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Walter T. Howard
Bloomsburg University

Virginia M. Howard

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THE EARLY YEARS OF THE NAACP IN TAMPA, 1915-1930

by Walter T. Howard and Virginia M. Howard

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was created in 1909 with the merger of W.E.B. Du Bois's Niagra Movement and a group of white liberals for the purpose of ending racial segregation and discrimination in housing, education, employment, voting, and transportation. It also sought to oppose racism and ensure African Americans their constitutional rights under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments.¹ From its beginning the NAACP worked not only through the National Office in New York City, but also by way of the branches and local associations in cities and towns scattered through the country. The NAACP branch established in Tampa in the early twentieth century is one of the oldest in the association's history.² Moreover, its early life in Tampa makes for more than an interesting story, as it reveals much about the character of the community's African Americans and about race relations in this southern city.

Although the early twentieth century was a period of significant reform in most areas of American life, historians have long recognized that "race," the "blind spot" of the Progressive movement, constituted the major exception to this generalization.³ This was certainly true of southern cities like Tampa. In Progressive-era Tampa, for example, the "White Municipal Party" carried out a successful campaign to exclude blacks from any political participation in the city's life.⁴ In the 1903 lynching of Lewis Jackson, a black man accused of an attack on a white child, white Tampanians showed that they would maintain traditional caste arrangements and white supremacy with violence when they felt the use of deadly force was necessary. Recently, one historian has traced white attitudes and behavior toward Tampa's African Americans through the antebellum, Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow periods. What he and other scholars found was that little significant response was forthcoming from the turn-of-the-century generation of municipal reformers and social workers in Tampa to the problems created by rapid black urbanization.⁵ Furthermore, the Florida legislature, between 1905 and 1909, passed a series of measures that outlawed cohabitation and miscegenation, as well as racial integration in higher education, in jail accommodations, on common carriers, on electric cars, in public waiting rooms, and at public ticket windows.⁶

Living under these harsh conditions the African-American community saw Tampa explode in growth after the turn of the century. As a boom town, Tampa's expansion was nothing short of phenomenal: its overall population jumped from 15,839 in 1900, to 37,782 in 1910, to 51,608 in 1920, and finally to 101,161 in 1930. The black population also multiplied: from 4,382 in 1900, to 8,951 in 1910, to 11,531 in 1920, and 21,172 in 1930. Nonetheless, it grew at a slower rate than the white population, declining from about 28 percent of the total in 1900 to some 21 percent in 1930.⁷ Additionally, census records clearly show that Tampa's black community in those years was of diverse origins: in 1920, 39.8 percent of the city's blacks were born outside of Florida, and in 1930 it was up to 43.7 percent.⁸ Tampa appears to have attracted many of its new black residents, not only from the Florida countryside, but from other nearby southern states such as Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia, as well as from Cuba and the West Indies.⁹



Parishioners in front of Tampa's Allen Temple A.M.E. Church on East Scott Street in 1926.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

As their numbers grew, Tampa blacks organized themselves in a variety of ways to promote self-help and advancement. They created the Clara Frye Hospital for blacks (1910), the Afro-American Civic League (1912), the Afro-American Monthly (1912), the City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (1915), and the weekly *Tampa Bulletin* (1915). By the 1920s black businesses, newspapers, schools, fraternal orders, clubs, and professional organizations had become permanent fixtures of African-American life in Tampa. And, finally, one of the most important organizational achievements of this period was the establishment of the Tampa NAACP in 1915.¹⁰

The roots of the local NAACP lay in West Tampa, a rapidly expanding black residential district largely populated by the overflow from older black neighborhoods. In April 1915 Charles S. Sturgis, a black minister and businessman, contacted the national office in New York City and asked how he could convert the organization which he headed up locally, the American Benevolent Association, into the West Tampa branch of the NAACP.¹¹ In response to this request NAACP Secretary May Childs Nerney explained to Sturgis the conditions under which a group such as his could become a branch of the association.¹² At this point, however, Sturgis apparently passed the initiative on to another activist, H.E. Lester, an African-American mail carrier. On June 25, 1915 Lester corresponded directly with W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the

high-level black officials in the NAACP, declaring “we want to organize a branch of your Association here in West Tampa. We would be very glad if you would send us some literature on the manner and mode of organization.”¹³ Du Bois referred the request to Secretary Nerney who instructed Lester: “As it is very difficult, however, to carry on this work in the South we think it would be better for you to consider organizing a local instead of a branch.” She added, “I am forwarding under a separate cover two copies of the form of constitution we use for locals.... If locals are successful we organize them into branches at the end of the year.”¹⁴

