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Tampa's Black Business Community: 1900-1915

The origins and development of a black business class in southern towns and cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have interested scholars in recent years. Juliet E.K. Walker's The History of Black Business in America, for example, provides a general history of black businesses. Unfortunately for Floridians and those interested in the Florida experience, relatively little of the scholarly work on this topic has centered on the state history of the African-American business community. A few volumes, such as Marvin Dunn's Black Miami in the Twentieth Century, offer some information regarding development of the business class in Florida, but generally studies focus their attention on more recent developments and do so only as part of a general examination of the black population.

Even a major urban center such as Tampa can lack a general history of the city's African-American community, much less an in-depth examination of the development of its pioneer black middle class. This is so despite excellent period and limited studies by a number of noted scholars. Susan D. Greenbaum's More Than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa covers a relatively small segment of the black population, while essays co-authored by Larry Eugene Rivers and Canter Brown, Jr. lay a foundation for a general understanding of the African-American community's experience up to 1916. Rowena Ferrell Brady, Robert W. Saunders, Sr., Nancy Hewitt, and others have added significantly to the body of knowledge as well, but much more remains to be researched and published.

This essay looks specifically and only into Tampa's thriving black business efforts as they appeared in the early twentieth century. An examination focusing on this time frame provides insight into the progress of the local black middle and entrepreneurial class following the end of national Reconstruction efforts. Socio-economic and political circumstances compelled many African-Americans to live in racially segregated districts and to rely principally upon themselves for goods and services. Additionally, the effect of Booker T. Washington's philosophy was felt in many areas, reinforcing and furthering local self-reliance. A look at whether and how such forces played out in Tampa adds further insight and understanding.

Several questions must be asked in order to identify what – if anything – was unique about Tampa's early black business climate. Obvious questions will be about the individuals who played key roles, and the businesses they operated. In some cases, questions should extend to which business sectors they eventually dominated. Less obvious inquiries include which local conditions changed over time and, if so, what circumstances compelled change? Further, what limitations constrained these entrepreneurs and how were those limitations overcome, if they were overcome? Finally, what role did gender play? Did black women occupy unusual and unexpected positions of influence, or enjoy remarkable success?
The process of answering these questions begins with a glimpse of black mercantile Tampa at the start of the twentieth century. The city (soon to emerge as Florida’s second largest metropolis) contained nearly 16,000 inhabitants. Despite this promising statistic, many African-Americans lived outside the city limits or in unincorporated adjacent communities such as Fort Brooke.3

Since the Civil War’s end, the city’s black community increasingly had focused on the Scrub area, where Central Avenue and Scott Street, along with Polk Street and Nebraska Avenue, were the main thoroughfares and boundaries. Inside and on the borders of the Scrub, black citizens created a lifestyle for themselves that promoted positive growth. During the 1870s, the area had attracted the attention of developers, who inaugurated subdivisions and housing projects. Onlookers described the homes of some members of Tampa’s black community as “decent cottages,” “beautiful homes,” and “magnificent homes.” Following the new developments were several churches, the Harlem Academy School, and other social organizations. These institutions doubled as training grounds for developing business skills and as frameworks for propelling and sustaining business activities. In addition, the neighborhood church indisputably served as the leading business enterprise among blacks.4

Life within the black community of Tampa paralleled the political and economic climate nationally, although exceptions to the rule existed. Blacks experienced varied degrees of oppression in social situations, economics, politics, and education. In Tampa, many blacks struggled with social/moral challenges such as “brawly houses,” and battled economic restrictions due to low educational attainment and resulting menial-level employment.5

Tampa’s early black business efforts can be traced to the late 1800s from advertisements in local newspapers. In one paper, Henry Brumick proudly advertised his shoemaking business. According to his notice, the craftsman “keeps on hand an assortment of leather and is prepared to do substantial and neat work at a fair price.” By 1866 Brumick’s success had permitted
him to expand his reach into real estate development, and three years later he boasted a personal worth in excess of $15,000. Success permitted Brumwick to ensure quality of education for his children. Daughters Iola and Mamie emerged in the twentieth century as educators and civic leaders.6

