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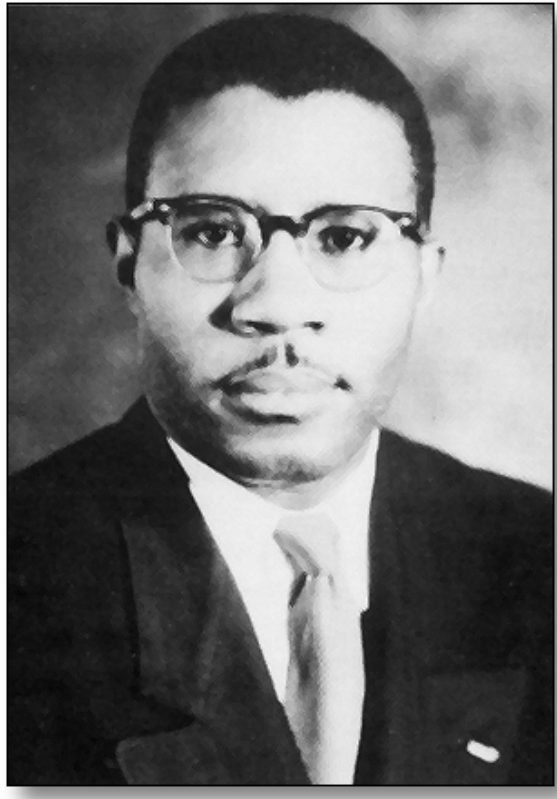
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Robert W. Saunders in 1952.

Photograph courtesy of U.S.F. Special Collections

DOCUMENTING THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS: THE PAPERS OF ROBERT AND HELEN SAUNDERS

by David L. Chapman

The recent acquisition of the Robert and Helen Saunders papers by the University of South Florida Library has made it easier for scholars and students to research an important, though often overlooked aspect of history. This collection contains correspondence, documents and publications covering the civil rights years from 1952-1966. It also contains correspondence and documents from 1966-1978, covering Robert Saunders' years as an Equal Opportunity Officer and Helen Saunders' year as president of the Tampa Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Robert W. Saunders was born in Tampa, Florida, in 1921 and he attended several local schools, graduating from Middleton High School in 1940. Saunders then attended Bethune-Cookman



Helen Saunders (left) and Mazie Braxton, office secretary, in front of the Tampa Branch office on Harrison Street in the mid-1950s.

Photograph courtesy of U.S.F. Special Collections.

College for two years before being drafted into the Army in 1942. He spent the war years as an enlisted man at Tuskegee Army Airfield, which had been set up by the U.S. Army as a segregated facility to train Negro pilots. In 1946, Saunders returned to Tampa where he worked for the city's weekly black newspaper, the *Florida Sentinel Bulletin*.

Saunders left for Detroit in 1947 to attend the Detroit Institute of Technology where he earned his bachelor's degree. Upon graduation, Saunders was accepted by the University of Detroit School of Law, but he interrupted his program of study to join the staff of Detroit's NAACP Branch as a volunteer engaged in voter registration. In 1952, following the murder of Harry T. Moore, president of the Florida NAACP Branches, Saunders was recruited to succeed him and become field secretary of the Florida NAACP during the tumultuous years of the civil rights movement from 1952 until 1966.

In 1966 Saunders accepted a position as chief of the Civil Rights Division for the southeastern region of the Office of Equal Opportunity. He served in that capacity from 1966 to 1976 and was deeply involved in the federal government's "War on Poverty Program." In 1976, he left federal service and accepted a position as chief of the Equal Opportunity Office for Hillsborough

County, the position that he currently occupies. Since his return to Tampa in 1976, Saunders has remained active in the Tampa NAACP Branch.

Helen Strickland Saunders was born in Mims (Brevard County), Florida. The fifth of eight children, she attended public schools in Mims and Titusville, graduating from Titusville High School as the class valedictorian. After high school, she attended Bethune-Cookman College before choosing a career in the life insurance business. She was employed by the Central Life Insurance Company of Florida, where she served as a registrar and supervisor.

Helen Saunders' participation in the NAACP first began in Mims with the NAACP Youth Council. She was influenced by the leadership of Harry T. Moore of the NAACP who had also been one of her teachers. In 1964, she became secretary of the Tampa Branch of the NAACP, a position she held until she was elected as president of the branch in 1976. It was under her leadership of the Tampa Branch that a voter registration drive was initiated that was heralded as the most effective in the nation. In recognition of this accomplishment the Tampa Branch won the Thalheimer Award, the highest honor that a branch can achieve. Helen Saunders accepted the award at the 1980 NAACP national convention in Miami. Since leaving office in 1981, Helen Saunders has remained active in the Tampa Branch of the NAACP, serving on various committees.

