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# The Forgotten Activists of Georgia: The Black Women of Savannah

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# **The Forgotten Activists of Georgia: The Black Women of Savannah**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in History.

By  
Emily Zanieski

Under the mentorship of Dr. Julie de Chantal

## **ABSTRACT**

Historians of the Civil Rights Movement in Georgia have primarily focused on how the national movement unfolded in the city of Atlanta. More recent scholarship has highlighted the role Martin Luther King Jr. played in Albany; however, many of these analyses focus on figures within the larger movement rather than focusing on local, grassroots organizers. Additionally, their primary focus tends to be on the role of Black men, leaving behind the voices of Black women who led alongside them. Through a Long Civil Rights Movement (LCRM) approach, I argue that Black women in Savannah, Georgia played an instrumental role in guaranteeing the success of the Savannah Movement by using relational organizing tactics. This strategy helped these women organize around political, social, and economic justice from the 1940s through the 1960s. My thesis shows that Black women in Savannah often served as bridge leaders in their community, unifying Black Savannahians of all genders, ages, occupations, and classes around social and racial uplift and ultimately shaped Savannah's local Civil Rights Movement.

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Lastly, I'd like to thank and dedicate this thesis to Black women in Georgia and across the country who continuously show the courage to fight for what they believe in. Their voices

have been silenced for far too long. Their work and passion is the driving force behind this thesis.

## **Abbreviations**

**CCCV** - Chatham County Crusade of Voters

**CORE** - Congress of Racial Equality

**CTSA** - Chatham-Savannah Tuberculosis Association

**FAB** - First African Baptist Church of Savannah

**LCRM** - Long Civil Rights Movement

**NAACP** - National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

**SCLC** - Southern Christian Leadership Conference

**SCRM** - Short Civil Rights Movement

**TB** - Tuberculosis

**WPA** - Works Progress Administration

**YACB** - Youth Association for Community Betterment

**YC** - Youth Council

## Introduction

During the 2020 United States Presidential election, nearly 90 percent of Black women voters across America cast their ballot for the Democratic nominees for President and Vice President, Joseph Biden and Kamala Harris.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, in the 2021 Georgia Senatorial runoff elections, the Democratic candidates, Jon Ossoff and Reverend Raphael Warnock, each earned roughly 93 percent of the Black vote statewide.<sup>2</sup> Largely because of the Black voting bloc, Georgia elected the first Black female Vice President and its first Jewish senator and first Black Democratic senator since Reconstruction, respectively. How did Georgia go from electing a Republican president in 2016 by over 50 percent to voting for a Democratic trifecta only four years later? Political pundits have pointed to the state's shifting demographics, as well as the work of Black women activists such as Stacey Abrams, Georgia's 2018 Democratic candidate for governor. While pundits are correct in looking at the collective efforts of Georgia activists like Abrams and Fair Fight, the foundation for Georgian activists' success was laid long before 2018.

Having in-person canvassing efforts affected by the coronavirus pandemic, in conjunction with the rise of digital media platforms, Democratic campaigns and organizers nationwide shifted from traditional organizing tactics—knocking on strangers doors—to relational organizing by leveraging volunteers' social networks. Relational organizing tactics aim to facilitate conversations between friends, family, and those in a volunteer's network in order to empower change from the ground up. In a study done by Outvote and Columbia University's Data Science Institute during the 2018 midterm elections, data showed that a simple text

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<sup>1</sup> Janell Ross, "How Black voters in key cities helped deliver the election for Joe Biden," *America Diverse Vote*, *NBC News*, Nov. 7, 2020, accessed February 3, 2021,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/how-black-voters-key-cities-helped-deliver-election-joe-biden-n1246980>.

<sup>2</sup> Austa Somvichian-Clausen, "The Influence Black voters had on Georgia's Senate runoff elections," *The Hill*, Jan. 7, 2021, accessed February 3, 2021,

<https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/diversity-inclusion/533215-the-impact-black-voters-had-on-georgias-senate>.

message from a peer—a common relational organizing tactic—increased likelihood to vote by 8.3 percentage points.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, groups in Georgia such as the New Georgia Project invested in relational organizing efforts and increased the number of Black registered voters in the state by roughly 130,000 from 2016 to 2020.<sup>4</sup> However, while relational organizing may be viewed as a seemingly ‘new’ tactic in the political sphere, this form of organizing has been utilized by Black women prior to the civil rights movement. Black women across the country, and especially in the South, used relational organizing tactics such as neighbor-to-neighbor canvassing to create a unified Civil Rights Movement. This thesis examines how Black women in Savannah, Georgia used relational organizing tactics from 1940 to 1965 to mobilize the larger Black community around social, economic, and political rights.

### *Historiography*

Study of the civil rights movement emerged shortly after what many view as the height of the movement in the mid-to-late 1960s. In his analysis on the historiography of the civil rights movement, historian Steven Lawson charts the changing focuses of study among historians. Lawson notes that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, scholarship of the movement largely “focused on leaders and events of national significance” and framed it as a primarily political movement.<sup>5</sup> Scholars of the next generation in the late 1970s and 1980s sought to place emphasis on the role of local communities and grassroots organization efforts and that protest movements sought to obtain more than legal victories. Finally, Lawson contends that in recent years, many

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<sup>3</sup> Aaron Schein et al. “A Digital Field Experiment Reveals Large Effects of Friend-to-Friend Texting on Voter Turnout.” *The SSRN* (September 2020): 1-32. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3696179>.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Miao, “Democrats’ historic Georgia Senate wins were years in the making thanks to local grassroots,” *CNBC*, Jan. 9, 2021, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/09/democrats-historic-georgia-senate-wins-were-years-in-the-making-thanks-to-local-grassroots.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,” *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (1991): 456.

scholars pursue “a more interactive mode, recognizing the need to connect the local with the national, the social with the political.”<sup>6</sup> In turn, extensive scholarship in the field has divided current historians into two different schools of thought on the origins and start of the movement.

The first school of thought is what historians call the Long Civil Rights Movement (LCRM). While not the first to take the LCRM approach, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s “The Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” published in 2005, has influenced many subsequent scholars and their approach in studying the civil rights movement. Hall argues that there must be a greater emphasis on the movement beyond the ‘dominant narrative’ of civil rights history. This narrative primarily focuses on the civil rights movement in Southern states, beginning with the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, continuing with public protest throughout the South, and peaking at the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Instead, Hall takes a more robust approach and contends that the LCRM begins with various social movement activists—laborers, civil rights activists, progressives, and radicals—combining their efforts in what Hall and others call ‘civil rights unionism.’ For Hall, ‘civil rights unionism’ that expanded a social democratic vision and placed emphasis on “Black radical and laborite leadership” was “not just a precursor of the modern civil rights movement...[but] its decisive first phase.”<sup>7</sup> Other historians such as Robert Korstad have emphasized the importance of New Deal liberalism and democracy in challenging the Southern political, social, and economic systems, and point towards ‘civil rights unionism’ as crucial to the development of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. More specifically in the case of the Savannah civil rights movement, historian Stephen Tuck takes a LCRM approach, placing emphasis on work done by the NAACP and local male leaders such as Reverend Ralph Mark

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<sup>6</sup> Steven Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now,” 457.

<sup>7</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no.4 (2005): 1245.



Gilbert. However, in both his analyses of the local Savannah movement and the larger Georgia civil rights movement, Tuck mentions the work of Black women merely in passing, leaving a major gap in Savannah's LCRM history. This thesis follows a LCRM approach while analyzing grassroots mobilization in Savannah, by beginning with the work done by Black health activists in the 1940s to promote racial and social uplift. Furthermore, this thesis will draw attention to the connections of gender, race, and class, thus filling the gap in Savannah's civil rights history that has been untold.

The second school of thought regarding the civil rights movement is the Short Civil Rights Movement (SCRM). Proponents of this approach argue that the 'dominant narrative' from 1954 to 1968 should be marked as a distinctive period within the larger Black struggle for freedom. Historians such as Steven Lawson argue that the SCRM "had little to do with class struggle...but [was] rather to secure extension and enforcement of existing legal and constitutional rights" and that there was no leader in the 1930s and 1940s that rivaled the national presence that Martin Luther King Jr. held in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Scholars of the Savannah civil rights movement like Clare Russell critique the LCRM approach, stating that long narratives tend to overlook why people join and abandon protest movements, as well as fail to "examine the continued recruitment of activists after the initial outbreak of protest." Unlike Tuck, Russell places more emphasis on social movement theory in understanding why people chose to join protest movements and how class and gender influenced the roles protestors took. Because of her focus on the distinctive leadership styles of Hosea Williams and W.W. Law in Savannah, I contend that Russell does not fully consider how Black women's work towards racial and social uplift during the 1960s is a continuation of the work done previously by women

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<sup>8</sup> John A. Salmond, "'The Long and the Short of It': Some Reflections on the Recent Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *Australian Journal of American Studies* 32, no.1 (2013): 56-7.

in the community. Thus, while Savannah might be viewed as a ‘short’ civil rights protest movement, my thesis frames it in an LCRM approach.

