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A Synopsis of the Civil Rights Struggle in Tampa and the Role of the Tampa Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

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By ROBERT W. SAUNDERS

The history of Tampa cannot be completed without taking into consideration the many efforts made by Tampa’s citizens of African descent to rid the community of racial segregation and the evil effects of "Jim-Crow." As this is written, it is also significant that what these Black Americans accomplished is directly related to the Bill of Rights, written two hundred years ago and subsequent amendments, particularly, amendments 13-15.

The changes that have occurred certainly could not have taken place without the help of some white citizens. There were quite a few who became concerned about the injustices that were imposed on African Americans. But often these concerns were tied to the traditional practices which relegated persons of color to the back of the bus and "cross the tracks" "away from the mainstream of Tampa's everyday affairs" mentality. But as pressures for institutional change mounted, so did the attitudes of a large number of white citizens.

Playing an important part in bringing about institutional change has been the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. With its broad program base covering every aspect of life, the NAACP through its local chartered entity, the Tampa Branch, and the Florida State Conference of NAACP Branches, led the attack against racial segregation and discrimination. This is only a small effort to tell this side of the story.

The events reported here, are based on actual reports written by me and sent to the national and regional offices of the NAACP. The reports and letters referred to were written during the time that the activities were happening. As a national representative of the NAACP, it was my responsibility to assure that the local Branch adhere to the policies of the Association. As a native born Tampan, I had a natural interest in seeing that racial discrimination and segregation came to an end.

There has been much confusion and misinformation about the history of the Tampa Branch. While I am not able to cover all of the Branch’s history, I have included a synopsis of how the Branch started during World War 1, some of its officers and early members and a few remarks about early cases. Recent research shows that most early black leaders including the late Blanche Armwood Beatty and the late Dr. Benjamin Mays were members of the NAACP.

This is a part of the manuscript that I am currently working on to tell the story of the NAACP in Florida. It also is, in my opinion, an important part of Tampa’s history. The truth is that the advancements made for and
about Tampa’s African American Citizens, were made with sacrifice, pain and fear of reprisal. The saying that nothing is free holds true in the “Fight for Freedom.”

THE NAACP STORY -- TAMPA

Racial discrimination and segregation has always been an issue in Tampa. In 1952, racial signs reading "Black" or "Colored" and "White Only" were seen in every government owned facility. Even during World War II, I was assigned to several troop trains bringing soldiers from Tuskegee Army Air Field to MacDill Army Air Base. The trains would pull in to the Southern end of the base and then back up to the northeastern part of the facility where the all black aviation squadron was located. All facilities at MacDill were separated by race. The USO club on Harrison Street was also segregated.

Protests against "Jim-Crow" practices have been a part of Tampa’s life. These protests began when the community was first settled. Slaves, escaping from plantations, joined with Seminole Indians in battle against Union troops in the 1800’s. Protests were raised during the Spanish American War when troops of the U.S. Army’s Twenty-fourth Infantry and the Ninth Calvary protested "Jim-Crow" treatment while waiting to board ships bound for Cuba. During the early 1900’s, Black parents protested segregation in public education and demanded better school facilities for their children. Lynching had its place with Ku Klux Klan elements taking front row to assure that Black people and "Nigger Loving" supporters remained in their places. Substandard housing conditions, job discrimination in the skilled and unskilled employment levels, and unhealthy living conditions helped to spawn the birth of NAACP.

The Tampa Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was organized in 1917. Reorganized in 1920-21, it has continued to exist without interruption. The Branch has had many active and well known persons as its supporters. Among its leaders were the Rev. Andrew A. Ferrell, Sr., a Presiding Elder in the African Methodist Church; an attorney Greene, the only Black attorney to practice in the city in the 1920’s; E. E. Broughton, who served as Treasurer of the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College and later as an officer of the Central Life Insurance Company, C. Blythe Andrews, who served as Secretary of Central Life and later published the Florida Sentinel Bulletin. Other persons who served as Branch Presidents were Mathew Gregory, my wife Helen Saunders, Charles J. Davalt, Charles Stanford, Levy Taylor, Ellen P Greene, Francisco A. Rodriguez, Elder Warren W. Banfield, Robert L. Gilder and another Seventh Day Adventist leader Elder Straghn. Straghn served at a time when there was dissension in the Branch and the Black leadership.

The Tampa organization also had its group who would be considered activists by today’s standards. Playing an important role was Norman E. Lacy, a man small of stature but strong in his beliefs that the NAACP should actively attack “Jim-Crow” laws. In 1945-46, the National Office of the NAACP dispatched Ella Baker, a field secretary to Tampa to mediate between the warring factions. With Andrews, Broughton and many others who opposed Lacy’s approach on one side and Lacy, supported by Mathew Gregory, Luther Maddox, Harold N. Reddick and Dan MaLoy openly calling for direct action to confront police brutality and unjust killings of Blacks, Ella Baker, an NAACP field secretary had her hands full.
Tampa Branch meetings in 1945 and ‘46 often became so heated that blows were struck between the opposing factions during meetings held on Cuba and Spring Streets. When Elder Straghn became the Tampa Branch President, Ella Baker made a second trip to Tampa to bring the two sides together.

