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here is a blind spot in our view of the past - a period a little too far back to remember clearly but too recent to have entered the realm of history. For many of us, the civil rights era is such a period.

Authors may be starting to close that gap. This publishing season brought many new contributions: several biographies of Thurgood Marshall, the memoirs of white civil rights lawyer Jack Greenberg and a cluster of personal books by African-American and white participants in the movement. David Halberstam has planned his next book on the lives of the lunch-counter demonstrators he covered as a cub reporter in Nashville.

We hope this issue of the Forum is a useful addition to the thin shelf of published writing on Florida in the civil rights period.

We began with two objectives:

* To assess Florida's distinctive place in the civil rights story.
* To evoke the times, both for those Floridians who lived through it, and for the rest of us who didn't but are curious.

The opening pair of essays address the first of these objectives. Noted historian John Hope Franklin eloquently places the movement in context and reminds us of what was at stake. Kermit Hall, formerly a University of Florida historian now a dean at Ohio State University, puts in focus where Florida fits.

In the final piece, for a flavor of the times, we turn to a half-dozen Floridians who were participants. Each has a distinctly personal story to tell.

Undertaking a topic so big in the confines of a magazine leaves a lot out. We have skipped over Florida's early history on racial matters - the Rosewood massacre, Klan activity and lynchings, the 1951 murder of NAACP field secretary Harry T. Moore. There was a civil rights movement in every major Florida city; we haven't chronicled each one here.

Instead the focus is on a trio of important Florida civil rights stories: the Tallahassee bus boycott, St. Augustine protests and Governor LeRoy Collins' leadership of a moderate white response. Scholars Gregory Padgett of Eckerd College and David Colburn of the University of Florida compressed much longer studies of Tallahassee and St. Augustine. Governor Collins' own speeches and the path of his career tell a story of growth from moderate acceptance of southern tradition to frontline work for civil rights change.

We have found some people reluctant to discuss the civil rights period. Memories have dimmed; the gradual shift in white attitudes is hard to reconstruct; much of what happened was unpleasant or worse. Attorney Marilyn Holifield confronts the "ugliness" issue head on in her essay. Even though the exercise may be uncomfortable, the times are worth remembering.

Present controversies can distort our view of what happened 30 or 40 years ago. Civil rights protests did not suddenly give way to racial harmony. Disputes about racially gerrymandered Congressional districts or school busing even leave a sour aftertaste on specific achievements like voting rights and school desegregation. But the civil rights era was a clearcut victory - against great odds and for fundamentals of equality and human dignity.
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ALL PEOPLE ARE MADE EQUAL

EQUALITY INDIV
John Hope Franklin first published his standard text *From Slavery to Freedom* in 1947. He and co-author Alfred A. Moss Jr. brought out the seventh edition of the book this year. So besides being one of the first and most prominent scholars of the sweep of African-American history, he has had an academic career that precedes and continues on after the peak of the civil rights era.

In Franklin's textbook the civil rights years make up part of a chapter on "The Black Revolution." He observes rather dispassionately that "an interesting and at times exciting interplay of action and response developed between government and civil rights advocates. And it was this interplay that did so much to carry the revolution forward." Franklin does not minimize the landmark civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965, but the next section of the chapter is subtitled "The Illusion of Equality." Street disturbances, the black power movement and concerns about the economic position of black Americans - north and west as well as south — followed hard on the heels of civil rights achievements.

Franklin, now 79 and professor emeritus of history at Duke University, attempted most explicitly to put the civil rights era in context in the third of three Thomas Jefferson Lectures he delivered for the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1976. He agreed to contribute excerpts from the lecture as an introduction to the period covered in this issue of the Forum.

"Almost from the beginning of their national history, Franklin begins, "Americans have been relentless, at times ruthless, in their pursuit of equality." But through most of that period black Americans were excluded — by torturous reasoning and policies — from sharing in that equality. After World War I, pressures on a system that excluded some began to build, pressures that would culminate in the explosion of the civil rights movement."
nequality in the administration of justice and the enforcement of the laws was apparent to any who cared to look. In 1921 a Negro was burned to death over a slow fire at Nodena, Arkansas. In the following year a mob, including women and children, slowly roasted a black man in Hubbard, Texas, while jabbing sticks into his mouth, nose, and eyes. Incidents like these caused William Pickens to describe the South as "The American Congo." After being forbidden by two white policemen with drawn guns to defend himself when a white man struck him, a young Houston Negro asked the Attorney General of the United States "just what is a negro worth here in Houston, as he is counted no more than a stray dog." In 1927 Nick Childs, black editor of the Topeka Plaindealer, told President Coolidge he could not see "how a President of the United States can sit idly by and see his living subjects burned to death by a degenerated class of evil doers." The reply from Washington was always the same. The Department of Justice even had a form letter it sent to any blacks pleading for protection. It said, "The Department . . . regrets to advise you that it would have no authority to take any action with reference to the matter to which you refer inasmuch as the State . . . possesses exclusive jurisdiction in the premises." . . .

Since World War II was a struggle against a particularly obnoxious brand of racism as well as a most reprehensible form of totalitarianism, consistency as well as sensitivity to the issues seemed to require the United States to pursue a policy of racial equality in its fight against Nazism. But the United States was neither consistent nor sensitive to the larger issues of the war as they related to the domestic scene. The Nation's leaders rallied against the supercilious Aryan doctrine of the Nazis, but the American Red Cross separated the blood of blacks and whites in the blood banks that had been developed largely from the work of a black physician, Charles Drew. They spoke out against the brutal treatment of minorities in Germany, but German prisoners of war in the United States received better treatment than blacks in and out of the armed services.

No Negro who had seen it could ever erase from his mind the sight of these war prisoners enjoying better treatment and more luxury than a Negro American could ever dream of enjoying in his own country. This is what Witter Bynner meant when he wrote in 1944:

On a train in Texas German prisoners sat
With white American soldiers, seat by seat,
While black American soldiers sit apart,
The white men eating meat, the black men heart.
Now, with that other war a century done,
Not the live North but the dead South has won,
Not yet a riven nation comes awake.
Whom are we fighting this time, for God's sake?
Mark well the token of the separate seat,
It is again ourselves whom we defeat . . .

One of the remarkable consequences of the effort to keep blacks politically impotent and generally degraded was the initially unnoticed black backlash to white intransigence which inevitably resulted in the erosion of that intran-
sigence. Blacks reacted to the revived Ku Klux Klan, the white citizens councils, and the other terrorist organizations with an equanimity that was somewhat disconcerting to whites. They laughed at the Klan parades as they recognized the swagger of Mr. Jones or the limp of Mr. Smith under their white sheets. And they began quietly but firmly to stand their ground in their demand for greater consideration as American citizens. Equally remarkable were the relatively modest demands that blacks made of white officials. They did not demand public office, but merely fair treatment in the administration of justice and an opportunity to participate in the political process. They did not even demand the same public accommodations.

One wonders what would have happened if blacks who wanted to register and vote in the 1950s had been permitted to do so. It is possible that they would have been more inclined to trust the white candidates for public office, voted for them, and manifested no undue interest in holding public office themselves. That is, of course, mere speculation. One wonders what would have happened if Montgomery whites had met the first demands of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his associates—to be permitted to enter the front door of the bus and to sit in seats reserved for whites when those seats were vacant. It was white intransigence that caused black voters to conclude they must vote and must hold public office in order to enjoy the first fruits of equality. It was white intransigence that caused Dr. King and his followers to decide they must have desegregated buses and must have black bus drivers in order to ride in dignity.

One supposes that the whites who were resisting the efforts of blacks to enjoy equality were actually operating from the premise that equality could not be shared. Since they assumed that blacks occupied an inferior position in the social order, they believed that equality could not and, indeed, should not be divided between blacks and whites. To the extent that they believed equality could not be divided they were perhaps correct. To the extent that they believed equality could be arrogated to one segment of society and withheld from another segment, they were woefully mistaken. Equality could be shared, but it could not be divided in a way that some would be more equal than others. For some three hundred years those in power in this country have confronted this problem and for most of that time they have succeeded in achieving the democratically incongruous feat of designating who should be equal and who should not be. Offhand, it reminds one of the paintings of Audubon's birds. They are attractive and even plausible, but some of the postures are anatomically impossible.

The incongruity has always been noted by some Americans, if only in passing. Some of the Founding Fathers noted it, but its solution had no priority on their agenda. The abolitionists were quite aware of it, but emancipation, not equality, was their main preoccupation. Partisan politicians were aware of it, but they were unwilling to run the risk of doing anything about it, lest their adversaries take advantage of their move, even for selfish and sinister reasons. Running through every consideration of the matter was the feeling that somehow this was not central to the survival or even to the progress of the country. Hence, one could not get too excited about it. This was a safe, comfortable position to take until about two decades ago, but it did not last. Indeed, it could not last in the face of a growing awareness among an increasing number of Americans that equality was indivisible. This awareness forced itself upon the American people through a series of developments that were both dramatic and significant.

THE EQUALITY WAS A MASS MOVEMENT
It was one thing to deal with a few Negro leaders and reach some compromise arrangement with them, or buy them off or seek to discredit them and, failing in these efforts, to engage in combat with them and win. That was essentially the pattern for two centuries and more. It reached its climax in what I choose to call the Booker Washington Syndrome in which whites would deal with one Negro leader and having brought that leader under their control had no further worries or concerns. Although a leader like Martin Luther King was abhorrent to them, they at least could focus on him and try to control him, feeling that he was the key to controlling the entire range of Negro aspirations. The Federal Bureau of Investigation had this perception, and this led to its despicable and thoroughly un-American methods of seeking to discredit Dr. King. It was quite another thing to confront not one leader or a few hundred or even a few thousand blacks whose very size made them vulnerable, but to confront several million angry, impatient, aggressive blacks who were willing to risk everything in the battle to achieve equality.

By the 1950s the movement to achieve equality was no longer an elitist movement directed from the offices of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League, but a mass movement; and the very numbers themselves dramatically changed the character of the movement. It was now the Movement for the Liberation of Black People or it was the Black Revolution. It was a movement that took to the streets in Alabama as well as New York to express the chagrin and outrage that blacks felt at having been denied equality for so long. It had more educated, articulate blacks than any earlier egalitarian movement could boast. There were teachers, physicians, lawyers, clergymen, and businessmen. But it also had enormous numbers of common laborers, maids, artisans, union members, and farmers. This not only provided a greater cross-section of the black population than had ever participated in a drive for equality, but it also presented to the general public a picture of solidarity that was hitherto unknown.

From the time of the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909, there had been whites in the movement for equal rights for blacks. Indeed, from the beginning, they had assumed leadership roles. Now, they were present in larger numbers than ever before. Some were leaders of interracial groups, others were leaders of religious or labor groups, while others came representing white organizations—friends of the court, as it were—willing to cast their lot with blacks for the common cause. But there were more than white leaders. There were hundreds of thousands of white followers, volunteering to assist in the struggle for equality. Held in suspicion by numerous blacks, they were frequently confined to yeoman service by those blacks who feared that the motivations and the aspirations of the whites might be different from their own. Indeed, some whites were driven out of the movement by some blacks whose paranoia, born of bitter experience, made it impossible for them to work with whites and trust them.

Some whites were doubtless motivated by fear and self-interest. If the movement got out of control and became violent, they did not want to be among those from whom Negroes felt alienated. There were many others, however, who were deeply moved by the opportunity, at long last, to participate in the realization of the long-deferred dream of equality. Some had even come to feel that equality was indivisible and that their own enjoyment of equal rights was a tenuous arrangement so long as equality was not shared by
all. It was entirely conceivable that if the equal rights movement became explosive, an unsympathetic government might take drastic steps to repress it. In doing so, it could well assume the posture of a police state and jeopardize the equal rights even of whites. The example of the absence of freedom in those communities where racial orthodoxy demanded that all whites stand together against all blacks was a frightening spectacle to some. The example of South Africa, as the logical extension of that repression, was there for all to see. What good would equal rights be in a country where apartheid prevailed and where even those who enjoyed a semblance of equal rights were not free even to discuss the matter? It had not quite happened here, but it could happen; and sensitive whites seemed to realize this.

