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[Transcriber's Note: This is a detailed summary of a lecture that Sybil Barnes, later Dr. Sybil Johnson, professor at Hillsborough Community College, gave during the late 1970s, as part of the Black History of Tampa project.]

Ms. Barnes' introduction

"Some of the things about the history of the black man in this area [are] depressing." People might not want to read some of the things. If someone starts and doesn't know better they might not continue the task, but Ms. Barnes thought there had to be something good. So she continued and found it extremely enjoyable.

This talk will be an overview, touching on some of the more pleasant aspects of black history. She will not talk about the things she found depressing, of which there were many. She had to hunt, dig, and do "a bit of oral history," rather than go by what was written.

Blacks in Tampa during the 1870s

Blacks were active; they were involved in cultural activities, and they did own property. In Nashville in 1870, two of the doctors that graduated were from Tampa. The first one stopped in Orlando, but finally came here.

Ms. Barnes shows some pictures of men and women dressed for a parade. People went to funeral parades. One picture is of adults "which appears to be Tarpon Springs area; there's water and they're walking on down to the beach."

Ponce de Leon's expedition

Ponce de Leon explored Florida in 1513, winding his way to the Punta Gorda/Ft. Myers area and sailing around Tampa Bay. He had black men with him on that trip. According to historians, the Florida Indians were tough to conquer and too stubborn to convert to

Christianity, and this was one of the reasons Ponce de Leon left. Indians were “kind of hostile” in those days.

Ft. Brooke and Louis Pacheco

Ft. Brooke was the beginning of Tampa. It was one of a series of forts that the federal government had to protect the pioneers from the Indians; they were scattered throughout the area. In the 1830s and 1840s it was still wilderness, and the forts were like on TV or in movies, designed to protect pioneers. In 1835, a runner came from Ft. King, near Ocala, to report some problems. It was necessary for soldiers from Ft. Brooke to go help them. So Major Francis L. Dade took about a hundred soldiers started out.

Louis Pacheco was one of the earliest blacks we read about. He was a brilliant man who was born a slave in North Florida. As a child, his master’s daughter taught him to read and write. He could also speak all the Indian languages and Spanish. Pacheco was married to a slave woman who managed to get her freedom in St. Augustine. He ran away, and was caught. He was sold to the commanders at Ft. Brooke, which was cheaper than taking him back to North Florida. The soldiers appreciated his skills; he was valuable since he could communicate with the Indians and the Spaniards.

Pacheco was with Major Dade when he set out for Ft. King. This turned into the Dade Massacre in December 1835. Pacheco was accused to telling the Indians that Dade was on his way. The Indians converged on them in an ambush, killing Dade and most of his men. Only Pacheco and one or two others survived. This is why we read about him.

Pacheco lived for a number of years with the Indians. Fifty-seven years later, he went back to Jacksonville and found his old master’s daughter, the woman who taught him how to read. He convinced her of his identity, and stayed with her as her protégé until his death. He died at the age of ninety-two. Ms. Barnes was impressed with his brilliance.

Jose Gaspar

In the 1700s, pirates were very active in Tampa. The annual Gasparilla celebration commemorates one of the infamous pirates, Jose Gaspar. In 1821 he encountered the United States Navy, and rather than be captured he decided to kill himself. He wrapped himself in chains and threw himself overboard, so that “Gaspar dies by his own hands, not by the enemy’s.” Ms. Barnes read somewhere that it was a black man who gave him the chain and assisted him in wrapping himself. In those days the wealthy whites “couldn’t do very much of anything; they had to have the blacks assist them.” Rich people had people to put their shoes on for them, and so on. So Jose Gaspar wouldn’t have picked up the heavy chain all by himself; he was assisted by a black man.

Slavery in Tampa

From 1824 to 1840 nearly half of the community’s total population was black. The 1840 census reports that ninety-six civilians was the total population of Ft. Brooke’s men and their families. More than half of them were slaves. As the pioneers moved into Tampa they brought their slaves with them. Many of the plantation owners were the children of

wealthy plantation owners in Georgia. They grew up and married in Georgia, and then came to Florida with their slaves.

In Georgia there were many slaves who would run away. They often ran to Florida because it was closer than going north and getting to the Underground Railroad to go to Canada. So they came to Florida and often joined the Indians.

Education

Education was very important in pioneer days. Blacks were not allowed to read and write, so as soon as they could get any kind of freedom they wanted education. They felt it was important to read, write and do math, so there was a school in every community. These were one-room schools, which might have been in a saw mill, a shack, a cabin, or a barn, but they were schools. They were supported by the children's parents, not by the city or state. Anyone who could read or write would teach, even if they didn't know much; Louis Pacheco started a school and taught children. This was what the first schools were like.