Mathew Gregory, a close friend of A. Phillip Randolph, founder and President of the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and himself a pullman porter, became president after Elder Straghn was assigned to a church in Sarasota. Gregory also served as Interim President of the Florida State Conference of NAACP Branches following the assassination of Harry T. Moore in 1951.

In 1948-49, the NAACP joined the Urban League and Andrews in a fight to erase housing blight in mid-town Tampa. The Rev. Paul Wagner, a white minister and pastor of the Palma-Ceia Methodist Church, announced that the Urban League had adopted a Resolution to be sent to Mayor Curtis Hixon. The resolution directed the attention of the Mayor and other city officials to the conditions of the "Scrub," which was once described by Dr. Benjamin Mayes, the League’s Executive secretary as one of the worst slum areas in the Nation.

The "Scrub’s" boundaries were Central Avenue on the west, Nebraska on the east, Scott Street on the north and Cass Street on the south. The Urban League called for the
"razing of the scrub" and building of low income housing for Black citizens. The "Scrub" was described as a focal point for city wide infectious diseases, crime and substandard housing. There was no economic class structure. Poor, middle and upper class Black families were clustered in substandard, unpaved streets. Perhaps a redeeming factor was the existence of St. James Episcopal Church on Lamar Ave.

The call for elimination of the "Scrub" came after a long series of bitterly fought condemnation suits which involved the taking of property owned by Blacks and a few whites in the Robles Park Area. The three or four block area had homes occupied by several Black families. This group protested the building of a three million dollar project to be constructed for white occupancy on the land they were being forced to vacate. They also claimed that they were being picked on by the Tampa Housing Authority. The area in which they lived contained a minimum of slum condition.

The Resolution text read as follows:

"Be it Resolved that the Tampa Urban League recognizes the need for low-cost housing and applauds the Tampa Housing Authority for the facilities already furnished.

Be it Resolved that the Tampa Urban League feels that great caution should be exercised in the location of housing units so that they will not destroy the value of presently situated single residence subdivisions.

Be it further Resolved that the Tampa Urban League feels that the so called "Scrub" area is a focal point for city-wide infection, and as such, a hazard to the health of those living in the area, and that the city should proceed with condemnation proceedings on the ground of sanitation."

The Resolution concluded with the following statement: "Be it further Resolved that the Tampa Urban League feels that the Housing Authority should provide additional low-cost Negro Housing and that it should be located in the "Scrub" so that slum clearance may actually be accomplished, rather than in any other district."

The Tampa Urban League’s Resolution is important to mention because it brought attention to the fact that some prominent white Tampans were espousing better housing, although racially segregated conditions, for the city's Black citizens. The NAACP with its predominately Black

NAACP SOUTHEAST REGIONAL STAFF (1956). Left to right: Ruby Hurley, S.E. Regional Director; Charles McClain, North Carolina Field Director; Medgar Evers, Mississippi Field Director; Rev. Holmes, Georgia Field Director; unknown; Robert W. Saunders, Florida Field Director; and W.C. Patton, NAACP Voter Education and Registration Director. One of regular staff meetings held to map plans to combat racial discrimination in the Southern States. Photo from NAHRW News
membership was not alone in this fight. Receiving copies the Resolution were Tom Dyer, Executive Director of the Authority, Senators Spessard Holland and George Smathers and Congressman McMullen of Tampa.

In January 1949, a delegation of ten Negro leaders appeared before the Streets Committee of Tampa to support a proposal for a Negro Housing Project. Andrews, acting as spokesman for the group, pointed to the failure of the City of Tampa to provide adequate housing for its Black citizens. Andrews argued that for twenty years every effort to provide decent housing for Negroes has met some sort of opposition from a certain class of white people. Making up this committee were Perry Harvey, Sr., President of the International Longshoreman’s Union in Tampa, Dewey Richardson and Frank Burt.

The fight waged for equal rights often made headlines in the local news media. An early case involved the slaying of a white bill collector by a Black man after the collector forcibly entered his home.

Among the most publicized NAACP cases involving the Tampa NAACP occurred when a white police officer killed a Black man named Sam Ingram. Mathew Gregory led a committee which asked to meet with Mayor Curtis Hixon regarding the shooting. The NAACP demanded that action be taken by the city to punish the three white officers who it believed were responsible for Ingram’s death. The NAACP also protested the brutal beating of a Black woman by Tampa police for forcibly entering the woman’s home. Another strong protest was registered after Cole Newcross, a seventy-nine year old Black citizen was beaten by deputies. NAACP protests continued well into the 1960’s with many complaints filed with the Federal Government under the new Civil Rights Statutes.