* * * *

In the twentieth century Negro Americans participated in two world wars against the twin evils of totalitarianism and racism. They returned home to riots, burnings alive while still in the uniform of their country, lynchings, and a stubborn, violent resistance to every effort to enjoy the equal protection of the laws. They sought work and housing in the cities but received scarcely a pittance. They reached out for assistance from the more powerful and affluent elements who abandoned them to grope and falter in the decaying inner city. And even when some whites extended a gracious, helping hand, others resisted their quest for equality with a bitter determination and a resourcefulness which all but nullified that quest. The despair born of such conditions reflected itself in the indifference, moral lassitude, pessimism, violence of one against the other, and general debility among persons as well as institutions. If they needed a personal and group reorientation, as indeed they did, they also needed the support of those decision makers and policy makers who had done so much to bring about their tragic plight in the first place...

More than anything else, however, Americans of every race, creed, economic rank, and social position need to recognize that equality is indeed indivisible. For the entire life of this nation an effort has been made to divide equality—to create a social order in which equality was to be enjoyed by some on the basis of race and denied to others because they did not belong to that race—and it has not worked. On the basis of our experience we are now faced with the grim choice of declaring that we shall adhere to a position that equality has no place in our society and sink into a state of general degradation characteristic of other decaying societies or concede that equality is a principle so essential to the shaping of our future and the future of any civilized community that we must abandon the futile policy of seeking to divide it and adhere to the principle of sharing it.

Then speed the day and haste the hour,
Break down the barriers, gain the power
To use the land and sail the sea,
To hold the tools, unchecked and free;
No tribute pay, but service give,
Let each man work that all may live.
Banish all bonds and usury,
Be free! Set free!
Democracy! Democracy!
America has experienced a revolution in civil rights, a revolution that Florida has shared but seldom led. Sixty years ago, segregation was a fact of life in the Sunshine State; there was inequality in the pay of black teachers and black school facilities; and blacks caught in the criminal justice system were likely to be treated more severely than were their white counterparts. Vestiges of all of these practices remain today, no longer though as part of the law-of-the-land.

Throughout most of American history, racist interpretations of the federal Constitution have sanctioned a legal system that supported slavery, marked blacks especially but other minorities as well as inferior, rendered them politically powerless, and denied them equal justice and access to society's resources. Yet both black and white opponents of racial subordination — from antebellum abolitionists to twentieth-century civil rights leaders — have found principles in American higher law that support their demands for freedom, citizenship, and equality. In the past sixty years change has swept over America, leaving in its wake landmark Supreme Court decisions, such as Brown v. Board of Education (1954), and major federal legislation, most notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both of which fundamentally altered the contours of life in both Florida and the nation. These changes came because courageous persons pursued justice despite often formidable odds. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and its legal arm, the Legal Defense Fund, were among the movement's pioneers. At the same time that the NAACP pursued a legal solution to the historic problems of race relations, other direct action, non-violent civil rights groups pressed for change. Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Congress (SCLC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) all left their marks on both the state and the nation.

Florida figured in several national civil rights developments, drawing to the state many of the movement's important figures. For example, in 1949 the state had its own "little Scottsboro," when four black men were accused of raping a seventeen-year-old white housewife in Groveland. Future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, then a young attorney for the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund, represented the three black defendants (the fourth had been gunned down by a mob outside of Greenville, Florida) before an all-white jury. The three were found guilty, with a sixteen-year-old sentenced to life in prison and the other two ordered to the electric chair. The United States Supreme Court ultimately ordered new trials, but in 1951 one prisoner was killed and the other seriously wounded when Lake County Sheriff Willis McCall shot them in a purported escape attempt.

The NAACP and Marshall had also participated in the late 1930s in efforts to equalize pay for black teachers. A forgotten forerunner to Brown, Marshall developed a legal strategy designed to enhance the quality of teaching in segregated black schools by offering salaries to black teachers equal to that of their white counterparts. By the mid-1940s, however, local school boards developed a scheme that frustrated the NAACP's ambitions by having black principals individually rate black teachers in discriminatory ways. Nonetheless, the Legal Defense Fund learned valuable lessons from this episode, lessons that informed their broader attack on school segregation that followed.

The NAACP participated in two of the state's most far reaching civil rights cases. In 1949 the Florida NAACP encouraged Virgil Hawkins to apply to the previously all-white law school at the University of Florida. When his application was denied, Hawkins then sought relief from the United States Supreme Court, a process that culminated in a 1956 high court opinion, written by Justice Stanley Reed, that found there
“was no reason for delay.” Florida authorities, including the Florida Supreme Court, succeeded in thwarting Hawkins’ application through a series of legal maneuvers. Hawkins never did attend the University of Florida, which admitted its first black student in August 1958.

The long struggle of Virgil Hawkins is an example of one of the methods used by white officials throughout the South to resist desegregation. Using every available procedural technique and inventing ways to distinguish the controlling precedents, Florida officials showed their counterparts elsewhere in the South how to obstruct desegregation while purporting to follow the law. This particular tactic frustrated the efforts of Virgil Hawkins is an example of one of the methods used by white officials throughout the South to resist desegregation. Using every available procedural technique and inventing ways to distinguish the controlling precedents, Florida officials showed their counterparts elsewhere in the South how to obstruct desegregation while purporting to follow the law. This particular tactic frustrated the efforts of the NAACP to develop a coordinated approach that would guarantee the implementation of established rights.

As in other southern states, the NAACP in Florida had to fight for its very survival. In 1956 the Florida legislature, following a pattern adopted in other southern states, created the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee to investigate groups such as the NAACP that threatened the well being of the state. Theodore Gibson, the rector of an Episcopal church, refused to turn over to the committee the list of NAACP members from Miami and he was subsequently found to be in contempt. In 1962 the United States Supreme Court, after first rejecting the NAACP’s position, changed its mind, thanks to the resignation of one justice and a stroke suffered by Felix Frankfurter. The decision regarding Gibson ended legislative investigations of the NAACP in Florida and elsewhere, but the cost to the organization in defending itself took a significant toll in money, time and energy.

Civil rights leaders in Florida did have success in other areas. For example, black organizers and white supporters in the NAACP demonstrated to the nation the importance of a “local movement center” in building civil rights activity.

The civil rights movement was not one homogeneous enterprise; instead, there were dozens of local movements with their own organizations, activists, relationships, and funding bases. In dozens of places in the South, local movement centers emerged to deal with the problem of racial segregation by using collective action. Tallahassee, along with Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama, was among the first of these centers to develop. In Tallahassee, for example, blacks composed slightly more than one-third of the total population in 1950. That population base gave black leaders in Florida’s state capital a critical mass to organize, doing so well in advance of the better
known efforts in the two Alabama cities. The Tallahassee Inter Civil League (ICL), for example, was a prototype of a civil rights organization designed to bring together various black factions and sympathetic whites. In the wake of the more famous Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956, the ICL joined hands with the NAACP to press a similar economic boycott through direct action in Tallahassee. The bus boycott in Tallahassee signaled that the black masses could be organized for protests in small southern cities, that massive social disruption was an effective weapon, and that the more celebrated Montgomery bus boycott was no accident. Although segregated seating returned briefly after the protest stopped, this pattern reflected the harsh political and social realities of Tallahassee rather than the weakness of the civil rights movement in that city.

Tallahassee emerged as one of the important models for the black student movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Students from all-black Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College (FAMU) organized the first mass civil rights demonstration on an American college campus, and they also conducted the first student-initiated bus boycott. In 1960, two sisters from FAMU organized the first interracial CORE chapter in the Deep South. CORE-sponsored sit-ins in Florida led to students for the first time in the country, choosing jail sentences as the penalty for occupying a previously all-white lunch counter. Moreover, the rape of a black FAMU co-ed by four white men in 1957 led to a mass march against the city’s police department. A white jury subsequently convicted the four men, marking the first guilty verdict for whites raping a black woman in the Deep South. Finally, the Tallahassee experience and the role of students at FAMU demonstrated to the nation the importance of African-American women in the protest movement. These women were not burdened with local leadership roles in African-American organizations, such as black churches, that were trying to preserve and sustain limited gains; instead, they were committed to direct results. Because African-American families were less patriarchal, mothers and daughters set a standard of action in Tallahassee that was followed elsewhere in the South.

While the civil rights struggle in Florida did not produce the high level of sustained national visibility that occurred in Alabama and Mississippi, it nonetheless contributed important moments to it. For example, in Tampa in June 1967 a major riot broke out in the black section located next to the business district. The shooting of an unarmed black robbery suspect by a white policeman triggered the riot. Tampa had developed a system of interracial organizations and communication that attempted to cope with the outbreak, but it was the development of the “Tampa technique” that gained the most national attention. In this instance, law enforcement officials withdrew their forces, leaving black youth squads wearing white helmets and accompanied by adult advisors to patrol neighborhoods. The “Tampa technique” demonstrated to the rest of the nation that cooperation between white business and civic leaders, on the one hand, and militant black civil rights advocates, on the other, was possible if both were willing to yield some ground.

Perhaps the greatest national attention showered on Florida came in 1964 when Reverend King and SCLC selected St. Augustine as a target city to demonstrate the importance of passing a federal civil rights act. While St. Augustine in the early 1960s exuded civility in its race relations, perhaps nowhere in the state was the commitment to segregation more pervasive. The intervention of Reverend King shattered this facade, although his actions were in some ways a mixed blessing. King’s focus was on national events and, once passage of the Civil Rights Act was assured, he and SCLC pulled out, leaving the local black community to deal with a situation for which they had neither organizational nor financial support. Only when the deteriorated state of race relations began to have an impact on the business community in St. Augustine did real change begin.

Yet for all of the important moments that Florida filled in the modern civil rights movement, its place was largely secondary. Florida, after all, was part of the “peripheral South,” as were Arkansas, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. In the states of the Deep South, whites were more committed to strict segregation and less aware of the true racial attitudes of blacks than was the case in these peripheral areas. In politics, moreover,
the states of the Deep South elected militant segregationists in response to Brown and the ensuing events. In Florida, however, Governor LeRoy Collins emerged as a moderate on the segregation issue. While Florida political campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s contained considerable racial rhetoric, much of it was aimed at the counties of North Florida, which were disproportionately represented in the legislature and where ten of the eleven most populous black counties were located. Elsewhere in the state other issues tended to grip the voters’ attention, most notably questions of economic growth and development in central and especially south Florida. Governor Collins was particularly important in this regard, leading the state through the tortuous changes that flowed from Brown. The governor denounced the sit-in demonstrators for violating the law and reiterated the right of businessmen to exclude whomsoever they wanted from their facilities. Yet Collins also appreciated, as did other moderate governors in other peripheral states of the South, that the longterm interests of business were clearly served by better race relations. Hence, while Collins agreed that white business people could decide whom to serve, he reminded his fellow Floridians that “I still don’t think he can square that right with moral, simple justice.” Although the 1960 gubernatorial election, that resulted in Farris Bryant, a strong segregationist, entering the governor’s mansion was a defeat of sorts for Collins, Bryant never overcame completely the moderate tone set by Collins and adopted by other of the state’s governors.

Moreover, with Florida’s economic future tied closely to continuing migration from the North and heightened business activity, most state leaders doubted the wisdom of continuing to play the race card. Between 1940 and 1960 more than two million people moved from the Northeast and Midwest into Florida. The result was a substantial increase in the size of the state’s white population and corresponding reduction in the black population to less than 22 per cent of the total, the smallest in the state’s history and down from 43.7 percent at the turn of the century. The new residents had little commitment to the state’s racial heritage and, with the exception of Miami, settled in communities where there were relatively few blacks. Because of the close correlation between the size of the black population and the state’s penchant for racial extremism, these population shifts provided a foundation for compromise and progress on the race issue that gave Florida a distinctive place in the civil rights movement. Combined with the decline of rural political forces in the state legislature after 1968, Florida emerged as a model of racial compromise based on a commitment to economic growth.

These developments, however, hardly signaled the advent of either a biracial society or equality of economic opportunity for minorities in Florida. The generally moderate tone struck by the civil rights movement in Florida was different in degree but not in outcome from the larger struggle that has occupied post-World War II America. As is true elsewhere in the nation, racial equality and the full enjoyment of civil rights continues to elude Florida.

