A Community within a Community: African-American Women in St. Petersburg during World War II

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“A COMMUNITY WITHIN A COMMUNITY”:
AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN IN
ST. PETERSBURG DURING WORLD WAR II
by Ellen J. Babb

“These are not the days to consider from whence one came, nor the traditional customs of social standing, caste, and privilege. These are the days for a united front with a united purpose to fight for that victory which we must have, or regardless of caste, creed or position, we will all sink together.”

When Florida educator and national reformer Mary McLeod Bethune appealed to her colleagues to support the war effort in a stirring speech delivered at the Southern Conference on Human Welfare in New Orleans, she hoped that black participation in the military service overseas and in support services on the homefront during World War II would lead to improved social conditions for American blacks at war’s end. Observing that the war was a “fight for the perfection of the democracy of our own beloved America,” Bethune noted the moral impetus of the country’s involvement in hostilities abroad and suggested that same spirit should prevail in redefining race relations at home.

But the “united front” Bethune envisioned eluded the majority of black citizens during World War II. Although African Americans suffered the same sacrifices as their white compatriots, black soldiers served in segregated military units in training camps and in combat, and on the homefront employers denied African Americans the types of economic advancement available to many whites in civil service and private industry when the country mobilized for war.

No one felt the disparity in social and public policy more than black women. Although in reality black women played important roles in the Allied cause, newspapers and periodicals recorded little of their wartime achievements. And white faces, not black profiles, graced war posters designed to recruit workers and stir patriotism in American citizens. The double burden of race and gender contributed to black women’s marginal social status and obscured their individual contributions to the war effort through paid work and volunteer activities.

This study of African-American women in St. Petersburg, Florida, during World War II depicts the many ways they helped to sustain their own communities while contributing to the larger war effort during these years of crisis. It also suggests that employment patterns for black women in this southern resort city remained remarkably unchanged, particularly in comparison to the experience of local white women, who enjoyed a vast expansion of job opportunities during the course of the war. Classified advertising, newspaper articles from the “Negro News” page of the St. Petersburg Times, city directories, personal scrapbooks, and personal interviews provide the bulk of information for this article.

When war broke out, St. Petersburg – with a population of more than sixty thousand – lacked a solid industrial base, relying on tourism and associated services for its economic survival. The War Department saved the city from financial ruin when military officials chose St. Petersburg as a training site for more than 100,000 troops. Local hotels, denied normal tourist occupancy,
housed military trainees while city residents became civilian landlords, renting homes and rooms to military families and to workers who labored in Tampa’s defense industries.  

Although St. Petersburg lacked the types of war contracts and industry that “Rosie the Riveter” and millions like her most often found in larger urban settings, local white women found work in traditionally “male fields” like automobile mechanics, welding, and city transit operations. Others commuted to defense jobs in Tampa, worked in family businesses, or joined the Nurses Corps or new women’s branches of the armed forces. Locally and nationally, white middle-class women experienced a great expansion of opportunity during the war years, while the majority of black women remained sequestered in low-paying, low-status jobs. In St. Petersburg, most African-American women continued to work as laundresses, hotel maids, and domestics just as they had previously.

Throughout the war, racist and sexist attitudes contributed to persistent segregation in the workplace. When employers depleted their sources of white male labor, they looked first to white women, then to black men, and only lastly to black women to fill vacancies. Employers defended this labor hierarchy by citing fears of strikes, walkouts, and work stoppages by white workers if they hired black women. Custom remained king. White women were particularly vocal in voicing opposition to sharing work space with black women. Many feared they would become ill from sharing bathroom facilities with individuals they believed to be “dirty and diseased.”

In spite of these obstacles, the number of black maids and domestics declined nationally by more than fifteen percent between 1940 and 1944 as black women left the service industries to pursue new types of work. In the South, large numbers of black women deserted farm labor and migrated to northern urban areas, hoping to take advantage of a labor market caught short by the loss of male employees to the armed forces. Their moderate success in these endeavors is reflected in the fact that the number of black women working in industry rose from 6.5 to 18 percent during this same period of time.