### *Organization of Thesis*

The first section analyzes how gender, race, and class impacted Black women’s activism. It is here where I tie in Belinda Robnett’s idea of Black women as “bridge leaders”—individuals who foster ties between the movement, the community, and political strategies. Gendered norms affected the various roles Black women took within the movement. The second section highlights how women in Savannah promoted community uplift through healthcare initiatives. Health facilities remained segregated in Savannah, and with the surge of tuberculosis in the community during the 1940s and 1950s, Black women often found themselves leading local efforts to provide at-home treatment across Savannah. Additionally, Black women led educational efforts to both spread awareness about health advocacy and to get youth in Savannah tested for tuberculosis, syphilis, and other diseases. Serving as bridge leaders helped Black women to ensure that their community survived but also provided them political agency through healthcare promotion.

The third section of this thesis provides context regarding Georgia’s political climate prior to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Furthermore, it examines how Black women led voter education mobilization efforts in citizenship education schools. An examination of Georgia’s politics in the 1940s and 1950s helps to show why Georgia is seen by scholars as a “bellwether state” in the South. While some progressive reforms such as the early abolition of the poll tax sets Georgia apart from other Southern states, the reliance on the county-unit system of voting meant the state minimized urban and Black voices. Scholarship about the Savannah

civil rights movement notes the importance of citizenship schools in increasing voter registration during the 1960s; however, scholars have failed to acknowledge citizenship courses led by the Black women of the NAACP started in 1949. While these courses disappeared in the 1950s due to white backlash, they returned in the 1960s. Citizenship training schools established by the NAACP and the Chatham County Crusade of Voters (CCCV) in the early 1960s were critical in educating Black Savannahians about their political rights. Educating Black Savannahians about their political, economic, and social rights and responsibilities was crucial in establishing a supportive base for the Savannah protest movement of the 1960s.

The final section brings the reader into the Savannah movement and highlights the various roles Black women played in the 1960s. The movement from 1960 to 1964 is what most of Savannah's civil rights scholarship is about. Alongside citizenship education schools, nonviolent protests in the form of picketing and boycotting were crucial in helping to desegregate public facilities and services across the city. The Black women who helped lead these protests recognized that their vote and their purse would help shape the city of Savannah.

This thesis contributes to the current scholarship regarding Black activism in Savannah, Georgia by highlighting the important leadership roles Black women took in shaping the city, even prior to the height of the civil rights movement. Many of the women who served as leaders in their community have been forgotten by history. This thesis aims to let their voices and stories be heard.

## **Bridging the Divide: Introducing Black Women as Bridge Leaders**

When I think of the social responsibility of Black women, I think of the generations of our foremothers and forefathers who instilled within us the idea and value that it is our duty to help those in need. I think about the women who have gone before us who, although poor, understood that the only way they could assure progress for the race would be through the dint of their own efforts.

- Joyce A. Ladner<sup>9</sup>

### *Introduction*

In order to begin discussing the impact Black women had on advancing social, economic, and political rights, readers and scholars alike must reconceptualize their ideas of leadership. In her book *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, sociologist Belinda Robnett argues that most civil rights scholarship largely focuses on “hierarchical and visible leadership” rather than grassroots organizers.<sup>10</sup> Researchers of the Savannah civil rights movement have followed this trend of focusing on Black men with titled positions in churches and local organizations. For Savannah, this has meant that most of its history both prior to and during the civil rights movement have been focused on men such as Reverend Ralph Mark Gilbert, Hosea Williams, and Westley Wallace (W.W.) Law, leaving out the Black women who worked alongside them. While Black women may have not been allowed to take formal leadership roles in some institutions, such as the clergy of the church, their roles as wives of preachers, educators, and mothers were important in unifying community members. In these roles, women exemplified what it meant to be a bridge-leader. Bridge leaders were those who “initiated ties between the social movement and community” and led strategies aimed at individual and communal change, as well as those that were “designed to challenge existing relationships with the state and other societal institutions.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Joyce A. Ladner, “Black Women as Do-ers: The Social Responsibility of Black Women,” *SAGE* 6, no. 1 (1987): 87.

<sup>10</sup> Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 17.

<sup>11</sup> Belinda Robnett, “African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization,” *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 6 (1996), 1664.

For Robnett, there were four different types of bridge leaders: professional, community, indigenous, and mainstream. Professional bridge leaders were women who “held positions with primary formal organizations” and their activism generally stretched beyond the local level.<sup>12</sup> Community bridge leaders were those whose organizing was shaped through their involvement with one specific organization and often bridged local communities to their cause. Indigenous bridge leaders often worked with community bridge leaders; however, they did not hold a formal role in an organization and were instead “well known as solid, outspoken, and trustworthy individuals who often took the initiative during community crises.”<sup>13</sup> Black women served as professional, community, and indigenous bridge leaders in Savannah leading up to and during the Civil Rights Movement.

Women were able to leverage their positions in the community in order to connect locals with the movement and government officials. Women were typically denied “visible” leadership roles because of gender and class constraints placed on them by society. Thus, being a bridge leader was often the most acceptable and available role. However, bridge leaders were not secondary to the movement. In fact, they were often the most “critical mobilizers of civil rights activities” and enabled the success of the national and local civil rights movements in which they participated.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, while women’s roles within the movement may be viewed as merely supportive, they did not view their positions in that light. Through interviews with Black female bridge leaders, Robnett notes that these women “did not feel oppressed by their gender at the time.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, they viewed themselves as leaders in their own right within the movement.

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<sup>12</sup> Robnett, *How Long?*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Robnett, *How Long?*, 21; Robnett notes that mainstream bridge leaders were mostly white women, and while important to the movement, do not serve a place in this thesis. When using Robnett’s term bridge leader, I am referring specifically to Black women but using her classifications of professional, community, and indigenous bridge leaders interchangeably.

<sup>14</sup> Robnett, *How Long?*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Robnett, *How Long?* 44; Robnett uses Septima Clark’s view on the movement in 1986 to show that some women have recognized, in hindsight, the gendered nature of the movement itself.

Black women in Savannah served as bridge leaders in their community through their roles as students, teachers, wives, and mothers in the community. As bridge leaders, these women used relational organizing to get their family, friends, coworkers, and peers involved in organizing work to support the betterment of the Black community in Savannah. Parnell Mines and Stella Reeves each led their respective community in Savannah and in Southeast Georgia. Through leading local youth organizations, Mines and Reeves bridged the gap between Savannah's Black youth, older Black community members, and white government officials. In turn, these women both set the stage for Savannah's civil rights movement and the city's history.

*Parnell Mines: Student Leader*

Born in Savannah in 1925, Parnell Mines lived with her three siblings in a modest, middle-class household. Her father, George, worked as a carpenter in the city while her mother, Leila, was a housewife. While neither of her parents were formally educated, the Mines' family sent their children—Henry, Georgia, Parnell, and Zelma—to local public schools in Savannah. In an interview with Margaret Parsons in 1990, Mines noted that her education at Beach-Cuyler High School, as well as her neighbor and church friends, influenced her activism for Black youth.<sup>16</sup> She later attended Savannah State College and studied nursing at Grady Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia from 1946 to 1949. As a nurse, Mines served with the U.S. Public Health Service in Alto, Georgia before returning to Savannah to work for the local Board of Education while also being a private duty nurse. Parnell's work, especially as a student in Savannah, helped to connect

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<sup>16</sup> Beach-Cuyler High School, now known as A.E. Beach High School, was built in 1867 by the Freedmen's Bureau as a school for newly freed slaves in the Savannah and Chatham County Area. Throughout its over 100 year legacy, the school has gone through four series of name changes: Beach Institute, Beach Continuation School, Beach-Cuyler Senior High School, and A.E. Beach High School. In the 1940s, Beach-Cuyler was the only school in Savannah open to Black students.

the Black community and young people in the city to their local government.<sup>17</sup> By bridging the gap between Savannah’s Black community and the local government, Parnell’s activism ensured that issues Black Savannahians cared about, such as improved healthcare and access to education, were not ignored by white political officials.

In 1944, following her high school graduation, Parnell worked with other students to form the Youth Association for Community Betterment (YACB). The YACB aimed to “build up [the] community by studying problems of the community as they relate to Negro youth and advocating solutions.”<sup>18</sup> To do this, the YACB fought to promote improved health conditions, educational opportunities, and recreational activities for Black youth in the city. For example, through the American Red Cross at the Recreation center on Ogeechee Road, Parnell organized swimming lessons for women, children, and interested community members.<sup>19</sup> The Recreation Center offered a space for Black families to enjoy leisurely activities such as swimming, as pools and public facilities in Savannah remained segregated. Furthermore, recreation centers and classes taught to community members were pivotal in shaping the Black Savannah, as these centers were often used for NAACP meetings and served as sites for racial uplift. At a time where *de facto* and *de jure* segregation excluded Black residents from most public facilities, these centers served as a communal space where Black men, women, and children could go without fear of facing humiliation and retaliation.<sup>20</sup>

In another instance, the YACB coordinated with the NAACP Youth Council (YC) and the National Go-To-School drive to encourage boys and girls return to school, arguing that “the

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<sup>17</sup> *The History of Public Health Nursing in Georgia, 1898-2002* (Atlanta: Georgia Department of Human Resources, Division of Public Health, 2006), 57.