Located in the Special Collections Department of the University of South Florida Library, the papers of Robert and Helen Saunders are open to researchers. Most of the records have been catalogued. Normally an archivist maintains a collection of personal papers as they were organized by the donor. This was not possible with Robert Saunders' papers because they were completely intermingled and evidenced little logical progression. To complicate matters further, his papers had been stored in large cardboard boxes in his garage, and many of the documents had been water damaged and partially eaten by rodents. The condition of his papers necessitated a complete reorganization of the major portion of the collection. However, the organization of Helen Saunders papers has been maintained as she had originally kept them. The only thing that was done to her papers was to remove any duplicate documents. Due to the size and scope of this collection, it has been broken down into four series, the first three covering the career of Robert Saunders from 1952 to the present. The fourth series covers Helen Saunders' tenure with the Tampa branch of the NAACP.

The first series of this collection covers Robert Saunders' years from 1952 to 1966 as Field Secretary for the Florida NAACP. All of the files in this series are in alphabetical order, and all of the documents within the files are in chronological order with undated documents at the front of each file. This segment of Saunders' career with the NAACP parallels the years of the civil rights movement. The Florida NAACP joined the battle in the early 1950s to desegregate schools and to end Jim Crow practices throughout the state. This included the much publicized Tallahassee bus boycott and the St. Augustine sit-ins. In direct response to the perceived threat from the NAACP, State Senator Charley Johns, in a proclaimed effort to search for Communists, ordered the Florida NAACP to turn over its membership lists to his Legislature Investigative Committee. The Florida NAACP in order to avoid complying with the Johns Committee sent many of its records to the national office, and these are now part of the NAACP collection in the Library of Congress.

The second series, as yet unorganized, covers Robert Saunders' years in Atlanta with the Office of Equal Opportunity from 1966 to 1976. Mr. Saunders has said that he believes "that this segment of his records to be the most important of the entire collection." This series contains documents and correspondence on the federal government's "War on Poverty." These records are valuable because they provide a regional look at the poverty program. This period covers the rise of "Black Power" and the destructive riots that swept most of the major cities in the country. It is also the period of black struggle for equal economic parity and the federal government's initiation of affirmative action.

The third series of this collection contains records, still to be processed, of Robert Saunders' service with the Hillsborough County Equal Opportunity Office from 1976 to the present. This series is important because it provides a look at how far the local black population of Hillsborough County has progressed towards economic equality with local whites. These documents will become a valuable tool to local historians in providing a detailed look at the economic status of blacks in the 1970s and 1980s.

The fourth series of this collection encompasses the papers of Helen Saunders while she was president of the Tampa Branch of the NAACP. Although not yet catalogued, this series covers the late 1970s and early 1980s and complements the papers of Robert Saunders' service with the Hillsborough County Equal Opportunity Office. These papers reflect the concerns of local blacks in their dealings with local governments and business interests. The records provide a look at the extent of political participation by blacks and the relationship between the NAACP and local authorities.

The University of South Florida Library has also recently acquired the papers of Ruth W. Perry to supplement the Robert and Helen Saunders Collection. The Perry papers (partially organized) contain letters, documents and articles from the files of the Miami Branch NAACP relating to the Johns Committee. These documents were saved from the Miami Branch files by Ruth Perry who served as the secretary of the branch during the 1950s and early 1960s. This collection also contains copies of Ruth Perry's articles written for the *Miami Times*, a black newspaper. The Ruth Perry Collection is important because it contains documents that are no longer in local NAACP files due to the Johns Committee's demand for access to those records. These documents were culled from the Miami Branch NAACP files by Ruth Perry and kept in her home until they were donated this year to the University of South Florida Library.

The following is a shelf list of the Robert and Helen papers.

SERIES #1 Robert W. Saunders, 1952-1966: Florida Field Secretary of the NAACP. All files in this series are in alphabetical order within the boxes, and all documents are in chronological order in each of the files with undated documents at the front.

Box #1

File #1 Activities Reports of the Florida Field Secretary
File #2 Address and Appointment Books of R. Saunders

File #3 Alfred Lewis Baker File
File #4 Awards made to R. Saunders
File #5 Correspondence—1959
File #6 Correspondence—1960
File #7 Correspondence—1961
File #8 Correspondence—1962
File #9 Correspondence—1963

Box #2

File #1 Correspondence—1964
File #2 Correspondence—1965
File #3 Court Decisions and Laws Collected by R. Saunders
File #4 Desegregation Misc.
File #5 Desegregation of Public Facilities
File #6 Desegregation of Schools
File #7 Discrimination by Police and Courts
File #8 Election of NAACP Officers and Officer Listings
File #9 Equal Employment Opportunity and Job Discrimination

Box #3

File #1 Fair Housing and Urban Renewal
File #2 Finances: Misc. Expenses
File #3 Finances: NAACP Financial Reports
File #4 Finances: NAACP Legal Expenses
File #5 Finances: NAACP Membership Dues and Donations
File #6 Finances: NAACP Operating Expenses
File #7 Finances: Travel Expenses of R. Saunders
File #8 Johns Committee
File #9 MacDill AFB and Military Discrimination
File #10 Miami Branch NAACP

