its influence on Tampa's local affairs can be seen in a *Tampa Tribune* editorial of November 1922. The paper declared that there was no need for the measure and that efforts should be expended on the underlying cause of lynching; that is, the misbehavior of "bad niggers." The *Tribune* declared the Dyer bill nothing more than Republican Party "pandering to the Negro vote."³⁸

35. Nancy J. Weiss, *The National Urban League, 1910-1940* (New York, 1974), 10, 29, 38, 59, 88, 163.

36. *Tampa Tribune*, July 7, 1922, Armwood Papers, Box 1, File 2.

37. Tampa Urban League stationery, unidentified newspaper clippings, 1922, Armwood Papers, Box 1, Files 15 and 16.

38. James Harmon Chadbourn, *Lynching and the Law* (Chapel Hill, 1933), 118.

Armwood replied to the *Tribune* article in an atypically strong tone. She spoke of the broken hearts of thousands of law abiding Negro citizens and admitted they would vote for those who supported the Dyer legislation. She further reminded her readers that since 1889, 718 whites had also been lynching victims and that only 16 percent of all lynchings involved even an accusation of rape. She also pointed out that the Negroes of "high color" testified to the disregard of southern white men for racial purity.³⁹

Armwood used Tampa's local circumstances in an effort to broaden the argument into something more than a black-white issue. Tampa had a large immigrant population with a record of militant unionism. A protracted cigarmakers strike had occurred as recently as 1920. Armwood emphasized this aspect of Tampa's politics to sway white leaders when she wrote that "it has been reported to us officially by the Republican National Committee that one of the greatest forces operating against the Dyer bill is the American Federation of Labor which has caught the spirit of the mob and often uses violence to carry out its purposes."⁴⁰ She had reason to believe the argument might be effective, because only a little more than a year earlier, Donald B. McKay, longtime mayor of Tampa, publisher of the *Tampa Daily Times*, and leader of the White Municipal Party, had declared that "it would be difficult to find an apologist for lynching these days."⁴¹ Armwood's almost strident words were somewhat out of character for a person who had so long preferred cooperation, but she felt strong measures were warranted.

Beyond the words of her letter or their effect on readers, the title of the piece, "Mrs. Beatty Protests Editorial Expression on Pending Dyer Bill," was a testimonial to the respect she commanded. Newspapers such as the *Tampa Tribune* rarely addressed black women as "Mrs." in the 1920s. But, black leaders who pursued a policy of cooperation with white leaders also walked a fine line. Some black leaders were beginning to criticize Armwood for being too accommodating to whites. In his autobiography, Benjamin E. Mays, her successor in the Urban League, said that when he first came to Tampa the racial atmosphere contained too much "sweet-

39. *Tampa Tribune*, December 2, 1922.

40. *Ibid.*

41. As quoted in Robert P. Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa, 1882-1936* (Knoxville, 1988), 24. See also Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (Chicago, 1987), 127-128.

ness and light.” He attributed these apparently favorable relations to reciprocal flattery and assessed the situation as one of benevolent paternalism. He specifically criticized Armwood for her support of an unsuccessful plan to concentrate all of Tampa’s blacks in a single subdivision of new housing.⁴²

Despite such criticisms, Armwood continued to emphasize the mutual benefits that were attainable through black and white cooperation. Upon assuming the duties of executive secretary of the Urban League, she declared that “we need civic organizations in large numbers just as we need churches. But let’s try to realize that each can live and function without attempting to crush the others.”⁴³ Speaking to the Florida Federation of Women’s Clubs she insisted that diseases spread between races and across geographic boundaries. Later, while making the case for a black recreational facility, Armwood argued that “a single playground in the heart of the negro district, properly supervised, would doubtless prove very much less expensive to the city than the care of the increasing number of young criminals created by lack of facilities.”⁴⁴