As a young NAACP lawyer, Thurgood Marshall brought suit to equalize pay for black and white teachers in Florida.

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THE PUSH FOR EQUALITY

A bus boycott takes root and blossoms

BY GREGORY B. PADGETT

Reverend C. K. Steele (middle, left) and two associates rode in the front of the bus Christmas Eve, 1956, six months after the bus boycott began.
arly on in the civil rights movement in Tallahassee, the Reverend Charles Kenzie Steele led a campaign for human rights that permanently altered that city's race relations. The bus boycott there and its sequel serve as a model for successful nonviolent protest. C. K. Steele also made a significant contribution to the national civil rights effort as executive vice president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. As a leader, Steele was resolute, brave,
eloquent and strategically shrewd. But perhaps operating in the broad shadow of Martin Luther King, Jr., he has received relatively little recognition for his significant role in one of this century’s crucial social movements.

Steele’s commitment to the ministry and to the cause of civil rights developed early. He was born in 1914 in Bluefield, West Virginia, an area noted for its political independence. The region had been controlled by the Republican party since 1863. Local white mountaineers’ hostility to the Confederate cause resulted in the area’s joining the Union as the state of West Virginia in 1863. Certainly, there was racial prejudice in West Virginia, but Negroes there encountered less resistance to their pursuit of equality than in other southern states. Steele did not encounter traditional southern racism until he attended Morehouse College in Atlanta in 1934. There he was both surprised and appalled by the hostility Negroes faced daily. In Atlanta, the strict enforcement of segregation had a profound effect on Steele. He concluded that the struggle for social justice must be part of any African-American minister’s mission. It was a significant turning point for a man who had begun preaching at age 15. Now, he had identified the central focus of his ministry.

Like King, Steele was part of a long tradition in the African-American community in which the struggle against racial discrimination was led by ministers. King was the most visible, celebrated exponent of a church-led civil rights movement, but he shared the stage with men of similar education and ability. Ministers like Vernon Johns, Fred Shuttlesworth, C. T. Vivian and Steele were King’s equals in dedication and commitment. Their sermons delivered from hundreds of pulpits across the nation helped to galvanize the African-American community into action and stir the conscience of a nation.

There are many similarities between the bus boycotts in Montgomery and Tallahassee, but the precipitating incidents were quite different. Tallahassee’s bus protest began as a student movement. Twenty-six year old Wilhemina Jakes of West Palm Beach and twenty-one year old Carrie Patterson of Lakeland, both Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) coeds could not have anticipated the ultimate results of their actions on May 27, 1956. The two students sat in a pair of vacant seats in the “whites only” section of a city bus rather than stand in the colored section. Questioned later, the pair claimed they were simply tired from shopping, but the example of the bus boycott in Montgomery, then in progress, cannot be discounted. When the bus driver demanded that they move to the rear of the bus, the women refused but offered to leave if their fares were refunded. The driver, Max Coggins, probably could have defused the situation at this point. Instead he flatly refused the coeds’ request. When the two again declined to move to the rear of the bus, Coggins drove to a service station and telephoned the police. The two women were arrested and charged with “inciting a riot.” Jakes and Patterson were later released on twenty-five dollars bonds, and the matter was remanded to FAMU officials. Later the charges were dropped. The local newspaper, the Tallahassee Democrat, treated this violation of segregation laws as a minor incident, worthy of only a brief paragraph. The newspaper article, however, did report the women’s address at 123 West Jennings Street.

On the night of their arrest, a cross was burned in front of the Jennings Street residence. University officials moved the two women into a dormitory for their own safety. The cross-burning galvanized rather than intimidated students at FAMU and the city’s African-American community. Thus with a few nearly accidental twists of circumstance, the momentum for a much more general protest was building.

The following day at noon, FAMU students held a mass meeting. The Student Government Association led by President Broadus Hartley called for a boycott of city buses. The boycott was to be enforced for the two weeks remaining in the school term. Students boarded buses passing
A cross burning galvanized FAMU students and the city's African-American Community.

through FAMU's campus and urged all Negro passengers to disembark. Most people complied, but one minister, Reverend R. N. Webb, refused and students removed him by force. This incident and pressure from the State Board of Control prompted FAMU administrators to prohibit students from boarding city buses to carry out the boycott. The school's administration wanted to lessen the very real possibility of violence and ensure student safety.

On May 29 Dr. James Hudson, president of the Tallahassee (Negro) Ministerial Alliance, and Steele, acting president of the local NAACP chapter, called a joint meeting. There it was decided that a city-wide meeting of the Negro community should be held that night at Steele's Bethel Baptist Church. Some 450 people attended, an index of the black community's interest. And two significant results emerged: the Tallahassee Inter-Civic Council was organized and Steele was elected its president. Privately, Steele stated that he would have preferred the NAACP conduct the boycott, but he recognized the need to have a locally based organization. This ensured that boycott opponents could not make the commonplace charge that the protest was the result of outside agitation.

The Inter-Civic Council's stated goal was the immediate desegregation of the city's bus service. Its methods were nonviolent but directly confrontational. The Council made three specific demands on the transit company. Seating on the buses should be on a first-come, first-served basis; Negroes were to be treated with courtesy by white bus drivers, and Negro drivers were to be hired to drive routes through the black community. The ICC promised the boycott would continue until all three conditions were met. It also began operating a carpool system to transport workers, most of them domestics employed in white suburban homes, during the boycott.

The Tallahassee City Commission's first response to the boycott announcement was to ignore it. City commission members claimed they had not received a written statement of what the Negro community wanted, even though the ICC's three conditions had been published in the city's newspaper. Charles H. Carter, the bus company manager, announced that his contract with the city had a segregation clause he could not violate. So the issue was joined.

For Steele the protest had an immediate personal impact. After he was identified as the ICC's president, his family was subjected to threats and constant harassment. By phone, by mail and sometimes by more direct means there were attempts to intimidate Steele. One of Steele's sons, the Reverend Henry Marion Steele, recalled that rocks and sometimes gunfire were directed at the parsonage on the corner of Boulevard and Tennessee Streets. "Bullet holes were still visible in the walls almost twenty years later when the house was torn down," Henry Steele asserted.
Reverend C. K. Steele was a preaching prodigy, holding forth informally in the school yard as an elementary student, conducting services from a pulpit at age 15. Part of the story of Tallahassee bus boycott's success was that Steele led the effort with eloquence and moral force at every juncture. He was much like his more famous associate Martin Luther King in that respect. Here is a sampler of what Steele said:

Rejecting a compromise proposal in June 1956 because the bus company did not agree to hire black drivers.

Since the present bus seating arrangement is economically unsound, humiliating, arbitrary, inequitable, inconvenient and morally unjustifiable, all bus passengers shall have the right to sit wherever they choose. . . . Since people of all races by their patronage contribute to the support of the bus company, all races should have an opportunity to work for the company in various capacities.

After the suspension of bus service July 1:

The Tallahassee City Bus Company has committed suicide. . . . It died at the hands of bus drivers who persisted in insulting its Negro patrons who supplied its lifegiving stream of revenue. The City Commission says it's dead. The owner of the company says it's dead. We lament its passing, if it is truly dead. However, I am positive nothing is wrong with Tallahassee Cities Transit Incorporated that a good dose of democracy, decency and Christian love will not cure. . . .

Just before the trial in October of boycott leaders for operating an illegal carpool:

We are still walking, praying and trusting God that the final outcome and consequence of our passive protest of love against injustice, unfairness and segregation on city coaches [will not be in vain]. . . .

Ladies and Gentlemen, the battle is not over, the race is not ended, our fight with segregated buses is not completed. We must not give up, not let up for a second; instead, we must fight this vicious monster called segregation until he is dead, buried, embalmed and sent to hell.

After a cross was burned in front of his home and other leaders were harassed, January, 1957:

Freedom is on the march. We come up tonight out of the smoke of shotgun firing and the debris of broken windows to say the fight is still on, the war is not over. . . . They have thrown rocks, they have smashed car windows, they have burned crosses. Well I am happy to state here tonight that I have no fear.
of them and praise God I have no
hate for them.

On the first anniversary of the boy-
cott, May 27, 1957:

Today it stands out in bold relief
as never before that no man's free-
dom is safe, until all others are free;
that justice for no group or race, or
nation is secure until it is guaran-
teed to all people, that the lady lib-
erty can enjoy good health only
when her feet and toes are as robust
as her head and shoulders.

A year later, the bus boycott had
succeeded and Steele was setting his
sights on other priorities:

We have come a long, long ways
since that hectic 29th of May 1956
when we voted to, at all costs, turn
our backs on segregated city buses;
and yet we have a long ways to go.
Our schools are still segregated. We
still have no representation in the
city, county, or state government.
Our hotels, motels, restaurants and a
number of other facilities are still
jim-crowed. We must not rest until
every vestige of segregation has
been driven out of our state and
nation.

In 1968, years of tension with the
deacons at Bethel Baptist Church, cli-
maxed in an effort to oust him. Steele
successfully sought a vote of confidence:

For sixteen years, I have been
your pastor. During this time, some
of you have labored to make my
stay and pastorate difficult and mis-
erable. You have my sympathy and
prayers. Others have worked to
make my job easier and my stay joy-
ous. You have my thanks. You have
asked that I give you a statement on
my relation with SCLC and Bethel
Baptist Church. First, I am a minis-
tor called by God, second I am pas-
tor of Bethel, third I am first vice
president of SCLC. My first loyalty
is to God, and second to the welfare
of mankind. I have given myself to
this task of care for my fellow man
body, mind and soul.

Some of the opposition to the boy-
cott came from within the Negro com-
community, including the membership of
Steele's own church. The congrega-
tion's disapproval of their pastor's
civil rights activity spilled out in their
treatment of his wife, Lois, at first
with polite indifference, and later in
the boycott with thinly disguised hos-
tility. Other church members, most
notably Christine Knowles, counter-
balanced this hostility with kindness
and assistance to the family.

When it became obvious the boy-
cott was not somehow going to fade
away, the city commission tried to
divide the Negro community. The
commission, after business hours on a
Saturday met privately at the Leon
Federal Savings and Loan with promi-
nent Negro leaders with whom they
had dealt in the past, snubbing the
ICC. Representatives from the black
community, including Father David
Brooks, FAMU football coach Jake
Gaither, and businessmen George W.
Conoly and Dan Speed.

Steele gave the divide-and-con-
quar strategy some unwitting assis-
tance the next day. Unaware of the
meeting, he chose as the topic for his
Sunday sermon, "Judas' betrayal of
Jesus." Those church members who
had attended the secret meeting, not
surprisingly, were convinced that the
sermon was a veiled attack upon
them. The sermon created a rift in
Tallahassee's black community that
would take years to heal. Indeed,
some of the dissension that arose in
Steele's own congregation never abat-
ed, and this lingering resentment
plagued Steele's ministry until his
death.

Steele did his best to repair the
damage, fearing the controversy
would destroy the boycott. But
despite his best efforts, people active
in the boycott displayed resentment
towards those who had attended the
secret meeting. George Conoly lost so
much patronage that he was forced to
close his gas station. He withdrew
from active participation in the boy-
cott but continued to help raise money
for the bail of those arrested by the
police. Father Brooks too lost consid-
erable credibility.

In each biweekly mass meeting,
Steele stressed the critical need for
unity. Years later, he declared that if he
had known about the secret meeting,
he never would have preached that
particular sermon. The boycott contin-
ued as Steele managed to ease friction
within the community, and inspire the
widespread cooperation necessary to
maintain the carpool.

As was the case in Montgomery
the carpool was critical to the boy-
cott's success. Reverend Dan Speed's
masterful administration of the car-
pool blunted community resentment
of his attendance at the secret meet-
ing. Also, the character of Tallahas-
see's Negro community was a key fac-
tor in the success of the boycott.