With few exceptions, these women secured new jobs with great difficulty, and they continued to work in positions that produced few qualitative changes in their lives. Often they found themselves performing hard, manual labor or work considered too dangerous for white women. A local example highlights that experience. In 1943, railroad officials in St. Petersburg hired Mary Johnson and four other black women to work as “common laborers” in positions normally reserved for black men.

A few local black women found work in northern factories during the war, but if the national model holds true, these women probably worked as janitors or performed menial labor, rather than working in the higher paying jobs reserved for white women. Annette Brown, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. E.B. Brown of St. Petersburg, worked in a defense plant in Milwaukee during the war, while her fiancee, Corporal David Bell, served in New Guinea. The newspaper article reporting her activities did not mention Annette’s actual position at the defense plant.

Women who wanted to serve their country could also join the military, although officials in the armed forces recruited black women with great reluctance. The women’s branches of the Navy
(WAVES), Marines (MCWRs), and Coast Guard (SPARS) excluded black women from their ranks completely until 1944 when President Franklin Roosevelt ordered military employers to recruit African-American women. The Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAACs) recruited black women much earlier in the war, but they capped black membership at ten percent.¹²

In St. Petersburg, black female recruiters for the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps interviewed prospective candidates at City Hall, at Gibbs High School (St. Petersburg’s only high school for African-American students), and at Jordan Park Community center in the heart of the black community.¹³ Rosalie Peck was twelve years old when the recruiters came to Gibbs High School with their “jaunty caps and leather strap bags.”¹⁴ Although she was too young to enlist, her older sister Theo signed up and was assigned to a base in Tucson, Arizona.¹⁵ A number of other young black women also enlisted and the community celebrated their induction with great enthusiasm and pride, as the following article from the “Negro News” page of the April 18, 1943 issue of the St. Petersburg Times illustrates.

Causing quite a flurry in social circles today is the departure of three of the city’s most popular young women for the WAACs camp in Des Moines, Iowa. They are Miss Gwendolyn Shelby, attractive cashier at the Harlem Theatre; Mrs. Elizabeth Daniels, columnist; and Miss Lucille Bradley, who was an employee at a local cleaning plant here. These three young women, all versatile, willing workers, and possessors of charming personalities, are expected to move ahead

Prior to World War II, domestic work was one of the few jobs open to African-American women.

Photograph from USF Special Collections.
This optimism may have proven premature because black women (like their boyfriends, fathers, and brothers in the military service) lived and worked in segregated units. Even more disheartening, many of these women were relegated to custodial and kitchen work once they enlisted. Theo Peck was fortunate to be assigned clerical work at her station in Tucson. Civilian employment for the military also existed, and local women toiled in the shipbuilding factories and at Drew and MacDill airfields in Tampa. Mrs. A. Albritton worked in the parachute department at MacDill, where her husband was employed as a chauffeur.17

Created in May 1942, the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps (WAACs) was the only branch of the military that accepted black women volunteers at the beginning of the war.

Photograph from The Negro to World War II by John D. Silvera.

quickly in this new organization of our government. They have been feted with many parties and teas prior to their leaving today.16
Countless articles in the main sections of the *St. Petersburg Times* lauded the efforts of white civilian workers on the homefront, but the only way to find out about the activities of someone like Theo Peck or Mrs. Albritton – unless one knew them personally – was to read about them on the “Negro News” page of the same newspaper. This page first appeared in the *Times* in October 1939 and was only distributed in black neighborhoods, so that the achievements and patriotic endeavors of local blacks went unnoticed by the community at large.\(^\text{18}\)

Such racist business practices reflected the state of public segregation predominant in the city. In these years before President Harry Truman’s executive order desegregating the Armed Forces, African-American soldiers in St. Petersburg could not stay in downtown hotels with white soldiers, but were forced to find housing in the black community. Black women like Jane Jackson, who owned a rooming house on 4th Avenue and 16th Street South above Webb’s City shoe store, rented rooms both to black soldiers and to the African-American entertainers who performed for them in local clubs like the Manhattan Casino.\(^\text{19}\)

