

Struggle In The Sunshine City:  
The Movement For Racial Equality In St. Petersburg Florida 1955-1968

by

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ABSTRACT

Recent decades have seen a shift in the focus of civil rights historiography. Building upon the exhaustive studies of national figures and events, and in search of new perspectives, many historians have concentrated on local movements often ignored or forgotten. Other than the work of a few local scholars, the civil rights movement as it occurred in St. Petersburg, Florida, has received little attention. Furthermore, the limited scholarship lacks the cohesion necessary to compare and contrast the movement with similar events throughout the state and across the nation. The story of St. Petersburg's active and significant struggle for social equality, placed within its proper context, adds another piece to a larger picture and continues to reveal the complex nature of the American Civil Rights Movement.

## Chapter One: Introduction

Recent decades have seen a shift in the focus of civil rights historiography. Building upon the exhaustive studies of national figures and events, and in search of new perspectives, many historians have concentrated on local movements often ignored or forgotten. Other than the work of a few local scholars, the civil rights movement as it occurred in St. Petersburg, Florida, has received little attention. Furthermore, the limited scholarship lacks the cohesion necessary to compare and contrast the movement with similar events throughout the state and across the nation. The story of St. Petersburg's active and significant struggle for social equality, placed within its proper context, adds another piece to a larger picture and continues to reveal the complex nature of the American Civil Rights Movement.

In the years following the Second World War, St. Petersburg was a burgeoning tourist Mecca and retirement haven. Between 1950 and 1960 the city's population increased eighty-seven percent, reaching 181,348 in 1960. Those flocking to St. Petersburg arrived in a place that seemed to live up to the picture painted in promotional leaflets and booster pamphlets: a warm, inviting community, blessed with a subtropical climate, pristine beaches, cheap land, and endless sunshine. A veritable "Sunshine City."<sup>1</sup>

Absent from booster literature, however, were references to a substantial black population. From its earliest years, St. Petersburg's economy depended heavily on tourism and a black labor force to service that industry. The city's black underclass lived at the lowest civic stratum, confined by rigid Jim Crow laws. While the white seasonal residents and snowbirds enjoyed socializing on the city's famous green benches, listening to concerts in downtown Williams Park, or enjoying friendly competition at the

Shuffleboard Club, an army of African Americans swarmed into their hotel rooms to make beds, or into their homes to cook meals, clean the dishes, and tend to the landscaping. To most visitors, however, these workers remained invisible and their contribution to the region's economic development seemed irrelevant.<sup>2</sup>

City leaders justified racial oppression by framing the need to perpetuate segregation in economic terms. Black workers allowed hotels, restaurants, attractions, and the municipal infrastructure to handle the seasonal influx of tourists, yet business and governmental leaders assumed that snowbirds and their wallets would flock elsewhere if black residents became too visible. For those Detroiters concerned about blacks entering their neighborhoods back home, city leaders in St. Petersburg wanted them to feel reassured that no similar integration would darken their experience in the Sunshine City. With occasional concessions to the black community, often with a heavy dose of paternalism, the city's white power structure was able to deny the black community any real reform.

Indeed, St. Petersburg remained one of the most residentially segregated cities in the nation at the dawn of the civil rights era. In the city's earliest black neighborhoods, residents formed tight-knit, insular enclaves that drew strength from the bonds forged under social oppression. By the 1950s, beyond the auspices of white St. Petersburg, existed a stratified and culturally diverse black community. Along the rippling, brick-lined 5<sup>th</sup> Ave S., in an area known as Sugar Hill, lived members of St. Petersburg's black elite. With roots as old as the city itself, this small yet substantial black middle-class,

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<sup>1</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, May 8, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, 124-125.

composed of physicians, clergymen, entrepreneurs, and educators, formed the backbone of the civil rights struggle.<sup>3</sup>

The epicenter of black society arose on 22<sup>nd</sup> Ave S., where the likes of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington performed at the Manhattan Casino, where black doctors tended to patients at the segregated Mercy Hospital, and where residents went for food and sundries, to catch a movie, go dancing, or get their hair cut. Locals dubbed 22<sup>nd</sup> Ave the “Deuces” and until the early sixties, in the earliest stages of integration, one could trace the heartbeat of black society back to this area. Yet the Manhattan Casino was not the Cotton Club in Harlem and for every black middle-class dwelling one did not have to look far to find abject poverty. In areas such as Methodist Town- where almost thirteen percent of the city’s black population lived-dilapidated shanties stood unpainted and teeming with termites. Many homes had no indoor plumbing nor properly working electricity. Garbage piled high in front of sagging porches with rotten floorboards, lining dirt streets that turned to dust clouds on arid summer days and muddy streams during the evening thunderstorms. A handful of wealthy, politically connected white citizens owned all of Methodist Town’s slum housing and successfully managed to strike down urban renewal legislation and thwart efforts to enforce minimum housing code requirements. The slumlords who regularly increased the rent rarely reinvested money back into the blighted neighborhood. With an average income of less than \$3,000 a year, residents--in a relationship that resembled the landed gentry and the disfranchised sharecropper of earlier generations-- had no other choice but to stay put.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rosalie Peck and Jon Wilson, *St. Petersburg’s Historic African American Neighborhoods* (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2008), 33-34.

<sup>4</sup> Author’s interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009; *St. Petersburg Times*, May 5, 1960, March 25, 1962. Peck and Wilson, *African American Neighborhoods*, 31-33.

Cracks in the paternalistic relationship between whites and blacks, and in the once entrenched, seemingly immutable social structure that defied life in St. Petersburg, began to appear in the 1950s. After the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, a number of St. Petersburg's black elite challenged the legality of segregated public facilities. In November 1955, shortly after several black residents were denied entrance to Spa Beach and Pool, a public recreational facility, six black citizens led by Dr. Fred Alsup filed suit against the city citing a violation of their constitutional rights. The legal battle lasted until April 1957, when the Supreme Court refused to hear the city's final appeal, but controversy over Spa Beach and pool continued. For almost two years, city administrators attempted to circumvent the Court's ruling by closing the pool any time blacks tried to use the facility. After a long standoff, Spa Beach and Pool eventually opened on an integrated basis in 1959.

But the struggle had only begun. During the 1960s, homegrown civic organizations like the Civic Coordinating Committee (CCC), the Council on Human Relations (COHR), along with local incarnations of nationally affiliated organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), continued the attack on racial segregation. By the mid-1960s, after the desegregation of lunch counters and movie theaters, the objectives of the struggle were no longer clear. In 1964, lawyer Jim Sanderlin, with the support of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, took on the cause of desegregating the school system. Organizations like the CCC and COHR fought discrimination in the work place and tried to secure

better job opportunities for black citizens. While many saw these two areas as inextricably linked, others abandoned the notion of integration altogether.

Disillusionment spread throughout the black community in the middle and late 1960s. Nonviolent forms of protest seemed inadequate at addressing the larger socioeconomic goals of the civil rights movement. Race riots erupted across the country. No longer could Americans pigeonhole white racism and bigotry or black impoverishment as a distinctly Southern phenomenon. America was sick.

The dissatisfaction was evident in St. Petersburg. A militant counter movement emerged that threatened to upend the advances of the local struggle and tear apart the fabric of the entire city. Much of the tension culminated in 1968, when St. Petersburg's sanitation workers-most of whom were black-went on strike. After a four-month standoff over better pay, St. Petersburg's black community dissolved into violent race riots. Similar to the transformative events that rocked other communities across America, the demands for reform by the sanitation workers in 1968 marked an important new era in the local struggle to trash the traditions of Jim Crow.

This study traces a thirteen year struggle for racial justice between 1955 and 1968--one that began many years earlier and continues to this day. But during these years, St. Petersburg, like the nation itself, came to terms with a reality it had for too long denied. How could this happen in a sleepy resort town? What sort of light can St. Petersburg's story shed on the larger civil rights struggle in America? As historians confront the larger geographic and regional identity of the Sunshine State, a peek into its race relations history is a necessary piece in a much larger puzzle.



## Chapter Two: The Gathering Storm

In August 1955, black civil rights activists in St. Petersburg, Florida, waded into controversial currents. Ten members of the Civic Coordinating Committee (CCC), a prominent black civic organization, approached the racially segregated Spa Beach and Pool municipal swimming facility and attempted to gain entrance. After refusing to sell them tickets the cashier called the police, who told the activists to “use their own beach,” down the road at South Mole. The situation ended without incident shortly thereafter. Two months later, after petitioning the city for “public use” of Spa and getting no response, the CCC filed a federal lawsuit, citing a violation of equal protection guaranteed under the Fourteenth Amendment. Thus began a nearly four year struggle to integrate Spa--one that ultimately sparked a movement to end racial inequality throughout the city.<sup>1</sup>

The efforts to desegregate Spa were “no spur of the moment thing,” explained CCC president J.P. Moses. Indeed, controversy surrounding beach access for black residents stretched back nearly forty years. In 1916, when Mayor Al Lang granted blacks a strip of beach on the south side of the city that eventually became known as South Mole, white residents protested. The issue arose again during the Great Depression. As part of efforts to revive a moribund tourism industry, the city strengthened and officially codified its Jim Crow laws. Moreover, the parlous economic conditions intensified the racial divide. Whites lodged complaints about blacks traveling through white parts of town to get to South Mole. To ease the tensions, the city formed the Interracial Relations Committee (IRC). The IRC, according to historian Raymond Arsenault, focused

primarily on the black beach issue. Efforts continued in the 1940s to no avail, and by 1955, South Mole, a dingy strip of beach with no life guards and no bathing facilities, stood as the only place along St. Petersburg's forty-five miles of coastline for blacks to swim legally.<sup>2</sup>

Everything changed in 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed public school desegregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. While awaiting the Court's plan for implementing *Brown*, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), with branches throughout the state, encouraged blacks to use their tax-supported municipal facilities. "Why use beaches of your own when you have a beach that your taxes are paying for?" proclaimed NAACP attorney Ray Chisolm. While state officials worked to forestall public school integration, blacks across Florida, from Delray Beach and Daytona, to Miami and Sarasota, began testing the legality of segregated beaches.<sup>3</sup>

In the wake of *Brown*, black leaders in St. Petersburg began "pushing" for action. "We knew we needed to create an incident," said black physician and CCC member, Fred Alsop. "I finally got my barber," he remembered, "and said 'let's get this thing on the road.'" Upon arriving at Spa Beach and Pool, they "had no definite proof that Negroes would be denied the use" of the facilities, but the CCC activists anticipated rejection,

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<sup>1</sup> Darryl Paulson, "Stay Out, The Water's Fine: Desegregating Municipal Swimming Facilities in St. Petersburg, Florida," *Tampa Bay History* 4, no. 2 (1982): 8; *St. Petersburg Times*, August 22, September 9, 1955, September 21, 1955, and December 1, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, August 22, 1955, October 14, 1916; Raymond Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888-1950*. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 265-267; and Paulson, "Stay Out," 7.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle For Equality*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vinatge Books, 2004), 711; Paulson, "Stay Out," 8; *New York Times*, March 13, 1956.

hoping to lay the groundwork for “potential legal action.”<sup>4</sup>

The unexpected breach in racial etiquette elicited a streak of white hostility. In the days following the “swim-in,” a group of angry whites met at city hall and formed the St. Petersburg White Citizens’ Council. The organization sent letters to restaurants and businesses downtown, urging merchants not to “help integrate the races.” But the fiercest opposition to integrating Spa came from City Manager Ross Windom, who condemned the “swim-in” and criticized the black community for its unhappiness with South Mole. However, the rash assemblage of reactionary forces and the dismay emanating from city hall mattered little once the CCC’s case against the city, *Alsup v. St. Petersburg*, went to trial.<sup>5</sup>

Lawyers for the city faced an arduous task. A month before the CCC filed suit, on November 7, the Supreme Court had banned segregation at public facilities in Maryland. The ruling affirmed a Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals decision regarding a case in Baltimore that determined the city had no right to bar any taxpaying citizens from public supported places. The decision augured well for Alsup and the other plaintiffs. Lawyers for the city contended that Spa Beach and Pool operated on a proprietary basis and allowing blacks to use the facility would damage its ability to turn a profit, thus differentiating the situation in St. Petersburg from the one in Baltimore. The federal District Court disagreed. “The capacity in which the city operates its swimming pool and beach is immaterial,” explained Judge George A. Whitehurst before ruling in favor of the plaintiffs. On appeal, a three-judge panel of the Fifth Circuit Court in New Orleans upheld the lower court’s decision, stating: “It is no answer that the beach and pool cannot

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<sup>4</sup> *Evening Independent*, 1985; Enoch Davis, *On the Bethel Trail* (St. Petersburg: Valkyrie Press, Inc. 1979), 68-69; *St. Petersburg Times*, April 25, 1947, and August 22, 1955.

be operated at a profit on a nonsegregated basis, and that the city will be forced to close the pool. .Unfortunate as closing the pool may be, that furnishes no ground for abridging the rights of the appellees to its use without discrimination on the grounds of race so long as it is operated.” The U.S Supreme Court refused to hear the case and in April 1957 the original ruling became official.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the legal victory, blacks stayed away from Spa until 1958. While members of the CCC may have been free from white reprisals, the average black citizen had little to gain and a lot to lose from thumbing his nose at the city’s white power structure; even if they had won the right to use Spa in federal court. The CCC, meanwhile, attempted to desegregate the seating on public buses. Just as *Alsup v. St. Petersburg* had gone to court in 1955, civil rights leaders in Alabama had begun the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Largely credited with kickstarting the modern American civil rights movement, the boycott and an accompanying lawsuit eventually secured an injunction against segregated bus seating policies in Alabama. Months later, a bus boycott in Florida successfully ended the discriminatory practice in Tallahassee, the state capital. In a meeting with Ross Windom, CCC cofounder and long time social activist Rev. Enoch Davis, along with Rev. Ben Wyland, urged the city manager to “avert the possibility” of another Tallahassee by dropping the segregated seating policy. Although no local ordinance ordered a separation of the races on public transit, Windom called their bluff and elected to preserve the tradition. Instead of a bus boycott, desegregation efforts returned to the beach and pool.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, September 22, 1955; and Paulson, “Stay Out,” 9.

<sup>6</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, November 7, 1955; and Paulson, “Stay Out,” 10.

<sup>7</sup> Glenda A. Rabby, *The Pain and the Promise: The Struggle For Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 3; *St. Petersburg Times*, April 27, 1956, June 13, 1956.

The dormant Spa controversy awakened in June 1958 when eight black teenagers and college students bought tickets to the beach and went for a swim. The incident turned into a spectacle when a half dozen reporters and photographers showed up. After only thirty minutes the swimmers came ashore, gave interviews, used the showers, and left.<sup>8</sup>

What appeared not to bother white swimmers at the time eventually caused a local firestorm. When word of the incident reached city leaders, an outraged Windom shut down the facility. For three days police officers kept people out. Windom reopened Spa on June 7, and the next day a young black man, David Isom, paid his way into the pool area and swam unabated for more than an hour. Again Windom closed it down. Following the incident the city council, adhering to the “as long as it is operated by the city” portion of the appellate judgment, voted to close Spa down for the rest of the summer.<sup>9</sup>

Ross Windom and the city council found themselves in a precarious position. Keeping Spa closed was bad for business. But according to their logic, so was an integrated swimming facility. The city’s old nostrum of quelling such a controversy with a search for a new segregated beach for blacks returned. To the dismay of Fred Alsup and Enoch Davis, the city council set aside \$15,000 for the construction of an all-black beach in the northernmost part of the city, along the Gandy causeway, an area inaccessible to most of its intended users. The standoff was becoming more contentious. Rather than risk a mingling of the races, city officials were fostering social and economic turmoil.<sup>10</sup>

As the summer beach season came to a close and students returned to school,

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<sup>8</sup> *New York Times*, June 6, 1958; Deposition, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*; *St. Petersburg Times*, June 9, 1958; and Paulson, “Stay Out,” 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Windom quietly reopened Spa in early September. A day passed without incident. But on September 4, a black teenage girl went for a swim at the beach. This time Windom took a different approach. “I realize that Negroes through court action have secured the legal right to use Spa Pool and Beach,” he said, but “we cannot escape from the reality that long established custom provides for separation of the races in recreational facilities.” Mayor Burroughs, echoing the city manager’s sentiments, urged black residents to “cooperate with us in an effort to continue our good relationship.” The patronizing pleas fell upon deaf ears. Days later, another swim-in led the city council to close Spa indefinitely. In addition, the council took punitive measures and decided to use the money set aside for the proposed Gandy beach (for blacks) to develop an all-white beach in the North Shore area of the city.<sup>11</sup>

At this point, the protracted controversy had already begun to draw the ire of influential factions throughout the city. Downtown, merchants and hotel proprietors worried about rising racial tensions and a closed beach that threatened the tourism industry. The major media outlets stepped up the pressure, but from different sides of the debate. While the *St. Petersburg Times* endorsed reopening Spa on an integrated basis and chastised city administrators for letting the situation deteriorate, the *St. Petersburg Evening Independent* stood by the city manager and the mayor, suggesting tourists would rather vacation elsewhere if the city desegregated its swimming facilities. Local clergy groups pleaded with the city manager to soften his stance. But Windom, who once vowed not be the person “that integrated St. Petersburg,” refused to budge.<sup>12</sup>

As the political pressure built and the din of public frustration intensified,

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<sup>11</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, September 5, 1958, September 16, 1958.

<sup>12</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, September 20, 1958; and Paulson, “Stay Out,” 14-15.

