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## “Without Compromise or Fear”: Florida’s African American Female Activists

by MAXINE D. JONES

*We must challenge, skillfully but resolutely, every sign of restriction or limitation to our full American citizenship . . . we must seek every opportunity to place the burden of responsibility upon him who denies it.*

Mary McLeod Bethune<sup>1</sup>

**I**n his study of the civil rights movement in Mississippi, historian Charles Payne observed that “men led but women organized.”<sup>2</sup> With few exceptions the same could be said of African American activists in Florida throughout the twentieth century. Women played a major role in combating racism and discrimination, and in seeking first-class citizenship for black Floridians.

Hampered by racial and gender barriers, these women actively sought to secure for blacks the same educational, political, and economic opportunities that most whites enjoyed. They supported those in need by providing food, clothing and shelter, and by creating institutions to strengthen their communities. Students of Florida history are familiar with the names of prominent civil rights leaders C. K. Steele, Edward Davis, Virgil Hawkins, Harry T. Moore, S. D. McGill, C. Blythe Andrews Sr., and John Due. Yet often missing from the pages of journal articles and monographs are the names of the black women who were equally important in eradicating injustice and generating resources and opportunities within their respective communities, women such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Eartha White, Blanche Armwood, Alice Mickens, Viola Hill,

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1. Mary McLeod Bethune, “Viewing the Facts Objectively,” Mary McLeod Bethune Papers: The Bethune Foundation Collection, Part I, Reel 2, Frame 612.
2. Charles Payne, “Men Led, but Women Organized: Movement Participation of Women in the Mississippi Delta,” in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (Brooklyn, 1990), 1-11.

Athalie Range, Fannye Ayer Ponder, Olive B. McLin and Patricia Stephens Due. They are just a few of the hundreds of African American women in the Sunshine State who made a difference. Some were known only within their communities and cities, while others were recognized on the state and national levels. They created educational opportunities and influenced federal policy; many worked within the system, others in spite of it. And some were more outspoken than others. Yet all challenged the system and were pro-active in meeting the needs of the black community and pointing out to the white power structure the inequities of segregation, racism, and discrimination. African American female activists and community leaders worked as strenuously and contributed as much to improving the condition of black Floridians as did African American men.

Black women in Florida followed a long tradition of female activism in the African American community. The condition of blacks in twentieth-century Florida required action, and those black women who were in a position to do so eagerly picked up the torch so bravely carried by Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Maria Stewart, and Ida Wells Barnett decades before. Throughout most of the twentieth century the majority of Florida blacks lived in poverty. Unequal educational, economic, and political opportunities contributed to illiteracy, unemployment, subsistence wages, poor working conditions, and poor health. In 1905 the death rate for black Floridians was 7.3 per 1,000; for whites it was 6.1 per 1,000. Typhoid fever, pneumonia, consumption, and heart disease killed hundreds of Floridians of both races annually. Only 2.2 percent of the state's white population above the age of ten was classified as illiterate in 1925. The black illiteracy rate topped 20 percent. The black illiteracy rate in Dixie County, an alarming 74.5 percent, was the highest in the state.<sup>3</sup>

Such conditions put Mary McLeod Bethune on the path to becoming Florida's most renowned African American activist. A South Carolinian by birth, Bethune adopted Florida as her home when she arrived in Palatka (Alachua County) in 1900. She left Palatka in 1904 to work among destitute blacks in Daytona (Volusia County) and to establish a school similar to the one she had attended in North Carolina-Scotia Seminary. In October 1904, Be-

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3. *The Third Census of the State of Florida, 1905* (Tallahassee, 1906), 142, 144, 146-49; *The Fifth Census of the State of Florida, 1925* (Tallahassee, 1926), 94.

thune, with five students and even fewer dollars, opened the Daytona Educational and Industrial Institute.<sup>4</sup>

Mary McLeod Bethune left her mark on Daytona, Florida, and the nation. Clarence G. Newsome concluded that "more than any other black leader during the interregnum between Booker T. Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr., she stood at the helm of the Negro's struggle for racial justice."<sup>5</sup> A natural born and fearless leader, and an independent woman, Bethune quickly earned the respect of many area whites. She believed in racial integration and refused to succumb to southern racial mores. When whites attended events on her campus, which was renamed Bethune-Cookman College in 1923, they sat with African Americans. Harlem Renaissance author and poet Langston Hughes visited the college in 1934 and praised its president for not making "'special provisions' for local white folks." During his lecture there he noticed that "a great many whites were in the audience but they sat among the Negroes." At other black schools in the South, "even the very well-endowed, and famous ones," Hughes found "an amazing acquiescence to the wishes of the local whites and to the tradition of the color-line." He criticized those schools that "set aside whole sections in their own auditoriums for the exclusive use of whites."<sup>6</sup>

Such intermingling between blacks and whites violated state regulations across the South. This was not lost on poet Hughes:

[I]f you think that is easy to achieve in the South and does not take bravery and gall and guts, try it yourself. Or else be humble like that college president . . . who says he is sorry the white people in his community who wish to hear Mrs. Roosevelt speak on his campus cannot attend because the state law is against it! Thus meekly he accepts an obvi-

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4. Henry Flagler employed hundreds of African American men to build the Florida East Coast Railroad. These men and their families lived in a destitute environment. Bethune hoped to educate their children so that they might know a better life. *The Christian Advocate*, February 4, 1937; Dorothy C. Salem, ed., *African American Women: A Biographical Dictionary* (New York, 1993), 47-51; *Crisis* 26 (September 1923), 222-23; Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York, 1973), 134; Leedell Neyland, *Twelve Black Floridians* (Tallahassee, 1970) 17-18.
  5. Clarence G. Newsome, "Mary McLeod Bethune in Religious Perspective: A Seminal Essay" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1982), iv.
  6. Langston Hughes, "Cowards from the Colleges," *Crisis* 41 (August 1934), 227-28.

ous wrong and does nothing— not even verbally. Such men would accept Hitler without a struggle— but Mrs. Bethune wouldn't— not even in Florida. . . .<sup>7</sup>