Notably, the boarding of soldiers was one area where the experiences of white women and black women merged, each providing housing for members of their own race. However, the paths of the races diverged again when considering opportunities for skilled employment. Only a few professional occupations existed for St. Petersburg black women at this time, and these were generally in education, nursing, and insurance. Within these fields, women were often promoted when black males were called to war.\(^\text{20}\)

Such was the case of Mrs. Doris Williams who, “due to the continued shortage of manpower and because of the fact that women [were] prepared to take over the work formerly done by men [became] the first woman supervisor of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company in the state of Florida.”\(^\text{21}\) The Atlanta Life Insurance Company, based in Atlanta, Georgia, served an all-black clientele. Doris began working for the company in her hometown of Way Cross, Georgia, in 1936, the year after she graduated from high school, and she transferred in 1938 to the St. Petersburg branch, where she worked soliciting new memberships. She feels that the promotion she received in 1943 would have been offered to a man during peacetime. After the war, Doris stayed on in her position for a short time before leaving to work with her husband and father-in-law in a family-owned business, Regal Sundries on Third Avenue South.\(^\text{22}\)

Rose Williams (not related), a co-worker of Doris Williams, remembers that women almost entirely operated the St. Petersburg branch of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company during the war. Prior to her employment by the insurance company, Rose worked in Morrison’s Cafeteria and in local hotels and provided non-professional nursing care to patients in private homes. One morning, shortly after America entered the war, a young man who had just been drafted approached Rose after church and inquired if she would like to take his place at the insurance company where he worked. Rose agreed and spent the next several years collecting insurance premiums from African-American subscribers in Pinellas County. She remembers that the job paid well, and Rose continued to work for the Atlanta Life Insurance Company after the war.\(^\text{23}\)

Local black women also filled vacancies created when black male teachers were drafted. African-American women substituted for black draftees at all three of the city’s black schools –
Davis Elementary, Jordan Elementary, and Gibbs High School. Helen Edwards, retired librarian for the James Weldon Johnson branch of the public library, taught at both Davis and Jordan Elementary schools during the 1940s due to the wartime manpower drain.²⁴

Edwards remembers that older black men, who were generally above draft age, managed most of the black community's middle-class establishments during the 1940s. According to Mrs. Edwards, the majority of younger black men worked as laborers, hotel porters, cab drivers, and yard men. Some of the black men who worked for the Atlantic Coastline Railroad were not drafted, but kept their jobs at the railroad, transporting soldiers from training camps in St. Petersburg to various points of embarkation. Helen’s husband, Elmer Edwards, received an occupational deferment from the government so that he could continue to handle baggage and mail for the railroad.²⁵

To augment the family income, the majority of black women continued to work as domestics, cooks, and laundresses. Large numbers of St. Petersburg’s African-American women worked as steam operatives before, during, and after the war. Interestingly, the atmosphere of the war years provoked some of these women to challenge their employers’ power. During the summer of 1944, twenty-five women from the Soft Water Laundry Plant “walked out” demanding higher wages, improved health and safety standards, and recognition of their newly organized union.²⁶ A week later, thirty-five black women from the Superior Laundry Plant walked off their jobs in a pledge of sympathy and support. This laundry experienced a large decline in output as a result of the strike, and plant manager S.L. McClintock feared he might lose the company’s government contract as well.²⁷

The striking workers received encouragement from local AFL organizers, state labor officials, and members of the religious community. On July 25, 1944 – two weeks into the strike – Reverend John Wesley Carter invited local laundry workers to a special meeting at the Bethel Baptist Church. In the sanctuary of this African-American church, James T. Whitney, a state labor leader and editor of the Florida Advocate, urged those in attendance to stand firm in their resolve to improve working conditions. Blasting the newspapers for being unsympathetic to the causes of organized labor, Whitney warned striking workers that “rich northerners had made fortunes out of ‘nigger labor’ and that ‘chiseling Yankees’ were responsible for the southern Negroes’ plight. You can’t always place reliance in newspapers, and don’t be alarmed by them. I have never yet seen a newspaper who champions labor, negro or white.”²⁸

Early in the war, the NAACP’s magazine featured this woman learning to weld as a representative of the slogan “Training to Beat the Axis.”