School conditions in 1920

Dr. D.E. Williams was state agent for Negro schools from 1927 to 1962. He was a white man; otherwise he couldn't have been a state agent in 1927. Conditions in the one-room barn, church, sawmill, and shack schools were terrible. Benches were substituted for desks; water was brought from home in jugs; the children used bushes for toilets. Painted boards were used as chalkboards; the Bible as a textbook. Any discarded materials or scraps were used as materials.

Schools in Tampa

Ms. Barnes attended a program the week before this lecture, where the speakers gave out a handout of public schools in Tampa in 1910. The black schools listed were Harlem Academy, which was on Harrison Street and Melville Avenue; West Hyde Park, old Doverville; and West Tampa, which is now Dunbar School. Harlem Academy was almost down, a red brick building right by St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, which was torn down a few years ago, in the 1970s.

The handout didn't list schools like Ft. Lonesome, Keysville, Seffnes, Dove, Hopewell, or Knight Station, all of which were in existence in the 1900s. Ms. Barnes has talked with people who attended these schools, and with one woman who taught at Ft. Lonesome in the early 1900s. Records were not kept on what black people were doing in the early 1900s in Tampa.

Christina Meacham

Although the facilities were poor and the years were depressing, there were many great leaders. One of them was Christina Meacham, who taught in a one-room shack school. There is a modern school called Christina Meacham School, which is in the Central Park project area near India Street and Nebraska Street. Meacham was the principal at Harlem School for many years. Ms. Barnes talked to several people in the community who were her students.

Blanche Beatty

Blanche Armwood Beatty was also one of the one-room school teachers. She went on to organize and develop the first day nursery for Tampa blacks. She was also the first executive secretary of the Tampa Urban League, and was able to get the national office in New York to support the Tampa chapter.

Benjamin Mays

Benjamin Mays came to Tampa a few years later. He recently returned to speak at the Urban League's Fiftieth Anniversary. He wrote the book *Born to Rebel*, which has a section about Tampa. Ms. Barnes has never read anything in print that gives a better picture of life in Tampa in the early 1920s from economical, sociological, and even psychological standpoints. "You could almost feel what was happening as you read it." She highly suggests that people read it.

Wilfred Butler

Wilfred Butler was another teacher who came from the shack schools. She taught at Ft. Lonesome, and was a music teacher for the community. In 1910, she taught voice, piano and violin to black children in Tampa. Ms. Barnes doesn't know anyone doing that today, "so sometimes I wonder if we're not going backwards. Yeah, some of the things that we were doing in 1910 we are not doing today, but I have to take that back. We have come a long ways; we've got a hell of a long ways to go."

Tampa's black families

In the community today, there are doctors, lawyers, school teachers, and businessmen, who can look back at their grandparents and say, "Yes, my grandfather was a slave and they came here in such year." Ms. Barnes was very impressed by some of these family stories.

The Sheehy family

In the 1800s, Charles Edward Sheehy, an Irishman, left home, traveled extensively, and settled in Nassau. He was the captain of a ship that transported import goods. In Nassau, he met and married a woman named Phyllis Rhodes. After they got married, they moved to Key West and later came to Tampa. They had thirteen children, five girls and eight boys.

The seventh child was named Joseph Washington, called J.W.; in those days black folks called each other by their initials. Even as a child, J.W. was very enterprising and concerned about making money, so he opened a meat market on Main Street. Ms. Barnes is amazed that people today still remember that meat market. J.W. married a woman named Anna Lorraine, and had six children with her, four of whom still live in Tampa. One is a physician, "one of my very favorite people;" one is a retired school principal, "one of my neighbors;" one a nutritionist in a nursing home, and one a home economist.

Joe Boza and family

Joe Boza was a Cuban immigrant, who married a woman named Goldie. He was a “vegetable man,” who was not very large in size. Goldie was a “big woman like me,” and she helped him by lifting potatoes or whatever vegetables. “So she was liberated, and that was in the early 1900s.” They had four children, the second of whom was born in 1899. This child married Sumner Wilson, a brick mason from Georgia, in 1920 and had fourteen children with him.

Five of these children still live in Tampa. Two are businessmen who own Wilson Funeral Home, one is a child care worker, one a sales manager at Maas Brothers Department Store, and the youngest is a clerical assistant. “But they go back to Joe Boza, the little man with the liberated wife who lifted the potatoes.”

The Ross family

This family still lives in the area, in one of the houses their grandparents built. They’ve added boards, remodeled, and changed a little, but the house is still in the same spot on LaSalle Street. It’s the same basic house, except larger and with new finishings. The great-grandfather was a runaway slave who stayed with the Indians until after the Civil War. He learned to read and write, and came to Tampa and located his three brothers. The four Ross brothers all lived in West Tampa on LaSalle Street. They built a little church at LaSalle and Fremont Avenue, which is still there, and their house is two doors down.