<https://dph.georgia.gov/sites/dph.georgia.gov/files/HistoryofPublicHealthNursinginGeorgia.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> “Youth Association has Its First Broadcast: Giving Purposes of Organization,” *Savannah Tribune*, July 6, 1944.

<sup>19</sup> “Swimming Classes Ogeechee Center,” *Savannah Tribune*, July 13, 1944.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the importance of recreational facilities to Black communities in the twentieth century, see Natalie N. Novoa, “A Home Away from Home: Recreation Centers and Black Community Development in the Bay Area, 1920-1960,” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2019).

youth will have a dynamic part to play in the post-war world and it is indeed necessary that they continue their studies and learning to be able to cope with the great problems that will confront them.”<sup>21</sup> They believed that for Black youth in Savannah that “education will be of far greater value in the years to come” and should be prioritized for the “uplift of the Negro community.”<sup>22</sup> Other events led by the YACB included informal discussions on the importance of youth following World War II and the connections between Black youth and education, health, and politics.<sup>23</sup> As young adults, the men and women of the YACB recognized that they had to be prepared for the economic, political, and social realities that they would face in a post-war society and encouraged local Savannahians to begin to understand their roles as American citizens, even in the face of being denied full citizenship rights. Parnell and the YACB used their roles as student leaders to raise awareness Black youth about how they could contribute to the survival of their community.

The same year, many of these same students, including Parnell, took leadership roles in the Savannah branch’s NAACP YC. Similarly to other Black women who held traditionally feminine leadership roles within local NAACP chapters, Parnell served as the council’s Secretary. While this role may seem supportive in nature, Parnell did more than just keep meeting minutes or other secretarial duties. She actively led the YC in organizing various events such as the fourth annual youth festival in 1945 and a cancer drive fundraiser among Black families in the community.<sup>24</sup> The Youth Council worked together with the local chapter of the NAACP, and they often sponsored each others’ events aimed at increasing membership and the number of registered young voters in Chatham county.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “YACB Urges Youth to Return to School,” *Savannah Tribune*, September 21, 1944.

<sup>22</sup> “YACB Urges Youth to Return to School,” *Savannah Tribune*, September 21, 1944.

<sup>23</sup> “YACB Sponsors 3 Major Projects,” *Savannah Tribune*, May 17, 1945.

<sup>24</sup> “YACB Sponsors 3 Major Projects,” *Savannah Tribune*, May 17, 1945.

<sup>25</sup> “Youth Mass Meeting,” *Savannah Tribune*, April 20, 1944.



In her two years with the NAACP Youth Council, Mines ardently worked to support the betterment of Black youth and the greater Black community in Savannah. Through her leadership in both the YACB and YC, Parnell Mines connected students and young people to larger organizations in the Savannah area and organized ways for Black youth to stay involved in their community. Mines exemplified what it meant to be a bridge leader not only by uniting Black Savannahians but by fostering a new generation of Black leaders prepared to organize for their communities in the future.

*Stella Reeves: Reaching the Youth through Teaching*

While there is some biographical information about Parnell Mines thanks to the *Georgia Nursing Oral History Project, 1987-2002*, much less is known about Mines' and the Youth Council's adviser, Mrs. Stella Reeves. Born in 1911, Reeves grew up in Savannah and went to the University of Pittsburgh to earn her degree in Education. Reeves worked as a Social Studies teacher at Beach-Cuyler High School in the mid-1940s while her husband, Hubert Reeves, worked as a government employee in Washington D.C.<sup>26</sup> Like most women of Savannah, Reeves was an active church-goer, community member and became an organizer in several of the organizations she was involved in. Through her work with the NAACP and the YC, Reeves was able to connect the needs of Black youth in Savannah to Savannah's First African Baptist (FAB) Church's civil rights activism.

As one of the founding members of the FAB's "Century Club," Reeves served as a bridge leader by fostering bonds between Savannah's youth and religious leaders in the community. Created by Reverend Ralph Mark Gilbert, the Century Club—Boston Williams, Joseph Green, Eugenia Diaz, and Stella Reeves—used organizing strategies to increase membership for both

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<sup>26</sup> In Black professional families, this working arrangement was more common than not.

the church and the NAACP. While Gilbert planned when FAB and NAACP meetings would happen and often recruited through his sermons, Reeves, Diaz, and others were the ones leading efforts in schools and local businesses to reach the “10,000 member...goal for Savannah’s 1944 [NAACP] branch.”<sup>27</sup> Because of the relationship that she developed with Gilbert and FAB, Reeves began climbing her way up within the local chapter’s leadership, eventually becoming adviser to the Youth Council in April 1944. A visible leadership role may have not been easy for her to get; however, because of her exemplary leadership and reputation, Reeves earned her position as a YC leader.

As the YC adviser and teacher, Reeves led students she taught in the classroom and guided them in organizing events aimed at increasing youth voter registration by over 1,000 by the end of summer 1944.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, as the President of the statewide NAACP Youth Council in 1944, Reeves organized to ensure that local movements across the state were getting the resources that they needed from the state and national organizations. As President and Savannah YC representative, Reeves led statewide workshops on ways that Black youth could “meet the problems common to all of [them].” Having a unified Black community across the state, determined to advocate for improved access to healthcare, education, and recreational activities was important for continued Black activism and promoting community uplift. As a leader in this capacity, Reeves fought to ensure that the needs of Black youth in Savannah were being met by the state organization.<sup>29</sup>

Reeves’s leadership connected and united young activists, religious leaders, and community members, and helped build a unified Black resistance movement prior to the civil

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<sup>27</sup> “NAACP Century Club Members,” *Savannah Tribune*, November 25, 1943.

<sup>28</sup> “NAACP Youth Council Holds Meeting,” *Savannah Tribune*, May 18, 1944

<sup>29</sup> “GA NAACP Conference Meets in Macon Dec. 8-9,” *Savannah Tribune*, December 7, 1944; “Y.C. to Send Delegates,” *Savannah Tribune*, February 27, 1947.

rights movement both in Savannah and across the state.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Stella Reeves' activism expanded beyond her hometown of Savannah as she organized for Black youth across Georgia. In her definition of what makes a bridge leader, Robnett states that “bridge leaders were able to cross the boundaries between the public life of a movement organization and the private spheres of adherents and potential constituents.”<sup>31</sup> Stella Reeves did just that. As a leader within both the local YC and the statewide organization, Reeves advocated for Black political and social rights while unifying various groups of individuals to champion her cause. In her role as a teacher and adviser, she led young students and adults in pushing for their own rights. In doing so, she used her relationships with the church to ensure that the needs of Black youth were understood. Even after her time as adviser to the local organization, Reeves remained active in leading discussions among new members.<sup>32</sup> Former President of the Savannah NAACP and leader of Savannah’s own civil rights movement, W.W. Law, stated that he hoped that “later NAACP members would not forget the dedication and labor of...Mrs. Stella J. Reeves.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Stella J. Reeves. *1940 United States Federal Census* [database online]. Provo, Utah, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012, Year: 1940; Census Place: Savannah, Chatham, Georgia; Roll: m-t0627-00652; Page: 6B; Enumeration District: 25-67B; “NAACP Century Club Members,” *Savannah Tribune*, November 25, 1943.

<sup>31</sup> Robnett, *How Long?*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> “To Visit Local NAACP,” *Savannah Tribune*, October 26, 1950; “Chairmen Named by NAACP for Important Committees,” *Savannah Tribune*, April 5, 1951

<sup>33</sup> Charles Lwanga Hoskins. “If We Forget, Who Will Remember?” *Savannah Herald*, February 23, 2011.

## The Ballot for Health: Black Women's Health Activism

### *Introduction*

From 1900 to 1940, Georgia's urban population increased from roughly 346,000 to just over 1 million. Chatham county experienced a 13 percent increase in its urban population from 1930 to 1940 alone.<sup>34</sup> Rapid urbanization in conjunction with white government neglect led to substandard housing and unsanitary living conditions among many Black communities across the state, including in Savannah.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the two led to an increase in tuberculosis (TB) cases among urban and low-income communities both in Georgia and across the country. The increase in TB in cities was "a major concern for reformers, city planners, and urban officials," as they knew how the disease could quickly spread.<sup>36</sup> While the death rates associated with tuberculosis continued to fall in the early 1940s due to new sanitary precautions, TB cases nationwide increased from 76 to 89 out of every 100,000 people between 1940 and 1945.<sup>37</sup> Savannah followed nationwide trends, with a decrease in mortality rates but with a reported increase in TB cases by roughly 400 in 1946.<sup>38</sup>

Black women's organizing efforts around healthcare reform across Georgia during the 1940s were focused on ensuring that the needs of Black communities were met by white government officials.<sup>39</sup> In doing so, Black women worked within established white supremacist

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<sup>34</sup>U.S. Census Bureau. Georgia Number of Inhabitants. *Georgia*. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., 1940.