Indeed it took courage to challenge the South's mores, and Bethune did so, but she also believed that interracial cooperation rather than confrontation was the key to settling the race problem. Thus, she called for "a better understanding between the White and Negro Groups."<sup>8</sup>

Mary McLeod Bethune championed social justice and sought to remove the barriers that prevented Florida's African Americans from participating as full citizens. She frequently spoke out against lynching, barriers to voting, insufficient funding for public education, and "the enactment of measures which in segregating Negroes in unsanitary ghettos make them a menace to the health and peace of the entire community."<sup>9</sup> Bethune called for the appointment of a statewide committee composed of "the best educated, most cultured, tactful and unselfish leaders" of both races.<sup>10</sup> Because of the "popular disapproval" of a lynching in Ocala in 1926, Bethune believed the time was right for such a commission:

Interracial cooperation in religious [work], education, social service, municipal and State government, is working with splendid effect in other States. Let us have more of it in Florida. The day of selfish, individualistic leadership has passed. We need in Florida a carefully selected interracial committee. Let us have one.<sup>11</sup>

7. Langston Hughes, "The Need for Heroes," *Crisis* 48 (June 1941), 185.

8. Mary McLeod Bethune, "Interracial Cooperation in Florida," typescript, n.d., Mary McLeod Bethune Papers, 1875-1955, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana (hereafter MMBP).

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.* In April 1926, a group of "masked men" seized Charles Davis, an African American accused of killing a Pasco County deputy sheriff, as he was being transferred from Ocala to Brooksville for trial. Sheriff W. D. Cobb believed Davis had been lynched and thrown into the Withlacoochee River. Papers of the NAACP, Part 7, The Anti-Lynching Campaign, 1912-1955, series A: Anti-Lynching Investigative Files, 1912-1953, reel 8, group 1, series C, Administrative Files, box C-351.



Mary McLeod Bethune at Bethune-Cookman College, 1943. *Photograph courtesy of the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.*

While it is uncertain whether state officials appointed such a committee, several communities, including Jacksonville, eventually did.

Bethune-Cookman College faculty and students hosted an interracial student conference in March 1936. Considering the state of race relations in Florida at the time, this was an extremely brave move. Less than two years had passed since the brutal lynching of Claude Neal in North Florida. But on March 3, 1936, white students from Rollins College and the University of Florida convened on the campus of Bethune-Cookman College. The exchange between the students was candid. Rollins College coeds asked their hosts: "What things can white friends do [to] immediately and significantly help improve the condition of Negroes?" Bethune-Cookman students asked those from the University of Florida whether they were willing to integrate their graduate and professional courses. Students from the University of Florida asked how black and white students could best cooperate for their mutual benefit.<sup>12</sup> The students responded to each other's questions honestly and with respect for differing views. All those present pledged to continue to work for better race relations through the Interracial Student Council. President Bethune believed that if the present assembly was any indication, the future for race relations in Florida looked promising.<sup>13</sup> The educator maintained that interracial cooperation at all levels was essential for improvement in race relations, and she facilitated interracial interaction whenever she could.

In February 1931, Bethune addressed an interracial conference in Lakeland, Florida. Dr. Ludd M. Spivey, president of Florida Southern College, directed the meeting and Will W. Alexander of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation gave the opening speech. Alexander declared that objective thinking was the "only sane approach" and key to solving the race problem.<sup>14</sup> Harris G. Sims, a reporter for the *New York Times*, reported that Mary McLeod Bethune "held her head high [and] said she was proud of her own black skin." According to Sims, Bethune "went straight to the heart of the race problem."

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12. The University of Florida student did not give a direct response to the question asked. He asserted that the students in attendance would be willing to accept a Bethune-Cookman graduate into their academic programs. He pointed out, however, that all graduate programs were already "overcrowded." "Interracial Student Conference in Florida," *Crisis* 43 (April 1936), 109.

13. *Ibid.*, 110.

14. *New York Times*, February 18, 1931, news clipping, in MMBP.

She . . . pleaded for social justice, pointed out the injustices that were being practiced upon her race, and did it with such sincerity and zeal that her remarks were followed by applause, instead of the derogatory comments that often follows when a Negro speaks with such candor.<sup>15</sup>

Bethune told the delegates that her people deserved social equality, which she defined as equal railroad accommodations as well as educational and economic opportunities. Intimate contact with whites was not the goal. It is uncertain how many "young Southerners" Bethune convinced to support her vision of equal opportunity for all, but she obviously made an impression, as they "made a bee-line to the Negro college president after she had made her speech, awaited their turn to shake hands with her and to address her as Mrs. Bethune."<sup>16</sup>

Bethune also made an impression outside the South. A 1926 *New York Times* article referred to her as "the 'Booker Washington' of her sex," while *Time* magazine dubbed Bethune "The Booker T. Washington of Florida" in 1939. The two educators did have much in common. Both were astute black college presidents who knew how to persuade prominent northern whites to contribute vast sums to black educational institutions. Both promoted vocational education and were "adroit politicians" as well, but the comparison probably ends there. Washington was never as brave or as candid as Bethune in pointing out to southern whites the effects of southern injustice, racism, and discrimination. Some may argue that Bethune and Washington lived during different times and in different environments, and that Washington had more to lose by being vocal.<sup>17</sup> But violence and lynching were as common in Florida as in other southern states. Between 1889 and 1918 more than 150 blacks were lynched in Florida. The Sunshine State led the nation in lynching in 1920 and continued to hold a disgraceful place in the top five for several years.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, Bethune refused to

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15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *New York Times*, November 11, 1926, news clipping, MMBP; Lottie Montgomery Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida" (master's thesis, Florida State University, 1942), 25.

18. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918*, with appendices for years 1919-1922 (New York, 1919), 35, 41.

be intimidated even by the Ku Klux Klan. When the Klan made an uninvited visit to campus in 1920, she did not gather her students and hide under the cloak of darkness. Instead, according to Dr. Florence Roane, head of the division of education, "Mrs. Bethune made all the girls come out on the steps of Faith Hall and sing 'We are Climbing Jacob's ladder.'" The Klan threatened them, burned a cross, and departed.<sup>19</sup>

Bethune lambasted Florida's treatment of its black citizens, but she did so with poise, dignity, and savvy. For example in one article addressing the disproportionate number of African American men in Florida's prisons, Bethune pointed out the tremendous social costs to whites of "keeping the nigger in his place."