Windom and Burroughs played their last card. Since 1953 the city had flirted with the idea of building a cultural center, and hiring an engineering analysis firm out of New York to survey the best the location for such a project. Twice, once in 1953 and again in 1957, the firm recommended that the city should build the proposed cultural center at the present location of the Alfred Whitted airpark, on a patch of land along the waterfront. After sitting on the project for more than a year, Burroughs suddenly suggested razing Spa Pool and building the cultural center in its place. Several downtown merchants immediately endorsed the idea, encouraging Burroughs, who a year earlier enthusiastically endorsed the Whitted airpark site, to hold “pep rallies” to garner support. Meanwhile, Windom flew around the country conferring with engineers involved with similar projects.<sup>13</sup>

Despite Burrough’s and Windom’s efforts, several city councilmen, the Council Of Neighborhood Associations (CONA), the St. Petersburg Planning Board, and the *St. Petersburg Times* all came out against the project. CONA president G. Harris Graham criticized the proposal as “slapped together,” and called for a “30 day cooling off period,” lest the city act impetuously. For much of the opposition the concern was more fiscal than racial or political. When it became clear that a cultural center was too big and too costly, a revised plan called for the building of a “geodesic dome” auditorium for an estimated \$450,000. Incensed, Graham threatened to circulate a petition to block construction, claiming most of the citizenry does not “want an auditorium--they want sewers and street lights.”<sup>14</sup>

In early November, the city’s efforts to prevent the integration of Spa began to

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<sup>13</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, September 9, 1958, September 19, 1958.

<sup>14</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, October 11, 1958, September 18, 1958...

unravel. First, the engineering firm Rader and Associates offered to build the auditorium for the elevated figure of \$1.2 million. For people like Graham, support now seemed utterly out of the question. Still, city council members decided to move forward with the auditorium. A few days later, Windom unexpectedly announced his resignation. St. Petersburg's longest serving City Manager gave no reason for his abrupt departure. The final nail in the coffin came when CONA issued a petition that bearing signatures from 7,767 registered voters, more than the ten percent needed to send the auditorium controversy before the electorate.<sup>15</sup>

Before a referendum could be held the city council abandoned the plan. Subsequently, the council voted to reopen Spa with the condition that acting City Manager Verlyn Fletcher had the authority to close it "should an emergency arise." The beach and pool remained open from that point on. A 160-acre site at the city's North Shore became the new site for the proposed auditorium, bringing a quiet end to the long fight over Spa. And yet only the beginning of the struggle to desegregate the public sphere.<sup>16</sup>

By 1960 the hope of a rapid dismantling of the Jim Crow system in the South had faded. Desegregation efforts had met with massive white resistance and a rising tide of race-baiting political demagoguery. While the American economy boomed, white-flight in the North, disfranchisement in the South, and discrimination throughout the country, kept millions of black Americans economically impoverished. Although the dream of full racial equality was deferred, civil rights activists were consoled by the passage of two civil rights bills (1957 and 1960) and the Eisenhower administration's deployment of

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<sup>15</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, November 7, 1958, January 28, 1959.

<sup>16</sup> *Miami News*, January 6, 1959; *St. Petersburg Times*, January 14, 1959.



federal troops in Arkansas during the Central High School desegregation crisis. Such developments “legitimized” the black struggle and “prepared the way for a more massive and militant phase.” With faith in the legalistic means flagging the fight moved to the streets. The next “phase” of the movement began in Greensboro, North Carolina, in February 1960, when four black North Carolina A&T students conducted a sit-in at a Woolworth’s lunch counter. Within weeks the sit-ins had spread to a number of cities, including St. Petersburg.<sup>17</sup>

Black civil rights activists in St. Petersburg (hoping to encourage city leaders to form a biracial committee) conducted two days of sit-ins in early March. On the second, C. Bette Wimbish and Gibbs Jr. College student Theodore Floyd sat in at the William Henry lunch counter. J.P. Moses and Rev. Dr. H. McDonald did the same at the Maas Bros. department store. Two unidentified black males sat in at the S.H. Kress lunch counter. In each case, the black activists were refused service, and the lunch counters immediately closed. “We were told they couldn’t serve us because of the existing state and county laws,” said J.P. Moses. In fact, the state’s legal position gave proprietors operating public accommodations the right to serve anyone they pleased. Unlike the situation in the Deep South, local or state law existed that specifically prevented white establishments from serving blacks.<sup>18</sup>

More sit-ins occurred the next day. This time, Theodor Floyd and close to thirty other college students took the demonstrations to Webb’s City, “the world’s largest variety store.” For twenty minutes the group waited by the turnstiles for “counter checks,” access passes to the lunch counter area. When employees from

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<sup>17</sup> Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle For Black Equality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 35-36.

<sup>18</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, March 3, 1960.

Webb's informed Floyd the store had run out of counter checks, the demonstrators moved on to S.H. Kress. The story there was the same. Kress closed its counters and waited for the students to leave.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike in Tallahassee, St. Petersburg's first brush with lunch counter desegregation barely registered on the social barometer. Everyone- from activists to waitresses to white customers and police officers- remained calm and civil. Business owners, however, took notice. Webb's City owner, Doc Webb, issued a written statement that blamed the sit-ins on outside agitators. Webb, who employed more than 100 blacks but in the lowliest positions, considered himself "a friend" of the black community and believed the demonstrations were condoned," by only "a few of the city's Negroes." Later, when demonstrations returned to Webb's City, Webb-once again took a paternalistic posture that refused to acknowledge the necessity of change.<sup>20</sup>

Despite Webb's bewilderment, the sit-ins appeared to work. Mayor Brantley initially balked at the idea of a biracial committee, saying: "There is no need to appoint a committee for the purpose of alleviating a condition that does not in fact exist." But pressure from an interracial group of clergymen led Brantley to reconsider. "It might be well to have a biracial committee to assist in continuing the present relationship and understanding that does exist," he later acknowledged. The creation of such a committee in Tampa had already led to a

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<sup>19</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, March 4, 1960.

<sup>20</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, March 5, 1960.

moratorium on sit-in demonstrations, and leaders in St. Petersburg hoped for a similar outcome.<sup>21</sup>

As negotiations over lunch counter desegregation began, black leaders shifted their focus to education. Six years after the *Brown* decision students in St. Petersburg and throughout most of Pinellas County still attended racially separate schools. As part of the state's plan to circumvent the *Brown* decision, individual school districts were given expansive powers to dictate the pace of desegregation. Instead of complying, the Pinellas County Board of Public Instruction acted as if, in the words of historian Gordon K. Mantler, "separate but really equal" would suffice. The county built new segregated schools and rejected black applicants to all-white institutions.<sup>22</sup>

*Brown* did, however, resuscitate the local NAACP branch, which in its early years had had concentrated on voter registration. When Ralph Wimbish became branch president in 1959, the St. Petersburg NAACP took the lead in local desegregation efforts. A graduate of Gibbs High School, Wimbish received a bachelor's degree from Florida A&M College and an M.D. from Meharry Medical College. In 1952, Wimbish, along with his wife C. Bette, returned to St. Petersburg and the couple almost immediately dove into social activism. While his wife led voter registration drives, Ralph formed the Ambassador's Club, a fraternal society that listed the most prominent and wealthy members of the black community on its roster. After helping initiate the CCC, Wimbish and a few

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<sup>21</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, April 15, 1960.

<sup>22</sup> C. Bette Wimbish, interview by Barbara Mott, November 7, 1994; Gordon K. Mantler, "I'm Against the It is Being Done: School Desegregation and Civility in Pinellas County, Florida" (master's thesis, University of South Florida, 2002), 50.

fellow members challenged the segregation policies at the Pasadena Golf Course in 1954. Rather than integrate the course, local leaders sold it to private owners.<sup>23</sup>

Six years later, though still smarting from the Pasadena episode, the Wimbishes developed an innovative political approach to school desegregation. If they could not force the school board to comply with *Brown*, they would integrate the school board first. On March 5, 1960 C. Bette Wimbish announced her candidacy for the “at-large” seat on the Pinellas County Board of Public Instruction. The “Wimbish for School Board” campaign was the first of its kind in Pinellas County. Never before had a black candidate run for a countywide political office. Operating out of the NAACP offices on 22nd St. S., Wimbish was well-suited to challenging the white hegemony in county politics. Having earned a degree from Florida A&M University, before doing graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania, and having worked as a teacher in the Hillsborough County School system, she had strong credentials as an educator. Moreover, she “had no fears of reprisals.” “No one could do anything to me,” she remembered, “my husband was a physician, self-sustained in the black community.”<sup>24</sup>

From the start, Wimbish “knew” she could not win. But she hoped to establish a political beachhead and to disrupt traditional arrangements, if only by using “the campaign process to access places like parks during rallies that blacks were not permitted to go.” Wimbish ran on a platform opposed to the practice of “duplicate spending,” the doubly excessive cost of funding racially separate

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<sup>23</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, December 18, 1960, June 2, 1954; Ellen Babb, “We Took the Leadership Away.” In *Making Waves*, ed. by Jack Davis and Kari Frederickson (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003): 298.

schools. But considering herself “a mother first and foremost,” she fought a larger fight for her children and those in the black community who had no “chance.”<sup>25</sup>

Despite receiving nearly 10,000 votes in the primary, Wimbish failed to unseat the incumbent, Dr. William Casler of Clearwater. While she fell far short of Casler’s 25,000 votes, her vote revealed pockets of progressivism throughout the county. Blacks only composed 3,798 of the registered voters in the county which means more than 6,000 whites cast votes for Wimbish. With more than 70% of her support coming from white voters, she considered the race “a moral victory,” a “path finding effort” that will make it much “easier for those that follow.”<sup>26</sup>

The success sparked a greater concentration on voter registration within the local black community, as Wimbish and her supporters set out to register as many new voters as they could before the November elections. The Non-partisan Voters League kicked off a house-to-house canvass to reach those whose jobs prevented them from getting to the registrar’s office during the day. Although St. Petersburg’s black voters failed to determine any elections, the November return revealed the possibility of increasing the black electorate unprecedented levels. In 1960, a significant number of St. Petersburg blacks switched to the Republican Party to vote for a moderate gubernatorial candidate, George C. Petersen, who was challenging the Democrat Farris Bryant, an arch segregationist. In Pinellas

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<sup>24</sup> C. Bette Wimbish, interview by Barbara Mott, November 7, 1994; *St. Petersburg Times*, March 6, 1960, April 12, 1960; and Babb, “Took the Leadership Away,” 298.

<sup>25</sup> Mott’s interview with C. Bette Wimbish, November 7, 1994; Since the 1949 school year black and white enrollment increased 106 and 184 percent, respectively, and predictions from University of Florida report expected those numbers to increase another 50% by 1963. To “keep pace in schools,” the county projected, would cost \$27 million dollars. *St. Petersburg Times*, April 12, 1960, April 26, 1960.

<sup>26</sup> Mott’s interview with C. Bette Wimbish; *St. Petersburg Times*, May 5, 1960, May 5, 1960.

precinct 61, home to 1,247 black voters and only 114 whites, Petersen nearly doubled Bryant's tally of 255 votes. Statewide Bryant won the election handily and soon set out to separate himself from the outgoing Governor Leroy Collins. As Governor, Bryant failed to reactivate Collin's state biracial committee and reaffirmed his opposition to racial integration at every opportunity.<sup>27</sup>

The presidential election was a different story. The black voters who backed Petersen at the state level preferred the Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy over Republican Richard M. Nixon. With blacks across the nation throwing their support behind Kennedy, the Democrat eked out a narrow victory.

By the winter of 1960 racial progress seemed at a standstill. The biracial committee had met only a few times and done nothing, and Brantley's stipulation that the committee act only as a mediating body rendered it almost powerless. In October, officials from Woolworth's, Kress, and McCrory's announced the integration of their lunch counters in Bradenton, Largo, Sarasota, Tampa, and Fort Myers, which only crystallized the St. Petersburg biracial committee's ineffectiveness. The only active racial issue involved efforts to reform the city's hospital facilities.<sup>28</sup>

Since January 1960, city officials had been exploring ways of improving local hospital facilities. City Manager George K. Armes organized a committee of the city's leading physicians to survey the deficiencies plaguing the all-black Mercy Hospital and to recommend solutions. The hospital, built in 1926, routinely

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<sup>27</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, September 6, 1960, September 6, 1960, September 9, 1960, and November 11, 1960.

fell short of covering its monthly operating costs, because of inadequate health insurance in the black community. On average, those admitted to Mercy carried policies paying anywhere between three and fifteen dollars a day, well below the \$30/day the typical patient cost the hospital. Furthermore, Mercy lacked proper instruments, bed space, and adequate staffing. The x-ray machines were unreliable, and doctors at Mercy often endured long waits to secure blood from the blood bank at the whites-only Mound Park Hospital. When Armes' investigative committee recommended building a new, racially segregated Mercy hospital adjacent to Mound Park, the city council concurred, voting to spend \$1.7 million for the construction of the new unit.<sup>29</sup>

What initially seemed like a simple solution, and to city administrators, an admirable gesture towards the black community, soon became a source of contention and foot dragging. For nine months groups with competing interests fought tooth and nail over the proper handling of the "Mercy situation." The Mound Park Advisory Board-essentially a white citizen's council with a more official sounding name-opposed the investigative committee's proposal, arguing for the remodeling of Mercy on its present site.<sup>30</sup>

When it looked as though the city was going to bend to the Advisory Board's demands, black doctors sent a letter to city council threatening to "boycott Mercy." They even vowed to send their patients to Mound Park if the Advisory Board got its way. "We are well aware of the procedure of the city fathers in previous years," the letter read, "give the Negroes a little and they will

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<sup>28</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, October 20, 1960;

<sup>29</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, March 7, 1960, February 7, 1960.

quiet down for 10 or 15 years.” Forewarned, Armes and the city council went back to the drawing board and eventually agreed to add an integrated wing to Mound Park while continuing to keep Mercy open. In response, the all-white Mound Park Civic Association condemned the new plan and circulated a petition to block all hospital integration. Unsure how to proceed, the city council promised to come up with a new plan by the first of the year. Black doctors formulated a boycott strategy and took a “wait and see stand.” Ralph Wimbish and the NAACP were heartened by the doctor’s stand, but the NAACP was preoccupied with other issues at the time.<sup>31</sup>

In November 1960, the NAACP and the CCC planned a selective buying campaign to protest lunch counter segregation and the discriminatory policies at department stores. National NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins had encouraged branches to conduct “patronage withdrawals” against chain and variety stores throughout the spring, but the St. Petersburg branch did not respond to his plea until November. With the Christmas shopping season already in full swing, the air was ripe for such a project. An executive committee composed of leaders from the NAACP and the CCC outlined a list of “target stores.” The NAACP also planned to bolster the campaign with direct action demonstrations that would involve the formation of youth council involved. After getting a taste of the sit-ins in March, local college and high school students had grown restless. During the summer, Gibbs high graduate David Isom, fed up with the conservative NAACP leadership, formed an “unofficial” youth council, and led

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<sup>30</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, March 11, 1960.

<sup>31</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, November 15, 1960, November 15, 1960.



sporadic swim-ins at Spa Beach and several lunch counter sit-ins. Isom left for college in September and the youth council fell apart. In preparation for the upcoming demonstrations, NAACP member Leon Cox Jr. organized the branch's first "official" youth council. To the dismay of Gibbs Jr. College president Jonathon Rembert, Cox, a professor of political science, recruited volunteers from his classes.<sup>32</sup>

When rumors leaked of the plans in St. Petersburg, the Congress of Racial Equality joined the fold. CORE's newest Florida chapter formed in the living room of Ike Williams, one of St. Petersburg's two black attorneys, during a meeting between CCC officials and CORE field secretary Richard Haley. Although a significant force in movements in Miami and Tallahassee, CORE struggled to gain traction in St. Petersburg. As much as the white establishment, black leaders resented encroachment from outside organizations. After its formation, CORE joined the selective buying campaign in a limited capacity, and, along with the youth council, supplied the bulk of the demonstrators for the direct action protests.<sup>33</sup>

To spread the word and garner support for the upcoming campaign, the NAACP held rallies at churches and in vacant lots throughout the black community. On November 27, the patronage withdrawal from select stores began, followed days later by direct-action protests. On the first day of demonstrations

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<sup>32</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, April 4, 1960, September 9, 1960, December 1, 1960; Report by Field Secretary Robert Saunders, November 30, 1960, Papers of the NAACP; Ted Lockhart, interview by Author, November 20, 2009; NAACP state field representative Robert Saunders also took issue with the idea of student protesters, but for different reasons than Rembert. Saunders worried about the potential cost of bailing arrested youths out of jail. Robert Saunders, interview by Canter Brown, January 14-18, 2002.