This counsel gave direction to local efforts. Speaking for many Tampa blacks, Lester answered Nerney: “We have been trying to look at the conditions as they really are in the South and especially in our locality. After due deliberations we have decided that we will try to organize a local.” He also noted that “After we have worked for a year no doubt we shall be in a position to know whether we are strong enough to apply for [a] charter for a branch of your Association.”¹⁵ The local was promptly set up, and Lester sent two copies of the constitution and by-laws to the national office. Founders named the local after Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, the ardent black nationalist.¹⁶

During the course of the following year African-American interest in establishing a branch in Tampa grew. Indeed, this growing interest was clearly encouraged by a visit from the NAACP’s new full-time field secretary and national organizer, James Weldon Johnson, who orchestrated a concerted effort to organize southern branches.¹⁷ Furthermore, by early 1917 Tampa blacks had found a strong, energetic leader D.W. Perkins, an African-American attorney, who lived and practiced in Tampa. Under his dynamic leadership some 107 African Americans joined the association as formal dues-paying members. In March of 1917 Perkins proudly informed the national office: “This as you doubtless know is the organization which Mr. Jas [James] W. Johnson reported to you as the result of his efforts here.” He also enthusiastically proclaimed that “The report would have been sent several days ago but for the ambition of the membership to send no less than one hundred members...and our motto is to increase the membership to five hundred within the next few days.” He concluded, “We are creating enthusiasm all over the state and have invitations to organize branches in several Florida towns.”¹⁸

The Tampa branch was plainly off to a strong start. James Weldon Johnson and the national office eagerly recognized and praised this noteworthy achievement. Johnson himself dashed off a telegram exclaiming “Congratulations to Tampa on holding the record for the South.”¹⁹ And Secretary Roy Nash (who replaced Nerney) wired that the “Application and check for one hundred nineteen dollars received. Heartiest Congratulations. You’ve broken the record for new branches.”²⁰ Subsequently, executive authorization was officially conferred on the Tampa branch on April 11, 1917, in a document signed by Joel E. Spingarn, chairman of the board of directors in New York City.²¹ This action routinely preceded the granting of a permanent charter.

The “Application for Charter” listed the officers and members of the Tampa NAACP: D.W. Perkins, President; Dr. Jacob White (a black physician), Vice-President; Mrs. Christine Meacham (black principal of Harlem Academy), Secretary; and Joseph Clinton (black businessman), Treasurer. Although most of the rank-and-file membership consisted of middle-class blacks (prominent among these were ministers, teachers, dentists, insurance agents,

undertakers, dressmakers, nurses, grocers, and tailors), many working people joined, including janitors, porters, clerks, messengers, cigar makers, and machinists.²²

The NAACP worked through the national office which determined the policy of the organization and supervised the work of the branches. Moreover, the successful activity of the association depended largely upon the effective organization and conduct of its affiliates. They provided it with membership and much of its financial support as well as information from the field. In the words of one scholar, “The branches are the lifeline of the association, and the national office is constantly struggling to maintain them in vigor and to found new branches.”²³

As soon as the Tampa branch began to flourish, it suffered the first major setback. It lost the leadership of Perkins who, with the United States’ entry into World War I in 1917, joined the military. From his training camp at Des Moines, Iowa, Perkins penned a revealing letter to James Weldon Johnson. He asked if it would be possible to have the *New York Age*, a widely read black newspaper, sent to Iowa for the benefit of the black troops.²⁴ Johnson replied, “I was a bit surprised to know that you are a soldier. I know that the loss to the Tampa branch is great, but of course, the gain to the country is greater.” He added, “I hope that someone has taken up the work of the organization in Tampa who will not let it lag, and I hope also that you will as far as possible keep in touch with the officers and members and encourage them in their efforts.” And he concluded, “I shall speak to the publisher of the *New York Age* concerning your request.”²⁵

Johnson naturally worried that the loss of Perkins might adversely affect the budding branch in Tampa. Thus, he took steps to keep it going. The day after he corresponded with Perkins, Johnson contacted Christina A. Meacham, the branch's secretary, and informed her that the Board of Directors in New York City had granted a permanent charter for the Tampa organization. He also offered encouragement by stating, “I trust that the receipt of this charter will provide the occasion for stimulating interest in the work of the branch. It should be framed and carefully preserved in order that it may be handed down to newly elected branch officers from year to year.” Johnson then suggested that a special meeting might be called for the purpose of making known to all the members that the charter had been granted and received. Then he declared, “Never in the history of the organization has there been greater need for determined and tireless effort on the part of the branches.”²⁶