Tampa NAACP leadership continued to protest racial discrimination in a different form beginning in 1949. James A. Hargrett, Sr., a former Middleton senior high school teacher and in ’49, operator of a grocery business on Lake Avenue, filed a suit in Federal Court for equal school facilities in Hillsborough County This effort by Hargrett would have been successful but for the fact that prior to the Federal Judges’ decision, a compromise was reached between the School Board and Black Leaders. The Board agreed to make all schools for Negroes equal to those attended by white students in the County. The suit, which was being considered as a part of what eventually became the 1954 Brown Decision by the national NAACP staff, was dropped by the NAACP because of the compromise. Hargrett suffered much criticism and economic reprisals from some Black citizens as well as members of the white community, who failed to understand the nature of the action or the fact that the nation was steadfastly moving towards outlawing race as a factor in education and everyday life.

A new and different kind of Branch leadership arose. Black World War II veterans, educated under the G.I. Bill of Rights, returned to the community as lawyers, medical doctors and teachers with higher degrees. Francisco A. Rodriguez, the son of Cuban parents with African heritage, graduated from Howard University’s College of Law. He joined William A. Fordham, a graduate of Lincoln University’s law school, to form the first Black law firm in the city. A third Middleton High School graduate, Harold Jackson, also began practicing law. In politics, Mary Alice
A delegation of NAACP leaders meeting with President Kennedy at the White House in 1962 to propose comprehensive civil rights legislation. Robert Saunders is 5th from left. Aron Henry, 3rd from left. On right is Patricia Harris; 2nd from right is Theodore Berry.
unsuccessfully ran for public office. In the early '60s other young attorneys such as Delano Stewart started their practice in the Tampa community.

There were several ministers with long years of service in the city. While most of them did not participate actively in Branch activities, they could be counted upon to rally their members in support of membership drives and efforts to end police brutality. Rev. William M. Davis, pastor of Beulah Baptist Church; Rev. Marcellius D. Potter an A.M.E. Presiding Elder and publisher of the *Tampa Bulletin*; Rev. G. J. Oates, also an A.M.E. minister; Rev. Jacob W. Rhodes, Bethel Baptist Church pastor; Rev. John C. Robinson, First Baptist Church, College Hill; Rev. William M. Scott and Rev. Sylvester A. Cousins, pastor of St. Paul A.M.E. Church, served as a core of religious leaders who not only openly preached about the NAACP but made their churches available for meetings. Rev. Joseph B. Bryant, who personally admitted to me that he was not a “…well educated man but he knew that Negroes needed the NAACP,” was a staunch advocate of voter registration.

As older ministers retired or died, younger and more civil rights oriented religious leaders representing the Baptist, Methodist and Seventh Day Adventist faiths replaced them. Among these were the Rev. Dr. A. Leon Lowry, Sr., a former college professor and pastor of one of Augusta, Georgia's largest Baptist churches; Elder Warren A.
Banfield, a Seventh Day Adventist minister; Rev. E. D. Lewis, a C.M.E. Pastor who had served as president of the Dothan NAACP Branch in Alabama; Rev. J. H. Adams, Jr., of the Methodist Church and Rev. S. M. Peck. Each of them became active in civil rights.

Rev. Peck was pastor of historic St. Paul A.M.E. Church during the time of school desegregation efforts and the sit-ins. He supported the work of the youth council and the senior branch and helped to promote the major public meetings held at the church.

Lowry was elected State Conference President in 1956 and served until 1962. Banfield and Lewis served as presidents of the Tampa Branch for several years and Adams was appointed chairman of the NAACP State Church Committee. Rev. Adams, as Chairman of the State Conference Committee in 1962, was instrumental in getting ministers through that committee to pressure Governor Collins for action in 1959 when a "Negro coed" was raped in Tallahassee. "This will acknowledge your recent correspondence regarding the alleged crime against a Negro coed"... Governor Collins wrote on June 4, 1959 in response to a letter from Rev. Adams. "The people here, white and colored, were understandably shocked and outraged. All judicial processes have proceeded efficiently and expeditiously," he concluded.

Among the new branch leaders were Rodriguez, who served for a short period in 1955-56 but resigned because he represented the Association in many local court suits. He was followed by Elder Banfield who provided leadership at the beginning of the school desegregation attempts. Ellen P. Greene, a Central Life Insurance employee became the first woman president in 1960. Stanford, Levy Turner, DaValt and Robert L. Gilder made up the roster of other Branch Presidents up to the time of my departure in 1966.

It was this latter group, buttressed by the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision, the Court's decision of 1956 ending racial segregation in intracity bus transportation and the 1964 Civil Rights Act, who faced the onslaught of racists' criticism and gave support to young high school and college students carrying out sit-in protests. One of them, Stanford, was arrested while leading members of the NAACP Youth Council during a sit-in demonstration. They also gave full support and in most cases, initiated the Mannings School case, a recreation suit against the City of Tampa, the case of Hammond and Griffin vs. the University of Tampa and complaints to end discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodations. The recreation suit was settled out of court with only one condition effecting an illegal reverter clause in the Ballast Point Deed being compromised.