<sup>33</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, November 10, 1960, November 16, 1960; Report by Field Secretary Robert Saunders, November 30, 1960, Papers of the NAACP.

there was “a buzz around Gibbs high,” remembered one volunteer, “. . .who was going, where is everyone meeting beforehand?” Around 5 p.m. on December 2, close to 30 protesters picketed Webb’s City, and another 15 demonstrators waved signs and passed out handbills at Maas. Bros. Inside Webb’s, protesters sat in at the lunch counters. In front of “counter closed” signs, next to white customers sipping coffee, black bus boys collecting dirty dishes from white patrons, Theodor Floyd of CORE and NAACP Youth Council president Ted Lockhart were denied service. That evening, picketers targeted white-owned liquor stores in the black community, protesting discriminatory hiring policies.<sup>34</sup>

For three days the demonstrations continued. Although picketers heard the occasional racial epithet, they received little in the way of physical affronts. Waitresses at the lunch counters refused to serve the black customers, but never asked them to leave and did not make a scene. At one point, the police got involved when several sign-toting youths burst through the doors of Webb’s City. In a deposition taken later, Doc Webb claimed the picketers “shoved and jostled” customers and threatened black employees with bodily harm. One man in the melee, Jack Morrison Jr., went to jail for blocking the entrance to Webb’s and not letting customers pass. On another occasion, former Ku Klux Klan Wizard Bill Hendrix arrived in St. Petersburg pulling a trailer with “signs depicting tribal Negroes in Africa” and the words “get out of town” written on the side. Chief Purdy caught up with Hendrix before he reached downtown and asked him to turn

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid; *St. Petersburg Times*, December 3, 1960; Author’s interview with Ted Lockhart, November 20, 1960.

around. After a few exchanges, Hendrix told Purdy that he would “make a fine Klansman,” and left town.<sup>35</sup>

Regardless of Purdy’s alleged Klan qualifications, he and his men played a large role in keeping the peace. Since becoming chief in 1958, Purdy had helped repair the historically troubled relationship between the black community and a mostly white police force. To handle the demonstrations, Purdy sent only black officers to the scene, keeping white patrolmen on backup alert. The mild nature of the demonstrations required little police intervention, and the officers wisely refrained from provoking a confrontation.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, an enraged Doc Webb single-handedly ended the protests. By noon on December 7, Webb’s attorney had obtained a restraining order against the NAACP and within an hour the protests at Webb’s City came to a halt. Citing the loss of \$45,000 in revenue during what Webb considered “malicious and violent” picketing, the injunction dealt the selective buying campaign a mortal blow. The demonstrations at Maas. Bros. ended the next day. NAACP lawyers Fred Minnis and Ike Williams immediately filed a motion to dissolve the injunction, and Williams warned that the picketing would resume if negotiations failed to reach a settlement.<sup>37</sup>

Like Doc Webb, city leaders had seen enough. Biracial committee chair Dr. Earl Edington convened a series of negotiations between chain store proprietors and NAACP executives that finally led to a settlement. To avoid the perception that outsiders influenced the situation, both sides agreed to wait a few weeks, until January 3, to

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<sup>35</sup> Legal Briefs, Papers of the NAACP; *Florida Sentinel Bulletin*, December 3, 1960; and *Tampa Tribune*, December 4, 1960.

<sup>36</sup> In addition to hiring more black officers, Purdy, only two months earlier, had appointed the city’s first black detective, Hosea Rogers. *St. Petersburg Times*, October 22, 1960.

<sup>37</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, December 8, 1960, December 9, 1960; Telegram from Fred Minnis to Robert L. Carter, Robert W. and Helen S. Saunders Papers, University of South Florida Tampa Library Special Collections.

announce the desegregation of the lunch counters. The NAACP ended all demonstrations but kept the selective buying campaign active until the first of the year. Days later NAACP State conference president A. Leon Lowry almost ruined everything. In a press release, Lowry celebrated the “NAACP’s successful” campaign in St. Petersburg--exactly the type of imputation leaders of both sides hoped to avoid. Lowry’s misstep, however, proved harmless.<sup>38</sup>

On January 3, 1961, fifteen stores in greater St. Petersburg, including Kress, Maas. Bros., and Woolworth’s, dropped their segregation policies. Webb’s City followed suit the same day. Fanny Ayer Ponder, Ruth McClellan, and Enoch received invitations to lunch at Webb’s City. Webb, however, pressed on with an injunctive suit against the NAACP to, in his words, “prove a point.” Circuit Court Judge Jack White denied the NAACP’s motion to dissolve the injunction, forcing them to scramble to find the money for an appeal. Minnis contacted the NAACP Legal Defense Fund for help. Upon reviewing the details, Defense Fund attorney Robert L. Carter believed the case “was one of the best” the NAACP would “get in this kind of situation,” and agreed to foot the \$2,500 appeal fee and fly to St. Petersburg to assist.<sup>39</sup>

As the racial tension seemed to ease, the hotels began to fill in anticipation of spring training baseball, presenting a glaring dilemma for Ralph Wimbish. For years he and other black leaders had helped find lodgings for black professional baseball players in town for spring training. As the most visible leader of the local struggle, Wimbish could not “battle for the integration of lunch counters with one hand,” as he explained at a press conference, “and further the cause of segregation by arranging separate housing

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<sup>38</sup> Correspondence between Ike Williams and A. Leon Lowry, Papers of the NAACP.

with the other.” Spring training baseball, however, was a tradition in St. Petersburg almost as old as segregation itself, and few city leaders and hotel proprietors felt the need for change.<sup>40</sup>

The first Major League Baseball teams arrived in St. Petersburg in 1914. By 1961, thirteen of the league’s eighteen teams trained in Florida, seven in the Tampa Bay area, including the New York Yankees and the St. Louis Cardinals in St. Petersburg. Long after the desegregation of Major League Baseball in 1947, writes historian Jack Davis, “racial policies in the spring training season continued to reflect Southern social patterns.” In St. Petersburg, white players for both teams stayed on the waterfront at the Vinoy Hotel or at the Soreno. Black players, on the other hand, rented rooms from dentist Robert Swain at the James Motel; others, including all-star catcher Elston Howard, stayed with the Wimbishes. And the segregated atmosphere did not stop there: the stadiums had segregated seating sections, restaurants and night clubs, social gatherings and recreational facilities banned black players, even those who were household names across the country. For white teammates, the several weeks in Florida were vacation time, but for black players, it was often a sort of penance.<sup>41</sup>

State NAACP officials gave Wimbish full support and sent letters to teams training in Florida, urging an “end to the problem of racial bias.” Although teams trained all across the southern part of the state, everyone waited to see what the Yankees would do. “If the St. Petersburg hotels had given in to Dan Topping’s demands,” said one

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<sup>39</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, January 4, 1961; Correspondence between Fred Minnis and Robert L. Carter, Saunders Papers.

<sup>40</sup> For more on the desegregation of spring training in Florida see Jack E. Davis, “Baseball’s Reluctant Challenge: Desegregating Major League Baseball Spring Training Sites, 1961-1964,” in *The Civil Rights Movement*, edited by Jack E. Davis (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing): 178-192; *St. Petersburg Times*, February 1, 1961.

hospitality executive, “we would have followed suit.” New York general manager Dan Topping met with the St. Petersburg chamber of commerce and hotel management to work out a “one-roof” solution, but no hotel would budge. Major League Baseball refused to get involved, putting little pressure on the state to intervene, essentially leaving the policies intact. White players stayed at the Vinoy and Soreno hotels anyway.<sup>42</sup>

While most teams waited till the following season to address the problem, several bucked the trend. When the White Sox, who trained in Sarasota, traveled to Miami to play the Orioles, their president, Bill Veeck, canceled his club’s reservations at the McAllister Hotel when it would not allow his black players. Soon after, the Braves integrated the seating at their stadium in Bradenton and removed racially discriminatory signs from the facility. The following year many teams, including the Cardinals and the incoming New York Mets, secured integrated housing. St. Petersburg’s Al Lang Stadium integrated the grandstands for spring training in 1962, but many of the city’s hotels continued to ban black guests.<sup>43</sup>

After the dissolution of the selective buying campaign movement leaders put the brakes on desegregation efforts to focus on securing more job opportunities for the black community. The election of Mayor Herman Goldner in 1961 represented a step in that direction. During his campaign, Goldner had promised to hire more blacks in civil jobs like meter-readers and bus drivers, and to reform the city’s biracial committee, which had gone defunct when the lunch counters desegregated. “As long as the climate and atmosphere of St. Petersburg is one of positive action-and that appears to be the case,”

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<sup>41</sup> *New York Times*, February 28, 1960; Davis, “Baseball’s Reluctant Challenge,” 175, 184; *St. Petersburg Times*, February 1, 1961;

<sup>42</sup> Davis, “Baseball’s Reluctant Challenge,” 182, 190; *New York Times*, February 19, 1961.

explained NAACP executive Louis O. Harper, “the [NAACP] intends to try to negotiate further gains without en masse protests. . .” The easing of tensions came as the broader civil rights movement heated up. Sit-ins and other forms of direct action protests had revived massive resistance throughout the South, and the racial tensions would only intensify over the next two years--even in cities like St. Petersburg where movement leader seemed to favor diplomatic solutions to their social qualms. Indeed, as the baseball players and snowbirds headed north, a new form of agitation threatened St. Petersburg’s peaceful interregnum.<sup>44</sup>

In May 1961, direct-action forms of civil disobedience went on the road. After the Supreme Court extended a 1946 decision (*Morgan v. Virginia*) banning segregation on interstate traveling buses to cover terminals (*Boynton v. Virginia*), CORE organized the Freedom Rides. Aboard Greyhound and Trailways buses, black and white civil rights activists trained in Gandhian nonviolence rode through the Deep South, testing the region’s compliance with the new ruling. After the first wave of rides ended were disrupted by Klansman and other white supremacist hoodlums in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama, student activists in Nashville, Tennessee, picked up where the CORE riders left off. The Nashville Riders, consisting mainly of students from Fisk and Tennessee State Universities, rode into the heart of darkness as far as Mississippi. Forced to respond to the violent beatings of defenseless Freedom Riders in Montgomery and Birmingham, the Kennedy administration made a deal with Mississippi Senator James Eastland that the Defense Department would allow law enforcement officials to arrest the riders as long as they were protected from mob violence. Kennedy had ridden into office

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<sup>43</sup> Davis, “Baseball’s Reluctant Challenge,” 191; In 1962, the St. Louis Cardinals and New York Mets stayed at the Outrigger Inn and the Colonial Inn. *St. Petersburg Times*, February 2, 1962.

on a wave of black support, but his preoccupation with Cold War foreign policy led him to neglect the black freedom struggle and to view the Freedom Rides as a diversion from Cold War imperatives.<sup>45</sup>

Historians credit the Freedom Rides with reinvigorating the black civil rights movement and exposing the depth of racism in the Deep South, but at a cost. The Kennedy administration's reluctant and ultimately ineffectual action to protect the Riders emboldened white extremists and alienated black leaders. Moreover, the Freedom Riders, as historian Raymond Arsenault has pointed out, "evoked vivid memories of meddling abolitionists and invading armies." "This was especially true in the white South," explains Arsenault, "where a resurgent 'siege mentality' was in full force in the post-*Brown* era."<sup>46</sup>

By the time word of impending Freedom Rides to Florida reached Governor Bryant in June, the movement had peaked. Nevertheless, Bryant sent an aid to warn targeted cities, suggesting the Riders should be left alone. As in the past, the fear of outside agitators extended to black leaders, too. In St. Petersburg, the NAACP "didn't want outside groups to come in and do things local groups could do." A "quiet check" of the bus terminals revealed no problems. The Freedom Riders came anyway. Two buses road into St. Petersburg on June 15, the first about 1 p.m., carrying seven Freedom Riders, three whites and four blacks. More than two hundred spectators showed up at the Greyhound station to witness their arrival. Chief Purdy felt "a busload of people. . .does not in itself constitute an emergency situation," yet he stationed trained riot police at the

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<sup>44</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, June 4, 1961.

<sup>45</sup> Sitkoff, *The Struggle For Black Equality*, 88-89, 99.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 101; Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6.



terminal. As the Riders disembarked from the bus, local resident Robert Bierl unleashed a string of verbal taunts. After repeated warnings, officers eventually arrested him. The incident with Bierl, however, was an anomaly. “The trip was very successful,” commented Francis Randall, a white Rider and history professor from Columbia University, “there was much less opposition, much less refusal of service than I expected.”<sup>47</sup>

Freedom Riders in Tallahassee and Ocala were not so lucky. Law enforcement officials in the state capital defied the governor, accusing the Riders—an interracial group of Protestant ministers and two Jewish Rabbis—of inciting a mob, and took them to jail. In Ocala, a fight led to several arrests. Stops in Gainesville and Tampa on the other hand, met with no resistance. On his experiences in Florida, a Freedom Rider remarked: “I gained a greater respect and greater understanding for the South and recognize that what happened in Birmingham was not representative of Southern attitudes.” Two days after a “workshop” at Rev. Enoch Davis’s Second Bethel Baptist Church, where the Freedom Riders reactivated the local CORE chapter, the outside agitators hopped a flight home to New York.<sup>48</sup>

Hoping to calm the storm wrought by the Freedom Riders, the Justice Department urged national civil rights leaders to focus their efforts on the franchise. The NAACP, CORE, SNCC, and SCLC all began voter registration projects throughout the South, including St. Petersburg, where leaders had already proclaimed a halt to direct-action demonstrations. For the rest of the summer the revived CORE chapter and NAACP youth

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<sup>47</sup> Rabby, *The Pain and the Promise*, 135; *St. Petersburg Times*, June 4, 1961, June 13, 1961, June 16, 1961, June 13, 1961, June 18, 1961, and June 16, 1961.

<sup>48</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, June 1961; Walter Barnes, interview by author, November 30, 2009; *St. Petersburg Times*, June 18, 1961.

council concentrated on voter registration.<sup>49</sup>

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Not everyone in the NAACP agreed with the executive council's decision to halt direct-action protests. Since the end of the selective buying campaign, Leon Cox had envisioned the Youth Council picketing the segregated movie theaters downtown. When Cox replaced Wimbish as branch president, he got his opportunity.<sup>50</sup>

Five of St. Petersburg's eight movie theaters catered to blacks customers. In fact, one of the nicest theaters in town, Park Theater, with air conditioning and central heat, cushioned leather chairs, carpeted aisles, had integrated a year earlier. But three downtown theaters-the Center, State, and Florida-only allowed whites.<sup>51</sup>

To prepare for the demonstrations, the youth council received training in nonviolent direct-action. Cox appointed Gibbs Junior College student Arnette Doctor Youth Council president, replacing Ted Lockhart, who had clashed with Cox over the direction the group would take in the aftermath of the selective buying campaign. Doctor could not have been more enthusiastic about Cox's plans, though he "didn't believe in nonviolence." As a kid growing up in the dilapidated, crime ridden, Jordan Park public housing community, Doctor developed a deep distrust for whites--one instilled in him by his mother. Philomena Doctor had fled from Rosewood, Florida, in 1923 during one of the state's worst episodes of racial violence. From a young age Doctor learned of his family's travails and kept the stories close to his heart, harboring little patience for indignities suffered at the hands of white people. Nevertheless, Doctor believed the

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<sup>49</sup> Sitkoff, *The Struggle For Black Equality*, 106; *St. Petersburg Times*, June 4, 1961.

<sup>50</sup> Author's interview with Ted Lockhart, November 20, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, November, 1960.

movement was “more important” than himself and did his best to remain nonviolent.<sup>52</sup>

On January 11, 1962, more than twenty youths, boys dressed in slacks and sport coats, girls in skirts and blouses, stood in line at the segregated theaters downtown, holding signs and attempting to purchase tickets. The harmless demonstrations did little more than irritate theater managers, though some Youth Council members reported verbal abuse and a few claimed to have been spit upon. But most whites simply ignored them. On one occasion at the Florida Theater a few whites bought tickets for the demonstrators, but the theater would not honor them, offering a refund not admission. For nearly ten days Doctor and his band shook off the humiliation and resisted temptations to retaliate. But on January 19, the center would not hold.<sup>53</sup>

At the Center Theater, the only place in town showing “King of Kings,” the story of Christ, theater staff had erected an eight-foot barrier to block the entrance. Around 7:30 p.m., usher Cecil Fernandez Jr. removed a chain to allow a line of whites into the theatre. Seizing the opportunity, demonstrators barreled through the aperture and scaled the wrought iron barrier, knocking Fernandez into a fence and cutting his hand. Another usher, William Fuerst, did his best to hold back the surging crowd, but several slipped by, plowing through the ticket line.<sup>54</sup>

In the melee a white man in his sixties approached Doctor wielding a .45 caliber revolver and placed the barrel of the gun to his head. “Nigger,” the man shouted, “if you don’t get your ass out of here, your brains are gonna be splattered all over the sidewalk.”

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<sup>52</sup> “I said ‘what about the jobs,’” remembered Lockhart, “What we needed were jobs!” Author’s interview with Ted Lockhart, November 20, 2009; Arnette Doctor, interview by Melissa Cusack, June 2, 2004; Michael D’Orso, *Like Judgement Day: The Ruin and Redemption of a Town Called Rosewood* (New York: Boulevard Books, 1996), 22-23.

<sup>53</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, January 12, 1962; Cusack interview with Arnette Doctor, June 2, 2004; and Alvelita Donaldson, interview by Luis Regaldo, June 28, 2004.

From the corner of his eye Doctor saw police officers, but they just looked on. As he stared the man, images of Rosewood running through his head, Doctor reached for a pistol tucked in his back pocket. But Doctor thought better of the potential deadly move and pulled his hand away. Moments later, police clad in riot gear moved in, and Doctor's assailant disappeared into the night. Within a few minutes law enforcement had the situation under control. But before officers loaded him into a paddy wagon along with the rest of the male demonstrators, Doctor passed his weapon off to one of the female demonstrators that the police had allowed to go home. Ten Youth Council members- Arnette Doctor, Artis Livingston, Jimmy L. Swain, Harvey L. Hammonds, Earl Williams, Ruby L. Hollins, Vernon Kearns, Joseph W. Lampkins, Eli C. Williams, and Titus A. Robinson-were released on \$500 bond with trials set for later that month.<sup>55</sup>

NAACP field secretary Robert Saunders called the arrests the "worst kind of apartheid" in meeting at Second Bethel Baptist Church. Saunders vowed to keep the demonstrations alive, urging others to join in and promising "as sure as night follows day, the Negro shall be allowed to sit. . . in St. Petersburg theaters." But contrary to Saunders's prediction, the arrests actually doomed the demonstrations.<sup>56</sup>

At the trials, city prosecutor Allan Weiss argued that the demonstrators' behavior constituted a breach of the peace. Police Sgt. George Brown confirmed Weiss's claim, saying the situation had bordered on a "riot." The ten defendants, represented by attorneys Fred Minnis and Ike Williams, denied the charges. In his closing statement, Minnis remarked: "If you strip this case of all subterfuge it would simply be whether or

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<sup>54</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, January 20, 1962; Letter from Robert Saunders to Gloster B. Current, January 22, 1962, Papers of the NAACP.