A large percentage of the Negroes in Florida's penal institutions are there today because of injustice, discrimination in the courts, and inability to secure proper legal aid. They come out hardened, brutalized, hating the society at whose hands they have suffered. They mingle in their community and spread the disease of bitterness among hundreds of others. To keep them inferior they must be huddled in segregated ghettos without drainage, light, pavements or modern sanitary convenience. They must be denied justice and the right to make a decent living. He must be insulted and bullied and mobbed, discriminated against in public places and denied access to parks and recreational centers. In dollars and cents the cost of this system is tremendous to the Commonwealth which sponsors it. In the effect upon those who put it into practice the price is too high to be paid in this generation. It must be paid by the children of the third and fourth generation.<sup>20</sup>

Booker T. Washington was never as forthright with white Alabamians. Of course, the majority of white Floridians were not swayed by Bethune's candor, even though she described the cost in terms they would understand. But black Floridians were aware of and appreciated her attacks on a system that discriminated against them.

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19. Dr. Florence Roane and Bethune were close friends. Another account of the same incident claims that the students sang, "Be not dismayed whate'er betide, God will take care of you." *St. Petersburg Times*, December 28, 1975; Newsome, "Mary McLeod Bethune in Religious Perspective," 244-45.

20. Mary McLeod Bethune, untitled typescript, n.d., MMBP.

When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) awarded Bethune its Spingarn Medal in June 1935, the selection committee hailed her national influence, which, it declared, "has always been on a high plane, directed by a superb courage. Mrs. Bethune has always spoken out against injustice, in the South as well as in the North, without compromise or fear."<sup>21</sup>

Mary McLeod Bethune took her campaign for interracial cooperation and first class citizenship for African Americans nationwide. As president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) Bethune fought for open seating at the 1925 meeting of the International Council of Women held in the nation's capital. On May 5, 1925, members of the NACW protested the segregated seating arrangements by walking out. An outraged Bethune denounced the seating policy, claiming "it was humiliating to the United States to be segregated in the presence of women from all over the world."<sup>22</sup> Her appointment as Director of the Negro Division of the National Youth Administration (NYA) during Franklin Roosevelt's administration, her friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt, and her presidency of the National Council of Negro Women gave Bethune a wider audience, more power and influence, and an opportunity to expand her work beyond the confines of Bethune-Cookman College and the state of Florida. In 1930 journalist Ida Tarbell named Bethune one of the fifty leading women in the United States. Little did Tarbell know that during the intervening years between the death of Booker T. Washington in 1915 and the birth of the modern day civil rights movement in 1955, Mary McLeod Bethune would assume the leadership of the African American crusade for racial justice.<sup>23</sup>

Bethune was just one of several black female activists working diligently for positive change for Florida's black citizens. Eartha M. M. White had as much influence and impact in Jacksonville as Be-

21. "Mrs. Bethune: Spingarn Medalist," *Crisis* 42 (July 1935), 202; *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 6, 1935, news clipping, MMBP; Monroe N. Work, *The Negro Year Book* (Tuskegee, 1937), 11.

22. Elaine Smith. "Mary McLeod Bethune" in Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley Brown, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, eds., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1994), 118-19.

23. Bethune died in May 1955. Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida," 28; "Along The Color Line," *Crisis* 37 (November 1930), 380; Newsome, "Mary McLeod Bethune in Religious Perspective," iv.

thune had in Daytona. White, known as “the Angel of Mercy” and the “Jane Addams of her race,” was Jacksonville’s first African American social worker and an advocate for the downtrodden. A native Floridian born in 1876, White, like her friend Mary McLeod Bethune, began her career as an educator. Her work eventually extended beyond the confines of the classroom to that of the broader Jacksonville community, and she became a bridge between Jacksonville’s black and white residents. Eartha White’s mother, Clara English White, taught her to “do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, for all the people you can, while you can.”<sup>24</sup> Until her death in 1920, Clara White worked alongside her daughter, helping those in need.

A fire in Jacksonville in 1901 left thousands of blacks and whites homeless and destitute. The two White women came to their aid. From their home they fed and clothed many of the dislocated. They solicited and raised funds to establish an Old Folks Home in 1902 for African Americans. Because blacks did not receive their fair share of social services in Jacksonville, Clara and Eartha White operated a mission from their home on First Street to meet the immediate needs of the poor. In 1928, as a memorial to her mother, Eartha White officially established the Clara White Mission. With the help and financial contributions of friends, White moved the mission from its First Street location to a permanent site on Ashley Street in 1932.<sup>25</sup>

Mary McLeod Bethune called Eartha White “a great humanitarian” and an advocate for “the needy and the unfortunate.”<sup>26</sup> Only five feet tall, White earned the reputation and gained the admiration and respect of influential whites that allowed her to establish institutions to aid the black community. Even though her

24. “Biography of Clara White,” in *75th Diamond Birthday Observance of [the] Useful Life of Eartha Mary Magdalene White*, souvenir program, 1951, Eartha White Collection, Clara White Mission, Jacksonville, Florida; *Florida Times-Union* (Star Edition), March 12, 1952, March 25, 1951; Neyland, *Twelve Black Floridians*, 38, 40-41; Paul Diggs, “Little Angel of Ashly Street— Miss Eartha M. M. White,” type-script, 1938, Florida Writers Project, Special Collections, University of South Florida (hereafter FWP).

25. James B. Crooks, *Jacksonville After the Fire, 1901-1919* (Jacksonville, 1991), 16-18, 89-90; Wilson Rice, “Negro Churches” unpublished manuscript, 1936, FWP; “History of Clara White Mission,” *75th Diamond Birthday Observance of [the] Useful Life of Eartha Mary Magdalene White*.

26. Mary McLeod Bethune to Eartha M. M. White, October 25, 1951, in *75th Diamond Birthday Observance of [the] Useful Life of Eartha Mary Magdalene White*, *Crisis* 49 (September 1942), 289.