Box #4

File #1 Minutes of Meetings for NAACP Staff
File #2 Misc. Letters and memos from NAACP National and Regional Office
File #3 Misc. Letters to R. Saunders
File #4 NAACP Annual Conferences
File #5 NAACP Chapter Formations
File #6 NAACP Committee Reports
File #7 NAACP Conference Statements
File #8 NAACP and General Publications Collected by R. Saunders
File #9 NAACP Membership File

Box #5

File #1	NAACP Youth Council
File #2	Newspaper Clippings Collected by R. Saunders
File #3	Press Releases, Editorials, and Announcements
File #4	Speakers Bureau
File #5	Speeches made by R. Saunders
File #6	Speeches Collected by R. Saunders
File #7	St. Augustine File
File #8	Tallahassee File
File #9	Tampa Branch NAACP
File #10	Voter Registration
File #11	Ybor City File

SERIES #2

Robert W. Saunders, 1966-76: Chief of Civil Rights Division, Southeastern Regional District for the Office of Equal Opportunity. All files are arranged in alphabetical order, and all of the documents in each file are in chronological order with undated documents at the front.

Box #1

File #1	Affirmative Action Plans & Programs
File #2	Consultants & Legal Aid Societies
File #3	Correspondence: 4/66-6/66
File #4	Correspondence: 7/66-9/66
File #5	Correspondence: 10/66-12/66
File #6	Correspondence: 1/67-6/67 (Note: Correspondence from 6/67-12/67 is missing.)

Box #2

File #1	Correspondence: 1/68-3/68
File #2	Correspondence: 4/68-6/68
File #3	Correspondence: 7/68-9/68
File #4	Correspondence: 10/68-12/68
File #5	Correspondence: 1/69-6/69 (Note: Many of the letters in this file were partially eaten by insects.)

Box #3

File #1	Correspondence: 7/69-12/69
File #2	Correspondence: 1/70-3/70
File #3	Correspondence: 4/70-6/70
File #4	Correspondence: 7/70-9/70
File #5	Correspondence: 10/70-12/70
File #6	Correspondence: 1/71-3/71

Box #4

- File #1 Correspondence: 4/71-6/71
(Note: Correspondence mostly missing after 6/71.)
- File #2 Correspondence: 6/72-7/76
- File #3 Court Decisions & Laws collected by R. Saunders
- File #4 EEO Complaints
- File #5 Federal Executive Board
- File #6 Letter to R. Saunders
- File #7 Memo's from Office of Equal Opportunity

Box #5

- File #1 NAACP Records collected by R. Saunders
- File #2 Newspaper Articles collected by R. Saunders
- File #3 Office of Equal Opportunity Position Statements
- File #4 Personnel: Promotion, Personnel Policies, & other misc. papers
- File #5 Personnel: R. Saunders Employee Records
- File #6 Personnel: Employee Evaluations by R. Saunders
Confidential— not to be used without the express permission of Robert W. Saunders
- File #7 Position and Research Papers collected by R. Saunders
- File #8 Press Releases (Note: not in any specific order)

Box #6

- File #1 Reports on the White House Conference: "To Fulfill These Rights."
- File #2 Speeches by R. Saunders
- File #3 Speeches, Addresses, and Statements collected by R. Saunders
- File #4 Training Policies and Requests
- File #5 Training Materials
- File #6 Travel Expenses and Records of R. Saunders

SERIES #3

Robert W. Saunders, 1976-present: Chief of Hillsborough County's Equal Opportunity Office. All files in this series are in alphabetical order within the boxes, and all documents in the files are in chronological order in each of the files with undated documents toward the front.

Box #1

- File #1 Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity
- File #2 Awards and Certificates of R. Saunders
- File #3 Correspondence: 1976-1981
- File #4 Court Decisions and Laws collected by R. Saunders
- File #5 Haitian Refugees
- File #6 Letters to R. Saunders

File #7 Memos from Hillsborough County Equal Opportunity Office
File #8 NAACP: Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity
File #9 NAACP: Conferences and Conventions

Box #2

File #1 NAACP: Correspondence 11/79-2/85
File #2 NAACP: Directories and Officer Listings
File #3 NAACP: Election of Officers
File #4 NAACP: Executive Committee Florida State Conference of Branches
File #5 NAACP: Finances
File #6 NAACP: Internal Investigations
File #7 NAACP: John G. Ripley Foundation
File #8 NAACP: Letters to R. Saunders
File #9 NAACP: Membership and Freedom Fund
File #10 NAACP: Misc. Banquets and Dinners

Box #3

File #1 NAACP: Misc. Materials
File #2 NAACP: Political Action Committee and Voter Registration
File #3 NAACP: Tampa Branch
File #4 NAACP: Youth Council
File #5 Newspaper Clippings Collected by R. Saunders: 4/76-12/79
File #6 Newspaper Clippings Collected by R. Saunders: 1/80-10/83
File #7 Speeches by R. Saunders
File #8 Speeches, Addresses, and Interviews Collected by R. Saunders
File #9 Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council

SERIES #4: Helen, S. Saunders Papers (uncatalogued).