<sup>35</sup> "Urged to Petition Health Department," *Savannah Tribune*, August 12, 1946; Philip Hopewell, "Tuberculosis in the United States before, during and after World War II," in *Tuberculosis and War: Lessons Learned from World War II*, edited by J.F. Murray and R. Loddenkemper. (Basel, Switzerland, Karger Publishers, 2018): 179-182.

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Judson, "Civil Rights and Civic Health: African American Women's Public Health Work in Early Twentieth Century Atlanta," *NWSA Journal* 11, no. 3 (1999): 94.

<sup>37</sup> Hopewell, "Tuberculosis in the United States," 182.

<sup>38</sup> "Schools Xmas Seal Sales Total \$860.19," *Savannah Tribune*, January 10, 1946.

<sup>39</sup> For more information about Black women's organizing efforts throughout the state of Georgia and across the United States, see Judson, "Civil Rights and Civic Health"; Susan L. Smith, *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women's Health Activism in America, 1890-1950* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Edward H. Beardsley, *A History of Neglect: Health Care for Blacks and Mill Workers in the Twentieth-Century South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987); Earline Rae Ferguson, "The Women's Improvement Club of Indianapolis: Black Women Pioneers in Tuberculosis Work, 1903-1938," *Indiana Magazine of History* 84, no.3

power structures to advocate and promote their own political agenda. For Black community leaders in Savannah, promoting “racial and community uplift [were] integral components to their public health activism.”<sup>40</sup> Women in Savannah organized for their community’s health by serving as bridge leaders between the Black community and white government officials. They advocated for health policies to ensure the survival of their community well into the future. Furthermore, they helped facilitate access to health services through leading education campaigns in local schools, serving as visiting nurses, and orchestrating fundraising campaigns. Through relational organizing tactics, women promoted improved healthcare for Black Savannahians and helped connect their community with their larger goals of racial and social uplift.

#### *Jeanette Harvey and Educational Mobilization*

Black women promoted community uplift and social improvement through education and encouraged participation from Black youth in Savannah, especially in the schools.<sup>41</sup> The women of the Negro branch of the Chatham-Savannah Tuberculosis Association (CSTA) used education as a tool to help save lives, while also creating a space for Black women to use their voices as community leaders. Black women used their roles as mothers and teachers to engage children in their activism, ensuring that all families in their community were taught proper health etiquette such as proper hand washing, became knowledgeable about how diseases such as TB spread, and learned ways in which they could advocate for improved healthcare themselves.

Black teachers, business owners, preachers, and church-goers began ramping up efforts to combat tuberculosis in 1943. In February of that year, the National Tuberculosis Association sent

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(1988):237-61; Cynthia Connolly and Mary Gibson, “The ‘White Plague’ and Color: Children, Race, and Tuberculosis in Virginia 1900-1935,” *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* 26, no. 3 (2010): 230-8.

<sup>40</sup> Judson, “Civil Rights and Civic Health,” 104.

<sup>41</sup> Judson, “Civil Rights and Civic Health,” 104.

field representative Miss Leola Franklin to Savannah in order to help bolster local health initiatives.<sup>42</sup> In efforts led by Franklin to help raise awareness of the effects TB had on Savannah's Black community, Savannah's business leaders fundraised to hire the city's first educational worker, Miss Jeanette Harvey. Harvey grew up in Chatham county, attended high school at Beach-Cuyler, and then moved to Atlanta to study health education at the Atlanta University School of Social Work. Shortly after her hire as the Negro Health Education Worker for the CSTA in June 1943, Harvey attended the Institute for Tuberculosis Workers, a conference at Dillard University for healthcare workers.<sup>43</sup> For both Harvey and the CTSA, attending the institute was critical in Savannah's battle against TB as she would be able to:

First, give to the students a modern concept of tuberculosis as a medical and social problem; second, present the approved methods of controlling tuberculosis as they have been worked out during thirty-five years of experiences; and third, to inspire those with the possibilities of saving lives from tuberculosis through trained leadership...and return with many new ideas for enlarging the present tuberculosis program in Chatham County.<sup>44</sup>

Upon her return to Savannah, Harvey's work began quickly, focusing on both providing free TB testing to Savannah's Black community and on educating students of the effects of TB on society. Harvey's goal was to educate the public on TB, and in doing so, promote community and social betterment. Throughout October 1943, the CTSA under Harvey's supervision administered over 900 free tuberculosis tests to students at Georgia State College, Beach-Cuyler High School, and Haven Home, as well as to those living in West Savannah.<sup>45</sup> Black Savannahians were not provided equal access to health facilities that tested for TB. The importance of adequate access to healthcare was especially important for students, who could easily spread the disease in overcrowded schools. Thus, providing free testing to students was

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<sup>42</sup> "Summary of Work Done by Savannah-Chatham T.B. Association in 1943," *Savannah Tribune*, January 13, 1944.

<sup>43</sup> "Summary of Work Done by Savannah-Chatham T.B. Association in 1943," *Savannah Tribune*, January 13, 1944.

<sup>44</sup> "Miss Harvey to Attend Institute," *Savannah Tribune*, October 21, 1943.

<sup>45</sup> "Summary of Work Done by Savannah-Chatham T.B. Association in 1943," *Savannah Tribune*, January 13, 1944; Georgia State College is the former name of Savannah State University, the oldest HBCU in Georgia, founded in 1890.

crucial in curbing the spread of TB in the classroom.

Harvey also focused on hosting city-wide educational events for any interested person. The first of these events was the November 1943 Press Institute held at Beach-Cuyler High School in conjunction with the Columbia Scholastic Press Project—Columbia University’s international student press association. This event, orchestrated by Harvey and others, was successful in increasing health awareness among Black Savannahians. Furthermore, and most importantly, it linked various local leaders behind one cause. Members of various organizations such as the CTSA, Savannah Boys Club, and the Savannah Public Welfare Association, as well as students, principals, teachers, and nurses all took part in speaking at the event in order to stress the importance of “health minded individuals to the American public.”<sup>46</sup> The Press Institute created a space for local Black leaders to voice how TB detrimentally affected Black Savannahians. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of the Press Institute allowed for all members of the community to work together to combat the spread of the disease. This early collaborative effort led to the creation of an active volunteer force who assisted Harvey and the CTSA in disseminating health literature to Black teachers and citizens across the city. Additionally, many of the same teachers who spoke or attended the Press Institute event showed educational movies to over 30 different groups in the span of two months, continuing to emphasize the importance of community togetherness in combating TB.<sup>47</sup>

Through promoting increased awareness of TB among Black Savannahians, Harvey was a bridge leader who connected community members of all ages, genders, and backgrounds. Events such as the Press Institute, showed that she could form an active base of diverse volunteers who promoted improved health and community well-being. Furthermore, Harvey’s

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<sup>46</sup> “Press Institute at Cylar Hi School,” *Savannah Tribune*, November 25, 1943.

<sup>47</sup> “Summary of Work Done by Savannah-Chatham T.B. Association in 1943,” *Savannah Tribune*, January 13, 1944.

efforts within the predominantly white CTSA ensured that the concerns of Black residents in Savannah were being addressed by the larger white organization. While health facilities remained segregated, the CTSA became actively involved in helping Harvey educate the Black population about the TB's dangers. In her role as the Negro Educational Worker for Chatham county, Harvey worked within an established "white-only" organization and power structure to advocate for an agenda that benefitted the Black community.

### *Mobile Clinics and Home Nurses*<sup>48</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt's various New Deal programs such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) ran targeted campaigns to tackle the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis (TB) and syphilis. Containing the spread of these illnesses was of the utmost importance, so the WPA used innovative solutions such as portable huts to help care for sick patients regardless of where they lived.<sup>49</sup> Black women in Georgia replicated these efforts and organized around combating TB and syphilis through the use of mobile clinics. Many hospitals and clinics were inaccessible to Black residents because of segregation, so free mobile health clinics were invaluable for those unable to receive healthcare treatment.<sup>50</sup> Women in cities like Atlanta used mobile clinics to provide free TB and syphilis screenings at schools and often visited the homes of students to encourage TB testing among Black families.<sup>51</sup> Similar to the mobile clinics established by Black women in Atlanta, mobile clinics and visiting nurses helped care for over 3,000 Black Savannahians with TB in 1943 alone.<sup>52</sup> Thus, mobile clinics and visiting nurses were critical for

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<sup>48</sup> "Accomplishments of Home Nursing," *Savannah Tribune*, January 2, 1947; The American Red Cross used the term "Visiting Nurses" and "Home Nurses" interchangeably throughout 1940s and 1950s.