Eartha M. M. White, n.d. *Photograph courtesy of the Eartha M. M White Collection, University of North Florida.*

primary clientele was African American, she assisted the “unfortunates of all races and all creeds, without pay and with loving kindness.” According to Matilda O’Donald, Chairman of the Interracial Committee in Jacksonville, “Miss White knows no racial differences when it comes to helping those who need help. Many young white persons both men and women have risen up and called her blessed.”<sup>27</sup>

In addition to establishing the Old Folks Home in 1902, White, through the Clara White Mission, operated a much needed Tubercular Rest Home in the black community. Tuberculosis was the leading cause of death among blacks in Duval County in 1920.<sup>28</sup> The “Angel of Ashley Street” also established an orphanage and child placement service, a home for unwed mothers, an unemployment agency, and a nursery for working mothers. The city of Jacksonville and Duval County failed to provide such services to their black citizens, so White assumed the responsibility. A successful businesswoman in her own right, White lobbied local politicians and influential whites and blacks for support and funds. Using her own money and that donated by others, including Mrs. Arthur J. Cummer and Mrs. Alfred I. DuPont, White established and sustained institutions that met the health, educational, and social welfare needs of Jacksonville’s blacks. Eventually White received aid from both the city and the county governments.<sup>29</sup>

By the 1930s, White had helped thousands, but she may have accomplished her most important work during the Great Depression. The Clara White Mission operated a soup kitchen that fed hundreds daily without benefit of government funds. No one was turned away. Although the federal government did not support the soup kitchen, it chose the Clara White Mission to direct its various projects designed to help blacks in Jacksonville and Duval County. With the help of government funds, the mission operated a sewing room that hired unemployed black women, provided art and music programs for youth, and housed the Negro Unit of the Florida

27. Matilda O’Donald, chairman, Interracial Committee, to Whom It May Concern, March 29, 1951, in *75th Diamond Birthday Observance of [the] Useful Life of Eartha Mary Magdalene White*.

28. Council of Social Agencies, *Jacksonville Looks at its Negro Community, a Survey of Conditions Affecting the Negro Population in Jacksonville and Duval County, Florida* (Jacksonville, May 1946), 2-3.

29. *75th Diamond Birthday Observance of [the] Useful Life of Eartha Mary Magdalene White*.

Writers Project.<sup>30</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune may have persuaded government officials to select White to head this project.

Eartha White accomplished much in meeting the needs of the black community with a leadership style quite different from that of Bethune. White, to a degree, adhered to Booker T. Washington's philosophy. She attended the organizational meeting of Washington's National Negro Business League in 1900 and was active in the Jacksonville chapter. She almost certainly was in the audience of 2,500 when Booker T. Washington spoke in Jacksonville in 1912. Although White sought to dismantle racism and discrimination, she was not outspoken and did not vocally challenge the system. According to Altermese Bentley, whose parents were friends of White's, Eartha White was "very strong" but "not overly assertive."<sup>31</sup> However, she used her influence with Jacksonville's powerful whites and policy makers to achieve for blacks those opportunities and services that they were denied. She used their financial contributions to establish Mercy Hospital, and she persuaded local politicians to provide a playground and other facilities for black neighborhoods. White established a network of supporters and admirers across the state, including Secretary of State R. A. Gray, Attorney General Richard Ervin, United States Senator Claude Pepper, and Governor Fuller Warren, all of whom wrote glowing testimonials in honor of her seventy-fifth birthday.<sup>32</sup>

Although cautious, White was not necessarily accommodating, and she often led by example. She was active in politics at a time when race and gender kept thousands from voting in Florida. She was active in the local Republican Party, serving as president of the Duval County Republican Executive Committee in 1920 and the state chairperson of the National League of Republican Colored Women in 1928. When women finally gained the right to vote in 1920 she actively encouraged black women to register to vote. As a direct result of the efforts of White and others, African American women registering to vote outnumbered white women in several wards. Threats from the Ku Klux Klan, which marched to discour-

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30. Diggs, "Little Angel of Ashly Street"; Rice, "Negro Churches"; *75th Diamond Birthday Observance of [the] Useful Life of Eartha Mary Magdalene White*, *Crisis* 49 (September 1942), 289.

31. Crooks, *Jacksonville After the Fire*, 85, 89, 94; Mrs. Altermese Bentley, interview with author, August 21, 1998.

32. Robert T. Thomas, "Interracial Relations," *Crisis* 49 (January 1942), 19; *75th Diamond Birthday Observance of [the] Useful Life of Eartha Mary Magdalene White*.

age blacks from voting, did not prevent black women from turning out in large numbers in the 1920 fall elections.<sup>33</sup>

White and Bethune were friends and were members of many of the same clubs and organizations. Both were members of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), a national organization that Bethune chaired from 1924 to 1928, and the Florida State Federation of Colored Women (FSFCW). With the power of the FSFCW behind them, White and Bethune lobbied state officials to provide a home for wayward and delinquent girls. In fact, White chaired the Education and the Industrial Home for Colored Girls Committees and received credit for securing the passage of the measure that established an institution for black female youth in Marion County.<sup>34</sup> Through national, regional, state, and local clubs and organizations, White and Bethune were able to influence policy that benefitted blacks outside of their respective communities.

Blanche Armwood was also affiliated with the club movement in Florida and was a contemporary and friend of Eartha White and Mary McLeod Bethune. She, too, sought first-class citizenship for African Americans and eloquently articulated the needs of those who had no voice. A Tampan by birth, Armwood emerged as an outspoken leader in the early struggle for civil rights in Florida. In 1922 this woman, described as a "rebel," became the first executive secretary of the Tampa Urban League. In this position and as Supervisor of Negro Schools for Hillsborough County, "she did not ask favors—she demanded rights—the same rights for all American citizens," for the county's more than 20,000 African Americans. Buttressed by her membership in the NACW, the NAACP, and the FSFCW, Armwood sought to make blacks in Tampa "politically conscious, educationally alert, socially constructive [and] economically independent."<sup>35</sup>

33. Walter F. White, "Election Day in Florida," *Crisis* 21 (January 1921), 106, 109; Barbara H. Walch, "Sallye B. Mathis and Mary L. Singleton: Black Pioneers on the Jacksonville, Florida, City Council" (master's thesis, University of Florida, 1988), 47-48.