Other speakers that night included Reverend Carter and Perry Harvey, the leader of the black longshoreman’s union in Tampa. Carter hoped that the negotiations would bring a swift and peaceful end to the strike, but the civic activist was not adverse to workers using “force if necessary.”²⁹ This was not the first time that Reverend Carter had played a major role in addressing issues of inequality and injustice in St. Petersburg. During the 1930s Carter had lobbied the all-white city council to provide black citizens with improved housing conditions, voting rights, expanded medical facilities, and better employment opportunities.³⁰
The meeting at Carter’s church occurred only two days after the *St. Petersburg Times* printed an article announcing that the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church had taken an official stand in support of organized labor at their thirty-second quadrennial convention in Philadelphia the week before. In their report, A.M.E. leaders approved of “trade unionism as an
instrument of practical brotherhood and a most important means of assuring security and equality of treatment in employment.” The report went on to commend “those labor organizations which have welcomed the negro worker on a basis of equality.”

The last reference to the laundry strike appeared in the *St. Petersburg Times* on August 4, 1944, approximately three weeks after the initial walkout at the Softwater Laundry. W.L. Durant, the local AFL representative, reported that the workers found better paying jobs in Tampa, indicating that negotiations between the striking workers and management had broken down. If the aim of the strike was primarily union recognition, then the strike failed. But it is more likely that the core issues for striking women were improved working conditions and higher wages, and that they viewed the strike as a fight for a better life for their families. In this respect, they made measured progress.

The social backdrop against which the laundry strike unfolded was one of grinding poverty for the majority of St. Petersburg blacks. Housing in most black neighborhoods was substandard, health facilities were inadequate, and the specter of Jim Crow marked relations between the races. It fell upon members of the black community to care for their own.

Rose Williams remembers that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was very active in St. Petersburg at this time, its energy fueled by the hope for equal rights at war’s end. Local and national leaders moved to pursue justice at home while black soldiers fought for democracy abroad. Rose attended NAACP meetings regularly, and claims that she was even “dumb enough to have an NAACP bumper sticker” on her car. Black teachers, considered leaders in the African-American community, were active in the organization, but performed their work secretly for fear of losing their jobs. Some white citizens also helped by contributing money, but they did not come to meetings and usually made their donations anonymously. In June 1944 the St. Petersburg chapter of the NAACP held a special fundraising drive, hoping to increase its membership from 139 members to 500 by the end of that year.

In addition to joining political associations like the NAACP, local women intensified their efforts to provide basic services to members of their community by joining black women’s service clubs. Seven such civic organizations existed in St. Petersburg during the 1930s and 1940s. These included the Sojourner Truth Federated Club, the Non-Pareils, the Modernistics, the Socialites Federated Club, and the Margaret Washington Federated Club. Each club operated as an independent member of the local chapter of the National Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, setting its own agenda but occasionally joining forces on major projects like the creation of a common clubhouse at Melrose Park.

The years framed by World War II were a particularly active time for Rose Williams’s club, the Non-Pareils. Organized by Fannye Ayer Ponder in 1926, the organization promoted an improved quality of life for black residents, as outlined in the first two sections of the club constitution:

Section I. To act as an organized unit for the moral, religious, literary, and civic advancement among Negro citizens of St. Petersburg Florida.
To achieve these goals, Rose remembers that club women raised money by holding beauty pageants and baby contests, hosting regular teas, and sponsoring community plays at Gibbs High School. The club donated food to needy families, as well as to the residents of St. Petersburg’s only black nursing home, located in the private residence of “Mother Jones” on 28th Street South and Fremont Terrace. The Non-Pareils and some of the other black women’s clubs also sponsored junior affiliates, in which club members trained young women, aged twelve and older, in leadership and community service.