While Perkins served in the Army, the mantle of leadership passed to Dr. J.A. White and Christina Meacham. They made decisions for the branch and enrolled new members. For example, in August 1917 Meacham wrote to Johnson that “I am authorized by the acting president of the Tampa branch of the NAACP to ask you to send to us all the matter that will assist us in getting up a Silent Protest Parade [following the example of the national office’s famous parade protesting an anti-black riot in East St Louis]. We are trying in a small way to bring about some needed reforms.” Johnson answered that the national office had indeed forwarded all pertinent information to all the branches.²⁷

In 1917 the Tampa NAACP also solicited some support from the white community. On August 19, the Tampa group held its regular monthly meeting at which Judge E.J. Binford, a white man, addressed the assembly. He was reportedly enthusiastic in his demonstration of goodwill, paying his membership fee and pledging his support for the association goal of interracial cooperation.



The July 1917 cover of the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*, depicted African American troops in battle.

At this same meeting Professor George A. Towns from Atlanta University delivered an inspirational speech and “made a strong appeal to his hearers to stand by the organization because it is doing something.” According to Meacham’s report to Johnson, “Twenty five new names were added to the branch.... The branch is taking on new life.” Then she added: “We are pleased to state that the ‘Red Light District’ has been wiped out of the city.... We see nothing but success.”²⁸ In reply, Johnson stated, “I certainly must congratulate the Tampa branch upon the splendid membership it is making. Tampa is one of the smallest cities in the country, but the Tampa branch has become one of the largest and livest [sic] members of the association.” He concluded with a pat on the back: “I sincerely hope that the officers and members will keep up the good work.”²⁹

In October Johnson heard from Perkins who was still stationed in Iowa. Like many other young, aspiring African Americans in the Army, the Tampa attorney was refused a commission as an officer. After expressing his disappointment, Perkins asked Johnson to help him determine “whether we are to be mistreated simply because of the Houston affair [referring to the incident in Texas where black troops took up arms to defend themselves against the local white community] for which we are in no wise responsible.”³⁰ Johnson promptly answered that “I share with you your disappointment in not having received a commission.... If I can gain any information that will be to your advantage, I shall immediately let you have it.” He then changed the subject and urged Perkins not to forget about the Tampa NAACP and to “take hold of the branch and help shove it forward.” He also praised the Tampa chapter as “one of the most wonderful of the new branches which we have.... [I]t stands among the largest in the country so far as National Association membership goes, being only a few members short of the branch at Atlanta.” He next instructed Perkins to “try and outline a plan of constructive work for organization.”³¹

Johnson’s concern about the health and vigor of the Tampa group was well-founded. He watched uncomfortably through the winter of 1917 and the spring of 1918 as the Tampa organization languished. Secretary Meacham admitted as much in the summer of 1918, stating that “Our branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has been inactive because of the absence of the President [Perkins].” In an attempt to reinvigorate the Tampa affiliate, Johnson visited Tampa on June 23, 1918, and suggested a drive for new members.³² This stirred local activists who conducted the drive and recruited fifty-six new members. This effort, however, was the last major spurt of activity for some time as the Tampa NAACP carried on through the early 1920s at a low level of operation.

The Tampa organization did not contact the national office again until April 2, 1922, when a white man, John Logan, murdered a local black woman. Authorities arrested and incarcerated the white suspect who showed no remorse. In fact, the local press widely publicized Logan’s racial slurs regarding the victim, he falsely claimed had tried to rob him. The branch president, R.R. Williams, a black physician, wrote to the national office informing them that he had investigated the incident and “immediately employed a lawyer to fight the case.” Referring to the accused, Williams added, “so far we have been able to have him placed under a \$5,000.00 bond and locked in the County Jail awaiting trial in the Circuit Court before the Grand Jury.” He closed his letter by declaring, “We trust that this action on the part of the local branch here will meet your hearty approval.”³³ The reply came back: “It is the opinion of the national office that you have

indeed acted wisely and we sincerely trust that your efforts in having this man punished will meet with success.”³⁴

At this point the historical record regarding the Tampa NAACP falls silent until 1929. Even though the national association fared well in the 1920s, it declined in Tampa and eventually disappeared altogether. There are several reasons that might explain why this happened. For instance, the Tampa branch had to compete with numerous other black organizations, especially churches and fraternal lodges, for followers and financial support. Additionally, no strong, active leader stepped forward during the decade to lead the local chapter. However, the most important cause for the apparent demise of the Tampa NAACP in the twenties was the stunning success of its major rival, the Tampa Urban League. This latter organization, with its goal of economic uplift for blacks, apparently proved more appealing for a time to the local African-American community than the NAACP's non-economic aims of achieving full civil and political rights.³⁵