<sup>49</sup> Brent McKee, "The WPA, Tuberculosis, and Social Distancing," *New Deal of the Day* (blog), March 29, 2020, <https://noddaily.blogspot.com/2020/03/the-wpa-tuberculosis-and-social.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Judson, "Civil Rights and Civic Health," 103.

<sup>51</sup> Judson, "Civil Rights and Civic Health," 103.

<sup>52</sup> "Summary of Work Done by Savannah-Chatham T.B. Association in 1943," *Savannah Tribune*, January 13, 1944.



Black Savannahians who were either unable to visit Savannah's tuberculosis hospital or were rejected from white facilities. By going into homes, Black women were the first point of contact with many families and spoke directly with families about the harmful effects the disease had on their way of life. Home nurses promoted health activism in the family homes they visited and were crucial in politicizing improved healthcare among Black Savannahians.

The early success of home nursing in the Negro branch of the CTSA led to the creation of free Home Nursing Courses to be taught by the Negro Auxiliary Savannah Chapter of the American Red Cross in 1947.<sup>53</sup> In the following years, American Red Cross home nursing programs in Savannah expanded, teaching Black teenagers, homemakers, and women of all professions on ways to create a safer and healthier home environment. The graduates of these programs then served as visiting nurses across the county. While the women were not trained as professional nurses, mobile clinics and at-home nursing programs enabled Black women to learn how to "keep [themselves] and families well, how to make living conditions at [their] home better, and how to make [their] community better through childcare and communicable disease control."<sup>54</sup> In teaching Black families about improved health practices in the home, nurses helped create the next generation of Black activists who viewed the battle for healthcare as integral to their community's survival.

### *Fundraising*

The *Savannah Tribune* extensively covered the activity of Black Savannahians' organizing around public health issues, especially the CTSA's annual Christmas seal sale. Popularized nationally in the early 1900s, the Christmas seal program coordinated by the American Red

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<sup>53</sup> "Accomplishments of Home Nursing," *Savannah Tribune*, January 2, 1947; "C.C. Health Group Meets," *Savannah Tribune*, January 16, 1947.

<sup>54</sup> "Leading Citizens to Head Red Cross Campaign," *Savannah Tribune*, March 1, 1948.

Cross and the National Tuberculosis Association helped raise money for tuberculosis sanatoriums and the treatments of tuberculosis patients. In Savannah, participation in the seal sale was a community-wide event, and the language used by the *Savannah Tribune* indicates that Black Savannahians had a duty to buy them. Not only did the *Tribune* argue that the participation of everyone was important for the survival of TB screenings and educational programming, but it equated the Christmas Seals as a “ballot for health,” showing the connection between political rights and social rights.<sup>55</sup> The *Savannah Tribune* argued that:

Within a short time all of us will be asked to stand for or against a sound health system. We cast a ballot for good or bad health almost every hour of the day by the way we eat, stand and sleep, and by our expression of opinion on matters of public health...Purchase of these seals amounts to casting a vote for health...Christmas Seals support the spread of health knowledge. When we buy them we cast a ballot for health. We are helping spread the information that periodic X-rays are important to each and every one of us, that none of us is safe until all of us are safe.<sup>56</sup>

For Black Savannahians, supporting the annual Seal Sale ensured the survival of their community while also serving as a symbol for both the political and social potential the Black community could wield in Savannah. Additionally, others communicated the need to support the Christmas Seal Sale by appealing to religious convictions. In his article titled “Citizens Urged to Support Seal Sale,” Civil Rights activist and community leader Reverend Ralph Mark Gilbert emphasized the role that all Black Savannahians played in combating the disease:

Enlightened self-interest dictates that we should give and give largely. Let none of us be content to buy in trifling amounts. Surely none of us will give in terms of cents, but only in terms of dollars. Let every Negro buy a sheet of stamps; use them on your Christmas gift packages in any manner you can think of but use them and use them plentifully. Tell this wicked monster, this modern Pharaoh, whose name is Tuberculosis to “LET MY PEOPLE LIVE.”<sup>57</sup>

Gilbert’s use of Biblical imagery comparing tuberculosis to the Egyptian Pharaoh in the book of Exodus highlighted to everyday Savannahians the severity of the disease, even if they did not understand its full effects. Unless Black Savannahians worked together in support of the

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<sup>55</sup> “Ballots for Health,” *Savannah Tribune*, November 30, 1944.

<sup>56</sup> “Ballots for Health,” *Savannah Tribune*, November 30, 1944.

<sup>57</sup> “Citizens Urged to Support Seal Sale,” *Savannah Tribune*, December 7, 1944.

Christmas Seal Sale, they would be enslaved by tuberculosis just as the Israelites were enslaved by the Pharaoh. Other signs of religious imagery used during the Christmas Seal Sale was the Double-Barred Cross emblem.<sup>58</sup> For Black men and women leading the Sale, this emblem symbolized the “battle on the home front [and] the fight for better health.” This double battle echoed that the Double-V Campaign fought across the nation. At a time where Savannah’s Black military men were fighting against Nazism abroad and Jim Crow at home, it was important for Black leaders to ensure that soldiers had a community to come home to. By using religious symbolism as a means of motivation, local leaders like Gilbert used their platform within Savannah’s Black community to garner support for health initiatives like the Seal Sale movement that aimed for community survival.

Male leaders such as preachers and business owners typically chaired Savannah’s Seal Sale in the 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>59</sup> However, Black women led the local campaigns and spread awareness about the Sale by word of mouth. Mrs. Sadie Steele led one of the most profitable fundraising bodies—the street Seal Sale—throughout the mid 1940s. As a result, the community’s fundraising efforts and results exponentially grew. In November and December 1943, Black Savannahians had raised roughly \$4,553.90. Merely 3 years later in 1946, this fundraising total grew to \$6,155.64 and continued to grow in the following years.

While men like Reverend Gilbert and Reverend F.W. Bagby focused on gaining support for the Seal Sale in Baptist and Evangelical churches respectively, women spoke to people in

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<sup>58</sup> The Double-Barred Cross was originally used by Godfrey of Bouillon, the Duke of Lorraine, following the Christian crusaders’ possession of Jerusalem in 1099. The Duke’s banners bore the Double-Barred Cross, signifying courage and success to the crusaders. In 1928 at the Council of the International Union Against Tuberculosis, it was decided that the National Association should adopt the Double-Barred Cross as the campaign’s emblem, as they believed that the fight against tuberculosis was a crusade as well; Sigard Adolphus Knopf, *A History of the National Tuberculosis Association: The Anti-Tuberculosis Movement in the United States* (New York: National Tuberculosis Association, 1922), 153-54.

<sup>59</sup> This changed when Mrs. Anita Stripling became the Seal Sale Chairman for the 1957-58 campaign. While men still held leadership roles organizing around the Seal Sale in their respective communities, women began to step into more formal leadership roles in the late 1950s.

restaurants, schools, businesses, beauty salons, and other predominantly Black spaces outside the church.<sup>60</sup> By leading in these spaces used by the Black community daily, women were able to extend their fight against TB beyond political and religious spheres. Their work highlighted the necessity for community-wide involvement and indicated that the fight for better health did not end at the polls or the pews. It was up to the entire community to fight against the spread of TB and to increase awareness of the disease in their day-to-day lives. Barbers and beauticians could secure the future of the community simply by talking to their clients about the dangers of tuberculosis. Schools could educate teachers and students about ways to best combat the disease. Tuberculosis was a disease that affected everyone—men and women, young and old, Black and white. However, the Black women in Savannah who organized to prevent the spread of TB ensured that the disease would not result in the death of the Black community, resulting in their community's political, economic, and social survival.

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<sup>60</sup> "Committeemen Named for TB Xmas Seal Sale," *Savannah Tribune*, November 1, 1945.

## **Knowledge is Power: Black Women's Political Mobilization through Voter Education**

### *Introduction*

Historians often look towards the 1960s as the transformative decade in Southern politics; however, political infrastructures were already changing, albeit slowly, in Georgia as early as the mid-to-late 1940s. While Georgia's political structures silenced Black voices, changes to electoral laws such as the abolition of the poll tax and Democratic white primaries, spurred an increase in Black resistance. However, while some significant changes had been made to Georgia's election process, other processes like the county-unit voting system largely left state policies and representation in the hands of smaller and predominantly white populations living in rural areas. These voters almost always favored racial traditionalists like Eugene and Herman Talmadge.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, as civil rights activism increased, Black voters across Georgia faced an increase in white violence which threatened their abilities to politically mobilize in churches, local businesses, their neighborhoods, and at the polls.