Individual club women exerted a great deal of influence within their community. Fanny Ayer Ponder established the St. Petersburg chapter of the National Council of Negro Women in 1942. Mrs. Ponder, a social studies teacher at Gibbs High School, had befriended Mary McLeod Bethune, who created the national council in 1935. The purpose of the council, based in Washington, D.C., was to provide a “coalition of black women’s organizations that addressed the needs of African-American women and the community through planning and action.” From the beginning, the St. Petersburg chapter provided educational programs designed to improve the quality of life for individuals in St. Petersburg’s African-American community.
Fannye Ponder also served as president of the State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs from 1942 to 1946. Her husband, Dr. James Maxie P ponder, served as the first official city physician to the black community, a position he assumed in 1926. During World War II, Dr. Ponder supervised the physical examinations of black military trainees in St. Petersburg. For her part in the war effort, Fannye Ponder traveled the state of Florida selling war bonds. According to Ponder’s son Ernest, Fannye Ponder sold over $300,000 worth of bonds statewide. After the war, President Truman invited Ponder to Washington and honored her for her work in the Victory War Bond Drive.41

Historian D’Ann Campbell, in her work Women at War, found the rate of wartime volunteerism among black women nationally to be very low. This was clearly not the case in St. Petersburg, where black wives, mothers, and daughters supported the war effort through volunteer work in their own community every bit as much as did white women in the more affluent neighborhoods.

Activities included planting Victory Gardens, Red Cross work, patriotic teas, and USO involvement. Victory Garden owners registered with Mrs. Henrietta Dominis and were asked to can vegetables for future use. Helen Edwards recalls that the Red Cross had integrated meetings and training sessions during the war, but that the black nurses aides and white nurses aides worked in different areas of the community. Helen’s mother belonged to the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and during the war the African-American and white chapters met together at the Bishop Hotel to make bandages.42

At school, children brought in their nickels and dimes to buy stamps to fill in books which were then traded in for war bonds. They collected aluminum pots and pans for community salvage drives, an activity encouraged by school teachers and parents. One of Rosalie Peck’s favorite pastimes was identifying planes as they flew overhead on their way to or from MacDill Field in Tampa. During dances and sockhops at Campbell Park recreation center, Civil Defense sirens blared in mock emergency and lights dimmed. Rosalie was at one of these dances when the news came that the Japanese had surrendered, and she and her friends ran home, elated that their boyfriends, brothers, and fathers would soon return home.43

Rosalie lived near Jordan Park, a public housing project built with monies allocated through the 1938 Wagner-Steagall Housing Act. The first phase (242 units) opened in April 1940, and by the fall of 1941 construction on the second phase was finished. In these early years Jordan Park was a source of great pride for St. Petersburg’s black community. Rosalie Peck beg her parents to sell their home and move to the project with its pristine dwellings and paved streets. Her parents, however, had worked hard to save the money necessary to buy their home – she as a maid, he as a gardener – and they had no desire to sell their property. Citrus trees grew in the Peck’s backyard, and on Sunday afternoons Rosalie’s mother baked cakes and made fresh lemonade for the young soldiers who stopped by to visit on their way to weekend activities at Jordan Park.44

While white soldiers frequented the Pier, the Coliseum, and other popular downtown bars and restaurants on their free time, black soldiers were restricted to special functions within the boundaries of the African-American community. Various women’s clubs sponsored patriotic teas
at their clubhouses, as well as formal “invitation only” programs at the Manhattan Casino on 22nd Avenue South, where soldiers danced to the music of local bandleaders Jessie Henderson and Fess Clark. They enjoyed movies at the Harlem Theatre and played softball against local teams like Elmer Edward’s Pepsi Cola Kids at Campbell Park. The USO held dances at the administration building in Jordan Park, and when the black soldiers stationed in Tampa could not come to St. Petersburg, local black churches packed busloads of young women off to MacDill and Drew fields to entertain the men on base. Many women met their future husbands at such get-togethers.45

This picture of African-American women in St. Petersburg during World War II is far from complete, and yet enough information exists to make some general observations. Although national and local research points to increases in types of employment available to white women during the war years, for the majority of black women life went on much as before the war. The social and economic problems that plagued St. Petersburg’s black community did not abate, and the reality of life in this segregated and race-conscious city meant that African-American women continued to work menial, low-paying jobs to provide basic necessities for their families. Occasionally women escaped these narrow confines by enlisting in the military or securing defense work in northern cities.