Negroes in Tallahassee were mili-
tant, resolute and organized despite
the constraints of segregation. Church
and civic groups had long received
strong support. The campus of FAMU
was the site of numerous cultural
events. Its student body provided a
pool of willing volunteers for commu-
nity activities. There was a strong sense of cohesion in the black community that could not easily be undone. FAMU employees and public school teachers made up most of Tallahassee’s Negro middle class. This group enjoyed relative prosperity but still lagged far behind the income of whites in similar occupations. In 1950, for instance, the median annual income for Negroes in Tallahassee was $1,144 and $2,952 for whites. Despite progress made by the middle class, the majority of the city’s Negroes lived below poverty level with little hope of relief. For all of Tallahassee’s 10,622 Negroes, segregation was an environment permeating every aspect of their lives. It also contributed, however, to a strong sense of community.

The city commission began to recognize the toughness of its opponents and the importance of the carpool to the success of the boycott. A campaign to disrupt the carpool began almost immediately. Carpool participants were systematically harassed by the police. Traffic citations and arrests were issued in large numbers. As president of the ICC, Steele was a special target. Once he was arrested three times in one day.

On June 6, a three judge panel ruled that Montgomery, Alabama’s segregated bus seating laws were unconstitutional. This called Tallahassee’s segregation laws into serious question, but the city commission refused to yield. Bus service to Negro neighborhoods was suspended. The city fathers hoped this action coupled with the attack on the carpool would end the boycott. Also a group of blacks led by Father Brooks issued a statement opposing the boycott and urging cooperation with the city commission. But the majority of the black community displayed considerable hostility to this group of accommodationists.

The boycott quickly began to take its toll on the bus company’s finances. Even a fare increase and reduction of the company’s franchise tax could not prevent a total suspension of bus service on July 1. The ICC-sponsored boycott had cost the bus company 60 per cent of its total revenue. Montgomery’s bus boycott, begun six months before the protest in Tallahassee, did not produce such dramatic results. Tallahassee’s black community demonstrated a high degree of discipline and cooperation and successfully exerted its economic power.

Although the city commission stood firm on segregation, the bus company’s management wavered. It proposed the resumption of bus service on August 2 with only the lateral seats at the front of buses reserved for whites. The company also promised to hire Negro drivers for routes in the black community. Steele and his ICC executive board rejected the compromise.

Governor LeRoy Collins in the July 3 issue of the Tallahassee Democrat criticized the protest leadership for “pushing too hard, too fast.” Collins’ motives for making these statements have never been firmly established. Perhaps the governor felt the necessity of taking a firm stand on the boycott in response to criticism from diehard segregationists. In any case, the comments contrast sharply with Collins’ later stand as a moderate champion of civil rights. Steele believed that the governor’s statements probably encouraged the city commission’s continued opposition. On July 4, Steele told the press, “We cannot sit quietly by and wait for freedom to come to us on a silver platter. For us there is no adherence to gradualism. No Negro worth his salt can afford to stand for anything other than the complete liberation of our people.” Steele’s uncompromising stance earned him the enmity of both black and white conservatives fearful of the rapid change starting to occur Tallahassee.

In the fall of 1956, those arrested by police for carpool participation went to trial. The city based its case on their alleged violation of the state’s “for hire” tag law. ICC members claimed that since no fares were
In the 60s the protests continued - here at a downtown movie theater.

charged, no laws were broken. On October 17, all twenty-two defendants including Steele were found guilty. Each was sentenced to sixty days in jail and fined $500. The jail sentences were suspended, but the fines totaling $11,000 were to be collected. This was an obvious attempt to bankrupt the ICC and end the boycott. The city had convinced the court that the ICC was an illegal business rival of the bus company.

To the dismay of city officials, the ICC abandoned the carpool but continued its boycott, and intensified a voter registration drive begun over the summer of 1956. The black community was determined to remove from office public officials it felt abused their positions. The church, the most viable, stable institution in the black community, was the driving force behind this renewed political activism. Because of the ministerial alliance and various civic organizations, Tallahassee's Negroes had the resources to mount a sustained voter registration campaign.

H. D. Price in his study, *The Negro and Southern Politics*, published in 1957 stated, “the Negro church is still one of the most popular places for political rallies.” With the community already in the habit of attending biweekly mass meetings, the organizational apparatus could be readily steered in a new direction. Price's study also identified the other factors necessary for black progress, all of which were present in Tallahassee. Price states that,

partner, a civic welfare group to make non-partisan appeals on behalf of the Negro community and a number of “accommodating” leaders who are fully trusted by the white community.

Steele recognized that a diversified attack on segregation had the best possibility for success. He tried to defuse community resentment of gradualists like Father Brooks because he understood all had a role to play.

On Christmas eve, 1956, Steele, A. C. Reed and H. McNeal Harris rode in the white only section of a city bus. The city commission responded by revoking the bus company's charter. Since the three ministers were the only passengers, company officials contended no violation of segregation laws had occurred.

The company then filed suit to challenge the validity of the segregated seating ordinance. It also sought and obtained a temporary restraining order prohibiting city commission interference in company operations. While the city and the bus company fought in the courts, Steele's family endured gunshots and crossburnings in front of their home in January 1957. To curtail the trend of violence, Governor Collins suspended bus service on January 3, 1957. That was lifted within weeks.

Despite the controversy and rising violence, the black community remained unified and active. Reverend King Solomon Dupont became the first Negro in twentieth century Tallahassee to run for the city commission, February 1957. He failed to unseat segregationist Davis Atkinson, but the election was marked by increased black voter participation. The February 28 issue of the Tallahassee Democrat noted that the increased percentage of Negroes on the voter rolls was a direct result of the ICC registration campaign.

Ironically, events that had begun in an atmosphere of tension and drama ended in an anticlimactic calm. The final process of integration was evolutionary, rather than revolutionary. Perhaps this is the reason why historian Adam Fairclough incorrectly concluded that Tallahassee's boycott "failed to achieve a clear victory." By December 1957, the segregation clause had been removed from the bus company's franchise contract, and by May 1958, buses were completely integrated in Tallahassee.

The settling of the bus boycott was just the start of a long sequence of related protests. Under Steele's leadership, the ICC continued to support civil rights activity throughout the sixties, often cooperating with other civil rights organizations. Between 1958-1963, the ICC provided administrative and financial support to CORE'S (Congress of Racial Equality) campaign to desegregate stores, housing, theaters and schools in Leon County. Thanks to the inspired leadership of C. K. Steele, the Tallahassee bus boycott served as the successful catalyst for social change and improved race relations.

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After almost a year of demonstrations, arrests, and violence, a large crowd of blacks and whites gathered on a sultry evening in late June of 1964 at St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal Church, near the center of St. Augustine. They came to hear the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. discuss the ongoing struggle for civil rights in the nation's oldest city and also to celebrate the recent passage of the 1964 civil rights bill by the United States Senate and President Lyndon Johnson's announcement that he would sign the measure into law.

The meeting began as it had for the past month and a half, since the arrival of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in early May, first with singing of an old slave song: "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Nobody knows but Jesus." Perspiring heavily from the television lights and the crowding on this warm summer evening, the audience, nevertheless, was oblivious to the heat. Buoyed by national developments, they were confident that the St. Augustine struggle was near an end.

When King entered off to the side of the church, the audience cheered and broke into "When the Saints Go Marching In." The celebration and singing continued with "Which Side Are You On Lord" as King stepped to the pulpit. The emotionalism and excitement of the evening stunned even experienced hands. An Associated Press reporter turned to Marshall Frady, a writer for Newsweek, and said: "My God, Marshall, have you ever heard anything like this?" Frady, who was more accustomed to the emotion of such civil rights gatherings, replied, "Look," as he extended his
Martin Luther King, Jr. came many times to St. Augustine in spring 1964. Here he is silhouetted against a photograph of a confrontation at a ‘white only’ beach.

One of these decisive developments was our last major campaign before the enactment of the Civil Rights Act—in St. Augustine, Florida. We received a plea for help from Dr. Robert Hayling, the leader of the St. Augustine movement. St. Augustine, America’s oldest city, and one of the most segregated cities in America, was a stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birch Society. Such things had happened as Klansmen abducting four Negroes and beating them unconscious with clubs, brass knuckles, ax handles and pistol butts. Dr. Hayling’s home had been shot up with buckshot, three Negro homes had been bombed and several Negro night clubs shotgunned. A Negro’s car had been destroyed by fire because his child was one of the six Negro children permitted to attend white schools. And the homes of two of the Negro children in the white schools had been burned down. Many Negroes had been fired from jobs that some had worked on for 28 years because they were somehow connected with the demonstrations. Police had beaten and arrested Negroes for picketing, marching and singing freedom songs. Many Negroes had served up to 90 days in jail for demonstrating against segregation, and four teenagers had spent six months in jail for picketing. Then, on February seventh of last year, Dr. Hayling’s home was shotguns a second time, with his pregnant wife and two children barely escaping death: the family dog was killed while standing behind the living room door. So SCLC decided to join in last year’s celebration of St. Augustine’s gala 400th birthday as America’s oldest city—by converting it into a nonviolent battleground. This is just what we did.
arm that bristled with goose bumps.

As King stood before this large, enthusiastic and admiring crowd in St. Augustine, his influence had never been greater. Only thirty-five years of age, he had become the spokesman for civil rights reform and human rights throughout the world. He had just recently been named the *Time* magazine’s “Man of the Year” and awarded the American Baptist Convention’s first annual Edwin T. Dahlburg Peace Award. In less than a month, he would be awarded The Nobel Peace Prize. King’s commitment to equal rights and human dignity had touched the soul of the nation and, indeed, much of the world. And, while he had stirred up the wrath and undying enmity of some as a result of campaigns like St. Augustine’s, he had also assumed a unique place in both the black and white communities of the country.

In addressing the audience at St. Paul’s, King spoke enthusiastically about civil rights developments nationally and about the important role these Floridians and out-of-town demonstrators played. But he also cautioned his listeners about the difficult work that lay ahead in St. Augustine. “We are at the most difficult moment,” he reminded listeners. “We must remain calm and not let them provoke us into violence.” As King finished his speech, 350 people, including approximately 50 whites, queued up outside the church in preparation for the evening march. Led by the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, the Reverend Andrew Young, and Hosea Williams, all of SCLC, the crowd walked quietly through the night toward the center of this historic community. King did not join the marchers, taking seriously the danger of threats on his life.

The marshaling of white militants and Ku Klux Klansmen in St. Augustine and the clashes between militants, police, and demonstrators earlier that day had heightened concerns of SCLC staff coordinators. In particular, efforts by civil rights leaders to integrate St. Augustine Beach on two separate occasions during the day had led to the near drowning of civil rights demonstrators when militants, despite the presence of state and local police, chased them into the ocean.

Waiting for the marchers at the Old Slave Market were more than 500 white militants whose anger at King and civil rights activists had been raised to a fever pitch by J.B. Stoner, Atlanta Ku Klux Klan leader, and the Reverend Connie Lynch, a pro-segregation religious zealot who drove around the country fomenting hate and bigotry. St. Augustine had become as much a battleground for white extremists as it was for civil rights leaders. Militants like Stoner and Lynch were drawn to the city because of King’s presence, and they came to not only defeat King but to destroy the movement.

These whites turned toward the sounds of the civil rights marchers, who sang spirituals as they neared the center of town, and with Lynch’s blessing began to sprint toward Shuttlesworth and Young. As the marchers walked past the old Alcazar Hotel and into the town square, a local resident who lived nearby commented: “Things would be quiet. Then I’d hear the shuffle of feet. Hair would rise on the back of my bassett. Then I’d hear singing, then police sirens, dogs barking, and people running.” For one brief moment the singing stopped, and there was near total silence, as in the eye of a hurricane. A reporter characterized it as an “eerie silence,” adding, “You could hear the clicking of stop lights.”
the storm hit. Marchers tried vainly to hold their ranks and to continue, but whites jerked individuals from the lines and pummeled them at will. For nearly twenty minutes, the assault continued with most marchers fleeing to the safety of the black community. Approximately fifty others, however, suffered cuts and bruises, while another eighteen had to be taken to nearby Flagler Hospital for treatment of more serious injuries. To add insult to injury, several of the injured were subsequently arrested by police for disturbing the peace.