They also were in office during the sit-in demonstrations and the demonstrations to desegregate Tampa's theaters. DaValt, as Branch president, assured the success of the youth council's activities by allocating funds from the senior Branch's treasury-funds needed to pay bonds, attorney's fees and even the buying of sign materials to be displayed during the downtown Tampa protests. Not known to the City's Bi-racial Committee which met with youth leaders for the purpose of silencing them, was the fact that funds were provided while the meeting was in progress.

Selection of Tampa as the site for the Field Director's office in 1952 was another factor that strengthened the NAACP Program in this city. Local branch leaders were able to
obtain guidance and assistance in planning and implementing civil rights programs. Attacks on the city's racially segregated policies often were settled in ways that perpetuated the discrimination that NAACP opposed. With a national NAACP staff person present, local Branch officers could not enter into compromises that were against NAACP policy or be influenced by other Black leaders. Finally, as Field Director, did not report to local or state NAACP officials and received my entire salary and travel expenses from the national Office. Threats of economic reprisal had no effect on the decisions and programs.

People like Matthew Gregory, Harold Reddick and Edward Davis knew that the only weapon to fight racial segregation was not to allow it to exist in any segment of community. I found it easy to gain their support when I approached them with new ideas. Gregory, who was president of the Tampa Branch until '54, was a fighter. He was a good friend of E. D. Nixon of Montgomery who, following the arrest of Rosa Parks, initiated the effort which brought the Montgomery Movement and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., into prominence. A pullman porter, Gregory had the strong backing of A. Phillip Randolph, president of the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and a national officer of the NAACP Randolph made several visits to Tampa and on several occasions spoke for local groups and the NAACP (He referred to me as his "son").

Beginning in 1952, new strategies for attacking and destroying the fabric of separate but equal, workshops to train individuals on techniques, public mass meetings with prominent speakers who were able to counter southern traditions and propaganda were held in Tampa and the rest of Florida. From my office, I prepared press releases, wrote a column for the Pittsburgh Courier and sent written communication to the organization and other black leaders explaining NAACP policy and asking for support, and started the ball rolling in a new direction. The new Branch leadership supported efforts to end housing discrimination and segregation by protesting Tampa's failure to comply with Urban Renewal requirements for a Citizen's Committee representative of the entire community. The events leading up to the protests began with the following statement issued by the Tampa Branch on Urban Renewal early in 1961:

"Urban Renewal is a program undertaken by the city with the assistance of the Federal Government to redevelop slums and blighted residential areas. The basic purposes of the entire program is to improve the housing conditions of local families by eradicating and halting the spread of urban blight and deterioration.

Urban Renewal, under ideal and fully democratic conditions, can be constructive. Local programs democratically conceived and equitably administered are an indispensable tool to the orderly residential and economic growth of our community.

However, to the Negro, Urban Renewal can have a very damaging and objectionable impact upon his progress as a citizen in the community. The overall practice of planning "for" and not "with" minority groups in the development of an Urban Renewal program for the entire community has a tendency to relegate the affected minorities into positions of having others plan for
the housing needs, irrespective of the rights guaranteed as citizens of the state and nation.

In the City of Tampa, although plans may be considered by some to be adequate, there has been a tendency to proceed with Urban Renewal, whether intentionally or unintentionally, without fair representation from and on a community wide level. It is essential that minority groups be represented in this planning and by persons who will defend their rights against encroachment while realizing that the program of Urban Renewal benefits the entire community when administered fairly.

Furthermore, it is necessary that all citizens recognize that an effective program is not short ranged. Urban Renewal plans and promotion reaches over a span of from eighty to one hundred years. Codes and laws which accompany the program effect all persons and will control the actions and lives of many generations yet unborn. It then becomes necessary that responsible citizens take cognizance of all programming in this area and demand that fair and impartial representation on all phases of Urban Renewal development be given to all groups regardless of color. By doing this then the program becomes acceptable and reaches the requirements of certain acts governing it.

Since Negroes, as a result of racial or economic discrimination, are usually forced to reside in substandard housing areas, Urban Renewal programs usually involve this segment of the population in a much higher ratio than another group. This is true in Tampa. Therefore, the responsibility of insuring local requirements lies with those who best understand the program of Urban Renewal and who are willing to address themselves to the problems that must be confronted and solved." This initial statement ended with a paragraph committing the local Branch to work "cooperatively with the entire communities to promote good wholesome, clean housing for every citizen."

In Tampa's Black community, the urban renewal concept and its effects was divisive as well as debilitating. NAACP leadership was concerned about existing discriminatory housing patterns and that the City's planners were on a sure course that would perpetuate illegal practices of discrimination based on race. Another group, largely made up of individuals who were the beneficiaries of the "Jim-Crow" system, benefited from racial segregation. It was clear that their insight was more speculative. They stood to benefit economically from the sale of already dated housing stocks. NAACP leaders knew that the city's appointing authorities would by-pass naming individuals who would demand that Urban Renewal policies and planning include corrective actions to end segregated housing.