<sup>55</sup> Cusack interview with Arnette Doctor, June 2, 2004; Letter from Robert Saunders to Gloster B. Current, January 22, 1962, Papers of the NAACP.

not it is. . . disorderly act for a Negro to seek to see King of Kings. . . the only place it is being shown in the area.”<sup>57</sup>

Initially, Municipal Judge Henry Esteva fined the defendants \$50 each, but he later suspended the fines when Minnis promised the “harassment” would cease. Judge Esteva’s ruling only pertained to the ten defendants, but the NAACP, almost bankrupted by the legal fees, could not afford to continue the demonstrations.<sup>58</sup>

The disastrous end to the picketing fractured the local movement. Pressured by school board Superintendent Floyd T. Christian, Gibbs Junior College President Jonathan Rembert fired Cox and stripped Doctor of his scholarship. By September, Cox had left for a job at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. In his final months as NAACP president, Cox led a countywide voter registration drive and officially requested the city of St. Petersburg to enact “ a bill that will ensure all of the citizens of St. Petersburg the rights granted every other citizen in the city.” One might ask, as Stokley Carmichael did, “What could be more harmless. . .in any even marginally healthy society?” Unfortunately, Mayor Goldner washed his hands of the situation: “We do not feel that it is proper for the city to interfere with the operations of private business in this area. It is suggested this is a matter of community conscience and the problem can best be handled on a non-governmental level.”<sup>59</sup>

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More than a year passed before the NAACP returned to the movie theaters. By

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., January 22, 1962.

<sup>57</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, February 9, 1962.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Brown interview with Robert Saunders, January 14-18, 2002; Letter from Robert Saunders to A. Leon Lowry, Saunders Papers; Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 1; Cusack interview with Arnette Doctor, June 2, 2004.

then the optimism of 1962 had vanished. Goldner's promises to expand job opportunities for blacks and reactivate the city's biracial committee never materialized. And not only the movie theaters retained segregation. Restaurants throughout the city, including the cafeteria at Webb's City, still refused to serve black patrons. What had seemed like "positive action" to men like Louis O. Harper in 1962 now looked like the same old "feet dragging."<sup>60</sup>

In the summer of 1963 the NAACP was still financially in the red, but the Youth Council was riding high. Over six weeks, as part of the nationwide "Crusade for Voter Registration Campaign," Youth Council members registered 1,041 new voters, the most in the country, earning the group an award and an invitation to the NAACP's national conference in Chicago. The success also encouraged council members to take on larger projects. When NAACP field secretary Robert Saunders shifted his focus to desegregating the movie theaters in Tampa, the St. Petersburg youth council revived such efforts at home. However, since the departure of Cox, the insolvent NAACP had fallen under the control of the CCC. Rev. J.L. Fennell, former branch president and then vice president of the CCC, had taken it upon himself to resuscitate the NAACP, and the organization was just getting back on its feet when the issue of picketing movie theaters resurfaced. With the NAACP's coffers empty and Fennell preoccupied with his pastoral and CCC, the Youth Council received little support from the adults.<sup>61</sup>

Fortunately, Elenora Adams stepped in to fill the leadership void. A member of the NAACP branch since 1962 and a volunteer participant during the 1961 efforts to

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<sup>60</sup> Letter From Robert Saunders to A. Leon Lowrey, Saunders Papers; When Farris Bryant refused to reappoint the state biracial commission created under Leroy Collins, many local municipalities saw no reason to continue such a committee at the local level. *St. Petersburg Times*, June 4, 1963, July 23, 1963.

integrate the lunch counters, Adams took unofficial control of the Youth Council when Leon Cox became branch president. After Cox left for Nashville and the NAACP essentially fell apart, Adams kept the council alive and ran it independently of the CCC. During the “Crusade for Voter Registration” she recruited white students from Florida Presbyterian College to join the council. Adams’ assertiveness brought success to the registration campaign but it also soured her relationship with men like Fennell. When NAACP and CCC executives showed tepid support for the theater idea, Adams again took matters into her own hands.<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile, events in Tampa suggested a renewed theater picketing campaign was imminent. On June 20, after a meeting between Robert Saunders and representatives of Florida Theater Inc. failed to reach a settlement, the NAACP’s Tampa branch launched protest demonstrations. Hoping to avoid a similar situation, St. Petersburg business and political leaders took action. First, the board of governors of the St. Petersburg Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution calling for “all persons and institutions to face up to the moral responsibility of equal rights for all.” In addition, four members of the Ministerial Association and the Council of Human Relations met with Vice Mayor Nortney Cox to discuss the hiring of more blacks in city jobs and the necessity of a new biracial committee. “We are facing a racial crisis in our community,” warned a minister from the Council of Human Relations in a meeting with local theater proprietors. But the owners would not budge.<sup>63</sup>

As the demonstrations began in Tampa, the St. Petersburg NAACP branch held a

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<sup>61</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, June 7, 1963; *Evening Independent*, November 27, 1962; Robert Saunders letter to Gloster B. Current, August 20, 1963, Saunders Papers.

<sup>62</sup> Babb, “We Took the Leadership,” 304. Cusack interview with Arnette Doctor, June 2, 2004; Robert Saunders Letter to Gloster B. Current, August 20, 1963.

meeting at Fennell's New Hope Missionary Baptist Church to vote on whether or not to follow suit. While the executive board debated the issue downstairs, steering committee chairpersons Elenora Adams and Howard Harris rehearsed nonviolent protest strategies with Youth Council members upstairs. The executives voted to authorize the demonstrations, and on June 21, 1968, a year and half after the last go around, picketers returned to the Center, Florida, and State theaters.<sup>64</sup>

Under Adams's leadership, the nature of the demonstrations took on a different tone than those in 1962. She required all participants to sign in each night before they could demonstrate, and all newcomers had to know someone else involved or they would not be permitted to join. Every night before picketing resumed, the Youth Council met at New Hope Baptist to "critique" the previous night's activities or "reprimand individuals for harassing the ticket seller." Participants included middle-aged white men and women carrying signs in one hand and holding their children's hands in the other. The timbre of the demonstrations and diversity of participants, not to mention the earlier efforts of the Chamber of Commerce, reflected the shifting winds in the city's racial climate.<sup>65</sup>

Behind the scenes, groups worked tirelessly to desegregate the theaters and end the need for protests. Consistently rebuffed by theater owners, the Council of Human Relations formed its own interracial negotiating body. Not to be out done, Mayor Goldner organized his own biracial committee. But in the end, neither group proved capable of bringing the issue to a close. Quietly, and under the radar, without the knowledge of NAACP executives, Adams and the Youth Council members met with the Chamber of Commerce and theater owners and ultimately reached a settlement. With

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<sup>63</sup> "Tampa Theatres Are Picketed," *St. Petersburg Times*, June 19, 1963, June 7, 1963, June 21, 1963.

<sup>64</sup> *Evening Independent*, June 18, 1968.



desegregation accomplished, Adams halted the demonstrations for good on July 26.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Babb, "We Took the Leadership," 305; *St. Petersburg Times*, June 22, 1963, June 23, 1963.

<sup>66</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, June 19, 1963.

### Chapter Three: The Lawyer and the Loose Cannon

Following the integration of St. Petersburg's movie theaters, the focus of the movement returned to the courtroom. In 1964, Jim Sanderlin, a young black attorney two years out of law school, sued the Pinellas County Board of Public Instruction for failing to comply with *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 Supreme Court ruling outlawing segregation. At the time, only two percent of the county's black students attended school with whites. For ten years the school board had managed to avoid such a lawsuit while thwarting all but the most token desegregation. In 1966, two years after Sanderlin filed suit, a young black activist in St. Petersburg, Joseph A. Waller, sat in court facing the possibility of five years in prison for an impetuous act of lawlessness. Penalized for his militancy, Waller had been subjected to a protracted legal battle symbolized the onset of white backlash in the late 1960s. A study in contrast, Sanderlin and Waller were the leading voices in the local struggle for black equality. Sanderlin's legal activism and his commitment to nonviolence fit well within the upper ranks of the city's conservative black leadership. Waller, on the other hand, led a militant counter movement that reflected growing dissatisfaction and frustration within the black community.<sup>1</sup>

The rise of both men to local prominence mirrored a larger cleave in the national civil rights narrative. Years of federal inaction and modest advances bred disillusionment and infighting amongst movement leaders. The nonviolent struggle peaked in 1963, when more than 200,000 people gathered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial as part of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Three months after the march, with Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a Dream," speech still echoing across

the nation, President Kennedy died at the hands of an assassin. Over the next two years, President Lyndon B. Johnson completed the work his slain predecessor had begun, signing into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. More than one hundred years after emancipation, black Americans had finally achieved civic equality with whites, if only in the eyes of the law.<sup>2</sup>

For many disillusioned blacks, however, it was too late. Over the next five years a rising tide of black militancy converged with a flood of antiwar sentiment and social unrest. Riots erupted across the country, threatening the fabric of American civilization and endangering the myths that had for so long defined national identity. In St. Petersburg, Sanderlin and Waller represented the diverging expressions of the black struggle. Their parallel and oft-intertwined sagas reveal not only their triumphs and failures as individuals, but also the shifting social and political...that framed the civil rights struggle of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

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“White and colored children shall not be taught in the same school,” read Florida’s 1885 constitution. Nine years later the U.S. Supreme Court validated this provision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, ruling separate facilities for blacks and whites did not violate the “due process” clause of the Fourteenth Amendment so long as said facilities were “equal.” Combined with the efforts of Southern legislators, who between 1880 and 1900 devised new state constitutions that effectively disfranchised blacks and poor

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon K. Mantler, “‘I’m Against the Way It’s Being Done:’ School Desegregation and Civility in Pinellas County, Florida” (master’s thesis, University of South Florida, 2002), 76-77; Omali Yeshitela, interview by author, June 23 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Sitkoff, *The Struggle For Black Equality*; 155.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year That Rocked the World* (New York: Random House, 2005), 6.

whites, *Plessy* formed the legal foundation of Southern Jim Crowism for the next fifty-eight years.<sup>4</sup>

St. Petersburg's first black family, the Donaldsons, sent their children to school with whites in the mid-1880s, when the community was still a frontier settlement. But as St. Petersburg's population grew, Jim Crow restrictions emerged, creating the need for an all-black school. In 1914, Davis Academy opened, followed in 1925 by Jordan Elementary. Separate, however, was never equal. In her study of Tallahassee, Glenda Rabby suggests the expense of operating a dual school system "contributed to the wretched quality" of education for "both races." Blacks, of course, suffered disproportionately. Before the turn of the century the state spent \$13.12 per black student as compared with \$26.66 for whites. By 1910, the spending gap had increased. For every \$9.95 spent on a black student, the state allocated \$36.05 for white pupils. St. Petersburg's poorly-funded black schools offered no more than a sixth grade education. Students as well as instructors felt the heavy financial burdens. Teachers often canvassed neighborhoods on foot for donations and sometimes went without paychecks in the final months of the school year. The institutional infrastructure of black education in Florida reached a nadir during the Great Depression. In 1932, according to a report released by the state superintendent of schools, 24 percent of the state's black teachers lacked a high school diploma, and only two percent earned more than \$1,000 a year.<sup>5</sup>

The depression had a paradoxical affect on black education in St. Petersburg. As funding dried up, doors opened. When the city's economy collapsed in 1926, a planned all-white elementary school sat empty. Local blacks successfully lobbied for use of the

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<sup>4</sup>Florida Constitution (1885), Article XII, Section 12.

facility, and in 1928, the first black high school, 34th St. School for Colored (renamed two years later to Jonathon C. Gibbs High School, after Reconstruction Florida's most prominent black politician), began holding classes for grades 5-12. When it opened, the school had no electrical lighting and the restrooms were designed for younger people. The office of the school's first principal, Samuel Reed, was in a custodial closet. Gibbs "offered the same curriculum as the white schools," remembered former principle Emmanuel Stewart, but with "old textbooks that had been discarded and were outdated, old sewing machines and typewriters. . .the vocational shops were deplorable." During Gibbs's first decade, there was no school bus for black students, many of whom had to walk miles to Gibbs, passing white schools along the way. When the school board turned down a request to supply Gibbs with a bus in 1939, principle George W. Perkins somehow raised the money to purchase one. Despite chronic underfunding and neglect by the county school board, Gibbs became the pride of the black community. Students destined to become community leaders "patterned" their lives after dedicated teachers like Olive B. McLin, Fannye Ayer Ponder, her adopted son Ernest A. Ponder, Ruby Wysinger, among others. By the beginning of World War II, a half dozen segregated black schools dotted the neighborhoods of South St. Petersburg, creating an expanding foundation for educational uplift.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the parlous economic conditions, the New Deal provided blacks with a measure of hope. "The Roosevelt administration," writes historian Patricia Sullivan, "aimed to include blacks equitably in New Deal programs administered in the South."

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<sup>5</sup> Scott Taylor Hartzell, *Remembering St. Petersburg, Florida*, vol. 2 (Charleston: History Press, 2006), 19, 21; Rabby, *The Pain and the Promise*, 198.

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Stewart, interview by Betty Jean Miller, September 6, 1993; Barbara C. Shorter, interview by Joan Schweickert, November 3, 1993; Paul J. Barco Sr., interview by Scott Morse, November 17, 1994.

According to Sullivan, “Southern blacks began to view their plight within a national context and appeal for federal and national support in securing justice and equal rights.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the first blacks in St. Petersburg to take on the establishment was Noah Griffin. In 1937, Griffin, then president of St. Petersburg’s branch of the NAACP, and principal of Gibbs high school, tried his hand at ending the salary disparities between white and black teachers. At the time, black teachers in Pinellas County earned half to one third the amount their white counterparts made. Prompted by NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall’s successful challenge of unequal pay for black teachers in Maryland, Griffin pressed the school board to change its policies. When the board ignored him, Griffin, with the Marshall’s help, filed a lawsuit. Though ultimately unsuccessful, the suit made it to the Florida Supreme Court, where the justices upheld a lower court’s decision, ruling that there was no legal basis with which to enforce pay scales upon school districts. To ward off other potential lawsuits, Pinellas County’s superintendent of schools fired Griffin and five others involved with the suit. The dismissal ended Griffin’s career as an educator in Florida, but this did not deter others from picking up the fight.<sup>8</sup>

Over the next decade black educators, many affiliated with the Florida State Teachers Association, in a wide range of Florida cities, from Pensacola to Ocala, to West Palm Beach, successfully forced their respective school boards to increase the salaries of black teachers. Locally, the Florida State Teacher’s Union filed another lawsuit against the Pinellas County school board in 1942. Finally, in 1945, the board acquiesced. By

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia Sullivan, “Southern Reformers, the New Deal, and the Movement’s Foundation.” In *The Civil Rights Movement*, ed. by Jack E. Davis (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 12, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Griffin was one of the most educated black teachers in the state, and the first to get a graduate degree. After his firing, he could not obtain work anywhere else in Florida and eventually relocated to San Francisco where he started the first NAACP branch in California. Gilbert L. Porter and Leedell W. Neyland, *History of the Florida State Teachers Association* (Washington D.C.:National Education Association, 1977), 65; and Noah Griffin Jr., interview by author, September 2009.

1952, the income for black teachers had risen to \$2,922, just below the \$3,195 figure for whites.<sup>9</sup>

As Florida emerged from depression and war into postwar prosperity, the state launched a program to improve its lagging school system. Under governor Millard Caldwell, Florida passed the Minimum Foundations Act in 1947. Millions of dollars went into the construction of new schools, including funds aimed at fulfilling the “equal” part of the “separate but equal doctrine.” Before 1947, the capital outlay per student in Florida was \$2.35 for blacks and \$7.24 for whites. By 1952 those expenditures had become \$68.78 and 59.84, respectively. Moreover, in 1945 the Florida board of control instituted a plan that funded thirty to forty scholarships for black students to attend college out of state.<sup>10</sup>

However benevolent such equalization efforts appeared to be, they mainly served to reinforce racial segregation, in the face of impending change. In 1954, after wiping out segregation at the graduate level four years earlier (*Sweatt v. Painter/ McLaurin v. Oklahoma, 1950*), the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation in the nation’s public school system in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The decision came at an unusual time in Florida politics. Governor Dan McCarty had died two years earlier and the state was awaiting a special run-off election to replace the acting Governor Charley Johns, a staunch segregationist from the north Florida town of Starke, considered calling a special

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<sup>9</sup> Porter and Neyland, *Florida State Teachers Association*, 66-67; Author’s interview with Noah Griffin Jr., September 2009; Mantler, “I’m Against the Way It’s Being Done,” 23-24.