The civil rights campaign in St. Augustine took place just over thirty years ago and it marked one of the major turning points in race relations in Florida and the nation. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, responding to a request from local activists, brought their non-violent civil rights forces to St. Augustine, Florida in the early spring of 1964. By the time King and SCLC intervened in St. Augustine, there had already been a year of escalating protests and incidents, and beatings of local activists. Nationally, SCLC’s focus was on the pending civil rights bill that was under consideration by the U.S. Senate in 1964. King wrote that the enactment of the bill was “so critical for the domestic health of our national community that we must mobilize every force and pressure available to see to it that the civil rights bill before the Senate gets through - as is.” King also believed that it was essential that black Americans play a central role in securing passage of the bill. Since blacks were nearly without representation in Congress, King felt that only through a moral crusade in the streets of the South could black Americans be politically effective.

But why St. Augustine? The community was attractive to the nation’s most prominent civil rights organization for several reasons. First, a local movement on which to build a major civil rights campaign already existed in St. Augustine. Dr. Robert Hayling, a dentist, Henry Twine, and many other black residents had launched demonstrations in 1963 in an unsuccessful effort to desegregate the community. Second, the local white leadership in St. Augustine had shown no willingness to compromise on desegregation. In contrast to Albany, Georgia in 1962 where SCLC had encountered a political wily sheriff, who had brought SCLC its first defeat, St. Augustine had no such savvy white leaders who might derail the movement. Third, St. Augustine was heavily dependent on tourism and thus subject to a national boycott that, if successful, might bring the community to its knees. Fourth, St. Augustine was one year away from celebrating its 400th birthday, and plans were well underway for a momentous celebration to mark its anniversary and also to highlight the fact that it (not Jamestown or Plymouth) was the oldest community in the nation. For SCLC, the national publicity that St. Augustine had begun to receive was an added bonus as it prepared to enter the local conflict. Such national visibility was particularly crucial to SCLC’s effort to win support for the civil rights bill.

In announcing SCLC’s forthcoming campaign in St. Augustine, King used the community’s 400th anniversary to publicize the organization’s struggle against what he termed “the oldest segregated community” in the nation. He was deliberately trying to generate broad national interest. It was an ironic characterization of the city, however, because historically, particularly in its Spanish period but also in the first British period, St. Augustine had been a multiracial society in which whites, African slaves and freedmen, and native Americans interacted on a daily basis.

Despite King’s characterization, St. Augustine was not a hotbed of racism before the events of 1964. Black and white citizens, in fact, often conversed pleasantly in public spaces, and there seemed to be a genuine fondness between many white and black residents. The historian David
Chalmers, himself a civil rights participant in the St. Augustine campaign, found a greater degree of racial intermingling in the community than in “hundreds of other Southern towns.” Even a local black resident commented that “You really weren’t too conscious at that time of the difference that existed.” Most white citizens, however, firmly embraced the color line and, while they might regard blacks favorably as neighbors, they were not prepared to accept them as equals.

What made St. Augustine so resistant to racial change and why did whites ignore the concerns of black residents? It would seem on the surface that a community dependent on northern tourism in a state that had changed so significantly because of immigration would adapt to social change more readily than a Birmingham, Alabama or Jackson, Mississippi. But St. Augustine proved as difficult as any to desegregate. As with other historic communities in the South such as New Orleans and Charleston, St. Augustine’s social structure had been defined by the traditions of the past, and segregation was a central element in that heritage. Living in the nation’s oldest city, St. Augustinians were especially proud of its history. According to one scholar who spent several years studying the place, the post-World War II white leadership exhibited a particular fondness for genealogy. Such family ties helped give one status and a special place in this historic community. It also, of course, defined the place of black citizens in a much more restrictive way than was typical in other southern communities. In effect the black heritage did not count; black residents were at the bottom of the social ladder, where local whites believed they must remain if this social structure was to be preserved. A tourist economy, which highlighted the community’s historic past, reinforced the status quo in race relations.

One could not live in St. Augustine and escape the history that oozed from every pore of city life.

The traditional nature of social and political life in the community received added reinforcement from local business leaders, the religious community, and Governor Farris Bryant, all of whom were committed to preserving the status quo in race relations. Moderates in the community found themselves in an untenable position and were even further isolated when fellow white residents joined forces to establish a chapter of the John Birch Society in 1963. Appropriately the Birch Society maintained an office and reading room on St. George Street in the heart of the old Spanish quarter. Led by a local physician with close ties to the political leaders of St. Augustine and with more than fifty members, the Birch Society quickly became a prominent force in the civil rights struggles.

Within the black community of St. Augustine, few public voices had emerged to condemn the state of race relations prior to 1963. Most black residents criticized racial conditions in the abstract, but these same people, despite their close relations with many whites in the community, knew how dangerous civil rights protests could be. They not only feared for the loss of their jobs but also their lives. In the aftermath of the Brown decision and following the civil rights developments in Montgomery, Little Rock, Tallahassee, and Greensboro, local blacks eagerly awaited the end of segregation in their community, but it was not clear that there would be a local civil rights movement.

Dr. Robert Hayling, who had moved to St. Augustine in 1960 to take over a dental practice, served as the catalyst for the emergence of a local movement. The son of a faculty member at Florida A&M University, Hayling had lived much of his life within the black community where he was partially sheltered from the racism in the South. He received his undergraduate degree at FAMU and his dental degree at Meharry Medical College in Nashville before coming to St. Augustine. Hayling closely followed civil rights developments nationally and had taken part in a civil rights demonstration in Nashville. He personally chafed under the oppression of Jim Crow in St. Augustine. Although he had many white patients, Hayling could not socialize with them nor could he get served at local restaurants. He had joined the local NAACP shortly after arriving in St. Augustine and in 1963 took over the leadership of the Youth Council of the organization. It was the Youth Council that initiated street protests in front of Woolworths in late June 1963, carrying signs that asked “If We Spend Money Here Why Can’t
We Eat Here?" A sit-in at a local pharmacy in July led to the arrest of sixteen young blacks, including seven juveniles.

The jailing of these young people became the defining moment in the local movement. Following the arrest of the juveniles, the county judge Charles Mathis informed parents that he would release the children into their custody only if they pledged to keep them away from further demonstrations. The parents of three children promised to do so, but other parents angrily rejected the judge’s deal. Judge Mathis then transferred the four remaining juveniles to the state reform school and refused to release them on bond or to set a term for their incarceration. Infuriated at the judge’s actions and realizing for the first time the true extent of the commitment of local whites to the status quo, many black residents rallied behind the children and their families and committed themselves to the desegregation of the community. On Labor Day 1963, more than 125 residents participated in St. Augustine’s first mass demonstration to protest the city commission’s refusal to appoint a biracial commission.

Mayor Shelley and other city leaders could have settled the mounting racial crisis by asking Mathis to free the teenagers or by appointing a biracial commission that activists sought. Instead Shelley and other leaders, including City Attorney Robert Andreu, School Superintendent Douglas Hartley, City Police Chief Virgil Stuart, and Sheriff L.O. Davis, opposed any compromise with civil rights activists. Although none was a member of the John Birch Society, they privately embraced the organization’s views. These five men met with Dr. Norris, head of the Birch Society, at his home in 1964 where they developed plans to undermine the efforts of black residents and SCLC.

Unable to talk with local civic leaders, let alone pursue a compromise, and threatened repeatedly by the Ku Klux Klan members, a civil rights group, led by Dr. Hayling and Henry Twine, journeyed from St. Augustine to Orlando in March 1964 where they met with the Reverend C.T. Vivian, a member of the Board of Directors of SCLC, and asked for King’s assistance. SCLC had already pledged to participate in the Mississippi Freedom Summer campaign in July, but the organization was in the process of debating whether it should not conduct protest activities earlier. Several in the organization, including King, felt strongly that such a campaign was necessary if black Americans were to maintain the pressure on the senate to pass the civil rights bill. There was no agreement, however, on where that campaign should be. The request of Hayling,
Twine and their fellow St. Augustinians came at a propitious moment.

The match of Hayling and the SCLC was to have its bumpy moments. For one thing, he was not a total advocate of non-violence, arguing that black citizens should be able to arm themselves when physically threatened. In practice, though, Hayling was a charismatic leader, if also a somewhat intransigent negotiator. And he had demonstrated great physical courage King and his colleagues could not help but admire. Twice Hayling’s home had been shot up, and he was badly beaten one night trying to observe a Klan rally. Hayling and his local colleagues gave away some control of the outcome of events by inviting in the SCLC; in exchange they teamed up with an organization expert at mobilizing protest and worldwide attention.

SCLC’s experience in major campaigns in Montgomery, Albany, and Birmingham had helped the organization develop a large following nationally and also helped prepare it for difficult struggles like St. Augustine. The organization had become much more skillful at planning and developing strategies for such campaigns since it began them in 1962 in Albany, Georgia. SCLC did not agree to participate in St. Augustine, for example, until aides had made two different trips to the community and until a plan of action had been prepared. Before entering St. Augustine, SCLC recruited participants from throughout the Northeast and in Florida. SCLC launched its first demonstrations over Easter week with Mrs. Malcolm Peabody, mother of the Governor of Massachusetts, and Mrs. John Burgess, wife of the Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts, leading a sit-in at a St. Augustine restaurant. This and other demonstrations conducted by SCLC were carefully planned to highlight the racism blacks endured on a daily basis, to point out the need for the civil rights bill, and to dramatize the movement so that the national media would keep the nation aware of developments in St. Augustine. A few days after her arrest, Mrs. Peabody appeared on the “Today Show” to describe the racial intolerance in St. Augustine and throughout the South. She urged Congress to pass the civil rights bill so that black citizens could freely exercise their rights as citizens of the United States. The personal commitment of this seventy-two-year-old woman captured the attention and support of white and black Americans in ways that SCLC had not even anticipated.

In mid-May, SCLC returned to St. Augustine and conducted daily demonstrations for two straight months. During this period, civil rights leaders varied their tactics to maintain the attention of the press and the public. King was himself arrested following an attempted sit-in at a local motel. The evening marches remained the most dramatic and dangerous because local and state police could not guarantee the safety of demonstrators, even if they were so inclined. The irony of local race relations was revealed one evening when white militants conducted their own march through the black community, only to encounter black residents who peacefully welcomed them into their neighborhood. At the end of two months of demonstrations, arrests, and violence, SCLC decided to pull out of St. Augustine in mid-July, having secured passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and an agreement from Governor Farris Bryant to establish a biracial commission. The crisis
SWIM-IN AT MONSON’S — AN INSTITUTION DOUSED

Throughout the racial demonstrations in St. Augustine, SCLC employed a variety of tactics that were designed to gain national press coverage and thus to ensure the attention of the American public. In addition to the nightly marches, the most innovative and dramatic tactic was the use of wade-ins and swim-ins to desegregate the beaches and swimming pools. The protests exposed the pervasiveness of segregation, touching as it did on every aspect of life in St. Augustine from schools and neighborhoods to public beaches. What other Americans could not understand was how a public beach could be subdivided into black and white sections.

To assure press coverage of its demonstrations, SCLC would often notify reporters in advance. Hosea Williams, special adviser to Martin Luther King, was particularly adept at developing new tactics and at mobilizing the press. One of his most effective was the swim-in at the Monson Motor Lodge on June 18th, 1964. Reporters stayed at Monson’s during the St. Augustine campaign, and as a consequence, SCLC often conducted its demonstrations there. The first of these was led by a group of rabbis who distracted owner James Brock while a group of black and white protesters jumped into the motel’s swimming pool. Brock yelled at two of the white demonstrators, “You’re not putting these people in my pool.” “These are our guests,” came the reply. In a fury, Brock ran into his office and returned with a two gallon container of muriatic acid that he dumped into the water. A group of whites, led by police officer James Hewitt, gathered nearby, not knowing exactly what to do. Finally, Hewitt jumped into the pool to arrest the protesters.

It was such a farcical sight that few in the media could resist it as illustration of foolishness of segregation. The Russian newspaper Izvestia ran this picture of the protesters with officer Hewitt jumping into the pool on its front page, as did most American newspapers. Segregation might continue for several more years, but few would deny that the institution had been doused that day at Monson’s swimming pool.
eRoy Collins was elected governor of Florida on May 4, 1954 – two weeks before the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education decision. Eleven years later he was playing a key role as the federal point man on the scene mediating the protest marches in Selma, Alabama.