34. Fannye Ayer Ponder, "A Salutation to a Friend to Man," in *75th Diamond Birthday Observance of [the] Useful Life of Eartha Mary Magdalene White*; Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida," 30.

35. Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida," 63, 64, 67, 70-71; Blanche Armwood Family Papers, Special Collections, University of South Florida; John R. Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years, 1890-1922" (master's thesis, University of South Florida, 1988), 13; *Fifth Census of the State of Florida*, 59; Mary Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood, 1890-1939," *The Sunland Tribune* 15 (November 1989), 40, 41.

Blanche Armwood's stint as a school teacher and principal prepared her for the position of Supervisor of Negro Schools in Hillsborough County (1922-1930) where she sought to erase the inequality of black and white schools. Educational opportunities for blacks in Tampa were poor. White students attended school for nine months, blacks for only six. Black schools were congested and unsanitary, and black teachers received substantially less pay than their white counterparts. It was obvious to Armwood that under such conditions black youth stood "a very slim chance for development into strong, intelligent manhood and womanhood." "Dynamic, aggressive, zealous, [and] enthusiastic for whatever cause she espoused," Armwood took action. Reputedly, within less than two years, the glaring inequities were at least slightly mitigated. African American students received instruction for nine months, the county dramatically improved school facilities, and black teachers welcomed an increase in salary.<sup>36</sup>

Armwood was the first African American in Florida to serve as a county Supervisor of Negro Schools. Whites generally held this position. During her eight-year tenure the county constructed five new brick school buildings and additions to two existing black schools in Tampa. She encouraged parents' participation in their children's education by establishing a parent-teacher organization in every black school in the county. Additionally, Armwood played a major role in creating Booker T. Washington High School—the first accredited school for blacks in the county.<sup>37</sup>

Ironically, Armwood, like Bethune, was considered a "Female Booker T. Washington." Perhaps it was because of her reputation for organizing successful schools of household arts, not only in Tampa, but also in Athens, Georgia, New Orleans, Louisiana, and Rock Hill, South Carolina. Maybe it was because in these schools, African American women learned "how to work with their hands while they trained their minds" and departed imbued with the gospel of "industry, thrift, self-reliance, and self-respect." She firmly believed that such skills ensured a degree of economic indepen-

36. Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida," 65, 66, 70; *Tampa Tribune*, February 26, 1983.

37. Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida," 66; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," 41-42; *Tampa Tribune*, February 26, 1983.



Tampa Club Women in 1925. Blanche Armwood is seated in the front row, far right. Photograph courtesy of the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.

dence that could lead to improvements in other areas.<sup>38</sup> Armwood, however, was more of a militant than an accommodationist.

Unlike Booker T. Washington she actively joined the NAACP and the struggle against racism, discrimination, and lynching. While probably not as outspoken as Bethune, Armwood was not one to hold her tongue. She denounced mob violence and lynching, fervently supporting the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign and the Dyer Anti-Lynching bill. When a white reader of the *Tampa Tribune* suggested that the "money, time, and determination" spent by advocates of anti-lynching would be better spent on "a campaign to eradicate the cause for which lynching in the South is the remedy," – what he called the "bad nigger" who is "usually of 'high color' and 'high eddication'" – Armwood could not help but respond:

38. Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida," 65-66; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," 40.

The Negroes of this community feel that the editorial referred to shows such a spirit of antagonism to Negro education and advancement as we are reluctant to characterize as the *Tribune's* real attitude. . . . The premium that white men put on their womanhood is worthy of the commendation of any people. Making criminals of hundreds of fathers of the future womanhood of their race who participated in mob murders is rather inconsistent, however. Please let us say further, Mr. Editor, that we do not know any case where educated Negroes have been lynched save in race riots like the ones in Arkansas and Oklahoma, where the bloodthirsty mob found pleasure in destroying the lives and property of the best Negro citizens as a means of humiliating the entire race. Nor do we understand what is meant by the Negro of "high color." Surely, the writer does not refer to mulattoes whose color proves the disregard our Southern white men have had for racial purity and the value of virtuous womanhood even among the Negroes, their humble loyal friends . . . Yours of peace and civic righteousness. Blanche Armwood Beatty.<sup>39</sup>

This exchange took place around the time of the racial incident at Rosewood, Florida, in January 1923, which resulted in the deaths of at least six African Americans and the complete destruction of their community. Many white Tampan's respected Armwood and worked alongside her at the Urban League and other interracial groups. In a sense she accomplished for race relations in Tampa what Eartha White did for Jacksonville's black and white citizens— she served as a bridge. Mary Burke concluded that Armwood's "conservative and diplomatic policy toward race relations led to acceptance by the white power structure."<sup>40</sup> Armwood's shrewd diplomacy definitely paid off for the black community, but the above letter to the editor throws her alleged conservatism into question. Her gender probably offered some protection, but often such bluntness resulted in a loss of respect and influence among whites, warnings, and even physical violence. Armwood demonstrated her boldness in challenging southern injustice not only by responding to the white reader, but also by including her name.

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39. Ibid.

40. Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," 43.

Likewise, she joined fellow Floridians Eartha White and Mary McLeod Bethune in supporting the Anti-Lynching Crusaders and helping to establish the Florida branch of that organization. She was also a member of the Republican Party and active in the National and State League of Colored Republican Women.<sup>41</sup>

Her actions and affiliations indicate that Blanche Armwood was not as conservative as she might have appeared. While Armwood aided African Americans in Tampa much as did White in Jacksonville— by working for daycare, health care, recreational facilities, better housing, equitable education— she was not quiet and retiring. Although she obviously needed the assistance of influential whites to bring about tangible changes in the black community, she did not turn her back when she saw racial injustice. Armwood openly criticized southern whites for their treatment of African Americans and consistently called attention to the inhumane conditions under which blacks were forced to live. She was unafraid to point out the discrepancies in almost every aspect of life between black and white Tampons.