<sup>10</sup> R.W. Puryear, “Desegregation of Public Education in Florida--One Year Later,” *Journal of Negro Education* vol. 24, no. 3 (1955): 220; Joseph A. Tomberlin, “Florida and the Desegregation Issue, 1954-1959,” *Journal of Negro Education* vol. 43, no. 4 (1974): 457-458; Rabby, *The Pain and the Promise*, 199.

session of the legislature to address the ruling, but decided against it, deferring to Senator Spessard Holland, who called for “patience and moderation.”<sup>11</sup>

Upon winning the state’s special gubernatorial election, Leroy Collins took office six months after *Brown*. An avowed segregationist, Collins promised to do everything in his power to legally avoid complying with *Brown*. But Collins understood what many of his peers did not, that the only way to preserve Florida’s prime economic industry, tourism, was to keep extremists on all sides at bay. Because the Supreme Court withheld a ruling regarding implementation of *Brown* until May 1965, Collins had plenty of time to draw up a “moderate” means of circumventing desegregation. The result was a devious plan for noncompliance developed by Florida’s attorney general Richard Ervin.<sup>12</sup>

Following its monumental ruling, the Supreme Court asked several state to submit briefs with suggestions on the best ways to implement school desegregation. Ervin, in his *amicus curiae* submission, outlined a plan of gradual integration and urged the “the court to restrain the use of coercive measures where necessary until the hard core of public opinion has softened.” Ervin based much of the brief on a sociological study conducted by Florida State University professor Lewis Killian. Commissioned by Ervin, Killian’s survey found, of those who responded, that 75 percent of blacks in Florida felt whites agreed with desegregation and, to the contrary, 75 percent of whites believed blacks supported segregation. In addition, Killian surveyed white policemen, and found that a large majority worried that desegregation would lead to violence. Ervin bolstered Killian’s findings with sociological data of his own. He pointed to the high poverty and illiteracy rates of black Floridians to demonstrate the imperatives of his “gradualistic”

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<sup>11</sup> Tomberlin, “Florida and the School Desegregation Issue,” 457; Rabby, *The Pain and the Promise*, 201.

<sup>12</sup> Anders Wallker, *The Ghost of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 89.



approach. Ervin essentially concluded that the socioeconomic status of blacks rendered desegregation hazardous to the overall well being of Florida's population. The brief, described by *Brown* scholar Richard Kluger as the "most extensive and spirited," of all state briefs submitted to the Supreme Court, became the foundation for thwarting desegregation in Florida.<sup>13</sup>

On May 31, the Court announced its implementation plan for school desegregation, known as *Brown II*. At the urging of the Justice Department and Southern state officials, the Court set no immediate timetable and simply proposed that desegregation efforts move "with all deliberate speed." The ambiguous "with all deliberate speed" was exactly what Collins and Ervin had hoped for. Indeed, Florida, was already on its way to formulating its own policy of handling desegregation. Several days before the Supreme Court announced *Brown II*, the state instituted a pupil placement law, a legislative manifestation of Ervin's "gradualistic" plan. The new law put the fate of school desegregation in the hands of local authorities and expanded the means by which school boards could avoid compliance.<sup>14</sup>

*Brown II* not only killed hopes for immediate desegregation, it also paved the way for massive white resistance in the South. In 1956, the separation of the races took center stage. With President Eisenhower refusing to push for more than token desegregation, opportunistic Southern politicians seized the moment by demagogically defending segregation. More than a hundred Southern congressmen-including Florida senators George Smathers and Spessard Holland- signed the "Southern Manifesto," a document

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<sup>13</sup> "Ironically," observes one historian, "this recast racial segregation from a system of legal repression to a defensive bulwark against black pathology." Anders Walker, *The Ghost of Jim Crow*, 93, 94; Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 727.

pledging to resist all attempts to implement *Brown*. Pressure came from the bottom up as well. Southern public opinion polls taken at the time revealed that 80% of white Southerners opposed school desegregation.<sup>15</sup>

During the Gubernatorial election, Collins's political rivals seized the opportunity to attack his "weak" stance on segregation. To fend off his critics, Collins turned up the dial on his commitment to segregation, but he never quite matched opponent Sumter Lowry, who called for "one hundred percent" segregation. Although Lowry garnered more than 100,000 votes, the electorate ultimately preferred Collins's more temperate approach to noncompliance. Over the next four years the state's plan of gradualism and civil noncompliance effectively prevented meaningful school desegregation. By the time Collins left office in 1961, only one school, Orchid Villa elementary in Miami, had integrated its classrooms.<sup>16</sup>

Collins may have disagreed with Florida's more extreme political elements, but he had at least one thing in common with his rival and former governor, Charley Johns. Both men, for their own reasons, detested the NAACP. And in 1956, Collins gave Johns's Florida Legislative Investigative Committee (FLIC) the greenlight. The FLIC, later dubbed the Johns committee, performed the functions of a localized House Un-American Activities Committee, tormenting any organization, person, or group, considered subversive. In its early years, the FLIC directed much of its harassment at the state NAACP and its branches, weakening their ability to fight for desegregation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mantler, "I'm Against the Way It is Being Done," 60; Puryear, "One Year Later," 226-227; Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 727-728.

<sup>15</sup> Mantler, "I'm Against the Way It is Being Done," 88; Sitkoff, *Struggle For Black Equality*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Soon after black students began attending Orchid Villa, the school became predominantly black as white families moved out of the area. Mantler, "I'm Against the Way It is Being Done," 56.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

In Pinellas County, where Collins received 69% of the vote in 1956, one can see the perfect execution of “gradualism.” There “is nothing to get excited about,” admonished school board Superintendent Floyd T. Christian in response to the *Brown* decision. Christian predicted no “major changes.” For the next year local politicians and school board officials simply avoided discussing the issue.<sup>18</sup>

Christian did not, however, speak for everyone. St. Petersburg’s black residents greeted the decision with a “absolute celebration,” remembered C. Bette Wimbish. *Brown* injected life into the struggling St. Petersburg branch of the NAACP, and with the help of state and national officials the branch began to formulate ways of enforcing desegregation. Another voice in the community, the *St. Petersburg Times*, which had long championed school desegregation, suggested in an editorial that the city take the lead in complying with *Brown* because its people had a higher degree of social conscience. Even after the announcement of *Brown II*, the *Times* called for the adoption of “a plan for a rational, workable, and reasonably speedy end to segregation.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite such sentiment, however, desegregation initially made no progress in Pinellas County. In 1954 and 1955, the county school board rejected applications submitted by Gibbs high graduates to St. Petersburg Jr. College. State NAACP officials encouraged the students to file suit, but they refused, claiming to have applied “just to see what happened.” Instead, a group of wealthy white residents got together and paid for the students to attend college out of state.<sup>20</sup>

The pupil placement law bolstered the county’s ability to circumvent integration. In 1955, the school board created the Committee on the Desegregation of Schools,

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

composed of 14 whites and 7 blacks. Contrary to its name, the committee merely devised ways of instituting the pupil placement law, and as a result, every black application to a white school between 1954 and 1959 was rejected.<sup>21</sup>

With control of school desegregation in the hands of individual school districts, and with institutions like the NAACP under fire from the Johns Committee, the Pinellas County's Board of Public Instruction also made a half-hearted effort to equalize educational opportunities for black students. Between 1954 and 1962 nine new black schools opened, while black applicants to St. Petersburg Junior College prompted the creation of all-black Gibbs Junior College. The state built eleven such colleges, locating them near white counterparts in areas where projected black enrollment exceeded 100 students. Such developments left many black leaders conflicted. Although they grimaced every time a new black school opened, the reality of better supplies and facilities for black students was a welcome development. The push for integration, however, continued. When a new all-white high school, Dixie Hollins, opened in 1959, eleven black students applied. NAACP attorney Francisco Rodriguez sent a series of petitions to Superintendent Christian to admit the students. Christian, while appearing to give the petitions serious consideration, ultimately rejected the applications. Instead, in an effort to sustain the pupil placement law's capacity to prevent wholesale desegregation, the school board initiated token integration in 1961. That summer St. Petersburg Junior College admitted two black students and in 1962, St. Petersburg High School, and Tomlinson Vocational School admitted several black students. By the 1963 100 blacks had transferred to previously all-white schools, and black leaders expected additional

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<sup>20</sup> Puryear, "Desegregation," 222.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

desegregation the following year. But by the start of the 1964 school year, only two percent of the county's black students were attending classes with whites. Tokenism was still the order of the day.<sup>22</sup>

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Sitting in his Boston apartment one day, Jim Sanderlin, thirty-three years old and fresh out of law school, had a decision to make. He had job offers from firms in Boston and his family was urging him to return to Washington, D.C., where he had earned his Bachelor's degree at Howard University. But Sanderlin wanted something different. Boston University's job placement services put him in contact with Fred Minnis, "a crafty" civil rights lawyer who had been across the country recruiting young black law attorneys to come to St. Petersburg. Eager to see the "the Deep South," but "too afraid to go to Mississippi," Sanderlin struck a compromise by agreeing to move to St. Petersburg in 1962.<sup>23</sup>

In St. Petersburg he joined a small cadre of local black attorneys. Sanderlin joined the firm of Minnis and Williams where he clerked alongside recent Howard Law school graduate Frank Peterman. The two cut their teeth working on the Webb's City injunction and the case of the arrested theater demonstrators, and after passing the bar in 1963, formed their own firm with Frank White, a native of St. Petersburg and the top student in his graduating class at FAMU law school. With the clear expectation of

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<sup>22</sup> Mantler, "I'm Against the Way It is Being Done," 45. *St. Petersburg Times*, November 11, 1968.

<sup>23</sup> Amy Goodden "James B. Sanderlin: The Gentle Giant of Civil Rights In Pinellas County, 1962-1990" (undergraduate honor's thesis, University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, 1995), 17; Ray Sanderlin, interview by author, 2009.

handling civil rights cases, the law firm of White, Peterman, and Sanderlin represented a changing of the guard in local legal circles.<sup>24</sup>

From the outset, Sanderlin wanted to foster the integration of Pinellas County. Along with White, he attended NAACP Legal Defense Fund seminars in New Orleans that stressed the importance of “institutional reform litigation” and outlined the proper procedures for handling desegregation cases. Sanderlin’s enthusiasm encountered resistance on all fronts. Conservative black leaders, initially opposed to the construction of new schools, had come to appreciate the increased funding and expanded opportunities; and from years of dealing with the school board, they feared retribution. Moreover, Sanderlin, eventually beloved by the black community, was still a bit of a newcomer, and like many of the northern whites who moved to the area in the postwar decades, lacked a broader understanding of local conditions. Nonetheless, by 1964 most of Florida’s larger urban counties already faced desegregation lawsuits, and it was time for Pinellas County to face the inevitable. After a family in St. Petersburg dropped a pending case in early 1964, Leon Bradley Sr., a police officer in Clearwater, contacted Frank White about suing the county school board.<sup>25</sup>

The previous year, Bradley, vice president of the Clearwater NAACP, had asked the board to transfer his son from the all-black Pinellas High School to John F. Kennedy Jr. Middle school. Bradley merely wanted to give his son an opportunity, something missing at the overcrowded, ill-equipped Pinellas High. Francisco Rodriguez sent numerous petitions to the School board on his behalf, to no avail. But Bradley refused to give up. After a two-hour meeting with Bradley, White concluded that the proposed

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<sup>24</sup> Goodden, “James B. Sanderlin,” 19; Author’s interview with Ray Sanderlin, 2009.

lawsuit would cost around \$15,000, more than Bradley could afford. But it did not matter. This was the case White and Sanderlin had been looking for.<sup>26</sup>

In May 1964, under the auspices of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Jim Sanderlin filed suit against the Pinellas County school board. After Superintendent Floyd T. Christian downplayed the developments, confident in the knowledge that the school board had deflected the earlier lawsuit by ending “double zoning” for elementary schools. Christian promised *Bradley v. Board of Public Instruction of Pinellas County* would meet a similar fate.<sup>27</sup>

He was wrong. Ruling on January 15, 1965, Federal District Judge Joseph Lieb called for a “comprehensive” desegregation plan that “eliminated dual attendance zones and reassigned pupils, faculty, and other personnel on a non-racial basis.” Two months later school board attorney Edward Turville and Sanderlin presented Leib with a plan to desegregate the entire Pinellas County school system by the 1968-1969 school year. Calling the plan “a realistic and fair one, considering the circumstances and conditions in the community, personnel and administrative problems,” Leib endorsed the proposal.<sup>28</sup>

The plan may have been the best available, but according to historian Gordon Mantler, it “contained two major flaws.” First, the “vague” definition of a “desegregated school” allowed school board officials to declare that a school was conforming to the guidelines of the plan as long as it had at least one black student. Second, the plan called

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<sup>25</sup> Goodden, “James B. Sanderlin,” 20-21, 24; *St. Petersburg Times*, February 15, 1962; Mantler, “I’m Against the Way It is Being Done,” 77,80.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-28.

<sup>27</sup> The earlier case was *Williams v. Board of Public Instruction of Pinellas County*. Mantler, “I’m Against the Way It is Being Done,” 80; Goodden, “James B. Sanderlin,” 29.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*,84; *St. Petersburg*, March 16, 1965.

for the closing of black schools, setting the stage for the elimination of the institutional infrastructure that sustained the black community's economic and occupational base.<sup>29</sup>

The problems with the Lieb plan were evident almost immediately. In its 1967 annual report, the school board claimed all twelve of the county's high schools had been desegregated. But these figures were misleading. At the time, Boca Ciega high school had only one black student and Gibbs had just one white one. Northeast High School had one black teacher, but no black students. Clearwater's Pinellas High remained an all-black institution. School board officials, nevertheless, claimed that the desegregation effort was ahead of schedule.<sup>30</sup>

The closing of Gibbs Junior College (GJC) presented another dilemma. Although its opening in 1957 infuriated many in the black community, the school had by 1964 become an invaluable source of upward mobility for blacks and an acceptable alternative to the largely white St. Petersburg Junior College. In the summer of 1965, GJC became part of SPJC and was renamed Skyway campus. Two years later a new SPJC campus opened in Clearwater and Skyway campus shut its doors for good. Blacks had continued to enroll at Gibbs after it became Skyway, but after it closed the number of black applicants to SPJC dropped off dramatically. Many black students just did not feel welcome in the predominantly white halls and classrooms of SPJC.<sup>31</sup>

As Sanderlin prepared motions against the school board's attempts to sidestep desegregation, another group in St. Petersburg found its voice. Twelve black officers in the St. Petersburg Police Department came to Sanderlin with a list of complaints, the most glaring of which was the department's discriminatory practice of assigning all of its

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<sup>29</sup> Mantler, "Im Against the Way it is Being Done," 84-85.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.



black officers to a single patrol area, known as Zone 13, which was almost exclusively black. Sanderlin felt they had case, but questioned whether the officers knew what they were getting into. “Ain’t no turning back,” he told them, “they gone really put the heat one you.” The officers, later known as the “courageous twelve,” decided to go ahead with the case anyway. In May 1965 Sanderlin filed suit against the city of St. Petersburg, City Manager Lynn Andrews, and Police Chief Harold C. Smith, calling for a permanent injunction enjoining the department from continuing its discriminatory practices. Although the city’s two black sergeants, Sam Jones and Hosea Rogers, were not directly involved, Sanderlin filed the case, *Baker v. City of St. Petersburg*, as a class action suit, incorporating the two men.<sup>32</sup>

As he would do with Sanderlin’s motions regarding school desegregation over the next two years, Judge Joseph Lieb found the arguments on behalf of the plaintiff unconvincing. Lieb concluded that Andrews and Smith, “charged with the duty of operating the Police Department. . .are vested with wide discretion in matters affecting the management and use of their personnel.” The NAACP Legal Defense Fund, in addition to covering the costs, sent lawyers Jack Greenberg and Leroy D. Clark to help Sanderlin with an appeal. More than a year after filing an appeal with the Fifth Circuit Sanderlin discovered the Court had misplaced the brief, an error that caused a fifteen month delay in the appeal proceedings. Insisting his office had sent the court the proper documents, Sanderlin was perplexed. But the black leadership in St. Petersburg had a more pressing problem. Although the “courageous twelve” would eventually have their

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<sup>31</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, May 6, 1964.

<sup>32</sup> Monica Rowland, “Zone 13: *Baker, et. al. v. City of St. Petersburg, et. al.* Discrimination on the St. Petersburg Police Force,” (University of South Florida, graduate seminar paper, 2004), 5; Author’s interview with Raymond Sanderlin, 2009.

day in court, and win, a new obstacle had emerged, establishing a new tone in the local struggle for black equality.<sup>33</sup>

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Five days after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the Watts section of Los Angeles, California, exploded into race riots. For six days the Watts ghetto-home to nearly a quarter of a million blacks-became a war zone. Thousands of National Guardsmen and Los Angeles Police Department officers moved in to quell the violent uprising of more than 50,000 disenfranchised black Americans. Thirty-four dead and \$30 million dollars in property damage later, Watts typified the growing disillusionment with nonviolence and the inadequacies of the movement's progress. Over the next three years race riots erupted across the country. The plight of black America-once pegged as a distinctly Southern phenomenon-now appeared a systemic, nationwide affliction.<sup>34</sup>

In Watts to witness the chaos was twenty-five year old Joseph A. Waller. On a leave of absence from his job at the *St. Petersburg Times*, Waller traveled to Los Angeles in early 1965. During and after the riot, he wrote correspondence pieces for the *Times*. With access to places and information inaccessible to white journalists, he kept the Sunshine City abreast of the turmoil, and for the first time in his life witnessed the "the power of the people." He returned to St. Petersburg as an inspired black militant.<sup>35</sup>

Growing up in tight knit black neighborhood in segregated St. Petersburg, Waller developed an acute racial consciousness at an early age. As a kid shining shoes on

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<sup>33</sup> CA 65-148-T, "Finding of Fact and Conclusion of Law (Judge Lieb), March 31, 1966; Rowland, "Zone 13," 12; and *St. Petersburg Times*, August 1968.

<sup>34</sup> Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 185, 192.

<sup>35</sup> Omali Yeshitela, interview by author, June 23, 2009; Anita Richway Cutting, "From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela: How a Controversial Mural Changed a Man" (unpublished undergraduate honors thesis, University of South Florida, 2000), 17.