The debate and pressures called for further action to assure that the City complied with requirements of the law. On June 10, 1961, as Field Director, I placed a call to Jack E. Wood, Jr., NAACP Special Assistant. Jack Wood responded to the telephone request by letter dated June 12, 1961. In his letter Wood wrote that:
"In response to your telephone call today advising this office that there is no Negro representation on the Tampa Florida Citizens’ Advisory Committee, I fully agree with you that the City of Tampa has failed to comply with the URA requirements respecting its eligibility for workable program recertification.

Effective February 8, 1960, the Urban Renewal Administration revised its workable program requirements in order to insure among other things that local citizens would be afforded adequate opportunity to participate in local urban renewal programs being aided by the federal government. The requirement, which prior to that date had been optional, called for the following:

Citizen Participation-Appointment of a citizens’ advisory committee, community-wide and representative in scope.

Naming of a subcommittee of the citizens’s advisory committee or a special committee on minority housing problems. This committee is to include representatives of the principal minority groups in the community, and will be primarily responsible for working for full opportunity in housing for all groups. Although this administrative change was announced in February 1960," Wood continued, "it was not possible to secure immediate compliance by all local municipalities for the reason that many had just had their workable programs recertified for another 12 month period. All local programs submitted for recertification after March 1961, must however, comply with this requirement as a prerequisite to approval. Inasmuch as the Mayor of Tampa has appointed a citizens’ advisory committee and has completely disregarded your repeated requests for representation by a responsible member of the Negro community, it is my thinking that the central office in Washington should suspend all further processing and approvals of the local program pending compliance by the local public agency”.

Jack Wood’s letter also addressed two very important matters that had sorely divided Tampa’s Black leadership.

“As the enclosed copy of the revised workable program requirements indicates, there should also be appointed in Tampa, a subcommittee to deal with minority housing problems. Such a committee should be engaged in a program seeking full opportunity for housing for all groups in order to aid and expedite the relocation phase of the local program.”

Woods then addressed what has proved to be a problem for the city even until the present time:

“I completely reject the mayor's announcement of a 'special' committee of Negroes to 'study' the Maryland Avenue Project”, he wrote. "The fact that this committee is to have an announced lifetime of two weeks is an affront which circumvents your rights of representation at a responsible level.
'As you will note", he concluded, "I am forwarding copies of this letter to persons whose responsibilities include the enforcement of the minimal safeguards contained in the urban renewal program. These persons will, I am sure, take whatever steps may be necessary to secure the degree of cooperation and accommodation that the Tampa Redevelopment Commission is legally obliged to provide."

Copies of the letter were sent to Dr. Robert C. Weaver, Administrator, HHFA; Mr. Frank D. Clarke, Assistant Administrator, HHFA and Mr. William Slayton, Commissioner, URA.

Jack Wood’s letter prompted the Tampa Branch President, Mrs. Ellen P Greene, to send a telegram on June 13, 1961, registering an official complaint against the City, to Robert S. Weaver, Director, Federal Housing and Homes Administration. In the complaint, Mrs. Greene said that:

"The Tampa Branch NAACP, requests that your office reconsider its recertification of the Urban Renewal Program for the City of Tampa, Florida, pending a restudy of the ‘workable program’ submitted to determine if specifications have been met. There has been no Citizens Advisory Committee appointed to make recommendations. Negroes who number approximately 23 percent of this city’s population, are not represented and an estimated 60 percent of those affected by Urban Renewal will be Negroes.

The present plan of city officials setting up a temporary committee to approve the Maryland Avenue Project does not meet requirements of the Federal Government nor the approval of a large number of citizens. Consideration is not being given to Negroes in the overall plan for Urban Renewal in this community.

Request your urgent consideration of this matter", she concluded.

On June 15, I wrote Jack Wood outlining the problems identified after an analysis of the Tampa Urban Renewal Program was made by the Branch. The letter stated the following:

“A commission was set up with seven persons, all members of the majority group (white). At no time has a Negro served on this permanent or continuing committee. The program has developed to a point where blighted areas are being cleared, land purchased and some families are now being relocated. The city has never had a sub-committee to the Citizens Advisory Committee.

Furthermore, a study reveals that present plans calling for a program of relocation and rehousing of affected low income occupants is following a line of the tradition and customs as they now exist, based on lines of color. An example of this is observed in planning for the so called ‘Maryland Avenue’ project. Here much of the blighted conditions and sub-standard housing in the City of Tampa is found. However, plans are to re-establish this area as a ‘Negro area’. It is also observed that in relocating persons affected by slum clearance in this and other
sections, that Negroes are not informed as to certain regulations with regard to rights and privileges in making purchases on the housing market. A large number are being relocated in areas circumscribed as Negro areas or Negro communities.