However, while "white backlash in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s curtailed NAACP activities," Black men and women in Savannah continued to build a strong voter base that proved critical during the start of Savannah's local Civil Rights Movement in 1960.<sup>62</sup> As bridge leaders, Black women of Savannah's NAACP taught everyday Savannahians about their

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<sup>61</sup> For more information on Georgia's political infrastructure see Tim Boyd, *Georgia Democrats, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Shaping of the New South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012); Patrick Novotny, *This Georgia Rising: Education, Civil Rights, and Politics of Change in Georgia in the 1940s* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2007); Stephen G.N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens: University Press of Georgia, 2001); Tarleton Collier, "Georgia Paradise of Oligarchy," in *Our Sovereign State*, ed. Robert S. Allen (New York: Vanguard Press, 1949); Cal Logue and Howard Dorgan, *The Oratory of Southern Demagogues* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1981); Charles Bullock, Scott Buchanan, and Ronald Gaddie, *The Three Governor's Controversy: Skullduggery, Machinations, and the Decline of Georgia's Progressive Politics*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017).

<sup>62</sup> Deanna M. Gillespie, *The Citizenship Education Program and Black Women's Political Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2021), 54.

political and civil rights. To do so, they organized citizenship education programs, recruited new NAACP members, and organized voter registration drives. The political infrastructure that Black women established during the 1940s and 1950s laid the groundwork for political mobilization strategies used in Savannah and throughout Southeast Georgia during the 1960s.

### *Citizen Education Programs*

In 1932, Miles Horton, Don West, and Jim Dombrowski established the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, Highlander focused on organizing unemployed and working people around increased wages, unionization, and better working conditions. By the end of the 1930s, Highlander was one of the leading centers for union organization in the South, “training union organizers and leaders in 11 Southern states,” including Georgia. In conjunction with fighting for labor rights, Highlander expanded their mission in the 1940s to fight against segregation in the labor movement and held its first integrated workshop in 1944.<sup>63</sup> In the 1960s, members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) coordinated their visions of citizenship education with Highlander’s later educational programs in Charleston, the Sea Islands, and Savannah. These schools were instrumental in connecting Black men and women to civil rights activism and “increas[ed] Black participation in voting and other civic activities.”<sup>64</sup> Increased voter registration and engagement in civic activities meant that white politicians could no longer afford to ignore the needs of the Black community.<sup>65</sup>

Most of the scholarship regarding citizenship education programs in the Southeast focus

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<sup>63</sup> “88 Years of Fighting for Justice,” Highlander Research and Education Center, <https://highlandercenter.org/our-history-timeline/>.

<sup>64</sup> David P. Levine, “The Birth of Citizenship Schools: Entwining the Struggles for Literacy and Freedom,” *History of Education Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2004): 388.

<sup>65</sup> Levine, “The Birth of Citizenship Schools,” 396.

on the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee and Highlander's later programs in Charleston and the Sea Islands.<sup>66</sup> Until recently, little had been published about Highlander's collaborative efforts with the NAACP and the Chatham County Crusade for Voters (CCCV) in Savannah. Historian Deanna Gillespie notes in "They Walk, Talk, and Act Like New People: Black Women and the Citizenship Education Program, 1957-1970," that citizenship schools established in Savannah by Highlander served to "keep pace with the movement that was already in motion" rather than spark the 1960 movement itself.<sup>67</sup> For Gillespie, citizenship schools were crucial to the movement's sustainability. The Civil Rights Movement and citizenship schools in Savannah were established by the men of the NAACP like Gilbert, Hosea Williams, and Westley Wallace (W.W.) Law. The work these men did in leading the NAACP was critical; however, the work done by women in leading citizenship training programs in the 1940s and 1950s is equally important yet often forgotten.

In 1948, Black voters across the state faced white intimidation and violence enacted by the Ku Klux Klan. On March 1, 1948, the day before the primary election, the Klan marched to the Johnson County courthouse, burned a 15-foot cross, and announced that "blood [would] flow in the streets of the South."<sup>68</sup> Their strategy worked; the following day, none of the nearly 400 registered Black voters cast a ballot in the Johnson County courthouse.<sup>69</sup> In the late 1940s and early 1950s, due to white intimidation, statewide NAACP membership declined, and the Savannah branch had a hard time recruiting new members.<sup>70</sup> In order to revitalize the Savannah NAACP, newly elected president, W.W. Law, set a goal of increasing membership and providing

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<sup>66</sup> These works include David P. Levine, "The Birth of Citizenship Schools: Entwining the Struggles for Literacy and Freedom," *History of Education Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2004): 388-414; John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996); Aimee Isgrig Horton, *The Highlander Folk School: A History of Its Major Programs* (New York: Carlson, 1989).

<sup>67</sup> Gillespie, "They Walk, Talk," 95.

<sup>68</sup> "The Deep South," *New York Times*, March 3, 1946.

<sup>69</sup> Novotny, *This Georgia Rising*, 266-67.

<sup>70</sup> Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 75-79.

citizenship training course to “at least 10,000 of the Negro citizens of Savannah.”<sup>71</sup> These citizenship training courses were held in over 30 locations across the Savannah-Chatham County area. To ensure the success of these programs, Miss Metella Maree spearheaded the Citizenship Training Committee and focused on preparing teachers, training students, and disseminating information about the upcoming 1950 election.

Growing up in Savannah and graduating from Beach-Cuyler High School and Savannah State College, Maree was an active member of Savannah’s Black community. Upon graduation, she joined the Savannah Beauticians Association and served as the Southeastern Regional leader of the Zeta Phi Beta sorority. With her sorority, she led fundraisers to support the CTSA and Savannah’s Community Chest Drive for Black youth. Furthermore, Maree used her relationships with local churches in Savannah to lecture to Black families about topics regarding faith and citizenship.<sup>72</sup> Because of her connections to different aspects of Savannah’s Black community, Maree was able to spread information about citizenship training programs and voter registration to a wide variety of community members.

In 1949, Maree focused on increasing the number of registered Black voters in the Savannah-Chatham county area. Operating before the Democratic primaries, from March to May 1950, the citizenship courses that Maree organized were taught across nearly 40 churches and local community centers. The use of common gathering spaces for Black Savannahians meant that these programs could permeate every aspect of peoples’ lives. By coordinating with various Black community organizations, the NAACP and citizenship training schools became inextricably linked with the ideas of social, communal, and racial uplift.

When asked by *The Savannah Tribune* about her expectations for the first round of

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<sup>71</sup> “Local NAACP Branch Lays Plans for Citizenship Training Course,” *Savannah Tribune*, October 20, 1949.

<sup>72</sup> “Miss Maree Women’s Day Speaker at St. James,” *Savannah Tribune*, September 27, 1951.



citizenship training programs, Maree expressed an even larger goal than Law hoped to achieve in 1949. Maree “hoped that 22,000 intelligent Negro registrants” would successfully register to vote by the end of the twelve week program<sup>73</sup> Like many Southern states, white government officials used Literacy tests and Character tests in Georgia to keep Black voters from casting their ballots. Maree organized citizenship schools to mitigate these issues and taught Black men and women basic literacy skills and government functions on the national, state, and local levels.<sup>74</sup> While all schools strived to succeed in creating a politically active Black Savannah, Maree recognized that women-led courses were the most successful. Mrs. Lena Franklin of Hannah Chapel AME and Miss Ruby King of Asbury Methodist drew the largest attendance of the 40 schools in operation.<sup>75</sup> By leveraging their relationships in the community as wives, mothers, teachers, and business leaders, Black women in Savannah were successful in creating a more educated citizenry who knew their rights at the ballot box.

For Maree and others, those who attended the citizenship training program had an “obligation to the community...[to] disseminate the knowledge gained through the course and give leadership to the registration effort.”<sup>76</sup> It was not enough to simply be a student in these classes and learn about how voter registration can promote social, racial, and community uplift. Maree believed that these students had to become the next teachers, putting their lessons learned into practice through educating others. Teachers were creating a new cohort of bridge leaders who could use their own networks to foster an engaged, unified Black community.

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<sup>73</sup> “Citizenship Training Courses Operating in Many Sections,” *Savannah Tribune*, March 23, 1950.

<sup>74</sup> In order to pass the Georgia Literacy Test, registrants would have to read a section of either the U.S. or Georgia Constitution aloud and then write it down. Based on the registrant’s performance, the Registrar could determine whether one was ‘literate’ enough to vote. If Black registrants could not pass the Literacy Test, they would take the Character test consisting of 30 questions related to government, politics, and the names of current office holders. They had to answer 20 out of 30 questions correctly to pass; Voter Registration in Georgia Before the Voting Rights Act, *Literacy Tests and Voter Applications* (1963) <https://www.crmvet.org/info/gavrhov.htm>; Summary of Georgia’s New Registration Law, *Literacy Tests and Voter Applications* (1958) <https://www.crmvet.org/info/gavrlaw.pdf>.

<sup>75</sup> “Voters Schools Proving a Big Success,” *Savannah Tribune*, March 30, 1950.

<sup>76</sup> “Urge Citizens to Beat Registration Deadline,” *Savannah Tribune*, May 4, 1950.