Brumwick's illustration, though, fails to come close to telling the whole story. By 1899, when they comprised nearly thirty per cent of the city's total population, blacks engaged in a variety of business activities, but not all were recognized officially. To the casual observer it might appear at first glance that black business growth failed to keep pace proportionally with overall population gains. Several factors must be taken into consideration, however, before reaching such a judgment. First, there was a myriad of social problems plaguing blacks. These problems meant black Tampans had to operate under the tensions of Jim Crow Laws, disenfranchise­ment, discrimination, and violence, including lynching and forced segregation. Next, regulatory licensing by business boards required examination and in some cases annual fees. As a result, many businessmen pursued their callings "off the books" and thus out of sight to regulators. Within limiting conditions over which they in most cases had no control, blacks achieved competitive positions in the business efforts they did pursue.7

These early black Tampa entrepreneurs enjoyed the support of a powerful nationally in their grasp for success. Booker T. Washington of Tuskegee Institute, considered the most influential black man in the nation and a leading educator, pressed for black business expansion through the encouragement and support of his National Negro Business League (NNBL.) Tuskegee Institute under Washington's leadership became the center of operations for demon­strating the philosophy of black economic, social, and political relief through black­owned businesses and business efforts. The NNBL, an instrument of the larger Tuskegee Machine (a term coined to describe the extensive influence and activities of the Institute), brought together businesspeople across the United States, many of whom were already engaged in successful ven­tures. It provided an important network for like-minded individuals to share work expe-
Businessmen and women in Florida – at Pensacola, Jacksonville, Ocala and other locales – joined the Washington-led movement. When a Tampa group led by Lee Roy Thomas, George A. Sheehy, Edward Byrd, George S. Middleton, James Elliot Bryant, William H. Green, and Thomas McKnight responded to the initiative with a status report in 1900, it opened a window on local conditions. According to the report, business-minded persons met in Tampa on August 15, 1900, to analyze opportunities and discuss local business operations. Their report contained a specific analysis of fifty-six business enterprises owned, conducted by, or in affiliation with African-Americans. The report also gave testimonies and personal accounts from and on many of the businesspeople, businesses, and activities.

The Tampa report provided detail and insight. It began with a description of geographic locale and economic possibilities for black proprietors and workers. Interesting parallels, it illustrated, existed between entrepreneurs and political leaders within the community. Black community leaders involved in politics (i.e., those who created experiences and edify other blacks.

The Armwood family’s Gem Drug Store, which was located on Central Avenue. Opened circa 1914. (Courtesy University of South Florida Libraries, Special Collections.)
CIVIC organizations and spoke out against unfair practices) often proved to be the same individuals who conducted gainful business ventures. In broad terms, the report creates an impression that the persons listed held strong and unwavering attitudes toward black self-determination within the Tampa community. Many of the individuals who contributed to the report, such as grocer Joseph A. Walker and tailor Isaac H. N. Smith, were among the founding members of the local black business community.10

On a merely statistical level, the size of some enterprises is surprising. The largest business enterprise listed in affiliation with the NNBL of Tampa, the Hillsboro Undertaking Company, was under William H. Green's ownership. In 1900, after being in business only three years, Green had amassed a total business value in the (then) considerable amount of $4,000. Furthermore, Green superintended an electrical plant and could claim precedence as the only colored man locally to pass the examination required of stationary engineers. The popularity of John L. Saulter's saloon, Saulter's Place, is demonstrated by its $2,500 evaluation. Saulter's Place's boasted "fine wines, liquors and cigars," as well as a "pool and billiard hall." One R. Donaldson operated two saloons. The West & Marshall Drug Store on Polk Street, operated by E. V. West, one of Tampa's three black physicians, likewise thrived. Merchandise included "drugs, patented medicines, French perfumeries, soaps and all kinds of toilet articles as well as giving special attention to filling prescriptions." Even the jewelry industry was listed among enterprises operated by blacks. In this business, Y. K. Meeks prospered.11

The list went on to include more varied merchant endeavors, and these responded to local conditions with local initiatives. Large African-American businesses operated in the tobacco, grocery, livery, fashion, cosmetology, and restaurant industries. Tampa's cigar industry had traditionally employed Afro-Cubans. However, the NNBL reported that one African-American cigar company, directed by W. O. Perry and his associates, had business collections totaling over $1,200. Local grocers, to cite another example, constantly upgraded their enterprises to remain competitive. According to a report published during the era by an out-of-state newspaper, "The Beasley Grocery Store . . . has installed an up-to-date meat market in connection with its store." Moreover, Beasley operated a restaurant. The Beasley Grocery Store and restaurant combination was a pattern appearing in the enterprise of others. For instance, J. Taylor, through his wife's help, made a solid living. While he maintained a store, she operated a restaurant. (The latter reportedly was among the best in the city.) H. Williams and Mrs. A. P. Mills also ran a restaurant in a city that was gaining fame for its tasty and varied cuisine. Interestingly, of all the enterprises discussed in the NNBL report of Tampa, only the restaurant industry credited women's participation.12