To come within the scope of governmental regulations, the Mayor of Tampa, the Honorable Julian Lane, recently appointed a bi-racial group with three white members and three Negro members. This group, according to announced responsibilities is to study the 'Maryland Avenue' project and approve same. Apparently this is an attempt to hurriedly meet some of the requirements for approval. However, since the committee is not one of a continuing nature and certain some of its members are not representative, its functioning as a responsible group which will face issues and problems is questionable.

In the light of the above, it is clear that the development of a program of improvement for this City has not been done for minority groups and not with Negroes. It is clear that if this program continues as it is now progressing, Negroes in Tampa will be relegated to a continuous pattern of racially segregated housing for the next fifty to one hundred years. It is the opinion of NAACP leaders that some effort must be made to prevent this pattern from becoming set and firm.

In some areas which were formerly inhabited by members of differing racial groups, such are now disappearing and are becoming solidly Negro, whites are selling their houses to persons being relocated. Prices are greater than the value of the house and the purchasers find themselves paying for houses that are soon to be classed as substandard. Meanwhile, the whites are building new homes financed with funds received from the sale of houses to Negroes or through FHA and other government financed programs. Thus, the pattern of racially segregated communities is being aided and abetted by the present Urban Renewal Plan which sets out to better living conditions by outdated and outmoded methods."

On July 23, 1962, slightly more than a year had passed since the activities and complaints of 1961. Once more the Tampa Branch's housing committee made its findings and recommendations to the Branch membership. The committee, in its opening paragraph stated that:

"...housing, like food and clothing, is an essential commodity." Reference was also made to the passage of the 1866 Civil Rights Act and "...its re-enactment in 1870...." The most sweeping and compelling opinion of the U.S. Supreme Court which outlawed "restrictive covenants", made it mandatory that persons desiring to purchase property be protected from the acts of those who would willfully plot through contracts and covenants, to deny other citizens this right because of color.

The committee findings were:

"(A) That in the area of home ownership in the city of Tampa,
there are efforts to establish strict lines of residency based on race. Participating in this conspiracy are members of the realty profession, mortgage lenders, buildings and promoters. Much reference is often made to 'Negro housing', 'Housing for Negroes', and 'Negro quotas' by some of these individuals while in essence, the overall program of community redevelopment should be concerned with housing for citizens regardless of race or color.

(B) Persons displaced by the Federal-State highway project are left to find their own housing. Many are led to believe that Progress Village is the only area in which Negroes may purchase housing."

The committee referred to a previous visit to Tampa by Madison Jones, NAACP Housing Director, in 1956. During that visit, Jones found the City's planning appalling. He also noted the lack of interest and/or knowledge of federal requirements imposed at that time. It called for the Tampa Branch to arrange for Jack E. Wood to make a complete study of all facilities and plans "for Tampa". Noting that it was being advocated that "property to be acquired for Urban Renewal purposes on the west side of Hillsborough River and extending from Fortune Street South", be turned over to the University of Tampa for further growth of this institution," the committee recommended that the NAACP oppose this plan. It recommended that the land should be reserved for residential purposes. "Persons having to move from this area should be allowed a first opportunity to repurchase land in this area for homes", it concluded in the report.

Another letter dated November 20, 1962, addressed to Mayor Julian Lane called for the appointment of "one or more Negro citizens" to serve as members of the Urban Renewal Board which was up for renewal.

Mayor Lane made a late night telephone call to the Field Director's home shortly after the November 20th letter, asking that the complaint filed with federal officials against the City of Tampa be withdrawn. Lane pledged that the city would comply. Following this call, the protest was withdrawn.

A public meeting was called by the NAACP at the Greater Bethel Baptist Church to announce that the city would comply. Present at the crowded session were white community leaders including members of the recently formed Bi-racial Committee and the City Planning and Development Commission.

While the NAACP was pushing for an end to racial discrimination in housing, another group comprised of leading white businessmen, developers and several persons from the Black community were developing plans for all Black development. This community was named Progress Village. The story of its development is one of intrigue. NAACP, as illustrated above, recognized the need for new and better housing stocks for all citizens regardless of race. Its leadership was fully aware of the past patterns and practices which existed in Tampa and the fact that politicians did nothing to prevent the perpetuation of these illegal past patterns and practices. Therefore, NAACP could not endorse or approve Progress Village.

Aurelio Fernandez was one of the persons with an interest in the Progress Village Project. Fernandez, of Afro-Cuban heritage, requested that I meet with him in his office at the old Henderson Street Junior High School where he worked as its principal.
(This school was formerly attended by white students. The Hillsborough County School Board converted it to an all Black program). Aurelio began by giving me a grand picture of the plans. He named some of the persons involved in the endeavor and how it would benefit the entire Black community. One of his arguments was that Attorney Rodriguez was in favor of the program. I reminded him that Rodriguez could not commit NAACP, especially in light of the complaints and long standing opposition to racially segregated housing. He asked if I would try to get the NAACP to endorse Progress Village. My response was that if the developers and proposers of the project would commit in writing that Progress Village would be a totally integrated and desegregated community, then I would carry the request for endorsement to the local Branch and subsequently to the National for consideration. This written commitment was never given. Contrary to much publicity, there was no official approval of Progress Village by the NAACP.