Although the National Urban League came into being in the early decades of the century to assist new black migrants to northern cities, it soon spread to the urban South where growing cities like Tampa also attracted large numbers of rural blacks.³⁶ The Urban League in Tampa, more interracial in its local makeup than the NAACP, was led at first by Blanche Armwood, a prominent woman in the African-American community, and by former mayor and *Tampa Daily Times* owner-editor, D.B. McKay, who became the first president of the interracial board.³⁷ McKay's involvement in this organization undoubtedly reflected the desire of some whites to foster harmony and cooperation between the races in the larger interest of developing and modernizing Tampa.

Perhaps the local Urban League's most distinguished leader in these days was Dr. Benjamin Mays who served as executive secretary in 1927. This nationally recognized black figure came to Tampa in the 1920s to lead the Urban League, but he later recalled that “Tampa was not the city of our dreams.” He came to know intimately the racial situation in the city and played a major role in writing about it.³⁸ His welfare organization proclaimed that it was “interested in anything that touches Negro life from the highest and most dignified type of social life to the jails and stockades.” Indeed, it provided needed services not offered by the NAACP, including two day-care nurseries for working mothers, alternative home placements for juvenile delinquents, family case work, the organization of clubs and recreation for black youth, and employment placement. In the twenties, the Tampa office was staffed by a trained secretary, the executive secretary, a specialized social worker, an office employee who handled the bookkeeping, and a stenographer who performed clerical duties such as filing and typing. For much of its work the Tampa Urban League successfully solicited volunteer services from ministers, teachers, doctors, and other public-spirited citizens of the local African-American community. Nonetheless, it functioned in an overall environment of indifference and even hostility from most white people in the larger community. Still, the Urban League meant a great deal to blacks as they struggled to adjust to life in Tampa. It filled a dire need by helping poor blacks in this rapidly industrializing New South city in the 1920s as it also tried to moderate social and economic discrimination.³⁹

The Tampa NAACP also had another competitor in the 1920s. The continuation of discrimination and anti-black feeling during this decade accompanied a sharp increase in the black population. The *Tampa Tribune* said as much at the beginning of the decade when it



Members of the Tampa Urban League in 1925. Blanche Armwood is on the left in the striped blouse.

Photograph courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

proudly proclaimed in 1921 that “white supremacy will be maintained in the South.”⁴⁰ Some African Americans concluded that the oppressive racial caste system under which they lived was so deeply racist that it might never change. They reacted to this situation by embracing the militant black nationalist views of Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey. Tampa’s black community supported two chapters of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).⁴¹ Even though it is difficult to determine how widespread the support for the UNIA was among the city’s African Americans, the mere existence of these chapters suggests the development of a level of black consciousness that contemplated an ideology of separatism and self-determination and that conflicted with the goals of the NAACP.

In spite of the successes of the Urban League and the UNIA, by the end of the decade Tampa blacks were ready to begin again with the NAACP. On February 6, 1929 Reverend C.S. Sutton, a field worker for the association, wrote the national office on behalf of interested black Tampans: “I have been asked what was [sic] the possibilities of opening a branch office (in this city) of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.” And he added, “I have been unable to give an answer to the question. Will you please inform me if such is possible, and give me all information and authority to open such a branch.”⁴² Robert Bagnell, director of branches, informed Sutton that “We are...sending you our organization handbook, ‘How to Form a



The Helping Hand Day Nursery, shown here in 1925, has long been one of Tampa's leading African-American institutions.

Photograph courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

Branch.' You will note that at least fifty members who may pay one dollar a year or above, are required for a chartered branch."⁴³ As his organizing proceeded, Sutton kept the national office informed about his activities: "So far we have been able to secure quite a few members who have paid their annual fee of one dollar and we are expecting more later. I hope to be able to form the branch not later than March 19th."⁴⁴ Bagnell wrote back, "I am glad that you are making progress towards the organization of a branch in Tampa. I trust that your hope of having the branch fully organized by the 19th will be realized." Sutton apparently met his deadline, and the new organization then picked its officers: Professor E.J. Wright, President; Gilbery Chisholm (elevator operator), Vice-President; Sarah Howard (cook), Secretary; and Mary Potter (manager of the *Tampa Bulletin*, Treasurer. Further, the Executive Committee consisted of Reverend Moses Edmond, Robert Williams (clerk), and G.E. Chisholm.⁴⁵