The fashion industry additionally offered a sizeable market for blacks, though this, like other aspects of the mercantile community, showed local characteristics. While other cities reported large numbers of dressmakers and female milliners, this was not the case in Tampa. Instead, mostly male shoemakers and tailors operated businesses making good profits. The business of J. W. McConnell fared so well that he could donate $100 worth of clothes to a Jacksonville charity. Furthermore, one of the city's premier tailors, Isaac H. N. Smith, possessed business properties amounting to $3,000. Yet, the name of his wife, Theresa Smith, could not be found listed in the Tampa NNBL report as a dressmaker — though she was one.13

Barbers and barbershops made up the largest segment of black businesses in Tampa. Referred to as tonsorial artists, black barbers comprised almost one-third of all people employed in the barbering profession and led the city as the largest black industry. The only all-black barbershop, the firm of Thomas & James, welcomed customers on Polk Street. B. J. McCullough, a leading barber, expressed the concern (shared by his colleagues) of being forced by local regulations to close their businesses on Sundays and the ultimate effect that this would have on other black businesses and their patrons.14

This glimpse of achievements registered by 1900 is the only manner in which the spirit of era and locale can be captured. City directories and additional sources permit closer views of conditions, lesser business ventures, other persons involved in businesses, and changes over time. These local sources cumulatively show that over
time additional industry areas emerged, including the culinary craft (butchers, cafes and restaurants), confectionaries, and more grocers. Along with fashion, cosmetology, undertaking, and medical businesses, these growth industries constructed the framework within which blacks would later pursue other business opportunities in Tampa.15

Before examining the long-range impact of these developments, one must note that the business community in Tampa had by 1912 reached such a level of sophistication that it merited Booker T. Washington's personal attention. Washington conducted tours of selected states, usually sponsored by the state chapter of the NNBL and the state lieutenant of the Tuskegee Machine. Essentially, Washington and his entourage traveled to major cities to bolster and promote the Tuskegee ideology and gain a sense of the nationwide black state of affairs. In Florida, Washington stopped in Pensacola, Tallahassee, Lake City, Ocala, Tampa, Lakeland, Eatonville, Daytona and Jacksonville, and passed through numerous others, giving lectures. During the tour of Florida, Washington spoke in Tampa. Several accounts relating the content of his speeches and lectures on self-sufficiency surfaced in local newspapers during the tour. His Tampa speech praised Florida A&M College and called for good race relations as a means of progress for the entire black race. He encouraged the need for economic self-sufficiency, not only in Tampa, but all over Florida. In Pensacola, "he urged black farmers to acquire land while prices were low and to keep abreast of production techniques."16

In the years following Washington's tour of Florida, black business ventures began to rise in Tampa, as elsewhere in the state. It is reasonable that this rise resulted partially from Washington's inspirational messages. A Washington visit was seen as a catalyst for renewed action and advancement. One year following Washington's visit, for instance, Ocala blacks established the Metropolitan Savings Bank.17

By 1915, just three years after the Washington tour of Florida, a change for the better appeared in Tampa as African-Americans expanded their participation in different business ventures. Blacks went into areas they previously had avoided or else conducted on a small scale. These areas included the operation of a printing shop and the establishment of hotels and boarding houses. At the time, black bed-and-breakfast inns were spreading throughout the United States, as seen in the reports of different leagues of the NNBL. Railroad expansion created higher mobility among blacks, creating a need for accommodations where they could stay in peace without discrimination.18

Greater numbers of blacks locally began creating and managing their own businesses. Twice as many black-owned cleaners, pressers, and restaurants operated in Tampa in 1915 as in 1912. The black entrepreneurial community added another insurance agency and real estate company. The Afro-American Industrial Insurance Agency employed sixteen agents to conduct its local business.19

Other enterprises experienced expansion as part of this general progress. John Larkins' grocery store expanded to include
a meat market. The notions and dry goods store already operated by R. L. Williams carried “several thousands of dollars of stock.” Additionally, an array of confectionaries, soft drinks and ice cream parlors prospered under black ownership. (Just three years previously, only three soft drink facilities, one of which belonged to Dave Hendricks, served customers. Hendricks then went on to build up a confectionary business.) One of the most successful black Tampa businessmen, John Andrew Williams, owned the Williams Cigar Company. His cigar distribution served to highlight local black achievement. With the smoking of cigars constituting a widespread social ritual, Williams’ product was enjoyed not only in the United States but as far away as China.20