Mary McLeod Bethune, Eartha White and Blanche Armwood were only the most prominent of the black activists in early to mid-twentieth-century Florida. Many other women such as Viola T. Hill of Orlando and Alice Mickens of West Palm Beach were active as well. Hill was appointed to direct the Negro branch of the NYA in Orlando in 1941. She also organized the first nursery for blacks in that city. Many of her activities were designed to strengthen the black community. Hill was particularly interested in developing leaders among black youth and women. Mickens, who believed there was “strength in union” became heavily involved in the club movement in Florida. She was elected president of the Florida Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs in 1938. She truly believed that equal rights and opportunities would be achieved for African Americans via colored women’s clubs. For more than ten years Mickens worked to secure a playground for black children in West Palm Beach. “White children had nine or ten playgrounds and athletic fields,” she pointed out, and “colored children had none.” Black children needed a safe place to play and Mickens believed that playgrounds kept them out of trouble. Because of her persis-

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41. *Tampa Tribune*, February 26, 1983; Blanche A. Beatty to Eartha White, April 28, June 16, 1928, Eartha M. M. White Collection, University of North Florida, Jacksonville.

tent efforts the city eventually erected a playground for blacks on Fifteenth Street.<sup>42</sup>

Mickens' biggest battle, however, was with the West Palm Beach (Palm Beach County) Board of Public Instruction. It was common in Florida and other southern states for black school children to attend school in the summer. Often referred to as "Strawberry Schools," such a practice made it possible for black children to harvest crops or, as in the case in West Palm Beach, to caddy for white golfers during the winter months. This arrangement also made it impossible for teachers to improve their credentials by attending summer school. Mickens lobbied the school board to change its policy and to lengthen the school year for black students. It refused. But as Lottie Clark Montgomery observed, "when Mrs. Mickens sets out to achieve an objective she doesn't rest until she accomplishes it." Although it took several years of struggle the county Board of Public Instruction changed the discriminatory policy. Black students began the school year in September and attended school for 9 months as did white students.<sup>43</sup> "Poised, patient, tolerant and benevolent," Mickens fought for equal opportunities for African Americans. She, too, was associated with various New Deal programs and encouraged blacks to take advantage of the opportunities offered through the NYA and the Civilian Conservation Corps. Whites apparently had high regard for Mickens and depended upon her "to interpret the Negro to the white race." When speaking before interracial groups she called for "better understanding and greater cooperation between the races."<sup>44</sup>

These African American activists often worked together on projects and called on each other for support when needed. White, Mickens, Bethune and Armwood helped secure the home for delinquent black females; White and Armwood were delegates to the Second National Conference on the Problems of the Negro and Negro Youth chaired by Bethune in January 1939. At the Washington, D.C., conference, delegates attacked the poll tax and discrimination in the military and New Deal agencies. They were actively involved in the NAACP's national anti-lynching campaign and advocated interracial cooperation. Armwood, Bethune, and White continued their activism and humanitarian efforts until their

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42. Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida," 83, 85, 57, 60.

43. *Ibid.*, 60.

44. *Ibid.*, 61-62.

deaths. Armwood died in 1939, two years after completing a law degree at Howard University. Bethune, who became a national leader, spent much of her time in the nation's capital from 1934 until her death in 1955 campaigning against racism, sexism, and discrimination. Her position in the NYA enabled her to influence policy that benefitted blacks in Florida. She played a significant role in securing recreational facilities for the black communities in Bradenton and Daytona Beach, and the Durkeeville Housing Project in Jacksonville.<sup>45</sup> Eartha White lived for another nineteen years after Bethune's death. In 1941 she along with Bethune supported A. Philip Randolph's threat to lead a March on Washington unless President Roosevelt issued an edict condemning discriminatory hiring practices in the nation's defense industries. Ironically, she did attend the March on Washington in August 1963. Born into a segregated society that oppressed those with dark skin, Eartha White outlived legal segregation and overt discrimination in Florida. By the time of her death in 1974, Florida society had changed considerably. The government— local, state and federal— helped provide for the needy and enforced federal laws that outlawed segregation and discrimination. She had played a part in bringing about such changes.<sup>46</sup>

In a sense, White linked Florida's early female activists with those of the modern civil rights movement. Through their activism these women built institutions that strengthened black communities across the state. The result was a more educated African American populace with the confidence and courage to follow in their footsteps. The Colored Women's Club movement and the examples set by Bethune, White, Hill, and Armwood, generated a new cadre of black female activists who were unafraid to challenge racism and discrimination. Their modes of operation differed considerably from earlier activists. They openly protested injustice, marched against discrimination, and were willing to go to jail to bring about change in the black community. Undoubtedly, many of them had met or had been influenced by those women who had laid the groundwork.

45. *Ibid.*, 30, 68; 69; Mary Claire Clark, "'In Unity There is Strength': Women's Clubs in Tampa during 1920s," *Tampa Bay History* 11 (Fall/Winter 1989), 15-16.

46. Smith, "Mary McLeod Bethune," 123; Audrey Johnson, "Eartha Mary Magdalene White," in Hine, et al., eds., *Black Women in America*, 1257; Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida," 69; Walch, "Sallye B. Mathis and Mary L. Singleton," 53.

In 1956, Carrie Patterson and Wilhelmina Jakes inadvertently catapulted the state of Florida into a new phase of the struggle for first class citizenship. Like Mary McLeod Bethune before them, Patterson and Jakes refused to accept southern rules. The two Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) students disobeyed a white city bus driver's order to leave the only available seats on the bus to go stand in the "colored" section. Patterson and Jakes refused to be publicly humiliated and offered to leave the bus if their fares were returned. Instead of returning their fares, the bus driver called the police, and the two young women were arrested for "placing self in position to incite a riot." Emboldened by their bravery FAMU students confronted the racist seating policy by organizing a boycott of the City Transit Company. The ultimately successful bus boycott forced the bus company to change its seating policy and thrust the Reverend C. K. Steele into the national limelight.<sup>45</sup>