At the moment of rebirth, a potential lynching incident provided the newly constituted NAACP with its first major challenge. According to Sutton's account, Charley Durham, a black Tampan, was arrested on February 17, 1929, and charged with raping a white woman. Knowing that such an explosive allegation stirred lynch fever in the white community, local authorities reportedly moved the black suspect out of Tampa to another facility in a nearby town. This development, however, worried the national office which was understandably concerned about Durham's safety. "I judge that Charley Durham has been located.... Will you let us know as we have heard

of several cases in which the person has been spirited away?" asked Bagnell. In response, Sutton informed the national leaders that as of April 1929 Durham was securely lodged in the Hillsborough County jail.⁴⁷

In April the Tampa NAACP and Sutton came to Durham's rescue. After conducting their own investigation, they found the black suspect innocent of the charge. Further, they watched developments closely, and in the spring of 1929 a judge continued the rape trial of Durham in order for the prosecution to locate and assure the appearance of its chief witness, the fourteen-year-old son of the alleged victim. The youth, for unknown reasons, had failed to show for the first trial. "We are prepared to fight the case," reported Sutton, and he continued, "We have put on a drive to raise the money to fight the case. So far we have \$118.65." He also announced: "We hope to win Charley Durham's freedom although the state attorney said at the hearing that he wanted the man convicted."⁴⁸ Ultimately, the NAACP campaign to save the black suspect was successful when the court acquitted him at the second trial.

Sutton's leadership so impressed the local African-American community that its spokesmen asked the national office to station him in Tampa permanently. In May 1929, Mary Potter, NAACP officer and editor of the *Tampa Bulletin*, praised the capable man who helped organize the Tampa branch. She declared, "Rev. C.S. Sutton spent several months in our city and moved among our group in a beneficial way. He made such an impression on the thinking people, that I am compelled to write." Potter stated that Sutton had "succeeded in getting a number of people interested in the NAACP." She then cited Sutton's specific achievements: "He was successful in cleaning up the following cases: Laopazier [white] was fined fifty dollars and [court] costs by Judge Cornelius, for assault on James R. Sutton, colored; Joe Farley [white] was fined \$62.28, the cost of repair of car and cost of court. It was proven that he willfully ran into Falsom Jones [black] on 21st St. and 17th Ave." Finally, Potter referred to the Durham victory and requested national leaders to maintain Sutton in Tampa.⁴⁹

This string of successes gave needed encouragement to the Tampa NAACP which helped to sustain its legal work through the decade of the 1930s and beyond. In regard to Potter's letter about Sutton, Bagnell wrote:

Mr. Sutton was in the National Office a few days ago and told us some of the things he had accomplished for the benefit of the colored people of Tampa.

I note that you ask that we station Mr. Sutton in Tampa, it is not within the means of the National Office to do this.... [N]ot only did he demonstrate that the Negro in Tampa could secure justice if he fought for it, but he gave practical evidence that it is within the power of every colored man and woman to help in the fight for justice by giving support and co-operation [to the NAACP].⁵⁰

Now on its own, the Tampa branch confronted its next big case in 1930. In February of that year a group of white people in nearby Brooksville descended upon the house of a black family and pulled Leroy Huggins, his wife, and his seventeen-year-old son out on to the street and "whipped them shamefully." The enraged mob had acted on the unproven claim that the son stole \$114 from the cash register at the garage where he worked. When law officers arrived, they arrested and incarcerated the father and the son rather than the vigilantes. Huggins's wife, in fear for her life, went into hiding.⁵¹

This episode shows how difficult and frustrating it was for the NAACP to handle cases of antiblack violence. The *Tampa Bulletin's* Mart Potter outlined the details of this crime to Walter White, now executive secretary of the NAACP, who in turn referred the matter to William T. Andrews, special legal assistant to the national office.⁵² Andrews wrote Potter, “We have no field investigator whom we can send to your community to investigate this case,” and he added, “I am this day writing to the President of our Tampa branch with reference to the above matter.”⁵³ In fact, Andrews asked President Wright: “Will you, as President of the branch, have the matter investigated and send us all information which you have about the case.” In conclusion, he requested, “Send me all of the facts you can possibly gather concerning the circumstances under which the whipping took place.”⁵⁴ Wright wrote back and asked the national office to send a detective to Brooksville in order to ascertain the facts of the case.⁵⁵

At this point, Andrews promptly informed Wright, “We have no one on our staff now available to go to Florida.” Further, Bagnell corresponded with Wright about matters other than the Leroy Huggins incident: “I am indeed glad to know that the Tampa branch is planning a mass meeting I trust that the branch will organize and conduct a most successful Moorfield Storey-Louis Marshall Memorial Campaign, to do honor to these two great leaders who did so much for the race.”⁵⁶ The membership drive added new members to the roll of the branch, but because of the overall lack of funds and resources, little could be done about the Huggins case. Although the whites who beat this family were not brought to justice, the NAACP investigated the affair and registered its opposition both on the local and national level.