It is the thesis of this essay that Collins evolved from a moderate, sometimes critical, defender of the southern way to an involved suporter of the thrust of the civil rights movement. It didn’t happen overnight. Rather, it was a progressive journey, largely taken in the 11 years 1954 to 1965. And because Collins was a man who wrestled moral dilemmas in public speeches, his growth as a moderate leader is largely documented in his own words.

* * *

Florida had no integrated public schools as Collins began his abbreviated first term in January 1955. Only the Miami/Dade system had made substantial progress toward school desegregation by the time he left office in 1961.

Racial issues had not been a factor in the 1954 campaign. As governor, Collins advocated gradualism in school desegregation. In his second term, as his national standing grew, he floated the idea of state commissions to oversee the process. But the concept did not catch on with his fellow governors, was rebuffed by President Eisenhower and was ultimately supplanted by the federal court orders of the 1960s and 1970s.

Collins’ first reaction to the bus boycott in Tallahassee, his home town as well as the state capital, was a straddle. He worked hard to prevent violence and civil disorder but criticized the unwillingness of boycott leaders to compromise. Also, faced with a U.S. Supreme Court decision that the University of Florida should admit a black law clerk named Virgil Hawkins to its law school, Collins sided with those who devised procedural ways to circumvent the order.

* * *
Collins decisively won a reelection to a full, four-year second term in 1956. This time race was an issue since his opponent was militant segregationist, Sumter Lowry. Collins took a stand against fashionable southern schemes for resisting federal orders. He opposed, though he lacked power to veto, the Legislature’s resolution in favor of "interposition"—a theory by which states could supposedly nullify federal orders in conflict with their own constitutions.

Collins began by selling moderation to voters as a pragmatic economic matter. "Nothing will turn...investors away quicker than the prospect of finding here communities hopped up by demagoguery and seething under the tension and turmoil of race hatred," he said. His campaign billed him as a super salesman for Florida, and Collins seemed presciently that the state was ready to take off economically. Howard Hughes was considering an investment in the state, and Collins seemed aware that "the average white citizen does not object to nonsegregated seating in buses." He urged white Floridians to recognize the realities of their society: "We can find wise solutions if the white citizens will face up to the fact that the Negro does not now have equal opportunities, that he is morally and legally entitled to progress more rapidly, and that a full good-faith effort should be made forthwith to help him move forward in the improvement of all his standards."

And Collins concluded the inaugural making the moral case for moving forward on racial matters. "There must be change and change usually comes hard," he said. He quoted a hymn by abolitionist James Russell Lowell:

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the Good or Evil side.

Collins charged, "The cause is with us now." Not all that he and his adherents sought could be achieved, but their efforts would make change easier for those who followed. They must begin. He pleaded, "God forbid that it shall ever be said of our administration, ‘They did not have the vision to see,’ or seeing, ‘They did not have the will to try.’"

The governor renewed his demand for change by again quoting from the Lowell hymn:

New occasions teach new duties,
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward
Who would keep abreast of truth.
Collins concluded, "This is the call of history—A history which grows impatient. Ours is the generation in which great decisions can no longer be passed to the next. We have a State to build—a South to save—a nation to convince—and a God to serve."

* * *

Through his second-term Collins became a nationally recognized spokesman for southern moderation. He was visibly active in the Southern Governor's Association, opposing and outflanking contemporaries like Arkansas' Orville Faubus. Collins began to take some heat back home as a darling of the liberal northern media. He also secured the prestigious position as permanent chairman of the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles in 1960. Like nominee Jack Kennedy, Collins had both the striking physical presence and the use of language needed to be effective on television.

In early 1960, the Tallahassee bus boycott had given way to lunch counter sit-ins and mass demonstrations. On March 20, Collins took to the airwaves and delivered his most forceful statement yet on racial justice. As biographer Tom Wagy relates:

"Rejecting the idea of a written transcript, Collins decided to deliver an impromptu talk that would express his true sentiments. He knew what he wanted to say. He arrived at the studio shortly before the 5:30 telecast time. Excitement filled the air as the station crew bustled about preparing for their roles in the important occasion.

Collins began by acknowledging the intensity of the divisions on the sit-in issue. He understood the risks of speaking out. Yet, he pledged: "As long as I am in this office, I will say what I think is right." He continued, "I will not have on my conscience a feeling that at any time the people needed my help, I ducked or dodged or looked the other way in order to follow the easy course." Beyond that, "I think the people of this state expect their governor to have convictions, and I think the people of this state when their governor has convictions about a matter expect him to express those convictions directly to them."

Confirming his belief in the legal rights of all citizens, Collins vowed to protect the businessmen's prerogative to select the patrons they served as well as the right of others to demonstrate. Yet, if a demonstration incited public disorder, then it was unlawful. "We are going to have law and order in this state," he pledged. But he did not stop with a legalistic analysis. Instead, he challenged his constituents to recognize new insights he had gained from his constant reflection on the racial dilemma.

"We are foolish if we just think about resolving this thing on a legal basis," the governor contended. The racial issue also involved certain "moral rights" and "principles of brotherhood." If a businessman invited the public to come into his store and trade, then he lacked any moral right to single out one department, such as a lunch counter, that he would not allow blacks to patronize. "Now he has the legal right to do that," Collins conceded, "but I still don't think he can square that right with moral, simple justice."

Were the South's racial traditions moral? Many southerners recognized that racial strife damaged the nation, Collins observed, but they argued "this could be eliminated if the colored people would just stay in their place." He responded: "Now friends, that's not a Christian point of view. That's not a democratic point of view. That's not a realistic point
of view. We can never stop Americans from struggling to be free. We can never stop Americans from hoping and praying that someday in some way this ideal that is imbedded in our Declaration of Independence... that all men are created equal, that somehow will be a reality and not just an illusory distant goal.

The station crew gave Collins his first reaction to the speech. The conviviality had disappeared. The cameramen, director, and other personnel seemed stunned. They met the governor’s searching glances with icy stares. Collins left the studio without a word being spoken.

* * *

After leaving office, Collins served for several years as executive director for the National Association of Broadcasters in Washington. He continued to offend southern reactionaries like Strom Thurmond—with a pro-desegregation speech in South Carolina. Collins recalled later that as a private citizen, he was part of the crowd that day in 1963 when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech during the mass march on Washington. Soon Collins would be more than a spectator. He was recruited by President Lyndon Johnson to head the Community Relations Service, charged with ensuring peaceful desegregation and conciliating conflicts.

March 9, 1965, found Collins shuttling back and forth across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama. He was the credible mediator between King and beligerent local authorities. The march went forward with minimal violence; the famous photo of the lanky former governor walking alongside King and his lieutenants was later used against Collins in his losing 1968 campaign for the U.S. Senate. Collins, ever gracious, made no alibis and wrote a book to pay off campaign debts. Most political observers think his journey to a moral, reasoned and proactive moderation took him well past Florida voters, though the state and region have largely caught up with his example in the years since.

* * *

Collins spoke to a predominantly black audience at Florida A&M University in 1981 at an event commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Tallahassee bus boycott.

He reflected on where he started and where he ended on the great moral issue of his generation:

I served as governor during that period when only public school desegregation had been mandated by law. We were confronted with hostility from both sides without standards by which effective solutions could be found under law. I had finished my term long before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided the strength of law essential to greater success. I do not want to appear defensive as to my own official efforts, but I do ask your understanding of the conditions which influenced some of the things I said and did in response to my duty as I then saw it. I do not ask that you judge everything I said or did to be right.

Born and raised here in Tallahassee, I was accustomed early to a segregated society. I was never taught to hate anybody, black or white. In fact, in my family and among most of my white friends, we had close ties and care and love for many black people. I was taught to be kind and generous to black people. Still, we grew up believing in separate schools, separate toilets, and separate drinking fountains. Adults then rarely called black people "Mr." or "Mrs.," yet very likely expected to be so addressed by blacks...

I made some statements in the 1950s that tended to ally me with the conditions and majority thinking of my time. But I hope historians will understand the broad responsibility I had to lead a reform program in Florida which required the support of the majority of the people. I hope also that I will be judged as having perceived and given some support to eternal values. We succeeded in very large measure with our general program of reform. We also made significant progress in keeping our racial issues stabilized and in avoiding much of the havoc and lasting injury that came to many other states of the South....

In 1968, out in west Florida, a few days before the senatorial election, I told a group that any rational man who looked at the horizon and saw the South of the future segregated was simply seeing a mirage. I emphasized that the concept of equality of all men is an idea that can never by stopped, not by custom, not by prejudice, not by hate, not by murder, not by armies, not by any mortal force. It may be thwarted, it may be delayed, its triumph may be at a great cost and sacrifice—but it will keep coming on and on, for it has the invincibility of simple truth, and justice and right.

Rick Edmonds is editor of the Forum. This account is drawn with permission from Tom Wagy’s biography of Collins (see suggested readings, page 42) and Charles U. Smith’s The Civil Rights Movement in Florida and the United States.
TALES OF THE PIONEERS

Being frontline in the movement was dangerous, unpleasant, exhilarating

MARILYN J. HOLIFIELD

Being the First
at Leon High School

Marilyn J. Holifield is a lawyer in the Miami offices of Holland and Knight. She is a co-chairman of the upcoming Summit of the Americas. As a teenager she was among the first cadre of students to desegregate Leon High School in Tallahassee. This piece is adapted from a speech she gave at the school in 1990.

It has been more than 30 years now since I was a Leon High School senior who sat in the auditorium and listened to her schoolmates cheer the announcement of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Back then the farthest thing from my mind was the thought of returning to the red clay hills of Tallahassee — much less returning to Leon High School. But I did in 1990 to speak to a new generation of Leon students.

Not because I have had a successful career after graduating from Swarthmore College and Harvard Law School. Many Leon High School graduates have had successful careers. I returned because I believe history assists us in understanding the present, and oftentimes history inspires those who are touched by its lessons to prove wrong all those who say you can’t and to prove right all those who say you can.

Our history reveals that education is precious, and there are Americans who were killed simply because they tried to learn how to read and write or they were beaten or they were run out of town simply because they tried to make education available to those who were shut out of schools by the laws and tradition of our Southern legacy.

The United States Supreme Court finally ruled in 1954 in Brown v. Bd. of Ed. of Topeka, Kansas that public schools should not be segregated. Well, Ms. Brown was grown by the time the Supreme Court decision was handed down, and she did not attend a desegregated school. An entire school system in one Virginia County closed all of its schools rather than comply with the law announced in the Brown decision.

In Tallahassee, the School Board, represented by the same powerful law firms that today have partners who make important decisions about publicly financed education, resisted complying with the Brown decision. Nine years after the Brown decision three of us entered Leon High School under the freedom of choice plan.

Why did I go? First, I was curious. Second, I felt that my family’s tax dollars that paid for education entitled me to go to any school in the county. Third, if Mrs. Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Tallahassee’s own Calvin Bess could risk their lives simply to stand up and be recognized as human beings, then I could honor their struggles and the struggles of thousands of
others before me and go to the school that the county poured twice as much money into compared to the schools reserved for blacks.

Some may not remember Calvin Bess. He was a black college student who went to Mississippi to support the struggle for the right to vote. When he was found dead in his car which was overturned in a swamp, Tallahassee, the state and the nation had lost one of its finest.

What was it like back then at Leon High? I can tell you what it was not. It was not having the freedom to wander into the bathroom alone. It was not having friends to compare notes or exchange ideas — unless Philip or Harold happened to be around. It was not walking or riding home exchanging chatter about the goings-on in school.

My father drove me to a black school, where we caught the bus for black kids, stopped at the black high school, and then the bus took the three of us on to Leon.

It was not being the teacher’s favorite student. It was not being the leader of the pack, holding elective offices or being voted best dressed or most likely to succeed.

It was seeing my mother tire not only from her work as director of the vocational nursing program at the then Lincoln High School, but also seeing her tire from worry and concern about my safety and educational success during my days at Leon.