During Armwood’s tenure as executive director, the Urban League directed its efforts toward the lives of women and their children. Females headed more than a fourth of black urban households, often providing the sole support for their families. To help them, the Tampa Urban League founded the Busy Merry-makers women’s service organization which in turn established the Helping Hand Day Nursery and Kindergarten. Armwood could not achieve her goal of a home for black juvenile delinquents, but juvenile court judges did begin placing first and second offenders in the custody of the Urban League. She also convinced the superintendent of the city stockade to stop the practice of having black female prisoners sweep the streets. Instead, the women were assigned to do laundry for the Clara Faye Hospital. To try to improve the health of Tampa’s black citizens, Armwood cooperated closely with Mrs. George W. Atkinson, Executive Secretary of the Red Cross, in starting a Booker T. Washington branch and training twelve volunteer case workers. The league sponsored a children’s clinic, vaccinations, a school nurse, the first black assistant city phy-

42. *Tampa Tribune*, December 2, 1922; Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (New York, 1971), 106, 111, 171.

43. *Tampa Tribune*, October 1, 1922, Armwood Papers, Box 1, File 16.

44. *Tampa Daily Times*, October 31, 1923, Armwood Papers, Box 1, File 16.

sician, care of tuberculosis victims, a course in midwifery, and a course in home hygiene. The League also established the Florida Negro World War Memorial with contributions from the American Legion Auxiliary. A black playground and the Harlem Branch Library were also started in the 1920s. Most of these programs depended on support from people of both races.⁴⁵

Armwood took the same approach in her position as Supervisor of Negro Schools. She lobbied the City League of Women's Clubs and persuaded them to appear with her at a special joint session of the school board. The meeting resulted in her most important accomplishment as supervisor: longer terms for black schools. During her tenure, the first black high school in Hillsborough was also opened. Booker T. Washington High soon became one of the few accredited black high schools in Florida.⁴⁶

Armwood left the school position in 1930 and a year later she married for the third time to Edward T. Washington, a member of the Interstate Commerce Commission. The couple soon moved to the nation's capital where she attempted to obtain a position in the District of Columbia schools. But, despite assistance from Florida Congresswoman Ruth Bryan Owen and other dignitaries, she was unsuccessful. She spent her time during the 1930s working with volunteer organizations such as the Golden Rule Recovery Alliance and the Non-Partisan League. She also earned a law degree from Howard University. These were her last activities, however. Blanche Armwood Washington became ill and died in 1939 while fulfilling a speaking engagement in Massachusetts.⁴⁷

When Armwood resigned as head of the Tampa Urban League in 1926, the board of directors resolved that "we express our belief that her work stands without parallel in our state or country."⁴⁸ Her record left considerable justification for the statement. She had pursued interracial cooperation during a lifetime patterned after that of Booker T. Washington. By doing so she had left herself open to the same charges that were levelled at him. Such charges can

45. Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love*, 111-113, Weiss, *Urban Leap*, 202, Mays, *Born to Rebel*, 108, and *Tampa Daily Times*, November 16, 1923, Armwood Papers, Box 1, File 16.

46. Unidentified newspaper clipping, Armwood Papers, Box 1, File 16.

47. *Ibid.*, Ruth Bryan Owen to Garnet C. Wickerson, Armwood Papers, Box 4, File 4, *Florida Times-Union*, December 10, 1931, *Tampa Tribune*, July 23, 1936, Armwood Papers, Box 2, File 3 and Box 4, Files 4 and 7.

48. *Tampa Tribune*, June 6, 1926, Box 1, File 16.

only be assessed in the context of her time. It seems that people like Blanche Armwood gave up what was already lost. Whether a more militant approach would have advanced the race faster is impossible to say. To denigrate her accomplishments because she reasoned and cajoled is unfair— and irrelevant. By addressing the interrelated issues of race and gender she defied the stereotype of the black middle class and proved the importance of a strategy that would work. That was not a small accomplishment in Blanche Armwood's time.