The year 1930 ended the same way it started, with the Tampa NAACP responding to an outbreak of antiblack violence. On Monday, December 1, 1930, white vigilantes took the law into their own hands by kidnapping a young black man (known only in the record as “Timothy”) from jail, carrying him to an isolated spot outside of town, and then castrating him. According to a newsclipping from the *Tampa Bulletin*, “The young man was arrested Monday morning [December 1] at the municipal hospital where he had been working a year or more. The accusation was that he had been flirting with a (white, female) nurse.”⁵⁷ Someone in Tampa penned an unsigned note to Walter White about this incident: “We are taking the liberty of reporting this case which we feel should be investigated.” White dashed off a letter to Wright in which he asked him to look into the incident and report back his “opinion as to whether or not you think it is a case in which the Association should participate.”⁵⁹

Responding to this request the branch immediately inquired into the gruesome crime and submitted its findings to the national office. The report specifically noted the feelings of fear and intimidation that existed in the local black community: “Many of the people who know about the current events are afraid to even ask for aid. The mother of the boy and also his devoted wife are alone, they have no one to speak for them. The boy is about 25 years of age.” The account filed with the national office was largely in the words of the victim himself who stated:

They drove the car down North Armenia Avenue and Platt Street, on North Armenia Ave. they blindfolded me.... They took me in a frame building tied my hands and feet also my legs and laid me on the floor, I was put to sleep with Ether. Then they removed my fluid glands [castration]. They brought me to town I woke up in the Negro Hospital commonly known as Clara Frye.... Mr. Wright please don't forget the secrecy of this matter.⁶⁰

This grisly act of extralegal violence against a black man was investigated and recorded by the NAACP, perhaps the most they could do given the harsh caste system under which they lived. And although white authorities never apprehended the vigilantes, local blacks did not passively accept the violent act that was aimed at them. In fact, looking back over the early history of the Tampa NAACP, its efforts to oppose antiblack violence highlight its activities. In several cases in these years the NAACP involved itself in attempts to protect the lives and safety of individual blacks and to bring to justice whites guilty of violence against them.⁶¹

This survey of the Tampa NAACP's early activities over a fifteen-year period reveals significant information about the attributes of the local African-American community and the nature of race relations in this southern city. During the first thirty years of the twentieth century, Tampa was a city in which the racial caste system of segregation, disfranchisement, and occasional resort to antiblack violence was the rule in race relations. Not surprisingly, then, Tampa blacks in those years endured continuous racial discrimination in almost all areas of life including exclusion from schools, churches, parks, hotels, movie houses, restaurants, and the like. This was also the time that whites drew a tight color line in the area of employment as custom relegated most blacks to service occupations where large numbers of them were concentrated in low-paid and menial jobs.⁶²

In the face of these disadvantages Tampa's African Americans organized the NAACP in 1915. The organization experienced an inconsistent history of ups and downs as it fluctuated between energetic and dormant periods. This occurred in large part because many factors limited the effectiveness of the Tampa branch in these years. One serious difficulty was its inability to maintain consistent leadership because of the high demands made upon the time, intent, intelligence, and energy of local leaders. Officers who led the NAACP were not paid a salary, but worked on a voluntary basis in their free time. Another problem was that few whites in Tampa were prepared to give assistance or even sympathy to the NAACP's work. The competition of the Urban League and other black organizations was still another difficulty that hampered the branch's effectiveness. And perhaps most damaging of all was the general poverty and discouraged state of mind of many African Americans oppressed by racial conditions. Considering all the impediments which the Tampa NAACP encountered, it is no wonder that it ran through irregular cycles in the years between 1915 and 1930. Still, except for the long spell in the 1920s when it remained completely dormant, the branch was active enough to maintain a basic membership roll and fairly regular meetings. It not only stressed the general goals of the association, but also worked on specific problems of Tampa.