So why did I do it?

I did it to get access to a quality education in specific subjects that were not offered at the black schools, particularly the mathematics and sciences.

I did it to bring Leon High School and Tallahassee closer to a democracy.

I did it to honor those who had struggled before me.

And, I did it to make a path for those who were to come after me.

What did I get? The most important benefit to me of my struggle at Leon High School was a recognition that a belief in myself ignites an irrepressible power and strength to reach higher and farther than anyone imagined to be possible.

You might ask, why reflect on the negatives of Leon High’s history? I submit that an examination of the harsh ugliness of our traditions and history surrounding the struggle of three who paved a way for today provides important lessons.

During my years at Leon, one or two white students marched to the beat of a different drummer and reached out to be my friend.

It should not be a secret, though, that two grandsons and a granddaughter of the Old South met in the halls of Leon High School in 1963 and stood firm against seemingly relentless hostilities.

Nor should it be a secret that the Old South culture and traditions exposed three teenagers daily to danger, intimidation and isolation in a struggle to make it possible for a later generation to exercise a right to benefit from educational resources.

ROBERT SAUNDERS
On the Trail of a Near-Lynching

Robert Saunders was born in Tampa in 1921. He attended Bethune-Cookman College and was drafted into the army in 1942. After Harry T. Moore died in a firebombing in 1951, Saunders succeeded him as field secretary of the NAACP in Florida, a position he held through 1966. He later served in the Atlanta office of the Civil Rights Commission and as an advisor to the city of Tampa. He is retired in Tampa.

Here, Saunders recalls investigating a near lynching in 1958.

In November of 1958, Jessie Woods, a black man living in Wildwood, was arrested for “whistling” at a white woman while shopping in the local A & P Store. He was placed in the Wildwood jail. During the night, a mob of white men broke into the jail. Woods was taken from the jail, beaten and left for dead near the Withlacoochee River.

The Florida State Conference of NAACP Branch was in session in Tampa at the time of the incident. Delegates were attending the Annual Freedom Fund Dinner on the night that Woods was abducted from the Wildwood jail. No one, including myself, had heard about the incident. Roy Wilkins was the speaker for the Sunday afternoon Mass Meeting at St. Paul A.M.E. Church. He was scheduled to arrive on the Atlantic Coastline’s West Coast Champion. Wildwood also serves as a junction where trains are broken into two section, one section heading into Tampa and other into Miami. Roy heard about the “lynching” during the layover at the junction.

I met Roy Wilkins at the Tampa Union Station. When we got into my car, he turned to me and asked, “What about the jail break-in and the suspected lynching of a black prisoner last night?” I was caught by surprise. Here was my boss telling me about an incident that had happened at a time when every NAACP leader in the state was assembled in Tampa, seventy or eighty miles from Wildwood.
Early the next Monday morning, a group of us prepared to leave for Wildwood. When we arrived there we noticed that the streets were deserted. I had many trips through Wildwood. Never had I seen U.S. Highway 301 so empty of pedestrians. It was deserted except for one lone elderly black man who stood several blocks east of the station on U.S. Highway 301. His standing on the street corner was not an idle gesture. He had been waiting there for a purpose. "Are you from the NAACP?", he asked. I assured him that I was the Field Director for the NAACP in the State of Florida and gave him one of my cards.

"Good", he remarked. "We’ve been expecting you. Come on and go with me". We drove east for several miles until we reached a dirt road. He told us to turn right and continue down the road until we came to a small settlement. About a mile from the highway, we drove up to two or three unpainted wooden frame houses. There were news reporters and investigators all over the place. He pointed out one heavy-set man seated on the steps of one house and who was talking to a middle aged black woman.

"The fat white man you see talking to my sister said he’s from Governor Collins’ office. But we ain’t talking to him or no one else", he commented. "Keep on driving further down the road until you come to another house. We’ll talk there", he said.

The second stop turned out to be the house of other relatives of Woods. Here, we were introduced as the NAACP men from Tampa. The real story of what happened to Jessie Woods began to evolve. I had worked for NAACP for six years. All during that time, I had never been thrown into investigating a lynching.

Jessie Woods relatives told what had happened after the arrest. They put him in that jail and left it unguarded. Late that night, some white men broke into the jail and took Woods out into the woods. There, he was beaten and left for dead. They drove off unaware that their victim was still alive and able to crawl to the edge of a dirt road. He was found early Sunday morning by an uncle and his wife who were leaving for Fort Walton Beach where he worked on a road construction project. Jessie was able to stop his uncle. He was bloody and sore. They took him back to the settlement and gave some first-aid. He was rolled into a rug, placed in the back seat of the car and taken away.

(Saunders and a reporter, Bettye Murphy from Baltimore, later made contact with relatives of Woods at a fish camp.)

An elderly black woman turned to me and directed me to return to her house. "When you enter the first room, lift up the rug and you’ll find a loose board. Lift the board up and you’ll find a letter with a Fort Walton, Florida address. That’s where he is". Then she and the rest of the family returned to their fishing efforts on the Withlacoochee River.

Three of us rowed back to the fishing camp. We drove to the settlement, entered the house, moved the rug, lifted the board and as we were told, found the letter. Two hours later, we were in the NAACP office in Tampa confessing with attorney Francisco Rodriguez about our next move.

Media people began to show up. Apparently, they knew that I was onto something or had knowledge about what had happened to Woods. I wasn’t talking. The reporter was eager to leave for Fort Walton Beach. The consensus was that this was an urgent matter and that we should leave immediately. Bettye Murphy agreed to buy my round trip airplane fare if I would agree to allow her to go with me. To cover our tracks we would travel under an assumed name as Mr. and Mrs. Smith. We boarded a National Airlines plane to Jacksonville and changed planes to Panama City.

The treasurer of the Bay County Branch was a funeral director named Pascal. When we arrived in Panama City, we urged him to take us to Fort Walton. In Fort Walton, it was easy to find the house. Our knocking on the door got no response. Bettye Murphy was insistent that we try to open the door. The door wasn’t locked so we went in the house. There was no one home. In a back bedroom, we found blood-soaked bandages and a blood-soaked rug. There was medication and we knew that we were on the right trail.

An hour passed before the occupants finally arrived at the house. I told them who I was, showed them the letter we had found in Wildwood and identified Bettye Murphy. What they told us confirmed how Jesse Woods was able to leave Wildwood.

We had missed seeing Woods by only two hours. They had taken him to Dothan, Alabama where he was being cared for by a local minister in that city. I refused to go on to Dothan even though the temptation was great. But I knew that the NAACP had been enjoined from operating in Alabama. I convinced my traveling partner to return to Tallahassee where we could regroup and she could telephone her story to her Baltimore office.

Dr. Nick Williams was a black dentist in Tallahassee. He was an active supporter of the civil rights struggle in Tallahassee and worked with both the NAACP and the Inter-Civil Council. We decided that we would remain at his home until it was time to catch our planes. This time Bettye Murphy would head back to Baltimore and I would leave for Tampa. Bettye made several long distance calls to her newspaper. During one of the conversations she heard the long distance operator remark that "they found that nigger that was supposed to be lynched in Wildwood." I think this persuaded her to leave the telephone alone.

About an hour after I arrived in Tampa, two men came to my home. They identified themselves as agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I was asked if I knew where Jesse Woods was and I replied affirmatively. I was asked to accompany them to the FBI office. It was agreed that before I gave them any information, the NAACP would be given a guarantee that Woods would be protected once he was apprehended.

Governor Collins was contacted by the agents. He assured them that the State of Florida would protect Woods once he was found. After receiving Collins’ commitment, I gave them a detailed story of what happened and where Jesse Woods could be found. Several hours later, I was called by an agent and told that what I had told them was accurate and that Woods had been found. The morning newspapers carried the story and attributed the finding of Woods to the FBI. The Governor issued a strong statement condemning the acts of cowards who broke into the jail. Woods was later tried on minor charges. To this day the NAACP has never been credited with finding him.

SAVANNAH WILLIAMS
Registering Voters, Walking the Picket Line

Savannah Williams, 75, has been a long time community activist in Gainesville. Here she recalls trying to register voters in the later 40s and 50s and walking the picket lines in the 60s.

I volunteered in 1948. Well, we started going from door to door, asking people if they were registered to vote, and if not, we would take their names and let them give us a time that we would go. Then we would make arrangements to take them.

A lot of people were scared, but I talked them into it. But they didn't know where (to go) and they were scared. It was on the north end of the courthouse...that's where the Voter's Registration Office was...you could tell that you weren't really welcome from the expressions on their faces when we came in. I carried in a lot of people, but I couldn't go no further than the door. If the people knew I was just as scared as they, I probably wouldn't be able to get nobody to go. I was scared, too.

But I can tell you one thing, if you don't watch out for your-self, no one else will. It's no point in saying that your vote won't count. Your vote will count just like everybody else's. If it wasn't, I wouldn't be trying to get you to go. Sometimes they'd look at me. I think they would see the sincerity in my approach.

I had a lady tell me one time, "You think because you got an education and can walk down the street and write people up to register and vote, that you somebody," I say, "Well, that's alright. Let's play crazy together. Let's go down and get registered where you can vote." (And she did, too.)

* * *

I walked the picket lines every day. Praying to God, don't let nobody hit me. When Reverend C. K. Steele and those came down from Atlanta in the SCLC, and was training in non-violence, I didn't see myself down on the pavement to keep nobody from doing something to me. I didn't see myself down there. I wasn't born a slave. I was born supposed to be free, although I'm not. As long as nobody hits me, we are going to get along fine. If they hit me, we are going to tell it on the judge.

I (picketed) on University Avenue all the way down to the Coffee Pot. From the Coffee Pot all the way to the University Plaza. Winjammer, bus station...we went to Archer and picketed a bar there. And I thought we'd get clobbered that day. Boy, red-necks come out and look at us like we were something that they drug out of some garbage bin or something. Clubs and all that stuff. Poor me, I didn't know what happened to the fear I had. Every day I walked the picket line, and I had a knife or an ice pick or something in a brown paper bag.

I did, because of an incident happened where Leon and them went into the Coffee Pot and they poured the hot coffee on them. Right on University Avenue across from Bell Telephone. They went in and ordered a cup of coffee; they took the hot coffee and poured it on them...1965.
JOEL BUCHANAN
A Pre-Teen Desegregates
Gainesville’s Humpty-Dumpty

Joel Buchanan, now 46, was one of the first students to desegregate Gainesville High School and later the University of Florida. He works as a counselor in the University's office of financial aid but is currently on leave compiling a history of African-Americans in Gainesville. Here he recalls desegregating a hamburger shop as a pre-teen:

There was a local restaurant that was called Humpty Dumpty, a drive-in type restaurant with a part you could go in. The NAACP at that time was testing to see if blacks could go into the facility. They wanted children that could go, minors that should not be arrested and if they were arrested their parents could financially support an attorney for them. Five of us went there, and I was the spokesman. I don’t know today how the police knew where we were going to go, because the NAACP was still picketing places in Gainesville: 13th Street, the College Inn across from campus, the Florida Theater downtown. There was a restaurant-motel where Albertson’s is, and that day we were testing to see if blacks were allowed to go into restaurants.

I had to be in sixth, seventh, or eighth grade. This had to be ’57 or ’58. My mother was very supportive, but my father was somewhat reluctant because he did not understand and was fearful for what could happen. At that time things were happening all over the United States; people were getting killed and being jailed. We were sure that would not happen to us. It was planned that day that if a car with blacks drove up into the drive-in, they would run out and tell them to leave. The strategy was when two or three cars with blacks would drive into the drive-in section, we would get into the restaurant.

I recall walking in and the manager was outside trying to get the blacks in the cars off the drive-in section. We went inside the building and sat down, and they asked us to leave. We just stated that we wanted to buy a hamburger. After we got in they locked the door so the other blacks couldn’t come in.

Now we were children, minors. It was during the busy lunch hour, and every person in that kitchen was black. The black cooks came out and looked at us, and I don’t know if they were feeling sorry for us, pitying us or what. We were asked to leave and we didn’t leave. I think we knew at that time if you were asked to leave in the presence of a manager twice, they could call the police and you could be arrested.