Central Ave, he asked his boss why the shoes of black folks were off limits. Later, after a series of run-ins with police officers and white authority figures, he became increasingly discouraged by the city's overt racial inequities. Fed up, he joined the Army in 1958. While stationed in Germany, Waller experienced a sense of freedom alien to black southerners. Friendships formed with blacks from other parts of the world illuminated a transnational struggle that transcended the informed the civil rights movement at home. Upon returning to the states, Waller was stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia, where his confident and confrontational attitude did nothing but get him into trouble. Honorably discharged in 1962, he made his way home to St. Petersburg, determined to get involved in the local struggle.<sup>36</sup>

His actual involvement came when *St. Petersburg Times* journalist Peggy Peterman introduced him to the NAACP. For a time he attended NAACP meetings and participated in demonstrations to desegregate the movie theaters. But it was not long before he concluded that the NAACP's efforts were "worthless" and "could not take them seriously." Impatient for substantive change, he managed Frank Peterman's daring but unsuccessful campaign for a seat in the state legislature. Despite his close friendship with the Petermans, he never felt comfortable in their circle of middle-class activists. The discomfort was mutual for Peterman's law partner, Jim Sanderlin, who never liked Waller hanging around their law office. After the campaign Peterman sent Waller to South Carolina to work for the CORE's Voter Education Project (VEP). CORE attorney John Due put Waller in charge of voter-registration and antipoverty projects in North Florida. Waller, however, could not buy into the organization's nonviolent ethos. At a

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<sup>36</sup> Regaldo's interview with Alvelita Donaldson, June 28, 2004; Cutting, "From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela," 5; Author's interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009.

rally in Gainesville, to the chagrin of VEP director Vernon Jordan, Waller advocated “Black Power,” a move that led to the end of his stint with the VEP. Undeterred, Waller formed the Florida chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).<sup>37</sup>

By 1966 the SNCC’s message and agenda jibed well with Waller’s sensibilities. Proponents of nonviolence at its inception in 1960, SNCC operatives had become increasingly disillusioned with the slow pace of change and the federal government’s unwillingness to protect civil rights activists. Failed voter registration projects in places like Albany, Georgia, and the crushing denouement of the 1964 Freedom Summer solidified SNCC’s militant turn. By the time “Black Power” advocate Stokely Carmichael became SNCC Chairman in 1966, the organization had already lost faith in nonviolence forms of protest.<sup>38</sup>

With a SNCC chapter up and operational and a “motivated” Waller at the helm, St. Petersburg’s racial tensions heated up in the winter of 1966. The city’s sanitation workers, all but one of whom were black, went on a week-long strike in November for better pay. Jim Sanderlin and Frank Peterman, though busy with the *Baker* appeal, represented an eight-man committee of refuse employees in labor negotiations with city administrators. City Manager Lynn Andrews publicly ridiculed the strikers and initially refused to talk. Within two days Andrews had fired 70% of the sanitation department’s workforce, recruited scabs to fill the vacant positions, and ordered riot gear for police

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<sup>37</sup> Cutting, “From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela,” 16-17; While Peterman ran for a house seat in Group 9, Ike Williams sought a seat in Group 7, but eventually dropped out. *St. Petersburg Times*, March 19, 1966; “We assumed the identity of SNCC,” Waller remembered, “we built it from the ground up.” Author’s interview with Omali Yeshitela, June, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, June 23, 2009; Sitkoff, *Struggle For Black Equality*, 171; and Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1-3.

officers. After several days of mounting pressure, however, Andrews capitulated and negotiated a settlement.<sup>39</sup>

The city's handling of the strike incensed Waller and his followers. SNCC, however, had trouble translating its frustrations into actions. Despite his criticisms of the NAACP, Waller initially led SNCC in a similar direction. Hoping to lure Stokely Carmichael for a visit, SNCC picketed an ABC liquor lounge in the black community that banned black patrons from entering the store and sitting at the bar. The orderly and uneventful picketing lasted more than a week and received little press coverage. Although SNCC struggled to win the support of other black leaders, Waller's friendship with Frank and Peggy Peterman kept SNCC from complete alienation. The Petermans could not always endorse Waller's radical views, but they encouraged his social activism and surreptitiously provided SNCC with financial support. In addition, SNCC found a confidante in Marvin Davies. Fired from his job as a teacher in Fort Myers because of his civil rights activities, Davies became a field secretary for the NAACP and opened an office in St. Petersburg in 1966. Initially SNCC shared space with Davies and could "rely" on him for material and moral support.<sup>40</sup>

Waller not only had trouble garnering the support of fellow movement leaders; he also found widespread apathy within the black community. But an opportunity to arouse the community emerged when city leaders announced their intention to spend a \$50 million federal grant on beautifying the downtown area. Waller felt he had found an issue around which people could rally. Slum-like conditions pervaded the black

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<sup>39</sup> Author's interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009; *Evening Independent*, November 15, 1966, November 19, 1966.

<sup>40</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, November 11, 1966; Author's interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009; Cutting, "From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela," 20-21.

community, where many homes held tenants but had no indoor plumbing, and the dirty streets Waller had walked along as a kid were still unpaved and unlit at night. If SNCC was going to garner any support against the grant-spending, the organization needed to prove its legitimacy. They found their cause hanging on the wall in city hall.<sup>41</sup>

In 1945, painter George Snow Hill finished the piece, “Picnicking at Pass-a-Grille.” Five years earlier, the St. Petersburg city council had commissioned Hill to paint one of his well-known “Southern Living” murals for the new city hall. For decades, “Picnicking at Pass-a-Grille,” depicting caricatures of black musicians with oversized pink lips, “elongated faces,” and grins that one critic described as looking “more like apes than men,” hung along the heavily trafficked first landing of the hall’s main stairway. According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, the mural’s “rich colors” held the “attention of admirers,” and “attracted interest and comment daily.”<sup>42</sup>

Those “admirers” were not black people. “There wasn’t a black person I ever met that didn’t despise that mural,” remembered Peggy Peterman. Beginning in the 1950s, city hall received complaints about the mural’s offensiveness. Ruth McClellan and her husband Charles, white social activists and members of the Council on Human Relations, voiced their distaste for the mural. Others, including future city councilman Ernest Fillyau and the Reverend Enoch Davis, lobbied city administrators to take the painting down. “Instead of removing the painting,” wrote Davis in his memoir, “the members of the council listened and laughed but did nothing about our request.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, December 13, 1953; Cutting, “From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela,” 23; Hank’s interview with Peggy Peterman, November 4, 1994.

<sup>42</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, December 13, 1953; Cutting, “From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela,” 23; Hank’s interview with Peggy Peterman, November 4, 1994.

<sup>43</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, December 13, 1953; Cutting, “From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela,” 22, 24; Author’s interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009; Davis, *On the Bethel Trail*, 100.

In December, Waller sent a letter to Mayor Herman Goldner requesting that the city take down the “despicable” and “derogatory” mural. Goldner scoffed at the suggestion. “I find nothing offensive,” he explained and “must admit that I have looked at this mural for the past ten years with nothing but admiration.” The mayor referred the letter to the head of the Community Relations Commission (CRC), Chester K. Guth, who echoed Goldner’s sentiments. “It is our feeling that this mural is a work of art,” retorted Guth in a letter to Waller. Guth compared the mural to classic “masterpieces” that would have long been burned “all because someone takes exception.”<sup>44</sup> Waller tried again. In another letter he re-articulated his points: “It is the consensus of the black community of St. Petersburg that it was most unfair for the city to use taxpayer money (Negroes included) to inflict the pains of racism as demonstrated in the picture at city hall.” Unfortunately, although Waller was correct to suggest that there was widespread condemnation of the mural in the black community, he soon realized he did not have the community’s support when it came to tactics.<sup>45</sup>

After reading an article published in the *Evening Independent* on December 23, describing SNCC’s intentions of marching on city hall in protest of the mural, the Rev. Davis called an emergency meeting of the NAACP and CCC. Davis had concerns, fearing years of dedicated public service and successful social activism hung in the balance. With one uprising SNCC could undo decades of progress. At the meeting, veteran black leaders expressed their strong disapproval of SNCC’s plans. NAACP president Louis O. Harper understood SNCC’s grievances, but felt other issues were more important. “Picketing should be a last resort,” added one of Waller’s former high

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<sup>44</sup> Author’s interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009; Cutting, “From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela,” 25-26; *St. Petersburg Times*, December 15, 1966.

school teachers, Fannye Ayer Ponder. Chester K. Guth suggested SNCC let the CRC handle the situation.<sup>46</sup>

SNCC members gathered at Webb's City on December 29, confident a victory was imminent. On Christmas Eve Waller had led a march to city hall, discouraged that it was closed for the holidays. They planned another trip to coincide with a city council meeting, realizing the city's major media outlets would be on hand to cover the meeting. Hoping to create a spectacle, the group marched two miles to city hall chanting "Lynn Andrews Must Go" along the way. Across the street from city hall State Attorney Investigator Dennis Quilligan and Justice of the Peace Richard Carr peered from their windows as the marchers arrived. As a crowd of mostly white onlookers formed near the steps of city hall, an elderly black woman began to speak. With Waller at her side, she launched into diatribe and in broken English lambasted local insurance companies for taking advantage of black clients. When laughter from the white crowd mocked the woman's garbled speech and cut her off, Waller lost his patience. Turning on his heel, the SNCC leader entered city hall, with Jody Wall, an eighteen-year old SNCC member trailing close behind. They ran up the stairs to where the mural hung and ripped it down, and together the two men carried the piece outside. "We're gonna take this picture down where all the black folks can see it," Waller shouted just outside city hall. Camera crews followed as Waller headed for the black community.<sup>47</sup>

People were shocked. "You black bastard," yelled a white woman as Waller left city hall. Waller and Wall then paraded down the sidewalk, with SNCC members,

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<sup>45</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, December 15, 1966; Author's interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Cutting, "From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela," 27-28; *St. Petersburg Times*, December 24, 1966.

<sup>47</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, December, 25, 1966; Cutting, "From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela," 33; Author's interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009.



journalists, camera-crews, and other witnesses in tow. Though temporarily caught off guard, law enforcement officials rushed in. Detective Homer Allen, who had seen the march developing earlier in the day, subdued Wall with the help of Thomas Witham. Down the street officers apprehended SNCC activists Tommy Williams, Lemuel Green, John Wesley Bryant, and Crawford Jones. Before getting pinned down, Williams managed to distract police long enough to give Waller time to get away. Dragging the mural behind him as he ran westbound on Central Ave, Waller briefly evaded capture by throwing the mural at the feet of a pursuing officer, Lt. Adkins. Eventually Adkins managed to corral Waller and placed him in handcuffs and under arrest. The crumpled mural lay on the ground with more than a third of its paint chipped off, a symbol of protest march that somehow had turned into a spectacle of brazen defiance.<sup>48</sup>

At the police station, Waller, Jody Wall, Tommy Williams, and Lemuel Green were charged with grand larceny, resisting arrest with violence, destruction of public property, and unlawful assembly, affray, or riot, and held on eight thousand dollars bail. Crawford Jones and John Wesley Bryant received lesser charges and a seven thousand dollar bail. Several of the...refused to cooperate, including Tommy Williams who refused to sit on a bench with codefendants, an officer punched him in the stomach. The defendant's "cocky attitude" continued in the courtroom of Justice of Peace Richard Carr. "We can stand the cracker law, man- if you'd only read it loud enough so we could hear," someone shouted as the bailiff read the charges. Waller initially refused to declare himself indigent in order to secure a public defender, but changed his mind and informed the judge he would only take one "if he is not part of this racist power structure." Carr

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<sup>48</sup> Author's interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009; Cutting, "From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela," 33; *St. Petersburg Times*, December 29, 1966; *Pittsburg Post Gazette*, December 27, 1966; and *Lodi-News*

added municipal charges to the equation, increasing each of the defendants' bond by fifteen hundred dollars. Unable to afford bail, all six went to the Pinellas County jail.<sup>49</sup>

In the aftermath conservative black leaders distanced themselves from the incident and Waller. At an "emergency" NAACP meeting the night of the arrests, Marvin Davies stated the organization's position: "It is highly unfortunate that the despicable mural was removed. We feel another method could have been employed to accomplish similar results. As concerned leaders of the black community, we oppose any act which defaces public property. However, we are too, opposed to any stereotype paintings of any nature."<sup>50</sup>

The local news media skewered Waller and his companions. In an attempt to undermine any public sympathy, the *Evening Independent* ran an interview with the mural's creator, George Snow Hill, who defended his work and claimed to be "hurt" by its destruction. Often an advocate of the black freedom struggle, the *St. Petersburg Times*, nonetheless condemned Waller's actions. "Hoodlumism is no solution to the grievances of the Negro minority," read an editorial, "such actions bring nothing but injury to the cause of racial equality and justice." City administrators agreed. Mayor Herman Goldner, echoing the sentiments of Ross Windom during the Spa Beach controversy, said "there is no attitude at City Hall that this was a responsible act of our Negro citizens but an irresponsible act of a few of our Negro community." Framing his words to imply a sense of solidarity between the black and white communities, Goldner added, "I am sure that

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*Sentinel*, December 30, 1966.

<sup>49</sup> Cutting, "From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela," 37-39.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

the vast majority of our Negro citizenry are as ashamed of these persons who committed this act as we are.”<sup>51</sup>

The fallout was not what Joe Waller had anticipated. Hopes for a credible civil rights victory that might bolster SNCC’s influence had been dashed in the span of ten minutes. For five of the six defendants the battle had been ended in court with either dismissals or probation. The legacy of Waller’s impetuous action became his and his alone. Instead of creating an inspirational spectacle, Waller had become one. While incarcerated he did his best to prolong the public’s attention. A hunger strike sent him to the jail’s hospital ward. When the trial began on January 30, 1967, Waller fired his attorney and long-time confidante Frank Peterman. Feeling that the trial “had to be treated politically.” He asked Peterman to file a postponement, hoping CORE would send a lawyer to represent him. Peterman, also defending Bryant, felt a delay would harm his clients and ignored the request. Without a lawyer and unable to defend himself, Waller received a sentence of one hundred and eighty days behind bars. Returning to jail, the embattled SNCC leader resumed his hunger strike. During interviews with reporters he dismissed the judge’s ruling as “white justice,” and added, “the whole thing was planned and decided before I went into court. It didn’t make any difference what I said.”<sup>52</sup>

Waller’s defiance did matter, however, to the other defendants. Careful not to mimic their leader’s example, Wall, Williams, Bryant, Green, and Jones appeared contrite before the court. Although Municipal Judge Henry Esteva found all of them

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 40; *St. Petersburg Times*, December 30, 1966.

<sup>52</sup> Cutting, “From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela,” 45-46.

guilty, he suspended their sentences. Only Waller served time for the municipal offenses. But the six were not out of the woods yet.<sup>53</sup>

The circuit court trials in Clearwater were fraught with complications. Presiding Judge Charles Phillips sympathized with the defendants and after a meeting with Waller, urged the city to grant parade permits to SNCC supporters. To lessen the chance of civil disruptions, Clearwater law enforcement officials darkened the windows of the courtroom and patrolled the grounds in plain clothes. But these precautions proved unnecessary as the threat of mass picketing never materialized.<sup>54</sup>

The number of lawyers involved in the case further complicated matters. While Assistant State Attorneys Richard Mensh and Allen Allweiss represented the state, the CORE's legal counsel John Due and Gainesville attorney Leslie H. Levinson handled Waller's defense. E.M. Davis represented Jones and Williams, and public defenders Robert E. Jagger and Paul Barnard took the cases of Bryant, Green, and Wall. Due and Levinson requested a stay, arguing that trying Waller and the other defendants again for the same crimes constituted double jeopardy. The Florida Supreme Court disagreed and the trials went ahead. Despite a dizzying array of defense strategies the jury took only four hours to render a split verdict: Waller and Wall were guilty, and the other six were innocent. In July 1967, Judge Phillips rejected Waller's appeal for probation and sentenced him to six months to five years in prison. Later, after initially withholding adjudication, Phillips gave Wall three years probation, considering him a risk to the social order.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 49-51.

Waller later claimed, however, he “did not have to go to prison,” that an apology on the stand would have led to a lighter sentence. But he was unable to “walk away from it.” “If one is ever convinced he is on the right side of history,” he explained, “the true sacrifice is doing nothing.” No one, including Judge Phillips, expected Waller to serve more than six months. But neither he nor anyone else understood the depths of Waller’s alienation or his determination to fight for what he believed in. Two and a half years in prison would both steal his spirits and fuel his rage.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Author’s interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009.

## Chapter Four: The Great Refusal

"History began to catch up with Americans," in 1968 noted historian C. Vann Woodward. The "fabled immunity from frustration and defeat had faltered and their myths of virtue and innocence became stock subject of jeers and ridicule. . ." By the late Sixties, "Racism and mechanization and a lagging labor movement rendered African Americans poor, powerless, and exploited." The progressive accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement had done little to erase the country's economic inequities. According to national statistics, in the mid-1960s black unemployment had reached 10% as compared to 5% for whites, and blacks earned on average 45% less than whites. Moreover, the increasing militancy of the antiwar movement and the ascendancy of "Black Power" to the fore of the civil rights struggle alienated many of the white liberals who once-supported both causes. The social welfare programs of Johnson's Great Society fell out of favor with Americans both disillusioned by the war in Vietnam and tired of rampant racial violence. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in May marked the twilight of the classical Civil Rights Movement and along with the murder of presidential candidate Robert Kennedy, compounded the nation's sense of urgency and moral declension. America's opportunity to redress centuries of injustice eventually dissolved in a wave of reactionary politics. History had begun to "catch up with Americans" indeed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Looking Back: The Perils of Writing History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 113; Michael Honey, "Martin Luther King Jr., and the Crisis of the Black Working Class, and the Memphis Strike," in *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940-1995*, ed. Robert Zeiger (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 152, 159; and James Sullivan, "The Florida Teacher Walkout in the Political Transition of 1968," in *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940-1995*, ed. by Robert Zeiger (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 207.