In retrospect, it is remarkable that the Tampa NAACP worked with the vigor it did in those years, showing positive aspects of Tampa's African-American community. A number of local blacks had the courage and resolve to organize a branch of the NAACP and then support it over the years. Such activities involved a certain risk since black teachers who joined may have endangered their jobs, black ministers who signed up risked offending white landlords who may have held the mortgages on their churches, and black businessmen may have chanced arousing the ire of their powerful white colleagues. Furthermore, many working class blacks, who were promised no immediate economic benefits from membership, joined the Tampa NAACP. And while the fight for standard NAACP goals such as voter registration as well as adequate schools, housing, jobs, parks, and the struggle for the hiring of black policemen and firemen lay in the

future, these early years boasted some successes. They included the challenge to white mob violence and legal mistreatment of African Americans, as well as a few court victories. In the final analysis, that so many black Tampans either became formal members or otherwise backed the NAACP program of racial fair play was the major strength of the organization.

¹ For the best recent treatment of the NAACP's role in American history, see August Meier and John H. Bracey, Jr., "The NAACP as a Reform Movement, 1909-1965: 'To Reach the Conscience of America,'" *Journal of Southern History* 59 (February 1993): 3-30.

² This distinction is part of the oral tradition of Tampa's African-American community. Walter Howard's interview with Robert Saunders, field secretary of the Florida NAACP during the modern civil rights era, December 1, 1993.

³ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951, reprint, 1971), 369-393. See also Jack T. Kirby, *Darkness at Dawn: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (Philadelphia, 1972); and Bruce Clayton, *The Savage Ideal: Intolerance and Intellectual Leadership in the South, 1890-1914* (Baltimore, 1972).

⁴ Steven F. Lawson, *In Pursuit of Power: Southern Blacks and Electoral Politics, 1965-1982* (New York, 1985), 343; and Hugh Douglas Price, *The Negro and Southern Politics: A Chapter of Florida History* (New York, 1957), 21-25.

⁵ Robert P. Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa, 1882-1936* (Knoxville, 1988), 10-14; and Gary R. Mormino, *Tampa: The Treasure City* (Tulsa, 1983), 139, 158.

⁶ Pauli Murray, *States' Laws on Race and Color* (Cincinnati, 1951), 77; and C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York, 1955), 67-68.

⁷ U.S. Census Office, *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900, Population*, Part 1 (Washington, D.C., 1901), 612; U.S. Census Office, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910, Population*, 2 (Washington, D.C., 1913), 330; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, Population*, 3 (Washington, D.C., 1922), 195; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population*, 4 (Washington, D.C., 1933), 421.

⁸ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negroes in the United States, 1920-1932* (Washington, D.C., 1935), 27, 48, 55; and Arthur F. Raper, J.H. McGrew, and Benjamin F. Mays, "A Study of Negro Life in Tampa," 1927, typescript, 4, Special Collections, University of South Florida Library, Tampa, Florida.

⁹ Florida's black population grew rapidly between 1920 and 1930, registering a 31.1 percent increase which was the largest of any southern state. It is also true that many of Florida's African Americans moved North in these same years. In 1920, for example, 1,275 blacks born in Florida lived in Harlem. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negroes in the United States, 1920-1932*, 7.

¹⁰ The life of the early NAACP is richly detailed in the Records of the NAACP, 1909-1939, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Group I, Series G, Container #42, files titled "Branch Files – Tampa, Florida, 1915-1917," and "Branch Files – Tampa, Florida, 1918-1930." For an account of the Tampa Urban League, see Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (New York, reprint, 1971), 106-124. "Clara Frye Hospital Now Under City Management," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 18, 1930. See also Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Greenwood, Conn., 1976), 362. Otis Anthony's "A Collection of Historical Facts About Black Tampa" (Tampa, 1977) is suggestive but must be used carefully because of its inaccuracies.

¹¹ Charles S. Sturgis to A. Dill, April, 1915, Records of the NAACP, 1909-1939, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Group I, Series G, Container #42, file titled, "Branch Files – Tampa, Florida, 1915-1917" (hereafter cited as NAACP, Branch File, 1915-1917).

¹² May Childs Nerney to Charles S. Sturgis, May 7, 1915, *ibid.*

¹³ H.E. Lester to W.E.B. Du Bois, June 25, 1915, *ibid.*

¹⁴ May Child, Nerney to H.E. Lester, July 1, 1915, *ibid.*

¹⁵ H.E. Lester to May Childs Nerney, September 20, 1915, *ibid.*

¹⁶ The two copies of this constitution can be found in the Records of the NAACP, 1909-1939, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Group I, Series G. Container #42, file titled, "West Tampa."

¹⁷ Papers of the NAACP, Part I, 1909-1950, University Publications of America, Inc., Microfilm, Reel #4, Report of the Secretary, 1918, p. 3.

¹⁸ D.W. Perkins to National Office, March 29, 1917, NAACP, Branch Files, 1915-1917.