However, this did not end discrimination in all of Tampa’s housing. NAACP leaders had to protest discrimination against Black servicemen in Tampa’s motels during the threatened invasion of Cuba by President John F. Kennedy and again in 1964 when airmen from MacDill Field were denied use of trailer park facilities.

In 1962, Rev. Lowry addressed the issue of hotel and motel segregation of Black troops to Clarence Mitchell, NAACP Washington Bureau representative. Negro airmen from MacDill Air Force Base were also denied the rental of space at several trailer parks. These trailer parks were placed off limits to military personnel because of this discrimination. Other complaints were filed to prevent the Tampa Housing Authority from perpetuating racial discrimination in its low income public housing program.

In 1963, a young and very articulate new leader was elected to lead in the Civil Rights struggle. This was Robert L. Gilder. Gilder’s election is a marked example of how one vote can elect an individual to office.

With Tampa as a test tube, it soon was possible to get other branches to follow suit. (Pensacola on the borderline of Florida and Alabama was first to begin a program to improve its program. Abraham Tolbert, the local branch president, reminded me of Gregory. Tolbert was independent. Employed at the Naval Air Station, his income was not affected by local threats. He also was a shop steward on the base. Tolbert never hesitated to call or inquire about programs and activities.)

The usual complaints about unnecessary police force were still being received and protested. However, an emphasis on voter education and registration and with the backing of the National Office, served as a new source for recruiting new faces. In 1953-54, Tampa boasted of approximately 1,500 registered Democratic Black voters. Black Republicans numbered less than twenty-five. The goal was to raise the Black voting strength to 5,000 by the end of 1955. Phillip "Phil" Weightman, political and voting specialist from the international CIO-PAC came to Tampa to assist me in organizing the drive. Weightman was able to obtain financial support from the United Steel Workers of America’s local union. Dewey Richardson, known to Tampans as "Mr. Democrat", was employed to help coordinate the effort. Several persons were hired to do the door-to-door. With these meager funds, transportation was given to those persons wanting to register at the County Courthouse. We brought individuals
to the Courthouse from Belmont Heights, West Tampa and Port Tampa. This was the start of the first statewide voter registration effort for the State of Florida since that conducted by Weightman prior to the campaign in which Claude Pepper lost to George Smathers.

THE JAMES HAMMOND STORY

It must be said that James Hammond had a burning desire to bring about change in Tampa. We did not always agree on the techniques he advocated as a means to achieve the goal of equality in Tampa, but in the long run, he always supported the organization’s objectives. Hammond, by trade was a graduate electrician. Like some other craftsmen, he could have stood on the sideline. He might have waited for the tidbits to be handed down to support his family. But waiting did not satisfy him.

Jim Hammond was aggressive. He had his own style for addressing the issues of racial segregation. However, the NAACP was always his means to buttress his demands whenever he was confronted with the "die-hard" or go slow attempts of the white power structure. My respect for Hammond grew as we often discussed stratagem to bring down discrimination. The University of Tampa venture was an example of how he attacked racism. There was another event which focused on his non-acceptance of racism and segregation.

As a Captain in the Army Reserves, Hammond found himself in command of groups headed for Fort Benning, Georgia for Summer Training. Prior to their departure, he told me that the mode of transportation would be by Greyhound Bus. The Army had arranged for the soldiers to eat at the Greyhound Bus Terminal in the State Capitol where racial segregation was still an issue. Rather than to be subjected to embarrassment, Hammond was ready to face Tallahassee’s racist segregation policies regardless of the outcome. He felt that as the Senior Officer, he had to take a stand.

The command consisted of more than forty or fifty white soldiers and perhaps two or three blacks. He was the Senior Commissioned Officer. As the Commanding Officer, Hammond had quietly decided that he would not accept efforts to divide the troops by race. We discussed the options that he had if City Officials tried to force the black soldiers, including Hammond to use the shabby "Colored" restaurant at the bus station. The two of us agreed that this was a golden opportunity to strike hard at racism in the State Capitol.

When the troops arrived in Tallahassee, Hammond would lead them into the "White restaurant." He hoped that since all of them would be in uniform, there would be no problem being served. If he was told that he and the other black soldiers could not eat with the white troops, he would order all of them to board the bus and continue on to their destination. We struck on another plan. I would call on Dr. George Gore, president of Florida A&M University. I would also alert Clarence Mitchell in Washington D.C., that he should expect strong opposition from State and City Officials. The Florida NAACP Conference of Branches could be depended upon to provide bond and attorneys, if needed.