In St. Petersburg, the racial tensions between the white and black communities had only intensified since the mural incident. The efforts of local organizations like the NAACP to procure better job opportunities for blacks had made little progress. By the beginning of 1968, fifty-nine percent of the city's black population earned less than \$100 a week. And nowhere did the city's economic and racial inequalities intersect more so than within the ranks of the sanitation department. As the eyes of the nation turned to Memphis, Tennessee, where Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated while in town assisting black sanitation workers in a citywide strike, long standing tensions within St. Petersburg's own department bubbled to the surface. While community leaders like Ike Williams and Chester K. Guth warned the atmosphere in St. Petersburg had the "ingredients of a riot," others downplayed the building tensions. But a month after King's death, the spirit of Memphis touched St. Petersburg.<sup>2</sup>

On May 6, 1968, a number of the city's sanitation employees went on strike. At 8 a.m. that morning, after receiving word of the stoppage, City Manager Andrews arrived at the sanitation department's Lake Maggiore compound where he found plenty of sanitation workers, but few willing to work. Andrews listened as the milling workers announced their grievances, including the lack of pay raises for collectors and foremen. The men expressed their frustrations for what they considered to be broken promises. A month earlier the city had restructured the hours and pay scales for the sanitation department. Instead of paying \$101.40 for six days of work including time and a half on Saturdays, the new system paid \$73.00 for five days of work. Sanitation Director Walter Schultz initially gained employee support for the plan by promising a month-long trial

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<sup>2</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, April 15, 1968, April 17, 1968.

period, after which the accounting books would be opened and some of the savings shared with the workers. But a month later, support began to dwindle as the books remained closed. The city asked for a two-week extension. After two weeks, another extension. By then the sanitation employees had had enough and responded with a strike. Andrews recommended the men take the day off, return to work the next morning, and give the city time to consider their demands.<sup>3</sup>

Later, at an emergency city council meeting, Andrew's labeled the situation a "wild cat" strike, the product of a "few dissident workers," and dismissed their demand for a 25-cents an hour raise. Andrews had seen this before. To avert a strike in 1964, he granted the requested raises. In 1966, again unhappy with their pay, refuse workers walked off the job. Taking a tougher stance, Andrews hired "scabs" from out of town as temporary replacements. But after a week, he gave in. This time, however, having wilted under pressure twice already, Andrews was "not going to be intimidated."<sup>4</sup>

The sanitation workers, too, had learned from the past. During the 1966 work stoppage, when an editorial in the *St. Petersburg Times* said the strikers were not worthy of raise because they were illiterate, sanitation crew chief Joe Savage formed the Young Men's Progressive Club (YMPC). The organization, comprised of Savage's coworkers, hired *Times* reporter Sam Adams to teach them to read and write. In addition, the YMPC enlisted Jim Sanderlin and Frank Peterman to speak on their behalf in monthly meetings with department heads. Over the next two years many of the city's refuse workers prepared for the possibility of another standoff.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, May 7, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, July 31, 1964, and November 11, 1966, May 7, 1968.

<sup>5</sup> Babb, "We Took the Leadership Away," 307; and Joseph Savage, interview by Richard Lally, July 9, 1999.



On Tuesday May 7, the second day of the strike, Andrews fired fifty-two sanitation workers when they refused to go to work. For another two days (the sanitation department usually took Wednesdays off) garbage went uncollected as the strikers sat idle in solidarity. Several of the workers reportedly wanted no part in the strike, but feared violent repercussions from coworkers if they refused to participate. Others remained on the job, and later, many suffered the consequences. While negotiations between Andrews and strike leaders continued, Savage urged his men to return to work.<sup>6</sup>

At the advice of their leaders, 150 refuse workers showed up at the sanitation compound Thursday morning. Only 40 were there to work. The others had come to protest. Around 7:10 a.m. a garbage truck escorted by police cruisers tried to leave the premises. With Sanderlin and Savage looking on, protestors formed a barrier to block the exit. After Police Sgt. Ray Stewart warned them to back off, Sanderlin interceded and convinced them to move, allowing two garbage trucks to leave the premises. Moments later, as a third truck sped away, confusion ensued when thirty-five sanitation workers, at the sight of police, broke ranks and abandoned the strike. Squad cars pulled into the compound and officers clad in riot gear piled out. After ensuring the safe passage of a fourth and final truck, the riot-squad hung around for half an hour before leaving. The protestors also disbanded and headed home, ready to fight another day. (footnote: During the 1966 strike the city had purchased \$35,000 in riot equipment but had never used it until now.) The four sanitation trucks collected refuse from hospitals, schools, and businesses, but residential trash piled up for the fourth consecutive day.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, May 8, 1968.

<sup>7</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, May 9, 1968, May 10, 1968.

In light of the incident, Andrews took firm control of the situation. After firing the 120 absentees, he threw out the "new system," a major impetus for the strike, and reverted to the old system with a 5-cents an hour raise. To drive his point home and show he was serious, Andrews provided temporary relief from the lack of trash collection by establishing several cities where citizens could dump their own refuse. After two days, over 12,000 vehicles had dumped trash at one of the eleven designated locations. Responding to complaints from other departments about the unfairness of a special raise for the sanitation workers, Andrews hoped to defuse the situation. He announced a five-cents an hour pay raise for the city's 958 hourly employees. Sanderlin and Savage met with Andrews and reduced their demand to a twenty-cents an hour increase. Andrews countered with his final offer, 7-cents more an hour. Talks stalled.<sup>8</sup>

Speaking that night at Bethel Community Baptist Church, Ike Williams, then president of the St. Petersburg chapter of the NAACP, proposed an impromptu march to city hall, where Sanderlin busily negotiated with city leaders. Singing refrains of "We Shall Overcome," sixty people headed downtown. The councilmen were, however, unmoved by the display, and in reaffirming their support for Andrews, rejected Sanderlin's demands.<sup>9</sup>

Days of fruitless negotiations turned into weeks. Over time, as the sanitation department slowly filled its vacancies with scabs and the occasional defeated striker, and every day more garbage trucks took to the streets, Andrew's position strengthened. "There will be no more effort to meet with these people, period," he declared, "they are no longer city employees." Within two weeks, Schultz reported garbage collection was

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<sup>8</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, May 11, 1968.

back to "100%." In truth, refuse collection had been limited to white neighborhoods, completely neglecting the black parts of town. The department finally addressed the trash buildup in the black community, sending garbage trucks manned by inmates from the city jail, accompanied by police cruisers, to pick up the refuse. Unimpressed, Savage led reporters through alleys in other black neighborhoods where rotting trash was piled high and overflowing into the right of way. But with an ever-improving sanitation department up and running, and the support of much of the city council and chamber of commerce, Andrews had little reason to back down.<sup>10</sup>

Pressuring the chamber of commerce to rescind its support for Andrews, the NAACP revived the "selective buying" spirit of 1960, calling for an economic boycott of white-owned business on May 23. According to Williams, the proposal "was partially in sympathy with the 211 striking garbagemen and partially to protest the discriminatory hiring practices by city hall and the general racist attitude of downtown merchants and professional businessmen." The NAACP saw the inchoate controversy as the perfect opportunity to redress a variety of systemic problems facing the black community.<sup>11</sup>

The strikers got another, unexpected, boost when Mayor Don Jones, broke ranks with his fellow councilman. Angered by the city's "poor judgment," Jones charged the city with "sowing the seeds of the present garbage crisis." A transplant from Geneva, New York, and former insurance salesman, Jones had been on the city council since 1963 when his friend, Mayor Herman Goldner, convinced him to get into politics. "I don't think city council or the administration have fulfilled their responsibility or shown a sensitivity to the community," he explained, "and these garbage men are now the focal

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<sup>9</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, May 11, 1968.

point of that failure." During the weeklong strike in 1966, Jones had urged Andrews to use restraint and encouraged him to negotiate a settlement. While Jones was only one man with one vote on a council of nine, his defection provided the strikers much needed moral support, even if it cost him his political career. For more than three months Jones was the only major city official to publicly endorse the striker's cause.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the verbal sparring between Jones and his contemporaries and the stepped up efforts of the NAACP, nothing substantial emerged to pressure Andrews or the city council. As May faded into June, negotiations stagnated. Andrews refused to open talks with the "fired" men, and newspaper editorials revealed a torn public. Many residents disagreed with Andrews's handling of the situation and vented disdain for city administrators. Others expressed confusion and bewilderment. Blinded by beautiful sunsets and myths of social harmony, much of St. Petersburg's white population failed to discern the growing racial tension within the black community. Ignoring the lessons of the Memphis strike, convinced that similar events "could not happen here," the city council, led by an authoritarian city manager, simply dug in its heels and refused to negotiate.<sup>13</sup>

The symptoms, however, of building social turmoil, were in plain sight. On June 5, the *St. Petersburg Times* published an assessment of the damage. Since May 9, the report read, "Twenty fires had been deliberately set causing an estimated damage of \$300,000." Firebombs burned a lumberyard, destroyed automobiles, and set a house ablaze. The St. Petersburg fire department responded to eight fires within a 12-hour

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<sup>10</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, May 5, 1968.

<sup>11</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, May 14, 1968;

<sup>12</sup> Don Jones, interview by author, August 20, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, August 20, 2008.

period on June 4 alone. During the first few evenings of the strike, firebombs struck the homes of two non-striking sanitation employees. Savage expressed doubt that sanitation workers were responsible for the bombings, but confessed he "really couldn't be sure." To distance themselves from the incendiary acts, Sanderlin and Savage formed an Anti-Violence Committee. Both the city council and the Anti-Violence Committee offered rewards for information leading to the arrests of those involved in the firebombings. But the random acts continued. Weeks later, gun shots, firebombs, bricks, and glass bottles-again targeting sanitation workers not participating in the strike-shattered windows and ignited fires. Such disturbances continued sporadically in the oncoming weeks, keeping police officers, already working twelve-hour shifts, many without a day off, fatigued and on constant call.<sup>14</sup>

With few other options, the idle sanitation workers took their case to the streets in a series of marches, hoping to mobilize an apathetic public around their cause. Aside from the spontaneous march nearly three weeks earlier, the struggle had remained isolated in the black community, behind the insulated walls of black churches and the closed doors of city hall. The first of more than 40 marches took place on Friday, June 7. Three hundred citizens-black and white-marched the 29 blocks from Jordan Park community center to city hall. Initially slated as a protest march, the event also became a tribute to the recently assassinated presidential candidate Robert Kennedy. Just as the striking sanitation workers tried to counter the recent violent episodes with a peaceful march, Joe Waller and a band of followers joined the march. Waller had recently returned from Gainesville, Florida, where his odyssey of imprisonment had taken another turn. In

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<sup>14</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, June 5, 1968.

May, ACLU attorney Gardner Becket joined his defense team and convinced the Second District Court of Appeals to release Waller on parole while awaiting an appellate ruling. Upon his release, Waller headed north to Gainesville to protest the incarceration of SCLC member Irvin Lee Dawkins. Within hours of arriving, Waller was back in jail, arrested on charges of “attempting to incite a riot.” He posted bail, but was back behind bars the same day. The state attorney, after receiving word of the outbreak of the sanitation strike and worried Waller would get into even more trouble, had his bond revoked. For two more weeks Waller sat in an Alachua County jail cell. Finally released on May 29, he fled Gainesville on the floorboard of a friend’s car and headed home to St. Petersburg. When he arrived, Waller was dismayed with the handling of the strike, and what he saw as “nice cozy relationship” between the embattled factions. As he and his followers joined the back of the procession, they injected it with an air of militancy, chanting “We’re gonna let St. Petersburg burn down, burn, burn, down, burn burn. . .” Savage abandoned the head of the march and rushed to quiet the provocateurs. After another verse, Waller silenced the group, only to continue the refrain a few minutes later.<sup>15</sup>

The return of Joe Waller to St. Petersburg worried conservative leaders on both sides of the issue. The *St. Petersburg Times* and *Evening Independent* printed a series of profiles about Waller, hoping to delegitimize him. But this was no longer 1966 and to impressionable youths, Waller’s rhetoric was just what they were looking for. Instead of discrediting the militant, the media attention raised his popularity and increased his following. Waller formed a black separatist organization known as the Junta of Militant Organization (JOMO). If the conservative strike leaders, in the words of Waller, were

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<sup>15</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, June 8, 1968; Author’s interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009; Cutting,

people “in the image of the oppressor,” JOMO represented an alternative path that especially appealed to the younger generation. Yet even Sanderlin and Ike Williams felt Waller’s magnetism and increasingly sympathized with his cause. “It is time this community rose up in arms,” intoned I.W. Williams before a crowd of over 200 gathered at Galilee Missionary Baptist Church. Williams assailed Andrews’s “lack of human dignity,” calling him a “zero in race relations and faithfulness to city employees.” Marvin Davies followed Williams at the podium with a heartfelt plea for community unification, and encouraged a more concerted effort in the economic boycott of downtown merchants. “Merchants who support Lynn Andrews shouldn’t have your dollar,” he implored. That same night, speaking in front of a group of St. Petersburg Jr. College students, Sanderlin articulated the fragility of the situation: “The strike provides a check on violence because Negroes were afraid violence might hurt the strikers’ position. But the longer the strike goes without a solution the more impatient and disposed toward violence Negroes will become.”<sup>16</sup>

Other factors played a role in the shifting tone of the strike. Most significantly was the economic toll taken on its participants. Already underpaid, the financial burdens of continuing the fight mounted. Over 200 men with families, which included more than 100 children, faced another month with little or no income. To alleviate some of the pressure, the Presbyterian Commission on Race and Religion provided the strikers with a \$1,400 preliminary grant. Sanderlin called it “seed money,” and said the Commission promised even more to help cover the \$700 a week budget of the recently formed Garbagemen’s Welfare Fund. In addition, the Society of Friends chipped in \$225

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“From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela,” 51.

collected from the church's membership. As many of the idle worker's wives found second jobs, and sanitation supervisor Bill Pulske announced the department was now "more than filled," any financial assistance helped. June sped towards July without an end in sight.<sup>17</sup>

The striking sanitation workers lacked a similar bravado. With no end in sight, strike leaders appealed to outsiders for help...To gain the support of national civil rights leaders and garner widespread attention, ex-sanitation workers Henry Cathirell and Howard Myrick flew to Washington D.C. on June 19 to meet with SCLC Chairman Dr. Ralph D. Abernathy, who was busy leading the Poor People's March on Washington. "Stand fast and know we're with you," a visibly exhausted and emotionally drained Abernathy advised, and "we will do everything we can to help toward a solution of the problem." Abernathy's aide Rev. Albert Sampson implored Cathirell and Myrick to involve white members of the community in their struggle: "Get the people to understand that it is not just the black community that is suffering but the entire community. Get nuns, church people, ministers of the city, and get the liberals involved and you'll win."<sup>18</sup>

While the men were in Washington, such efforts had already begun at home. An ecumenical group of religious leaders, calling themselves the Concerned Clergy of the St. Petersburg Area, met with the city council and voiced deep concerns about the growing crisis. The city responded with a symbolic, yet nonetheless empty gesture. Following the orders of Vice Mayor Horace Williams, the city's legal team deleted the last remaining references to racial segregation in the city charter, of which sections still enabled the city

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<sup>16</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, 6-14-1968.

<sup>17</sup> Later, Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the National NAACP, provided the St. Petersburg branch with funds to assist the striking workers. *St. Petersburg Times*, June 18, 1968, June 27, 1968.

<sup>18</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, June 19, 1968, June 22, 1968.



council “to establish and set apart separate residential limits or districts for white and Negro residents.” The city charter contained a provision-long declared unconstitutional-that enforced an all-white primary in local elections. The move to expurgate racism from the charter, while hyped as a progressive move, made little substantive difference. Battling rain and oppressive heat, the marching continued.<sup>19</sup>

Efforts to gain national attention paid off, but at the expense of splintering the grassroots resistance. As a cast of nationally prominent civil rights leaders descended upon St. Petersburg, local support waned. The crises outgrew its localized scope, and in turn, became less about the sanitation workers and the racial and economic injustices in St. Petersburg and more about demonizing white reactionaries like Lynn Andrews. The appearance national figures, however, only strengthened Andrews’ resolve. In preparation for the arrival of A.D. King, brother of the slain Martin Luther King Jr., Andrews, for the first time since the marches began, denied the strikers a permit. He claimed the timing, which had been set back later than usual, would interfere with traffic. Several city council members disagreed with the decision, concerned it would only antagonize the resistance. Andrews relented, but issued the permit on the grounds that the march used an alternative route. Outraged, yet undeterred, Savage planned to go ahead with the march. Andrews warned the strikers against defying the permit, and threatened to use law enforcement officials to break up the march. King, upon learning of the contentious developments, backed out. More than 250 people, using the old route, marched anyway. As promised, police met the procession head on.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, June 21, 1968, June 22, 1968.

<sup>20</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, June 6, 1968, June 27, 1968.