Papa Ross was a mixture of black and Irish. The family still lives in Tampa. There were five children; one was a doctor and the others were all teachers in Hillsborough County. The doctor was a dean at Meharry Medical College, who died three or four years ago.

Other black families

Some of these other families came to Tampa right after or even before the Civil War, and some were slaves who were freed: the McFollies, the Armwoods, the Bosticks, and the Gordons.

William Henry Gordon was a businessman; his grandson died recently.

The Wilsons are Helen, Barbara, Emma, Leo and Lucy; their family was here in the late 1800s and they are still in the community.

There’s a man named Norman Lacy, who was the first president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Mathew Gregory followed him, and is still alive and still active.¹

A.J. Ferrell was the principal at Middleton High School for a number of years; he’s retired now. His father was one of the early ministers and one of the “Stork Stud Fighters” for getting chairs for Lomax Elementary School.

More on schools

¹ Mathew Gregory also gave an interview for this project.

The NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and [the] Urban League had to fight to get a high school. Tampa didn't have a black high school until 1925, so kids had to go to Jacksonville or Tallahassee to finish high school. They didn't really need to, because you could start teaching when you finished eighth grade. Ms. Barnes has some certificates from 1902, from people who had just finished eighth grade and were certified to teach.

When St. Peter Claver School was organized, they went through seventh grade. After the first seven years, their graduates started teaching. It is still in existence. The first building was purchased in 1893, and after the first year it was burned down by the Ku Klux Klan or somebody, who resented the fact that the nuns were teaching black children. The school was in an old church in a white community. The people who burned it warned them that any other school they started would also be burned. So they bought the current property on Scott Street. Back then this was the boondocks, since Tampa was right around Franklin Street. But the school went on, and seven years later they graduated a class that started teaching the community's black children.

The M.J. Anderson family

Dr. Anderson was born a slave in Jefferson County, Florida, on October 23, 1863. He lived there and attended the public schools and Florida Baptist Institute. He taught for eight years before going to Meharry. He returned to Florida in 1897 and came to Orlando for one year before going to Tampa.

In 1900 he married Irene Baker, a teacher from Leon County. Ms. Barnes has her teaching certificate. They had two daughters, Miriam and Irene. Miriam still lives on Estell Street and is a very charming young woman.

Dr. Brumick

Dr. Brumick was the first dentist. He owned a great deal of property, including the area where Barnett Bank now stands and the area where Pioneer Fire Company is.

Madame Fortune

Another person who owned a lot of property was Madame Fortune Taylor, after whom Fortune Street was named. She was a wealthy black woman who owned property all the way from Laurel [Street] and a large part of West Tampa. She was especially loved by children. The kids would sell peanuts or potato pies in the street, and Madame Fortune would buy them all and give them to the poor children. There was a great deal of selling in the streets. Ms. Barnes noticed that several people had wagons they would use for that purpose.

Clara Frye Hospital

Ms. Barnes has a program from the dedication of Clara Frye Hospital. In the early 1920s, there were no facilities for blacks in hospitals. Mrs. Clara Frye was a nurse, who was so concerned about the lack of medical care that she started taking care of people in her home on Lamar Avenue. That was unheard of, but she did it anyway.

Eventually a Dr. Winton became aware of what she was doing, and supported her and gave her money. The first hospital for blacks was at 1608 Lamar Avenue, and later became Clara Frye Hospital. According to the dedication program, “she was an unusual woman; she was very self-sacrificing for the sick of this community and with the assistance of Dr. Winton she was able to start serving the needs of the people.”

One of Clara Frye’s first patients, who needed surgery, was a woman named Lizzie Washington. Her family still lives in the community.

Dr. Johnson

Dr. Essie or Macachan Johnson [spelling from original transcriber] was the first chief of staff for Clara Frye Hospital. He was an outstanding physician. He was born and raised in Tampa, unlike the other doctors who came later, and was a shoeshine boy. He was a very happy, happy go lucky person. People thought that if he made money from shining shoes, he would spend it, but instead he saved it and put himself through school.

Middleton High School

Middleton High School was named for the first black mailman in Tampa. All the other schools seem to be named for educators, but Middleton was named for a mailman.

Dr. Ervin

[This is in response to a question about the first black dentist. Ms. Barnes first answers Brumick, then goes on to describe him. Then she corrects herself, saying, “That’s Ervin.” The original transcript implies that the man described is Dr. Ervin.]

Back in the 1930s, Dr. Ervin practiced on Central Avenue. He took care of a lot of the Latins in Ybor City, who used to call him “the Mulatto” because he was reddish in skin color and “very, very light.” He is still alive and practicing by appointment only; people should call him at home before nine o’clock and he will meet them at the office.

end of interview