Through these years, Tampa’s black women often acted independently or alongside men to build stable businesses and futures. Dorcas Bryant, who worked as a laundress for white families, set an early example by building family security in a manner that eventually would reach beyond Tampa to influence the state. Many women followed her example. Mattie Lee successfully took over operation of their business after her husband’s death. Prior to William Lee’s demise in the early 1900s, he had run the “largest livery, feed and sale, stables, undertaking and embalming [business] in this city.” Mattie Lee managed easily to sustain that business legacy. Accounts of other women’s enterprises occasionally surfaced in newspaper reports. Amanda Threadcraft owned real estate while working as a caterer. Christina Johnson-Meacham ran a grocery store in addition to teaching school.21

Nationally, black women associated themselves in this era with certain industries. These included culinary activities, domestic service, laundries, dressmaking, millinery, and cosmetology. The profile applied well to the employment of Tampa’s black women, although they did not produce large numbers of business owners or managers in these industries. In Tampa, according to the NNBL account, black female entrepreneurs apparently engaged solely in the restaurant industry. (Occasionally, early twentieth century American black women ventured into other fields. A noted example was Dr. Julia Coleman of Newport News, Virginia, who operated a well-patronized pharmacy.)22

In most cities such as Macon, Georgia, Birmingham, Alabama, Denver, Colorado, and Tampa’s mirror city of the era – Jacksonville – African-American businesswomen seemed to have been more or less in line with the traditional business activities of black women nationally. Reports from the cities’ local NNBL chapters confirm these activities as typical of women. As the years progressed in Tampa, black women slowly began to establish themselves as principals and managers within these industries.23

Unfortunately, a significant amount of women’s participation in the local black business community may have been overlooked. Often, women oversaw business activities without recognition. Perhaps the role of black women in business was obscured because women made more of the prestige and status of marriage, listing businesses in their husbands’ names or in their married surnames. Sometimes, using a man’s name on the business registration carried more perceived influence, whether or not he was the woman’s spouse. Social patterns hide the real roles women may have played and cause difficulties now in identifying those persons who actually oversaw and facilitated the work done with the businesses.24

In some instances locally, as elsewhere, women did not directly involve themselves with the businesses of their husbands, yet still contributed to their development. The successful Williams Cigar Company traced its roots to family matriarch Rachel Williams. Although not heavily involved in the cigar industry, she strongly influenced her son, John Andrew Williams, proprietor of the successful company. Her work ethic and drive directly shaped the development of his business, as she worked “indefatigably for their [her children’s] welfare and education.” Black Tampa’s wives and mothers in family businesses gave comfort and helped carry the financial and emotional strains of a business. For instance, Mrs. John Andrews’ dinner parties for Williams Cigar Company affected many of the social aspects of the family’s business. When Washington visited Tampa on his tour of Florida, he lodged at the home of Rev. Daniel A. and Mrs. Rowena A. Perrin, typifying the close relationship between church and business in the black community.25

Women, through their association with businesses, formed parallel organizations...
such as the Florida Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, the Phillis Wheatley Association and the National Association of Colored Women. These single-sex organizations allowed women "to adopt strategic modes of action appropriate to their diverse goals and to meld their influence as women with their power as members of the larger black community." Organizationally, women busied themselves in economic, political and social issues, as well as the condition of blacks and women locally and beyond Tampa. The same women who worked with their husbands in various enterprises used their social status to gain local support and lead these organizations. Margaret Murray Washington, wife of Booker T. Washington, is a classic example of how this worked. In 1913, a year after her husband's tour of Florida, Mrs. Washington conducted a similar tour, visiting many of the same cities. In this tour her audience were women's groups such as the Phillis Wheatley Art Club of Tampa. Another example is that of Rowena Perrin, wife of Rev. Daniel A. Perrin, who was heavily involved with the Florida Women's Club at Tampa.26

Beyond the omission of women's business leadership in the Tampa NNBL report or in city directories, several types of local black businesses went unnoticed as well. Because some firms were not listed does not mean there was no black activity in a given business area. In the case of black hair goods and hairdressers, only one operation, that of Lila Kinsler in 1912, could be discovered in Tampa, and by 1913 Kinsler's business was no longer listed in the city directory. However, it is certain that across the United States in the early twentieth century, black beauty products experienced remarkable sales growth, particularly in hair-straightening products, bleaching creams, etc. Possibly, Tampa women who sold a black hair care line did so door-to-door. Two national hair product lines, Madam C. J. Walker of Indianapolis, Indiana and Dr. Julia Coleman's of Newport News, Virginia, operated as door-to-door and mail-order businesses. These direct marketing enterprises did not require a woman to utilize a storefront, were seldom formally regulated, and would have been overlooked by the local city directory.