Equipped with shotguns, gas masks, and shields, 160 officers-many of them brought in from Clearwater- formed a barricade several blocks from city hall to intercept the marchers. For thirty minutes demonstrators calmly confronted police. Some sat down and sang freedom songs. Police ordered everyone to disband, but they were ignored. Officers repeatedly ordered the crowd to disperse, but no one budged. After about twenty minutes, King and Sanderlin drove by in a convertible, and the throng of demonstrators surged towards the vehicle. Set off by the commotion, officers moved in on the crowd and calmly began making arrests. The episode, with all the ingredients for a violent confrontation, remained peaceful even as police hauled forty-three protestors off to jail.<sup>21</sup>

As local groups like the Concerned Clergy continued to call for open communications, more outsiders poured in. Kentucky state senator Georgia Davis and Kentucky Christian Leadership Conference (KCLC) representative Raoul Cunningham landed in St. Petersburg on July 3. Surveying the situation, Davis, Kentucky's first black senator, expressed "despondency" over the "lack of Negro support," in a stump speech in front of city hall. Two hundred and thirty people answered the call, and showed up to march on Independence Day. And Davis did not stop there. The next morning she led a "pray in" outside the entrance to the sanitation department. Beginning about 6 a.m., an interracial group of women stood in front of the compound singing and praying. For several days the pray-ins continued before Davis left for Kentucky.<sup>22</sup>

Outsiders kept coming. On the heels of Davis and Cunningham's departure, William Lamd, a staff member of the New York-based Commission on Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ. Lamd took up residence in the YMPC's new headquarters, a

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<sup>21</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, June 28, 1968, June 29, 1968.

two-story wooden house on Dixie Ave. Two weeks later, on June 12, A.D. King returned with an entourage, including SCLC vice president C.K. Steele, Senator Davis, Raul Cunningham, and several union officials from around the state. That evening, King gave an impassioned speech to a gathering at Mt. Zion Primitive Baptist Church. His abstract rhetoric touched on the impoverished state of the nation and the “many problems in St. Petersburg.” “America is flowing with milk and honey,” he exclaimed. “I’m talking about white America. I want some of that milk and honey.” But he offered little in the way of concrete solutions. Marvin Davies followed King at the lectern and presented the ex-sanitation employees with a \$500 check from the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees Union, with promises of more donations down the road. “We’re going to let everybody know the struggle is going to continue in St. Petersburg,” Davis said. The more intense the local situation became, the less likely a strike settlement seemed. Nonetheless, amid oppressive heat and torrential summer rains the stalwart strikers slogged their way to city hall almost every day of July.<sup>23</sup>

The protracted struggle began to take its toll on all sides of the issue. The national attention not only worried city officials and attenuated public support, it irked local black leadership as well. On July 12, the St. Petersburg branch of the NAACP officially withdrew its support of the sanitation strike. “At this time we don’t have any responsibilities for decisions and strategies of the sanitation workers,” declared President Ike Williams. The NAACP had “served as a catalyst for getting negotiations started,”

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<sup>22</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, July 5, 1968, July 7, 1968.

<sup>23</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, July 12, 1968.

Williams added, and “members of the organization will continue to participate in the marches, but only as individuals.”<sup>24</sup>

Local police officers, too, had grown tired of the situation. By late June the city had spent more than \$60,000 in police overtime. That number only increased as more officers were needed to oversee the daily marches and handle the growing social discord. Although cruisers had stopped escorting garbage trucks on their runs, everyday another incident demanded their attention: structure fires; vandalism; and the ever present threat of JOMO. On July 8, police arrested six JOMO forces for picketing outside Webb’s City and shouting “Let’s burn it down.” As the pressure mounted, and communication channels closed, no one seemed to benefit from ongoing crisis.<sup>25</sup>

The efforts of outside agitators climaxed on the final evening in July. Nearly 1,100 people crammed into the gymnasium at Gibbs high school to hear Rev. Ralph Abernathy and A.D. King speak. As the event began, Joe Waller, who had been purposefully excluded from the program, entered the gym through a side door. When he appeared, the place erupted with applause. Waller gave an impromptu speech where he worked the crowd into a frenzy, declaring “anyone who would starve 211 families is criminal.” Abernathy and King followed, and the climate inside the gym cooled down. Between inspirational orations, the coterie joined together in freedom songs; choruses of “We Shall Overcome” reverberated throughout the emotionally charged evening. As the

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<sup>24</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, July 13, 1968.

<sup>25</sup> The lengthy standoff appeared even worse after a sanitation strike in Tampa lasted only three days before reaching a settlement. In Tampa, sanitation workers ignored Mayor Dick Greco’s promises of a pay raise and walked off the job on July 15. But unlike the situation in St. Petersburg, what began as a labor strike in Tampa stayed that way. From the start, union leaders took over the negotiation process, and the employees returned to work three days later. *St. Petersburg Times*, July 18, 1968.

event came to a close, hundreds of people lined up to donate money to the depleted sanitation fund.<sup>26</sup>

Playing off the momentum, strike leaders planned the “National Mobilization Day” march, expecting more than a thousand participants from around the state. CORE representative Patricia Stephens Due, arrested weeks earlier outside the sanitation compound along with several other protesters for laying down in front of the exit, preventing the trucks from leaving, brought in dozens of supporters from Tallahassee. Despite such efforts, only 650 people showed up. Using an alternative route for the first time, marchers locked arms and paraded east on Central Ave, while police officers blocked oncoming traffic. Wearing a beard and darkly tinted sunglasses, Waller took over when the march reached city hall. “We keep talking about fighting for freedom in Vietnam when the real battleground is in the streets of this country,” he shouted. “I can hardly pronounce Ho Chi Minh, but I can pronounce George Wallace. I can pronounce Ku Klux Klan. I can pronounce Lynn Andrews.” But like so many times in the past, the thundering rhetoric, and the heartfelt pleas, failed to make a difference.<sup>27</sup>

The “NMD” march marked the end of the line for the striking sanitation workers. Their cause had no staying power with a national audience overwhelmed by seemingly ubiquitous social strife. Local support flagged, too. Days later, JOMO renounced its support. Waller had tried on many occasions to take over as the voice of the sanitation

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<sup>26</sup> The March was originally planned for the 2,200-seat Bayfront Center, but organizers relocated it to the more affordable Gibbs High School gymnasium. *St. Petersburg Times*, July 28, 1968, August 1, 1968; Author’s interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, August 3, 1968, August 4, 1968

workers, arguing he “could have ended the situation a long time ago,” but their futile forms of protest had run their course with the militant leader.<sup>28</sup>

Just as the strike reached its nadir, cracks in Andrew’s hegemony began to form, letting in a ray of hope for the sanitation workers. The city manager had become sick with power and desperate to bury the opposition. The attempt to deny the strikers a permit had mushroomed into an all out effort by Andrews to reject all future permit requests. Moreover, he had submitted the names of a number of outsiders assisting with the strike to congressman William Cramer. If a riot should occur, reasoned Andrews, the people on his list could be subject to prosecution under a new federal antiriot act. City Councilmen Claude Greene implied Andrews intended on instigating such trouble. “How many people do you plan to kill during this controlled riot,” he asked. The dissension stretched beyond city hall. To help repair the communication gap, members of the chamber of commerce, along with Mayor Jones, initiated the creation of the Community Alliance, a biracial organization “designed to solve problems” of poor job opportunities for local blacks, the renovation of slum housing, and the expansion and improvement of educational opportunities. Unlike in years past, economic motives had come into play too late.<sup>29</sup>

By mid-August, St. Petersburg had, according to one reporter, “Out Memphised Memphis.” Despite the criticism, Andrews seemed confident as ever. “The strike ended May 20, and the sanitation department has been rebuilt with new employees,” he reiterated time and again. Sanderlin, recognizing what Waller had discerned all along, the futility of nonviolent demonstrations, put a halt to the meetings. A few days later, when

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<sup>28</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, August 8, 1968; Author’s interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009.

riot police wielding bayoneted rifles arrested picketers in front of the houses of both Lynn Andrews and Claude Greene, the nonviolent struggle was all but over. In a rare appearance before the city council, Sanderlin, Enoch Davis, and several representatives from the black community, made a final plea on behalf of the fired sanitation workers. “No responsible city can allow 221 men to be fired without publicly inquiry, without a public responsibility shown in it,” said Sanderlin. Davis warned “if the crisis goes unsettled,” the more than 5,000 members of the seven local black churches would take to the streets in protest. Barbara Robinson, a spokesperson for the Young Women’s Progressive Willing Workers Club, declared: “The black community is becoming more enraged,” and urged a settlement “before it leads to destruction and loss of life.” The wave of sympathy felt earlier by councilmen like Claude Greene, crashed when picketers targeted his home, and again Jones stood alone in favor of negotiating a settlement. No one had to wait long to realize the severity of the fomenting crisis.<sup>30</sup>

The arrest and beating of Joe Waller sent members of the black community over the edge. In an apparent setup, police took Waller into custody after he showed up to quell a confrontation between a young black woman and the officers. On the way to the station police bruised and bloodied a handcuffed Waller. “They took it all out on me,” he said, “all of their frustration.” The officers took Waller to the hospital and when pictures of his injuries circulated throughout black neighborhoods, the rebellion began.<sup>31</sup>

In the early morning hours of Saturday, August 17, the city erupted into race riots. Fires raged throughout the night, destroying, warehouses, abandoned homes, and parked

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<sup>29</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, July 14, 1968, July 23, 1968; David Welch, interview by Samuel Davis, July 30, 1998; Author’s interview with Don Jones, August 20, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, August 16, 1968.

<sup>31</sup> Author’s interview with Omali Yeshitela, June 23, 2009.

cars. As rocks pelted police cruisers and smashed storefront windows, an armored vehicle dubbed “The Monster” moved throughout the city, spraying tear gas canisters into crowds of congregated suspects. The city council called a meeting that morning and granted Andrews expanded authority over city affairs. Andrews declared a “civil emergency” and shut down a 550-block area within the black community. Moreover, Andrews banned the sale of liquor and “containerized” gasoline. That afternoon Governor Claude Kirk made a brief stop in St. Petersburg to meet with city administrators. Kirk committed 350 National Guardsmen, highway patrolmen, and game wardens, all with special riot training, to assist in restoring order if needed. The disturbances abated Saturday afternoon, an eerie calm before the oncoming storm. The city braced itself for nightfall.<sup>32</sup>

As anticipated, the rioting resumed Saturday evening and stretched into Sunday. Again police brought out the “The Monster” to quell the violence. When the sun rose Sunday morning, the damage report told the story: Fifty-nine arrests, eleven fires, and more than \$120,000 dollars in property destruction. An opinion poll printed in the *St. Petersburg Times* that Sunday revealed for the first time the disparate perspectives running along racial lines. 58% of whites considered the problem “very serious” as opposed to 94% of non-whites. 76% of whites felt the demonstrations and marches should stop, but only 35% of non-whites held this opinion. Interestingly, 61% of whites, compared to 23% of non-whites, believed “outsiders” to be responsible for the demonstrations.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, August 18, 1968.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, August 18, 1968.



For the third consecutive night, violence consumed St. Petersburg. The "monster" once again roamed the streets unleashing torrents of tear gas. At one point, in a bout with friendly fire, policemen driving the armored vehicle spilled out into the streets after inhaling the noxious gas. Later, a tear gas canister crashed through the window of St. Petersburg resident Charles P. Kelly's, barely missing his eleven-year-old daughter. As smoke filled the house, Kelly and his family stood in their front yard for over 12 hours waiting for the air to clear. Scattered disruptions occurred again Monday night, but with less intensity. Andrews perceived an "easing of tension in the Negro community," but kept bars and liquor stores in the black sections of town closed for another night. Ironically, current sanitation employees went to work Tuesday morning cleaning the destruction wrought by the violence.<sup>34</sup>

The rioting made a strong case for the futility of nonviolent forms of protest. Although hardly anything on the scale of Watts or Detroit, the unprecedented violence sent all sides scrambling into action. In the end, economics won the day. The city had spent nearly half a million dollars on extra police and riot gear while experiencing a 5 percent decline in the tourist trade. The Community Alliance, excluding Sanderlin and Savage, stepped in and negotiated a settlement. On August 30, the sanitation strike officially ended. In a press conference, Andrews sat beside black accountant David Welch, cochairman of the Community Alliance, and announced the terms of the settlement. Conspicuously absent from the proceedings were the leaders of the entire sanitation strike, Jim Sanderlin and Joseph Savage. Sanderlin, who had been told the settlement announcement would come quietly and without a press conference, later

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<sup>34</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, August 19, 1968.

admitted he felt the Community Alliance had sold the strikers out at the expense of an immediate compromise with city officials. Nevertheless, no one complained that the crisis had finally ended.<sup>35</sup>

Eventually 83 of the 211 strikers went back to work under the original pay scale, the one previously abandoned by Schultz for streamlining purposes. Those who did not go back to work found other jobs. By October 1, the beginning of the city's fiscal year, collectors received an increase of 8-cents an hour. Foremen earned an additional 14-cents an hour raise. Veterans lost their seniority and accumulated sick leave, but according to David Welch, eventually regained the lost benefits. But ultimately the strike succeeded because of what it meant for the future of community relations, not necessarily for any tangible gains won by individual sanitation workers.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, August 31, 1968; Mantler, "I'm Against the Way It is Being Done," 97.

<sup>36</sup> Davis's interview with David Welch, July 30, 1998.

## Chapter Five: Epilogue

The sanitation strike represented a watershed moment in the history of St. Petersburg. The depth of the city's racial and economic injustices had been exposed and no longer could city leaders ignore or claim to be unaware of existing racial problems. Moreover, the creation of the Community Alliance represented the first time in the city's history that a cross-section of community leaders--white and black--had come together to address the plight of the oppressed. It looked as if, in the words of Mayor Don Jones, St. Petersburg had finally "joined the 20th century."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, maybe it had. Just eight months after the sanitation strike ended, C. Bette Wimbish broke the color line in local politics, winning a seat on the city council in March 1969. Just four years earlier, she had enrolled at Florida A&M University's law school with ambitious plans to become an attorney. Just shy of her graduation in 1967, her husband, Ralph Wimbish unexpectedly passed away. Never one to quail in the face of adversity, C. Bette returned to St. Petersburg to finish what she and her husband had started.<sup>2</sup>

Jim Sanderlin, too, rode the wave of his successful social activism into uncharted waters. In 1972, he became Pinellas County's first black judge. Three years later, he won election to the county circuit court. But the ascents of Wimbish and Sanderlin also represented a racial and cultural convergence many in the black community hoped to avoid. Blacks worried about the ramifications of integration; about the loss of

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<sup>1</sup> Author's interview with Don Jones, August 20, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, March 2, 1969; Babb, "We Took the Leadership," 301.

community; the loss of identity. And when the schools began to desegregate, those fears intensified.<sup>3</sup>

When it came to education, especially in the late-1960s, blacks in St. Petersburg cared more about equal opportunities and less about integration. The NAACP, however, reasoned that unitary status equality would never occur if the school system remained segregated. Until white students went to schools in the black community, their parents would have little incentives to care about the conditions of those schools.<sup>4</sup>

With that as his driving philosophy, Jim Sanderlin continued the fight for school desegregation. In 1968, the Fifth Circuit of Appeals ruled that Florida, along with six other states, must integrate its remaining all black schools or shut them down. A year later, the Supreme Court threw out *Brown II's* implementation timetable of “with all deliberate speed,” and ordered “every school district” to “terminate dual school systems at once and to operate. . . only unitary schools” (*Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education*). But in St. Petersburg, like much of the entire county, demographic patterns adversely affected the progress of desegregation. In 1970, Judge Leib signed off on another desegregation plan that instituted “pairing” and “clustering,” and called for the closing of Gibbs High School. This decision almost devastated the black community and intensified its worst fears about integration. However, on August 12, 1970, after more than two thousand black citizens signed a petition to keep Gibbs open, the school board capitulated.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Goodden, “James B. Sanderlin,” 83, 86.

<sup>4</sup> C. Bette Wimbish, interview by Tonya Simmons, November 25, 1993; Mantler, “I’m Against the Way It is Being Done,” 116.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

Victory came at a cost. Although Gibbs remained open, it began the 1970-71 school year with a white principal and newly installed racial quotas. Whites made up 70% of the student body, and blacks the other 30 percent. Gibbs may have been saved, but it certainly was no longer the school 2,000 petitioners had hoped to save. Unfortunately, the toughest part of integration for the black community had yet to come. That same year, the Supreme Court approved the use of busing to achieve school desegregation in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenberg Board of Education*. By the beginning of the 1971-72 academic year, upon the orders of Judge Lieb, the school board implemented a comprehensive busing plan. Attendance zones separated north and south county schools in an attempt to scatter black students proportionately throughout Pinellas while requiring selective white communities to accept terms that sent their children to schools in black neighborhoods for two years. While much of the bad press that busing received came from white parents unhappy with rezoning, black children within a few blocks radius of one another might attend four different schools. They therefore, bore the brunt of the burden.<sup>6</sup>

One individual particularly incensed by the dismantling of the black community was Joe Waller. For three years following the sanitation strike, while his lawyers appealed his sentences from the mural incident and his arrest in August 1968, Waller was in and out of prison. His personal struggle came to symbolize that of St. Petersburg's black community in the early years of integration: social and cultural alienation and loss of identity. In 1972, he formed the African People's Socialist Party (APSP), and changed his name to Omali Yeshitela, which in Swahili, means "an umbrella to protect one thousand people." The APSP, also known as the UHURUs, pioneered a Pan-Africanist approach to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 118-120.

social struggle in St. Petersburg, and while many of the city's most prominent figures from the civil rights era embraced the newfound freedoms, Waller never spiritually left the insular world he came from. Unlike so many others, Waller never let go of the cloudy legacies that cast a long shadow on the Sunshine City.

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