FAMU students initiated the civil rights movement in the state capital, and black women were at the forefront. Patricia and Priscilla Stephens were especially determined in their efforts to challenge segregation. In 1959, the FAMU sophomores organized a campus branch of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). CORE, an interracial organization established in 1942, confronted racism using nonviolent tactics.<sup>48</sup> In February 1960, Patricia and Priscilla Stephens, along with nine other students (including Mary Gaines, Barbara Broxton, and Angelina Nelson), launched a sit-in at the downtown Woolworth and were arrested for "disturbing the peace and tranquility of the community and inciting a riot." On March 17, Judge John A. Rudd found the students guilty and sentenced them to sixty days in jail or a three-hundred-dollar fine. Three students appealed and were released on bonds. Three others paid the fine so that they could "carry on the fight." Patricia and Priscilla Stephens, Barbara Broxton, William Larkin, and John

47. *Tallahassee Democrat*, May 27 and 28, 1956; Glenda A. Rabby, "Out of the Past: The Civil Rights Movement in Tallahassee, Florida" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1984), 10, 21-27; Gregory B. Padgett, "C. K. Steele and the Tallahassee Bus Boycott" (master's thesis, Florida State University, 1977), 25-27; Gregory Padgett, "C. K. Steele, A Biography" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1994), 60-62; Leedell W. Neyland, *Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University: A Centennial History—1887-1987* (Tallahassee, 1987), 421; *Tallahassee Democrat*, February 20, 1994, May 25, 1997.

48. Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, 1984), 128-29; *St. Petersburg Times*, May 26, 1963.



Patricia and Priscilla Stephens confront police officers while picketing and boycotting stores in downtown Tallahassee in December 1960. Photograph courtesy of the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.

Broxton chose the sixty-day jail sentence.<sup>49</sup> Although they missed classes and fell behind in their school work, their parents supported them. Patricia Stephens explained, "Our parents came up and offered to pay the fine. But we felt if we paid any more money to the city, we would be supporting segregation." The student activists spent forty-nine days in jail and were released on May 5, 1960. This was the first of several arrests for student activist Patricia Stephens who asserted, "when I get out, I plan to carry on this struggle. I feel that I shall be ready to go to jail again, if necessary."<sup>50</sup>

People across the country were impressed with the students' determination to end racism and discrimination, and with their willingness to be incarcerated in a southern jail. They gained na-

49. *Tallahassee Democrat*, February 21 and 22, March 17 and 18, 1960; *St. Petersburg Times*, May 26, 1963; Padgett, "Steele, A Biography," 169-72; Rabby, "Out of the Past," 100-104, 139.

50. *St. Petersburg Times*, May 26, 1963; Neyland, *Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University*, 424; *The Southern Patriot* 19 (September 1961), 3, and *Ibid.*, 21 (April 1963), 2.

tional attention and soon after their release embarked on a national tour. They spoke to a variety of groups including a congregation in Harlem pastored by Adam Clayton Powell. Former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt welcomed them and hosted a luncheon in their honor in New York. They were also received by Jackie Robinson. More importantly, CORE presented them with the Ghandi Award for "outstanding service in the field of civil rights and human relations."<sup>51</sup> Patricia Stephens continued her activism, picketing and protesting in Miami and Washington, D.C. Between 1960 and 1965, Stephens, CORE, FAMU students, and white students from Florida State University and the University of Florida targeted Tallahassee's Trailways Bus Station, Neisner's, and the Florida Theater. After a long and bitter encounter the students forced the establishments to make concessions. Tallahassee lunch counters were desegregated in January 1963. After mass arrests and numerous dates with Florida judges, the Florida Theater finally integrated its facilities in 1965. The victories, however, were won at a great cost. Campus leader Patricia Stephens and fellow student Rubin Kenyon were suspended from FAMU during the 1963 fall semester. Patricia and Priscilla Stephens emerged as campus leaders and eagerly assumed prominent roles in the Tallahassee movement. They, along with hundreds of others, suffered many indignities— jail, tear gas, in addition to being spit on, called nigger, and dragged through the capital city's streets.<sup>52</sup> But none was as humiliating as the second-class citizenship that sentenced them to a life of inferiority.

Patricia Stephens Due continues the struggle but in a different arena. While her goals are the same as they were in the 1960s, her activism has shifted "from the street to the places of personal encounter— homes, schools, neighborhoods."<sup>53</sup> Other black females emerged from FAMU and other black institutions in the state as strong advocates for equal educational, political, and economic opportunities for African Americans, for women's rights, and for racial justice. They continued to work in their communities, churches, and schools and to articulate the needs and concerns of the poor and oppressed. Some took their platform for change to

51. *St. Petersburg Times*, May 26, 1963.

52. *St. Petersburg Times*, May 26, 1963; *Miami Times*, October 6 and 26, 1963; *Miami Herald*, May 31, 1963; Neyland, *Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University*, 425.

53. *Tallahassee Democrat*, February 2, 1993.

the people and were elected as representatives at all levels of government.

Interestingly, women who attended FAMU a decade before Patricia and Priscilla Stephens evolved into influential leaders during the 1970s and 1980s, and took the concerns of their constituents directly to the policymakers. Gwendolyn Sawyer Cherry, Mary Littlejohn Singleton, C. Bette Wimbish, and Carrie Meek, all FAMU graduates, became outspoken advocates for women, minorities, and the poor. All were educators, and all had been victims of racism and sexism. Cherry, Singleton, Wimbish, and Meek were older and more established than the Stephens sisters. They had families and successful careers, and because of the gains of the civil and women's rights movements, were, while not necessarily welcomed, able to seek and win elected positions in city and state government.

Gwendolyn Sawyer Cherry became the first African American woman elected to the Florida legislature. Born and raised in Miami, Cherry represented Florida's 96<sup>th</sup> district. From 1970 until her untimely death in 1979, Cherry sought equal rights for women and minorities, and prison reform. She was also a strong advocate for children's rights and became a "legislative pioneer in the quest for statewide affordable child care centers."<sup>54</sup> A feminist, Cherry was not afraid to tackle controversial issues. She supported abortion rights, asserting that it was "a matter between a woman and her doctor." She disagreed with the 1977 United States Supreme Court decision that ruled that states were not required to pay Medicaid benefits for non-therapeutic abortions and that public hospitals did not have to provide such services. Cherry claimed the ruling discriminated against poor, particularly African American, women. She also called for prison reform, the establishment of rape centers for victims of sexual assault, and an end to capital punishment.<sup>55</sup> Cherry did not have Bethune's reputation or White's influential white friends, but her legacy was as important. She laid the groundwork for the African American women and men who would follow.