"Non-legitimate" businesses, described as persons who utilized their trades or skills without the formal knowledge, licensing or taxing of government, also escaped published notice. Self-employed child care workers, housekeepers, handymen, and yard workers – widely employed in Tampa - fall into this category. Often these business enterprises supplemented the practitioner's income from other sources. For example, black laundresses and seamstresses employed in larger businesses often undertook entrepreneurial work. A seamstress had access to fabric scraps from the dress shop where she worked; these were used to create outfits at home. When her unique ensembles became a sensation among her neighbors, the seamstress' services were then in demand. Although legally she did not have a business permit, she was an entrepreneurial businesswoman. Many men and women in Tampa or Macon or Indianapolis undoubtedly entered business in a similar manner.27

The Tampa black business community waxed and waned like other business communities, responding to local conditions. The Negro Board of Trade and local versions of the NNBL became Tampa's networks to support and encourage formation of black businesses. Businesses here, as elsewhere, experienced competition among themselves, but it does not appear to have been a negative factor. Saulter's Place and the Chappelle Theatre both competed in the entertainment market, but each business had a slightly different focus and appealed to different audiences. As some businesses developed, others closed due to various reasons, primarily financial. Overall, Tampa blacks sought to build an economically self-sufficient community. Support of black businesses was a concept the NNBL stressed amongst its members. When support of black businesses began decreasing, a plea "to patronize their own [black] establishments" was issued.28

The capacity for blacks to employ other blacks surfaced as one of the most profitable features of the business landscape locally. Black employer-employee relationships left both individuals with positive self-images. Black employers did not, or at least to a far lesser extent than in mainstream society, enact discriminatory practices, job mis-treatment, and prejudicial wages. The willingness of black businesses to hire black personnel – and to create jobs where few might have otherwise been found – is demonstrated by Williams Cigar Company
as "helping to solve this great problem by employing their race in the office and factory." This same approach is found in most period black businesses in Tampa. Many blacks worked in the groves of William and Mattie Lee, for instance. Of course, it is possible that black entrepreneurs had only black applicants for jobs. Nonetheless, this employment worked to the benefit and overall advancement of blacks.29

The variety of business ventures undertaken by blacks created, in several industries, the ability for blacks to function without much immediate contact with or interference from whites. In the culinary industry, for example, blacks dominated the Tampa cook shops. Each year, blacks comprised at least ninety percent of the population working in these shops. There were other race-specific employment practices in Tampa in the era. The Cubans in Tampa commanded most of the work in the cigar industry. The Chinese, as in other regions, were heavily involved in the laundry business. Because an industry was heavily race-specific, however, did not mean that it excluded interaction with other racial groups. Sometimes these were driven by necessity. In the larger context of black business locally, since blacks owned few wholesale distributors (apart from cigar manufacturers), they had, in order to obtain most merchandise, to rely on whites.30

In spite of the racially divisive climate affecting economics and political advancement, blacks in Tampa still managed to pursue their business endeavors. Perhaps seeing the advancements of other blacks through the NNBL and in the nearby cities of Jacksonville and Ocala encouraged business development. Clearly, Booker T. Washington's influence nurtured local black business efforts. How these early efforts continued and expanded following Washington's influence in 1912-15 remains to be examined by the scholarly eye. It is certain that established black businesses in Tampa today are built upon those nascent years of growth and determination. As Tampa's blacks in the early twentieth century entered and attempted to establish themselves in each aspect of public life - education, politics, economics - their forays into the business world reflected that drive, coupled with local responses to local pressures and opportunities.
ENDNOTES


19. See, generally, 1912 Tampa city directory; 1915 Tampa city directory, 957, 988, 1007-9; *New York Age*, April 15, 1915.


27. Report of the 2nd Annual Convention of the NNBL, NNBL Papers, 36-8; Report of the 7th Annual Convention of the NNBL, NNBL Papers, 141-44.


30. See generally 1899, 1912, 1913, 1915 Tampa city directories.