The policemen were across the street. They took us to jail. The manager asked us to leave in the presence of officers, and we were arrested. They pulled the chairs from under the table and picked us up and put us in the police car and took us to jail. When we got to jail we were put in a holding cell, and I recall the officer saying, “Well, get the records,” because it was obvious that we had to be bad children. There were no records to get, and we were to be locked up. Then they had to call for the juvenile officer to come down. They had a black juvenile officer, and when he came he knew all of us. “What are you doing here? I’m ashamed of you. I’m going to call your parents.”

Of course, when they called our parents, our parents knew. Our parents came down, they called the judge, and he released us in the presence of our parents. We went to jail and had to go to court the next day. There was a lot of publicity about it. The attorney that we hired—now a local representative in Duval County—came over and that morning we went court, and we had a meeting with the NAACP officers to find out how to handle going to court.

Judge MacDonald was the judge. We were separated from our parents. We were sitting together in the area where they bring in the criminals, though we were not locked up, and our parents were in another part of the room. There was no jury, just a judge, and our attorney came late because he had to drive from Jacksonville. We waited for a while, and then he went on with the court. He found us guilty of trespassing, and the sentence was six months to a year in a correctional institution for bad boys and girls. When he said that, it shocked everybody, especially myself: I remember chills going through my body because I had not done anything wrong. That was his decision. I remember looking at my mother like, you know, what have I done?

Well, I think we appealed the decision, and we were put on probation for a year, had curfew at 9 p.m., and had to report to the juvenile officer frequently—I think it was weekly or bi-weekly. For extra-curricular activities we had to get the approval from the juvenile officer, who got the approval from the judge. This left a very permanent scar on my life, because I didn’t do anything other than go in to buy something. I could not buy it, and because
I was there. I was arrested. Because of that, I was put on proba-
tion for a year. That let me know then, that Joel, you are not an
individual, you are not like other people are. And I think that
was a turning point in my life.

* * *

Buchanan entered Gainesville High School as a junior in 1964, one
of the three black students integrating the school. He gives this account
of lunch in the cafeteria the first day.

Have you ever heard the term, “the hush?” “The hush” is to
walk into a room where there is noise, and all of a sudden it
becomes quiet. Well, that day the two black girls and the black
boy walked into the cafeteria. We walked in that day, and it was
just a typical lunchroom: chatter, chatter, chatter. And
then...quiet. You could not hear a thing. “The hush.” Three blacks
had walked into their cafeteria. Now, we were in class with them
all day that day, so if there was chatter, I did not hear it, because
I came in right before class started and left right before class was
out. I am quite sure they talked among themselves, but here they
were, out of the teacher’s room, in the cafeteria, and we walked
in.

We had to get our food, of course, and the teachers were in
there eating at their table. We went and got our food, and there
were three vacant spaces at a table where some students were.
We went and as we approached the table, I guess I could say it
was just like three monsters appearing. They just got up, left their
food, and moved back. Dirt. Filth is coming. There were com-
ments. Immediately, the teachers got up and we ate with the
teachers. For the first few days we ate lunch at the faculty’s table
because they could not afford to have a table where three people
sat where normally twenty would sit.

Howard Kleinberg was editor of the Miami News from 1976 until
its closing in 1988. He presently writes a national column for Cox
Newspapers, as well as a local historic perspective column for the
Miami Herald.

It was the September of 1963 and, as executive sports
editor of the Miami News, football was on my mind. So was Birmingham, however.

Just several months away from being appointed
news editor of the paper — and aware of the impending promo-
tion — I found sports news losing its priority to more significant
events.

On Sept. 15, the 16th Street Baptist Church in a black section
of Birmingham was bombed by racists. Four little girls attending
Sunday school there were killed. I was outraged.

Bill Baggs, the editor of the Miami News during those earlier
days of civil rights struggles, had instilled in me a strong feeling
for the issue. It was he, along with other white southern liberal
newspaper editors such as Ralph McGill of the Atlanta
Constitution, who championed the cause of civil rights in a very
troubled South.

It also was Baggs who, the year before, averted a sit-in at
Miami’s largest department store (Burdin’s) by negotiating a
deal wherein the store promised the NAACP it would integrate
its dining room on Jan. 1 if a sit-in did not occur during the
Christmas shopping season. The NAACP leaders insisted that Burdines’ management put the pledge into a letter to Baggs. “He was the only white man we trusted,” later said Rev. Canon Theodore Gibson, the pathfinder of Miami’s NAACP activity.

My sense of outrage over the atrocity in Birmingham took the best of me. A short time after the bombing, it was announced that a memorial march would be held in Miami to protest what had happened. Similar marches were taking place all over the country. There was never any hesitation. I knew I had to be in the line of marchers as they walked through the streets of Overtown, Miami’s historic black district. We were there by the thousands, white and black. Arms were locked in solidarity and we walked our way undisturbed through the streets.

Along with me were several other staffers of the Miami News, and I spied some of our competition — the Miami Herald — in the pack.

As we marched, still photographers and TV cameramen got their messages.

The restrictions placed on black people as a result of customs, attitudes, and laws separated us from other immigrants, creating conflicts and isolation in every phase of life. Like millions before me, I found a world limited by laws imposed by the United States government.

Colored Town/Overtown was a northwest neighborhood across the railroad tracks from Miami’s white downtown business community. In contrast to Zora Hurston’s apocalypse about Eatonville, differences were apparent in Miami. For more than fifty years Colored Town was self-contained as a result of restrictive social practices and segregation laws. These laws limited black people in every phase of life. Preparing for my first prom was case in point.

Excitement reigned as I prepared for the junior prom in the Spring of 1959. My excitement about what to wear surpassed my thoughts about “getting a date.” A promising debutante, I was certain that the “date” would be a family friend. With joy and anticipation I looked forward to selecting the dress, shoes, and accessories myself.

The day for prom shopping finally arrived, and my mother and I headed to Flagler Street in downtown Miami. Spring was in the air and in the store windows. The mannequins were all dressed up in pastel colors in fabric that seemed to float away if one stared hard. The prom gowns were especially enticing. After window shopping for what seemed like an eternity I finally spotted the one of my dreams. Pink with off-the-shoulders fitted bodice, and a long hooped skirt that stood up by itself.

Upon entering the store we headed to the prom gown section. It was a Saturday afternoon in early spring, and the store was nearly empty. The saleswoman was pleasant as she inquired of our interest. Without hesitation I explained that I wanted the pink gown in the window for the prom. In just a few minutes she appeared of the marchers and, would you believe it, there I was! There were no identifications, but I was obvious to any who knew me.

That day, as I reported to the Miami News for work, I was met by the then-news editor who was holding a copy of the Herald with the page turned to my picture. Behind him stood the managing editor. They rebuked me for participating in the march. It is not the role of a journalist to partake in political activities, they told me — or something like that. We are to remain out of the activity and be observers.

I told them I was sorry if I had embarrassed the newspaper, but, really, I didn’t give a damn what they said. It was my moral obligation to be in that march. Later, when I talked with editor Baggs about my being admonished, he smirked and winked. Never said a word.

I got his message.

DOROTHY JENKINS FIELDS

You Can’t Try On That Prom Dress

Dorothy Jenkins Fields is a social studies teacher and archivist for the Dade County Public Schools. She founded the Black Archives, History and Research Foundation of South Florida.

I was born Colored and grew up a Negro. At the time of my birth, New Year’s Eve, 1942, in Miami’s Colored Town/Overtown, Florida’s constitution mirrored attitudes prevalent through much of the rest of the nation.

The Declaration of Independence declared that “all men are created equal,” and the federal constitution guarantees that “all persons are entitled to equal protection under the law.” But historically a gap existed between those public aims and private deeds. The restrictions placed on black people as a result of customs, attitudes, and laws separated us from other immigrants, creating conflicts and isolation in every phase of life. Like millions before me, I found a world limited by laws imposed by the United States government.

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Several weeks passed before I allowed myself to think about the prom again. In the interim my mother had gathered pattern books with the latest styles. Time was short. The decision had been made to go to Colored Town/Overtown to prepare for the prom.

The next Saturday we left our home in the suburbs, an unincorporated area known as Brownsville, and drove to Miami's Central Negro district, Colored Town/Overtown. By the late 1950s this area had developed into the cradle for business and culture for black people. As a result of segregation the area had become a self-contained and self-sufficient community providing goods and services to residents and tourists alike. It was south Florida's black Mecca. On a regular basis black people from as far north as West Palm Beach and as far south as Key West traveled to Miami's Overtown to pay their insurance and other bills; shop for groceries, furniture, clothes and accessories; play tennis; take care of personal needs; buy one of four newspapers; enjoy the movies, and nightclubs, and watch celebrities climb in and out of limousines going to and from their hotels. As a result of segregation the top name entertainers including Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Nat "King" Cole, Pearl Bailey, Red Foxx and sports figures such as Joe Louis and Cassius Clay (aka Muhammed Ali) could be seen at the Mary Elizabeth and the Sir John hotels. There was a twenty-four hour clock with continuous activities. The core of Colored Town/Overtown came to be called "Little Broadway" and "The Great Black Way".

The comings and goings of the celebrities added life and spice to the area, but because they were Colored they too had to live by federal law that meant that although they could entertain on Miami Beach and in the white hotels on Biscayne Boulevard and Coral Gables they were not allowed to bed or board with white people. Intellectual W. E. B. DuBois was a frequent visitor to the area during his trips to conferences in Cuba, the Caribbean, and the West Indies. Zora Neale Hurston was known as a folklorist and writer in the larger world. When she lived in Miami she was "just a domestic."

This was not the day for entertainment. My trip to Overtown was strictly business. Having studied the pattern books and selected a style dress similar to the one in the store downtown of Flagler Street, I prepared to make my selections for the prom in Overtown. All of my expectations were met. My fairy godmother was Mrs. Irene Rolle, one of numerous dressmakers. She skillfully made the pink, off-the-shoulder, stand-alone hooped dress and slip with a matching lace handkerchief. The catalog-purchased shoes were dyed pink to match the dress by Mr. Donald Evans, a shoemaker/manufacturer. He also made a matching purse. A fake fur stole was also ordered from a catalog. In order to survive, the community evolved into a self-contained and self-sufficient community in spite of negative public policy by making positives out of negatives. My first prom was a great success. Cinderella would have been proud.

Dorothy Fields and Howard Kleinberg wrote their recollections for the Forum. Those of Joel Buchanan and Savannah Williams (edited by Lisa Hered) are from the Oral History Program at the University of Florida. Robert Saunders' is from an unpublished memoir in his papers at the Special Collections Library of the University of South Florida.
Yes, it’s that time again... when the Clyde Butcher Calendar makes its annual appearance. For those familiar with Mr. Butcher’s photographic artistry this magnificent work needs no further introduction.

Admired as one of America’s greatest landscape photographers, his stunning black and white images of our rapidly vanishing native landscape are treasured by fine art collectors the world over. His use of large format view cameras enables him to capture all the subtle textures and exquisite detail that distinguish Florida’s native environment.

The 1995 Clyde Butcher Calendar is 17 by 18 inches and contains 12 more of the stunning black and white images he is known for. This beautiful example of Mr Butcher’s artistry is a limited edition and FHC is fortunate to have secured a quantity which we are offering as a premium for our new members. While they last, they are yours to enjoy for a $100.00 membership donation.

Home is a word of great power to most of us. It is a place we protect and value, where we find refuge and rapport. The place we call home says a lot about who we are and where we have been.

Home to many Floridians is still Detroit, Havana, Buffalo or Kingston. Florida is their address but not their home.

The Florida Humanities Council invites Floridians to make Florida home by sponsoring programs that bring citizens together to discuss our history, our values and our future priorities. By doing so we hope to build bridges across this diverse and expansive state and to promote a better understanding of Florida – who we are and where we have been.

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All memberships of $100 or more will receive Clyde Butcher’s “Florida Landscapes” Calendar.

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Governor LeRoy Collins walks beside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his wife, Coretta, at the start of the Selma-to-Montgomery march in 1965. Collins served as the federal government's chief civil rights mediator at the time.

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