It is striking that only one out of the eight individuals interviewed for this study remembered any women who left town to secure new employment during the war. In fact, the war years remain a blur in most of these women’s memories, indicating patterns of consistency in their lives during the 1940s. And personal interviews, the city directory, and the classified advertising section of the St. Petersburg Times provide evidence that most local black women continued to find work primarily as laundresses, domestics, cooks, and in other low-paying jobs in service industries. A large military-based clientele simply replaced an earlier tourist-based clientele.

Meanwhile, virtually all of the white women interviewed for a similar study remembered the war years with great clarity, as though their entire world had been reordered for those few years. Even if they themselves did not join the military or work in the defense industry or in other non-traditional jobs, they knew plenty of friends and neighbors who had. Countless articles in the St. Petersburg Times attest to this dramatic shift in employment patterns for local white women during the war.46

In addition to working at low-paying jobs, African-American women in St. Petersburg performed extensive volunteer work in their own “community within a community,” providing essential services that were routinely furnished white citizens as a matter of course.47 During World War II, they took on additional nonpaid work in support of the Allied cause, entertaining soldiers, making bandages, engaging in Red Cross activities, selling war bonds, and attending to many other details as they struggled to keep their families together until war’s end.

When the war finally did end, the dream of a “united front” that would improve the lot of minorities ended with it. Nationally, the vast majority of Americans remained unaware that their African-American brethren had sacrificed and suffered as they had. Most did not care. In the aftermath, what mattered most was a return to “normalcy” and women in general were the losers. White women generally lost whatever economic advantages they had gained during the war and
were shuffled back down the economic ladder. For African-American women, as reflected by the experience of black women in St. Petersburg, the economic impact of the end of the war was not as harsh. Since they had climbed but little, the fall was not nearly as hard.


2 Ibid, 1100-1101.


4 Maureen Honey, Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 119.


6 Ibid.


8 Ibid.


12 Campbell, Women at War, 25.

13 “Negro WAACs Stage Drive for Recruits Here,” St. Petersburg Times, February 20, 1943.

14 Interview with Rosalie Peck on November 20, 1992.

15 Ibid.

16 “Three Popular Young Women now in WAACs,” St. Petersburg Times, April 18, 1943.


18 Hooker, The Times, 65.

19 Telephone interview with Helen Edwards on November 18, 1992.

20 Babb, “Women and War.”

Telephone interview with Doris Johnson (Williams) on February 10, 1994.

Interview with Rose Williams in her St. Petersburg home on November 11, 1992.

Edwards interview.


“Negro Laundry Workers Walk off Jobs Here,” St. Petersburg Times, July 14, 1944.


“Negro Laundry Workers Urged to Stick to Demands,” St. Petersburg Times, July 26, 1944.


Arsenault, St. Petersburg, 269.


Arsenault, St. Petersburg, 264-270.

Rose Williams interview.

Ibid; “NAACP to Hear Noah Griffin,” St. Petersburg Times, June 18, 1944.

Rose Williams interview.

1926-1945 Yearbook of the St. Petersburg Non-Pareil Club. In the possession of Rose Williams.

Ibid; Rose Williams interview.

Gabriele Schulte “Celebration of 50 Years of Service,” St. Petersburg Times, November 9, 1992.

Ibid.


Peck interview.

Ibid; Arsenault, St. Petersburg, 270 and 272.

Edwards interview; Peck interview; Williams interview.

Babb, “Women and War.”

In her interview, Helen Edwards referred to St. Petersburg’s black community as a “community within a community.”