I called Dr. Gore and explained the situation to him. Dr. Gore agreed that Florida A&M facilities would be prepared to accommodate the soldiers. Francisco A. Rodriguez was made aware that he might be called to go to Tallahassee. Clarence Mitchell’s office was ready to move.
The expected happened in Tallahassee when white and black troops entered the traditionally segregated 11 white" facility. The manager wanted to know who was in command. Hammond responded that he was. He was told that the black soldiers could not eat with the white troops. This included Hammond. The fact that the group were under orders issued by the Army made no difference. Hammond’s protests brought threats of enforcement by police if he insisted on breaking racial segregation patterns. Finally, Hammond ordered the soldiers to get on the buses. The group headed for Florida A&M where they ate in the dining room.

Bob Sykes represented Florida’s Third Congressional District. His base was in Crestview, a hot bed of racial segregation. Because of the number of years he had served in the U.S. House of Representatives, he was known as the "Dean". When the news broke, Sykes immediately protested to the Army. The cry was that Hammond had used his authority to embarrass white troops and to violate Florida’s segregation laws. A demand was made to take his commission. Hammond’s refusal to accept racial segregation was upheld. He retained his commission. The forces of discrimination in Tallahassee had lost another battle.

THE UNIVERSITY OF TAMPA SUIT

The final chapter of racial segregation at the University of Florida was near completion. Another chapter was about to start at one of Florida’s prestigious private institutions.

On March 9, 1962, Gloster Current received a letter from me on, "action taken here, in Tampa, to correct an act of discrimination at the University of Tampa on March 1, 1962". I reported that the National Labor Relations Board, through the Regional Director for the 12th District had agreed to cooperate with the University of Tampa in sponsoring a course for labor leaders and management. The course was for twelve weeks. On Thursday night, Mr. Perry Harvey, Sr. President of the Local 1402, ILA, AFL-CIO; attempted to enroll in the course and was told that he could not because the school maintains a segregated policy. Mr. Harvey refused to remain and protested to union leaders and to the NAACP.

In the report I told of the action taken to protest the act of discrimination against a prominent and important leader. The action included the following:

1. Issuance of a Press Statement;
2. Sending of telegram to the chairman NLRB with copy to Mr. Clarence Mitchell requesting action;
3. Letter to Dr. David Delo, President of the University requesting an audience to discuss desegregation of the University.

The Chairman of the NLRB ordered the course removed from the school on Friday after Mr. Mitchell had talked with him. Negroes are now attending the school without discrimination.

I explained to Gloster that the University of Tampa is a private institution. It receives a large sum from the City and County for Public Relations and its athletic program. It is also being considered to receive additional grounds for expansion in the Urban Renewal Program. The land is presently occupied by Negroes. If there is any hesitancy about desegregation, I continued, we will seek to
get an injunction withholding public funds from the school. The press statement included a statement from Francisco A. Rodriguez that, “in receiving funds from the City or any public source, the University is opening its doors to those who make it possible for the funds to be contributed. It is my understanding that some of the property which is part of the University of Tampa is formerly city owned or presently administered by the City of Tampa.” Rodriguez believed that in making an allocation of public funds to the University, the Institution becomes a function of the State itself and therefore cannot bar persons because of race.

However, the University’s opening of its doors in 1962 was of short duration. On February 25, 1964, I filed a complaint with the Presidents Committee on Equal Opportunity. The letter stated that, "Recently, two negroes, one a Tampa school teacher, named Mrs. Hazel Gibson Phillips, at the Middleton Senior High School and Mr. James Hammond, an electrical contractor in Tampa, attempted to enroll at the University of Tampa which claims to be a private institution, but which has obtained and is using government funds and public property.

"The University maintains an extension course for MacDill AFB personnel, however, it is known that Negro Airmen, although they may participate in the program at MacDill, they are not allowed to attend the University or to use its facilities in the City of Tampa. The school has also obtained FHA funds to build several facilities on the campus."

The Committee was requested to begin an investigation of the discrimination policy at the University for the purpose of opening up all areas of its operation to all persons regardless of race, creed or color. My letter concluded that the school had obtained a Federal Scholarship Fund for Cuban Refugee students. Congressman Sam Gibbons, against opposition from some members of the institution’s Trustee Board, warned against continuing a policy of racial discrimination.

Rodriguez filed a suit in the Federal District Court on behalf of Mrs. Gibson and Hammond, on May 6, 1965. The suit was dismissed in the Federal District Court for the Middle District of Florida by judge Joseph P Lieb. On appeal to the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, the Appeals Court held that although the University of Tampa was not a State or City Institution in the usual sense, where its establishment was largely made possible by use of a surplus city building and the use of other City land leased for University purposes, denial to Negroes and the right to be admitted to the school was a State action under the 14th Amendment. However, because the University’s Governing Board withdrew racial barriers and some Negroes were enrolled, the court stated that injunctive relief was no longer required.