Maree, Law, and other teachers urged those who attended the citizenship training programs to increase Black voter registration numbers prior to the June 28th Democratic primary. Maree believed that “the NAACP branch [saw] that this type of program [had] no ending,” and citizenship courses were crucial in creating a politically educated Black citizenry in Savannah.<sup>77</sup> Teachers and organizers like Maree not only taught citizenship courses but helped secure a better future. They were bridge leaders because they connected Black Savannahians with the goals of racial and community uplift and proved in Savannah that citizenship training programs were fruitful by the time Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson with the SCLC established formal schools in the city in 1961.

*The NAACP and the Decline of Activities in the 1950s*

The election of Klan-endorsed Herman Talmadge as governor in 1948 “ushered in a decade of aggressive white supremacy in the state.”<sup>78</sup> Statewide, the number of active branches of the NAACP fell from 55 in 1946 to under 20 within two years. Even in Atlanta and Savannah, where over two-thirds of the NAACP membership was concentrated, recruiting new members became excruciatingly difficult in a decade defined by white violence.<sup>79</sup> As membership declined, Law and others became more focused on “maintaining the local branch rather than supporting Black activism elsewhere.”<sup>80</sup> For them, it was important to maintain

By having a top-down approach to organizing by getting leaders in the local community to join the NAACP, women of the branch expanded by using relational organizing, leveraging the relationships of those in the community and encouraging greater action from them. Still, in

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<sup>77</sup> “3 Citizenship Training Schools Close,” *Savannah Tribune*, April 27, 1950.

<sup>78</sup> “The Southeast; Klan Openly Backs Talmadge in Georgia Campaign,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1948; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 74.

<sup>79</sup> Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 75.

<sup>80</sup> Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 82.

the face of white backlash, Black women of Savannah's NAACP continued to take leadership roles and organized around racial and community uplift for their community. In 1952, long-time native of Savannah, Mrs. Lillian Wilson, was elected to serve as one of the vice presidents of the branch and was tasked with organizing membership drives. Wilson and the NAACP urged that "all persons, including the pastors, school teachers, and heads of organizations...[should] help the local branch reach its goal of a thousand and one members."<sup>81</sup> While this goal was much smaller than in previous years due to loss in membership, it was effective in reaching Savannahians of different backgrounds. Wilson and others bridged the gap between the NAACP and various organizations in the community focused on communal uplift. For a branch that once had over 4,000 members it was crucial for the NAACP to organize Black Savannahians from all walks of life, not just to reach their membership goals but to ensure that the Black freedom struggle in Savannah did not die.

*Education for Empowerment: Citizenship Education Schools in the 1960s*

The success of citizenship education schools in Savannah during the 1960s hinged on the earlier successes of Savannah's citizenship education programs in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Because of previous successes in facilitating citizenship education courses, it is not a surprise that Miles Horton, Septima Clark, and Bernice Robinson of Highlander saw that "Savannah held the most promise" and was the best city to facilitate citizenship education courses.<sup>82</sup> As recognized by the Highlander associates, Hosea Williams was extremely interested in increasing literacy education and voter registration, as he saw the two to be inextricably linked. For Williams, if one could become literate, they would be eligible to cast a ballot in local, state, and

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<sup>81</sup> "Trying to Bolster Local NAACP Drive for New Members," *Savannah Tribune*, June 26, 1952.

<sup>82</sup> Gillespie, *The Citizenship Education Program*, 57.

national elections. Furthermore, he also saw education schools as an opportunity for locals to address and advocate for a myriad of concerns such as desegregation and improved living conditions. Thus, citizenship education courses were crucial in increasing the Black community's political and social power.

The CCCV quickly started three citizenship classes to be taught by Juanita Williams, Hosea Williams's wife and a long-time educator, CCCV Secretary Eugene Stroman, and Bernita Spaulding Matthews.<sup>83</sup> A fourth teacher—Carolyn Roberts—was added to help Williams teach in the Burroughs/Canebrake community once Williams became pregnant. From December 1960 to March 1961, 32 students attended the school taught by Juanita Williams and Roberts. Of these 32 students, 26 students registered to vote at the end of the training.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, just as hoped, a number of these students sought opportunities for economic advancement by opening their own local businesses. Stroman's and Matthews's schools on the west and east sides of Savannah taught 60 students. Forty-eight of them registered to vote by the end of the three month program.<sup>85</sup> By coordinating their efforts, Williams, Stroman, Matthews, and Roberts taught a larger number of Black students and showed Black Savannahians that regardless of where in the city they lived, that they were united for the same cause. Because of citizenship school teachers and their students, a sustainable group of volunteers formed. These leaders were prepared to dismantle voter suppression barriers and desegregation across the city.

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<sup>83</sup> Gillespie, *The Citizenship Education Program*, 57.

<sup>84</sup> Gillespie, "They Walk," 118.

<sup>85</sup> Gillespie, "They Walk," 118.

## Savannah's Protest Movement

### *Introduction*

Historians often begin the story of the Civil Rights Movement in Savannah on March 16, 1960 with the sit-ins at Levy's Department store on Broughton Street. While historians Paul Bolster, Stephen G.N. Tuck, and Clare Russell note that the previous efforts of NAACP leaders like Reverend Ralph Gilbert shaped Black activism, they rarely discuss the activism of Black women in doing the same.

Local leaders of the Savannah protest movement were insistent on not having national leaders of the SCLC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) interfering in local protests. They believed that keeping the movement localized was the most effective way to organize around the specific issues plaguing Black Savannahians. For example, instead of inviting MLK Jr. to speak to churches in support of the Civil Rights Movement, Savannahians wanted local church ministers to lead the movement.<sup>86</sup> Keeping the movement local allowed organizers to properly address what was best for their community and also avoid claims of outsiders infiltrating and changing the city. Furthermore, local male leaders like W.W. Law, Hosea Williams, and Eugene Gadsen used relational organizing tactics like door-to-door canvassing to gain support for the movement. While their work was important, it was not original. Black women activists used these tactics in the decades prior to organize around racial, community, and social uplift. Discussing the Savannah protest movement from the perspective of its female participants will not only add to the movement's existing scholarship but it will highlight how Black women were leaders alongside their male counterparts.

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<sup>86</sup> Stephen G.N. Tuck, "A City Too Dignified to Hate: Civic Pride, Civil Rights, and Savannah in Comparative Perspective," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 79, no.3 (1995): 540; Similar resistance to interference from non-locals can be seen under the leadership of Reverend C.T. Vivian in Nashville.

### *Direct Action Protest*

Born in July 1942, Carolyn Quillion Coleman was a native Savannahian and attended high school at Beach-Cuyler. Later, Coleman received her Bachelor of Science degree in history from Savannah State College. Coleman was one of four siblings in a close-knit family who grew up in the Jim Crow South. When describing her experience as a student during the national Civil Rights Movement, Coleman noted the importance of both the older generations of Savannahians and the NAACP Youth Council in influencing her desire to get involved. In an interview with *The Savannah Tribune*, Coleman was cited as “witness[ing] and join[ing] her mother advocating for neighborhood improvement and other causes,” and this is where she “realized the power of her voice as an influencer of change.”<sup>87</sup> The YC was active throughout the city in the 1940s and 1950s and organized to recruit new students from Savannah’s Black high schools and colleges. This inspired Coleman and others interested in challenging Savannah’s segregationist policies and practices.

In the early 1960s, Savannah, like other Southern cities, was “segregated in every phase of life...[from] lunch counters, schools, buses, parks, movie theaters, and churches.”<sup>88</sup> After the sit-in at a segregated Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960, Black students nationwide joined protests in college towns across the South.<sup>89</sup> On March 16, 1960, just one and a half months after the sit-ins in Greensboro, Coleman and other students gathered at First African Baptist, divided into four groups, and prepared to sit-in at three white

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<sup>87</sup> “The Savannah Tribune Celebrates the Life of Carolyn Quillion Coleman,” *Savannah Tribune*, April 13, 2022.

<sup>88</sup> Carolyn Quilloin Coleman, “SCAD Honors Visionary Voices,” *Savannah College of Art and Design*, October 19, 2016, Video, 55:46, <https://www.scad.edu/scadtv/video/scad-honors-visionary-voices>.

<sup>89</sup> For more about the the Greensboro sit-in in 1960, see Miles Wolff, *Lunch at the Five and Ten, the Greensboro Sit-Ins: A Contemporary History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970); Linda Wynn, *Greensboro, North Carolina, Sit-Ins 1960* (Canton, Michigan: Visible Ink Press, 2009); Rebekah J. Kowal, “Staging the Greensboro Sit-Ins,” *TDR* 48, no.4 (2004): 135-54; Iwan W. Morgan and Philip Davies, *From Sit-Ins to SNCC: The Student Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida: 2012).

establishments in the city.<sup>90</sup> Later that day, Coleman, Joan Tyson, and Ernest Robinson sat at the lunch counter in the Azalea Room of Levy's Department Store to protest against segregation. The *Savannah Tribune* reported that the three students sat at the white lunch counter and that when the students refused to leave after being warned by the store's employee, they were arrested. They were later charged under a new Georgia law, passed specifically to curb protests against segregation, which stated, "that anyone will be guilty of a misdemeanor who refuses to leave the premises when requested to do so by the owner or employee."<sup>91</sup> Because the three refused to leave, they were sent to jail and had their bond set at \$300. This first sit-in served as a catalyst for continued civil rights protests in the city.