¹⁹ Telegram from James Weldon Johnson to D.W. Perkins, April 3, 1917, *ibid.*

²⁰ Telegram from Roy Nash to D.W. Perkins, April 3, 1917, *ibid.*

²¹ "Executive Authorization," *ibid.*

²² "Application Charter," *ibid.*

²³ Gunnar Myrdal, Richard Sterner, and Arnold Rose, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York and London, 1944), 822.

²⁴ D.W. Perkins to James Weldon Johnson, June 21, 1917, NAACP, Branch Files, 1915-1917.

²⁵ James Weldon Johnson to D.W. Perkins, June 25, 1917, *ibid.*

²⁶ James Weldon Johnson to C.A. Meacham, June 26, 1917, *ibid.*

²⁷ C.A. Meacham to James Weldon Johnson, August 13, 1917; James Weldon Johnson to C.A. Meacham, August 17, 1917, *ibid.*

²⁸ C.A. Meacham to James Weldon Johnson, September 1, 1917, *ibid.*

²⁹ James Weldon Johnson to C.A. Meacham, September 6, 1917, *ibid.*

³⁰ D.W. Perkins to James Weldon Johnson, October 16, 1917, *ibid.*

³¹ James Weldon Johnson to D.W. Perkins, October 23, 1917, *ibid.*

³² C.A. Meacham to John R. Shillady (NAACP Secretary), June 28, 1918, Records of the NAACP, 1909-1939, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Group I Series G, Container #42, file titled, "Branch Files – Tampa, Florida, 1918-1930 (hereafter cited as NAACP, Branch Files, 1918-1930).

³³ R.R. Williams to Secretary of NAACP, April 12, 1922, *ibid.*

³⁴ Assistant Secretary to Dr. R.R. Williams, April 17, 1922, *ibid.*

³⁵ For an insightful account of the rivalry between the NAACP and Urban League, see B. Joyce Ross, *J. E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP, 1911-1939* (New York, 1972), 19, 24.

³⁶ Nancy J. Weiss, *The National Urban League, 1910-1940* (New York, 1974).

- ³⁷ Walter Howard's interview with Joann Tokely, Executive Director of the Tampa Urban League, July 13, 1993.
- ³⁸ Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (New York, reprint, 1971), 106-124.
- ³⁹ Raper, et. al., "A Study of Negro Life in Tampa," 33-34.
- ⁴⁰ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, January 22, 1921, quoted in Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes*, 28.
- ⁴¹ Martin, *Race Firs*, 362.
- ⁴² C. S. Sutton to National Office, February 6, 1929, NAACP, Branch Files, 1118-1930.
- ⁴³ Robert Bagnell to C.S. Sutton, February 13, 1929, *ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ C.S. Sutton to National Office, March 9, 1929, *ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ Robert Bagnell to C.S. Sutton, March 15, 1929; S. Howard to Robert Bagnell, June 9, 1929, *ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ C.S. Sutton to Robert Bagnell, March 26, 1929; Robert Bagnell to C.S. Sutton, April 2, 1929, *ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ C.S. Sutton to Robert Bagnell, April 5, 1929, *ibid.*
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ M.E. Potter to NACCP National Office, May 10, 1929, *ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ Robert Bagnell to Prof. E.J. Wright, May 14, 1929, *ibid.*
- ⁵¹ M.E. Potter to Walter White, February 25, 1930, *ibid.*; see also *Brooksville Journal*, February 12, 1930.
- ⁵² Memo from Walter White to William T. Andrews, February 28, 1930, *ibid.*
- ⁵³ William T. Andrews to M.E. Potter, March 1, 1930, *ibid.*
- ⁵⁴ William T. Andrews to Prof. E.J. Wright, March 1, 1930, *ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ E.J. Wright to William T. Andrews, March 17, 1930, *ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ William T. Andrews to E.J. Wright, March 21, 1930; Robert Bagnell to E.J. Wright, March 28, 1930, *ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ This newsclipping was filed in the National Office, December 17, 1930, *ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ Walter White to E.J. Wright, December 19, 1930, *ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ Amos Butler (new branch secretary) to National Office, December 22, 1930, *ibid.*
- ⁶¹ The Tampa NAACP continued this effort in the 1930s when a black Tampan named Robert Johnson was lynched, see Walter T Howard, 'A Blot on Tampa's History': The 1934 Lynching of Johnson," *Tampa Bay History* 6 (Fall/Winter 1984), 12.
- ⁶² Residential segregation in Tampa is clearly documented in Tampa City Directories from 1886 to the 1920s. See also Raper, et al., "A Study of Negro Life in Tampa"; Wali Kharif, "Black Reaction to Segregation and Discrimination in post-Reconstruction Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 64 (October 1985), 161-173.