Carrie Meek completed Cherry's term after her death in 1979. According to Meek, "Gwen was strong: she cut a wide swath up

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54. Roderick Dion Waters, "Sister Sawyer: The Life and Times of Gwendolyn Sawyer Cherry" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1994), 108.

55. Waters, "Sister Sawyer," 112-14.



State Representative Gwendolyn Sawyer Cherry, Florida's First African American female legislator. *Photograph courtesy of the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.*

here. And she made it much easier for another black woman to come into the Legislature and be accepted."<sup>56</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune had served as Carrie Meek's heroine and role model. Meek

56. Waters, "Sister Sawyer," 220.

became friends with Bethune when she worked at Bethune-Cookman College. Though Meek “experienced extreme, rigid and very painful segregation and racism from childhood,” she asserted, “I don’t see myself as a victim— Carrie Meek is a fighter.” Meek, a Tallahassee native, earned her stripes in the civil rights struggles in Tallahassee during the 1950s.<sup>57</sup>

Meek was elected to the Florida Senate in 1982. The first African American woman to serve in that body, Meek achieved another first when, in 1992, she and Corrine Brown of Jacksonville became the first African American congresswomen from Florida. Meek became an effective politician and an excellent advocate for women and minorities. She worked diligently to provide affordable housing for the poor and to improve education, and also introduced bills to aid women and minority business owners. Bethune’s influence on Meek was evident in the causes that she championed.<sup>58</sup>

Mary Littlejohn Singleton joined Cherry in the Florida House of Representatives in 1972. She had been elected to the Jacksonville City Council in 1967 along with Sallye Mathis, the first African Americans to serve on the council for more than half a century. The Jacksonville community considered Singleton “a trailblazer and a bridge builder.” In the state legislature Singleton, a former teacher, became a strong advocate for education and worked to improve race relations.<sup>59</sup>

C. Bette Wimbish, educator, attorney, and civil rights activist, continued the struggle against segregation and discrimination. She endured the humiliation of segregation and the hurt, anger, and helplessness of “trying to explain to her children why they could not have an ice cream cone in a downtown drugstore” in St. Petersburg.<sup>60</sup> Wimbish and her husband, physician Ralph Wimbish, challenged racial inequities and slights, and along with other prominent St. Petersburg blacks, provided housing for professional African American baseball players who trained in the Sunshine City as well as black entertainers. Blacks, regardless of their status, were not welcomed in the city’s hotels and restaurants. Wim-

57. *Jet*, September 28, 1992, 34-37; *Time*, November 2, 1992, 46.

58. Allen Morris, *A Changing Pattern: Women in the Legislature*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Tallahassee, 1991), 114-16; *Time*, November 2, 1992, 46; *Florida Flambeau*, April 30, 1979.

59. Marianna W. Davis, ed., *Contributions of Black Women to America* (Columbia, S.C., 1982), 222; *Florida Times Union*, February 1, 1991, February 9, 1992; *Tallahassee Democrat*, November 28, 1976.

60. *St. Petersburg Times*, March 9, 1998.

bish also held "sit-ins" at downtown lunch counters. "It was a very frightening experience," she recalled. "There was always the threat of shooting, beating or spitting. But it was a thing that had to be done." Crosses were burned on her lawn when she ran for a seat on the Pinellas County School Board in 1960. Undaunted by the cross burnings and her failure to gain a seat on the school board, Wim-bish continued to seek means to improve conditions for blacks and to destroy segregation. In 1969 she became the first African American to serve on the St. Petersburg City Council, which enabled her to influence public policy, improve conditions in the black community, and to dismantle unfair laws. Wim-bish served as vice mayor of St. Petersburg, from 1971 to 1973. Even though her bids to become an advocate at the state and national levels were unsuccessful, her most important work had already been achieved in the trenches.<sup>61</sup>

The historical record shows that hundreds of black women willingly and sometimes unknowingly served as active, effective, and outspoken advocates for African Americans in Florida. Whether individually or through clubs, churches, or other institutions, these women, to the best of their abilities, articulated the concerns of the poor and disabled. They fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and provided health care for the sick. In addition, they attempted to change the laws that made it nearly impossible for Florida's African Americans to enjoy the benefits of a democratic society. These female activists gave hope to many and built institutions that served and strengthened the black community. Their encouragement persuaded many to not give up, to continue to battle for access to equal education, political rights, and economic opportunities. It should be noted that whites sometimes assisted black female activists in Florida. Bethune, White, Armwood, Mickens, and Hill depended on financial contributions and support from sympathetic whites. The same was true during the more recent struggle. Patricia Stephens acknowledged white support. White students marched, demonstrated, and picketed segregated businesses, and were gassed and arrested alongside black students.<sup>62</sup>

61. *St. Petersburg Times*, June 28, 1970, March 18, 1979, March 9, 1998; Davis, *Contributions of Black Women to America*, 200-201; The Associated Press Political Service, AP Bios, @ (<http://web.lexis-nexis...7c88c12517986161aa8479>); *Who's Who Among African Americans*, 111<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York, 1998) @ (<http://web.lexis-nexis...Of850bca0734c94822d2ec>); *The Southern Patriot* 18 (June 1960), 2.

62. *St. Petersburg Times*, May 26, 1963; *New York Times*, April 3, 1960; *Miami Times*, October 5 and 26, 1963; *Miami Herald*, May 31, 1963.

Scores of other African American women deserve attention. Carrie Mitchell Hampton, Clara Frye, Lydia Pettis, Johnny Ruth Clarke, Olive Beatrice McLin, Mary McRae, Athalie Range, Aquilina Howell, and others emerged as leaders in their communities as doctors, nurses, educators, and business women and in the process shielded African Americans to some extent from the malignant cancer of racism. They were positive role models who encouraged race pride and provided the indomitable spirit and courage needed to continue the struggle for equal rights. African American women were the backbones of Florida's black communities.