Following Coleman, Tyson, and Robinson's arrest, women and young people led a series of direct action protests across the city. During the following three weeks, over 25 students were arrested at lunch counters, bus stations, and stores across Savannah.<sup>92</sup> When not participating in protests, Black women led boycotts and discouraged Savannahians from shopping at Levy's Department Store, Woolworths, Mcrory's Grants, Silvers, Kress, Livingston, and Walgreens Drug store, as they discriminated against Black patrons and did not hire Black employees. Black men and women knew that if these businesses did not change their segregationist practices, business owners would feel the consequences from loss of Black business. Law, Williams, and the Youth Council leaders led weekly mass meetings at churches across the city to discuss strategies for effective boycotting and picketing. These men argued that participating in these activities could ensure that Black Savannahians were treated equal in respect to their white counterparts. In just over one month, attendance at these meetings rose from 1000 to over 2500,

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<sup>90</sup> Coleman does not name all the students involved but names include Lewis Scottsdale, Mabel Morris, Joan Tyson, Joan Scott, Jenette Green, and herself, among others.

<sup>91</sup> "Three Local Sit-Downers Arrested," *Savannah Tribune*, March 19, 1960.

<sup>92</sup> Paul D. Bolster, "Civil Rights Movements in Twentieth Century Georgia," (PhD. diss., University of Georgia, 1978), 226; "Lunch Counter Sit-Downs Continue," *Savannah Tribune*, March 26, 1960.

and the local NAACP membership tripled from 564 to nearly 1500 members.<sup>93</sup> Savannah's Black community was determined to keep the momentum of students' protests and understood that direct action could prove successful through unified action.

On August 17, 1960, NAACP Youth Council students used a similar strategy when they organized a "wade-in" at Savannah Beach, a segregated beach.<sup>94</sup> Local police officers arrested the group of eleven students for "disrobing in public."<sup>95</sup> This charge prevented the NAACP from challenging laws governing segregation. The Youth Council students emphasized the correlation between citizenship and rights to health and equal treatment, announcing that:

Wholesome recreation is a necessity in the development of healthy minds, healthy bodies, and also contributes to a sense of fair play which promotes good citizenship. And since we are citizens of Chatham County and it becomes our duty to take a fair share of responsibilities that a good citizen should assume in a democratic society, then it should follow that as citizens we should enjoy a fair share of the privileges that we are entitled. The Negro youth having been denied the use of public recreational facilities, such as Savannah Beach, feel that they have been unjustly treated and are now determined to help Savannah and Chatham County to become truly democratic through granting Negroes the privilege to use all recreational facilities.<sup>96</sup>

The *Tribune* stopped publishing between 1960 and 1973. However, other newspapers reported about the events in the interim. *The Pittsburgh Courier*, for example, reported incidents of ride-ins conducted by the NAACP throughout 1961. In one instance, a white man pulled a knife on Carolyn Coleman on a local bus in retaliation to Black protestors trying to desegregate the bus system.<sup>97</sup> White backlash to Black protest continued in the city throughout the 1960s; however, boycotts and direct action persisted for over fifteen months and helped sustain the overall movement.

In conjunction with direct action protests, leaders in Savannah sought to increase voter registration in order to influence local politics. Hosea Williams and the CCCV led these efforts.

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<sup>93</sup> "Local Lunch Counter Sit-Downs Continue," *Savannah Tribune*, March 26, 1960; "NAACP Holds Sixth Mass Meeting," *Savannah Tribune*, April 30, 1960; Georgia State Conference of NAACP Branches, Annual Report, 1960.

<sup>94</sup> "Youth Stage 'Wade-In' at Savannah Beach," *Savannah Tribune*, August 20, 1960.

<sup>95</sup> "Youth Stage 'Wade-In' at Savannah Beach," *Savannah Tribune*, August 20, 1960.

<sup>96</sup> "Youth Stage 'Wade-In' at Savannah Beach," *Savannah Tribune*, August 20, 1960.

<sup>97</sup> Bolster, "Civil Rights Movement," 236.



Williams created women's organizing committees tasked with spreading awareness to certain groups such as beauticians and mothers within the larger Savannah community. This organizing tactic mimicked how Black women previously organized within the NAACP and within religious institutions like the church. Local community members used relational organizing tactics such as canvassing their peers at businesses, civic organizations, and churches, among other places to gain support for the movement. In turn, they drastically increased Black voter registration numbers across Savannah.

Williams and Law fought for control of the local Savannah protest movement; however, Black women continued operating as relational organizers behind-the-scenes and served as bridge leaders, carrying out the tasks of the NAACP and CCCV.<sup>98</sup> Women like Mrs. G. Hackett spoke in support of the sit-ins and picketing during the fifteen-month long continuous protests and urged other women to contribute their time and money towards the Crusades and NAACP. She further stressed that “in addition to facing the issue of lunch-counter segregation, the fight was an all-out one against discrimination of any kind.”<sup>99</sup> For women like Mrs. Hackett, fighting against segregation was only part of the battle. Black women in Savannah and in cities across the country were fighting to attain equal rights and treatment as women.

Women within the movement argued for increased involvement from other women in the community by appealing to sentiments of motherhood. Juanita Williams expresses this sentiment in her article *A Mother's View*, in which she argues that segregation and oppression “leaves an impression upon the minds of our little ones” and that it is the community's duty to “provide them [children] with something with which they can govern their entire lives—a way of life, a

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<sup>98</sup> For more information on why Hosea Williams and W.W. Law fractured and led two separate groups, read Clare Russell, “Upheaval in Savannah: The Protest Cycle of a ‘Short’ Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 47, no.4 (2012): 773-92.

<sup>99</sup> “NAACP Launches ‘Crusade for Votes,’” *Savannah Tribune*, April 9, 1960.

path of freedom.”<sup>100</sup> Juanita Williams’ identity as a mother influenced her activism. Mothers like Williams organized around the idea of racial uplift in order to secure a better future for their children and future generations. Mothers had a duty to their family, to let their children know that “they can too help to secure their freedom so that they will know within themselves that they are free.”<sup>101</sup> Black women, particularly mothers, were bridge leaders between the older generation of Black Savannahians and the younger generation of Black Savannahians who would grow up in a city free of segregation.

The combined work of the women of the NAACP and the CCCV in direct action protesting was successful in helping to desegregate facilities throughout Southeast Georgia. By 1963, the two organizations had successfully integrated the public library, city and county water fountains, and the city and county voter registration lists, among others. Savannah was ahead of the curve in regards to city-wide desegregation, as Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin was not enacted until the following year. While the Savannah protest movement was visibly led by men, the tactics that these men employed had been both used by Black women in the past and were carried out by the women of the movement. Law and William’s leadership was crucial in drawing attention to the movement; however, it was women like Carolyn Coleman and Juanita Williams who kept the movement alive. Women’s work in the movement led to MLK Jr. declaring that Savannah was “the most desegregated city south of the Mason-Dixon Line” by the end of 1964.

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<sup>100</sup> “A Mother’s View,” *The Crusader*, July 12, 1963.

<sup>101</sup> “A Mother’s View,” *The Crusader*, July 12, 1963.

## Conclusion

While the success of the Civil Rights Movement was important for all Black Americans in the struggle for freedom, it was doubly important for Black women. Black women had to fight against segregationist politics and policies that oftentimes neglected their community's needs entirely. Furthermore, they had to prove themselves as leaders within their communities, American society, and the Civil Rights Movement itself. As men often held prominent positions in organizations that fought for Black equality like the NAACP, women had to work harder in order for their voices and ideas to be heard. Battling against a segregated and patriarchal society, Black women had the most to gain from the success of the Civil Rights Movement and other social movements promoting Black community uplift.

While Black women may have not held traditional leadership roles in Savannah, they were bridge leaders in their communities. Women like Stella Reeves, Jeanette Harvey, and Juanita Williams crafted and organized city-wide strategies aimed at racial, social, and community uplift and the promotion of Black equality. These women used relational organizing tactics such as canvassing and dissemination of information by word of mouth at churches, community centers, beauty salons, restaurants, and other places across the city to connect Black Savannahians of all genders, ages, and occupations behind their unified cause.

Black women's voices have been traditionally left behind by history, Yet, they are oftentimes its largest contributors. Black women have shaped America's 245 year history, from the time of slavery to changing the outcome of the 2020 Presidential Election. By using their voices, their stories, and their experiences, I explored the ways in which Black women served as leaders in their own community in Savannah. While this thesis focused solely on the women of Savannah, these women can be found in many city's histories. Each city has its own Carolyn

Quilloin Coleman, Parnell Mines, and Metella Maree and their stories are waiting to be told.

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